



Art by the Honorable Chris Smith

FATEBOUND
Journey of the Sun Child
SUNSET
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Forward

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

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

He whispered, "You awake?"

"Yea."

"You sleepy?"

"No."

Silence slipped back between them.

"Let's go on an adventure?" The younger proposed.

"Where?" The older asked.

"To a different planet."

"A made-up planet?"

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

"What's it called?"

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

"Mystakle Planet."

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

Years began to tumble by, and time gained momentum. Responsibilities constricted their creativity as society forced its definition of reality upon them. Soon their adventures seemed like nothing more than a dream shared between brothers, a dream that was slowly slipping their mind.

But dreams have a tendency to come true once forgotten.

Welcome to the Journey of the Sun Child.

This is for Joe.

Prologue

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

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

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

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

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

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

And there was only one left to hunt.

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

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

He charged. With his elgroom high, magic burst from his body. The sorcery hit the emerald flames that engulfed the skeleton and evaporated. The Samurai wasn't done yet. Ice crawled over his right fist and engulfed his forearm, the tip melting into a sharp point. Standing so close to the monster that the fringes of the eerie flames tickled his skin, he thrust his arm up into the dark knight's chest plate. The ice blade cut through the cold metal and Ben thrust deeper. He forced his frozen weapon far into the shell of the opposing knight's rib cage, well past where the undead's heart should've rested, but to no avail.

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

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

PART ONE

Chapter One: Home is Where the Heart Is

“Oh, *come on!*”

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

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

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

The light turned green.

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

“JESUS CHRIST!”

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

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

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

“This natural selection picked me out to be-”

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

“Kill me now!”

“-a dark horse running in a fantasy.”

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

“Flesh and bone!”

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

“And I’m running out of time!”

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

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

“Flesh and bone!”

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

The semi-truck plowed into the passenger side of the little car and sucked the rest of the automobile beneath its starving eighteen wheels.

- - -

Shimmering snowflakes swirled past the trolley window, churning like the Milky Way as they unfurled into the darkness beyond the reach of streetlights. Frost crept across the pane only to be beaten back by the hot breath of the eager elf with his nose smushed up against the glass. Despite the crushed condition of his nostrils, he still managed to inhale the scents of the city. Winter had finally overtaken Yelah. The sulfuric stench of fishy wharfs was now overpowered by a smoky, eye-watering coldness. He could taste the ash that erupted from the chimneys they

passed. The midnight smog blasted from the smokestacks like music from trumpet bells, celebrating his return. Zalfron Sentry had only to imagine his arrival anthem.

“Somewhere outside that finish line...”

He sang quietly to himself. Despite his nobility, Zalfron was a considerate civilian. He would never intentionally let his good time get in the way of someone else’s. Though he was conscientious almost to a fault, he was nearly unconscious when it came to being cognizant of his surroundings. There was no one else on the trolley aside from the conductor and – had Zalfron been paying attention – he would’ve noticed that the conductor’s eyes had been boring into the side of his head for at least as long as they’d been within the city limits. Her pointed ears even quivered as if attempting to somehow wiggle just right to catch faint hints at what the young passenger was murmuring. Whether the prodigal son was preparing a potent spell or merely crooning the latest catchy tune, the conductor couldn’t tell. Just in case, she took her right hand off the wheel and reached across her hip for-

“I square up and break through the chains-”

Zalfron bound out of his seat with a shout, “SIR!”

The conductor jolted, flinching in different directions like a lightning bolt. The fingers pinching her knife flicked and flung the weapon to the floor of the train. She lurched forwards to catch it but her right shoulder caught the brake lever and cranked the car to an abrupt stop. Now not only was her dagger clattering to the floor, but her passenger was hurtling down the corridor towards the driver’s seat. Tumbling head over heels, the lanky young man skidded to a halt with his ankles up on the dash and his back flat against the mat adjacent to the operator. He cradled the dagger against his breast and presented a sheepish smile.

“Ah meant ma’am.” Zalfron’s drawl included the unspoken “sorry”. Unfolding his arms, he handed the conductor back her blade, “Hare’s your knahf back.”

She took it hilt first but didn’t sheath it quite yet. Her dark blue eyes narrowed as they glared at the young man’s wide, yellow gaze – which he quickly averted after noting the knife was still in her hand. Chalking it up to his misgendering, the elf figured the hostility was fair enough. Standing, Zalfron’s left arm dusted himself off while his right gestured out the starboard side of the trolley offering both an apology and a solution to their standoff, “Sorray again, ma’am, and uh...this is mah stop. Almost didn’t sae it.”

As daft as the young man had already shown himself to be, this one wasn’t on him. The streetlights – the amber beacons that split the galaxies of snow flurries like suns eclipsing distant constellations – were sable silhouettes nearly unintelligible amidst the darkness of this block. The artistic flair of the blizzard was lost in the abyss, transformed into nothing more than a howling chill. Deep within the murky black, the shadow of a structure loomed. For Yelans like the trolley conductor, the place was known as Mutiny Palace. For Zalfron Sentry, Mutiny Palace was home.

Scooping a handful of gold and lint from his pocket and dumping it into the trolley driver’s still-knife-wielding-hands, Zalfron bound out the doors before the conductor had the time to crank them open. Dropping both blade and bullion, she jammed the door-release and

jerked the doors ajar just in time for the weaselly wayfarer to wiggle his way out of the train car and into the bleak, snowy twilight.

“I hit like a raging bull!”

A specter of warm breath wafted from his mouth with the words of the song as he slipped between the rod iron gate into the courtyard. The gate split in two and recessed into slots in thick stone columns. Beyond these rocky outcroppings a cobble wall unfurled to encircle the palace. Immediately beyond the entrance, in the shade of the stone pillars, cloaked in shadows somehow darker than the nigh-absolute darkness of the winter night, two men lay in wait. One was a bearn, furry and tall, the other a nellaf, stumpy and short, but both bore crossbows with bolts locked in. They raised them as the elf waltzed past then squeezed the triggers.

THWACK! THWACK!

“WouaaAAAAH!”

THWACK!

The assassins weren't the only threats blending into the bleakness. While the storm above pumped volley after volley of snow over Yelah, it disguised its most dangerous invasion: ice. Black ice crept across the gravel streets and walkways, pranking pedestrians and sabotaging civilians the moment they let their guard down. Such ice slipped beneath Zalfron's boots and yanked his feet out from under him right as the crossbow bolts zipped through the space where he'd been standing. The arrows disappeared into the darkness as Zalfron's yelp woke the sleeping city up then he landed flat on his back.

Straining his neck, he managed to spare himself a concussion. In his peripherals, he saw the archers by the gate behind him. As he rolled over and got back to his feet, he called out to them.

“Kennedy, Romanov,” despite the dark, he identified their mannerisms. He'd grown up amongst the capitol guards and this was not the first time he'd seen the two bewildered, “what they gotcha workin in the dark for?” Zalfron asked before providing his own answer – the only possible answer, far as he could tell, “Pa trahina save monay bah cutting the lahts off at naht again?” Shaking his head, he turned back towards the palace. Promising the two crossbowmen as he strutted away, “Ah'll turn em back on when ah get insahd.” Muttering, “Dangerous to work in the dark lahk this...” before his lips slipped back to the lyrics of his song.

“Anointed by the blood...”

While Zalfron left Kennedy and Romanov gaping behind him, he was approaching the mass of the palace police and – having seen Zalfron slip and heard his comments to entrance security – they were enchanted by a similar paralysis. Their blades and bows were half raised, their brows cocked at half-mast. Was the boy oblivious or had he come back from college cooler than a cucumber? Perplexed into a state of near out-of-body experience, they watched the prince proceed into their midst. The guards bobbed like brainless buoys bouncing off a determined dingy, *the Zalfron*, intent to continue until it breached the shore.

“...I take the reins.”

A fountain spat out frozen arches of water smack dab in the center of the courtyard. Zalfron glanced at the glacial architecture as he passed it. A typical addition to the winter décor of the Mutiny Palace, the vaulting rebar of ice were often decorated with shiny ornaments and evergreen reefs. The display created monstrous shadows by midnight that haunted Zalfron as a child but entertained his imagination as a young man. Tonight, however, there were no ferns or vines nor glimmering bobbles. Instead, two amorphous globs hung from the crests of the two largest vaulting glaciers.

“Cut from the cloth-”

Zalfron had to cut himself off, yelping, “Woh!” as a club came crashing down towards his face. Diving beneath the bat and rolling out of the throng, Zalfron dodged the bludgeoning but the attack finally began to chip away at his sense of security. He bound to his feet and turned on the staff, gesturing wildly at the decorative geyser and the dangling globs.

“Piñatas in the dark? Y’all naerlay killed mae!” Zalfron exclaimed, “Have y’all gone insane!” His flailing arm cracked like a whip and straightened to point at the offending officer, “Bobby! Saw your brother, John, at the gate, what gives?” He jerked his head back to the palace, back pedaling towards the shadowy abode, “Ah’m gonna get the lahts on then y’all’re gonna tell mae what the hell is going on.”

His audience was as stiff as the ice that filled the fountain but Zalfron didn’t press them further. Spinning around, he marched onwards into the Sentry mansion, singing:

“...of a flag that bears the name: Battle Born...”

As his echo dissipated in the night air and his shimmying visage disappeared into the dark halls of the manor, another trolley skidded to a halt just outside the gate. Like the one before, there was only one passenger on board. Unlike in the prior car, it was the passenger in this instance that wanted to kill the conductor. Not just the conductor, the whole crew gathered in the crepuscule courtyard.

The man was suited in armor from head to toe. A large scarlet jewel decorated the temple of his helm, painting the snow bloody as he strolled across the icy cobblestone. His armor clinked with his stride and the bones beneath the steel plates click-clacketed. There was no flesh on this figure, nor were there any cracks in their armor for anyone to be able to notice that, only the sounds of his skeleton could give his secret away. What he lacked in brawn, he made up for in brains. Two consciousnesses shared his being. One trapped in the gem between his brow and one that had been born to the bones long before they’d been picked clean of meat – the latter went by the name Rotama Metrom, Commander Rotama Metrom.

“Was that the boy?”

The fact that there wasn’t a hint of rage in the undead’s tone somehow invoked more dread than any sort of tone could’ve conjured. He stopped abruptly before the fountain to address the main lot of the palace staff. The faint humming of the Sentry heir could be heard from within Mutiny Palace but there were no sounds in the courtyard other than that of the hissing blizzard. The silence answered Rotama’s question well enough.

His bones began to rattle within his armor. The steel plates began to jostle as the Commander began to shudder. His vibrations were seismic upon his subordinates. Though Rotama's were born out of rage, his minions trembled out of fear. Their boots were already pawing at the pavement and permafrost, pedaling them forwards before the command emitted from their superior.

“GET HIM!”

Zalfron heard the order. He chalked it up to an especially impatient piñata punisher. He hollered towards the front of the house, “HOLD YOUR DRAGONS!” Muttering, “Fixina get em back on...” before continuing to sing.

“With my face flashing crimson...”

The capitol building of Sentrakle was not only constructed long before becoming known for betrayal, the manor was built before magic and science combined to create reasonable electrical systems. Thus the wiring required a bit of ingenuity, resulting in more than one electrical closets being located throughout the Palace. The breaker responsible for the front courtyard, the foyer, and the rooms above had been installed in a hall that had once led to a backhouse. Centuries later, the servants' quarters had been demolished for a renovation in which the palace-front switched sides. The narrow corridor survived to the side of the main entrance, hiding in the shadows of a covered patio. Garden tools hung on the walls to provide easy access for landscapers and the generator sat hidden amongst the shovels and hoes. Zalfron felt for the lever.

“...from the fires of hell.”

The lever was all the way down. The generator was off. Had the power simply popped itself off, activated by a safety-mechanism likely due to too much activity during the staff's late night festivities, then the lever would be three-quarters of the way down. Zalfron had been joking when he suggested his father might've popped it off to save power, but now... *Would hae?* Someone certainly had. It had to have been his father otherwise the staff would've turned it back on. *Unless they wanted the lahts off?*

Looking back the way he'd come, at the door that led to the patio that led to the courtyard, his golden eyes bored down on the black, four paneled glass that sat in the top third of the maintenance door. He jerked the crank up 180 degrees. The closet lit up like an explosion and the window unveiled the illuminated courtyard. The contiguous arches that separated the patio from the courtyard did their best to hide the view but were as successful as the splayed fingers of a parent covering their child eyes during a raunchy scene, Zalfron could see the frozen fountain full well now: the crowd of employees that raised him alongside his parents, the frozen water vaulting towards the sky before plummeting back to splash from the pond like stalagmites, and the hanging bodies of his mother and father.

His stomach clenched then plummeted down into his intestines. His esophagus twisted up into a knot in his throat. The hair on the back of his neck stood rigid as ice slipped up and down his spine like electric currents surging through copper wire. His extremities went numb while his brain was overwhelmed by a million emotions at once.

Then someone thwacked him in the back of the head with the flat of a shovel.

WHAM!

Zalfron hit the floor.

“Martin!” a guard behind the shoveler hissed.

“Malcolm!” the shoveler hissed back.

“Wae’re not supposed to-”

“Hae’s not dead!”

“You sure about that?” Malcolm growled. No sooner did his growl end than did he follow it up with a yelp, “Hit him again!”

Behind the shoveler, Zalfron had risen. Or at least the body of the boy had. His posture was tighter than before. His shoulders were stooped over like an apes whereas before they’d been rocked back as if he were stargazing. His arms hung like dangling pendulums. His hair obscured his face but his eyes seemed almost to glow. The infamous Sentry golden iris had rolled back, leaving only moon-like whites. No sooner had the boy risen than did a cry escape his slackened jaw. It was similar to the cry he’d emitted in the courtyard but also exponentially exaggerated, starting low and guttural then crescendo-ing into something horribly unnatural.

“WouaaAAAAH!”

Martin swung the shovel. Zalfron caught it by the shaft. Stepping up by Martin, Malcolm swung a hoe down to cleave Zalfron’s neck. Zalfron jerked the shovel, yanking Martin with it and putting his spine right where Zalfron’s had been a moment before. The blade of the hoe split apart Martin’s back as Zalfron wrenched the shovel free. Flipping the spade around, he smashed the edge of the shovel into Malcolm’s head, sundering the man’s skull like it were a hard clump of dirt. As the two crumpled to the floor of the corridor, the front door was flung open behind Zalfron.

“WouaaAAAAH!”

The uncanny bellow gave the second wave pause but their nerves were quickly resuscitated by the hard place of the terrifying Commander waiting behind them. The first two were bears, so bulky they had to enter single file, but they’d brought battle gear that gave them better odds than that of their garden-tool wielding former comrades.

The first bearn brandished a spear, stabbing for the electric elf with the crazy eyes. He wasn’t attempting to skewer the boy but rather attempting to set him up – and it worked. As the elf smacked the halberd aside with his shovel, he left his side completely open. The bearn second-in-line had his spear holstered, but his crossbow cocked and loaded.

THWACK!

The bolt struck Zalfron in the right shoulder. Blood spurted from the wound and the hand let loose of the shovel, leaving it in his left hand’s grasp. The spearman jerked his spear up, throwing the shovel back and opening Zalfron’s torso. Jerking his elbows back, the guard now prepared to skewer the boy. Instead of following the weight of the shovel blade, Zalfron let the head fly high then replaced his right hand on the shaft and drove the wooden rod of the shovel down towards the beady eye of the bearn spearman. Howling in pain, the bearn dropped his

weapon before he could drive it through the elf. The elf also dropped the shovel, deciding instead to scamper over the collapsing spearman. The archer was still reloading their crossbow when Zalfron pounced on him. Like a feral cat, the elf tore at the furry flesh of the traitor using both fingernails and teeth.

Outside the palace, Commander Rotama Metrom was beginning to lose his patience. The Admiral's son was not a known warrior. Zalfron Sentry studied history in relative paradise on the tropical island of Panta. The assassination – after years of meticulous planning – had been conducted flawlessly, this final complication could've even been disregarded completely had they merely exited the premises a minute earlier. Yet now the Sentry's fail-son seemed poised to jam a stick in the spokes of the plot – had the Commander not swung by to supervise the exit. His instinct delivered him from defeat once more. Rotama hadn't become Commander by trusting his subordinates, precisely the opposite. With an impatient snarl, he strolled into the chaos.

Zalfron had made it out of the electrical closet and onto the patio. Former-servants-turned-snakes slithered away in all directions while those yet to face their prior-master did their best to justify their betrayal. Jules, who'd once changed the prince's diaper, came down with a cudgel. Zalfron caught the club and jammed the handle back up into Jule's teeth. Archy, who'd once cleaned the duke's wound after a cycling incident, sliced at the young noble with a knife. Raising his arm, Zalfron allowed the cleaver to strike his wrist. It stuck fast in his bone then Zalfron jumped up to deliver both boots into the butler's breast, bowling him and the next to behind him over. Lennie, who'd once looked the other way when the young noble snuck out to see a girl, came at Zalfron with a mace. Yanking the machete from his arm, Zalfron lobbed it at the watchman. The blade spiraled before implanting between the eyes of the turncoat.

“WouaaAAAAH!”

His roar now echoed beyond the confines of the palace and courtyard. The people of Yelah would recall jolting out of bed at the sound of the strange howl. Only in the morning, with the light of Solaris, would they learn of the change that the yell signified. Had they realized then, little could've changed at that midnight hour.

The skeletal Commander stepped past his pawns. His right gauntlet had been thrown to the snow, his bare phalanges squirmed out from the shadows of his gaudy bangles like tentacles. The berserking boy twisted to thrash the undead villain but stopped short as those osseous fingers curled around his shoulder blade. A ghastly chill quickly spread from Rotama's grasp. The spell overpowered the mystical rage within the young elf, put the demon within to rest, and froze his body as if turning him to stone. Zalfron remained unconscious, his mind locked in a nightmarish realm, replaying over and over the last thing he'd seen before being smacked in the back of the head: his hanging parents, slowly twisting in the winter wind.

- - -

Joe was standing on a sidewalk, looking over the crumpled body of the humpback hag he'd almost hit at the intersection prior to his wreck. A passerby was busy performing CPR on the body and, when Joe appeared, the Good Samaritan himself almost had a heart attack. Without ceasing the rhythmic thrusting of chest compressions, the stranger proclaimed to Joe, "Holy hell, you scared the--"

His statement was cut short as the sound of bending metal, squealing tires, and shattering glass exploded upon the summer day.

Then a shadow fell over Joe, separating him from the light of the Sun. The gentle breeze ceased and, as if it'd been carried in the wind, so did the commotion around him. For a split second, all was silent. Then a single voice split the air like a bolt of lightning.

"Hello, Joe."

The voice was so dull and monotonous that Joe almost didn't feel the need to spin and face the speaker. He knew in his heart who it was. Nonetheless, he turned and stared into the sockets of a humanoid skull. Black cloth wrapped the cranium and fell loosely down to hide the rest of the being's body. The figure looked just as Joe would have expected.

"You're the Grim Reaper, aren't you?" Joe asked.

"No," Death responded, "I am Death."

Joe looked away, contemplating making a run for it before realizing any attempt would be futile. Time had stopped. Beside them, the man leaning over the old crone was frozen with his palms still clasped one on top of the other in-between the old lady's breasts. His jaw was still slack and his eyes were still stuck on the destruction across the street. Torn metal hung in the air, smoke sat around the tractor trailer like stagnant clouds, shards of glass stuck in the summer sky, caught in mid glimmer, constellations of debris.

Game over. Joe thought.

"Does this mean I have to die now?"

"No." Death said.

"Really?"

He immediately regretted questioning the get-out-of-fate free card Death had just handed him. Looking up at the reaper, he was relieved to see that Death did not appear to have changed his mind. In fact, as he responded, it seemed he was almost bored with the entire situation. He spoke so slow that it sounded almost as if he inserted a pause between each syllable, something that tortured Joe's bewildered soul. It was like listening to the clinking of a roller coaster being slowly pulled up the initial incline, a roller coaster you had not signed up for.

"You aren't to die like this."

"Then why are you here?"

Death slowly tilted his pale, hooded melon to nod at the body mounted by the first aid giver beside them.

"Then why am *I* here," Joe scratched his head with his key, "with you?"

Looking up from the hag and extending an empty hand towards Joe, Death said, "You've got her key."

"Ah..." Joe frowned, "don't you need my key?"

"No. She's dead. I need *her* key." Death said, "You can keep yours. You aren't dead yet."

Joe looked back across the street. Half of the tractor trailer was hidden behind the façade of the overpass. The sedan had almost made it by but the truck driver had swerved the wrong way, striking the back right corner and gobbling the rest of the car up. The tattered remains of his

vehicle lay scattered across the intersection like a mutilated corpse – like he would’ve been if not for the Knome. He looked at the two keys in his hands, his own and the old woman’s.

“You will die if you stay here.”

“What?” Joe jerked his eyes back to the cursed man, still holding his hand out to Joe expectantly, “Why? Are you going to put me back in my car?”

Death sighed, then said, “That is not how you die.”

“Then what if I want to stay here?” Joe asked, clutching the keys to his chest as if handing them over might expedite his fate, “What if I’m done with Solaris?”

“Then you will die.” Death stated before rattling his extended hand and asking once more, “The lady’s key?”

Joe didn’t budge, “Why?”

Again, Death sighed.

“Tell me how I die!” Joe demanded.

The undead ground his teeth, “After this question, there *will* be serious consequences if you do not give me the key.”

“Depending on what you tell me,” Joe muttered, “I might prefer those serious consequences.”

“Take my hand.”

Death lowered his arm and turned his hand, like a maiden extending her hand to be kissed. Shoving the keys back in his pocket, Joe did as Death commanded. Death then turned and guided Joe into the street – the street where he’d been stuck waiting on the dead woman to pass. They strode between the lanes of frozen cars for only a couple yards before Death stopped.

“Close your eyes.”

Joe closed his eyes. No sooner did he do so then did he feel a gust of wind. With the rush came a cacophony of horrendous sounds and a heat like no other – *almost* like no other, for it was something like that he’d experienced that first night in Solaris. Without Death’s grip to support him, he would’ve collapsed. Then it was over. Almost as if it had never even happened. He’d had his eyes closed hardly longer than a blink when Death order him to open them again.

“Look.”

In the commotion, Joe’d been turned around. He was looking back towards the intersection now, only it was gone. In its place was heat incarnate. A ball of fire had consumed the overpass and, though time was frozen and the flames with it, tongues of blaze like thrashing tentacles stretched out in all directions making it obvious to Joe that this infernal orb would be expanding if time were to continue. Joe’s hand instinctively tightened around Death’s boney phalanges.

“This is how you die.”

Joe couldn’t pull his eyes away from the ball of destruction. The darkest blacks and the brightest whites lacerated with gaseous amber. Even in the stillness, as Joe stared, it seemed to be moving. Pulsating with impatience.

“This is how Earth dies.”

“Can I stop it?” Joe asked.

Death shrugged, “I don’t see futures, Joe, only fates.”

“But I can change my fate, right?”

“The Knome would say yes.”

“Does he know about this?”

“What doesn’t he know about?”

Joe fell silent, thinking.

“Now,” Death said, “if you will, the key.”

“I’m going to save Earth.” Joe muttered, having ignored Death.

“Joe.”

“If I’m the Sun Child, then god damn it, I’m gonna save Earth!”

“JOE.”

“If the Knome saved me from that car then he can save Earth from...from this...we can-”

“JOE!” Death’s voice shook him to the core like a thunderclap, but then Death softened back to his monotone drab, “The lady’s key.”

Joe handed it over.

- - -

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

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

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

“Are those moons?” Joe asked.

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

“How many moons do you have?”

The Knome knelt by the fire the two had made. It was a log cabin fire: two base logs running parallel, smaller branches stretching across it and two bigger logs set on top that were perpendicular to the base logs. The pattern was repeated with kindling shoved between each

layer. Dragging his eyes from the masterpiece he tended, the Knome craned his neck and glared at the lunar chain. A smile stretched across his lips and the old face that seemed to be constantly enthralled with the task at hand, whatever it was, suddenly softened. His eye lids sagged, his eyebrows relaxed, and he let out a sigh.

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

“Huh?” Joe yelped.

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

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

“Of course!”

“They must be huge!” Joe exclaimed.

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

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

“No.” The Knome sighed, “One was slain long ago, the other wreaked havoc but ultimately returned home.”

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

“You got matches?” Joe asked.

“Nope,” the Knome said, “never needed em-”

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

“Yes, but don’t ask me to teach you. I’m a swordsman, my magical grammar is atrocious.” He let out a cough then held his breath til the fit passed. “I know just enough to get by. The friend I’m taking you to can help you with that.” He shifted his butt in the dirt until he found a suitable position, continuing to talk all the while, “Shoot, if everything goes smoothly, I’ll send you to a school. It wouldn’t hurt. If we have time, that is.”

Joe plopped down across from him.

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

“No blankets?”

“Just dirt.”

“Alrighty.” Joe said.

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

“Thanks, Ekaf,” Joe said, “for saving me.”

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

“You going to stay?”

“Stay?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh no, Creaton Live is alive!” Ekaf explained, “You’ll probably have to fight him.”

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

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

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

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

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

Ekaf whispered, “I wasn’t talking to you, I was talking to the reader. They can get by skimming these ‘Tale’ parts-”

“Huh?”

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

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

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

Ekaf's Tale 1: The Moon Dragon Man

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

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

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

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

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

“Is it a myth too?”

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

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

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

“So its smarter than us?”

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

“Has anyone been able to figure it out?”

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

“What happened to them?” Joe asked.

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

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

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

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

“Exactly! I-”

“What’s a cloudling?” Joe asked.

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

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

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

“See, that’s why they’re endangered.”

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

“Sure!”

- - -

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

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

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

When he would hunt and catch prey, Ali-Iya would place both hands on the animal and drain a cloudy white gas through the deceased creature's flesh. Afterwards, the beast's bones would be as brittle as dried leaves. She explained it as a way to ensure no energy would be wasted from a creature's death. The energy gave her a euphoric sensation, putting her body and mind completely at ease. She left out the part about how miserable one felt after the effects wore off or how to stop consuming this substance she termed "energy" would mean to die.

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

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

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

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

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"I thought they thought harpies weren't human." Joe interrupted.

"Malcova wasn't human either." Ekaf stated.

"You know what I meant."

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

"You've got a point."

"A lesser race, a lesser gender, it's all a part of the same way of thinking."

"Alright, you can keep going."

- - -

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

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

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

Creaton could kill the harpy but they needed a guide to take him to their home. He saw an opening for victory and severed the man's sword arm. Instead of retreating into the sky, the harpy's boney fingers wrapped around the medallion hanging from Creaton's neck and yanked the void-dust free. He spat on the blue gem, causing it to hum angrily, then threw it at Creaton's feet. Creaton stood motionless as the one armed harpy fell to his knees, clutching at his stub, all the while cursing his opponent in his foreign tongue. The man would've died from blood loss atop that wall if Creaton hadn't healed him.

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

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

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

“It is land in Knomish,” Ekaf explained. “The first to assign the continental names was a minotaur named Solon Icespear who got the names from his navigator, Polo, a Knome. Even well after the time of Solon and Polo, the tradition stuck as new lands were discovered. There's

Batloe, Manaloe, Foxloe, Darkloe, Dogloe, and Iceload – except Iceload means iceberg. You want to see? I think I have a map in my-”

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

- - -

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

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

But Creaton never got an answer.

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

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

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

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

As the looting continued well into the night, Creaton found an empty room within the pyramid where he could contemplate the consequences of his actions. The earth elf raiders beheaded what few harpy soldiers they found in the temple-city. They mounted the heads on pikes which they posted like tiki torches around their ships and rowboats. They threw the bodies of the old, the workers, the women, and the children into the pond. The reflective, crystal like water became dull as the midnight blood diffused, painting the surface black beneath the cloudy night sky. What had started out as vengeance, had quickly surpassed revenge. Creaton prayed to the harpy gods. He feared that even though he did not partake in the atrocities he would never be able to look Ali-Iya in the face again.

Little did he know, his fear would come true.

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

- - -

“That’s horrible!” Joe exclaimed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s the unholy flame?” Joe asked.

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

“These terms are misleading.” Joe stated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Think of it like-”

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

- - -

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

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

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

January first, year one, he awoke with the harness on, the black wings folded behind him. His ankles were strung together, hanging against a rigid pole of wood, and his wrists were bound to a beam that stretched across his shoulders. The Live had crucified Creaton. They jabbed him with spears, shot arrows into his shins, and hung vipers from his biceps. The crucifixion was not

an execution, but a celebration in which all participated. If they didn't inflict him with physical pain, they berated him with titles like "bird-fucker" and "sodomizer". He had remained unconscious the first two days spent on the cross. His body had yet to give, despite the multitude of wounds ailing him. When he finally died, on the third day, a mighty explosion filled the sky.

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

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

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"Woh!" Joe jerked upright, "Isn't that a little much?"

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

"He didn't have to kill everyone!" Joe protested.

"He didn't necessarily do it on purpose!"

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

"Who said anything about Creaton being the good guy?"

Joe scratched his head, "So he's the bad guy?"

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

With an eye roll, Joe laid back down.

- - -

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

Black fire still danced over the slow rotting corpses of Creaton's kin as Chane approached the prostrate banshee. When he addressed Creaton, he reawakened the slumbering rage and Creaton, unwittingly, activated the second part of the spell he'd used to destroy Valleyshore. The corpses of the villagers animated. Murmuring much like the demon harpies,

they stood and marched towards their conjurer. Creaton rose and, grabbing the fire elf's sword, slaughtered the zombified remnants of Valleysore. When the only moving beings left were Chane and himself, Creaton stopped.

After Creaton saved his life, Chane decided it was worth one more try. This time, he started by telling Creaton that Malcova still lived. In the charred dirt, he illustrated a man with a hammer fleeing up the coast of Tadloe into the lands of the Fou Tribe. Alongside the man was a strange woman, a pregnant woman, and – though the details were minimalistic – Creaton could tell this figure was supposed to be recognizably *not* elven.

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

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

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

"How's that?" Ekaf asked.

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

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

"Yea, but-"

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

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

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

“Huh?”

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

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

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

In the heart of the first summer of Solarin history, Creaton and his followers fortified their northern outposts, to keep the Fou at bay as they turned their gaze south. The Kemplor tribe was nothing more than a band of anglers spread across the Saluman River founded by Saluman Kemplor (Kemplor was part human part earth elf and had been raised among the Toxica). Saluman Kemplor welcomed Creaton in, treating him as if he were a holy savior. They then pushed further south into the marshlands. By this point, Creaton had mastered necromancy and many other simple magics having even taught many techniques to Chane and other well trusted warriors. To reward his soldiers for their fearless devotion, they gathered on a hill above the

massive city-state of Inton and watched as Creaton directed an army of reanimated skeletons to take hold of the city. From there they continued south into the lands of Won. The Won was a spread out tribe consisting of hunter gatherers with very few settled-locations. They lived in hollowed out fallen trees and caves. However, they were not unorganized. They had a mysterious way of communicating through their forests so that – when threatened – the entirety of the Won people would unite to defend their comrades. Together, the Won were as formidable as the Fou. Creaton knew this and had no intention to face the same obstacles he had in the north. Instead of winning with brute force, he made use of his cunningness. They chopped a ring around much of the Won lands and built a moat using the excellent guidance of Inton irrigation experts. Then they set the Won woods on fire. Those that made it to the moat joined Creaton or were immediately killed. The rest either perished in the ashes of their homeland or fled further south, seeking refuge with the remaining tribes.

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

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

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

He fortified his control over the wooded continent and turned his war party into a well-trained military. They domesticated the dragons of Tadloe, creating Solaris' first dalvary, in

preparation for the demon-harpy invasion Creaton rightly assumed would one day come. It was this prophecy of impending doom that got the Fou to surrender. Seeking to work with Creaton against the hellish foes, Queen Farak Fou bowed to the Crown and history never forgave her – her name, even in Tadloe, is now the equivalent of the F-word on Earth.

The harpies came in December of that first year, testing the resolve of Creaton's Tadloe. They beat back the demons, not with ease, but nonetheless they persevered. Unable to rest, Creaton sought to take their army to other continents. Chane really pushed this. He had a revenge of his own he was after.

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

- - -

"Void War?" Joe asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joe yawned, then ask, “Tomorrow?”

“I haven’t finished the First Void War yet! You want me to skip to the Fourth?!”

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

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

“Why?”

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

“They’ll kill me?”

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

“Jesus...” Joe muttered.

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

“True...”

“Good night!”

“Night...”

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

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

Chapter Two: Dozen ex Machina

The semi-truck plowed into the passenger side of the little car and sucked the rest of the automobile beneath its starving eighteen wheels but Joe was no longer in his car. He was no longer in the intersection. He was sitting on his butt in soft, damp soil surrounded by healthy, green foliage with rotted leaves padding the earth beneath his hands. Monstrous trees climbed into the sky around him, their tree trunks as big around as his car had been long. The trees climbed higher than any tree he'd ever encountered and covered the heavens with a dark deciduous canopy. Birds screeched overhead and beasts moaned in the distance. Although he'd heard birds and beasts, these creatures sounded strange, alien and yet, somehow familiar.

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

"Yup! Welcome to your afterlife."

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

"You an elf?"

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

that is not spelled with a ‘g’ but rather with a ‘K’, a capital ‘K’, and I’ll let you in on a secret: the reason for the capitali-”

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

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

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

“And you’re already an accomplice!”

“No, I’m not, I’m just a witness!”

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

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

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

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

“You kinda owe me,” folding his arms, he raised his eyebrow and pursed his lips, “I did just save your life.”

“I thought I was dead?!”

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

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

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

insects, were different – but not too different. Not something beyond the capability of his own imagination. *At least when I wake up, I'll have a solid excuse for missing my interview.*

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

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

“Sure, where are-”

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

Turning around, Joe yelped and stumbled backwards. A being had emerged from behind one of the giant tree trunks. The person was taller than Joe, at least six foot tall, and was dressed in metal plates held together by chainmail. In the center of her chest there was a circle surrounded by tiny triangles that pointed outward, a symbol Joe easily recognized as a sun. Her entire body was covered in armor, from her armored boots to her armored gloves, all the way up to her neck. The helmet atop her head was covered in carvings of mythical creatures, dragons and dinosaurs, minotaurs and monsters, and it was crested with horns that cut a line down the middle of the woman’s scalp like a mohawk. The sliver of face that was visible was wrinkleless and wispy with eyes that were glossy chrome disks. It wasn’t the armor that made the woman look so peculiar, it was the transparency. Joe could see through the woman’s flesh. There was no muscle or bone. The woman was nothing but a bluish cloud hanging onto a humanoid shape encased in a suit of metal.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CLANG!

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

“For knights, you folks really have no manners. However y’all may feel about myself, that is no excuse to treat this man like a villain! He’s a guest in our world – and a stranger to me, I might add – I’ve got no clue who he is.” He glanced back at Joe, “Sorry bout them, Joe.” Then back to the knights, “Alright. Here’s the deal. I’m quite fond of spirits. Biologically I mean. You’re magnificently efficient organisms. And I’m not so fond of slaughter. This is all to say that I’m offering y’all an out. I’ll let all five of you leave, unharmed, and I’ll take your retreat as a sufficient apology – especially if you take this tale of mercy back to your comrades, maybe spend a little time reconsid-”

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

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

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

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

Joe gaped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are they coming?” Joe asked.

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

“What’s with that knife?”

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

“Dookie?” Joe snickered.

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

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

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

“Jesus!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’ve never seen a key?”

“No, the box!”

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

“Wanna bet?” Joe scoffed.

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

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

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

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

Joe chuckled with bewilderment then changed the subject.

“Who were those guys back there?”

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

“Like bringing me here?” Joe asked.

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

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

“Depends on how you define dead.”

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

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

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

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

“How’s that?”

“By killing yourself, of course.”

“That seems counterproductive.”

“Unless you want to die.”

“I’d rather not.”

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

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

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

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

The two trudged on, finding their way onto a trail as Ekaf elaborated on the importance of swordsmanship. His voice drained to a dull murmur in Joe’s ears as he took in the world around him. Head swiveling, he stumbled onward like a child. They hiked through crispy leaf laden meadows beneath thick canopies that had emerged from winter like a student from his semester eager to live once again. Cutting through old woods, the trail led them onward into the

ranks of new saplings that rose above the ashen remains of scorched forest. Then the trail curved upward, hanging on the hillsides as it ascended onto orange carpet dropped by shingle-barked pines, before falling back to the valleys. Between the green mountains, simmering streams striped the lowlands, producing thick glossy leaved foliage and bright colored flower buds that eagerly waited to blossom. Each bizarre bird call, each lude leaf, and each strange scent sank into Joe's brain, planting the seeds of questions, millions of questions, in his mind. One of which he was about to ask when he looked down to see Ekaf had stopped.

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

"Don't move."

The spirits found us! Joe thought, *But where are they?* Aside from the sounds of birds, the rustling of distant itty bitty beasts, and the bugs bouncing about the brush, Joe only spotted one other living creature: Ekaf. And looking past him, he saw nothing but forest. A couple yards from a stream barely a step wide the trail curved left to dodge the base of a hill. *Nothing.* The valley was dominated by a thick-leaved, dusty-barked bush opposed only occasionally by a tree. Joe couldn't tell if the bush was one or a million of the same. As far as Joe could see into it, which wasn't far, the flora made a web of itself. Joe was sure their pursuer wouldn't be able to sneak through the thick brush and flank them. In some places the plant rose higher than Joe's head, stacked on top of each other and packed in like sardines as if it were a type of mangrove that grew on dry land. Behind him there was only more of the same.

Foliage but no foes. *No one.*

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

"What is it?"

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

As Joe's heart sank towards his intestines, he watched a long black snout lift from the cover of leaves. A fat black nose, dripping with slobber, pulsed in front of beady black eyes that stuck to the side of the monster's head. The face was bull-like but the horns were far too large, more like an ox's, and the jaws were far too long and narrow, almost reptilian, like a crocodile. The general size of the creature dwarfed any cow Joe had ever seen. Its shoulders were broader and its back steeped into a hump, just behind the neck, much like a buffalo. But unlike

all the animals Joe's brain attempted to compare it too, he knew this was no herbivore. With a blood curdling growl, the lips rippled, revealing rows of teeth longer than his hands, sharp as the blade in Ekaf's belt.

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

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

White light filled his vision, but he wasn't about to stop. Groping the stone he'd bashed, Joe crawled through the shrubbery, getting a couple yards away from the trail before hunkering down between the roots. Listening, he could hear heavy steps and the same rolling growl he'd heard when his eyes first met the beast. But, as far as he could tell, there was no sign of Ekaf.

Shit!

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

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

A drop of saliva fell onto his shoulder.

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

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

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

"What the hell was that?!"

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

“What's going on, is that your pet?”

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

“What was that?” He whispered sharply.

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

“No.” Joe snapped.

“Why not?” Ekaf stopped in his tracks.

Joe repeated himself, “What was that?”

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

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

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

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

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

“A leaf?”

“A wet leaf.”

“A wet leaf?”

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

“Why?”

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

you'd last long enough for me to drop down on the godi gopper, but you really gave it a run for its money, going for the sword like that, I was im-

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

"Barren."

"-you could test an old wives' tale?!"

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

"I NEARLY DIED!"

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

"*Saved my life?!*"

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

"Had you not intervened, they would've never been after me!" Joe growled through clenched teeth.

"And your body would be under a tractor trailer and your soul'd be swimming in that lake of fire, so in the end, I had-"

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

"Well, you did just use the Lord's name in vain." Ekaf mumbled.

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

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

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

Ekaf shrugged, "Unless the Muslims are right."

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

"Thanks!"

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

"So, where are we?" Joe asked.

"I thought I told you." Ekaf replied, his pace unmarred.

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

"Ah, see, remember Solaris is the solar system, not the planet, though we call the world Solaris - cause the world isn't only the planet, right? It's a social construct of ours, the way we

see the world. It's more than just dirt. Something y'all got hung up on. After all, for thousands of years y'all thought the moon was made out of curdled milk so it really is no wonder that you literally named your planet dirt."

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

"Zouzu."

"Huh?"

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

"Zuzu?"

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

"Hold up," Joe interrupted, "how come y'all speak English here? Even those spirits spoke English?"

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

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

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

"Yea...that's not it...its just the fashion, I guess."

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

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

"So we're in Zouzu, Tadloe. Where are we going?"

"To Hyzoh Zou. Across the Saluman River. We're ultimately headed for Suinus. A city at the center of Tadloe, built in the base of an ancient crater, but we'll be camping beside the

Saluman River tonight. Tomorrow, we'll cross it and stay with a friend in the woods one more night before we arrive in Suinus on the third day – where we can get into the Key Library and rid ourselves of this key!”

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

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

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

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

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

“What?”

“Nothing.” Joe sighed.

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

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

“How long until we reach this river?”

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

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

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

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

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

“You know what diabetes is?”

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

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

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

“Cure me?” Joe froze.

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

“Cure me.”

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

“This is definitely a dream.” Joe stated.

“Or heaven.” Ekaf suggested.

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

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

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

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

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

“You can’t change the future?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“On the contrary, most people don’t know about the Key Library and most of those that do think it’s a myth, but – much like the tale of a barren being lulled to sleep by its mother – the Key Library is an old bachelor’s tale that turns out to be true!” Then he quickly added, “But, I’d advise you not to mention it. Not to keep it secret, but because people likely won’t believe

you...and they'll already be giving us weird looks thanks to the way you're dressed..." Ekaf thought for a moment then added, "...and also to keep it secret."

Joe nodded solemnly, ducking beneath a low hanging branch.

"The Library is a relic of an ancient universe, one still parallel but separated from this dimension by thousands of timelines wedged in between-

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

"Some of them, yes, though most come from those in between and this very one here."

"Are they librarians?"

"Ha!" Ekaf laughed, "Librarians with swords!"

Joe hurriedly defended himself, "You said they're from the library!"

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

"And that key is in that crater city we're going to?"

"Suinus." Ekaf nodded.

"So...you called them spirits, right?"

"Correct."

"But didn't you say something about their biology?"

"Indeed."

"But aren't spirits...sorta like...ghosts?"

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

"They looked like ghosts!" Joe protested.

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

"I meant that-"

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

"Then how do they-"

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

"Huh." Joe murmured.

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

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

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

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

“Yet.”

“What’d you do? Why are they mad?”

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

“But they’re not ghosts?”

“But they want to be ghosts. And want everyone else to be too.” Ekaf said before placing what he thought would be the final piece of the puzzle in Joe’s lack of understanding the conflict, so proud was he that he twirled his index finger and plunged it into the sky as he said, “And I’m trying to stop them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ekaf nodded.

“Why?” Joe asked.

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

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

“Precisely.” Ekaf nodded.

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

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

“The Catechism?” Joe asked.

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

“Sounds very Nazi like.”

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

“Queen of Darkness?” Joe asked.

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

“I was about to say...” Joe chuckled.

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

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

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

“Why’s that?”

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

“Which part?” Joe asked.

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

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

“Me?!” Joe croaked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“*Seriously?!*”

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

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

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

“Barrens?” Joe shivered.

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

Everything burned. Every bit of Zalfron’s flesh that touched the knobby stone floor, every place his sopping tunic stuck to his pasty skin, every quivering entrail that shriveled in a last-ditch state of self-cannibalistic entropy – *everything* seared. Darkness gouged at his eyes whether open or closed and his brain bashed itself against the insides of his skull like a rat caught in a one-way trap. An incessant ringing filled his ears, blotting out the sounds of his own

incessant screams until his voice had been lost – not long before his sanity. He couldn't smell anymore but he could taste: blood and bile, like his mouth was filled with a soup of rusty filth.

He writhed there so long that he'd forgotten the last thing he'd seen – his murdered parents. His torment may have even been somewhat of a reprieve from that reality but his compromised state banished any sort of appreciation for that bleak bright side.

Splinters of consciousness occasionally scorched through his mind, spiking the relentless agony as if punishing him for the audacity of existence. *Is this death?* If it was, it was hell. *Is this a dream?* Only if it were a nightmare. *Why?* Back on Panta, he would've been embarrassed. A historian asking why bad things happen? That was a query for the philosophers and faithful, not for the archaeologists and record keepers. *Why not?* Was their answer. As long as there was life, there was pain. What made Zalfron Sentry – heir to the Atriarchy of Sentrakle, son of the Admiral of the Imperial Navy, brother of the Mystakle Samurai herself – think himself immune from life's bitter downsides? He'd enjoyed such a privileged existence thus far, it was about time fate threw him some curveballs.

Light!

Suddenly light! Sure, it immolated his eyeballs but he could hardly register significant fluctuations in pain at this point. Warmth! It was a meager temperature increase but compared to the ice age he'd been enduring he felt as if Solaris herself were shining down upon him. He convulsed onto all fours, his head flung back on his spine like an open PEZ dispenser then snapped back as blood and molten guts poured out his maw. The vomit didn't taste great nor was the process very comfortable but the release was still somehow cathartic and Zalfron didn't spend time dwelling on what exactly that might mean about his current state. Wiping his lips, he gazed up into the angel now eclipsing heaven's beacon, proclaiming:

“GARBLARBARGAUGHGA!” Absolute gibberish.

“Shut up.” His savior growled.

She stepped over the puddle of puke and shut the door to allow only a narrow beam of light in. Stooping to a squat beside him, she placed two copper bowls on either side of the barf. Zalfron thought he couldn't smell before but he suddenly realized he could – he could smell the water. His olfactory senses had been so consumed with stench he couldn't decipher one scent from another but suddenly he could smell something: nothing. Clean, pure, fresh water. He plunged his grubby tongue into the bowl and let his taste buds simply soak in the universe's solvent.

“You're the brother of the Samurai.” The young woman continued.

Zalfron paid her no attention. His brain registered her words and filed them way back in the recesses of his mind, but his forefront was newly possessed by another smell. A thick savory aroma wafted over the lip of the second bowl, avoided the now-tainted water of the first, and slipped up into the nostrils of the boy. His eyes rolled back in their sockets but before he could go berserk they rolled back into place and he pounced on the second dish. Like a dog, he swallowed the meat whole. The strip of steak dipped into his stomach acids while the other end snaked up his throat to tickle his uvula. Now it was his savior who felt queasy.

Girding her loins, she proceeded, "I'm the sister of a Samurai."

Undaunted by the fact that he was choking, Zalfron looked up to face this strange Messiah. She looked no older than he. She wasn't elven, her ears were rounded when they poked out of her dark, black locks. Taller than he, Zalfron figured her a human from the Solaris-scorched lands of Sondor, but her humanity wasn't what he fixated on. Her right eye was a hard black sphere. She was a shadowmancer.

Suddenly, Zalfron remembered everything – or at least, enough to come to a few conclusions. He recalled the mutiny at Mutiny Palace – a blackout split this memory but he came to paralyzed in the grasp of a necromancer decorated in Mystvokaran armor. The Mystvokar ruled Iceload. Sentrakle – where Zalfron's family ruled – was a region of Iceload that had enjoyed simultaneous loyalty to the Mystvokar and his rival, the Trinity Nations that surrounded Iceload. The assassination of his family by Mystvokar soldiers meant said duality was over. Sentrakle was no longer governed by the Sentry. The assassination of his family by Mystvokaran soldiers using mancy meant the Trinity Nations, which had declared a War on Mancy, was no longer Iceload's rival. The Trinity Nations and the Mystvokaran Iceload must now be at war.

Who was this human shadowmancer now giving him food, water, light, and warmth?

"I'm going to get you out of here," the shadowmancer had gotten up and slinked back towards the cracked door, "just trust me and shut up."

Then she was gone.

The darkness returned.

Zalfron swallowed the last inch of the steak and his stomach groaned like an old ship. For a moment, the torment remained at bay. He gazed around his cell blinking dumbly. Reaching down, he picked up the copper bowl of water and took a gulp. The hydration didn't go to good use. No sooner did his body begin to process it than did it began to pour over his eyelids and stream down his cheeks. He through the bowl against the wall and screamed as loud as he could until the ringing returned. By the time the cold fiery pain swept back over him, he welcomed it. He couldn't think of escape or of war, not yet. He could still only think of the last thing he'd seen before he'd wound up where he was. Such grief transcended any physical anguish.

He now knew he was alive, but he also remembered he was in hell.

- - -

It was somewhere between yesterday and tomorrow, but not yet today, when the two laid down to go to bed and even Joe, on the cot, could tell he wasn't going to be able to fall asleep. At least, not for a good long while. Too much had happened. Zalfron, on the cavern floor, was the first to break the silence.

"You slaep?" The elf asked with his melodic drawl.

"Nope," Joe replied, "not even close."

"Yup." Zalfron sighed.

Silence threatened to descend upon them again but Zalfron beat it back once more, "So your from Earth?"

“Yea, it’s nothing like Solaris.” Yet as Joe said it, he realized it was a bit similar. The folks he grew up around talked a lot like Zalfron. Though instead of pointed ears, they had red necks.

“Better or worse?” Zalfron asked.

“Well, if I can stay alive, Solaris is an exciting place, that’s for sure.” Joe tapped the stone in his chest. *Clink. Clink. Clink.* Then continued, “I do miss my friends and family...though I don’t miss diabetes.” He chuckled, then asked, “Where are you from?”

“Iceland,” Zalfron replied and though Joe knew what he meant, the word sounded dangerously like, “Assload” with the elf’s Yelan accent. Zalfron asked, “Ever been?”

“I just got here a few days ago, Tadloe’s all I’ve seen.” Joe thought back to the story of the ancient warriors Ekaf had been telling him, “I’ve heard of Iceland though. I heard your last name was Sentry, is that like the Zannon Sentry of legend?”

“Not legend, hae was rael.” Zalfron assured Joe, nodding vigorously. Then he remembered that Joe couldn’t see him from his cot and stopped, “Mah familay descends from the fella, but the surname ain’t as uncommon as ya’d thank. Half of everayone in Sentrakle goes bah Sentray – everay elf that is.”

“Ekaf told me the story of the First Void War but that’s about all the history I know.” Joe admitted, “That story is the only thing I really know about this planet.”

“Who’s Ekaf?” Zalfron blurted.

“A Knome.” Joe shrugged.

Zalfron could see the human’s shrug from where he lay on the floor, but the gesture didn’t satisfy the elf, “The Knome we just met?”

“No?” Joe half laughed before stopping himself. It hadn’t been an hour since all three had been on a first name basis, “That was Grandfather.”

Zalfron sat upright abruptly, “Your Grandfather’s a Knome?!”

“No!” Now Joe full laughed. Sitting up to face Zalfron, “The Knome’s name is Grandfather.”

Now it was Zalfron who shrugged, lying back down and muttering, “You sure hang out with a lotta Knomes.”

Joe rolled his eyes and laid back down as well, saying, “Yea, well, they keep saving my life.”

“Oh yeah?” The elf remarked. His tone had warmed back to genuine curiosity after the suspiciously-Knome-critical interrogation, “Thought you said you just got hare?”

“I did!” Joe exclaimed, hoping the elf didn’t think this was his usual way of life, “First they saved me from a car wreck on Earth.”

“A trainwreck?” Zalfron interjected.

Joe paused, then tried again, “Like uh...an electric wagon collision.”

“Doesn’t sound so deadlay...” Zalfron tried to whisper to himself but his volume control was even worse off than his manners.

“Okay, fair enough.” Joe admitted, “It might as well have been a trainwreck.”

“Brutal.” Zalfron remarked, “What else they save you from?”

“From uh...” Again Joe stumbled over his words as he tried to figure out how best to describe the second situation Ekaf had gotten him out of, “From spirits?”

“Spirits?” Zalfron yelped, “But spirits are nice!”

“Not these ones.” Joe stated.

Zalfron grunted, then again tried to grumble under his breath, “Prollay cause you had a Knome with ya...”

Again, Joe heard his comment but this time, he had to admit, “Actually...you’re not wrong about that one...but then Ekaf saved me from a barren.”

“Saelu! A farakin barren!” Zalfron exclaimed, jerking upright again. Finally the elf was able to overcome whatever bias he had towards Joe’s short, elderly saviors as he reveled in response to Joe’s claim, “Ah’ve onlay ever saen those in zoos!”

“You better hope you keep it that way.” Joe shuddered, “Then there was the river monsters – shamoos, I think.”

“Ah’ve saen shamoos. They’re no barrens but they’re pertty spookay too...”

Zalfron began to ramble about how one time he accidentally hooked a shamoo on a deep-sea fishing trip and nearly flipped the ship over but Joe’s thoughts began to speak over the elf. He was thinking about Zalfron’s earlier offhand remark, “*Prollay cause you had a Knome with ya.*” The shamoo situation was a bit because of the Knome. He certainly shared some of the blame but it would’ve never happened had the Knome not gone behind his back and...*The barren wasn’t though – or was it?* Did Ekaf lead him into the monsters path just to save him? Was Ekaf saving him from self-made crises in some sort of a conspiracy to guilt trip him into staying in Solaris? *The car wreck wasn’t Ekaf’s fault. Joe assured himself. Nor was diabetes. He didn’t have to get me cured. He knows I could take the cure back to Earth and leave him with nothing for it.* So absorbed in his own thoughts, not only did the speak over the elf they suddenly spilled out of his own mouth to interrupt Zalfron, “Got my diabetes fixed by bringing me down in these caves too.”

Zalfron took the cut off in stride. Noting on the cave, “This cave ain’t half bad.” He rolled his shoulders beneath him. His cell in the dungeons of Icelore had been damp and sticky, this cave was wet but in a mysteriously fresh sort of way. A mist kept their chamber cool, but didn’t make them slimy. They stone beneath his back was lumpy but somehow in all the right places, as if it were just soft enough to slowly mold to better fit his back. To be honest, the stone felt better on his spine than he figured the cot felt for the human. He certainly didn’t want to bring that up however. He quickly kept talking, keeping the conversation about worse caves, “You know, ah told mahself ah would never slaep in another cave after ah escaped the dungeons of Asslore.”

Joe knew Zalfron to have meant “Icelore”.

Zalfron continued, “Ah had a couple of dozen ex machainas then too.”

This, Joe did correct, “Deus.”

“Yea, when it’s onlay two it’s ‘dous’,” Zalfron explained, “but when you’re on our level it’s at laest a dozen.”

“Pretty sure ‘deus’ means ‘god’, not ‘two’.” Joe countered.

“Maybae on Earth,” Zalfron offered Joe a way out, “but under Solaris, ‘dous’ maens ‘two’.”

Joe swallowed his pride and took the olive branch.

Zalfron continued, “The sister of a Samurai was undercover working for the Dissahples of Darkness or the Black Crown Pact or whatever they call themselves these days... Anyway, shae raelahzed they were hahding the brother of a Samurai down in the dungeons – mae.”

“Huh,” Joe muttered, “wonder if she’s supposed to be on our team too.”

“Ah’d lahk that. Baefore her, ah prettay much figured everay mancer was aeivil. Aevin her brother, the shadow slangin Samurai – figured hae maht not should bae trusted so much. When you gotta kill to live, you gotta go crazy at laest a little bit.” Blushing, Zalfron sat up and gestured to Joe a conciliatory, double hand wave, “No offense, Joe! Flame throwers aren’t as bad as bone benders and shadow slangers! You don’t have to kill and all...” then, gritting his teeth, he back tracked a bit, “But to bae honest, baefore shae anus ex machaina-ed mae-”

The phrasing took a bit of the sting out of the admonition for Joe as he forced himself to suppress a smirk.

“-ah wouldn’t have trusted a pahromancer aither. Suppose ah used to bae a bit straight edge and a little bigoted against the dark arts.”

“Not to mention Knomes.” Joe muttered.

“Huh?” Zalfron asked.

“I’m glad we met when we did, Zalfron.” Joe said aloud.

“Mae too.” Zalfron lay back down with a smile, “Hey, how’d you baecome a flame thrower? They hardlay exist anaymore on Mystakle Planet, are they a big thang back on Earth?”

“Not at all.” Joe said, “It was either another dozen ex machina or the opposite.”

“Anaihcam xe nezod?” Zalfron nodded.

“Wha-” Joe stopped himself, “Yup. That. Exactly. So, my first night in Solaris, we camped out by a river and after I fell asleep...”

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

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

In my hand I hold pain.

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

But I also hold power.

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

I hold the power to kill.

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

And I hold the power to protect.

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

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

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

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

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

Joe understood. He nodded.

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

Pain.

Bright, brilliant, beautiful agony.

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

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

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

instinctively and that's when he remembered that his insulin, blood meter, and pricker were in his car which was, consequently, in another world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Good!”

And with that the Knome was gone, scurrying off into the woods, leaving Joe with the cube and his thoughts. *I wouldn't mind this place being real if that means I can go home without diabetes...though, I'm not sure how I could explain that...Or how I'll explain the wreck.* Wandering over to the edge of the bluff, he stared into the water below. *Ekaf can't really expect me to stay – if he wanted a hero, he should've picked one! Of the few keys he said he found, there's no way I was the best candidate.* The cliff was quite high and, from Joe's point of view, it seemed even further from the water's surface than it was. *The longer I stay here, the more I waste his time.* His stomach churned the extra-terrestrial meat in his gut and he decided to avert his gaze from the drop. Instead, he tossed the warp cube into the air, watched it reach its peak over his head, before sticking out his opposite hand to catch it as gravity sucked it back down.

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

“Amazing...” Joe whispered.

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

THE KEY!

The silver key fell past his feet towards the water.

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

Joe screamed but he kept his arm outstretched.

His hand closed around the key.

The creature bit down on his forearm.

Then the two of them hit the water.

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

Then, the beast let go.

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

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

Joe felt a wave of warmth rush over his face.

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

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

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

- - -

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He gritted his teeth.

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

"Now the arm."

Joe's right arm was a gnarled clump of flesh. Bone, slick with blood, was visible in some places. A tangled mess of muscle and skin clumped around his forearm. It looked as if he'd stuck his arm into a blender yet somehow his hand got off scot-free. Blood was flowing out of the arm

steadily, pouring down the dirty beach to mix into the river. Still, the body continued to flip flop between biological matter and flame. Fire jumped to life along the trail of blood, as if it were gasoline, only to extinguish itself a moment later. Hastily wiping the blood from his hands in the dirt, before it could combust on his fingers, Ekaf removed his knife sized Duikii. Pointing the knife at Joe, it grew to about the size of Ekaf's arm. Nothing happened.

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

The sword hesitated for a second, as if indecisive.

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

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

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

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

"Let's get you some fuel."

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

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

Ekaf smiled in greetings.

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

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

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

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

"Uh, well, I'm not the best one to describe the ways of a pyromancer-"

"Pyromancer?" Joe asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s why I have a rock in my chest!” Joe exclaimed as he buttoned his shirt.

Taking a deep breath, Ekaf began to untangle the long splintery rope that tied the boat to a water-soaked log.

“So who was the fiery man that visited me last night?”

Ekaf finished unwrapping the rope and plopped down on it before answering, “Agony.”

“Who?”

“Agony. Remember when I told you about the Fate Programmers?”

“Yea, the guys who understood that magic rock?”

“The Voidstone, yea. They’re cursed and they’re souls are untethered-”

“Untethered?”

“Disconnected from any certain reality, they slip somewhat uncontrollably within and between universes...almost like they’re in multiple places at once...at least that’s how I make sense of it.” Ekaf shrugged, “Anyways, Agony was one of the Fate Programmers.”

“And he came here last night?”

“Yes. Wherever there is pain, Agony is there. Though, most folks don’t see him.”

“Does he like...” Joe cocked his head to the side, “...cause the pain?”

“No, no, no, no, no, no!” Ekaf said hurriedly, achieving a shake of the head with each rapid negative, “The opposite. He feels it. All pain. He feels it.”

“Jesus...” Joe muttered.

“Yea,” Ekaf nodded, sadly, “but anyways, he appears in the dreams of most all pyromancers when they’re being initiated. Suppose he gets lonely living his hell.”

“He kind of... facilitated it, yea?” Joe asked.

“Facilitated? Nah. Joe that stone didn’t get shoved into your chest in a dream-”

“What do you mean?”

“I did it.” Ekaf said, shamelessly.

“You put this in my chest?!” Joe exclaimed.

“Yea.” He nodded, “I recited the spell and stuck that coal in your chest. If you hadn’t approved, it wouldn’t have worked-”

“Would’ve just left me with third degree burns, right?”

Ekaf patted the Duikii in his belt as he defended himself, “Which I would’ve healed before you woke up!”

“Do most pyromancers get turned in their sleep?” Joe said through a glare.

Ekaf nodded, but admitted, “Though they normally know what’s going down beforehand...” Then he lifted his voice and brought back his grin, “Aren’t you excited though? Don’t you realize what you just did? You just evaporated an entire chunk of the Saluman River!”

“There’s no getting it removed, is there?”

“Nope.”

“Well then,” Joe grunted, “I suppose you win.”

“How’s that?” Ekaf asked.

“I can’t go home with a giant rock full of fire lodged in my sternum.”

Ekaf apparently misinterpreted Joe’s tone, “I knew you wanted to stay!”

“This better be a dream.” Joe muttered as he hopped in the row boat and looked across the Saluman. The river rushed west with a gentle gliding pace. It had fully recovered from Joe’s detonation. His fingers ran along the wooden side of the vessel, daring the splintery edges. The sweet stench of dead fish, *or dead reptile?* invaded Joe’s nostrils. Joe mumbled under his breath, “If I have to stay, he better cure my diabetes...” As Ekaf jumped in, Joe asked aloud, “Where’s the paddles?”

“Paddles? Magic.”

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

“So where was I?” Ekaf asked.

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

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

“I didn’t die.”

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

“Y’all have vampires?!” Joe exclaimed.

“No, you idiot! Don’t be ridiculous!”

Joe glowered.

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

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

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

“What?”

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

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

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

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

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

“War...” Joe gulped.

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

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

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

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

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

“That’s right.”

“Ah yes, Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff.”

“Who?”

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

Joe grumbled, “No promises.”

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

Ekaf's Tale 2: Warriors of the Blue Ridges

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

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

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

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

In Vanii, in the third January of Solarin history, Zannon met his cellmate – a chidra with black scales. He had to teach him Etihwy, the language of the electric elves, before they could communicate. Zannon gave the man the name Cannon, because the reptilian refused to tell his true name and his arms were the size of cannons. He did agree to explain how he got to be in Vanii. His homeland had been destroyed by the forces of a man named Creaton. The lone survivor of his village, as all others had been slaughtered or sold into slavery, Cannon fled to Iceload. The pale elves of Iceload had never seen a chidra before and his black scales only served to drive home the idea that this was no man, no person, but rather some sort of monster. It did not take long before he'd been arrested and transported to Vanii to be judged. He felt he was

being punished for abandoning his people – he wouldn't say his own name out of shame, he felt his name had been left behind in the desert sands of Batloe. Desperate to obtain the strong-man's assistance, as they were chained together, Zannon promised to help find Creaton if Cannon was willing to work with him to escape the dungeon. The two slit palms and shook on it, becoming blood brothers, then, as soon as their jailor's lowered their guard the two escaped – fleeing north across the river into Dustenhale.”

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

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

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

“I haven't told you?”

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

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

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

“I have?”

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

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

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

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

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

Ekaf nodded.

Joe cursed with raised eyebrows.

“They own the moons. Tons of resources up there – solar enertombs for one, which are like sun charged rock batteries. People – typically poor folks – used to go up there and mine but that kinda slowed down after the Third Hatching. You definitely don't want to be in space when

that dragon comes back. The city itself is still amazing – make your cities look like they’re still in the Stone Age.”

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

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

“What?”

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

“What if the Samurai are in Space City?”

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

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

“They look like bear people.”

“What do bear people look like?”

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

“Centaur style?” Joe asked.

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

“Yogi Bear?” Joe asked.

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

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

Ekaf shrugged, “Any more questions?”

“Electric elves?”

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

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

“Good, shall I continue?”

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

Zannon Sentry was a skilled fighter, but he was far better a blacksmith. In Dustenhale, one of the Hale Villages across the river from Vanii, they set up a shop making tools and weapons for the locals. They saved their money to journey west to face the warlord that had invaded Cannon’s land. When Ipativy pushed their way into Sentry lands, the captives were sold into slavery and the most prized class of these slaves were the smiths. Forge owners bought these craftsmen from the war parties and it didn’t take long before enslaved-Sentry-made metal works

became the standard of excellence among the Ipativy. Thus, the people of Dustenhale quickly recognized Zannon's technique. To be of another dynasty and live freely in another's land was quite the taboo but, as this was a peaceful town nearly devoid of military presence and Zannon and Cannon weren't causing any trouble, no one bothered to rat him out to the Ipativians. Plus, allowing him to stay in their midst gave them access to Sentry smithing without having to purchase a pricy smithing slave or buy the products off wealthy, up-charging slave owners.

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

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

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

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

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“Wait, they fled *through* Vanii?”

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

“That’s what you sa-”

Ekaf glowered, “Exactly.”

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

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

Joe nodded, “Gotcha.”

“Any more questions?”

“Yea, one more: how big are sky dragons?”

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

“And they hoard jewels and things?” Joe asked.

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

“True.” Joe agreed. “Was that Creaton’s army?”

“Huh?”

“The dragons that attacked – didn’t you say Creaton made a dragon army?”

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

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

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

“That sounds disgusting.” Joe stated.

“Pity evolution didn’t produce creatures you consider aesthetically pleasing.”

“You’re a jerk.”

“Wait one second!” Ekaf exclaimed, “You believe in God, that means God’s the jerk!”

“You don’t have to be an atheist to believe in evolution, Ekaf.” Joe growled.

“Fair enough.” Ekaf shrugged, “Back to the story?”

“Please.”

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Now it may have been spring but the spring in Iceload is much like the fall – it’s still winter. In fact, in the Vanian Mountains, it is always winter. Thus to flee into the Vanian

Mountains with little to no preparation and no knowledge of magic was not the brightest decision the two boys could have made – however, alternative options were few and far between. They would have frozen to death within the first week if they hadn't happened upon a charitable spirit. Her name was Rahsai and as soon as Zannon and Cannon laid eyes on her – even though none had ever seen a spirit and they believed her to be a ghost – both men fell in love. Saving them from the cold, she brought them to her people's home – a mountain pass village called Grantara.

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

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

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

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

his own and though his strength was unstoppable, his lesser peons were losing the fight. Many minotaurs had died but finally only one roost remained in GraiLord territory and this dragon nest was where Mycenae was headed when he met Cannon and Zannon.

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

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

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"Huh?" Joe asked.

"What?" Ekaf asked.

"Jesus Christ?"

"Mhm."

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

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

"Solaris has a Jesus?" Joe pressed further.

"The Jesus." Ekaf corrected.

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

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

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

The accusation of ignorance cut Ekaf deep and drew out the explanation Joe was looking for, "They found the Gospels, in the Vanian Mountains, long, long time ago. So long ago that by the time of this story they'd already been lost again. Anyways, this Gospel wasn't exactly the

same as the ones on Earth. Things like miracles and stuff are left completely out. No mention of heaven or hell either.”

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

Ekaf nodded.

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

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

“The Quran’s here too?!”

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

“What about the Torah?”

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

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

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

“They did kill his kid.” Joe joked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh yea?”

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

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

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

Joe nodded, “True.”

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

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

Ekaf snickered, “Maybe they’re right?”

Joe shrugged, “Maybe we all are.”

“Or y’all’re all wrong.” Ekaf grunted.

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

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

“Ha! From Golden Rule and collectivism to the Black Crown and survival of the fittest, I think that’d be quite a stretch.” Ekaf laughed, “But the Muslims of early Tadloe – as the Quran was found around the Saluman River – did think he might be Muhammad 2.0 and Creaton didn’t necessarily dispel those rumors. Whether he was the ultimate Quranic prophet or not, he definitely professed to being the deliverer of justice and really vibed with the message of the holy book.”

“Interesting...”

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

“I thought they were Christian?”

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

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

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

Dressed in the fire resistant fur of zeals, the three journeyed back to Krynor with a party of blood thirsty minotaurs to support them. They took the narrow passage through which they escaped and arrived in the belly of the mountain to find the sky dragons already at war – with the Ipativians. If not for the GraiLord, the elves would’ve perished in that cave but Zannon, Cannon, and Mycenae attacked the sky dragons from behind and together slayed every last reptile within that cavern. Kor was nowhere to be seen. Few of the elvish war party survived, but of those survivors was their charismatic leader, Thor Ipativy. After seeing the face of his saviors, he

immediately pardoned Zannon and Cannon (his heart had been softened by the harsh words of the villagers of Dustenhale who had chewed him out after Zannon and Cannon fled). Yet, criminal charges were the least of their worries in the deadly climate of the Vanian Mountains.

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

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

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“Is Kor the Moon Dragon?” Joe asked.

Ekaf moaned, “How'd you know?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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“But she obviously loves Cannon!” Joe cried.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It turned out good for everyone!” Joe said.

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

“Alright, so what happened?” Joe asked.

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

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

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

Chapter Three: The Oldest Necromancer Dead

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

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

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

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

"What happened to the Samurai?"

"What?"

"Remember, yesterday you said Benjamin Fleetfeet was killed-"

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

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

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

"A monkey's tail?" Joe repeated.

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

Joe shrugged, "Man?"

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

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

"Yea, you're right."

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

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

“Defeated. Like captured?”

“No. He disappeared.”

“Huh?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Or if they’re even alive.”

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

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

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

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

He is right, a few days ago I wouldn't have even tried to fight back when faced by such creatures. Maybe I do have it in me. The whirling fire in his chest seemed to agree, sending waves of warmth through his body. Joe rolled his shoulders back and stepped firmly onward. *Was Cannon a hero before he met Zannon? Was Creaton a leader before he met Chane? What makes a hero anyway? Is it in your DNA? Is it our history? Or is it merely the situation? Anyone can be a hero in the right place and the right time...right?* Joe set his chin and furled his brow. *Right!*

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

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

"What did I just say?"

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

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

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

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

"And you want me to find them?"

"Yes sir!"

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

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

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

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

"See, currently, the Soul Staff is held by a fella in the Black Crown Pact. Remember the Pact are the folks who follow Creaton and fight the Emperor of the Trinity Nations. The Pact has been backed into the corner of a continent called Darkloe fighting what's left of the Samurai's

forces. What you could do is hunt down this guy with the Staff, Hermes Retskcirt, kill him, then hit yourself with the Staff.”

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

“I suppose you don’t *have* to kill him. You could probably just trick him into hitting you with it.” Ekaf said, completely missing the crux of Joe’s implied-critique, then he continued with the second lead on his list, “Opposite the Black Crown Pact, you’ve got the Order of Mancers. They made the Staff and while the actual maker is just as lost as the Samurai, other high ranking Order members might have a clue or two up their sleeves. They’re fighting over in Iceload against the Ipativians and the GraiLords, basing their operations out of the island where Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff defeated Kor – Icelore.”

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

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

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

“What makes you think that?”

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

“Two thousand years ago.”

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

Ekaf started to interrupt but Joe caught himself.

“-not bad guys, but our enemy.”

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

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

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

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

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

Joe raised an eyebrow, “Is that so?”

“For the most part.” Ekaf shrugged.

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

“You consented!” Ekaf argued.

“In a dream!” Joe crowed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Like training?” Joe asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Gentlemen.”

Joe yelped.

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

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

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

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

“Ekaf Emanlaer Reppiz.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oil?”

“Wasn’t it once biological?”

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

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

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

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

“He could see us?” Joe murmured.

“He’s a busy man, I highly doubt-”

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

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

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

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

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

That didn’t ease Joe’s suspicions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yup.”

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

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

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

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

“Oh no, his skeleton is that of an ice raptor’s, which is considered a beast and not a being, but he wasn’t always a dinosaur. He once was an elf, from Iceload, named Bale Morain. You’ll

hear about Bale Morain later but for now you just need to know that his reptilian appearance is due to one of Creaton's many experiments."

"You mentioned that."

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

"So he was the first to have a boneguard?"

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

"Seems kind of pointless..."

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

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

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

"Do undead have hearts like ghosts?" Joe asked.

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

"Huh...then it isn't that weird to imagine how Creaton made Bonehead, right?"

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

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

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

Joe froze.

"What?" Ekaf asked him, "You've never seen a pancreas before?"

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"So Bonehead raelly was a dahnosaur." Zalfron remarked.

"His skeleton was." Joe confirmed.

"And what is uh dahnosaur again?" Zalfron asked.

“Just a reptile I guess.” Joe admitted.

“Huh. Lizards gotta lot cooler names on Earth.” Zalfron concluded, “*Dahmosaur*.”

Joe rolled over in his cot so he could see Zalfron’s face as he pried, “What’s Darkloe like? The war and all?”

“Darkloe’s uh dump.” Zalfron stated bluntly, all the was missing was for him to hock a loogie in a spittoon, “Thank onlay goblins raellay lived there for the last thousand yaers or more so the Black Crown Pact or the Dissahples – one of em – started building up some sorta bad guy, lava fortress-”

“That’s a bit overdone, huh?” Joe interjected.

“Oh yeah?” The elf perked up, genuinely intrigued, “Lotta bad guy lava fortresses on Earth?”

“No I mean...” Joe found himself scratching the back of his head and wincing awkwardly. Wasn’t so easy to poke holes at reality with the new elf as it had been with the old Knome. He ushered Zalfron on, “What was the war like?”

“Brutal.” Zalfron sighed, “Just relentless. Ah maen, the Samurah may have faltered but they got Craeton on the back foot. Problem is, a lava fortress is uh pertty good place for a last stand. Figure that’s whah it’s so overdone?”

“Fair enough.” Joe agreed, then asked, “So it’s just sorta a stalemate?”

“Yup.” Zalfron was frowning at first but suddenly a smile curved his lips, “Just waitin on us Knahts to show up, huh?”

Joe matched Zalfron’s enthusiasm and an idea suddenly burst into his brain, “Wait, that Kenchi guy is another Samurai sibling – like the girl that saved you and yourself – you think he might be one of the guys we should be looking for?”

“Eh...” Now it was Zalfron who was scratching the back of his head and wincing, “General Kenchai’s raellay cool and all but...hae’s a bit done with prophesay talk at the moment.”

“Ah...” Joe sighed, “That why you think he didn’t accept you?”

Zalfron lightened up at the comment – which threw Joe for a bit of a loop but he took it in stride. Zalfron said, “Totallay! Yea, hae said it was somethin about swordsmanship and all but ah thank hae felt a bit lahk hae was looking in the mirror looking at mae, ya know? Hae’s saen so many folks daestroyed bah the prophesay – lahk his brother – hae probablay doesn’t want anyone else to get hurt. Trahin spare anyone not already roped in.” Zalfron rolled his shoulders and puffed out his chest, then shook his head and sighed, “Poor guy.” He turned to Joe, “How’d your reptahlosaur go about it? Saems lahk him and the Knomes you surround yourself with were just dahing to draw you in!”

Joe pondered, “I kind of felt that way too...they always offered an out though...and to be honest, I kind of wanted for it all to be true. You know? To be a part of all this...uh...epicness?”

“How so?” Zalfron asked, “Lahk, whah?”

“Well...” Joe paused to chuckle, “to be honest, it all sort of starts with another dream.”

“You aeting okay hare?” Zalfron asked, “With all these draems?”

“Only had Knomish and dinosaur food so far so probably not.” Joe acknowledged.

“One of the Knahts better bae a godai chef.” Zalfron swore, “Anayways, tell mae about it – the draem.”

“Okay, so...”

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Tufts of fuzzy wheat seeds, clinging to wiry stems, bowed in the midnight breeze, brushing against the two boys' hips. Prickly footed insects dragged themselves across the two boys' sandaled feet but the two were unaware. Their heads were upturned, their bright eyes bound to blades of light burned by meteors breaking through the atmosphere as they fell towards Earth. Joe watched the children from a few yards away. He recognized the field, he recognized the night, he recognized the boys, and he couldn't help but feel a chill run down his spine as a man strode past him to stand between the two.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I could never be that brave..."

Yes, you could! Though Joe couldn't see from where he hovered, clinging to the tall grass, he remembered how his little brother had looked down from Papa to look up at him. He wondered how his brother was taking his disappearance. He wondered if his brother would lose

the initiative and the bravery he had grown into in the grips of the grief sure to come if Joe did not return.

I miss them so much!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then Joe reopened his eyes.

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

How long was I asleep?

“We had to put you under.”

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

“The organ transplant was done without severing the skin, don’t worry, you won’t even be sore.” He bowed slightly, all the while passing the buck of the amazing deed off, saying, “The wonders of modern magic.” Straightening back up, he said, “Your diabetes is now just a link in your DNA and nothing more. And, if that’s a problem, I can fix that too.”

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

“Correct.”

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

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

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

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

“Yea,” Joe scoffed, “I still don’t.”

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

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

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

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

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

“He did indeed.” Bonehead nodded.

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

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

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

“No one.” Bonehead stated.

“Don’t y’all have newspapers?” Joe crowed.

“Plenty!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“As, I’m sure, are the Knomes.”

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

“We’re allies here in this cave.”

“Absolutely.” Joe nodded, “Absolutely.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“*It rhymed?*” Joe repeated.

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

“*Easier to remember?!*” Joe’s voice was slowly rising.

Bonehead continued before Joe could attack, “The musical nature of the Foretelling is one reason skeptics doubt its authenticity. Although, it wouldn’t be the first time the universe has developed something slightly off in an effort to keep things in order.”

“So that’s where you think the Prophecy came from, the universe?” Joe asked.

“Some – like Saint – would argue God – Christian God, that is.” Bonehead said, “Though that doesn’t mean he necessarily disagrees with the Knome and I, we posit that the Prophecy was the doing of the Fate Programmers.”

“The Fate Programmers...” Joe murmured, “Like Agony?”

“You met Agony?” Bonehead asked.

Joe tapped his stone, “When I was converted...”

“You should feel honored, not everyone gets to see him.” Bonehead said.

“You think they all set this up?” Joe asked.

“They must’ve.” Bonehead said, “This is all far too convoluted to be the work of a god.”

“Ha,” Joe laughed, “let me tell ya, religion’s definitely got it’s convolutions.”

“Still, I wish I could show you the rhyme scheme.” Bonehead shivered, “Corny, to say the least. I highly doubt the author was omniscient.”

“Suppose there’s a reason they were too embarrassed to include it in the book.” Joe remarked.

Bonehead cocked his head to the side, tapping the thick novel in his hands, “Oh, it’s in the book.”

“Never mind.” Joe blushed, hurriedly moving on in hopes that the reader wouldn’t catch the joke, “If the Blaze is the Sun Child, who’s the ‘Spark’?”

“That has not been revealed.” Bonehead admitted.

“I’m supposed to be ‘combined’ with him? Her? Them?”

Bonehead shrugged, “Maybe it is a she and y’all’re combine in the form of a future child.”

“Wait...” Joe cocked his head to the side, “...so not only do y’all want me to save your Samurai, y’all want me to find someone here, pop out a baby, and raise that child to ultimately defeat the Queen of Darkness?” Joe laughed, “Sorry, buddy, but if I decide to stay, I definitely wasn’t planning on sticking around for the rest of my life.”

“No need to apologize.” Bonehead assured Joe, “If you are the Sun Child, then it will happen.”

“Y’all are seriously going to try and set me up with someone?”

“You’ve got to save the Samurai before you can start worrying about your fusion with the Spark.” Bonehead diverted, “And you’ve got to assemble the Knights before you can save the Samurai.”

Joe laughed a bit, nervously.

“A visit to the Emperor should be your first priority. He may save you the trouble and reveal the names of your future comrades.”

“You’d think Ekaf would’ve checked that before picking me.” Joe muttered.

“Maybe the Emperor would not permit him.” Bonehead suggested.

Joe gave Bonehead a doubtful look, “I assume you’ve known him longer than I, he doesn’t seem like the sort of guy that you can or can’t permit.”

“Then there you have it.” Bonehead said, “He’s likely already checked and if he’s checked, then I doubt he would be wasting his time with you if you weren’t the Sun Child.”

“How long do you think this all will take?” Joe asked.

“It could take a month. It could take years-”

“But I’ll get to go home, right?”

Bonehead looked down and then off to the side.

“Bonehead.” Joe could feel hot blood begin to fill up his cheeks, “I mean, if it takes years, I could at least take a key and visit Earth, right?”

The dinosaur met Joe’s gaze but when its snout opened, all that came out was a brief choking sound.

“That’s not fair!” Joe sputtered on, “Like you said, if I’m the Sun Child and the Foretelling is true and it takes years...”

No! A throbbing ball had lodged itself in Joe’s throat and it was swelling painfully, *I can’t think like that, I will get to go home!* He shoved his fears to the back of his mind but that only opened up space at the front, space that was flooded with thoughts of home, of friends and family – of his brother. He snapped, “Bonehead! Tell me I’ll see my brother again!”

“You will.”

The undead’s voice was stable. It actually calmed Joe a bit.

“Will I get to go home?” Joe asked.

“In the end, it will be your choice. It’d be cruel of us to force this upon you.”

Bonehead reached a handout. In his craggy palm was a plain silver ring.

“This ring will disguise you. Your physical body will not change. You will still be a pyromancer and you will still have a working pancreas, but when people look at you, even those who know you well, they will see what they expect to see.”

Joe picked up the tiny silver halo.

“You’ll still have to explain how you survived the car accident and will probably have to maintain the charade that you are still diabetic,” Bonehead warned, “but this ring will hide your chest stone, even from the most intimate of touches.”

Joe slid the ring on his finger. He turned his hands over but saw nothing new. The stone still shone through his white button up shirt.

“You will always see what you are,” Bonehead explained, “but those who do not know, will never know any better as long as you keep that piece of jewelry on your finger.”

“Why would you give me this?” Joe asked, “Don’t you want me to stay?”

Bonehead nodded, “I do, but I also know that the Sun Child would not abandon us.”

Joe slid the ring off his finger and placed it in his pocket.

Bonehead shrugged, “Feel no pressure, Joe. If you choose to go home, then you were never the one we were looking for to begin with. Do as you wish. Think it over and follow your heart, though you don’t have much time to ponder. Tonight, the two of you must return the key to the Key Library.”

“Tonight? It isn’t night already? How short did I sleep?”

“Not too short, for you it’s already tomorrow, tomorrow afternoon that is.” The dinosaur explained, sticking the book back into its place on the bookshelf, “According to Ekaf, this is your third day in Solaris.”

“Third day...”

Joe mumbled his words, thinking back to the car accident. How simple that day had felt, how ordinary. The dinosaur’s head was cocked to the side. If it had eyes Joe was sure they would’ve been fixed upon him with a penetrating stare. Reaching out with a boney claw, Bonehead poked the glowing stone in Joe’s chest.

“Fire. Since day one it has fascinated humans.”

Joe looked down at his chest and reveled in the warmth that swirled in the orb that was now a part of him. There was an urge in him that he couldn’t describe, it was strange. It was almost as if he longed to be aflame, like a toddler longing for the comfort of his blanket, or an addict seeking the solace of intoxication.

“But, like any skill, natural as it might initially be, you must hone it with training and teachings.”

“But if all the pyromancers are gone, who can train me?”

“I’ll be glad to train you.” Bonehead said, “Although I’m not a pyromancer, I’ve studied them. As soon as you and Ekaf return from the Key Library, we can begin. In the meantime, before you leave, may I ask? What do you know?”

“How to blow up.” Joe laughed, “That’s really it. Ekaf told me I need to constantly restock on fire, but I don’t even know how to do that!”

“It is simple!” Bonehead moved beneath one of the hovering fire lights and said, “Call it.”

Joe frowned but nevertheless glared at the flame that levitated by the dinosaur’s head. *Call it.* Stretching out his hand that only yesterday had been gnarled to the bone, he called it, “Fire.”

The flame flickered, pulsating, growing and shrinking, as if it were a living creature itself. Joe’s eyes widened as the ball of fire began to hover towards him, swirling around, squirming as if it wanted anything but to come to Joe. When it got within a yard, the ball of combustion ushered a quiet pmf and then slipped into the surface of the orb in his chest. Joe felt that familiar heat surge through his veins. It was dizzying at first but, after a moment, the feeling mellowed, leaving him feeling refreshed.

“Now release it, not all of it, just some of it.”

Joe closed his eyes. He could feel the fire – no, it was no longer fire, it was a part of him now. He was the flame and the flame was he. When he opened his eyes, he saw tongues of fire licking his arms and legs, bouncing up and down on his shoulders. He wasn’t surprised. He wasn’t scared. He felt radiant, as if he’d never been healthier, and he felt strong.

“How does it feel?” Bonehead asked.

“It feels...” Joe whispered, a goofy smile stretching across his lips, “it feels amazing!”

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The cylinder began to roll over as the hammer pulled, then BLAM! The hammer snapped back and punched the cartridge, driving the bullet down the barrel to send it hurtling towards the ringed target beyond. Or well...the man behind the trigger had intended to send the bullet hurtling towards the ringed target beyond but instead the bullet went spiraling off towards the eager crowd stationed a supposed safe distance from the line of fire. Before the projectile could make its own bullseye out of some poor, unfortunate audience member's melon, it stopped in midair. The round quivered for a moment in midair then whizzed over to smack flat against the metallic palm of the man in the center of the tent.

The man's left hand closed around the bullet. It wasn't just his hand that was crafted from different plates of steel, the chrome continued up until lip of the cape draped over his shoulders. Golden epaulettes adorned the scarlet cloak, signifying his importance, as his soot smeared smirk did not suggest he was the one guy in the pavilion with a surefire excuse out of every battle. Despite his dusty appearance, his dreads were pulled back into a neat bun. They weren't normally, but the do made sense as he rose from his throne and snatched a pair of katana's that had been leaning against the arm rest on his right.

"You're not Tabuh's brother." The General stated.

"You'd baelaeve mae if you gave mae a hammer and anvil." Zalfron barked back, tossing the revolver to the ground and making half the congregation jump behind him for doing so. He quickly straightened his posture back up and added, "General Kou."

"You're not applying to be a smith, though, Zalfron." Kenchi said, pausing midstride to sigh. They stood in a ring of dirt surrounded by the best the Kou Warriors had to offer and those that just so happened to be in the right place at the right time for a show. Kenchi took a deep breath then explained, "I shouldn't have said that, that was mean. I know your Tabuh's brother."

"Farakin raht..." Zalfron muttered.

Kenchi let it pass, "But you're not cut out like her." He gestured with the two swords to the rest of the tent, "Like the rest of us."

"Tell that to the bastards that murdered mah familay." Zalfron spat into the dirt between his boots.

A wave of murmurs wafted throughout those gathered. Feet were shifting and postures were tensing. Zalfron's enthusiasm had been endearing initially. His bumbling ineptitude entertaining. But now that he was beginning to bristle at the generous General's patient rejection, folks were beginning to be rubbed the wrong way by the boy. Sure he'd survived the tragic assassination of his family and the torturous stint in the dungeons of Iceload, but who in the Kou Warriors hadn't suffered terribly? What the Warriors hadn't was being born into wealth and privilege. That Zalfron had in spades. And now the pale elf had the gall to spit on their turf in the face of their General who was simply being honest? Not cool.

"Alright, fine." Kenchi said despite shaking his head. He gave the Sentry one last chance. Tossing one of the katanas to Zalfron, he said, "Can you-"

Zalfron reached out and caught the end of the sheath then whipped his hand to his side – as if maybe he thought it was the hilt? And was trying to whip the sheath off? It could've simply been that Zalfron had no clue what to do and was in the midst of what he might later reflect back on as a panic attack. His heart was beating so loud he could hardly hear the General. The deafening thump even led him to believe that the crowd behind him was laughing and booing him. Surprisingly, they weren't. Even as the sword shot out of the sheath in his hand and clattered to the dust ground.

“Donum.” Kenchi cursed.

“So what ah can’t catch a sword!” Zalfron proclaimed. He spun around to look back at the crowd but didn’t really register any thing as he completed his three-sixty intentionally quick to prevent proving what his insecurities were shrieking in the back of his mind. He dropped the sheath by the sword, saying, “Ah can’t waild one veray good aither to bae honest.”

Kenchi tried to stop him, “Zalfron-”

“Did the Samurai Marvell of the Ax use a sword?” Zalfron continued, “What about Paud Gill and his infamous Claws? And Bold,” Zalfron balled his fists and crouched down, faking a courageous grin, “with his barefists?”

Kenchi bowed his head and rubbed his temple with his metal fingers. He would’ve preferred to stand there massaging his noggin a good bit longer but he could hear the threat of rising indignation beginning to manifest amongst his many men and women standing behind the electric elf so he pulled his head up from his hand and did his best to speak the boy’s language, “You’re not wrong.” He offered, “We enlist combat magicians and anyone that can prove themselves capable can tryout for the special services, the Kou Knights.” He threw the crowd a bone to keep their mindset kind, “Pesh was cracked out on zirra and obsessed with explosives and she made the team.” Snickers successfully subsided the animosity, at least temporarily. He met Zalfron’s gaze once more, “Listen kid, all hope isn’t lost. We’d love to find a place for you. Selu! You know we’d love to have you as a smith-”

“Or a Knaht!” Zalfron was gaping. He even did a little twirl. The boy’s panic attack had flipped right over into manic euphoria, “Tabuh would bae so proud.” Pulling his head out of the clouds for a second, he asked, “What sorta thang would ah have to do to get in?”

Kenchi exhaled through clenched teeth but even his patience was wearing thin. *Maybe I should manufacture some sort of prosthetic patience reserves. I bet Gear Baba dabbles in brain chips.* He shook his head and snapped back to the present, tossing a ridiculous goose chase of a solution out to the poor, dream-drunk boy from Iceload, “You catch any of the top ten most wanted mancers and you’ve got my Solaris-honest word, I’ll knight you.”

“Catch a mancer?” Zalfron repeated, “Catch a mancer!”

“Well, not just any mancer.” Kenchi warned.

“Catch a mancer!” Zalfron exclaimed, “Ah can do that!”

“Zalfron, wait, I-”

But the elf was already gone. Pushing and shoving through the crowd of bewildered soldiers as if his new quest had some sort of expiration date on it. Kenchi took another step towards the escaping elf then stopped and just shook his head again. His men and women held it for as long as they could – letting Zalfron escape the pavilion even – before they burst into raucous laughter. While Zalfron’s anxiety had imagined derision before, his mania hallucinated exuberant applause as he strolled through the camp, embarking on his grand quest.

“Catch a mancer.” Zalfron murmured to himself, his feet kicking so high as he waltzed he nearly fell onto his back with every gait, “How hard can it bae?”

- - -

Joe spent the rest of the day playing with fire, building up his tolerance for the high supplied by the absorption of flame. Every so often as he walked down a lonely hallway of the dinosaur’s cavern he would launch flames from his appendages as ordinarily as an athlete stretches. He daydreamed of returning to Earth with his newfound power. He was normal in

Solaris, but on Earth he would be super-human. *Forget that ring, I could be a superhero!* By evening, half the fiery lights in the cave had mysteriously disappeared, the orb in Joe's chest was shining suspiciously brighter than ever, and he had enough of a buzz going that he wouldn't have trusted himself behind the wheel.

After many hours of exploration in the subterranean tunnels, he stumbled upon Ekaf. He caught a glimpse of his little companion through a cracked door. On his tip-toes, Joe approached the door, staring over Ekaf's shoulder. The Knome slipped a hand in-between the buttons of his tunic and retrieved a wad of paper from an inner-breast pocket, unfolding it with slow delicacy. Joe saw that it was a list, an extremely long list, falling like a slinky to the ground where it continued to unfold, continuing until out of view. Squinting, Joe managed to read silently, "~~Number one nineteen, steal Dresden's sword.~~" It was crossed off. Joe continued to read, "~~Number one twenty, steal the Warp Cube.~~" Also crossed off.

"What's that?"

Ekaf flinched, almost dropping his pencil. With a broad grin he stepped out of the doorway so Joe could fit through. Joe entered the room with a forced smile. When the Knome had turned around, Joe hadn't initially recognized the old man. There was a pang of worry in his brain as he feared he might've just startled a stranger. But despite his initial suspicions, he saw that the Knome recognized him.

What is wrong with me, Joe wondered, Bonehead may have been right, I really am Knomophobic.

As Joe was lost in his thoughts, Ekaf hurriedly marked something off his list then turned back to face Joe with an answer, "It's a to-do list of sorts, things to do before I die."

"Like a bucket list?" Joe asked.

"What's that again?"

"A list of stuff you want to do before you die – before you," Joe added air quotes, "'kick the bucket'."

"I guess you could call it that." Ekaf shrugged as he folded the sheet of paper and tucked it back into the inside pocket of his tunic. After clearing his throat, he said, "Bonehead told me he's taught you a little on the topic of the art of pyromancy. He's quite the skilled necromancer, well, he's quite the skilled mancer period. He could be a splendid teacher, if you'd like that. Would you like him to teach you?"

"Sure!" Joe said, "I'm not gonna lie, this pyromancy stuff feels great."

He strode past the Knome and into the room to look around. The room was quite plain and reminded Joe of a Hollywood Western jail cell. Other than the sink – a stone basin that jutted out from the wall below a jagged faucet head – the room's only other amenities consisted of a thin rectangular mattress, sheetless, blanketless, and pillowless.

"Is this your bedroom?"

"On the contrary, it is yours. I moved the cot up here, I still got some more things to add to it but, eventually, it'll be your bedroom. Look cozy enough? I mean there are other rooms but they all look about the same. And this one has a sink – a magic sink! Slide your hands beneath the faucet and it'll cut on. It's crazy that Bonehead's got piping down here, I mean, how far underground do you reckon we are? Must've been a clever bastard whoever carved this cave! I mean after all-

"Hey?" Joe asked, "Did you read the Fate Programmer's Book?"

“N-” he couldn’t even get the lie off his lips before a fit off coughing knocked him clean off his feet. Joe lunged forward to help the old man up. Ekaf settled to sit on the floor. Dusting off his tunic he looked back at Joe, smiling with guilt like a caught puppy, “Kinda...”

“And?”

Ekaf shrugged, “Like I’ve told you, you’re the Sun Child.”

“But what else?!” Joe yelled, “You know it all, right? Give me something! Where are the Samurai? Who are my seven team mates supposed to be? Why don’t I go home?!”

Ekaf shook his head. His eyes fell to his lap and his hand slid his hat off the top of his head to hold it over his heart. When his eyes returned to Joe, his lips were twisted and his brow furled, “Trust me, Joe. That’s all I can tell you.”

“Ug.” Joe rolled his eyes.

“Anyways, about tonight.” Ekaf said hurriedly, hoping to smother Joe with words to draw him out of his contempt, “Suinus is really cool, but you are a criminal now, remember, so we’ll have to be in and out fast. Once you get stronger and, of course, once everyone knows you’re the Sun Child, I’m sure folks will make an exception, but for now you’ve got to stick to the shadows. Anyways, the plan – our plan, that is, who knows fate’s plan, right? I know you might think I know now, but I tell ya, my memory isn’t what it used to be. Honestly, even what it used to be wasn’t the most trustworthy. Memory is fickle-”

“The plan, buddy, the plan.” Joe grunted, moving past Ekaf towards the cot.

“Ah, yes. We get to Suinus, meet my friend – he’s got a key to the Library – get there, ditch your key, then you book it back here to Bonehead and train.”

Something about the way Ekaf said “you” threw Joe for a loop. He couldn’t quite place it. Joe plopped down on the cot, half expecting the mattress’s frame to offer some give but there was none. The mattress was as soft as wood. The lumpy stone floor looked to be just as comfortable. *Does he mean that...* Joe asked, “You’ll be coming back with me, yea?”

“I shall try, but even so, I won’t be able to stay.” Ekaf frowned, “I’ll have to go gather the other Knights and make sure they’re heading in the right directions. But we’ll meet again I-”

Even though Joe’d only just met the Knome and, in their short time together, he’d annoyed Joe quite thoroughly, he’d come to like the old man. Not only that, he’d come to rely on the old man. The world was scary enough, without Ekaf by his side...it’d be terrifying! But his emotions boiled up too fast to be articulated, instead of expressing them, he spat out some foolish excuse to convince his new comrade not to abandon him.

“Who’ll finish the story of the First Void War!”

“Everyone knows the story of the-”

“But most people will tell me the story historically.” Joe did really want Ekaf to finish it, he wasn’t lying when he argued further, “You’ll actually tell me the story with all the things most people don’t know.”

“I’m sure Bonehead can tell a mean story and he was around for the First Void War after all so I’m sure he’d-”

“What if you finish the story now, before we go to the Library?”

At first the Knome hesitated. After all, he had planned on getting quite a bit done before their journey and if he wished to finish the tale they would probably have to leave immediately after. Then again, he would miss Joe and he would hate for Bonehead to ruin the story. Giving in, he sat down on the rock floor across from Joe’s bed.

“Where were we?”

“You just told me about how Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff met, forged the Mystak Blade, and slayed Kor the first moon dragon. I think you stopped right when Creaton was about to invade Iceload.”

“Ah yes, the epic finale to Creaton’s first coming,” the little Knome’s body shook as a wave of memories coursed over his body, “Here we go...”

Ekaf's Tale 3: Battles of Ice and Blood¹

At the start of the fourth summer since the first moon dragon hatched, Creaton and the followers of his Black Crown encompassed more territory than any of the dynasties of the western taigas or the clans of the eastern plains. After Creaton unified the earth elves of Tadloe and fended off the crusading demon harpies, he sailed south to liberate the fire elven slaves in the continent of Batloe. They defeated the two factions of snake-like people known as sechers, forcing those that survived to flee on boats south, into unknown waters. Once the fire elves were liberated, Creaton gave the land to Chane who set his people above the other races, the molemen and the chidras, enslaving them. The Black Crown Pact's appetite still hungered. They surged east into the grasslands of Sondor, into the domain of the human clans.

The strength of Creaton's elven army, now a combination of earth and fire, swept up the southern end of the continent and subjugated the villages of Mannistan, expelling the Cormac and dominating the Draeb, Yelkao and Eninac Clans. As the Pact reached into the territory of the Cage Clan, their progress slowed. It became obvious that mass amounts of blood would be spilled, still Creaton and his pointy eared warriors would have pulled through if not for the desert people of Koustan. With their dying breaths, the Cages sought the help of the Kou Clan from the north. With their assistance, the humans forced the Black Crown Pact back to the Eninac River, the border of Mannistan, and ended Creaton and Chane's campaign in Sondor.

By now, Creaton was losing interest in war. He was beginning to see that nothing would solve his restlessness, nothing could fill the void left in the wake of Ali-Iyah, but he wouldn't abandon his followers. The warriors of the Pact were rowdy from their losses against the humans of Sondor and there were not enough spoils with which to console them. Creaton looked west to the frozen legs of Iceload. As the snow was beginning to thaw, the Black Crown Pact arrived in Az-Uran territory, a bearn dynasty in Azunu, the southern peninsula of Iceload. They captured the settlement of ancient Southpoint, modern day Fort Zannon. Before the Pact arrived, the bearns knew of the war waged across the eastern continents from the word of fleeing refugees. But they had not expected Creaton's appetite to include the harsh cold lands of Iceload and they were completely unprepared. As the fire and earth elves fought their way north, the Az-Uran could do little to stop them – they'd never had much reason for war before this point. The Az-Uranian bearns that lived further up the peninsula fled to their brothers, the Az-Naru, and warned them of the coming doom. The Az-Naru had no plans to bow to the Pact but knew they would not be able to oppose Creaton alone so they asked for help from their northern neighbors – the electric elves.

The Az-Naru had been friendly with their elven neighbors, the Etihwy, though they had interacted very little in the past. When their messengers went into Etihwy lands, they were

¹ For a map of the Black Crown Pact's Empire check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

surprised to meet a new dynasty in power there: the Ipativians. Fortunately, the Ipativians spoke Etihwy all the same and the Az-Naru were familiar with the tongue. Unfortunately, the Ipativy were not as friendly. The Az-Naru urged the Ipativians to join with them to defeat Creaton because, if they did not, Creaton would destroy the dynasties of Iceload individually. The Ipativian leaders saw this as an insult to their military prowess and were unsurprised that the pacifistic southerners couldn't handle the foreign invader.

That said, many Ipativians disagreed with their leaders. Especially those of other dynasties that had only recently been conquered. Ex-subjects of the Etihwy dynasty took the bearns' warning for granted and a large group banded together, leaving their homes, to help the Az-Naru and, possibly, to find a new home out from under the rule of the pompous Ipativians. This group was led by the elf named Bale Morain.

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"Bale Morain!" Joe exclaimed, "Didn't you say that was Bonehead's real name?"

"You've got a sharp memory!" Ekaf praised him.

"Judging by the looks of him now, I'd wager that he and his soldiers weren't that helpful to the bearns." Joe guessed.

"Many historians would agree with you, but I wouldn't. See, if not for the help of Bale and his elves, the Az-Naru would have fallen as swiftly as the Az-Uran but thanks to Bale they were able to inflict such grievous wounds on the forces of the Pact that by the time Creaton reached the border of Ipativian lands his men were too tired and discouraged to wage immediate war with the pale elves."

"So Creaton killed Bale Morain and made him a boneguard?"

"No, he did not become a boneguard until later. Bale Morain was captured by Creaton and forced to become an advisor to the Pact's campaign in Iceload in exchange for the safety of the Etihwy that had fought and been captured along with him. Creaton saw that the people of the Etihw had no real allegiance to the Ipativians and sought to exploit that in Bale by making him his right hand man."

"I thought Chane was Creaton's right hand man?"

"Well, Chane had sort of pissed Creaton off. The Moon Dragon Man was none too fond of the racially-mandated slavery Chane implemented in Batloe."

"Didn't Creaton enslave folks in Tadloe?" Joe asked.

"Only those that broke his laws." Ekaf said, "Remember, Creaton's all about merit. He doesn't mind slavery, if you deserve to be enslaved, but slavery where you can be enslaved just by luck of birth? Not his cup of tea."

"But he let Chane do it anyway?"

"Well, he's a man of honor in that old fashioned sort of way. When they conquered Batloe, he *gave* it to Chane. Chane was essentially the Black Crown of Batloe. When Creaton saw what he chose to do with his authority, he was pissed – but it wasn't his business. That said,

lotta his disciples pointed out the hypocrisy and it didn't take long before the two were on the brink of waging war on one another. That's another reason they got stumped in Sondor. In the end, they agreed to disagree. Chane stayed in Batloe while Creaton went on to Iceload. If Creaton hadn't faltered in those icy mountains, he likely would've turned on his old comrade."

"Chane seems like a dick." Joe stated.

"Yea." Ekaf agreed, "If not for Chane, Creaton might've never left Valleysore. If not for Chane, Creaton's Black Crown Pact probably never would have existed."

"What happened to him?" Joe asked.

"That's a story I'll have to tell you later – old bastard's still kicking though, I'll leave it at that. Shall I continue with the story?"

"Sure."

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After Bale Morain's capture and the fall of the southern bearn dynasties, Creaton fortified his warriors in Azunu and went to Condatus to meet with Thor Ipativy and the others that governed the Ipativian dynasty. They agreed that the current border in the south would remain and neither empire would dare to cross it. Both leaders claimed to not want war, though both coveted the other's lands. Thor planned to stockpile troops along their southern perimeter and eventually, maybe a dozen years from then, over power Creaton and force the Pact out of Iceload. He hadn't counted on Creaton maneuvering through the Vanian Mountains to attack Ipativy at the heart of the empire.

Creaton contacted the three minotaur dynasties that dwelled in the mountains, the Kurr, the Lunas, and the GraiLord. He knew that a war against the minotaurs would be as bloody as a war against the electric elves, but he had another plan. Up until this point, Creaton had not revealed his power over the bones of the fallen. As he had learned in Tadloe, when it was known that he could control skeletons many cultures instantly perceived him as evil. Through Bale Morain he learned of Christianity and how it was spreading from the minotaurs and spirits to the northern elves, the Sentry. What intrigued him was the similarities between the Islam of the elves in Tadloe and this foreign Iceloadic religion. After many meetings between he and the minotaur leaders, one being Mycenae GraiLord, he realized that the minotaurs would never bow to him if he were but a secular being. If he wished to conquer the minotaurs without drawing blood, he would have to convince them that he was holy.

Under his guidance, he trained Bale Morain in the art of necromancy then instructed him to guide a troop of necromancers with an army of undead into battle against the Kurr minotaurs. The minotaur war party was so horrified they could not fight to their full potential and by Bale Morain they were defeated. Battle after battle, the Kurr fell to this treacherous elf. Word spread up the Etihw River that Bale Morain, in an effort to stop Creaton, had succumbed to evil magic. Blinded by a thirst for blood, Bale had lost sight of his original goal, had wandered off into the mountains, and was now attempting to eliminate all those that had faith in the Lord. The Lunas

were petrified and they were next in line. As they prepared to face Bale and his undead militia in a valley beside the Etihw River, Creaton appeared in between the two forces. He approached his men and killed Bale Morain on the spot, turning him into the first boneguard. Then, he commanded the now skeletal Bale and the other mancercs to unanimate their undead armies. The Lunas celebrated Creaton as a savior as did the Kurr once Creaton returned their freedom. They paraded him through their cities and provided feasts in his honor as his earth elven soldiers spread the word of Creatonic Islam.

As Islam spread amongst the minotaurs, its roots amongst the Tadloen thrived. In Iceload, the earth elves discovered that their common tongue – which they learned from the words of their Quran – was nearly identical to that language spoken by the Etihwy electric elves.

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“But I thought Etihwy was English?” Joe asked.

“It is, yes,” Ekaf nodded, “we call it common tongue, as I told you before, but-”

“But the Quran was written in Arabic!”

“Do they not have Qurans in English on Earth?”

“They do...” Joe frowned, “but didn’t you say that the Quran arrived in Solaris shortly after it was written – which would mean long before it was translated into English?”

“Didn’t I also say that if your God is God and he can split universes then he can do whatever the hell he wants with his holy books?”

“Yea...?”

“Because not only did he modify the Quran, he modified the Bible too, remember?”

“No miracles.” Joe nodded.

“Not just that-”

“No heaven, no hell-”

“*And* it was in English, too. According to historians, the Etihwy got their language from an ancient copy of the Bible that, by the time of Creaton, had been long lost and forgotten – by everyone but the minotaurs and spirits of course. And, like the Quran, the original Earthen Gospels were not written in English.”

“Hm.” Joe muttered.

Ekaf raised an eyebrow, “Adds credence to the Atheists’ arguments, huh?”

“Didn’t you just admit that if my God is real then he could totally have made all this work?” Joe asked, “It’s almost impossible without an all-powerful God.”

“And an oddly random thing for an all-powerful God to do, though, right?” Ekaf countered.

“Not if he planned on having an English speaking Sun Child.” Joe countered.

Ekaf gasped then beamed at Joe, “Ah ha! Good point, Sun Child! And now that your God’s called you to be here, you’d surely be damned if you left us!”

“Remember when I told you I don’t believe in hell?” Joe asked.

Ekaf nodded, “That was after I’d pointed out that you’d probably be swimming in that lake of-”

“*Anyways*, where were Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff during all this?”

“I was getting there when you interrupted me earlier...”

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Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff knew Creaton was up to no good from the start. First off, Cannon had witnessed the ravages of the Black Crown Pact in his homeland and, second off, Bluff saw Creaton as the dark figure from his dreams. They spent most of this time trying to convince the elves to break the treaty and go to war against Creaton and while they had swayed their friend Thor, he could not disobey the elders of the Ipativy family who sought to stay out of Creaton’s way until they were sure that victory could be swiftly achieved. So, in the midst of July, the three went to the minotaurs to attempt to convince them to go to war against Creaton.

When they arrived in Recercoff, they found the soldiers of the Black Crown Pact were already there. Mycenae told them that they might be wrong about Creaton. That Creaton had saved the Lunas and had come to usher in a new era of prosperity, an era of unity of all nations beneath Solaris. Mycenae warned them that Creaton planned to attack the Ipativian capital of Vanii and urged them to have Thor convert to Islam or bow to the Black Crown before blood was spilled. Discouraged by the side their friend had chosen, the three sought out Creaton themselves. After a short conversation, violence broke out. Cannon and Creaton fought as Zannon and Bluff tried to keep the surrounding soldiers back but, in the end, they had to flee into the mountains. Their first thought was to go back to Vanii and warn Thor Ipativy but Creaton foresaw this. As the soldiers of the Pact prepared for an invasion of the electric elven lands, Bale Morain with his army of necromancers patrolled the edge of the mountain range, making sure not to let the three through to Vanii. Fleeing Bale, the Warriors of the Blue Ridge were forced to head west for the island of Icelore.

The nellafs of Icelore had intense love for the trio after they liberated them from the hold of the reptilian deity. Once the leaders of Icelore heard of the viral spread of the Black Crown Pact they, like Thor, saw that Creaton’s quest would not end until his grasp encompassed the entire known world – including the frostbitten mountain island. The warlords entrusted the Warriors of the Blue Ridges with a battalion of nellaf soldiers under Captain Heimdallure Darkblade. Wasting no time, they crossed the waters of the frosted coast, plunged back into the Vanian Mountains and met Creaton’s forces just as they began their hike to Vanii. The battle was bloody for both sides but thanks to a rare summer blizzard, Creaton and his soldiers were forced to flee back to the minotaur city. Bale had to retreat with the rest of them, this allowed the Warriors of the Blue Ridges to get to Vanii where they could recuperate and warn the Ipativians.

Under Thor Ipativy’s supervision, Zannon, Cannon, Bluff, Heimdallure and their men licked their wounds and told the elven commander of the arrow Ipativy had just dodged. Thor took this to the elders of the family but still they demanded they obey the treaty – after all,

Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff had been in foreign soil during the attack and if the minotaurs sought to join Creaton that was their own decision. The alliance between minotaurs and the Pact boded well for the Ipativians, after all, Mycenaë, the hero of the Vanian Mountains, was as much a member of the Warriors of the Blue Ridges as Thor was. All Thor could do was secretly station scouts along the mountain passes so as to alert them if Creaton were to try it again. By forcing the Pact to utilize trails and passages unknown to the Ipativians, Creaton's scouts found a new way to Ipativy – a way that passed through the spirit village of Grantara.

At the beginning of August, Godi Morain came to Ipativy claiming to be the sole survivor of Bale Morain's rogue regiment of Etihwy warriors. Though Creaton had promised to free them, the Moon Dragon Man had recaptured them once Bale headed into the mountains. In captivity, Godi, Bale's brother, had overheard the plan to pacify the Ipativy and sneak through the mountains to attack Ipativy at the heart: Vanii. Finally, the elders believed the warnings and sent word out all over the empire for aid but it was too late.

The day after Godi's arrival in Vanii, the Black Crown Pact's warriors arrived. Locking the city's great walls, Ipativy prepared for a siege that never came. Godi Morain hadn't told the Ipativians everything. He hadn't escaped, he had been released. Like his brother, Creaton had struck a deal that if he betrayed the Ipativians then he would free the rest of the men from his war party, those who had refused to fight for the Pact. All Godi had to do was open the gates when the Pact arrived. As the Ipativy were preparing to wait for reinforcements, they found Creaton's men already within their walls. The ensuing battle resulted in the first fall of the Ipativian Dynasty.

Civilians and soldiers fled the city with their leader Thor and their heroes Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff along with the nellaf Heimdallure. They went north, into Sentrakle, to make their last stand among the rebellious Sentry which had allied with the northern bearn dynasties: the Nevomns and the Drebs.

Creaton was forced to halt his northern progress in order to solidify his control of Ipativian lands. The resistance kept up the fight against his northern border, fortifying north of the Black River and pushing south to gain more land with each battle. The Pact had over extended and though Creaton called for reinforcements from elsewhere in the empire (even bringing Chane in to fight alongside him once more) the day of reckoning was fast approaching. Rahsai, Cannon's spirit wife, managed to sneak through Pact territory to find her husband and brother and make known the demise of Grantara. Grief overcame Bluff but it quickly turned to horror as Rahsai finished her tale, explaining that the surviving spirits had led Creaton to the Stone of Krynor in order to earn their freedom. Rahsai doubted they would be freed for only the spirits knew how to instruct one to build a legendary weapon using the giant grain of void-dust. The heroes feared Creaton would find a way to make weapons similar to those forged by Zannon and, even if he didn't, once he finished his subjugation of the Ipativian lands, he could focus all of his attention on the northern resistance. This would be their only chance to strike, while the Pact was drawn out and not yet filled in. So they devised a plan to sneak a large force of well-trained warriors through the mountains to face Creaton in a battle of last resort at Mount Krynor.

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“How the hell did they ‘sneak’ an army into the mountains?” Joe demanded.

“They took a troop of the remaining Ipativians, some Sentries and bears, and went back to Icelore with Heimdallure. Then the Warriors sailed from Icelore into the backside of Iceload where they were able to slip between the vertebrae of the Vanian Mountains.” Ekaf answered, “Just as they had before when they intercepted Creaton’s army-”

“They just left the north defenseless?”

“No, no, no, Baldure Ipativy, Thor’s brother, stayed behind with a large force in case Creaton managed to push them back. But also remember, at this point Creaton’s men were busy consolidating and the army of the Warriors had won almost all the battles since they left Van-”

“Sounds like the Pact was crumbling on its own.” Joe stated.

Ekaf nodded, “Many historians believed it was a matter of time. Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff merely functioned as the catalyst. Yet, others argue that if this last ditch effort failed – or never happened – Creaton would’ve had time to stabilize his newly gained territories. Plus, who knows what would’ve happened if he’d learned how to use the Stone – or gotten the spirits to put it to work for him?”

“Interesting,” Joe waved his hand, “alright, keep going.”

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Upon their return to Icelore, they were met with a mix of gratitude and anxiety. Word had spread to the bleak island of how the war was going and it was as obvious to the Icelore as it was to the mainlanders that this battle could be their last chance. Heimdallure let his surviving men return to their homes and stocked up on a fresh squad then they returned to the boats. It was late September when they arrived in Grantara. The soldiers of the Pact were caught completely off guard and those that avoided slaughter fled into the mountains to freeze to death. One of these hopeless deserters was our dear friend Bonehead who had already experienced his metamorphosis into a dinosaur in the caves of Mount Krynor. Before he fled, he told Zannon that Creaton was still inside the mountain with a flock of spirit prisoners. The mountain was heavily guarded by undead with a select few necromancers-turned-boneguards of equal deformities as Bale Morain.

They fought their way down the road to Mount Krynor and, once there, Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff took the back way that they’d been shown during their early adventures with Mycenaë GraiLord. Thor Ipativy and Heimdallure Darkblade fought their way openly towards the mountain top and in their valiant ascension, Thor met his match to the hands of one of Creaton’s boneguards. The interior of Mount Krynor was a frozen draconic crypt – a natural memorialization of when the Warriors of the Blue Ridges ridded the caverns of their dragon inhabitants. Zannon and Bluff fought with a handful of Sentry and bearn soldiers so that Cannon

could face the Moon Dragon Man alone. Finally, Creaton had found an adversary that could equal his skill with a blade and could defend from his spells with the magic engrained in the Mystak Blade. Neither man had the upper hand and it seemed they would fight on forever. Yet, Heimdallure and the rest of the soldiers had fought their way into the mountain and soon reunited with Zannon and Bluff. Creaton was alone and surrounded – he was doomed. He would have been captured or executed if not for the Stone of Krynor.

Legend has it that the stone spoke to him just as the stone he wore around his neck had when instructing him on how to heal Ali-Iyah years ago in the woods of Tadloe. Whether the stone sought to save him or not, Creaton turned to it just as Cannon had the Mystak Blade poised to strike him and as Cannon swung, supposedly crying, “Slither back to the shadows, you bastard!” Creaton struck the Stone of Krynor with his blade and disappeared. Just like that, two heads of the Black Crown Pact in Iceload, Bale Morain and Creaton Live, were nowhere to be found.

Baldure led the Sentries and northern bears to reclaim the Ipativian lands and met with Zannon, Cannon, Bluff, and Heimdallure in the ruins of Vanii. There they founded the city of Ipativy, in honor of the late dynasty, as the Sentries became the ruling elven power in Iceload. The GraiLord admitted their betrayal in their acceptance of the Pact and, mostly due to Mycenae’s leadership and his sorrow for the fallen Ipativian warlord, they assisted in the expulsion of the Black Crown Pact from Iceload. In doing so, Mycenae died in battle at the hands of Chane. Despite the minotaur’s compliance, the GraiLord’s bond had been with the Ipativy who now, through Baldure, ruled only a few cities and had little to no say in the rising power of the Sentry Dynasty. An anti-minotaur, anti-Muslim resentment grew among the Christian electric elves. In the coming years, the majority of the GraiLord would abandon Christianity completely. With each decade, the elves would take more and more land from the minotaurs. Eventually the elves and minotaurs would become sworn enemies and the hatred would last for many, many years. Though Creaton and the Pact had been booted out of Iceload, the bloodshed would not end for days to come and the Void War itself was far from over.

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“Why wouldn’t Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff defend the minotaurs? Were they pissed they kinda abandoned them?” Joe asked.

“Not at all. Before his death, Mycenae had begged the boys for forgiveness and, as friends tend to do, all was forgiven. But then he died and they left Iceload.”

“Why?”

“Well they couldn’t just let the Pact stand, they rightly figured the Pact would want to avenge Creaton’s defeat in Iceload. And Zannon needed to make good on his promise to Cannon.”

“Beating Creaton wasn’t enough?”

“Not even close, remember Cannon came from Batloe and when Creaton took over Batloe-”

“Oh yea, the fire elves enslaved everyone, right?”

“Right. So they pursued the Pact east. They defeated the fire elves and followed them to Sondor where, with the help of the humans, they cast the red-haired elves out with their leader, Chane, and sent them sailing south towards unknown lands. Finally, the Warriors of the Blue Ridges came to Tadloe and found the earth elves were as tired of the war as they. A large portion of their population had been distributed between Iceload, Batloe, and Sondor and most of them never returned. Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff along with a force combined of electric elves, molemen, chidras, and the North Sondoran clan of humans known as the Kous, fought a handful of battles against the Fou – who essentially ruled Tadloe after Creaton disappeared. After a particularly bad defeat, in which their leader Farak Fou died, the new leader Lakatu Fou immediately agreed to sign a treaty stating that Tadloe would never again be the aggressor in an intercontinental war. This was considered the end of the First Void War which lasted five years, from the dawn of history to the signing of the Nonaggression Treaty in December. Many-”

“What’d the three do after that?”

“Sick of the violent memories that Iceload, Batloe, Mannistan, and Tadloe represented, Cannon and Rahsai went to the deserts of Northern Sondor. Koustan. A somewhat more modest Zannon operated a smithing shop in Yelah, Iceload and did his best to influence the politics taking place around him though he quickly became apathetic as the people grew deaf to his opinions. As for Bluff, he led the church in Iceload until his death. Bluff and Zannon tried to stop elven aggression against the minotaurs but by this point, the heads of the Sentry Empire cared little of the two hero’s opinions.”

“What about Heimdallure, Thor’s brother, Bonehead, Bonehead’s brother, and Creaton – where’d the stone take him? How did he get back?”

“Those will have to be stories for another day, its nearing time for us to leave the cave.” Ekaf said, “In fact, from the smell of it, I think Bonehead has made us a pre-mission dinner and I don’t know about you but I am starving!”

And before Joe could argue, the Knome pivoted and trotted out of the room. Joe’s stomach growled, there was no denying his own hunger, but he still wished the long winded story teller could have continued. *If I’m to fight for this planet, I have to know what I am fighting for!* But there was no debating with Ekaf Emanlaer Reppiz. No, he would have to be patient.

Though things were about to start moving a lot faster and his time for history lessons would become fewer and farther between.

Chapter Four: Plans Were Made to be Broken

After a dinner of mystery-meat casserole (which was as off putting as its name, “organ pudding”) the Knome and Joe followed Bonehead to the exit of his subterranean labyrinth. Heat emanated from Joe’s chest. Each bit of combustion he had added to his collection gave him another ounce of confidence but with the confidence came jittery anticipation. He couldn’t shake the ominous feeling that something was going to go wrong and his Knomish companion wasn’t helping.

“So, to reiterate,” Ekaf said, as he had said over a dozen times since supper, “the plan is to arrive in Suinus, find Grandfather,” which Ekaf had established as his friend, “and convince him to let us into the Key Library.”

Joe couldn’t help but wonder if this friend would have flesh. He also wondered if this was a nickname, like Bonehead, or the fellow was actually named Grandfather because he knew for a fact that the man could not possibly be Ekaf’s Grandfather.

“Once in the Key Library, you can replace your key while I look for a few other keys I’ve been wanting, you know, so I won’t have to mooch off of Grandfather and who all anymore-”

Joe smiled, “How considerate of you!”

“Of course! Anyways, get to Grandfather, get to the Library, return the key, come back to Bonehead’s. And-”

“Hold up,” Joe asked the Knome, “I’ve been thinking, what if I go home – just for a little bit, just to say good bye – then come back?”

“That’s not a part of the plan!”

“But couldn’t I, potentially, go home and come back in a split second?”

“If you can find the right keys, but I’m not sure we’ll have time-”

“But you’ll have time to find the keys you want, seems only fair I find the keys I want!”

“You’ve never been there! You won’t know left from right! It’ll take twice the time because I’ll have to show you around and ugh...can’t you just do that later?”

Joe rolled his eyes, “Only if you promise I’ll get the opportunity?”

“Promise.” Ekaf said.

Joe glowered, “Your fingers are crossed.”

His fingers were in fact crossed.

Ekaf shrugged, “I always keep them this way! Now, as I was saying, Suinus, Grandfather’s, Key Library, then,” Ekaf paused, poking Joe in the ribs as they walked on, finally reaching the spiral staircase, “this is imperative, so listen up, if we happen, I mean, I doubt we will, but if we just so happen to stray from the plan, out of some rare chance – but I highly doubt this will happen – though if it does happen: stick with Grandfather and he’ll get you back to Bonehead. Got it?”

“So you’re going to ditch me in Suinus?”

“No!” Ekaf exclaimed, before adding beneath his breath, “Only if I have to.”

Joe sighed, “You really trust this Grandfather?”

“Absolutely!” Ekaf exclaimed, “More than I trust myself!”

“Not sure if that’s saying much...”

“Once back with Bonehead you can speak with him about when would be a good time to go home and say your goodbyes. He’s pretty good at keeping fate straight. Just remember, if tiad hits the fan, stay with Grandfather. Back to Bonehead’s. Stay with-”

“He’s got it.” Bonehead chuckled, his rattle of an undead laugh sent chills down Joe’s spine – he’d almost forgotten the dinosaur was behind them, “This is the hundredth time you’ve told him.”

“Better safe than sorry, that’s what I always say, and I also always say-”

“Plans were made to be broken.” Bonehead completed, “I’m finishing your sentences and you just got here. I suppose it is about time for you to leave.”

“Ah, my fleshless friend,” Ekaf paused, turned around, and patted Bonehead’s leg bone, “I will miss you dearly.”

“I’ll be here when you get back, old friend.” Bonehead said, “And by then Joe’ll be a master mancer.”

Ekaf nodded, sighing quietly.

“So...” Joe said, quickly taking his chance to speak as Ekaf paused, “are we walking to Suinus?”

“By the Guardians, I should hope not! A few of my friends have volunteered to give the two of you a ride.” Bonehead said, “Are you scared of heights?”

“Scared of heights?” Joe scoffed, “I’ve seen spirits, barrens, river monsters, and now an undead dinosaur. Just a day ago I literally exploded. Bonehead, I’m starting to get used to facing my fears.”

“Good because the two of you will be flying.”

As if on cue, the spiral staircase came to an abrupt end and once more they faced the forests of Tadloe. In the small clearing stood two snarling beasts. They were dark as a shady spot, on a moonless twilight. Their hairless skin, as slick as the surface of an untouched pond, was stretched taught over their muscled horse-like bodies. Joe shivered as he watched them, staring through their transparent flesh at the pale white bones beneath. Misty swirls of breath rolled out from their nostrils. Their ruby red eyes glowed like distant stars. The two beasts reared back on their hind legs and whinnied, hoofs stirring the air as their bat-like wings spread wide above them.

“Pegasus...es?” Joe murmured.

“Pegasuses?” Ekaf chuckled, “Those aren’t real! These are horseflies, steeds of darkness, midnight mares, carnivorous, mind you, unlike their bland herbivorous cousins. They’ll eat insects, rodents, dogs, cats, babies...according to an old Knomish bachelor’s tale, a heard once swarmed a barren and got damn well near to tearing the hump backed, bestial bovine to-”

“Horseflies...” Joe repeated beneath his breath before speaking further to interrupt, “How do you ride one?”

“Hop on and hold tight,” Bonehead answered.

“I won’t...uh...sink in?”

“Ha! They’re transparent but not fleshless. I’ll go first, just follow my lead. Oh yeah, just warning you, it’s gonna be chilly up there.” Ekaf said as he strode forward with his hand extended to the creatures. The two eyed him, treading the soil beneath their feet warily. Ekaf didn’t hesitate. One of the freakish horses reached out with its long neck and snapped at Ekaf’s pointed hat, barely missing as Ekaf turned back to face Joe, saying, “But actually, I bet your fire will keep you from hypothermia.” Clutching his chest and bowing his head, unwittingly dodging

another nibble from the horsefly, he added humbly, “I will be protected only by my superior will power and reserve – which has delivered me through so many-”

Joe cleared his throat to stop the Knome. Joe watched the horseflies much like the way they had watched Ekaf. The creatures did not look like eager participants in this journey and Joe shared their mentality, “And why do we have to fly again?”

“Suinus is a walled city.” Ekaf replied, “Guarded by a dalvary-”

“Dalvary?”

“A calvary of dragons.” Bonehead explained.

“Oh yeah...”

Bonehead continued, “And not only that but you’ll be pressed for time.” Bonehead interjected, “Without a warp cube, the Knights of the Light will not be far behind.”

“Huh?”

“The Fate Nazis.” Ekaf explained.

“Ah...” Joe realized, “the spirits...isn’t that ironic they work for the Queen of Darkness?”

“She considered herself the Queen of the Light.” Bonehead said.

“Oh yeah...” Joe murmured.

“Historians are petty.” Ekaf interjected.

“The Knights of the Light were supposedly eliminated when the Queen was defeated, many of them absolved themselves for serving her.” Bonehead elaborated, “They weren’t bad people, just misguided.”

“Petty, but merciful.” Ekaf added to his description of historians, “That’s why we still refer to them as the Knights of the Light.”

“That said, those still loyal to the Queen do exist – even if the historians don’t know it – and they are coming for you as we speak. If they catch the two of you, they might just-”

“Not if I’m with him, Bonehead.” Ekaf assured Joe, “You’ll be safe.”

“Plans are made to be broken, Ekaf.” Bonehead said, calmly before turning back to Joe, “If they catch you, fight. Otherwise, they’ll use your key on you and you know what that means.”

“Yea...” Joe nodded, then he realized he really didn’t, “What’s that mean again?”

“You’ll be back in your car!” Ekaf exclaimed, his voice giving away a bit of annoyance, “Or close enough to it for that tractor trailer to...”

As the Knome began to describe Joe’s death – embellishing it in a manner that, had Joe been paying attention, would’ve seemed inappropriately specific – Joe stared at Bonehead. The dinosaur had cocked his head to the side and Joe was getting the vibe that the necromancer would’ve been giving him an odd look had the skeleton had just a little more meat on his bones to do so.

“You do know where the keys go?” Bonehead asked.

“Uh...” Joe hesitated, “I know the key we’ve got goes to Earth.”

“It goes to your fate, Joe.” Bonehead stated, “All keys go to people’s fates.”

“Fates?”

“Deaths.”

“So if I use that key, I die?” Joe asked.

“Eh, yours is a bit rusty, but most likely.” Ekaf said.

But Joe was less so focused on his key and more so focused on the implications of the fact that these keys were bound to fates – that combined with the statement Ekaf had made the other day, the statement on why exactly Joe seemed to him to be the Sun Child.

“If there are no more keys after mine...” Joe whispered, thinking aloud. Bonehead’s cocked head turned in Ekaf’s direction. Joe continued, “...then that means...” he too now turned to Ekaf, “...what does that mean?”

Ekaf was grinning, his face suddenly sweaty. The Knome sputtered for words, scooting the black, ash like dirt around with his sneakers. Joe turned to Bonehead.

“It may not mean what it seems it might mean.” Bonehead suggested, “Death is but a man, maybe he simply hasn’t gotten around to it.”

Now it was Joe’s head that was twisting in a questioning manner.

“You know not of Death?”

“Not if that’s a proper noun.” Joe said.

Bonehead cleared his throat, a noise that seemed very unnatural coming from a skeleton.

“But you know Agony, you’ve heard of the Suffering Siblings, yes?”

“Suffering Siblings?”

“Fate Programmers – Agony amongst them – cursed to suffer for, what may wind up being, all eternity. Agony must endure the pain of the people, Death must be there when they die. He then retrieves their key.”

“So either everyone on Earth is dead,” Joe said, “or Death’s busy.”

“Or he’s waiting...” Ekaf suggested, jutting back into the conversation, “waiting for you.”

Joe gulped.

“He won’t have to wait much longer if the two of you don’t get going.” Bonehead stated.

“Would he really be waiting on me?” Joe asked.

Ignoring Joe’s question, Ekaf waved to Bonehead, “Good bye, old buddy.”

“Wait, seriously, because if that’s the case...does that mean I can’t go home?” Joe voiced this question a little louder.

“Take care of Joe.” Bonehead nodded to Ekaf.

“GUYS!” Joe roared, “Come on, you can’t just say something like that and-”

“When you get back from the Library,” Ekaf said, calmly but sincerely, “you’ll have the opportunity to go home.”

Joe whirled to face Ekaf, “And will it kill me?!”

“No.” Ekaf said, though he added, “But it also might not be what you hope it will be.”

“That’s the best you’re going to give me?” Joe snapped.

Ekaf nodded.

Joe growled.

“You must go, Joe.” Bonehead said softly, “Focus on the mission at hand for now. We’ll figure fate out later.”

Joe sighed. He turned to back to the dinosaur, walked over, and shook his hand.

“Bye, Bonehead.”

“Have courage, Joe,” Bonehead bowed, whispering, “and patience.”

“Thanks for the hospitality, as always,” Ekaf said as he began to climb up on one of the horseflies, “Don’t feel as though you must wait for us in your hole, go out and enjoy the night for once!”

Joe imagined Bonehead was smiling as he said, “Take care, Knome, I’ll be here.”

As the dinosaur retreated back into the cavern, Joe followed Ekaf's lead and clambered onto his devilish steed. No sooner did he mount than did the beasts trot into a sprint and takeoff, wings flapping wildly, rising just steeply enough to clear the tree-line.

His tie flapped about behind him like the tongue of a dog with its head thrust out a car window. The ride was smooth. At first, Joe expected the height would be the worst aspect but in the end it was the wind that was the most unbearable. The horseflies themselves were cold too. It was like riding an ice sculpture. Nevertheless, Joe held on tight and did not complain, after all, if he was cold then he could not imagine what his miniature companion was going through. The journey seemed to take forever, but, in reality, it took them less than half an hour to reach Suinus.

Even without the stars, Joe would've been able to make out the megalopolitan city from miles away. It looked like a bonfire, reaching up from the depths of a firepit, twinkling in defiance of distant suns. Just behind the lip of the city walls, houses upon houses were stacked one on top of the other, squeezed into the belly of the crater. Drawing nearer, Joe could see tiny wooden balconies jutting out from the front doors of the upper level abodes that then wound around to the sides of the buildings and led down to the streets like fire escapes. There were so many balconies, Joe was sure one could walk for miles on the upper levels of the neighborhoods without ever touching solid ground. There were four major rings of these tall, half-hazard stacked structures, illuminated by amber streetlights so that, from above, it looked almost as if he were looking down on the barrels of giant, glowing gatling guns. Within each ring, bulkier, stumpier buildings huddle closer to the center around wide open city-spaces – some flattened like city squares and others lumpy with plant life like public parks. At the center of the crater, surrounded by the circular neighborhoods, a garden of sky scrapers rose up from the dimpled earth like defiant umbrella trees in the African Savannah. The ancient stone towers fanned out at the top, so that the roofs were far wider than their bases. Just like the city-spaces in the outlying neighborhoods, these rooftops were not all paved. Many appeared to harbor thick forests, from which Joe could hear the tide-like hum of cicadas and see the sporadic flashing of lightning bugs, even from far above. Also like the neighborhoods, the sky scrapers surrounded large openings on the crater floor lit by balls of swirling fire. These clearings were well lit. Not only could Joe spot guards patrolling below, like ants marching through the cracks of a sidewalk, he could see murders of dragons circling above them like a wake of vultures.

“THOSE THERE ARE CALLED STAR PILLARS,” Ekaf yelled over the rush of the wind, “SOLARIAN TOWERS OF BABBLE!”

Joe nodded then his gut clenched as Ekaf directed his beast downward and Joe's immediately followed. Passing story upon story of foliage-garbed architecture, they swooped between the stacked houses in the boroughs. They had to fly single-file to avoid scraping the elevated terraces.

“KEEP YOUR CHEST TO THE BEAST!” Ekaf roared.

Joe did as he was told, smothering the light of his chest stone. He kept his head craned upward, looking between the rooftops in an attempt to keep watch for the eerie silhouettes of the aerial police, but the street lights around him blotted out the stars painting the sky above pitch black. *Let's hope they're as incompetent as American police.* Then after a moment, he thought of his status as a prosecuted minority and an illegal alien and quickly wished the Tadloe Guard to be far more sophisticated than the police back home.

He returned his gaze to the city streets and was swept away by the pulchritude.

Each building was dressed like a forest, wrapped in wreaths, lacerated with lianas, and cloaked in kudzu. The natural environment seemed to be a part of the city, not outside of it. The scene reminded Joe of images of ancient Aztec temples, abandoned and overcome by the jungle. But here, civilization still thrived. Even in the dark, Joe saw figures traversing the boardwalks and shadows standing in the windows. His awe helped his mind to stray from the cold and his rapidly decreasing distance from the road below.

He could see the guards better now – stalking the alleyways and patrolling the streets with large ax bladed pikes, adorned with massive suits of armor. It didn't seem that the civilians strayed far from their porches. As they zoomed out of the neighborhoods and between the roots of the sky scrapers that Ekaf had called star pillars, the only non-plant life forms seemed to be prepared for battle. Joe could tell immediately that downtown had a curfew.

The horseflies glided lower and lower in silence and none of the police seemed to notice. The ride was so smooth, Joe was caught off guard by the fact that the ground was coming up to meet them at a not-so-slow pace. Falling yards in a matter of seconds. Abruptly, his horsefly spread its wings wide, incidentally, testing Joe's hold on its neck, a test which he fortunately passed.

Joe's eyes were shut when they hit the cobble stone street with the CLICK-CLACK of horse hooves. If his mind had not been on his stomach, he would've cringed with Ekaf at the loud landing. Hurriedly, their steeds dipped out of the main road and into a back alley. The horseflies galloped down the narrow passage, across another open street, and into a forest where the soft mossy ground cloaked the sounds of their hooves.

They trotted a small distance down a trail. The grove was a small park. Joe could see street lights glimmering between the staggered tree trunks. The same night songs of nocturnal critters he'd heard coming from the star pillars hid the sounds of their steeds'. The fresh smell of oak wafted into Joe's nostrils and fireflies winked as they passed, welcoming them back to solid ground.

Ekaf hopped off his horsefly and turned to Joe.

"We're-" he paused as the horsefly shoved its nose in his face. He patted it a few times, "Thank you," he said, "stay here." The beast almost seemed to nod but then it trotted off, nose to the ground, looking for a late night snack. Turning back to Joe, Ekaf said, "We'll leave them here. As I'm sure you noticed, they're a little too loud for the streets."

Joe nodded. He slid off his steed and almost collapsed had his ride's long snout not swooped in to support him. The ground hit his feet like a bed of needles as blood began to return to his numbed extremities.

"Whatchya think of Suinus?" Ekaf asked.

"It's amazing." Ready for the tingling, Joe straightened back up and stroked his horse, adding a quiet but sincere, "Thank you! Now uh...stay here, with your buddy, alright?"

The horsefly snorted then joined its companions critter hunt.

"Not all cities are this fantastic," Ekaf admitted, "Portville's a little bland, but you'll love Etihw City. Not to mention Poricoff. Zviecoff's seen better days, but I think you'll still enjoy it!"

"Are they all this...uh...natural?"

"Absolutely – big cities especially!" Ekaf chuckled, "You can't burn all these lights and not have something to suck up all the carbon."

"Wonder why we never thought of that..." Joe mumbled.

“Not enough profit in preserving the future. With the majority of the population as wage slaves serving a handful of rich robber barons, civilization can get nasty. Suppose we’re lucky we found magic before we found coal-”

“Should we be in a hurry?”

“Yes!” Ekaf said with a hop. He scurried over to Joe and beckoned for the human to get down on ear-level so that he could – unnecessary as it was – whisper the plan into Joe’s ear, “Grandfather lives off one of those town squares, where the main roads intersect in between those beastly buildings.”

Joe nodded, “The star pillars.”

“Yes. He’s got a shop house in the base of one of those behemoths. The night guards are tough. There’s a curfew downtown and they’re especially not fond of finding a Knome that’s breaking curfew – especially around the shops. Not to mention you’re a pyromancer.”

“Great.”

“We’ll have to be sneaky,” Ekaf straightened his cap, “and we’ll have to be fast!”

And that was it. Ekaf was off. His tiny legs pumping as he zoomed into the brush.

“Jesus!” Joe yelled, running after his companion, he lowered his voice to a hiss, “Slow down!”

Ekaf didn’t hear, or maybe he did, but nevertheless Joe managed to catch up. They were out of the park in seconds. They stuck to a main road but dashed along in the shadows, dodging the glaring balls of fire that stole the stars’ right to light the night. They’d jogged for about ten minutes before they passed a police officer. Neither Joe nor Ekaf had seen him but they definitely heard him as he came jogging out from a dark alleyway.

“Hey!”

“Don’t stop!” Ekaf exclaimed.

The two increased their jog into a sprint only to run, head first, into a few guards as they rounded a corner. The two they hit fell on their butts, but two others stood with their halberds lowered menacingly. One tapped Joe’s stone with the spear-like tip of his weapon, poking a tiny hole in Joe’s tie. The guard’s appearance only served to heighten Joe’s fear – his nose and jaw jutted out slightly more than a human’s and he was coated with fur and topped with a nose more similar to the ursus genus than the homo. This was the closest Joe had ever been to seeing a bear and this bear appeared ready to arrest him.

Before speaking to either Joe or Ekaf, the bearn addressed the bird on his shoulder, “We’ve got two curfew violations, one dark magic violation,” he snarled the last bit, “and a Knome. Report back in five.” The bird fluttered off over Joe and Ekaf’s heads. Then the police turned his attention back to his captives, “Now you know better than comin in the city with a rock like that in your chest.”

“Maybe he doesn’t,” one of the guards said as he rose to his feet. This man was dark skinned, shorter and skinnier than his bearn counterparts, and he had long pointy ears. The presence of an earth elf, a more humanoid race, among the constables relaxed Joe’s nerves a bit. The elf continued, “after all, he’s running around with a,” he snarled as if the next word stung his tongue to pronounce, “*Knome!*”

Ekaf was indignant, “I’m a citizen same as you!”

“Cept we don’t ride around with illicit magicians.” The other bearn guard said as she helped the other elven guard to her feet, “After curfew.”

“Actually, y’all are also walking about after-”

The second elf interrupted, “What are the two of you up to?”

“Visiting a friend.” Ekaf said.

“Oh yeah?” The bearn who had first spoken sneered, “Order or Pact?”

“Don’t make us fight you,” Ekaf groaned, “just let us go.”

“You hear that?” The earth elven male asked.

Ekaf and Joe hadn’t before but now they could, the rattling of armor and clapping of boots. Reinforcements were on their way.

“Even if you could fight us,” the elven female said, “back up’s around the corner.”

“Leave the Knome.”

The guards turned and were as surprised as were Joe and Ekaf to find that the clinking metal and heavy footsteps were not reinforcements at all but instead the armored spirits that Joe and Ekaf had fled from in the forests south of Saluman River. Their black blades were drawn and their silver eyes swapped between glaring at the Knome and pyromancer to the four constables that harassed them.

“And who are y’all?” One police asked, “Manaloen?”

“Never seen that insignia.” Another said.

“This is not your territory, spirits.” A third warned.

“Explain yourselves.” The fourth demanded.

The spirit in the lead, the same one that had demanded Ekaf’s arrest two days ago, spoke with such annoyance-filled hate it almost seemed to be a hiss, “We’ve got no time and no need to explain – this is a matter of extreme importance. Step aside or we will consider you in league with the Knome.”

“I’m afraid the Tadloe Guard bows to no one but our Master, our Queen, and the Emperor.”

“So be it.”

As halberds struck swords, Ekaf tugged at Joe’s shirt sleeve and the two slipped into an alley. When they came out the other side, back onto the street, they were no longer sticking to the shadows. There was no stealth to their mission any more, now their only hope was speed. The towers they passed got bigger and bigger, as did the fat square shop buildings that sprawled out from their bases. Finally they came to one of the grand intersections between the bases of the star pillars. They paused and Ekaf took a long sweeping gaze of the block.

“This way!”

Joe followed, looking over his shoulder: two figures were now thundering down the road after them, their armor clanging like church bells, but from the distance Joe couldn’t tell whether there was flesh under their armor or the wispy blue matter of a spirit. *I wonder if I’d be able to fight my way out if Ekaf and I got separated...I wonder if I’d be able to find my way back if we got separated.* But it was too late to look for street signs. As Joe returned his gaze to Ekaf they arrived before a humble stone house built in the shadows of an alley that looked as if it once cut through the base of a sky scraper.

Ekaf tried the door. It was locked. Joe turned. The guards hadn’t made it to the square just yet, but he distinctly heard them coming. Turning back to the door, Joe was surprised to see it ajar and Ekaf waiting impatiently inside.

“You picked the lock?” Joe asked.

“No.” Ekaf pointed to a window next to the door, “Window was open, now come on.”

Joe leapt hastily inside and Ekaf swung the door shut.

“You think they know where we were going?” Joe asked as his eyes began to adjust to the pitch-black darkness of the room.

“Well, most Knomes live in the Under. Grandfather’s probably one of the few if not the only Knome living in Suinus. So they’ll probably guess that we’re in here or we broke in elsewhere.” Ekaf stated.

“And the spirits will be able to track us because of the key.” Joe cursed.

“Exactly.”

Ekaf closed the window and dropped the blinds, leaving Joe’s chest as the only light source. Joe was about to suggest they do something about the darkness but before he could the room exploded with light. A ball of fire, like those he’d seen above the streets, clung to the roof in the middle of the room.

“Well, well, well, look what the dog hiccupped.”

For a split second, Joe thought he was seeing doubles. Ekaf wore a blue tunic and leggings, with a black belt and black boots, and a red cone-shaped hat. Grandfather wore roughly the same except all his clothes were as black as coal. The two mirrored each other age-wise and both had bright blue eyes. Aside from apparel, the main defining feature that separated the two were the beards: Ekaf’s was ash-gray and unkempt, Grandfather’s was well trimmed and white as the moon – well, the Earthen moon that is.

“Wait!” Ekaf yelled, “Who are you?!”

“Who am I?” Grandfather barked back, “Who the godi crimpsin tiad are you?!”

Simultaneously, the two charged one another, but Grandfather came out on top. Straddling Ekaf, Grandfather grabbed him by the ears and slammed his head down on the tile so hard that Ekaf’s cone flopped off and the key bounced out.

“How’d you get ahold of that key, huh?” Grandfather demanded, grabbing Ekaf by the ears again, “You got one answer and it better be the same as my best guess or you’re dead and if it’s my best guess you’re faraking dead, you hear me? You hear-”

“Hey!” Joe shouted.

Having rushed over to the two, he wasn’t sure what to do. He couldn’t kick the old man. But as he got on his knees so as to reach and attempt to restrain the Knome, the old guy cooled it.

“Joe?” He blinked, as if awoken from a dream. The scowl softened as his face relaxed.

“Yea?” Joe hesitated, staying on his knees but leaning as far as he could away from the intense stare of the Knome he thought was Grandfather.

Grandfather looked down at himself and he and Ekaf stared at one another. Though the scowl half returned, he got off Ekaf.

“You wanna tell me why this key isn’t in a warp cube?”

“That’s actually my fault...” Joe admitted.

Ekaf hurriedly retrieved his hat and the key and returned them both to his scalp as he said, “Some welcome that was.”

“You attacked me!” Grandfather snapped.

“And yet I’m the one with the concussion?” Ekaf shot back.

Grandfather stepped towards Ekaf, “Just because you lost doesn’t mean you didn’t start it.”

“Maybe it means I wasn’t trying to hurt you?” Ekaf stepped towards Grandfather.

Grandfather hissed, “Maybe you should knock before you break into someone’s house?”

“Maybe we’re in a hurry?” Ekaf whispered.

Grandfather propped his hands up on his hips, “Is that so?”

“It is.” Ekaf was almost mouthing the words at this point, the two close enough to kiss, “We’ve got to get into the Library before the spirits get here.”

“THE SPIRITS!”

Rage again filled the old Knome’s eyes and along with the rage came a blade. Grandfather extended his arm and a black sword materialized in his closed grip. As Ekaf drew the Duikii and the conflict threatened to return, Joe wasn’t there to stop it. In fact, he’d stopped paying attention. He’d heard something outside and had tiptoed over to the window to check it out.

As Grandfather crowed and summoned his dark weapon, Joe saw the spirits arrive, not five yards away. And as Ekaf drew his own weapon and the two moved to strike one another, the front door flew across the room in splintered chunks of wood. The Knights of the Light marched in. They strode past Joe – unnoticed where he stood, up against the wall by the doorway – and pointed their blood-dipped swords at the two Knomes. There were four of the armored spirits in all. They came to a stop a yard before the Knomes. Still unnoticed, Joe began to creep towards the doorway. He stared into the empty city square, *I could run! I could escape!* But whatever part of his mind gave him such ideas was shut down by the greater majority of his conscience. *No! I can’t leave Ekaf!*

The lead spirit raised her visor but before she could speak a smoldering ball of flame slammed flat into her back and sent her sprawling forward, over Ekaf, to slam into the far wall. The three other spirits turned to see Joe in the doorway.

“Shit.”

Now Joe ran. Yet, a few yards out into the cobble courtyard Joe found the Tadloe Guard trickling in from all angles, earth elves and bearsns geared up to fight. There was nowhere to run. He turned back to face the spirits, two of them, closing in on him. *What do I do? Where do I go? Where can I go?* An idea came in the nick of time. Letting fire pour out from his stone, envelop his shoulders, and drip down his arms, he shot another fireball – not at the guards nor at the knights – at his feet. The blast launched him into the air, tumbling like a kid who’d gotten too much air on the trampoline, right over the charging spirits to slam back down on the hard paved ground.

The air was knocked out of him and he did not have the time to gain his composure before the spirits spun around to chase after him. Fortunately, as they neared, Ekaf leapt over the prostrate pyromancer to deflect their swinging swords. As Ekaf parried the spirits and Joe crawled to his feet, the Knome yelled to him.

“Joe! Grandfather needs you to open his warp cube!”

“What about you?!”

“Save your flame, I’ve got these goons!” Ekaf cried, “Quick! Go back to Grandfather, we need to be in that Library before the police arrive!”

Joe spun on his heels and sprinted back to the house. Bounding through the doorway, he nearly tripped over an empty suit of armor crumpled on the floor. The implications of an abandoned pile of one of the spirit’s equipment wouldn’t hit Joe until later, for now adrenaline narrowed the scope of his thinking to the task at hand.

“Grandfather!”

The Knome was busy sparring away with the head spirit, wielding the blade he’d threatened Ekaf with. Without glancing to Joe, Grandfather tossed his warp cube across the room.

Joe caught it.

“Turn it on, tap the first screen twice, swipe it left!” Grandfather instructed, “If it’s a lil rusty, then it’s the right one!”

Joe pressed the button on the top, immediately a neon green key appeared, hovering above the cube. He spun the cube around in his hand until the tiny screen he stared at had a one atop it. Not bothering to read the tiny text, Joe went ahead and tapped it twice then swiped left. The hologram didn't seem to change. *Is that a different key? Is that rust or does it just need polishing?* He swiped again. Instead of a key, the room was nearly filled with a bulging green oval.

“You’ve got a boat in this thing?!” Joe crowed.

“This is no time to go snooping through my stuff!” Grandfather roared, “For the love of Solaris, get that godi key!”

Joe swiped back right and the cube switched back to projecting a key. Just as Joe had on the cliff above the Saluman River, he stuck his finger through the ring of the key and it solidified. As the green became silver and the light became solid, Joe’s vision blurred. No longer was he across the room from Grandfather fighting a losing battle with a warrior twice his size, now he stood amidst row after row of book shelves. Each shelf was covered with pegs upon which hung silver keys. The shelves themselves seem to sit on nothing but a pure white floor and the floor was same as the walls and the roof – it was as if there was no floor, walls, or roof. It was almost as if the entire room, which extended as far as Joe could see, was floating in a world of nothingness. Taking a step forward, the illusion disappeared and he was back in Grandfather’s house.

“USE THE KEY YOU SON OF A BITCH!” Grandfather begged as he ducked under his adversary’s legs and fled up the stairs.

The spirit turned to Joe. *How do I use the key?* Before he could try, Ekaf flew in the doorway and snatched the key out of his hands. As the spirit raised his sword and charged, Ekaf thrust the key out before him, twisted his wrist, then pulled back. The air in front of Ekaf opened. No longer was he looking past Ekaf at the approaching spirit, he was once again staring at the Library, though, only a glimpse of it – a small oval. Ekaf strode forward, stepping between dimensions, and Joe followed on his heels.

Holy shit, that was close!

The Library was unbearably bright and yet, not bright at all. Once more, Joe took it all in. It wasn’t just the lack of boundaries that made the chamber incredibly strange – there was something off with the light. *There are no shadows.* He shuddered. This peculiar, never ending expanse of pale nothingness in which the Key Library sat was far more alien to Joe than Solaris had been. This, Joe thought, *seems like a dream.* As Joe followed Ekaf down an aisle of key covered shelves he squinted, trying his best to find where the rows ended. The rows would break, so that one could walk over to a parallel row, but then after giving a yard or so of space, the rows would continue. On and on and on.

“Keys for everyone past, present, and future-” Ekaf began before interrupting himself, “Watch out!”

Ekaf yanked Joe out of the way and pulled him around the side of the next row so that they could sit with their backs up against the shelf. Instead of explaining, he held a finger up to his lips. A second later, Joe could hear why. Metal clinking. Joe listened as the spirits strode down the aisle, behind them, then watched as they continued to wander through to the next one. Once the spirits, three of them, were out of sight, Ekaf released Joe and lowered his finger.

“Sit tight.” He whispered.

Joe was just glad they didn’t have to run for the moment. His eyes ran over the keys across from them and one in particular caught his eye, it glowed radiantly as if the very metal

was a light source. Joe reached out and took it off the hook. The Library disappeared, the entire world fell out from beneath his feet. Darkness engulfed him then a split second later the sun was beaming down on him. He was on Earth. Time had stopped and left him staring at a woman, an ancient woman that was lying on the crosswalk. She looked as old as Ekaf and Grandfather combined. *The humpback lady from the intersection!* The one he almost hit! Joe looked around, she was on the road at the edge of the intersection, the very intersection of his accident. He looked across the street and, sure enough, the eighteen wheeler was inches away from his little green sedan – frozen in time. *This was right before my wreck, right before my death – or, right before I would've died...* He glanced back at the prone lady. He took a step forward, towards the accident.

“Joe.”

He was back in the Key Library, somewhere between Earth and Solaris. His fingers held the new found key. Ekaf stood a few yards down.

“Did I just teleport?” Joe asked in a whisper.

“No. Notice how none of the keys have labels, right?”

Joe looked about, Ekaf was right. Some of the keys were rusted, few were shiny like the one he'd grabbed, but for the most part he couldn't tell one from the other.

“When you touch a key, you see the fate it would take you to – unless of course, the fate is your own. Now-”

“What about the key we used to get here?” Joe asked.

“Some keys are less accurate than others, did you notice how it was a little scuffed up around the edges? But yes, someone did die to leave that key, now come on before that someone is one of us!”

Joe stared at the key in his hand. Then he got up and followed Ekaf.

“...The Library seems to organize itself randomly but you always manage to find what you are looking for-”

“Mrow!”

“Shoot.”

The two stopped. A black cat, its fur as slick and flawless as the pure whiteness that surrounded them, sat atop a shelf. Its tail flicked back and forth and its eyes, silver like cooled steel, watched. Ekaf turned to Joe and whispered, “That's Alone, the third Suffering Sibling, she's the librarian.”

The cat hopped down, strode past Ekaf, and approached Joe, sniffing his pants leg.

Looking up from the cat, Joe asked Ekaf, “Are you or are you not allowed to be here?”

Ekaf shrugged, “I don't think Alone can remember people.”

“Let's hope she can.” Joe muttered.

“Let's hope she can't.” Ekaf corrected.

“Can she not understand us?” Joe asked.

“Nor can she hear us.” Ekaf explained, “She's Alone, after all.”

“Jeez...”

“The good news is, since no one can communicate with her, she lets most anyone do as they please so long as they strike her curiosity. If you bore her...well...you may get to see Agony again, I'll leave it at that.”

The cat hesitated a moment longer then rubbed its head against Joe's pants leg.

“We're good.”

As soon as Ekaf had spoken, a new voice erupted through the peace and quiet of the Library behind them.

“There you are!”

The two turned and their hearts sank. Two Knights of the Light stood three dozen yards down. Their swords were drawn, their visors up, and their transparent lips pursed.

“Once again, you’re under arrest, but now, the both of you!”

Ekaf and Joe turned to each other but no words need be spoken – they were off. Ekaf got Joe’s key out from beneath his cone and threw a lateral pass to Joe.

“Wait,” Joe caught the key, “why are you giving me the key?”

“They’re more interested in catching me than you!” Ekaf said as he huffed and puffed and continued to run alongside Joe, “Catching you would be like shooting dead fish in a barrel.”

“So they won’t chase after me?”

“Well,” the two turned down an aisle of shelves, Ekaf snatching miscellaneous keys as they ran, “they’ll catch me first and then worry about you. If nothing else, we’ll have better odds losing them if we can separate them.”

They slipped down another row. Ekaf looked back just in time to see that their previous pursuers were gone only to be replaced by a tall dark cloaked figure who glided quickly after them. He turned back to Joe.

“Death!” He gasped.

“What?”

“When we get to the next aisle, we’ll split up. Alright?”

“Alright!”

They reached the next aisle. Ekaf took the row to the left, Joe took the right. And only a few seconds after they’d split, Joe froze. *How am I supposed to get back to Grandfather’s house?* A tempting thought popped into his mind as he glanced at the key he’d plucked off the wall. *I could always just return to Earth.* He looked behind him. Two spirits were hot on his trail. *Shit, I may have to!* Joe took off yet again. *Where the hell am I going? Where do I put my key?*

“Mrrrow!”

The cat – or librarian or whatever it was – was flying down the top of the key shelves just ahead of him. *Follow me.* That wasn’t Joe’s thought. *That wasn’t my thought!* Joe’s eyes grew wide but he didn’t stop running. *Are you talking to me?*

“Meow.”

I thought you couldn’t communicate?

“Mrow,” *follow me.*

Joe followed. The cat hopped down onto the floor, scurrying along, its coat of fur seeming to melt across the strange blank turf of the Library. They zigzagged from row to row, passing key after key. He glanced over his shoulder, he could no longer see his pursuers. Looking ahead, his eyes stuck on another key that, like the old lady’s, seemed to shine brighter, as if begging to be noticed. Joe skidded to a halt.

“Mow.” *Follow me!*

Reaching out, Joe poked the key. Once again, a dropping sensation hit him in his gut as his vision flashed back, but this time light returned to him slowly as did the details, as if trickling into place. The sun shone in gently, glistening off specks of dust that drifted lazily through the air. It was a green room, it smelled old, a bit musty, like cumin. There were two desks, one covered in papers and one with a computer. *It’s definitely Earth.* Pictures of family, children in

their graduation day robes, but also pictures of other things, a rocket ship, a moon rover, Earth as viewed from space, lined the walls. Then he saw a chair, in the corner of the room, and the old man who sat in it, sitting rigid and still – so very still.

He knew where he was even before he saw, he'd only hoped he'd arrived there sooner.

Papa...

Follow, the cat hissed, nudging his foot, me!

Joe was back in the Key Library, glaring at the shining key.

“Raise your hands!” Came a command from behind him.

“Meow.”

Joe didn't even bother to look back but instead he bolted after the cat. They came to the end of a row, turned around, and ran down a parallel isle. Then they swerved right, going right back down the aisle they came from, and continued running in the direction they'd been before. Four rows down, Joe glanced back to see they'd put almost three rows between them and the guards. *Thank God I'm not wearing armor!* At the end of the next row, they turned left and turned down another hall before the guards rounded the corner to see them. After another minute of running, the cat meowed: *Your key is coming up to the left.*

Joe watched the shelf intently but saw no empty pegs.

Stop. It is here, directly to your right. Three pegs up.

Following the cat's directions, Joe found himself staring at another key.

What the... Joe thought as he reached out to touch it.

“Meow!” *I wouldn't do that if I were you.*

“Why?”

The cat offered only a blank stare.

Joe rolled his eyes.

The cat almost seemed to shrug as it purred.

“Screw it.”

He reached out and touched the key. His gut dropped and the world went black. Light returned slowly to his vision. The first thing he noticed was snow. Snow was everywhere. Then he saw the audience. Before him, rows and rows of darkly dressed people sat in stands – blurry from the distance at which they sat but obviously focused on whatever was occurring directly in front of Joe – a scene which he could now make out. Beside him was a dark skinned woman with pointed ears in a glamorous black dress. She was stooped over another figure, the figure of a man. *That's me!* he realized. He was on his knees with his head slumping back over his shoulders to rest on a small cross that he was bound to. A pale white blade was lodged in his stomach, attached to the grip of the woman. Shuddering, Joe staggered back. He was whisked away from the scene and back in the Key Library.

You know curiosity can kill you? the cat warned.

Joe left the key on the peg and looked up at the cat. She meowed from atop the bookshelf. Her paw resting on the key-less peg above the one holding the key Joe had just released. Joe looked down from the peg to the keys in his hands then he looked back to the Librarian as she meowed.

I think it's time for you to return to Solaris.

Joe looked over his shoulder. They'd evaded the spirits for the time being but that time wasn't going to last forever. His heart thumped with exhilaration formed of fear, confusion, and excitement. Fire swirled about in his chest, ready to be released. His body wanted him to leave but he couldn't-

“Not without Ekaf!”

Good bye, pyromancer.

The cat was gone, the guards disappeared, the shelves and shelves of keys were whisked away, the practically blinding white atmosphere of the Key Library was tossed upside down, flipped inside out, and color returned to the world. Joe was lying on wooden floorboards.

“You’re back already?”

“Grandfather?”

“Who farakin else?!”

Grandfather stood over Joe as he put on a black leather backpack. With the bag situated, Grandfather fixed Joe with a glare then opened his left hand and his weapon materialized in his grip. Joe stared at the sword from where he lay, getting a better look than he had been able to during his short tussle with Ekaf. It was plain but black, indescribably black. Not glossy or shiny but not dull either, it was simply black as the Library walls had been simply white. It was almost as if it wasn’t real, as if it was a hole in the universe like the one Joe had just fallen through. It was a Fou-style sword. Though Joe didn’t know that, it was a style Joe recognized, very similar to a katana: a slender, one sided blade on a skinny hilt with only a small disk between blade and grip to protect the hand.

Noting Joe’s stare, Grandfather grunted, “This is the Suikii, brother of your bastard-friend’s Duikii. Speaking of the old geezer, where is he?”

“We got split up...” Joe said, averting his gaze – in doing so he noted the pile of empty armor lying above the stairs, *Looks like Grandfather may be as apt as Ekaf...just a little less merciful.*

“I knew it would happen! I knew it, I knew it, I knew it! And I bet you that fart’s still got my key! Doesn’t he? *And* he owes me money...That scoundrel! He knows I’m too old for this...That son of a-”

Footsteps came from below them. *We’re above the room we were in before*, Joe realized, *that must be the Tadloe Guard!* Joe was on his feet in an instant, shoving his keys in his pockets. He looked back to Grandfather and the two exchanged similar expressions of panic.

“Get the light!” Grandfather whispered.

Joe spun to face the fiery sphere, frowned, and almost turned back to ask the Knome before he remembered what Bonehead had taught him. He called the swirling ball of flame and it came to him with a whispery poof. The room went pitch black aside from the moonlight that shone in through the stone window frames and the glow emanating from Joe’s chest.

“Listen son, I need you to keep them from coming up here.” Grandfather raised his sword, “This puppy, the Suikii, is a lot like those keys you were fooling with. What I mean is, if I sweet talk her enough she’ll open up a way to escape. Just keep them back!”

Tingling with anticipation, Joe moved to stand above the stairs. A furred guard already stood at the bottom.

“Come down without your weapons and with your hands up!” He demanded in a husky voice.

Trying his hardest to deepen his voice to match that of the bearn, Joe warned, “Don’t you come up here!”

“Boy, if you don’t surrender now then you will surrender your right to a trial.” The guard shot back, “Three good civilist citizens have already died because of you, my comrades would love to get some revenge.”

Three! Joe was horrified. *Those spirits must've killed some of those guards – Ekaf and Grandfather wouldn't have...would they have?!* He spoke aloud, "I apologize but I assure you, those spirits weren't with us, they're as much our enemy as they are yours!"

"Indeed, but they were here because of you and you are here illegally." The bearn countered, "Now I won't tell you again. Keep your hands over your head and come down the stairs."

Joe looked over his shoulder at Grandfather. The Knome was waving his sword around with wild eyes, dancing about the room as if facing an imaginary foe. Still no luck. When Joe looked back down the stairs, the bearn charged. Instinctively, Joe stepped back. *You can't let him up!* Joe stepped forward and flexed. His entire body was engulfed in flames. The warmth swarmed over his skin like a heated fleece. From his own glow, he could see the fur blown back into the charging guard's eyes which were wide with fear. Joe didn't even have to attack, the mere gust from the flames – or the fear they instilled – knocked the guard off his feet. He fell down the stairs, on top of his following comrades.

Though Joe may have stopped their leader and those unfortunate guards who had come right behind him, other guards clambered over their stunned companions to run up the stairs with their pikes aimed at Joe's gut. Raising his palms to point them at the closest guard, he released two bursts of flame, smacking her in the chest once to throw her off balance and again to have her crash into the others behind her. Once again, the police were falling back down the stairs to land on top of the guards that had just begun to get back on their feet. Now there was a dog pile at the base of the stairs, too large to climb and too tangled to get out of. Just in case, Joe poured his fire onto the top three stairs until they were alight themselves.

With the constables subdued, Joe turned back to Grandfather in time to see the old Knome jump up and swing the Suikii for the final time. The weapon tore through the very fabric of the universe, opening a dark hole that was somehow darker than the unlit atmosphere of Grandfather's house. He turned to instruct Joe but the pyromancer had already dove through the portal.

Joe could see the stars, the moon, and swirling masses of clouds slowly drifting over the sky-scape. *Those clouds are awfully low.* Then a breeze hit him. No. It wasn't a breeze. It was wind with the force of a tidal wave. *Oh God!* Joe's eyes grew wide, his jaw dropped, his stomach clenched. *That isn't wind! That's gravity!* He was hundreds of feet in the air and, as he rolled over onto his belly, he was looking down on the city of Suinus.

The Suikii had opened a portal into the night sky.

"GODI SWORD!" Grandfather cried, his old crackling voice barely audible over the whipping air as the two fell towards the ground, "STUPID GOOD FOR NOTHING! I'VE BEEN NOTHING BUT GOOD TO YOU AND HERE YOU GO CONSPIRING AGAINST ME!"

"TRY AND OPEN ANOTHER!" Joe yelled over his shoulder, craning his neck in an attempt to spot the Knome, "WE MIGHT HAVE TIME!"

Grandfather was now falling beside Joe.

"NO." Grandfather shouted with crossed arms.

"WHY?" Joe exclaimed.

"WHAT?"

"I SAID WHY!"

"I?"

"WHY!"

"WHY?"

“YES!”

“IF SHE WANTS TO BE IMMATURE, THEN FINE. WE’LL DIE AND SHE’LL DIE WITH US!”

“GRANDFATHER,” Joe yelled, pronouncing each word as if his life depended on it – which it did, “I! DON’T! WANT! TO! DIE!”

Grandfather looked at Joe then at the sword in his hand then back at Joe. And just as he looked as if he were about to speak, he looked down.

“WHAT’S THAT?”

Joe followed Grandfather’s gaze.

Against the darkness of the city below, silhouetted above the fiery balls that spotted the towers, were many flying creatures. At first, Joe could only see the dalvary, large reptilian silhouettes that slithered through the sky above the city, but then he spotted two bird shaped creatures. The creatures grew closer and closer as they fell and Joe soon noted that they were not bird shaped at all, but rather mammalian. More horse shaped than bird shaped. And to be completely specific, they were more horsefly shaped than horse shaped.

“The horseflies!” Joe exclaimed.

“HUH?”

“THE HORSEFLIES!” Joe repeated, “EKAF AND I RODE THEM HERE!”

“Of course,” Grandfather chuckled, speaking so that only he could hear, “it was on the list.”

- - -

“Ride horseflies into Suinus.”

Ekaf read aloud as he folded the paper gently, slipped it back into the inside pocket of his vest, then sighed. *Well, until we meet again, Joe,* Ekaf smiled, his eyes twinkling, *let’s hope I prepped you right.*

“How am I not surprised.” Death said with a voice as deep as a roll of thunder but completely devoid of any inflection.

“Is it possible to surprise Death?” Ekaf asked.

Death shrugged.

“I know you’re a mortal and all, but still...” now Ekaf shrugged, “Just curious.”

“If anyone could do it, it’d be you.” Death replied.

Ekaf was sitting in a plain wooden chair: four-legged, four beams shooting out the back topped off with a plain wooden cross bar as a back rest, no cushion, no padding, it was merely a chair in its dullest yet most accurate of forms. The chair’s four legs sat on nothing. Ekaf looked down between his stubby legs. His sight could’ve gone on forever, then again, it could’ve stopped beneath his chair – it was impossible to discern within the whiteness. Much like the walls of the Key Library, Ekaf was in a blank world and all that existed in it was himself, his chair, and Death. Death strode into Ekaf’s line of sight, observing the Knome.

The first couple times Ekaf had set eyes upon Death, he’d gotten chills. But as he grew into a ripe old age, he came to fear Death less and less. He became more of a promise than a threat. Of course, that sense of dread, the same sense of dread proclaimed in the monotone notes strung out by Death’s vocal cords, was still there and Ekaf dreaded the day he would leave Solaris behind. But, until then, he was content to continue a conversation with the gothic-clad bag of bones.

“Boo!” Ekaf said suddenly, his thin lips pulling back in a charming smile as he watched the skeleton before him for any sort of flinching. When it became apparent there would be no such movement, the Knome continued, “Well, Death, you may not be glad to see me, but I sure am glad to see you. It’s been forever.”

“Too long...” Death nodded.

“Too long indeed, you should drop by more often! I say we go out for coffee or beer or...well...I suppose the sort of beverage won’t make a difference to you. You’re just skin and bones...or...bones rather. You know, that’d be what I miss the most – the undead can’t eat. You ever miss eating?”

With empty eye sockets, the skeleton watched the Knome.

“Am I wrong?” Ekaf asked, “You can’t eat after you die, right?”

“I don’t know.” Death said, “I’m not dead.”

“I forget that sometimes.” Ekaf said.

“I don’t.”

“I wonder when I’ll die.”

“I don’t.”

“I mean like *really* die. I mean the real deal. When me – like the last me, between every universe, every timeline – really uh...kicks the bucket. That’s a little euphemism Joe gave me.”

Death nodded, a gesture that – in this context – had all the significance of a shrug.

“Can you give me a hint?”

“About when?” Death asked.

Ekaf nodded, actually meaning to signify, “Yes,” rather than just filling the gap in the conversation.

“Yes.”

Ekaf jerked in his seat, stopping himself from leaping to his feet as he cast a distrustful glance at the absence of matter below him. He returned his attention back to the conversation.

“When?!”

“I can but I won’t.”

“Why?!” Ekaf lamented, “You tell Joe!”

“As is part of the plan.”

Ekaf switch objectives, hoping his failed previous request might make this secondary query seem more acceptable, “Can you find room in the plan to let me know whether or not we get it right this time around?”

“No.”

“*Come on!* It went pretty smooth this time...so far...just a little hint?”

Death deadpanned.

“You’re a buzz kill.” Ekaf pouted.

“You’re obnoxious.” Death stated.

“You’re cold-hearted.” Ekaf snapped.

“You’re loud.” Death replied.

“You’re dreadful!” Ekaf cried.

“You’re a Knome.” Death said.

Ekaf giggled, “You’re a funny guy when you don’t try to be.”

“You’re not.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t asked about Joe yet.”

“Figure he’s the same as always...and I’m in no hurry.” Death gestured to the emptiness surrounding them, “We’ve got all the time in the universe.”

“Yes,” Ekaf stood up on the chair and glanced around the realm, as if checking to make sure the coast was clear, then turned back to Death and whispered, “but too long a conversation and the reader’s will get bored.”

Death cut right to the chase, “You continually test the program.”

“I know, I can’t help myself...I’m dreadfully ashamed,” Ekaf said, whole-heartedly, “but if we try the exact same thing, over and over and over and-”

“He’d claim that you never did try the *exact* same thing.”

Ekaf smirked, sitting back down in his chair, “Yea and I’d say the old geezer is senile, I wou-”

“The boy understands too much.”

“Yea?”

“He’s got no respect for fate – no respect for time.”

“At this point,” Ekaf shrugged, “time’s got little integrity left to respect...” then he frowned, finally hearing what Death had said, “Wait, why do you say that?”

Death looked away from Ekaf and gazed off into the white abyss.

“This time,” Death said, “he left with three keys.”

- - -

As the horseflies came to a running stop in the small clearing before Bonehead’s cave, Joe felt a tad uneasy. It wasn’t just him either, the horses’ eyes were wide, lips curled back, and their pale ivory teeth were frothing with foam. Before the two could dismount, their steeds whinnied and leaned back on their hind legs then pranced about the clearing, treading the brittle soil beneath their feet like angry bulls. Finally, they came to a rest and allowed Grandfather and Joe to exchange weary glances as they slid off the slick, transparent hide of their demonic-rides and gave each their due pats.

“I got a bad feeling...” Joe said, watching the entrance of the cave.

“As do I,” Grandfather nodded, wielding the Suikii as they approached the rocky entrance, “stay close behind me and watch our rear. Just in case.”

Joe nodded and glanced back to watch the horseflies trot off into the dark forest, smearing their noses in the dirt in search of pray, before he turned back to follow his new Knomish companion into the rocky depths of Bonehead’s cave. At first, the scent was weak, almost a mere suggestion and Joe couldn’t really tell what it was he smelled – he could only tell that he did smell something. As they reached the base of the spiral stair case, he knew immediately what he’d smelt. Burning. Ash. Charcoal. The aftermath of a fire and, oh, was the smell ever so strong. Yet, all the fires that had once lit the subterranean halls were gone, even the one’s Joe hadn’t absorbed. The two proceeded with only the light of Joe’s chest.

“Should we call for him?” Joe whispered.

“For Bonehead?”

“Yes sir.”

“No,” Grandfather said sternly, “if Bonehead is here, he knows we are here. Which means one of three things – he doesn’t want to greet us, can’t greet us, or he isn’t here.”

“Or he’s going to eat us...” Joe mumbled beneath his breath.

“He would never,” Grandfather said, not an ounce of doubt in his voice, “I’d trust him with my soul. And also he’s undead so eating us wouldn’t do him any good.”

“True,” Joe scratched his head, “hey this may not be the right time-”

“It isn’t.”

“-but I left Ekaf back there, in the Key Library.”

“Ekaf?” Grandfather asked.

“Yea.”

“Who?”

“Ekaf.” Now Joe was scratching his head out of befuddlement.

“Who the-” Grandfather choked on his own words, “*Ekaaaaf*. I gotcha. What were you saying?”

“We left him back there!”

“We left him or he left us?”

“I left him.” Joe confessed, “I mean, he said if we get split up its fine, but what if-”

“He’ll be fine. Trust me. He is the last person you should be worried about. Honestly, we’d all be better off if something bad *did* happen to him. Farak, then I’d finally be able to get some rest.”

“I thought you were his friend?”

Grandfather snorted, “Joe. Ekaf is not in trouble. I guarantee you he is hitch hiking on fates, slipping in, out, and between universes right now, having the time of his life. If the world were to end tomorrow, he’d be the last one to die. Trust me. He is fine.”

Joe sighed but accepted the half-assed attempt to reassure, “Alright.”

“Now hush, I’m pretty sure we aren’t the only ones down here.”

Joe obeyed but Grandfather broke his own silence a moment later.

“And by not the only ones, I mean someone other than Bonehead.”

After that comment, the only other sound in the cavern was the dripping of water from the stalactites above. Joe put a hand to the stone in his chest, feeling the warmth and doing his best to estimate how much fire he had left. Each second trickled by sluggishly and it felt like an hour before they reached the laboratory where he had woken up the previous morning. The smell of burnt wood had increased steadily as they neared it and, when they rounded the corner, they could see flames bouncing up and down in the shadows on the walls around them.

“Oh no!”

Grandfather dashed down the hall with Joe stepping on his heels as they sprinted into the room. The fierceness of the flames had been amplified by the shadows for most of the fires had gone out. Most of the smoke floated up through ventilation holes carved in the roof of the chamber, though some did trickle down the hallway. Only a few clumps of books and shelf were still standing, the rest were smoldering in heaps on the floor. The majority of the room had long since burned away. *The book! The Fate Programmers’ Book!* But just as Joe’s mind threatened to slip into panic, he noticed a black figure sitting amidst the piles of ash with its back to the two. Somehow this stranger’s presence, though he had perceived it initially as a threat, calmed him.

Grandfather was already one step ahead of Joe. He stood with his chest poked out, his white-bearded jaw set, and his sword pointed at the kneeling figure before them.

“Don’t move!” Grandfather commanded.

The figure tensed up. His body glimmered in the firelight due to a mixture of sweat and ash. Joe could now see that the man’s skin was much lighter under the outer layer of filth and,

Joe couldn't be sure, but he thought he could make out two pointy ears sticking up from under long blonde hair.

"Your name."

"Zalfron Sentry."

The man's accent was thick, sounding very familiar to the thick accents common in the Southeastern regions of the United State, so thick in fact that "Zalfron" sounded like "Zahvrawn" and the "Sentry" sounded more like a "Sentray".

Sentry! Joe thought, *Could he be a descendant of Zannon Sentry?*

"What are you doing here?" Grandfather continued.

"Ah was followin someone." the elf said.

"Who?"

"If y'all're friends uh whoever lived hare...wae're on the same sahd..." The elf paused, "Can ah turn round?"

"Slowly."

The elf got to his feet, arms raised, and turned to face Joe and Grandfather. Joe was suddenly struck by the height of the man, probably six and a half feet! He was skinny but Joe could tell there was some lean muscle hidden beneath the soot. His shirt had been torn nearly to pieces and his rough brown pants were intact but covered in ash and glued to his legs with perspiration. Joe was staring at his very first electric elf.

"You're Tabuh's brother, aren't you?" Grandfather asked.

Zalfron nodded, squinting at the Knome with his brow furled before turning to look at Joe. His golden eyes lit up.

"Uh pahromancer! No way! Ain't never thought ah'd maet one uh y'all!"

It was as if the elf had completely forgotten that the old Knome was pointing his sword at him. Zalfron leapt over to stand before Joe, poking the glowing orb poorly hidden by Joe's dress-shirt. The elf paused, his eyes straying from the stone in Joe's ribs to the plain red tie rolling down from Joe's neck.

"What's this? Some kahnda pahromancer garb?!"

But before his query could be answered he was on the ground, on his belly, Grandfather standing on his back holding his wrists with opposite hands and twisting them so that the elf winced.

"What about slowly don't you understand! You're lucky I didn't run you through! Goodness sakes, son," Grandfather growled, more aggravated than angry, "explain yourself!"

"Ah was chasin uh bone bender!"

"Why?"

"Cause ah wanna faht in the Samurai's Army."

"What?"

The elf sighed, "Ah wanted to faht for the Emperor...but they said ah was too...uh...unco-ordained?" Then his voice regained the energy it had when he'd first spoken his name, "But then they tol me bout the Knahts!"

The Knights? Joe wondered, thinking back to his conversation with Bonehead about the Foretelling. Joe asked, "The Knights?"

"The Kou Knahts!" Zalfron said, "Ther lahk the Kay Dubbya special forces."

"K.W.?" Joe asked.

"Raelly?" He scoffed, "You must bae a few arrows short uh quiver."

“No laughing!” Grandfather demanded before explaining to Joe, “Stands for the Kou Warriors, but you might as well just call them the Samurai’s Army. Tiad, now they go by the Tenchi Kou Warriors too.”

“The Kay Dubbya Knahts are the folks that snaek insahd the enemay’s citaes an open up the gates, they craep inta fortresses to assassin generals and what not. You ain’t gotta use a sword to bae a Knaht, you jus hafta prove you can faht – and ah can faht.” He snickered, “Don’t belaeve mae?”

Zalfron struggled beneath the old Knome but was unable to get him off. Grandfather scoffed but this time he accompanied it by giving Zalfron a playful heel-kick in the gut.

“So you wanted to kill a necromancer to show that you could be of value?” Grandfather asked.

“Oh God,” Joe muttered, “please don’t tell me you killed Bonehead.”

“Ha!” Grandfather shook his head, “This punk is far too weak to take down Bonehead.”

“Bonehead?” Zalfron asked.

“Was the necromancer you were after an undead dinosaur?” Joe asked.

“Huh?” Zalfron blinked dumbly, “What’s a dahnosaur?”

“A reptile.” Grandfather explained, “Was the necromancer undead?”

“Yup!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Was the undead a person or an animal?” Joe asked.

“A person...” Zalfron snorted, “...you ask waird questions.”

“He’s not from here.” Grandfather said.

“Where ya from?” Zalfron asked.

“Earth.” Joe said.

“Earth?” Zalfron repeated, then his eyes widened and he seized beneath Grandfather, “Where the Bahble came from?!”

“Calm down! We are the ones asking the questions, Sentry.” Grandfather roared, kicking the elf in the gut, “Tell us about this necromancer.”

Zalfron stopped struggling and obeyed, “Ah’d followed this necromancer for thrae days...er was it two? Well...it was more than one for sure! So uh couple days ago the bone bender left the war sane in Darkloe. That’s uh rael war now, bah the way. Farak, last tahm ah heard it was jus a buncha skirmisheray but sure as hell it’s full blown now. Waird thang was, the Samurai weren’t there.”

Zalfron paused, his eyes wandering off to the heat-dried stalactites above, before they rolled back to the ground beneath him, “Anywho, hae, the bone bender, hah tailed it from Darkloe hare. Ah followed him down into this cave, hae’d gone down hare with some undead. Ah smelled a fahr so ah followed the smell and found a handful uh undead burnin thase books but the necromancer was gone as yesterday. So ah fought his skeleton friends and baet em up rael good and – you can sae their bones over yonder,” he pointed with his head. Grandfather and Joe looked and sure enough, a couple crumpled skeletons lay against the corner of the destroyed library, when they turned back to Zalfron he continued, “That necromancer was waerd lookin, it was lahk he was on fahr but the fahr was graen – lahk Flow Morain, but hae sure as hell wasn’t Flow Morain. Ah dunno...but ah suppose all them bone benders look a lil funky, maybe all mancners do...judgin from the way you look.” He nodded towards Joe with this comment. “You thank hae mahta been a Doom Warrior that somehow flew the coop?”

“I’ve got a good idea of who it may be,” Grandfather murmured, “but continue.”

“Anyway, after killin all the undead, ah found this paper. Thas what ah was doing when y’all got hare. Just thankin bout this paper. It musta come from one uh them burnt up books and ah raelly don’t know how ah managed to fahnd it but if you’ll let mae up, ah’ll show ya.”

Grandfather cast Joe a cautious look then rolled off the elf. Zalfron stood, dusted himself off to no avail, then pulled a sheet of paper about the size of his thumb out of his pocket. It was burnt on all edges and what little was written across the sheet was smeared with ash. But Joe managed to catch what it said.

“Zalfron Sentry.” Joe read aloud.

“Mah name.” Zalfron nodded.

“You think it was from the Book?” Joe asked.

“Even if it is, it may mean nothing at all. Everything, and I mean *everything*, son, is in that book.” Grandfather stated.

“I wish Bonehead would have just let me read it.” Joe sighed.

Zalfron interrupted their brooding, “Who’s this Bonehead fella?”

“The owner of this cave.” Grandfather explained, “A good friend of the Emperor who had a book that recorded the twenty-four names received by Saint in the storm that preceded the Foretelling, twelve of which have already made themselves known-”

“The Samurai!” Zalfron interjected.

“-the last twelve have not. I’ve never seen the list but you being Tabuh Sentry’s brother, I wouldn’t be surprised if your name was on it.”

“So maybe he is one of the Mystakle Knights!” Joe exclaimed.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Grandfather raised his hands, “I’m still not so sure you’re the Sun Child.”

“Huh?” Zalfron yelped, jabbing Joe’s chest with his index finger as he asked, “You maen to say this flame thrower’s the Sun Chahld?”

“Some of our friends think he is,” Grandfather shrugged and rolled his eyes, then he said to Joe, “but we definitely can’t say for sure until you save the Samurai.”

Zalfron was confused, “The Samurai ain’t need no savin.”

“Zalfron,” Grandfather hesitated. While paused, he vanquished all the coldness from his voice, so that when he continued, one could almost describe his tone as grandfatherly, “have you not heard?”

“Heard what?”

“When was the last time you saw your sister?” Grandfather asked.

“Uh yaer ago? Ah dunno, uh good whahl ago...”

“Where did you go to be recruited to the Kou Warriors?”

“Darkloe.”

“Do you seriously not know?” Grandfather asked again.

“Know what?” Zalfron cried.

“How is this possible?”

“*What?!*”

“The Samurai aren’t fighting in Iceload anymore – the Empire, the Trinity Nations, they pulled out. The war in Darkloe you saw, that’s where the Samurai’s Army is. The Kou Warriors – that’s what’s left of them. Creaton is back, Zalfron. The Samurai fell.”

Zalfron fell limp, collapsing to sit on his butt with a grunt.

“The Samurai fell,” the Knome continued, walking over to stand at eye-level with the elf, “but they got Creaton out of Iceload and threatened Shalis’ hold on the continent, it wasn’t in vain.”

“The Samurai fell?” Zalfron mumbled, staring at the Knome but not truly seeing him, “What’s that aeven maen?”

“They’ve been defeated. Captured or killed. Benjamin Fasthoof was the last one left, he was cut down in battle the other day by Hermes Retskcirt.”

“And,” his voice cracked, “Tabuh?”

“She’s gone.” Grandfather whispered.

Zalfron stood up slowly. He strode away from the two, his thick leather combat boots sinking into the ash that covered the cavern floors. He walked back and forth, his eyes as dark as his soot covered cheeks. Finally, facing away from the Knome and human, he fell to his knees, head bowed, just as they had found him.

“Tabuh...” he whispered.

“Son...” Grandfather cursed his skeptic ways. He had to put his doubts aside, not only for the sake of the heart broken elf or for the lost Earthboy, but for the future of Solaris. For if his doubts proved to be unfounded, then he very well could ruin what so many of his friends and heroes had fought for. Walking over to Zalfron, he put a hand on his shoulder, “Son, that Earthboy over there – he being here means that the time is soon for the Samurai to return. Your sister and the rest of the Samurai aren’t dead – even if they are, they won’t be dead forever. You heard the Foretelling, right?”

Zalfron nodded silently.

Grandfather continued, “We just don’t know where they are. Some, including the Emperor, think they’re just dormant. Waiting in some void until they can return and defend our world once again. I’m not sure about all this myth and legend stuff, this prophecy shenanigans, but if both Bonehead and that old godi gop thought this kid is the Sun Child...” Grandfather looked to Joe, “...then you must be the Sun Child.”

“So what do we do?” Joe asked.

“We need to go to the Emperor.” Grandfather said.

“Yer crazy! Wae cain’t just go to God’s Ahland and ask to sae Saint!” Zalfron crowed.

“We can and we will.” Grandfather said, “Now, Zalfron, that necromancer you were talking about. He was undead, right?”

Zalfron nodded.

“And engulfed in green flame?”

He nodded again, “You know who it was?”

“I think so,” Grandfather stroked his beard, “anything else you noticed about him?”

“His skull was strange...” Zalfron mumbled, “Not elven...not human aether...kahnda...kahnda baet up too, now that ah thank about it...”

“Aha! That’s because he is a bearn and not just any bearn. He was killed by the Samurai Tenchi Kou, turned into a banshee by the Doom Warrior Flow Morain, and now he serves the Black Crown Pact. With the Samurai gone, I’d wager Creaton is trying to tie up all the loose ends. Creaton must’ve sent Hermes, that’s right, the feller that took Benjamin Fasthoof out just the other day, to hunt Bonehead down after he saw Bonehead talking to you about the Prophecy.”

“But why would Creaton all of a sudden start watching Bonehead?” Joe asked.

Grandfather laughed, “Bonehead trained the Samurai, I’m sure he was under constant surveillance.”

“But Ekaf said-”

“Take what Ekaf says lightly.” Grandfather warned, “Now, no more talking. We need to get some rest – or at least, I do – and we don’t have much left of tonight. The cave should be safe. I’ll cast a couple trip spells to wake me up in case we get company, though I doubt we will. My sword is the bane of banshees, I doubt Hermes would dare come near you two if I’m here. So get some sleep, as much as you can. I know it may be rough trying to sleep for you, Zalfron.”

The elf nodded silently.

“But you need rest. We need to leave for God’s Island tomorrow and get to Saint as fast as we can.”

“Wae?” Zalfron and Joe said in unison.

“We.” The Knome nodded, “I’ll wake the two of you up, bright and early.”

- - -

Joe led Zalfron to his cavern room (after they found a shower for the filthy elf to bathe in). Unfortunately, Ekaf had only brought one cot for the room thus someone would be sleeping on the stone floor. Zalfron assured Joe he would be able to sleep on the floor saying that he’d been sleeping on the ground for so long his body wouldn’t know what to do with a bed. Joe didn’t put up much of a fight. The moist bumpy floor of the cave looked anything but comfortable though it couldn’t have been much better than the cot.

Sleep would not be in the cards for either boy – at least not for a while. Too much had happened. Joe’d flown to Suinus and back, witnessed his own death in the process, discovered Bonehead dead and his library destroyed then found one of the seven Bonehead had preached of (although Grandfather insisted that they not declare Zalfron a Knight until Saint confirmed, Joe was convinced). And as for Zalfron, well, his hope and dream of becoming a Kou Knight was closer than ever with the old Knome’s prophetic revelation that he could possibly be in the party of heroes who might come to parallel the epic-ness of the Mystakle Samurai themselves. Screw the Kou Knights, this was on a-whole-nother level. He fully committed to believing this possibility, after all, to not believe it meant to believe that he could do nothing to save his sister. And, worst case scenario, he could always turn Joe in as a mancer and become a Kou Knight as back up. Either way, he’d need to endear himself to this alien. What better way to spend a sleepless night than getting to know someone from another planet?

“You slaep?” He asked.

“Nope,” Joe said, “not even close.”

“Yup.” Zalfron sighed.

The elf pried Joe about Earth and his odd affiliation with Knomes. Both boys talked about how many times in their lives they’d dodged fate (Joe’s examples being especially recent). Joe explained the belligerence with which Ekaf and Bonehead practically begged him to save the universe while Zalfron did his best to accurately portray his rejection from well-meaning General Kou and finally that led them to a new conversation as Joe was prompted to say:

“You know, I’ve hardly even heard the details of what all happened with the Samurai. Not to mention literally everything else that has happened on Mystakle Planet since the First Void War.”

“Well, to bae honest, ah was busy studaying history in Panta for most of the Samurai’s shenanigans and totallay missed all the stuff in Assload crammed down in the dungeons of Asslore.” Zalfron admitted, “But ah could tell ya all about Solaris baefore now. Figure, it mahht actuallay help us fall aslaep. Is there anything specific ya wanna know?”

“What year is it?” Joe asked.

“Umm...” now it was Zalfron who chuckled, “...well ah know it’s in the 90s...”

“The 1990s?”

“Course!”

“Woh...” Joe muttered, “Think Bonehead said the Foretelling was in the early 90s.”

“Mhm,” Zalfron said, “just a couple years ago...So what else ya wanna know?”

Numerous questions stood out in Joe’s mind: *When did the other moons hatch? How did Creaton find his way back into Solaris? What was the Queen of Darkness’ story?* His mind settled on one he felt was quite relevant towards his mission, “What’s the Emperor like? Saint, right?”

“Saint’s a pretty cool gah. Hae prolly won’t aeven have a problem that you’re a pahromancer.” Zalfron shrugged.

Joe gulped, “I was wondering about that...He’s the Emperor. I’m a mancer – an outlaw – and Grandfather’s a Knome, which I’ve come to learn is an issue on this planet, yea?”

“Yea...” Zalfron conceded but he seemed to simultaneously disagree, “You raellay don’t know much about Saint, do ya?”

“Relatively nothing.” Joe acknowledged.

“Well now ah know what ah can tell ya bout!” Zalfron jerked to an upright position, sitting cross legged, “This was mah favorite storay growin up! You sae, in the yaers after the first millennia, after the Quaen of Darkness naerlay took over Solaris, the known world doubled. Jaeographically. The southern hemisphere – Assload, Tadloe, Sonder, Munkloe, and Batloe – had been all that was known up until that point. For naerlay fahv hunnerd yaers the folks of the South fought over how to divahd the territoraes of the North, despaht the fact that many of these lands were already owned bah natives. They fahnally decahded to chop it up twaen twelve Bishops and thase baecame the Bishopraes of the Hundred Empahr Allaiance.”

“Like Christian bishops?” Joe asked.

“Yup, yup! Back then, almost everayone in the Southern Hemisphere were Christian...well...almost everayone in power that is.” Zalfron continued.

“And was Saint a Bishop?”

“Hahahaha!” Zalfron laughed, “No sir! Hae killed most of em!”

“Oh! But he’s Christian, right?”

“Ah don’t want to give away anaymore than that, ya gotta haer it from the beginnin. Ah’ll start with how hae was found as an infant in the Winter of uh...what was it? Oh yea, 1487...”

Zalfron's Tale 1: The Forbidden Child²

On the day the second moon hatched, Baldura Ipativy, Bishop of Dogloe, was found by the door watchman strangled in her bedroom. The guard, an enslaved minotaur named Theseus Icespear, was mortified, for not only did he feel like a father to Baldura but she had been through the better part of a pregnancy. He was just about to gather the rest of the guardsmen when he heard a squeal from beneath the late Bishop's bed. Difficult as it would be for an eight foot tall old man, Theseus managed to look beneath the bed and retrieve Baldura's infant. Theseus examined the crying baby and, seeing the brown eyes, realized what had happened. Of the four races of elves, none had brown eyes. The child had undoubtedly been Baldura's, but the father could not have been Aldo Sentry, her husband. So Theseus fled, with the baby, and hopped on the first ship he came to which just so happened to be heading to the Dreb Empire in the rainforests of Munkloe.

Once in Munkloe, Theseus dodged the larger cities and settled in a small, tree-top village of bearns called Radderock. Theseus fit in quite well but it was not the same for the boy. Despite his brown eyes the boy still had blonde hair and pointed ears. To the bearns, he resembled their oppressors – the Ipativians – and as he grew up the villagers kept their distance from him. As soon as the child could walk, he was assigned the job of shit-shoveler. Alone, he scoured the roots of the great jungle trees that lifted Radderock and gathered the dung that was used to fuel the village's fires. While big cities were switching to magic torches powered by enertombs, most empires neglected to provide these to their smaller villages and these villages could not afford such luxuries on their own, thus they retained their old traditions.

Including Theseus, the half-elf only had four friends in Radderock. At the age of five, he learned the ways of the shit-shoveler from a fragile old bearn, far too old to keep up with the dung-demand, named Dindayal Azuran. The crone's diet consisted solely of epiphany shrooms – shit shrooms which sprout from turds as they marinated in the fungi on the rain forest floor – which meant he lived in a state of constant hallucinations. Though the villagers saw him as crazy, which he absolutely was, many also took his wild ramblings to hold prophetic value. He was one of the higher ups in Radderock religion, which focused on the Delian god Kuru. Saint's third friend was another religious figure, in fact, the villagers saw him as a deity – half man and half god. His name was Quonon. He was a harpy and was many centuries old, though he hadn't aged past his thirties. At this time, only the rich were educated enough to know their history so few had heard the tales of Flow Morain and his banshee army of Doom Warriors. If these stories had reached Radderock, they would've seen Quonon for what he was, a banshee, but instead they thought the mystical red flames that engulfed him were nothing more than a holy aura. Rather than using the villager's faith to his advantage, Quonon taught peace and acceptance, thus when Saint arrived with Theseus, Quonon made sure to show the young outcast kindness. In fact, it was Quonon that gave Saint his name. Though these three men all saw Saint as a friend, they were more father figures than equals with the half-elf. Saint's best friend didn't appear to be a man at all.

Before he turned ten, after a late-autumn morning spent moving manure, Saint was headed home. Though Saint could not see the puckering rain clouds through the canopy roof, he

² For a map of the Bishopries of the Hundred Empire Alliance check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

could tell from the lack of light on the jungle floor that the first rain of the wet season was soon to fall. The rain was late. In Munkloe a storm normally arrived within the early days of October. With the distortion of natural cycles, village tempers ran high and the beasts of the jungle behaved erratically.

The brooks – giant, thick scaled lizards that crawl across the ocean floor, from Tadloe to Munkloe to enjoy the rain of the wet season – had been acting especially vicious. The pieces of three young bearn children who had been playing on the jungle floor were found only a week before Saint encountered five of the monsters alone. These reptiles were known to be clever. Before brooks devour their prey, they torture and taunt it like felines. All Saint could do was flee and pray that he might find a way to evade the brooks before they got tired of toying with him. He was chased to the mouth of the village’s holy cave – the Cave of Kuru.

Kuru was the Delian God of Courage, the only god worshipped by the Radderock. The cavern was an ancient enertomb mine, once used by the extinct harpy kingdoms. The walls shimmered with purples and blues and it was difficult for one to deny the supernatural vibe of the place. Though magic scholars attributed this to the energy in the rock, the religious claimed that the energy was implanted by a higher being. At the end of the cave there was a steep drop off into a pit where rain water drained. Though the sides were jagged, it was nigh impossible to climb out due to the slipperiness of the wet rock. During a powerful rain in the wet season, such as the first rain, the drainage becomes so thick that anyone near the cave mouth would risk being washed inside and dragged, with the current, into the bottomless pit. The first rain had just begun when Saint found himself pinned between the blood thirsty brooks and the mouth of the merciless cave.

With little hope, he attacked the giant lizards with his shovel but was quickly subdued. Bloodied and bruised, Saint fought until consciousness drifted from his body. When he awoke, he was still alive. The bodies of the five brooks lay scattered around him and beside him sat a dog with fur black as midnight marred only by red streaks. He brought the dog, which he named Crimson, to Theseus but the old minotaur would not believe the tale until he saw the brook bodies himself. Once he believed, Theseus couldn’t keep the story to himself. The villagers ate the beasts then used their hide for armor and their teeth for kitchen knives. For the first time, Saint was embraced by the people of Radderock but his acceptance was short lived. Quonon, his trusted teacher, frowned upon the murder. He reminded the village that five beasts had sacrificed their life for one man. The feast ended in somber meditation for the creatures that had died.

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“That’s crazy.” Joe stated.

“Huh?” Zalfron asked.

“Wasn’t he glad Saint was okay?”

“Yea but...Quonon was trahna taech em to live in harmony with nature and what not.” Zalfron explained, “Ya know, hae taught that true Kuruin courage meant, aven when faced with vahlece, one ramains paeceful.”

“But to survive, you have to kill something, even if it is a plant. Even animals kill one another – shoot, didn’t you say the brooks had been killing children?” Joe countered.

“Yup,” Zalfron shrugged, “but revenge ain’t courageous.”

“I’d think it can be.” Joe muttered, then he spoke up, “Did he want them to not eat animals, too?”

“Yup, plants too.”

“How did Quonon expect them to live?”

“Well...hae kahnda didn’t.”

Joe sat upright, “He wanted them to die?”

“Kahnda...lahk what the Quaen of Darkness wanted.” Zalfron said, “With the Catechism and all.”

“I gotcha...” Joe paused as a thought struck him, “Was this story before or after the Queen came?”

“After.” Zalfron said, “Bah lahk...fahv hunnerd yaers.”

“So if Quonon was a banshee and he was left over from the old harpy kingdoms, then that means he was alive when the Queen came, right?”

Zalfron shrugged.

“You think he was a Knight of the Light?”

“Nah, hae was a good gah!”

Joe shrugged, “Sounds like he definitely agreed with them.”

“Well hae never got the chance to Catechahz anyone anyway.” Zalfron concluded, “Now, where was ah?”

“You just explained how Saint met his dog.” Joe answered.

“Ah yea, this next part is where thangs pick up,” Zalfron pondered for a moment longer then jumped back into his story.

- - -

During this age, most history knowledge was restricted to the richest of the rich, those who could afford to visit the Pillar of the Past on the island of Panta. This island was under the control of the Bishop of Greater Iceload, even though it’s closer to Sondor, Munkloe, and Dogloe. This was not the only discrepancy in the distribution of power between Bishops and because most of these discrepancies served the interests of the Bishop of Greater Iceload, he had become known as the archbishop – essentially playing the role of Emperor over the theocracy. The archbishop’s niece Mimira Ipativy was the Deacon of Panta. In 1498, historians from the Pillar of the Past came to Mimira and told her that they had possibly found the home of the Voidstone – a place called the Well of Youth in Munkloe. When Mimira told her uncle, Loki Ipativy, the Archbishop, he sent his right hand man, Mimira’s brother, to explore. This man found the Well and the abandoned pyramid which it surrounded. In the pyramid, he found stone carved maps that showed a web of tunnels carved through veins of enertombs that stretched out like a net beneath the roots of Munkloe’s rain forests. All but one tunnel came out beneath larger cities. The one exception led to Radderock.

This man, Hodur Ipativy, received permission from the Bishop of Munkloe to set up a mining operation in Radderock. Apache Dreb, Bishop of Munkloe, agreed for three reasons: to prevent the development of mines beneath the greater cities, to pay off some of their Energy Tithe, and to keep the Bishopry off Munkloe’s back for their illegal production of booze. By the dry season of 1499, Hodur and a crew of miners arrived in Radderock. The villagers were horrified but peaceful. They argued while the miners set up but quickly became aware that their words fell on deaf ears. An entire neighborhood in the canopies was abandoned as the Ipativians cleared the trees, most of which were hundreds of years old, from the mouth of the mine. The villagers took the offenses in silence, except for Dindayal.

On the day the mining was set to begin, the miners found the cave entrance blocked by Dindayal Azuran. When the miners attempted to push past him, Dindayal screamed and flailed. Frightened, one of the miner's thought Dindayal meant to attack them and so she attacked first – imbedding the spike of his pickax into the scalp of the old bearn's head. The people of Radderock might've understood the situation for what it was had Hodur spoke with them, however, when the miner's took the limp body of the crazed bearn to the elf he told them to toss the body in the bottomless pit at the end of the cave.

Hodur and his miners would have gotten away with it if it were any other hole but this hole collected the drainage, not only from the jungle floor, but from the Well of Youth. The tunnel that stretched from the cave to the pyramid connected to the bottomless pit into which flowed the Well's enchanted water. Any who fell into it would become an angel, that is, if they were still alive when they fell in. When Dindayal's corpse was tossed in, his soul had long since left the body. Still, his flesh was preserved and ghostly flames engulfed him but his consciousness was gone. In the dark of the night, Dindayal rose from the hole as a demon – a mindless, blood thirsty, zombie.

That night, a white rodent, like the red foxes of Tadloe, woke Saint. The creature asked Saint if he was a friend of Dindayal, when Saint nodded, the fox then told the half-elf to follow. The fox took Saint to the Cave of Kuru where he watched a mindless Dindayal, still with the spike of a pick ax lodged in his cranium, levitate from the wet abyss. At first, Saint thought his old friend had become a deity, for his flames resembled those he saw on Quonon, but when Dindayal yanked the pick from his skull and came after Saint, he could sense an intent to kill and realized Dindayal was no longer the Dindayal he had known. There in the cave Saint killed his friend, who then melted into black fluid that trickled back down the cavern and into the hole from which he had risen. Afterwards, Saint cried until his sorrow was replaced with rage when the fox told him what had happened: Dindayal was blocking the entrance, so a miner struck him.

Saint didn't care which miner had committed the crime, he wanted them all out. So, he marched straight from the cave to the tree house in which the bishop's men had taken residence. There, he found Hodur who he tried to kill but was forced to flee when the rest of the miners woke up. He did not leave Hodur unharmed, though, he managed to slice the elf across the face – breaking his nose and blinding his eyes. Without waiting for the sun to rise, Hodur addressed the elders of Radderock and demanded they surrender the 'blond haired boy' when the bishop's people return in three days. Then, Hodur and his miners left on the dragons they'd flown in on.

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“Before you said the world was split up between twelve bishops,” Joe stated, “were they basically kings?”

“Nah, they were bishops.”

“What I mean is,” Joe rolled his eyes, “were these guys just in charge of the church or were they in charge of it all?”

“Oh! Yea, yer raht, they were kangs and quaens.”

“Okay,” Joe chuckled, “So...was the entire world under this sorta Christianity?”

“Fer the most part. Tadloe's the only place ah can thank of raht now that wasn't but there were places hare an thare.”

“And the Loki guy, the Ipativian, he basically ran shit?”

“Mhm, that’s one reason wah the folks in Radderock didn’t really trust electric elves. Aven though they had a bearn for a bishop, one of their own, Apache Dreb, the Ipativaiaans still bullae em.”

“How’d Loki get them all to obey him anyways?”

“Well the whole Bishopray, the Hunnerd Empahr Allaiance, it was all his ahdaea. And since it started in 1415, Loki made sure to have the loyaltay of most if not all of the bishops and the deacons.”

“Deacons?”

“They carried out the rules of their bishop in their own lil districts. They also were the ones who voted fer Bishops.”

“Was Hodur a Deacon?” Joe asked.

“Nah, hae was just Loki’s nephew.”

“How do you know all these things?”

“Ah studied histery.” Zalfron ran his fingers through his long, greasy hair and shrugged, “Mahta skipped grammar class but ah was damn good at histery. In fact, ah was plannin on doin that the rest of mah lahf, live in Panta and everaythang...but that plan sorta fell through what with the war and all.”

“Maybe after the war?” Joe suggested, “It’s impressive. I mean, I wish I knew my history as well as you know yours!”

Zalfron blushed, though Joe couldn’t see in the darkness, and did his best to brush off the compliment, “Well, this storay is close to mah heart, thas all. Saint’s a personal hero of mahn. Can ah keep goin?”

“Of course!”

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The villagers of Radderock gathered in the Great Cabin, their tree-house version of a town hall, and Saint explained his actions. Though Dindayal had been somewhat looked down upon in life, in death the old bearn’s vices were forgotten. He was one of them and he died defending their holy cave. The Great Cabin grew louder as the villagers grew resolute: when the Hundred Empire Alliance’s men returned they were determined to fight. Then Quonon flew in. He was disgusted by how the towns folk had been seduced into violence. Reprimanding them, he compared them to the Ipativians. Dindayal had been murdered, but what sense did it make to sacrifice the entire village in his name? No matter how hard they fought, the Ipativy would win and whatever wounds Radderock might inflict would quickly heal. Still, the bearns had their hearts sets to fight. Quonon looked to Saint to end the matter, telling the young man to turn himself in so that the village might be spared. But Quonon’s words fell on deaf ears. Even if Saint had agreed, the villagers’ minds were made – and Saint didn’t agree nonetheless.

Saint’s late mother, Baldura Ipativy, was to bear Aldo Sentry a child which would then rule the Sentry’s Bishopry of Northern Iceload as an Ipativian Puppet after Aldo died. Partially due to Aldo’s infertility but also thanks to Baldura’s infidelity, the plan failed. Aberthol Sentry, Aldo’s nephew, was Plan B. Loki Ipativy sent him to destroy Radderock in the now-blind Hodur’s place. If he was successful he would win Mimira, the Deacon of Panta, ’s hand in marriage. This was but a formality, a display of Aberthol’s loyalty to Loki. Aberthol was sent with enough men and dragons to destroy Radderock without raising a finger, unfortunately, the boy was a tad bit cocky, as Sentries tend to be. He expected the townsfolk to be surrendering the

‘blonde haired boy’ so he had his men land in the trees and approached the Great Cabin with a small guard to protect him. When he demanded the half-elf show himself, Saint did. Aberthol wanted to impress Loki by displaying his initiative, bravado, and the extremity of his loyalty to the Bishopries of the Hundred Empire Alliance. Rather than arresting Saint and bringing him back to Iceload, Aberthol decided to execute Saint right then and there in front of all the villagers.

He never got the chance. As soon as Saint got close, the half-elf pulled a dagger from under his shirt and slit the elf’s throat. The elven guards were quickly subdued by the villagers and the foolish dragon riders that swooped in next, abandoning their beasts to fight the bears in the canopies, fell easily as well. A good number of Aberthol’s men stayed on their dragons and as they saw the battle would not be won with steel, they set fire to the treetop village. The only villagers that survived were spared by merciful dragon riders who bound them and slung them over the backs of their reptiles to sell them back home as slaves or turn them in as prisoners. The Great Cabin was fully aflame when Quonon flew in. There was little time, but he offered to carry Saint to safety. Saint refused unless he would save Crimson first. Quonon complied and returned before the Cabin crumbled out of the trees. Now it was Saint’s turn and he agreed only after he forced Theseus to promise to surrender to the Ipativians, rather than fight and die (as there was no time for Quonon to return and fly him out). As Quonon toted Saint to where he’d left Crimson, Theseus was tied up and strapped onto a dragon to be taken back to Iceload.

There are many elves with the last name Sentry but the specific, ancient line of dynastic royalty, descendants of Zannon Sentry, had been severed centuries before the Hundred Empire Alliance. That said, a few rich families claiming the surname had risen as powerful members in the Sentrakle region since the loss of the bloodline. One after the other had been plagued with misfortune. The supposed “royal family” of Sentries during the Hundred Empire Alliance was no different. With Aberthol Sentry dead, old-man Aldo Sentry was the lone survivor of the royal family. If he were to die, the Deacons of Northern Iceload would be forced to select someone that was obviously a surname-bandwagoner or, as Loki hoped, pick a member of another royal family as their Bishop merely to keep their leader of pure electric elven lineage. So, Loki ordered Hodur to assassinate Aldo, which he somehow managed despite being blind, and they set up one of their recently acquired Radderock captives to take the fall: Theseus. No one questioned the legitimacy, after all, minotaurs and elves hated each other. A date was set and Theseus Icespear was to be executed in Yelah, Iceload.

Quonon took Saint and Crimson back to Theseus’s tree house, which was on the outskirts of Radderock so it had survived the attack. When Quonon refused to help Saint save Theseus, the harpy left and Saint realized how impossible it would be for him to accomplish such a thing himself. As far as he knew, he’d never been out of Munkloe! Yet, then came the fox. The red fox offered to assist Saint in saving the minotaur but he warned the half-elf that his methods might disgust the young man. Saint cared not. The fox sent Saint to a canopy dragon nest where he slaughtered nearly two dozen of the beasts. Throwing the corpses from the tree tops, Saint descended and found the fox waiting for him with an army of demons – yet there was something unfamiliar about these demons. As the fox moved on to converting the dead dragons into undead forms, Saint realized that the fox had turn the dead villagers into demons but, unlike Dindayal, these demons listened to the fox. Though Saint acted unperturbed, the creatures around him frightened him. A slow distrust towards the fox began to grow within Saint but still he had no choice. If he did not work with the rodent, Theseus would die. So, on the backs of undead canopy dragons, Saint, the fox, and a small army of demon villagers headed west to Iceload.

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“Whaaat?”

“Huh?” Zalfron asked.

“How’d the fox do that?”

“Well...ah don’t wanna ruin the surprahs...” Zalfron hesitated.

Joe waved his hand, “Ruin it.”

“The fox was a banshae.”

“And banshees can control demons?”

“Yup. Nope... Well...if a banshae turns ya into uh daemon, they got some control but, for the most part, yer still crazy.”

“But Dindayal-”

“Fell in the water. Hae wasn’t turned bah the fox.” Zalfron corrected.

With narrow eyes and furled brow, Joe asked one more question, “Who is the fox?”

“Now that ah ain’t gonna ruin...where was ah...oh yea! The execution!”

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Mimira, Deacon of Panta, stood on the scaffold alongside Theseus. Loki had decided to have her kill the minotaur, who they had not only pinned Aldo’s death on but Aberthol’s as well. Loki portrayed Mimira as a distraught lover, though her almost marriage to Aberthol had been anything but romantic. To further extend his family’s dominance, Loki planned for Mimira to replace Aldo as the Bishop of Northern Iceload. Having her execute Theseus would make her a hero to the Sentries. Yet, once again, Loki’s plans would be foiled.

Saint’s entourage was far smaller than the troop of Ipativian dalvary that guarded the skies above Yelah but the undead were far more difficult to kill than the living and the terror they brought with them caused many of the elves to falter. The fox led the demonic murder to distract the Ipativians as Saint flew straight for the scaffold. Crimson, his beloved hound, fended off the guards as Saint fought Mimira. Before he could kill the Deacon, slicing her head clean off, she pulled the lever and Theseus was dropped but his neck did not snap. If Theseus had been any other man, he would’ve died then and there but few in Solaris’ history have been able to match the strength of muscle and will power of the great minotaur. Still, if Saint hadn’t been swift, Theseus would have been strangled but, with Crimson’s help, they pulled up his adopted father and fled on the undead beasts they flew in on.

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“I’m not saying this Loki guy sounds like a real gem,” Joe interjected, “but Saint seems pretty savage to be the good guy...”

“The paeple hae killed deserved to dah.” Zalfron countered bluntly.

“But he’s sinking to their level!” Joe argued.

“Alraht, Quonon!” Zalfron chuckled, then he admitted, “A lotta people agrae whitchya. In fact, Saint would bae one of em, hae’s changed a good bit since hae was thirtaen.”

“Thirteen!” Joe exclaimed.

“Huh?” Zalfron asked.

Joe assumed he had misunderstood, “He wasn’t thirteen when all this was going on, was he?”

“Yea...wah?”

“Thirteen’s a little young to be running around chopping heads off!” Joe crowed.

“Thirtaen ain’t no lil boy,” Zalfron laughed then he paused, “Wait, is it on Earth?”

“Yea!” Joe cried, “On Earth, you don’t get treated as an adult until you’re at least eighteen – I’d argue not even until you’re twenty-one!”

Zalfron was intrigued, but doubtful. Having grown up the son of aristocrats, many of his cousins had been sheltered so much so that they didn’t appear to achieve adulthood until such an age. He suspected a similarity. He asked, “Raelly? Aven for the poor?”

The shock caused by Zalfron’s prior statement decreased as Joe realized he was wrong. There were plenty of places on Earth where adulthood began well before the age of eighteen. Places across the globe and places down the street. In fact, there were more places than there were not. *This is a war-torn world, but then again, so is mine*, Joe realized, *I’ve just never had to deal with it*. He said, “No, you’re right. I come from a pretty privileged background when I think about it...so privileged that sometimes I forget that I am.”

There was quiet for a moment. Joe could hear Zalfron’s lips part, smacking quietly, but after a moment of hesitation, no words came out. Finally, Joe broke the spell.

“What is it?”

“You ever had to kill anyone?”

Joe nearly laughed out loud but quickly choked the outburst. He didn’t find the question funny, he thought it was quite sobering that such a question need be asked. Never on Earth would anyone have asked him that. The question made Joe come to terms with the fact that: *If I stay...If I join this fight, I will have to kill*. He shuddered.

“No.” Joe said.

Now it was Zalfron that almost laughed, “Seriously?”

“Yea. Never.”

Zalfron was quite for a moment. In the silence, Joe could feel the elf’s hopes in him diminish. But Zalfron didn’t voice his concerns, instead, he continued the story.

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When Saint, Theseus, and Crimson returned to the ruins of Radderock – having left the fox behind in Yelah – Theseus went ballistic. He immediately turned on their undead dragon and hacked away until it melted into an ominous black goop. Then, he demanded Saint tell him where he learned such magic. Theseus did not know who or what the fox was but he recognized the banshee magic and decided that whoever the fox was he was no good. He forbids Saint to ever speak to the fox again. They spent their days rebuilding the village and Saint spent his nights, reluctantly, sneaking out to speak with the fox who slowly began to seduce him towards dark magic – starting by teaching him the Sacred Tongue. Saint was not interested in dark magic but he was interest in growing stronger plus the fox claimed to know information about his parents and claimed he would tell Saint when he was ready. Eventually, Saint was caught by Theseus who so fiercely rebuked the fox that it left, promising that the next time they would meet, the fox would destroy Saint and Theseus wouldn’t be there to stop him. With the fox gone, they managed to enjoy a few more weeks of peace before chaos came to them yet again.

Quonon found Theseus and warned him that Loki Ipativy was threatening the Bishop of Munkloe with war if Theseus and his mysterious savior, the 'blond haired boy', were not given up. This time, Saint agreed to surrender. He realized that if he had surrendered in the first place, Theseus' neck would never have faced the noose but because of him he would be hung yet again. So, they traveled to Sereibis where they were taken to the bearn named Apache Dreb. Apache was the son of the prior Bishop of Munkloe. His father had been a puppet but Apache resisted the Ipativians' influences as best he could. Still, he had inherited the disgusting debt of his father's foolish investments in enertombs that now lit the streets and powered the machines of the few large cities of Munkloe. Apache sought to pay his debt, called the Energy Tithe, with the growing tunatub fruit beer industry. Unfortunately, any alcohol aside from wine was illegal in the Hundred Empire Alliance thus Munkloe's market was basically limited to Tadloe, the only continent completely free from the Hundred Empire Alliance. Loki Ipativy saw Tadloe as an enemy. The beer trade was one step away from treason and, because of this, Loki and Apache despised one another. Now Loki finally had a reason to attack and to open another seat in the Bishopries for a member of his family. Apache's military could not stand against the forces of the eleven other Bishops but, even still, when Saint and Theseus came into his throne room, his heart was conflicted on whether or not he should turn them in. In the end, he put aside his pride and bowed to the Alliance.

The blind Hodur Ipativy was sent to collect for though he could not see to confirm it was truly the boy, he would recognize the voice. Little did Hodur know, Loki had already figured out who the 'blonde haired boy' was. After they captured Theseus in Radderock, a prison guard recognized him as Theseus, one of the heroes that defeated the Queen of Darkness and the beloved hero of the GraiLord Empire before it was conquered by Loki's Alliance. The records were examined and Loki found that Theseus had surrendered with his people in the Third War of the Blue Ridges. He'd slipped anonymously with his comrades into slavery where he was sold from master to master until ultimately being sold to the Bishop of Dogloe as a bodyguard. The records also showed that Theseus disappeared after Baldura's murder – yet this had not been in the report Loki had received from Hodur. Hodur was the only living soul who had seen Baldura's baby and Hodur had given Loki his word that the child had been slain. Then there was his blinding in Radderock. Hodur had not mentioned that his attacker hadn't been a bearn until the half-elf showed himself at Theseus' execution (the elves had believed the attacker to be a blonde bearn). Loki concluded that Hodur had allowed Theseus to escape with the child and that the blonde haired invader was the son of Baldura and that not only had Hodur allowed Saint to escape when he was attacked in Radderock, he'd mislead Loki when describing the boy. When Loki sent Hodur to bring back Saint and Theseus, he handpicked the guards that would accompany him. The guards were instructed to wait until Hodur, Apache, Saint, and Theseus were in the throne room then to attack Hodur. It was to look as though Apache was defending the two murderers and it would give the Alliance more than enough reason to turn against one of their own Bishops.

And so, as the wet season was drawing near, Saint and Theseus kneeled before the Bishop Apache while Crimson and Quonon watched from the shadows. Hodur strode down the sprawling carpet. The Iceload guards followed to collide against the Munkloe guards in the middle of the chamber. Then, just as the transaction began, a guard slipped behind Hodur and slid his sword through his back. As Hodur fell to the level of Saint and Theseus, the elves attacked the bearns. In the midst of the conflict, the guard who had slain the Ipativy withdrew his sword and stumbled back. Engulfed in sapphire flames, Hodur rose from the carpet and drew his

blade against the men that had betrayed him. Many bears died, but Apache and his men came out on top. All but one of the elves died: the Ipativian. Apache, Saint, Theseus, Quonon, Crimson, and the remaining Munkloe Guards surrounded Hodur.

Theseus stood up for Hodur, revealing to Saint that Hodur helped him save Saint as a baby. Then Saint asked why he had the flames of a demon to which Quonon answered. He had watched as Hodur and his explorers investigated the Well of Youth and had witnessed Hodur, along with a few others, taking painful dips in the enchanted lake. Just as Dindayal had been changed when baptized in the water, becoming a demon, so had Hodur evolved into a ghost, becoming an angel. The rest of the group could care less about how Hodur had come back from the dead, they were worried about the future. Apache realized this was an attempt to frame him for treason. To ensure their safety and obtain retribution for the corruption within the Bishopries, he demanded Hodur go public about being set up. Hodur agreed but Theseus pointed out a flaw: no one would trust the words of an undead. Unlike the villagers of Radderock, when the Alliance thought of banshees they thought of Creaton Live, the Queen of Darkness, and the Doom Warriors of Flow Morain's reign of terror. Hodur was dead to the Alliance.

It was in that throne room that these five men, Saint, Theseus, Quonon, Apache, Hodur, and a dog, Crimson, conspired to overthrow the Bishop of Greater Iceload, the Archbishop. Their ultimate goal was to revise the Hundred Empire Alliance. They, even Quonon participated, began by preparing Munkloe for war and the Munkloens eagerly cooperated.

As for the Alliance, well, many Deacons had begun to smell something fishy with the antics of the Ipativy but the majority welcomed ignorance. For though revolts were constantly being thwarted in the colonial like Bishopries of the Northern Hemisphere, those who lived in the South lived happily unaware. Besides, what good would such a struggle be for? Even the optimistic idealist would be hard pressed to think it possible to rid the Bishopries of Ipativian corruption. Few Bishops remained unbound to the Ipativy. Four of the eleven other Bishops were already Loki's puppets: Bragi Ipativy replaced Aldo in Northern Iceload, Sigyn Ipativy had been given Etamladep's spot to maintain order amongst the barbarians of southern Sondor, Valkyrie Ipativy was voted in after her father died as Bishop of the Spirits in Manaloe, and Gramur Woodfolk took Baldura's empty throne in Dogloe (Gramur was not a part of the Ipativian family but he had married in through Valkyrie, one of Loki's three daughters. The truth of the matter was that Gramur was but a figure head manipulated by Hel, another one of Hodur's daughters.).

All in all, Saint and his comrades figured they would not be victorious. Even if they managed to keep the Alliance at bay, there would be no end until Loki had won. But they and the Munkloens felt as though they were being bullied by the power hungry Ipativy and though they had for so long been a peaceful people, they'd grown tired. As the Sixteenth Century neared, they decided they would rather die than let the pretentious pale elves continue to tell them what to do.

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“And that's it!”

“Hey wait, we were getting to a fight!” Joe cried.

“Ah'm tahred, cain't we finish the storay later?” Zalfron complained, “Wae got at laest two hours worth left!”

The elf had a point. Throughout the tale Joe had caught his eyelids drooping and, though he wasn't sure, he might've dosed off for a couple minutes here and there.

“I suppose Grandfather will be getting us up early.”

“Who?” Zalfron asked.

“Yea, right...”

“Huh?”

Joe attempted to discern Zalfron’s expression with the light of his stone and saw the boy appeared genuinely curious, “The Knome, remember?”

“Hmmm,” Zalfron shrugged and rolled over on the cold stone, “Ah don’t remember a Knome...”

“I just reminded you before the stor-”

Zalfron had already begun to snore. *He can remember all the tiny details of what happened five hundred years ago, but he can’t recall meeting Grandfather a couple hours ago.* Joe laid back down and watched the roof. He was tired too but despite his exhaustion, with the bear growling next to him, Joe couldn’t bring himself to fall asleep. It wasn’t just the noise. Something weighed heavily on his mind and, as the hours dwindled by, he lay awake trying to decide what to do.

Chapter Five: Saying Good-bye

There would be no sleep, his mind would simply not allow it. The after effects of the evening's excitement still flowed through his veins. Not to mention, he had something to attend to. Three metal objects in his pocket jabbed his hip no matter how he positioned himself. He let out a sigh which morphed into a yawn then he reached into his pockets. First he pulled out the ring Bonehead had given him and put it on his finger. Then he yanked out the three keys.

After wiggling out of their back-to-back attempts to momentarily steal away his vision, Joe staggered to his feet and hobbled over the prone body of Zalfron. He held the one in his right hand, thrust it in the air, then stopped. *Wait no...* this key had not given him a sneak peek at the fate it was bound to, which meant...*wrong key*. He put the key back in his pocket then retrieved one of the other keys. A brief glimpse of the key's initial preview was all he needed. He thrust it into the air and twisted his wrist. As he pulled back, sunlight exploded into the room – bright and warm. He had opened the door to a hot, Earthen summer day. Joe glanced down at Zalfron, the Sun lit up his Solarin cheeks, but the elf didn't budge. Joe took a deep breath, swallowed his spit, then strode forward.

He was standing on a sidewalk, looking over the crumpled body of the humpback hag he'd almost hit at the intersection prior to his wreck. A passerby was busy performing CPR on the body and, when Joe appeared, the Good Samaritan himself almost had a heart attack. Without ceasing the rhythmic thrusting of chest compressions, the stranger proclaimed to Joe, "Holy hell, you scared the-"

His statement was cut short as the sound of bending metal, squealing tires, and shattering glass exploded upon the summer day.

Then a shadow fell over Joe, separating him from the light of the Sun. The gentle breeze ceased and, as if it'd been carried in the wind, so did the commotion around him. For a split second, all was silent. Then a single voice split the air like a bolt of lightning.

"Hello, Joe."

The voice was so dull and monotonous that Joe almost didn't feel the need to spin and face the speaker. He knew in his heart who it was. Nonetheless, he turned and stared into the sockets of a humanoid skull. Black cloth wrapped the cranium and fell loosely down to hide the rest of the being's body. The figure looked just as Joe would have expected.

"You're the Grim Reaper, aren't you?" Joe asked.

"No," Death responded, "I am Death."

Joe looked away, contemplating making a run for it before realizing any attempt would be futile. Time had stopped. Beside them, the man leaning over the old crone was frozen with his palms still clasped one on top of the other in-between the old lady's breasts. His jaw was still slack and his eyes were still stuck on the destruction across the street. Torn metal hung in the air, smoke sat stagnant around the tractor trailer, shards of glass stuck in the summer sky, caught in mid glimmer, constellations of debris.

Game over. Joe thought.

"Does this mean I have to die now?"

"No." Death said.

"Really?"

The question escaped his lips and he immediately winced, regretting questioning the get-out-of-fate free card Death had just handed him. Looking up at the reaper, he was relieved to see

that Death did not appear to have changed his mind. In fact, as he responded, it seemed he was almost bored with the entire situation. He spoke so slow that it sounded almost as if he inserted a pause between each syllable, something that tortured Joe's bewildered soul. It was like listening to the clinking of a roller coaster being slowly pulled up the initial incline, a roller coaster you had not signed up for.

"You aren't to die like this."

"Then why are you here?"

Death slowly tilted his pale, hooded melon to nod at the body mounted by the first aid giver beside them.

"Then why am *I* here," Joe scratched his head with his key, "with you?"

Looking up from the hag and extending an empty hand towards Joe, Death said, "You've got her key."

"Ah..." Joe frowned, "don't you need my key?"

"No. She's dead. I need *her* key." Death said, "You can keep yours. You aren't dead yet."

Joe looked back across the street. Half of the tractor trailer was hidden behind the façade of the overpass. The sedan had almost made it by but the truck driver had swerved the wrong way, striking the back right corner and gobbling the rest of the car up. The tattered remains of his vehicle lay scattered across the intersection like a mutilated corpse – like he would've been if not for Ekaf. He looked at the two keys in his hands, his own and the old woman's.

"You will die if you stay here."

"What?" Joe jerked his eyes back to the cursed man, still holding his hand out to Joe expectantly, "Why? Are you going to put me back in my car?"

Death sighed, then said, "That is not how you die."

"Then what if I want to stay here?" Joe asked, clutching the keys to his chest as if handing them over might expedite his fate, "What if I'm done with Solaris?"

"Then you will die." Death stated before rattling his extended hand and asking once more, "The lady's key?"

Joe didn't budge, "Why?"

Again, Death sighed.

"Tell me how I die!" Joe demanded.

The undead ground his teeth, "After this question, there *will* be serious consequences if you do not give me the key."

"Depending on what you tell me," Joe muttered, "I might prefer those serious consequences."

"Take my hand."

Death lowered his arm and turned his hand, like a maiden extending her hand to be kissed. Shoving the keys back in his pocket, Joe did as Death commanded. Death then turned and guided Joe into the street – the street where he'd been stuck waiting on the dead woman to pass. They strode between the lanes of frozen cars for only a couple yards before Death stopped.

"Close your eyes."

Joe closed his eyes. No sooner did he do so then did he feel a gust of wind. With the rush came a cacophony of horrendous sounds and a heat like no other – *almost* like no other, for it was something like that he'd experienced during his conversion, in that dream with Agony. Without Death's grip to support him, he would've collapsed. Then it was over. Almost as if it had never even happened. He'd had his eyes closed hardly longer than a blink when Death order him to open them again.

“Look.”

In the commotion, Joe'd been turned around. He was looking back towards the intersection now, only it was gone. In its place was heat incarnate. A ball of fire had consumed the overpass and, though time was frozen and the flames with it, tongues of blaze like thrashing tentacles stretched out in all directions making it obvious to Joe that this infernal orb would be expanding if time were to continue. Joe's hand instinctively tightened around Death's boney phalanges.

“This is how you die.”

Joe couldn't pull his eyes away from the ball of destruction. The darkest blacks and the brightest whites, lacerated with gaseous amber. Even in the stillness, as Joe stared, it seemed to be moving. Pulsating with impatience.

“This is how Earth dies.”

“Can I stop it?” Joe asked.

Death shrugged, “I don't see futures, Joe, only fates.”

“But I can change my fate, right?”

“The Knome would say yes.”

“Does he know about this?”

“What doesn't he know about?”

Joe fell silent, thinking.

“Now,” Death said, “if you will, the key.”

“I'm going to save Earth.” Joe muttered, having ignored Death.

“Joe.”

“If I'm the Sun Child, then god damn it, I'm gonna save Earth!”

“JOE.”

“If Ekaf saved me from that car then he can save Earth from...from this...we can-”

“JOE!” Death's voice shook him to the core like a thunder clap, but then Death softened back to his monotone drab, “The lady's key.”

Joe handed it over. Death took it, sliding it within the folds of his robe, then he reached back out again.

“Can I keep mine?” Joe asked.

“Yes,” Death said, “but you have one other.”

Joe fished the other out of his pocket. Death reached for it but Joe jerked his hand away.

“You've got to let me use it first.”

A low rattling growl emitted from Death's cowl but he protested no further. Joe went ahead. He thrust the key out into the stagnant air before him, twisted his wrist then jerked his hand back and rendered a tunnel through time and space. He strode forward, letting go of Death's hand.

A gentle drizzle of sun speckled dust hung in the air around them, neither falling nor rising, as this realm, too, ceased to progress past the present. For a moment, Joe couldn't drag his eyes away from the static figure held in a plush emerald chair in the corner of the room. The man would have been similarly statuesque even with the passage of time. His jaw hung loose, not as if in awe or shock but as if in a deep sleep. A book sat in his lap, abandoned by his hands which rested, with upturned palms, on either side of his lap. Tears budded in Joe's eyes and he wanted nothing more than to embrace the shell of the grandfather he loved but he had come to do something else.

Blinking the tears from his eyes, Joe spun to face the room. He glanced over the portraits of his family, lingering just a bit incase this was to be his last look, and over the images of lunar landings and outer space vessels, before plopping down in a chair at one of the two desks. The other desk was dedicated to a computer, printer, scanner, and the like while the one he sat at was for the more medieval forms of documentation: paper and pen. Sliding open a drawer, he withdrew an envelope and a pencil then scooted the rolling chair towards the other bureau to snatch a blank sheet of paper from the printer. As he took to writing, he could feel Death watching over his shoulder. Joe finished writing the letter, signing it, "I'll be back in a blink of an eye. Joe." He folded the sheet, slid it in the envelope, licked the lid, then sealed it shut. On the outside he wrote, "To my brother, Stephen." Then, Joe opened the drawer once again to deposit his note.

He froze.

He hadn't noticed before but there was another sealed envelope waiting in the drawer. Like his own, this one was addressed to "my brother" only instead of "Stephen" it was to "Joe". Joe looked up at Death who continued to watch with what Joe could only assume was intrigue, then he opened the letter and read it. When he got to the end, he read it again, then again a third time.

"Dear Joe, thanks for writing home. You don't know how hard it was for me not to spill the beans about everything after I found your letter. Soon enough I'll be right alongside you (figured this was the only way I could write you back until then). Don't break character! We'll be Papa's spacemen in no time at all. Together. Exploring the galaxy and befriending the aliens, right? Still not quite sure how we'll manage to ride a shooting star but, anyways, thanks for going first and don't worry, I left right behind you, you'll see me soon."

"Stephen."

"P.S. Earth, Solaris, Delia, the whole fucking universe, we're all depending on you! You ARE the Sun Child!"

Then a little farther down the page.

"P.S.P.S. Hope that little spoiler won't make you choke, but I figured you could use the support!"

Joe rocked back in his seat and closed his eyes.

"Does this mean I save Earth?"

"I do not know."

Joe sighed.

Death let him rest for a moment longer before interrupting.

"Take this back to Solaris."

Joe looked up. Death extended a key out over Joe's head. Joe reached up and handed him Papa's in exchange for the new one. It was rusted and chipped. Weighing it in his palms, he allowed the vision to come upon him like a crashing wave. He was looking at the charred subterranean library where he had met Zalfron only hours before. Shaking himself out of it, Joe folded up his brother's letter and dropped it into his pocket.

"Keep the keys in a warp cube or-"

"The Knights of the Light?" Joe nodded, "Yea, I know."

Joe got up from the chair, holding the key, but there he paused.

He asked, "When I die...do I die happy?"

Death looked at Joe, thinking for a moment before responding, "You die ready."

Joe gulped.

Death elaborated, "You die good."

Joe couldn't help but release a short, awkward chuckle.

"Thanks." Joe paused to yawn, "I think I'm ready to go back now."

Death nodded, "Good bye, Joe."

"Good bye, Death."

Joe thrust the key of Bale Morain, who he knew as Bonehead, into the still air beside him then stepped through the portal it opened, leaving Earth behind.

"Good luck." Death murmured.

PART TWO

Chapter Six: Conspicuous Cargo

She knelt with her head bowed. A light in her chest squirmed, it sent waves of amber color across the stone floors, splashing orange on the walls. She watched the dancing light as she spoke to her god. She prayed for her people and she prayed for her new found planet, but she did not pray for herself. Her fate was sealed. She could see that clearly. She could feel it in the sad warmth of the fire in her breast.

“I am ready, Ahsik, I am willing.”

The door burst open and pale light flooded the cell. Skeletons stormed in, armed with steel, but Sunasha Flamecall did not move. She stayed on her knees. After the boneguard entourage came the Sheik. She loomed like a tower over the fire elf.

“There is a new pyromancer.” The Witch said.

Sunasha remained silent, though a smile slid across her lips.

The Witch continued, “It’s the one, isn’t it?”

Sunasha snickered.

“Laugh now, while you can.” Shalis Skullsummon snapped, “Save your tears for when I slay him before you.”

“Silly bone bender,” Sunasha chuckled, “can’t you smell it in the air? Your Disciples are rotting, the Black Crown is crumbling, this new pyromancer is the birth of a new age, love.”

The necromancer flinched at the last word, but the pyromancer proceeded. She looked up, not at the Witch, but at the heavens she couldn’t see past the dungeon ceiling. Her chest puffed out and her arms spread out on either side with her palms towards the distant sun.

“Witness the rise of Delia!”

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“Bale Morain is dead.”

Hermes Retskcirt spoke with his armored chest puffed out, his skull tilted towards the roof, and his hand on the Staff in his belt. He was standing within one of the four Basalt Minarets, the great towers of the Acropoliskia. The Acropoliskia was a hodge-podge of holds and spires assimilated to the lumpy surface of Dalvary, the famous hills in the center of Hormarah, Darkloe. Like a tangled heap of four giant black pythons, the Acropoliskia coiled around Dalvary. The neck of the serpents, the pillars known as the Basalt Minarets, reached rigidly towards the three moons with their tongues tied together to meet at the center tower, the fourth tower – which rose from the highest peak of Dalvary. It was in one of these thick dark obelisks, somewhere near the top, that Hermes stood glaring with his eye-less sockets at Aeschylus Roq, his superior.

“You’d best bow before you speak to me.” The undead responded, his upper lip twitching as it curled. His bushy red brows drew together, dropping over his eyes, as he looked up at Hermes. The skeletal bearn stood motionless, debating mentally whether to commit to defiance but ultimately conceding once Aeschylus’ hand moved towards his hilt. With his knees on the

marble floor, Hermes' teeth ground against each other. Aeschylus didn't hide his pleasure. Smiling, the banshee folded his arms, one plump with muscle, the other arm made of naked bone.

"Killing Bale was unnecessary." Aeschylus Roq's growl rattled the bricks of the tower and his velvet cape fluttered behind him like wildfire.

"I disagree." Hermes snapped, "I find it *necessary* to put an end to anyone who provides aid to the enemy."

"I did not ask your opinion, *mancer*." Aeschylus spat the last word.

Curving his temper, Hermes kept his voice low but loaded with sarcasm, "My apologies, Master Roq, may I hear your opinion?"

"Bale Morain was one of our greatest spies, through his eyes Our Lord could watch the enemy."

His knees having served their time, Hermes stood, revealed the scrap of paper clamped in his armored fist, and asked, "Then why does Creaton need this, if he could already see it?"

In one swift motion, Aeschylus took the paper in his ossein fingers and struck Hermes with his right hand, knocking him back on his knees. The crimson fires, red as the cape draped from his shoulders, swelled, rustling his wavy harvest-moon-colored hair, causing his battle scars to glow – especially the X across his left cheek. These flames poured out his mouth as he rebuked his subordinate.

"Refer to Our Lord with the respect due!" He hesitated, waiting to see if Hermes would retaliate but the undead bearn held his long-since-decomposed tongue. Aeschylus proceeded sternly, "Our Lord asked for this page only to ensure you had destroyed the correct book. Now rise."

As Hermes stood, Aeschylus turned to the black doors that loomed behind him like a shadow. Placing his hands flat on the sable posterns, he paused before pushing them open.

"Before entering Our Lord's presence, I must remind you to mind your manners. He is much more just than I, his reprimands far more absolute."

If Hermes had eyes, he would've rolled them. Aeschylus pushed the doors open and a strong gust swept at their flames, as if welcoming them back into the outside world. Stepping out beneath the moons, Aeschylus led Hermes across a bridge that linked their belfry, the smallest of the Minarets, with the tower in the center. Beneath them, the torches of the castle twinkled like the stars in the skies above. Before them, atop the middle Minaret, eight columns surrounded a cathedra elevated on a stout pyramid of stairs. The throne was not facing them, so once they arrived, they strode around to its front before beginning to scale the stairs. When the man in the chair at the top stood, the two banshees halted and knelt before him.

Their Lord was crowned with the blackened skull of an eagle, holding down ebony locks of hair. His face was flaw-less, defined by a stern chin, hurt eyebrows, and weary, blackening brown eyes. A dragon tooth necklace rested across his chest, hanging over a worn black-maroon vest. A heavy belt held up his trousers, the buckle marked with the symbol of the Black Crown Pact: three crescent-moon shaped claw marks. A coat of black feathers was draped over his shoulders, slit so that the wings of his lover could extend behind him. His body was engulfed in the red flames of a banshee, the same shade of his right-hand man who now knelt before him, alongside Hermes.

"My Lord," Aeschylus said, "Hermes has burnt the book and retrieved the page."

Creaton stepped down from the cathedra and took the charred paper from Aeschylus. He read it in silence before saying, simply, "Joe."

The paper turned to ashes with a hiss.

“You both may stand.”

The two stood. Hermes was over eight feet tall, taller than Creaton, but Creaton kept himself higher, distancing himself with a few flights of stairs.

“Hermes Retskirt. Of all the mancers in the Black Circle, you’ve proved yourself to be quite valuable to our plight. Many were skeptical.”

Creaton strode back to his seat. Instead of sitting down, he whirled back around.

“After all...”

He marched swiftly back to Hermes, standing nearer to the banshee than he had before.

“You abandoned the Ipativians for the Mystvokar, abandoned the Mystvokar for the Order, the Order for the Doom Warriors, the Doom Warriors to bow before me as you do now.” Creaton slowed his role, continuing, “You’ve proven valuable, but I, like your critics, do not trust you...I would like to, but I cannot.” Once again, Creaton turned his back to Hermes and strutted back to his throne, plopping in his seat as he continued, “For this purpose, I have devised a final test. The boy Bale Morain was assisting, this Earthboy, this Joe, I want you to hunt him down and kill him. He is uneducated, untrained, and weak. He is no threat to the Pact nor to me, not physically.” Creaton stood and began to pace before his seat, “What worries me is the very thing that so worried Bale Morain up until the moment that you killed him. Do you know the Delian Prophecy?”

Ignorant, Hermes glanced over at Aeschylus and, from the banshee’s expression, he gathered he was the only one on the precipice that was not familiar. Creaton read this in his silence.

“What about the Foretelling?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Hermes nodded, “spoken by the Bastard Emperor?”

“Ask any Delian, the Foretelling is merely a reiteration of the Delian Prophecy but both Delians and Solarins interpret these predictions differently. While the Foretelling predicts this Sun Child will bring back the Samurai, the Delian Prophecy claims the Sun Child will return the Queen to Solaris. If the old boneguard is right, if the Earthboy is to be the Sun Child, then once word spreads to Shalis Skullsummon she will want to have him. That we simply cannot allow. It is far better he remain with the Bastard than fall into the hands of the Witch. While I do not believe in these ridiculous predictions, I cannot afford to ignore them.” Creaton fell back into his seat, “Do you understand the potential of this threat?”

“Yes, my Lord.” Hermes said.

“Kill the Earthboy and you will gain my trust. Fail and Aeschylus will get the pleasure of piercing your frozen heart. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“This is an honor. You should be proud. If nothing else you should be thirsty for the despair your success will elicit throughout the Empire. Depart tomorrow morning, alone, for Chanetown. There your guide, The Bard, will find you and take you to whoever he has chosen to accompany you on this mission. Now leave me, I wish to speak with Aeschylus alone.”

Hermes nodded with a swift, “Yes, my Lord.” Then strode back around the cathedra and across the bridge towards the Minaret. After waiting for the undead bearn to walk out of ear shot, Creaton turned to Aeschylus and asked, “What do you think of Catherine Meriam, could we trust her to watch Hermes?”

“I believe so...”

“What is it?” Creaton demanded, “Speak your mind?”

“Why don’t you send me, my Lord? This Earthboy is nothing. Why make the risk of sending Hermes when he very well might have the nerve to turn around and deliver him to Shalis? Why trust him or Catty when I could easily wrap this problem up before anyone realizes its potential?”

“Aeschylus, my son, if this boy is the Sun Child and the prophecies are true then whoever I send is doomed!” Creaton laughed.

“But my Lord, if Hermes is a traitor-”

“I would not be surprised.”

“Wouldn’t it be safer to send someone you trust? In case it isn’t too late and we can stop the Prophecy?”

“Listen to yourself!” Creaton shook his head, “If the Prophecy is true, then it cannot be stopped. Yes, we will try – of course we will try – but I have seen the boy, this alien Earthboy, through Bale Morain’s eyes and he is nothing to worry about. The only use for him is as a test of Hermes’ loyalty. If I wanted to I could find him and snap his neck tomorrow – but there is no hurry. In the coming days, if the boy does become a threat, if the Prophecy does appear to be true, do not worry. I have other plans in motion to arise to the occasion. Plans I will oversee myself. Which is why none of these plans involve you – you will be needed here, my son.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Aeschylus nodded.

“But remember, as of now, we’ve got no more reason to trust the words of a prophecy than we’ve got to trust the words of a politician. The Bastard Emperor’s Foretelling is nothing more than a rhyming riddle used to keep the peasants in the field, the soldiers in line, and the hope alive.”

Aeschylus looked down at his boots, “I apologize for my superstitions.”

“There is no need for apologies,” Creaton stood from his throne, marched down to Aeschylus, and clasped him on the shoulder, “and no need for superstition. Even if Hermes takes the Earthboy to the Order, he will not join Shalis. You know the power Knomes have over the minds of fools. After a few days with that silver tongued slickster, even an alien would rather die than join the Order.”

“It shouldn’t take much lying to convince anyone of Shalis’ evil.” Aeschylus agreed. Then he asked, “My Lord, how can Saint or Shalis believe that someone from Earth, a planet with no knowledge of magic, can save our world? Without their machines, they are nothing! It is true the Bastard and the Witch don’t come close to you in wisdom *but* how can they not look at this boy and see the weakness you see?”

“Even the wise can be wrong,” Creaton admitted with a chuckle as he returned to his throne. When he sat down, he asked, “After all, was it not a Knome, the least of all Solarins, who first put a stop to the Queen of Darkness?”

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“Wake up you lazy bums! It’s time to move!”

The raspy Knome gave the two boys no time to obey. Hopping over Zalfron, he grabbed Joe by his tie and pulled him halfway off his cot. Then, he turned on the snoring elf and shook him by the shoulders. The only effect was a pause in the wheezing for an abrupt snort before the nose returned to the incessant white noise. After a minute or so of shaking Zalfron, Grandfather had had enough. He kicked the elf just above his butt crack. The snore turned into a howl as Zalfron rolled across the room. Hopping to his feet, the elf raised his fists first at Joe. Joe, having

just staggered out of bed, replied with a blank stare. Then Zalfron lowered his gaze and squinted at the Knome before him.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Who am I? Wake up, son! We’ve gotta long day ahead of us!” Grandfather crowed then stormed out of the room.

“Who the hell was that?” Zalfron asked Joe while rubbing his butt.

“You know who that is!” Joe snapped, before realizing he couldn’t actually remember who it was as he had hardly opened his eyes before the Knome scurried off. *Was that Ekaf or Grandfather?* Ekaf hadn’t come back. Had he while Joe was sleeping? Yet, to be honest, the Knome hadn’t sounded like Grandfather or Ekaf. Joe had no clue. As Zalfron asked again, Joe sprinted out of the room after the Knome.

“Hey!”

The skidded to a halt and turned with such speed Joe expected some sort of grumpy rebuking. He was dressed in all black – but typical Knomish garb: floppy cone hat, tunic that ended in a kilt, stockings, and sneakers – with a well-trimmed snow-white beard and, currently, snarling blue eyes.

“What?” He snapped.

“Uh...” Joe fumbled in his pockets before withdrawing the keys, “what should I do with these?”

“Where’d you get those?” Grandfather demanded.

Joe shifted his feet rather than provide the obvious answer.

“You’re just as bad as the old coot!” Grandfather sighed then continued down the hall, “You might as well keep em.”

“Keep them? But won’t the spirits trace them to us?” Joe asked.

“I’d really refrain from calling them, ‘the spirits’. Be like if I referred to the Nazis as, ‘the humans’.”

“Oh...” Joe mumbled, “sorry.”

“No sweat off my sack.” Grandfather shrugged before spinning around again, “But honestly, impressive. You’re learning fast. The Knights of the Light will definitely hunt you down with those keys jangling around in your pocket.” He took off his black cone, pulled a small cube out of it, and tossed it to Joe, “Take my warp cube.”

Joe dropped the keys in the process of catching the cube, “Your warp cube? You mean I can have it?”

“Well, I shouldn’t think you’ll be out of reach anytime soon.” Grandfather said, this time he remained facing in the opposite direction, continuing to march through the cavern halls, “Besides, I’ve got more than one and you’ll need one sooner or later.”

“Really?” Joe asked rhetorically, “Thank you!”

“Thank me?” Grandfather shrugged, “Ha, it’s the least I can do, son. After all we’ve dragged you into this mess of a world.”

“Willingly.” Joe stated.

“Willingly?” Grandfather scoffed, “Ignorantly willing.”

They’d come to the kitchen, the same food hall where Joe, Ekaf, and Bonehead had shared organ pudding an evening prior, and found that Grandfather had concocted a breakfast of sorts. The meal was divided into mason jars and had to be scooped out using pale white tongs that stuck to the tongue (when Joe asked why, he immediately regretted it. Grandfather explained briskly, “Bone clings to your saliva.”). The color of brain matter, or so Joe imagined, the gruel

had the texture of soft scrambled eggs as it slid down his throat. Joe stopped eating when he noticed that Grandfather had refrained from serving himself a jar.

“Hey, so...” Joe paused, his tongue losing power as his mind mulled over a way to ask that wouldn’t give away the fact that he’d almost ditched them all.

“Spit it out.” Grandfather said, nodding at the stone doorway where the clamoring echoes of a half-asleep but fully-hungry electric elf stumbling about the maze of tunnels could be heard getting louder and louder.

“Last night, Death showed me what happens to Earth.” Joe said.

“Mhm?” Grandfather raised an eyebrow.

Joe looked away, scratching his scalp as if digging for something to protect him from the old crones piercing gaze. He continued, “Do you know if there’s a way I can stop it?”

“That’s an Ekaf question.” Grandfather stated.

Joe’s heart sank into his stomach.

“But if I remember correctly,” the old Knome continued, “if you save Solaris, then you’ll have the chance to save Earth.”

Joe frowned and looked down at his mason jar. Even if the grub had been appetizing, he was no longer hungry.

Zalfron finally staggered in, his nostrils flaring, golden eyes wide, tongue running a couple laps around his lips before he was able to ask in a tone that signified genuine hurt, “Why didn’t y’all wake me up!”

Grandfather responded by slinging his empty mason jar at the elf’s head. The jar missed and shattered on the damp façade of the cave. Zalfron raised two fingers, index and middle, then put the finger tips against his throat – a gesture equivalent to an American shooting a bird. Their salutations expressed, Zalfron joined Joe and Grandfather at the breakfast table. He proceeded to devour his mush, drinking it straight from the jar. Then, like a nervous puppy to modest to make a peep, he eyed Joe’s portion. Shaking his head, partially amazed and partially disgusted, Joe slid the elf his jar and watched him down it.

With a burp, Zalfron looked at the others, slapped his thighs and said, “So, what’s the plan, huh?”

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Grandfather set the pace, his tiny legs pumping with such vigor that Zalfron and Joe could only keep up by jogging. They followed a trail for a good couple hours before it opened up onto a gravel road. Occasionally a wagon would pass by, horse riders and all, but, to Joe’s dismay, no dragon riders. Zalfron and Grandfather explained that those who traveled by dragon would be flying. Though, with skies overcast as they were, Grandfather noted that he wouldn’t be surprised to see a few dragon riders pick the road over the icy precipitation above. As they trotted down the road, Joe spoke up to get his mind off of his throbbing feet.

“So, how far away is Portville?” Joe asked.

“A good day’s walk, fortunately, Kemplor’s on the way. Not much more than a few more hours. From there we’ll rent a buggy and we’ll get to Portville before midnight.” Grandfather said, “Stay there the night, sail out tomorrow morning.”

“It’s fixina bae rainin hammer handles,” Zalfron stated, watching the sky, “maht aeven snow.”

“Is hitch hiking a thing in Solaris?” Joe asked.

“It is, but not for us.” Grandfather responded, “Not with that rock in your chest.”

“And not with a Knome on board.” Zalfron added.

The fiery orb imbedded in Joe’s sternum was hardly hidden by the thin white cloth of his button-up dress shirt. The glow could even be seen shining through the crimson of his tie. Joe’s hand went to the ring that now shared a pocket with his warp cube, the ring Bonehead had given him. He asked, “What happens when we get to a city? Will they try and arrest me? Should I-”

“Psh!” Zalfron elbowed Joe in the shoulder, “They’d look a shadah slanger straight in his crow ah and still let em in!”

“You’re right to worry. Suinus wouldn’t have it. But cities along the Saluman? They’re small and they’re trading cities. Long as you aren’t causing trouble and you’ve got money to spend, they don’t mind. In these towns, we won’t be worried so much about the guards as we will about the people.”

“Mhm.” Zalfron nodded, “In these sorta towns, the paeple do the guarding. Survahval of the fittest.”

Joe gulped.

“Especially nowadays.” Grandfather concurred, “You got folks loyal to the Pact, the Order, and the Empire on the same street. Outside of cities like Suinus, where martial law is viable...you’re on your own. Everyone above the age of thirteen is carrying.”

“Wae’ll sae a faht...” Zalfron promised, nudging Joe with an elbow, “maht aeven win one.”

“Wonderful.” Joe said, “I thought the war was in Darkloe and Iceload, what’s everyone doing here in Tadloe? Tadloe’s a part of the Empire, right? The Trinity Nations?”

“Right.” Grandfather nodded.

“Then why’s the Pact and the Order here?” Joe asked.

“Why is there a war at all?” Grandfather countered.

Joe frowned, emitted a frustrated snort, then threw up his hands, proclaiming, “Why is there?!”

“The Order and the Pact wanna rule the world.” Zalfron answered, “Lahk Saint does now.”

“Essentially.” Grandfather agreed, “But see, in the Twentieth Century, you can’t just conquer the world. You’ve got to win the hearts and minds. You’ve heard of the New Pact and the Disciples of Darkness?”

“Grandfather.” Joe said. “I haven’t heard of anything.”

“Right.” The Knome cleared his throat, taking a quick glance at the heavens to ask a god – any god – for assistance, then continued, “In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century, a buncha anarchists started causing trouble – and I mean real anarchists. Not revolutionaries, straight up anarchists. A bunch of terrorists that thought the world would be a better place with no government at all and, even though Craeton’s empire in the First Void War *definitely* had a government to it, they harkened back to those days and the original Black Crown Pact and started calling themselves the New Pact.”

“But that was waaay before Craeton came back,” Zalfron said, “back then they weren’t half as bold as they are now. Now they just go on and call themselves the Pact.”

Grandfather continued, “These guys *hated* the Trinity Nations and they weren’t alone, because around the same time-”

The Knome cut himself off, pausing to ask, “You know Saint created the Order of Mancers?”

“Yea...” Joe felt like patting himself on the back, “Yea, I actually did know that.”

“Yea, so, Saint called it ‘nonproliferation’. The Order of Mancers was meant to reduce mancy, in a civil way.”

“Then the Dissahples took over.” Zalfron muttered.

Grandfather nodded, “They were a political party within the Order of Mancers. They felt oppressed, the Disciples of Darkness, and they wanted to increase mancy.”

“And they wanted to brang back the Quaen.” Zalfron noted.

“Why?” Joe asked, “They wanted a world of ghosts?”

Grandfather shrugged, “Maybe...or maybe they thought the Queen was their only hope to overthrow Saint’s Empire. Anyways, wanting the Queen back really vibed with the New Pact guys – and the New Pact guys’ anarchy was really vibing with criminal networks all over Solaris. And so the Disciples spread their message and membership, through the New Pact, across Solaris and by the time the Trinity Nations was aware and able to do something about them, the Pact and the Disciples had already managed to grab ahold of some real power.”

“The Mystvokar.” Zalfron sighed, wistfully.

“Huh?” Joe asked.

“Fancy word for monarchy.” Grandfather explained, “See, there was a coup in Iceload. The previous government had been riddled with corruption. The coup was popular, but the king, the Mystvokar-”

“Talloome Icelore.” Zalfron said, again sighing as if swooning for the guy.

“-was vulnerable. The Disciples had their web spread far and wide across Solaris, waiting for some hapless monarch to fall prey – Talloome wound up being that victim. With him under their control, they no longer felt the need to keep to the shadows.”

Zalfron nudged Joe, “Now ah’m bout as clueless as you far as what happened next. All ah know is the Samurai invaded.”

“Indeed. And when the Samurai invaded, the Disciples and the Pact were basically the same thing. After the invasion, they broke up. Emerging separately as the Order of Mancers and the Black Crown Pact, led by Shalis Skullsummon and Creaton Live respectfully. Though Creaton hailed from Darkloe and Shalis from Iceload, their networks of loyal followers remained wrapped around Mystakle Planet like the threads of a net.”

“Huh.” Joe murmured, reiterating for clarity, “So a buncha of Creaton-fans joined with a buncha Queen-fans to fight the Trinity Nations, then the Samurai attacked them and they broke up to continue fighting the Trinity Nations on their own?”

“Eh...” Grandfather fought valiantly against his Knomish instincts to elaborate but ultimately surrendered to the urge, “Actually, the Order isn’t really fighting the Trinity Nations – per say. They’re fighting the Coalition – which is basically Iceload – which isn’t in the Trinity Nations anymore-”

“Woh!”

“Really?” The old Knome couldn’t help but blush, “Really thought I was losing you. I’d be glad to elaborate, it’s honestly been killing me, horribly simplifying such complicated international-”

Glancing over his shoulder, Grandfather realized that Joe’s “Woh” had not been in reference to the political landscape of Solaris. Behind them, three dragons were galloping down the road. From afar, Joe couldn’t make out one from another. The beasts ran shoulder to shoulder and moved fluidly, as coordinated as an old couple on a tandem bike. Grandfather ushered the boys to the edge of the street where they could allow the reptiles and their riders to pass.

“Act normal.” Grandfather ordered.

This command led Zalfron to stand rigid with his heels together but toes pointing outward, his hands behind his back, his shoulders squared, and his chin on his neck so that his eyes bore into the road at their feet – Joe could only shake his head.

To Grandfather he asked, “Will they care about my rock?”

“The chest stone? There’s no way of knowing but if I were them, I’d stop and check us out. Unless they lived on the Dragon Islands before the Disciples hijacked the Order of Mancers, they’ve probably never seen a pyromancer.”

“Mancers maen trouble,” Zalfron added, “and Knomes maen double.”

“Shut up.” Grandfather snapped, this led him to see the elf’s ridiculous posture, “Boy, stop standing like that!”

Zalfron looked up and raised his hands to shrug.

“Exactly, stand just like that.” Zalfron did exactly as commanded – freezing mid shrug – but Grandfather didn’t have time to bother with the elf any longer, “Let me do the talking.”

The dragons waited until they were right beside them to stop abruptly. As they stiffened their limbs and dug their talons into the gravel, a shower of dirt and rock sprayed the three. The beasts were smaller than Joe had expected, though this didn’t undermine his pleasure in finally seeing a dragon up close – three at that! They were of the same kind though they varied in size. The lead was the largest, looking to be almost thirty feet if it were stretched taut from head to tail. Its scales were a dark violet, nearly black under the cloud filtered light of Solaris. The others were closer to twenty though all about the same height, no taller than the roof of your typical pickup truck. Their scales came in all sorts of sizes, starting with large shingles that ran up the belly then getting smaller the closer they got to the spine. Their wings, batlike, were folded, tucking in the saddles that held the riders. Of all the dragons Joe had heard of, he knew instantly which he saw – curlheads. Their name came from the curled crest that came off the backs of their heads and curled in towards their necks. Joe had little time to take in the spectacle before two of the riders hopped down.

Despite their stern faces and cold eyes, Joe couldn’t help but get excited. One was an earth elf. She wore a heavy suit of armor, made up of a conglomerate of mis-matched pieces coming in varying shades of gray – all except for her left shoulder plate. It bulged out. It was far bigger than her right shoulder plate and it was the color of dried blood. A line of black spikes ran down the middle, from front to back. Beside her was a woman of a race Joe had only heard about a crimson scaled, purple eyed chidra (like Cannon Sentry). The reptile’s get up was far less intriguing. She wore robes from head to toe, only her dome-faced head was visible.

The elf had her hand on her sheathed hilt and the chidra kept her fingers in her pockets.

“What do we have here?” The elf asked.

“Wary travelers.” Grandfather said, “Spare a ride?”

“Na, Civ.” The chidra said, then she pointed at Joe and Zalfron, “Can’t trust dem pale elves dese days. And a mancer?” She laughed, “No sir!”

Joe couldn’t help but notice that there was a “pale elf” on one of the dragons, though he wasn’t about to point that out.

“You know, we’ve been to every corner of this planet and back. Few things we haven’t seen. One fewer now,” the earth elf said as she strode over to Joe. She poked him in his chest, “never seen a pyromancer.”

Grandfather’s thought process was split between trying to explain why and how there was a pyromancer standing next to him and examining the riders on the third dragon. The

electric elf had half her head shaved and a bandage that crossed her face to cover her left eye. The bearn was dressed in tight leather, tufts of fur poked through where his get up was torn. An unstrung bow sat in the furred warrior's quiver. He had the feeling he knew exactly who the four were, what he wasn't sure of was whether or not that knowledge would hurt or help their chance of winning a free ride.

"You know what I've never seen?" Grandfather began, "A bearn with a bow."

"Changing the subject, eh?" The earth elf accused.

"No, I was just curious..." Grandfather raised his voice to address the bearn, "You fought for the Samurai's Army, right? They called you Sniper?"

The bearn didn't budge.

"And a chidra in the robes of a mage." Grandfather turned back to face the scaled woman before them, "Not rare, not at all...but with an accent straight out of the factories of Foxloe?" He cocked his head to the side, "You, my friend, are one in a million, am I right? Ms. Peshkova?"

She, like the bearn, said nothing.

"Boys," Grandfather whispered, "bow and show your respect. These folks deserve our honor." The two boys obeyed. Whether or not his tongue could earn them a ride, he was now sure that he could at least keep these four veterans' suspicions from turning violent. To seal the deal, Grandfather added, "They fought with your sister."

"His sister?" The electric elf sitting behind the bearn, still on the dragon, asked.

"Tabuh." Zalfron stated, looking her in her one visible eye.

Grandfather stepped hard on the elf's boot and he looked back down at his feet.

"He is Zalfron Sentry?" The earth elf scoffed before looking back over at Joe, "Who are you?"

"He's no one rea-"

She cut off Grandfather, keeping her eyes on Joe, saying, "I asked you."

"I doubt you've ever heard of-"

"What's your name?" The earth elf demanded.

"Joe-"

"Well, Joe, normally we kill the mancens we come across." The earth elf said.

"But normally we ain't see nuddin but bone benders and shadow slingers!" The chidra acknowledged.

"And wae rarelay run into uh Sentray." The one-eyed electric elf added, snickering from atop the dragon.

"But before we run along and let y'all go on your way, I got a few questions." The earth elf brought the attention back to herself.

"Fire away." Grandfather replied calmly.

"Nah, these are for the pyromancer to answer. No cheating." The earth elf gazed between the Knome and the dirty pale elf, making sure she saw comprehension in their faces before continuing, "Where ya headed?"

"Um..." Joe prayed he remembered correctly, "Kemplor. Then to Portville."

"Mhm? And where from there?"

"To see the Emperor." Joe answered.

The two interrogators and their comrades burst into laughter, even the seemingly mute bearn chuckled. Anxious, Joe looked at Grandfather but the Knome gave a reassuring wink. When hilarity lost its flavor, the earth elf returned for one last question.

"What you got to do with the Emperor?"

“Uh...” Joe hesitated.

“I think the Emperor would’ve told you,” Grandfather stepped in, “if he wanted you to know.”

The earth elf looked down at the Knome silently. Rain began to fall, pecking them one at a time then turning, in half a second, into an all-out downpour. The precipitation seemed to spur the dragon riders on. Without a word, the chidra returned to her steed as did the earth elf. The dragon with two, the electric elf and the bearn, left first followed quickly by the chidra’s beast. The earth elf waited a bit to give the three travelers a farewell.

“Sorry about the rain, but we can’t afford to offer you a ride. We probably are already being too trusting to let y’all go like this.” The elf shrugged, “Chances are we’ll see you in Portville. If so, maybe we’ll buy y’all some drinks and...since y’all are so fond of war heroes,” she rolled her eyes, “maybe we’ll lend you a tale.”

Neither of the three cared to respond or wave which didn’t seem to bother the elf. After her short goodbye she followed her friends and left Joe, Zalfron, and Grandfather standing on the side of the road in the cold, Spring rain. Glaring up at the overcast skies Joe squatted down on a bolder at the base of a large tree trunk on the side of the road. Thunder exploded above them as Grandfather, willing to take a break from their travels in an effort to stay somewhat dry, forced the human to scoot over a little so that the two could fit on the rock. Zalfron joined them, each hardly having any bit of rock left to sit on as they watched the rain sink into the dirty gravel road.

“Ah say wae wait til the next travler comes bah an hitch a rahd.” Zalfron said.

“I second that.” Grandfather said.

“Didn’t you tell me you doubt anyone would agree to?” Joe asked.

Adjusting his cone hat grumpily Grandfather explained, “We don’t have to give them an option.”

Joe grunted uneasily but before he could protest such a plan, his train of thought abruptly switched tracks. His hands slid into his pocket and he felt the warp cube. *My keys!* He asked, “If we don’t get a ride and I get drenched out here, will that break the warp cube?”

“It’s possible,” Grandfather admitted, then he shrugged, “but unlikely. Typically, they’ve got to be really submerged to malfunction. Besides, I’ve got a way to recover things lost in my warp cubes, in case of situations like these.”

“Good,” Joe sighed, “while we wait, may I ask you something.”

“Why not?”

“Ekaf told me that the Order of Mancers betrayed the pyromancers and locked them up somewhere...” Joe hesitated but the old Knome was bobbing his head so he continued, “If everyone knows that, why are people still sketched out when they see that I’m a pyromancer. You’d think supporters of the Trinity Nations would see me as a refugee, not as a threat.”

Zalfron answered, “It’s against the law.”

“Mancy has pretty much been illegal since it started.” Stroking his beard, Grandfather hummed on a thought for a moment before elaborating, “I suppose you could compare a mancer’s place in society to that of a drunkard’s – in most places, being a mancer and being a drunkard is illegal but-”

“Baein uh drunkard ain’t illegal,” Zalfron argued, folding his arms, “laest not in Sentrakle.”

“You can’t just roam the streets liquored up now, can you?” Grandfather challenged.

Frowning, Zalfron grunted, “Spouse not.”

“As I was saying, if you stayed out of trouble, people tended not to complain and authorities tended to look the other way, *but* that didn’t change the fact that people would rather you not. Pyromancers, like shadow and necromancers, were never exactly welcome. Granted, the Disciples did the pyromancers dirty, but folks didn’t really want flame throwers wandering around anyways. You know how the Disciples thought Saint’s nonproliferation was unfair?”

Joe nodded.

“Well the folks in the Trinity Nations thought it was too soft. The Order of Mancers was pretty controversial. Just as a lotta folks see drug addiction as a choice, ignoring the wrongs in the world that led someone to start down that deep dark hole, a lotta folks blame the individual for the choice they supposedly made to convert. That said, a lotta people do feel bad for the pyromancers.”

Zalfron chimed back in, “Yeah, those guys were just crimpsin tiad Antipas.”

“Crimpsin Tiad Antipas?” Joe asked.

“Crimpsin tiad’s a curse.” Grandfather said.

“Antipas are too.” Zalfron smirked.

“No they’re not ya godi centrist.” Grandfather snapped, taking a moment to glower at Zalfron before turning back to Joe to explain, “Antipa is short for Antipacter. They were the vigilante groups that rose up in response to the annoying New Pacters.” Grandfather explained, “Just as the New Pact found a home following Creaton, the Antipacters found a home in the Samurai’s Army.”

“So then...” Joe frowned, turning to Zalfron, “You said it like it was a bad thing...but you’re a fan of the Samurai, you wanted to join the Samurai’s Army, right?”

“Ain’t everay soldier fahting for the Samurai Antipa.” Zalfron warned.

“Okay,” Joe looked back to Grandfather, “fill me in here. Antipas are good or bad?”

“Eh...” Grandfather thought for a moment then finally committed to an answer saying, “They’re necessary. They aren’t necessarily loyal to Saint or his Empire because they don’t find the Trinity Nations progressive enough...but they are devoted to stopping the Pact and the Order, they definitely don’t think Creaton or the Queen would offer a better alternative...I suppose the pro and the con of Antipas is that they’re a little more willing to resort to violence than the Empire is...”

“And sometahms that vahleence jus gives rahs to new problems.” Zalfron said.

“Ends justify the means, son.” Grandfather shrugged, looking off down the road and sighing before adding, “At least that’s what we tell ourselves...”

Joe groaned, “I’m never going to understand this place.”

“It’s not that hard. You got four parties: Creaton’s Black Crown Pact, Shalis’ Order of Mancers, Saint’s Trinity Nations, and then Antipas.”

“But that isn’t everybody, is it? You said Iceload-”

“We’ll talk more about it later, for now,” Grandfather nodded down the street, “It looks like our ride has arrived.”

“Hey!” Zalfron leaped to his feet and ran out into the middle of the street, “Hey! Stop!”

The dark-skinned man driving the carriage yelped. His horse reared back on its hind legs and whinnied, hoofs pawing at the sky. Zalfron got out of the way and walked to the side of the buggy as it came to a stop. The man, an earth elf, was standing at the coach, beneath a fruitful cloth awning, reins in hand, eyes wide with outraged confusion.

“Sorry, sir, but can wae getta rahd?” Zalfron asked.

“Get a ride?! Are you crazy?! Runnin out into the road outa nowhere!” The man cried.

“Sir, wae ain’t got any money, but wae’re uh...wae’re warriors and could offer protection. Thas a pretty rahd ya got there, proolly carryin some expensive cargo-”

The man jumped down from his vantage point atop the cart and jabbed his index finger into Zalfron’s chest, “What do you know bout my cargo?”

Zalfron was flustered, “Huh? Not a thang! Ah was jus sayin...looks lahk a fancy carriage, a healthay horse, an what not...”

The earth elf watched Zalfron carefully. The rain pelted the two. It took less than a minute for both of them to be entirely soaked. The cart was indeed nice. Its wood was smooth and painted with colorful trim. Satin curtains covered the windows. The buggy was probably the nicest one the three had seen on the road that entire day and they had been passed by well over a dozen.

“That’s an earth elf,” Grandfather whispered to Joe, “and Zalfron’s an electric elf. I’m not sure if you gathered as much before, but earth elves don’t always trust electric elves and for good reason I suppose. In many of the wars in this great world’s history have had Tadloe against Iceload.”

Grandfather got to his feet. Joe followed suit. They were still a considerable distance from the earth elf and Zalfron. They were out of view for the driver, who faced Zalfron, and also out of hearing distance.

“I think Zalfron stumbled upon a smuggler, tobacco if I had to guess.” Grandfather said, his voice stern and controlled, “The man might draw a weapon.”

The two watched as Zalfron continued to argue. The earth elf seemed to be getting increasingly annoyed. Joe looked down and saw that Grandfather was holding the Suikii, Joe nervously began to pat the fiery rock in his chest.

“Tobacco’s illegal here?” Joe asked.

“Yup.” Grandfather said, “That boy’s got no common sense running up to a stranger like that! Who knows who could be waiting inside that buggy.”

Joe had been watching Zalfron and the smuggler but something rustling across the street caught his eye. At first, he saw nothing, just a few bushes shaking in the rain, but then he saw more movement. Green movement, green in the shape of a man. *An elf!* There were maybe four of them in all – not all of them elves, some were furred – and all were dressed in brown and green, crouching low in the leaves.

“Grandfather, look over there.” Joe pointed across the street.

“What, where? Oh!” The Knome flinched, “Thugs!”

“Thugs?” Joe asked.

“Highway men, bandits, thieves, these roads out here in the woods are dangerous these days. Which is why I don’t understand this man coming out here with no guard...unless...” Grandfather’s eyes grew wide, “I’ve seen this done before. All right son, listen up. I bet that there’s no cargo in that buggy. I bet that there’s a handful of armed men in that cart and what we’ve got here is a scam – highwaymen hunters. They drive a nice cart, no noticeable defenses, so they attract bandits. Bandits come up and attack, bam! Out comes the ‘cargo’ which is really just a bunch of thugs themselves. They over power the bandits and turn them in to the authorities, dead or alive, for cold hard cash, because chances are they’ve got a record of criminal activity!”

“So those guys across the street, they’re about to attack the buggy?” Joe asked.

“Yup.” Grandfather nodded.

“And then folks are gonna hop out of the cart and kill them?”

“Yup.”

“And Zalfron’s in the middle of this?”

“Yup.”

“Shouldn’t we warn him?!” Joe exclaimed.

“Not yet, be ready...” Grandfather waddled out from under the tree to get a better view, “I want to see him fight.”

“Grandfather.” Joe stated, his heart fluttering as panic was threatening to take the reins, “That seems pretty fucked up.”

“Calm down.” He assured Joe, “Rumor has it that boy killed an entire hit squad of Order assassins with nothing but his bare hands. A couple amateur highway hooligans should give him no trouble.”

“How do we know they’re am-”

There was no more time for discussion. With a loud, high-pitched shriek – like the Confederate rebel war cry – the muggers hopped out of the brush brandishing their rusted rapiers and bent blades. Two of the highwaymen clambered up onto the far side of the carriage, out of Joe and Grandfather’s view, while the other two ran forward, confronting Zalfron and the earth elf.

Zalfron ran forward and ducked as a brown furred bandit clumsily swung a sword at his head. He balled his hand into a fist, still running forward, and caught the bearn in her gut. The thug stumbled backwards, straightened up, and raised her sword yet again. The two glared at each other for a moment, lightning striking overhead, then the thief struck. Leaning back, Zalfron waited for the wide swing to miss then lunged, tackling the bearn – who was half a foot taller than him – to the ground. Before the two landed, Zalfron had already delivered a sloppy but effective knockout punch across the thug’s jaw.

“He’s a natural!” Grandfather whispered to Joe, “Now, get your flame ready and wait for my command!”

Zalfron turned to face the second bandit who had just run his blade through the cart driver’s ribs. Yanking his sword free, the thief turned to face Zalfron. Before either the thief or Zalfron could make a move, the door to the carriage cabin flew open and another dark-skinned elf squeezed his way out. Far bigger than the earth elf that approached Zalfron, he was covered in rippling muscles from head to toe with a long broad sword held in both hands. The highwayman took one look at the giant and charged Zalfron in hopes of running him over – or running him through – and escaping back into the trees.

“Fire!” Grandfather yelled.

But Joe was distracted.

When Zalfron tackled the bearn, Joe’s eyes had been pulled over to the buggy driver. He’d run back to the carriage, hopped back onto his platform and had begun to hurriedly scrounge around beneath his seat. Having found what he was looking for, a sheathed sword, he turned to see the other highwayman clambering up behind him. The coach hurriedly yanked the hilt and the sheath apart – but it didn’t budge. The blade was stuck in its case. He only had time for his heart to sink at the sudden realization of his fate before the highwayman plunged his blade into his belly.

Joe flinched.

As if he’d somehow felt the punch of the sword impaling the coach. As the thug pulled his sword free and the carriage driver slumped to the feet of his throne, clutching the blood pouring out of his stomach, Joe couldn’t help but clutch his own abdomen in horror. The elf that

had been scrambling for his weapon a second before was now scrambling to keep his guts from spilling out of his body. As Joe watched, this scramble slowed. It slowed until, after mere seconds, the man rocked forwards until his head touched the platform and he laid there still. His open stomach continued to weep that crimson fluid as he bowed, prostrate.

“*JOE!*”

Grandfather yanked the pyromancer hard and he snapped out of it. The cold, sociopathic machinery of adrenaline took over Joe’s consciousness. It had only been a few seconds since the highwayman had run the coach through and now his burgundy blade was pointed at Zalfron.

“*FIRE!*”

Joe jumped out into the street, screaming, “ZALFRON, DUCK!”

The elf, although his brain seemed to be constantly wrapped in a mind-numbing fog, was in his element now. Immediately upon hearing Joe’s warning, Zalfron leaped out of the way and dove into the muddy gravel. A beam of flame burst from Joe’s chest and hit the elven bandit. The elf let out a berserker’s cry as he pranced about the street, his clothes roasting on his skin, before collapsing to the soggy earth, unconsciously dousing the flames in a puddle. No sooner had he hit the ground than Grandfather jumped over the unconscious, burnt body and glared defiantly into the eyes of the giant earth elf from the cart. Meanwhile, Zalfron got up from the mud only to see the unarmed bearn that he’d knocked down earlier back on her feet.

“Hey Knome, ya wanna switch?” Zalfron asked without removing his gaze from the bearn before him.

“No, I’m fine!” Grandfather yelled back, “Ya wanna race?”

“Race?” Zalfron repeated.

“Race!” Grandfather answered.

“Race.” Zalfron grinned.

“I’ve never killed an old man before.” The tall earth elf said with a white-toothed grin stretching across his face. The veins in his arms bulged as he raised his Cormac-style sword.

Grandfather grinned back though the Suikii in his hands was a dwarf, or Knome, in comparison to his opponent’s weapon, “And I’ve never been killed.”

The earth elf lunged and swung his sword in a downward arc. Grandfather lifted his sword, tapping the dull edge of his blade against the elf’s. Then he jumped – pressing his blade against his opponents to guide his leap – and flipped over the massive steel blade. The elf’s sword hit the muck of the road below as Grandfather, still in the air, retracted and spun the Suikii.

And then he was gone.

“What the hell...” the elf looked around but the old Knome had disappeared out from under Solaris, “where’d you Far-”

A dull black blade shot through the elf’s skull, protruding out of his right eye socket. The elf fell to his knees as his eyeball bobbed in the puddle before him. A second later, the man followed his eye and fell flat on his belly, his brain-dead head submerged in the rain-soaked earth. Grandfather, standing on the elf’s back, looked over at Zalfron who sat watching the Knome with an expression similar to that of a child’s face on Christmas morning. Zalfron’s opponent was still struggling, Zalfron’s arm wrapped around her furry neck.

“I think I won.” Grandfather said, his smile as white as his goatee.

“That’s the,” Zalfron released the bug eyed bearn and let her fall to the road below, “Suikii!”

“That it is.”

“So yer-” Zalfron was interrupted when his enemy staggered to her feet. The elf raised his fists but the bearn raised her hands with fingers flayed. Zalfron stepped to the side and the thug bounded off into the woods. Returning to the Knome, Zalfron continued with the same excitement in his voice, “Yer Grandfather! *The* Grandfather! The legendaray Knomish smith!”

“No, the other Grandfather...” Grandfather rolled his eyes.

“Oh... Ah got rael excahted there for a-”

“OFCOURSE I’M *THE* GRANDFATHER!”

Grandfather placed one foot on the giant earth elf’s head, took the handle of the Suikii, and pulled it from the back of the man’s skull. Zalfron got beside Grandfather so quickly it was as if he’d teleported. Staring at the plain black Fou-style blade as if it were the Holy Grail itself, he declared, “Ya gotta taech mae some tricks! Ah maen, ah’m as good a smith as my sis but you...yer a legend! Who makes yer hammers? Bet ther prahssy! How hot a fahr-”

“Fire!” Grandfather jumped off the dead body, eyes wide, jaw dropped, “Where is Joe!”

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While Grandfather and Zalfron tussled with their separate foes, Joe wandered over to the other side of the carriage, remembering the other two bandits and wanting desperately to keep moving. Even in his shock-induced mental state, he could feel the horror waiting in the back of his mind, thirsting to consume his consciousness and paralyze him. So he stomped forward. He found the two other highwaymen, elf and bearn, face down in the mud. Over the bodies stood a man of a race that he’d only just seen. However, unlike the robed dragon rider he had encountered, this chidra was dressed far more revealing – wearing only shorts and, that said, these being the shortest of short shorts. He was dome faced with hotrod-red scales. Snake-like tails hung off the back of his head, almost like a fleshy version of dreads. Two more of these tails stuck out in opposite directions below his nostrils, resembling a mustache. He held a large two-handed sword with a scarlet hilt shaped like a cross.

The two stared at each other, mammal and reptile. Lightning flashed. The chidra took a step forward. *He looks like he could snap me in half – but I have magic. I need to let him know I can use it.* Joe spread his arms and let fire seep out of his chest and across his shoulders from hand to hand. Flames ran down his pants legs and fires danced about his head.

Thunder boomed.

The chidra raised his head in a nod, “Never seena flame drower before.”

Joe was suddenly surprised to hear a voice that sounded as young as his own. After he’d spoken, he lowered his head again and smirked and the two returned to the silent staring contest. Once again, the swordsman broke it. With three long paces, the reptile closed the distance between them and swung his sword upward. Joe back paced and instinctively released a blast of fire from his chest. The flames hit the man’s swing and knocked the man’s blade back – yanking one of his hands off the hilt. The reptile spun, reclasped the handle, and swung again, this time aiming at Joe’s head. *No!* Joe thought, *Block!* Raising his hands he brought fire into his palms and pushed out, the flames bounced the reptile’s sword back once more.

I can’t keep letting him attack!

As the swordsman stumbled back, Joe strode forward. He brought his hands together and put them to the reptile’s chest. The man’s snake-like eyes grew wide and he dropped his sword to slap Joe’s hands off him. Joe’s blast missed, sailing into the rain-soaked forest. The reptile fell to the ground and rolled to his feet. Turning to Joe, he froze.

“Don’t move.” Zalfron said, coming to stand beside Joe.

“Wait a second,” Grandfather, now standing on Joe’s left, rubbed his eyes then squinted at the warrior before them, “I swear I’m seeing a ghost.”

The man didn’t reply.

“Hae looks alahv an well to mae.” Zalfron said.

“Very alive,” Joe agreed.

“No, I swear he looks like-”

“Sharp?” The chidra asked.

“Yea, son, if Sharp was red then you’d be twins!” Then he added, “Without the beard and armor, that is. You’ll grow into that though...the beard I mean...I’m going to take a wild guess here. You’re one of Dresdan’s boys.”

The chidra gave the Knome a curious glare.

“You’re Grandfadder?” He asked.

Grandfather nodded.

“Recognized da sword, Civ.”

“Hold up, Grandfather, yer sayin this guy is related to Sharp Otubak?” Zalfron asked.

“Yes, which isn’t as rare as you’d think.” Grandfather looked back to the chidra, “Dresdan wasn’t exactly picky when it came to women.”

“My fadda wasn’t picky?” He laughed, “Nah Civ, he jus had da cream of da crop bowin at his feet!” He paused to duck his head, respectfully, “I go by Nogard.”

“Nice to meet you, Nogard.” Grandfather bowed, “This is Zalfron Sentry, Tabuh Sentry’s brother.”

“Selu!” Nogard strode up to Zalfron to shake hands but stopped, stepping back to ask Grandfather, “And who’s da pyro?”

“Hae’s from another planet, like Daelia.” Zalfron said, proudly, as if it were an achievement to befriend an alien.

“What’s ya name, Civ?” Nogard asked.

“Joe,” Joe answered, “I’m sorry, I’m still learning about this place, but who are you?”

“Da bastard son of a great pirate captain,” Nogard grinned, “and half brudder of a Samurai.”

“That can’t be coincidence.” Joe stated.

“You think he’s one of the seven?” Grandfather asked.

Joe shrugged.

“Eh?” Nogard asked.

Grandfather said “You’ve heard of the Foretelling?”

“Saint’s prophecy.” Nogard muttered, nodding.

“Some people think our friend here might be the Sun Child.” Grandfather continued.

“Da Sun Child?” Nogard whirled to watch Joe, “You be da Sun Child?”

Joe shrugged again, “That’s what I’ve been told.”

“And what’re dey tellin you I be?” Nogard asked.

“There’s sposed to bae seven others,” Zalfron explained, “to help the Sun Chald. The Mystakle Knahts.”

Nogard stared at the three for a moment before bursting into laughter, “Da gogo got me goin, da gogo got me dis time!”

Nogard fell to his butt where he continued to laugh.

“It got me seeing dings!”

“What’s his problem?” Joe asked.

“The gogo.” Zalfron snickered.

“The huh?”

“You know how I said tobacco is illegal here?” Grandfather said. Joe nodded. The Knome continued, “Gogo isn’t.”

“And gogo is?”

Zalfron smirked at Joe with accusations in his golden eyes, “Come on, ya know! Smoke it. Smells lahk uh skunk. Makes ya giggle and turns yer ahs red-”

“Weed!” Joe exclaimed.

Having stopped writhing in the mud, Nogard sat up suddenly and asked, “Folks I rode wid dead?”

Joe and Zalfron exchanged glances then looked to their guide.

Grandfather didn’t hesitate, “Unfortunately.”

“Ya bastards!” Nogard grabbed his sword and hopped to his feet. The three backed away and prepared for the attack but the chidra began to laugh once again. Between chuckles, he managed to explain, “No worries, Civs. I’m messin whitcha, we be good! Hahaha! Da situation no longer leads us to kill each udder and, don’t know bout y’all, Civs, but dere be four reasons why I say da four of us hop up in dat carriage and ride way.” Nogard sheathed his sword then raised his index finger, “First, dis be one hell of a trippy situation.” Up came another finger, “Second, I’m wet. And dird,” raising his ring finger to join the first two, he grinned, “I got more gogo!”

“And fourth?” Zalfron asked.

“Fourd?” Nogard repeated, “Didn’t I say I got gogo?”

More jubilant laughter bound out of the chidra’s lips as he clambered back on board the carriage. He entered for a second before re-emerging to ask, “Y’all were goin to Portville, right?”

“Yup!” Zalfron nodded before Grandfather could shush him.

Skeptical, Grandfather stepped between his boys and the carriage and warned, “If you try any funny business, son, you best believe you won’t get away with it.”

“Wouldn’ta dreamed of it!” Nogard chuckled, “I need y’all, Civs! I can’t drive dis ding! Horses give me da creeps!”

Joe looked to Zalfron who looked to Grandfather.

“It does seem too good a coincidence to let pass.” He admitted.

“We were askin for a rahd anyway...” Zalfron added.

Grandfather gave in with a shrug, “I’ll drive, you two hop in and keep an eye on that joker.”

They left the bodies on the side of the road, an act that Grandfather promised Joe was not altogether uncommon. He claimed that some other hooligans – or maybe even respectable people, low on funds – would come by and pick them up and turn them in for the reward. An act Grandfather claimed was not completely unethical but, nonetheless, was below him. Joe didn’t press the Knome, though he couldn’t help but notice that Zalfron and Nogard had made no comment through the entire process nor during or after Grandfather’s explanation. On the way back to the carriage, the subject was subverted with expletives and lamentations regarding the current temperament of the heavens.

Crackling and flashing, the storm seemed to be following the four as they travelled down the puddle-stricken road. The rain showed no intentions of letting up. According to Zalfron,

weather “comes and goes” year-round in Tadloe. He predicted the storm wouldn’t last until night. The only one of the four with any prior carriage driving experience was Grandfather and he was more than happy to take the reins. Joe, whose first encounter with a Knome was Ekaf, noted that Grandfather was much quieter and more introverted compared to the other Knome and, from what he’d gathered, that was peculiar for their race. Nogard, on the other hand, was not so quiet. He was chock-full of questions.

“So how Solaris be treatin ya, Civ?” Nogard asked, slipping on a silky body-length robe and lighting the long-stemmed corncob pipe in his mouth – he looked like a reptilian Hugh Hefner.

Joe shrugged, “I’ve only been here for a few days, though it’s felt like forever. Man, since I got here I’ve been chased by spirits and barrens, inducted into pyromancy, bitten by river monsters, exploded, ridden see-through flying horses, been chased by town guards, chased by knights, now-” Joe paused abruptly, clasping a hand over his mouth. He could feel his breakfast, putrid as it had been, rising up his esophagus. It moved in tandem with the disturbing images imprinted on the inside of his skull, images of the dead and dying they had left lying in the mud. He closed his eyes and held his breath, biting his tongue, fighting with all his might to keep his food down and his thoughts at bay.

With a sly, sharp toothed grin the reptile replied, “Sounds like dey been good days, dough.”

Joe opened his mouth as if to speak only to have to stop himself again. Nogard’s smile wavered a bit, his brows twitching as if they sought to fall into an expression of concern, but instead he looked away. Allowing only the drapes hanging from the window to see his frown. Beside Joe, Zalfron had pulled back the curtain and sat watching the lightning crisscross the overcast skies – he hadn’t even noticed Joe’s difficulties. Joe breathed slowly, letting his hand fall from his mouth just as slow as if too fast a motion might invigorate the sickness. *Think of something else, fast!* He settled on observing the cart. There were two benches in the carriage cabin. The booths faced each other so that their backs rested on the walls. The seats were cushioned and the carriage was quite comfortable, but there wasn’t much to observe. *Sleep!* That should’ve been an easy escape. Every muscle in Joe’s body cried out for him to go to sleep – this was the most comfortable environment he’d been in since he left Earth – but the bumpiness of the water-logged road ensured that sleep would be no easy feat and Joe was a tad bit worried the state of laxity might encourage the thoughts and the nausea to stage one ultimate, victorious charge. With no alternatives, Joe braved opening his mouth and attempted to create a conversation.

“What do they call your people again?” Joe asked Nogard.

“Cold-blooded bastards,” Nogard held an emotionless stare for ten seconds before bursting into explosive laughter, “Hahaha, nah, Civ. Chidras. Only scaled folk left benead Solaris.”

“That’s what I thought,” Joe said, “like Cannon.”

“Honorary fadder of my kind, Civ!” Nogard nodded.

“Hae was a Sentry!” Zalfron stated.

“Psh,” Nogard chuckled, “skinned folk always be tryina take da credit from dose of us wid scales.”

“Damn right! Laest ah ain’t bouta waste that credit on gogo!” Zalfron declared sarcastically.

“Waste?!” Nogard countered with mock outrage.

Zalfron giggled and continued, "So where were ya headed after Portville?"

"Da Aquarian Ocean. Got a friend I'm tryina see." Nogard said.

"Fishfolk?" Zalfron asked.

Nogard nodded.

"Ah didn't thank chidras raelly lakked goin below the surface fer long." Zalfron said.

"Come on, Civ! Not all chidras be da same!" Nogard laughed, taking a puff before admitting, "But, you right. I don't."

"So it's a rael good friend?"

"My brudder!"

"How long would you be staying with him?" Joe asked.

"No clue, Civ, til he kicks me out I guess," Nogard laughed, "why?"

"More than a day or two?" Joe continued.

"Hahaha, yea Civ, why?"

"Ah," Joe sighed, "well, we are headed to the Emperor. Hopefully, he'll tell us who all we're supposed to be looking for...he might even be able to clarify whether or not I am the Sun Child. Anyways, if you happen to be on the list, I thought I should ask where I could find you."

Nogard shrugged, "Don't know. I never know. I'm here and dere."

Damn, Joe thought to himself, maybe he isn't one. Maybe it was just a coincidence.

"Come on man, ah thank ya should rahd with us." Zalfron stated, "Everyone has plans! Ah had plans when ah ran into Joe but how could ah turn down somethin this big?"

"Someding you *dink* is dis big," Nogard critiqued, "y'all jus guessin!"

"But what were the chances of us runnin into you? Don'tcha fael it?" Zalfron turned to Joe for support, "Come on, don'tcha guys fael it?"

"I feel it...I think" Joe sighed, "Zalfron, he's right. We can't expect him to drop everything because of what we believe."

Zalfron frowned and folded his arms. Nogard playfully nudged the elf's boot with his sandaled feet.

"Don't worry bout dis prophecy business. It happens if it's meant to happen, Civ. Dats why it be a prophecy."

The cabin went silent. The thunder grew distant and the lightning became frayed threads on the horizon. Joe ran his hand through his hair, it was still dripping wet. Nogard looked around with his scaled eyelids pursed. Zalfron looked back out the window, a blank stare in his gaze, lower lip hanging down to create a very unintellectual expression. Sighing, Joe closed his eyes. The lingering psychological shock had finally been defeated – at least for the moment, suppressed so far back that he no longer felt its constant pressure on his consciousness. And, despite the rugged road beneath him, after a few minutes, Joe found himself falling asleep.

Then five minutes later Zalfron woke him back up.

"Ah never finished the storay!" Zalfron exclaimed.

Joe yawned, "Oh yeah...where were we?"

"Ah cain't remember..." Zalfron frowned.

"Uh...So, Saint grew up in Munkloe then got fed up with the Bishopries and started a fight."

"Yea! And the Archbishop framed the Bishop of Munkloe so hae, Apache, decided to back up Saint which meant it became Munkloe against all the Bishopries." Zalfron recalled.

"Da story of Saint's rise, eh?" Nogard asked, "Haven't heard dis sense I was a lil Civ!"

Nogard nudged Joe foot with his sandal, "I warn ya, Joe, you won't be able to keep up wid da

names – dere be da twelve Bishops, den dere’s Saint’s friends – you know who Deseus was, right?”

“The minotaur that saved him as a baby!” Joe proclaimed proudly.

Nogard pressed on, “Quonon?”

“The harpy his village thought was a prophet!”

“Crimson?”

“His dog!”

“Apache?”

“Zalfron just said – the Bishop of Munkloe.”

Nogard frowned, still not convinced that Joe couldn’t be stumped, after a moment he asked, “What about Hodur?”

“Uh...” Joe frowned, “Oh yeah! The guy they sent to kill Saint, but they really set up to get killed with Saint, so he joined Saint.”

“Pretty good, *but*,” Nogard smiled mischievously, “can you remember the twelve Bishops?”

“Oh come on, that’s not fair.” Joe argued.

“It don’t matter,” Zalfron agreed, “all that matters is that you learn how the Emperor became the Emperor, got it?”

“Dat’s easy,” Nogard laughed, “he killed all da Bishops.”

“Spoiler!” Zalfron crowed.

Smirking, Nogard raised his hands in passive defense.

“It’s alright, Zalfron,” Joe smiled, “go on with the story.”

It took a moment for the elf to tear his glare away from the chidra, but finally he looked back over at Joe, took a deep breath, and began, “Alraht, this is the Tale of the Renegade Crusader...”

Zalfron's Tale 2: The Renegade Crusader³

By October of the year 1500, all the great cities of Munkloe: Harp, Tenta, Chick-Chaw, Drathernan, and Sereibis, were occupied by the Hundred Empire Alliance under Gerda Ipativy, one of Archbishop Loki's daughters. Unorganized groups of rebels still hid in the canopies and among the roots of the massive jungle trees but the only organized resistance left had abandoned the mainland to reside on the island of Jungloe which sat east of Munkloe. There, early in the month, the leaders of the rebels, Saint, Theseus, Quonon, Hodur, Apache, and, though others might not include him, Crimson, the half elf's trusty hound, were met by the captain of the Saluman Sailors, a Tadloen band of privateers. He, as many of the beer smuggling pirates of that time, had become a part of the rebels' naval defense. Captain Shirahama Kemplor had been sent by Apache to seek aid with the Bishop of the Sands in northern Sondor. Shirahama brought a half-satisfactory reply: Bishop Barenchi Kou would join in their plight, however, not until a victory seemed possible. Two bishops against ten would do little to change the tide. This did anything but instill hope, as did the Hundred Empire Alliance's sudden assault of Jungloe. In the chaos, Saint and his friends were forced to abandon Apache and flee on board Shirahama's ship, the *Rising Sun*.

The *Rising Sun* raced across the Drauburn Sea with the original intention of bringing Saint and his party to Tadloe (the one state not under the archbishop's control) but plans quickly changed when Eir Ipativy, an eye-patch wearing naval captain for the Hundred Empire Alliance, appeared hot on their tail. Another ship was nearing on the horizon so Shirahama, fearing the new vessel to be another enemy, decided to turn and attack Eir rather than wait and face two foes at a time. As a result, *Rising Sun* sank and Saint, Theseus, Quonon, Crimson, Hodur, and Shirahama found themselves at the mercy of their captor. Her mercy was little needed, for the nearing ship belonged to the Bishop of the Sands and was captained by the bishop's daughter Vali Kou. There's one thing you need to know about Vali. Despite whom her father was, the Archbishop wanted her dead. She had instigated numerous riots and acts of violence against the Bishopries. In order to keep his seat, her own father, who funded most of her exploits, had to publicly rebuke her. In short, she was no friend of the Ipativy. Having heard of Saint and the rebel's war waging in Munkloe, she swiftly plucked up Saint and his comrades and left Eir Ipativy empty handed.

As Vali took the crew back to Sondor, she revealed to Saint that she had actually known his mother when she was young. The two talked the entire ride and by the time they made it to dry land, they had spent at least one night together between the sheets.

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³ For a map of the Bishopries of the Hundred Empire Alliance check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

“Woh, woh, woh! He’s thirteen!” Joe exclaimed.

“Yessiry!” Zalfron grinned, “Saint always hadda way with the ladies!”

“Which is funny, cause da Civ be celibate now!” Nogard interjected.

“Dude’s a couple centuraes old,” Zalfron said, snickering, “hae maht not have a choice in the matter.”

Joe was not laughing, “You said she knew his mom! How old was she?”

“Valay knew his mom when shae was *little*. They were maybe six or seven yaers apart...” Zalfron shrugged, “Shae wasn’t aven twenty...or was shae?”

“That’s still pretty weird.”

“Whah?” Zalfron asked.

“He was a boy!” Joe exclaimed, “A child!”

“What makes a child a child?” Nogard asked Joe, “Innocence? Ignorance? Irresponsibility?”

“How about biological maturation of the brain?” Joe interrupted.

“Saint was fahtin for his lahf, Joe, sex was the laest traumatic thang hae’d experienced up to this point.” Zalfron said.

“I’m just saying that maybe this Vali is a little bit creepy.” Joe pulled his hat out of the argument ring, “War or no war...”

“Civ has a point.” Nogard admitted.

Zalfron shrugged.

“Thanks, Nogard. Sorry for interrupting Zalfron, you can keep going...just uh...from here on out, you don’t have to tell me when Saint gets some, okay?”

“But thas parta the story!” Zalfron complained.

Joe winced as he risked another debate, “Is it though?”

“Ya, Civ,” Nogard again chimed in on Joe’s side, “I’m not sure dat da sex stuff is really dat impor-”

“You wanna tell the farakin story then?!” Zalfron snapped.

Both Joe and Nogard exchanged wide eyed glances.

“All you, Civ.” Nogard said.

Joe rolled his eyes.

Finally Zalfron continued.

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As soon as they arrived in the capital of the Kou Empire, Sandtown, Saint began to speak with Bishop Barenchi Kou, weilder of the Mystak Blade, about his plans to reform the Hundred Empire Alliance. Saint believed that most people felt as the bearns of Munkloe did. He was right. Nearly all the colonies felt contempt for the Ipativians and it was a commonly held belief, though quietly discussed, that the Alliance gave privileges to the Ipativians no other Empires seemed to

receive. Solaris was quickly becoming Loki's world. Barenchi had Saint trained in military combat during the day and taught him of the political landscapes at night: The Fou Empire of Tadloe was helping Munkloe keep up the resistance, the spirits of Manaloe were peacefully protesting, and the Fang Sacha was growing to such prestige in Batloe and Foxloe that they could operate almost solely on their own paying no heed to the doings of the Ipativy. The climate was such a way that rebellion did not seem altogether impossible.

His stay in Sandtown was short. Naval Captain Eir told her grandfather that the renegade Princess Vali was hiding Saint in the Koustan. Barenchi was not yet ready to break free from the Alliance so he told Vali to take Saint through the Plainsmen's lands of Mannistan in the south. The Plainsmen's Bishop, Zion Cage 3, was wealthy, much like his merchant people, and happy with the archbishop's mass-micromanaging. He was warned Saint might flee into his lands and he did his best to intercept, in fact, he would have caught Saint had he not been tricked by Vali into letting them pass – after all, Zion didn't want his wife (or the Archbishop for that matter) to know that he and Vali had been having an affair. Saint found out however and, though he never told Vali, it did hurt the love-struck young man.

The southern end of Sondor, Mannistan, was ruled by the Bishop of the Barbarians who was one of Loki's three daughters: Sigyn. Before Sigyn, the "Barbarians" had been ruled by a native named Etamladip Eninac. Etamladip had been removed in 1487, accused of the murder of Saint's mother, Baldura Ipativy, who witnesses had seen him visiting frequently. After this the Eninac Family and the rest of the people of Mannistan lost their right to self-rule as, one by one, Deacons unwilling to sell out their congregations were eliminated or excommunicated. Much like Munkloe, Mannistan was now unhappily ruled by the Ipativians.

It wasn't long after Saint's arrival that Vali Kou was able to find the would-be-Bishop, the daughter of Etamladip, Takia Eninac. Takia and those loyal to her family had been planning a bloody coup. With the arrival of Saint and the few hundred men he came with – some from Munkloe, some Saluman Sailors, but most from the deserts – Takia was confident enough to bump the day of their revolt up to the middle of December.

At a party, two nights before their plot, Takia and Saint got a little carried away partying and-

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"Shut up! Are you kidding me?" Joe cried.

"Nah, man! They hooked up!" Zalfron exclaimed.

"Wait..." Joe paused as thoughts swirled around in his head. He was trying to keep all the names in the right spot, but something didn't seem right. He was killing she, she was screwing he, but somewhere in all the mess two names, tethered together, orbited his brain. *Eninac and Ipativy. Etamladip Eninac was framed for killing Baldura Ipativy, Saint's mother. Saint was a half elf and half what? Half human?* Joe's eyes lit up as he aimed another question at Zalfron, "Was Etamladip Saint's father?"

“Yup.” Nogard nodded.

“And...and Takia is Etamladip’s daughter?” Joe continued.

Nogard’s head continued to bob as his grin grew.

“Ew! Now y’all can’t deny that this time, it’s pretty messed up.” Joe said.

“Maybe-” Nogard couldn’t withhold his laughter, but he continued between his giggles, “Maybe gettin wid his sis...be why he went celibate!”

“I swear to god, if this isn’t relevant later-”

“It is!” Zalfron promised then he hesitated, “Kanda...Now lemmae finish!”

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The day comes and the capital building, at Yelkaovuhl, is blown up from underneath. With their troops rising from tunnels carved from miles away, they stormed the bishop’s palace. Saint found Sigyn, the two fought, and Saint killed her. After news spread that the rebels had the palace and the bishop was dead, the soldiers, most of them humans who identified as Mannistani, surrendered. Renouncing the Bishopries, the Deacons of the independent Mannistan elected Takia Eninac as their Queen.

Unfortunately, the glory only lasted until January. A furious Loki ordered Zion to attack, after all, his failure to stop Saint made him partially responsible for the death of Loki’s daughter. Zion would have been capable of defeating Mannistan if the Bishopry to its north hadn’t pitched in. Barenchi Kou was finally convinced. He declared Koustan independent and attacked the Bishop of the Plainsmen from the north, forcing Zion to split his forces and promising a stalemate.

The war hadn’t waged long before Vali was ready to return to her desert home in Koustan. When Saint said he would stay in Mannistan, Vali told Saint that the woman he was currently in love with was actually his half-sister. This changed his mind. Takia stayed and Saint and his crew returned north via one of Shirahama’s pirate friends. Their stay in north Sondor was short, long enough only for Barenchi to give Saint the Mystak Blade. Then he headed to Dogloe, to reclaim the land of his birth for the Mannistani.

On the way, low and behold, they ran into Eir Ipativy and the Hundred Empire Alliance’s navy. Knowing they couldn’t fight their way through the fleet, they changed course and plunged into the fringes of the Iahtro Storm in a suicidal attempt to escape. Surprisingly, almost all of the rebels survived, but Saint, Crimson, and Captain Shirahama were thrown overboard with the minority that didn’t. They washed up on the beach of Panta where they woke up in jail. Apparently, Eir Ipativy had washed up with them but was unrecognized because her eye patch had been torn off her by the gusts of the storm, leaving her crow eye – the sign of a shadowmancer – plainly visible. No one knew Eir was a shadowmancer. Thus the Archbishop’s black sheep granddaughter was assumed to be an associate of the rebels and thrown into jail along with them. Saint and his rebels managed to overpower the naval officers, who’d been imprisoned with their captain, and kept Eir from being able to convince her captors of her true

identity. The Deacon of Panta was unsure whether or not the half elf was the half elf the Bishopies so urgently sought, it took a week spent consulting numerous advisors before the Deacon summoned up the courage to report his finding to the archbishop. Loki himself decided to come and identify the boy. In the two or so weeks they spent imprisoned, Saint had to protect Eir from many of his own who got rowdier and rowdier as escape seemed less and less likely. A mutual respect had manifested between the two, as well as a secret romance.

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“Saint was sleeping with the enemy too!” Joe laughed.

“Well, ask a historayan, they’ll tell ya Eir Ipativy was quaht the looker.” Zalfron said.

“With a name like Saint, I expected him to be some sort of ascetic pacifist.” Joe shook his head.

“Come on, Civ, da boy went from scoopin tiad to leadin a revolution!” Nogard defended his Emperor, “He grew up in a country where dere weren’t no girls for him ta look at.”

“Less hae lahked em with fur.” Zalfron added.

“From what I’ve heard,” Joe muttered, “I doubt he’d say no.”

Zalfron continued.

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With no other way out, Saint put his faith in Eir and allowed her to reveal herself to the Deacon in hopes that she would protect him from her grandfather. Now it was Shirahama who had to protect Saint from the troops. The rebels were furious! They felt betrayed, even Shirahama was a little frustrated with their leader’s soft heart. Their rage was justified for Eir was not true to her word. Fortunately, the rest of the rebels arrived in Panta before the Archbishop could make it. After the storm, which had been worse than expected, they had retreated to Jungloe (where Apache had been able to re-establish some safe zones for the resistance). As soon as they intercepted word that the archbishop was on his way to confirm the captured half elf castaway as the Forbidden Child, the rebels sailed to Panta. They broke Saint, Crimson, and Shirahama out and left Panta with Eir Ipativy in their custody as well.

Instead of sailing directly to Dogloe, as planned, they made their way to Manaloe. The Christian spirits of Manaloe had been expressing their disdain, through nonviolent means, for the theology enforced upon them by the Hundred Empire Alliance. Christianity originated in the Vanian Mountains and spread to the elves through Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff. The theology split in two shortly after the First Void War with the finding of the unabridged Gospels, polarizing between Thoran or Mystakle Christianity which took root among the Sentry and the new form of Christianity, Thoran, which grew amongst the Ipativian. The Ipativian version, Thoran, added hell, miracles, made Jesus God’s only son, and exchanged the merciful God for an omnipotent one. The spirits of Manaloe learned Mystakle Christianity primarily from minotauren

exiles that'd fled as Islam spread in the Vanian – thus they were not fans of the Ipativian's Thoran Christianity.

By the time a Bishopry was established to govern Manaloe, the two types of Christianity were so different they were essentially two separate religions – the Thorans included heaven and hell and miracles in their theology, whereas Mystakle Christians fixated almost solely on the Golden Rule – and the actions of the Thoran Christian Bishopries of the Hundred Empire Alliance were unacceptable in the eye of a Mystakle Christian. Prime examples being slavery in Vinnum Tow and the devious debt rendering Energy Tithe. Even if the Bishopries weren't pressuring the spirits to adopt their theology and hadn't permitted – if not created – such exploitative industries, the spirit's saw bureaucracy as inherently sinful and did their best to refuse their part in it. In the end, their abstinence only served to leave them voiceless as Loki appointed his own Deacons and his own Bishop to rule over them.

The spirits had begun to gather behind the speeches of a smart young flame called Brahim Phinn. Though Brahim loved the Mystakle Christian doctrine, part of which made no excuse for violence, he feared that their peaceful display of discontent would have little to no impact on Loki and the Ipativian presence in Manaloe. Still refraining from lifting the blade, Brahim began to lead marches in which entire villages of spirits would surround the palace of a Deacon until the Deacon resigned out of pure irritation with the inconvenience. It often took weeks. The last march had begun while Saint and his comrades had been in jail and it happened in the capital. Brahim and his patriots had the Bishop Valkyrie Ipativy surrounded. Valkyrie planned to repel these peaceful rebels with violence and a few spirits working for the Bishopries warned Brahim. Brahim could not back down. If the Bishopries resorted to violence then the world would not be able to deny the Alliance for what it was – more so what it wasn't: a peace pact. Yet, if Brahim did not back down, how many of his fellow spirits would die? So, Brahim sent a spirit to contact the rebels led by Saint.

The rebels arrived in February, fashionably late. Valkyrie had already begun to carve through the peaceful occupiers, killing and arresting chunks of the masses gathered. With each day's growing brutality, the troops of the Bishopry became less and less attentive and enthusiastic. Those that didn't drop their guard, dropped their swords and deserted. By the time Saint arrived, the Bishop of the Spirits' soldiers were unorganized and lacking in morale. The rebels hardly had to raise a sword before the Bishop Valkyrie fled Manaloe and the warriors she left behind laid down their weapons.

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“Are there still two types of Christianity?” Joe asked.

“Naw. Thoran Christianitay jus about dahd with the archbish-” Zalfron gasped and bit his lip, “Spoiler alert!”

Joe laughed, “Pretty sure you told me that Saint killed them all back at Bonehead's, Zalfron.”

“Oh...” Zalfron pouted.

“You Christian?” Nogard asked, eyeing Joe intensely as he puffed away on his pipe. Joe nodded, “Probably more of a Mystakle Christian than a Thoran Christian, though.”

“Dere be alotta Christians on Urd?”

“A good bit.” Joe admitted, then he asked, “What are you?”

“Me? Just me.” Nogard said with a smile, “I don’t believe one way or da udder cause I believe in what I see.” He winked, “I believe dere prolly be somedin bigger dan me, but dat don’t make it a god. It’s like, I be bigger dan an ant but dat don’t make me its maker, ya know? I can still change dat ant’s life, make dat ant dink I be a god, but dat’s jus cause da ant can faddom someding as big as me.”

Joe was impressed, “Seems like you’ve thought about this a lot.”

“Mostly, I doubt dere’d be a god who’d write a book and not even mention da gogo.” Nogard took a puff, “Dat I just don’t buy.”

“That’s how most gogo fiends saem to thank.” Zalfron said, laying an unimpressed, somewhat pretentious look on the chidra, “But you do believe in *something*,” Zalfron smirked, “Civ.”

“I may be a Civilist,” Nogard admitted, “but dat ain’t a religion,” he turned to Joe, “it’s a philosophy.” He spread his arms wide, “We dink about da civilization, before we dink about ourselves. It’s political.”

“Yea?” Joe asked.

“Yea.” He said, though he shrugged, focusing more on his pipe than anything else.

Zalfron said, “Ah’m uh Christian. Mystakle Christian, that is.”

“That’s cool.” Joe smiled.

“Laest ah was raised that way...” Zalfron thought for a moment, “but ah suppose the way ah know it, it maht as well be a philosophay too – lahk a moral philosophay, more so than political.”

“Makes sense.” Joe said, “Sort of what my faith is, a way to look at the world and a way to behave. That’s why I figure I’m more of a Mystakle Christian than a Thoran. Thoran sounds a little more strict-”

“Oh yeah,” Zalfron nodded, “lahk you gotta take the scripture word for word.” He shook his head, “Suppose you just gotta hope you got the raht translation.”

“We gonna start a Bible study or you gonna finish da story?” Nogard asked.

“Raht,” Zalfron cleared his throat, “back to Saint, wae’re almost through.”

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The rebels stayed in Manaloe throughout February to help Brahim get things settled. Despite their distrust for letting one spirit rule over another, a very tentative government was established to make communications with other nations possible. Now Saint’s eyes fell once more on the land of his birth – Dogloe. Bishop Valkyrie Ipativy had fled there, to her husband’s

domain. It seemed the coup would be easy for just as in Manaloe, the people of Dogloe had become unruly. After Saint's father, Etamladip, had been accused of his mother's murder, the man was taken into custody and was never seen again. Since that time, the largest ethnicity in Dogloe, ethnically Mannistani, had done all they could to make life difficult for the Bishopry. Once a week, a town would throw a revolt and a Deacon would flee to the capitol (or a head would arrive mounted on the end of a spear at the bishop's doorstep). So Saint and his fellow leaders, Theseus, Quonon, Crimson, Hodur, Shirahama, and Vali, decided they would take a small tactical force and storm the palace to overthrow the Bishop Gramur Woodfolk.

Not all were eager to kill the bishop and his refugee wife, one being, of course, Quonon, but the other being Saint. Brahim's religion had struck a chord with Saint and the guilt of his past murders were beginning to catch up with him. Christianity first intrigued him when Barenchi Kou spoke of it during his training in Koustan – plus his P.O.W. girlfriend Eir happened to be the daughter of Gramur and Valkyrie *and* a Christian as well. Saint suggested they storm the palace with Eir in cuffs and force Gramur and Valkyrie, along with all those associated with the Bishopry who preferred not to be executed, to leave the continent or their daughter would be slain. Vali disagreed. She wanted blood. As did Theseus and Shirahama. Though, to everyone's surprise, Hodur sided with Saint.

Hodur's behavior wasn't, actually, out of character. One of Hodur's daughters, Hel Ipativy, was the Bishop of Dogloe's top advisor which meant she received orders from Loki and instructed Gramur to carry them out. Since her father's expulsion from the Alliance, Hel, one of Loki's most beloved pawns, constantly appealed to the archbishop for her father to be forgiven. Finally, an opportunity presented itself. After a discussion with Loki, Hel risked her life to sneak into Manaloe. There she listened in and contributed to the planning through the mouth of her father who reluctantly cooperated. Though he felt obliged to serve Saint, seeing as he murdered the boy's mother, he was first and foremost a father and he could not see his children unless he was forgiven by the Bishopries. So, though the rebels didn't realize it, they were planning to put all the rebel leaders within the Bishopries' grasp. Still the vote was tied. They asked Brahim for input. Since either plan would involve violence, he refused to give his opinion but he did offer a solution: a coin toss. The coin was flipped and Saint, Quonon, and Hodur won – they would attempt to offer the bishops a way out.

The rebels waited for a stormy day, to avoid the dalvary guards, and flew through the rain on the backs of Manaloe lion dragons. They stormed into the courtyard of the famous Citadel with ease and fought their way to the royal family's chambers with minimal casualties. Though they forged onward, they were all aware of the fact that the castle seemed under armed for such a tumultuous time. Gramur, Valkyrie, and Hel were waiting in the voluminous hallway, facaded with windows, that stood before the family's quarters. When the rebels arrived, the dalvary guards broke in through the windows. Troops, who had been hiding, sealed the doors on either side. Despite the appearance that the tables had turned, the rebels offered Gramur, Valkyrie, and Hel an escape: to surrender, take Eir, and leave Dogloe. They refused. The rebels weren't daunted. They'd been getting used to having their backs against the wall. Saint and his comrades

made surprising headway against the dragon riders. As more flew in to replace those that had fallen, the rebel leaders made their way towards the two Bishops.

Hodur revealed his betrayal when Quonon bested Hel in combat. As the harpy prepared to strike his final blow, his banshee heart was pierced from behind by Hodur. Outraged, Saint attacked Hodur. The half elf was no match for the veteran warrior, who had taught Saint many of his tricks, but even after unarming the rebel leader, Hodur didn't have it in him to kill his sister's son. By this point, Theseus had slain Gramur and Shirahama had killed Valkyrie. Vali was hungry for blood. She stepped in front of Saint and took on Hodur. Hodur was the stronger combatant, but his heart was not in the fight and, after forcing a promise from Saint that Hel would be spared, he gave up and Vali cut off his head. The supply of dragon rider reinforcements was quickly diminishing what with their leaders dead, but still Hel ordered for more. As the rebel leaders turned to the double-traitor's daughter, they were prepared to take her alive but that never happened. Eir, having broken free from her bondage in the chaos, was filled with rage. The original plan would have spared the lives of her parents. She saw their deaths as Hel's fault. Picking up the blade of a fallen soldier of the Bishopry, Eir took on Hel and, quite easily, defeated her, driving her sword through the girl's heart. Eir got revenge and won the trust of the rebellion. The rebels continued the fight until the dalvary stopped coming. Upon opening the doors, the troops were reluctant to surrender until the rebels revealed the heads of their fallen leaders. One way or another, though they had lost Hodur and Quonon, the rebels had taken down yet two more of the twelve Bishops.

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"So how many have they killed?" Joe asked.

"Huh? Lemmae thank...dayumn..." Zalfron blinked at his sudden realization, "They actually only killed thrae Bishops."

"Ya but danks to dem, Munkloe, nord Sondor, soud Sondor, Manaloe, and Dogloe all left da Bishopry." Nogard pointed out.

"True." Joe agreed. Then, with a smile, he noted, "Hodur killed as many Bishops as the rebels when he worked for Loki!"

"Hows that?" Zalfron asked.

"Well, he strangled Baldura, killed her lover the Eninac guy, and didn't you say he killed the Sentry Bishop in northern Iceload?"

"Hae didn't kill Etamladip Eninac." Zalfron stated.

"Then who killed him?" Joe asked.

"Noboday." Zalfron said.

Nogard was fighting a smile, "He disappeared, Civ."

Joe's eyes lit up, "Wait, is he-"

"Shut up!" Zalfron roared, "Ah'm almost there!"

By now, the rebels couldn't help but turn their hungry eyes on Iceload. At the time of Dogloe's surrender, only four Bishopries, outside of the icy three-pronged continent, remained loyal to the Archbishop. One was the Plainsmen of central Sondor, though they were stuck in a long war with their neighbors to the north and south. Two others were Batloe and Foxloe which were both controlled by the prominent chidra sacha known as the Fang. They were content with minding their own business and supposedly even sent a messenger to Saint saying that the rebels could do anything, castrate Loki for instance, and the Fang Bishops wouldn't raise a finger as long as their lands remained unscathed. Aside from these three, there was Vinnum Tow, the slender desert islands renowned for their enslavement of the dwarven natives.

Vinnum Tow was well aware that they would be next on the agenda for the rebels, so they sent a messenger to Dogloe. The nellafs of Icelore, of the same race as those that colonized Vinnum Tow, did not trust the archbishop and though they joined the Hundred Empire Alliance they maintained their disdain for the Ipativian's imperialism. The Icelore were loyal to their racial kin in Vinnum Tow and both sought to make a deal with the rebels in order to maintain their way of life after the fall of the Alliance. The Vinnum Tow messenger was accompanied with a messenger from Icelore. The messengers said that if Vinnum Tow could be guaranteed one hundred years of peace – under which it was suggested the nellafs would be restructuring their society to prepare for the abolition of slavery – the rebels could use Icelore to invade the archbishop's capital in Zviecoff. After their last plan went haywire, the rebels were skeptical. Saint demanded some type of proof before they decided to blindly trust the Icelore. The nellafs had come prepared. The old messenger from Icelore was not a mere messenger, but the hundred-year-old Bishop himself – Heimdallure Darkblade 10. The ancient warrior bowed before Saint, offering the Renegade Crusader the opportunity to execute him then and there if the deal did not interest him. Impressed, Saint and his comrades agreed – this was called the Darkblade Handshake.

As the rebels congregated in Icelore, Loki scrambled to organize his defenses. His foreign allies were either nonexistent or not listening. His northern neighbors, the Sentry, had given up hope on the Bishopries and cast out their Bishop, Bragi Ipativy, who returned to Zviecoff to be executed for incompetence. He did his best to have troops patrol the Vanian Mountains but they were constantly bombarded by the scattered remnants of the GraiLord Empire, still pissed from the Third War of the Blue Ridges. Meanwhile, half of his fire power had to be focused on Middakle, the middle peninsula because Zion Cage, the Bishop of the Plainsmen, finally raised the white flag, demanding peace in exchange for his noncompliance with the archbishop. This allowed Munkloe, Tadloe, and the opposite ends of Sondor to send their own forces to attack the Bishop of Greater Iceload. Apache Dreb, Saigo Fou the King of Tadloe, and Takia Eninac met Saint and his comrades in Icelore to join in on the final raid.

In the middle of April, the rebels began their journey through the Vanian Mountains as Loki sat sweating on his throne. They orchestrated a simultaneous thrust upon Zviecoff with the

rebel forces east of the city. The battle was still not an easy one. Apache Dreb fell as they fought to break through the castle walls, but it seemed the others might make it as they breached the archbishop's chambers. His royal guard was a force to be reckoned with and the old crone Heimdallure was the first to make it to Loki. The old men fought hard and, in the end, they slid their swords between the other's ribs. As both fell, Heimdallure immediately died but Loki lived on. He might've escaped had Crimson not caught his scent. Saint broke free from the guard and followed his hound to the archbishop.

Loki lay at the feet of the white fox, who explained to Saint that he had been helping Loki. The fox challenged Saint not to kill the old elf. Saint refused. He slit the old man's throat while he lay on the floor. The fox mocked Saint for the pointless killing. After all, the war had been won, the capital had been overrun. There was no need to kill Loki for the old man was doomed to bleed out in mere minutes. In response, Saint threatened to kill the fox and so the fox revealed himself – he was Creaton. Saint did not recognize him and was undaunted. As the two fought, Saint made stupid mistake after stupid mistake, nearly costing him his life if only Creaton had capitalized. Finally, Creaton did.

But as Creaton's blade flew, Saint was knocked out of the way – Crimson took the hit. His beloved hound had been watching the duel loyally, as his master ordered, but when he saw Saint about to falter, he couldn't let it happen. The dog died in Saint's arms. Creaton laughed. As Saint wept, Creaton told the story of how Etamladip Eninac was captured by Loki and turned into a dog (Dogloe was known for its herds of dogs, tamed by dogherders – individuals quite low in the social hierarchy). He was to be executed as a dog to humiliate his people. However, somehow, the dog had escaped and found his son. Hearing this, Saint lowered his father to the floor and raised his sword once more. Creaton could see in the half elf's eyes that even he, the Moon Dragon Man, the Black Crown himself, could not match this young man's strength, so he fled.

In the 1000s, the Queen of Darkness had moved the Stone of Krynor into Zvie Castle and there it remained during the time of the Bishopries. Creaton ran right for the Stone and Saint pursued. By now, Theseus, Shirahama, Vali, Takia, and Eir had fought their way through the archbishop's guards and were running after Saint. Creaton ran into the Stone's chamber then hid and, when Saint came in, he grabbed the boy and struck the stone with his blade. Theseus, Shirahama, Vali, Takia, and Eir arrived in time to see the two disappear. Though they didn't know what would happen, they didn't pause to ponder. They too strode forward to strike the stone. Just like that, the rebels won but they had lost their leaders. As the Hundred Empire Alliance crumbled, the people of Solaris were abandoned.

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“What about the King of Tadloe?” Joe asked.

“Saigo?” Zalfron said, yawning, “Yeah, hae was still around, but that man was *cray-zay*.”

“Don’t forget, de moon dragon finally lands right after Saint and his buds bounce. So half de world be leaderless and den a giant dragon starts wreakin havoc.” Nogard said.

“Well where’d they go?” Joe asked.

“They went uh...” Zalfron yawned again, turned away from the two, and rested his head against the window, “...they went...wenna...”

And just like that, the elf was asleep.

“I wish I could sleep dat quick.” Nogard remarked, then he laughed, “Widdout de gogo dat is! Suppose I’ma take a nap now too. Night, Civ!”

“Night.” Joe returned though it wasn’t night. They hadn’t even made it to Kemplor yet. He rested his head against the side of the buggy, but his conscience had decided to come back alive and he couldn’t help but mull over the events of the conflict that had occurred a few hours prior. His stomach rolled over and bile rushed up his throat. He jumped up and threw his head out the window, regurgitating the already puke-like breakfast Grandfather had prepared for them back at Bonehead’s cave. He let his head hang outside the cart for a minute, spitting ever so often, before wiping his mouth with his hands then using the rain on the side of the cart to wash his hands. Plopping back down in his seat, he looked around.

Zalfron was out cold and Nogard was too – though Joe had the suspicion the chidra was faking – leaving Joe with his thoughts and the sounds of the storm and the horse and carriage thundering along the muddy gravel road.

Chapter Seven: Tussle in the Tavern

Joe glared through the hazy cabin at the snoring elf and sleeping chidra, who still had his pipe pinched between his lips. Despite the rain, Joe drew back the curtain to avoid suffocating in the reptile's growing cloud of gogo. A minute hadn't even passed before the wheel beneath him struck a puddle and a thick glob of mud splattered across his face. Smearing the muck on the curtain, Joe let it fall back in place and decided it would be best to tolerate the skunk-smelling fumes. As he tried to comb the mud out of his hair with his fingers, he let his mind roll back to the jarring images of the fight that had been seared in his mind since. On the bright side, the dark thoughts saved him from the olfactory discontent of Nogard's ganja.

I saw someone die. With his eyes closed, he could see the event play over again in his head. *The highwaymen came screaming from the tree line and the carriage driver fleeing from beside Zalfron to get back on his perch. There he pulls a sword out from under his seat. Holding the hilt, he pulled at the sheath but the blade didn't come free. As he fumbled with his weapon, one of the bandits climbed onto the carriage and slid his own blade through the gut of the coach. The coach fell before his seat, coughing blood and clutching his belly, as the bandit hopped down. The blood just oozed and oozed, spurting out from between his fingers as if the blood had a mind of its own and that mind was hell bent on escaping the body, on surging like a wave to seep into the mud and grime of the road below.*

Blinking the thought away, Joe found himself looking at his peers once again. Their lips quivered as their chests rose and fell. Their brows were relaxed, their muscles slacked. *How can they sleep after...* Joe's memory once again brought imagery to the front of his mind: the bodies of the two bandits, limp and soggy in the mud, slain by Nogard mere seconds before he and Joe met. Joe grimaced. *How was he so nonchalant?* Joe couldn't chase his frown. *Maybe that's why he smokes so much...what about Zalfron? Grandfather too?* He recalled the empty suit of armor piled half-hazard in the corner above the stairs, back in Suinus, empty of the spirit that once filled it. *No one seems to care! We just left the bodies on the road! Like they were nothing! Like litter!*

Joe's lips trembled and his eyes threatened to tear up. Fighting the urge, Joe reached across the booth and snatched the pipe from Nogard's lips. The chidra stirred, grumbled something, but never woke. Joe wouldn't have cared. Raising the pipe to his lips, he lit the bowl with a spark from his chest, and breathed in. The smoke dove into his lungs and a spasm of coughs rattled the Earthboy. As if the fit had shaken around the thoughts in his brain, a new reality occurred to Joe. It was as if the tug on the Solarin's pipe allowed him to see the situation from their point of view. *What choice did we have? It was kill or be killed. Could any of those lives have been spared?* Placing the pipe back in Nogard's lap, Joe realized, *Yes! Life was spared!* Joe was sitting across from an example of such spared life now.

Then he thought back to the coach and the man that killed him – the man Joe had set aflame. *He was a murderer! He deserved it.* The highwayman had been burnt pretty badly, but he definitely wasn't dead when they left him, on the side of the road, surrounded by the bodies of both friend and foe. He'd likely be picked up and arrested for the deaths of at least one of those left beside him, but for some reason Joe felt judgement in a court of law wasn't enough. *I should've killed him!* But, another voice within him questioned that. *Wasn't the carriage driver likely a murderer too? According to Grandfather, probably. Killing and capturing highwaymen was their gimmick.* Yet for some reason Joe felt a special sort of hatred for the elf he'd lit on fire.

Is this what happens? Is this how I'll cope with it when I actually... his stomach groaned but there was nothing left to give. There was nothing else to think either, nothing except for one question that hung over him like the storm clouds above.

When will I have to kill?

Thoughts like these kept Joe awake for the rest of the ride. The rain slowed to a drizzle not long after they passed Kemplor – taking a ring road to avoid traveling through the small, transient town – and Solaris set before they arrived at the day's final destination.

Portville was much smaller than Suinus, at least, it appeared to be. Sitting on level ground and lacking the colossal sky pillars the great crater city had harbored, Portville was far less intimidating. Most buildings were no higher than three or four stories. Patches of forest filled empty lots, their canopies reaching higher than any of the town's man-made structures. Groves sprouted from small squares of soil, their roots framed by the streets that their branches pointed down. Vines crawled up cobble-stone walls and kudzu draped red-brick facades. *That's one thing Portville has in common with Suinus, Joe noted, the people sure share their space with nature.* The light drizzle didn't bother the townsfolk, hustling to complete whatever chores they had left before curfew set in. A dreary mist, rising from the roads like steam, seemed to seep through the buildings, piling up in the alley ways to hide the gangsters from the guards and bathe the huddling homeless. The sound of hoofs on the beaten cobble clapped in unison with the leaking pools of precipitation trickling from the roof tops to splatter on the stone. The smell of wet earth helped the flaccid police force coerce the citizens into bed.

They found a stable near the eastern gate and sold their horse and carriage for a hefty sack of gold. The buyer, a lanky earth elf, watched them with accusation in his eyes, remarking how "strange it was to see such a group with such a horse and such a buggy but no such thing as cargo." However, the man seemed to be nothing more than curious, seeing as he paid Grandfather well and quickly turned his attention to cleaning out the interior.

The sprinkle was stopping as they left the stables.

They didn't make it far before the stable owner called them back. He was standing outside the door of the stables, his dark eyes alight, a mischievous grin stretched across his lips. In his hand, he held a small wooden box about the size of a crate you could keep a pair of shoes in. It was carved with elaborate images of flames and dragons and covered in a glossy finish that protected the wooden exterior.

"You forgot something beneath the seats." He said, raising an eyebrow.

The four exchanged puzzled glances then Grandfather walked back to the man and grabbed the box.

"You should be grateful I said something." He continued, beaming. The hand he'd used to give Grandfather the box remained extended, his palm open and empty.

"You should be grateful I don't call the guards." Grandfather snapped.

The earth elf spat on the cobble stone between the Knome's feet.

"Watch yourself, traveler." He looked up at the others, eyes narrow, "Travelers."

Then he whirled around and marched back to the stables. The three strode over to join Grandfather. The Knome opened the box, looked in, then closed it back and looked up at Nogard.

"Did you know anything about this?" Grandfather asked.

"What?"

Grandfather wasn't convinced.

“Listen, Civ, all I knew is dey be goin west. Dey said we’d likely run into trouble and if dey did dey expected my help. Das all dey told me!”

“How’d you know them?”

“I met dem at a gogo bar in Ta-Nissassa, me and a buddy beat em in a couple games of spades and when da boys couldn’t pay all what dey owed, I asked for a ride instead of gold.”

“You didn’t know them?” Grandfather asked one last time.

“Civ,” Nogard stooped to look the Knome directly in the eyes, “I’m telling the trude. Don’tcha dink I woulda been pissed dat ya killed em if I knew dem?”

The chidra had a point.

“I didn’t know dem. And I don’t know what da hell’s in dat box.”

“Is it tobacco?” Joe asked.

Grandfather shook his head, “It’s worse.”

“How bad could it bae?” Zalfron asked.

Grandfather opened the box and picked up the vial that was inside. It was small, no longer than Joe’s index finger and with a radius no more than an inch. The liquid inside was an extremely dark shade of purple, so dark that Joe found himself wondering whether or not it was black or indigo. The cork had something scribbled on the top that looked almost like scratch marks but Joe could tell they were there for a reason. Three curved marks, like parenthesis, the first in the crescent of the second and the second in the crescent of the third. Growing bigger from left to right.

“Dark marrow,” Grandfather said.

“From da Black Crown Pact.” Nogard said, recognizing the symbol.

“Dark marrow?” Joe asked.

“Dat’s what makes you a necromancer.” Nogard explained, “Enchanted brooks blood.”

“Brook marrow.” Zalfron corrected.

“Let’s get moving.” Grandfather said, having already started walking. Quickly. The others followed, “Now that I think about it, I bet those two you met in Ta-Nissassa, I bet they weren’t in the Order or the Pact – either that or they were trying to get out.”

“Why?” Nogard asked.

“Do you know how much dark marrow is worth?” Grandfather asked, “You think two guys in a buggy would be sent by an international crime syndicate to transport valuable goods down a thug-ridden gravel road?”

“Good point.” Nogard admitted.

“I bet you they stole the marrow, probably stole that buggy, and were trying to get to Portville to sell it to someone. I thought they were highwaymen hunters – but there’s no way, not with only two of em, even with you. Three men?” Grandfather shook his head, “They were in some sort of trouble. No wonder they were gambling with more than they could afford.”

“You think they were mancans?” Joe asked.

“Nah...” Nogard shook his head, “dey were big on da zirra.”

“Don’t maen they weren’t mancans.” Zalfron stated.

“Nah, Civ,” Nogard shook his head again, “mancans don’t fiend for drugs like normal folks do, dey don’t need em like dat. Dey got mancy to get high off of.”

“Nogard’s right.” Grandfather agreed.

“What’s zirra?” Joe asked.

“Da opposite of gogo.” Nogard said.

“It peps you up.” Grandfather said, “You can eat, snort it, smoke it – but however you do it, you’re damn sure gonna want more in thirty minutes and your brain’s gonna be running full speed in five different directions.”

“It’s illegal, too.” Zalfon added.

Grandfather turned into an alley then immediately stopped and spun on his heels. He trotted over to the side of the building he’d skirted and peeked back down the street the way they’d come, ushering the boys to get in the alley behind him.

“Someone is gonna be expecting this and, if not,” he said, wiggling the vial behind his back before turning back around to face the gang, “someone is going to be after it now – unless y’all are down to go back and kill that stableman.”

All three boys maintained blank expressions, letting Grandfather know that they were so far away from entertaining such a thought that they considered the suggestion rhetorical. Clearing his throat, Grandfather continued as if he hadn’t considered it either.

“This is great.” He scanned the alley before them for any onlookers. If there were any they were thoroughly cloaked in mist. Satisfied, he said, “Looks like tonight,” He raised the little potion like he was lifting a glass of champagne for a toast, then smashed it on the street, “...we may have ourselves a fight.”

Grandfather tossed the box onto a mound of trash piled up by the wall then started marching down the alley, wiping his hands on his tunic as if the cargo had left him unclean. The others lingered, watching the odd dark liquid dart between the cracks in the cobble like insects burrowing after having just been uncovered.

“Dat potion’ll make some interestin worms...” Nogard muttered.

Grandfather stopped. Looked back at the chidra, shook his head, then said, “Come on now. We need to get moving. It’s already past curfew.”

“You no dat don’t matter in a town like-”

“Regardless.” Grandfather snapped, “I’m tired. Now come on.” He turned and continued walking and the others followed. The old Knome went on, “There’s a bar I used to frequent when I lived here, used to be full of Antipas – who may or may not want to fight us...at least until the Pact or the Order or whoever that stableman knows shows up.”

Joe grimaced, “You really think they’ll come after us?”

“I would.” Grandfather stated.

Joe gulped.

The boys followed Grandfather westward towards the harbor as evening evolved into night. The drizzle was defeated but the clouds persevered, hiding the constellations from the four. Before long, a new form of precipitation fell from the heavens: snow. The ground was too wet and not cold enough so few flakes lasted more than a moment once they reached the roof tops and roads. Still, the snow brought in a chill and whether it was the aging night or the dropping temperature, pedestrians were becoming few and far between on the streets. The haze that still hung low over the town, seemingly made even hazier by the light of the fiery lampposts, made it so that, for the few folks they did pass, they kept out of sight. Seeing each other only as dark shapes in the mist.

The fog finally began to lift as they found themselves strutting down a street walled on either side by saloons, as if fate sought not to give the staggering drunkards the benefit of anonymity.

“Sam Budd,” Grandfather said, “that’s the man’s name.”

“Sam Budd...” Nogard repeated, rubbing his scaly chin.

“That name’s familiar.” Zalfron said.

“I wouldn’t doubt it. A couple of years ago, he aided two fugitives in escaping the law and was arrested.” Grandfather waited to see if anyone would figure it out.

“I got nothing.” Nogard admitted.

“Crimpsin tiad!” Zalfron cursed, “Ah know it, ah just can’t for the lahf of mae...”

“What kind of fugitives?” Joe asked.

“The vigilante pirate killing kind.” Grandfather continued, having given up on the other two, “The fugitives wound up being none other than-”

“Mah sister!” Zalfron yelled.

“Indeed.” Grandfather concurred, “Tabuh Sentry and Tou Fou – two Mystakle Samurai. Didn’t take long after Saint’s Foretelling for word of Sam Budd’s criminal activity – now a valiant act of patriotism – to spread. He was quickly released and, in the years since, I hear his bar has become a bit of a hot spot for folks passing through.”

“Takin us to a godi tourist trap, Civ?” Nogard moaned.

“This doesn’t exactly seem like a touristy town.” Joe noted.

“When yer rich, anywhere can bae a vacation.” Zalfron stated, he laughed a bit, “Mah parents used to take us to the farakin poorest places – ah’m talkin down raht dangerous too.” He shrugged, “But wae always had gaurds with us anyways.”

“It ain’t a godi tourist trap.” Grandfather cut back in, “Budd’s not the sorta guy to sell out to make a little more gold. He’s a farakin dingus, I’ll give ya that, a godi stick in the mud, but that also means he’s a man of tradition so I’m sure he’s kept a few regulars around – as well as some paid guards that we can count being on *our* side – and, no matter how packed it is, he’ll have a couple of rooms reserved for old friends. So...”

Grandfather fell silent. Both Nogard and Zalfron’s posture seemed to suddenly get just a little more rigid. Joe looked up and saw why. Two guards were approaching them. One bearn and one earth elf. As they split to let Joe and his friends pass between them, they kept their eyes on Joe’s chest. Despite the flame within him, he felt a chill. He instinctively averted his gaze, looking straight ahead until they passed, but once they had he whipped around so fast he almost tripped over his own feet. The guards kept walking. Their backs turned.

“They were just curious.” Grandfather stated, “Told you the guard ain’t tiad here.”

“Don’t act like you didn’t get a bit spooked too.” Joe muttered, still walking sideways to keep an eye on the policemen.

“Crazy, Civ.” Nogard shook his head, “You know dey say Tadloe be da most progressive country under Solaris, but dey talking bout Westport and Eastport and Suinus – even Ta-Nissassa – you go and visit one of dese small, river towns and it be like you’re in Sondor.”

“Anarchay.” Zalfron agreed.

“Makes you wonder if Creaton hasn’t already won.” Grandfather murmured.

“You know, I been meaning to bring this up but, the other day, Bonehead gave me a ring-”

“Bonehead?” Nogard asked.

“That’s Joe’s S.O.” Zalfron whispered, fighting back a smirk.

Nogard hopped with delight, “Aye, Civ! Invite me to da weddin, I’ll bring da gogo!”

Zalfron burst out laughing and the air puffing up Nogard’s chest was released as he realized he’d been the butt of a joke. As Nogard shoved Zalfron and Zalfron shoved Nogard back, Joe ignored the two and continued talking to Grandfather.

“Bonehead gave me a ring that could probably hide my chest stone.” Joe said.

“I know,” Grandfather stated, “but to be honest, despite the attention it attracts, it may help keep folks from messing with us. Pyromancers are rarer than a Knome on a throne, folks’ll probably figure that the one pyromancer left free beneath Solaris is not to be messed with.”

They rounded a corner and Grandfather froze.

“Hey, Joe.” Grandfather said, “Never mind.”

“Yea?”

“Put it on.”

A mass of people were gathered just down the street. They were half hazard organized, all squeezing for a spot up against the building that leaned over the street, creating a bulbous line that stretched halfway to the street corner Joe, Nogard, Zalfron, and Grandfather stood upon.

“Half of Portville must be in dere, Civ!” Nogard moaned.

“Looks lakh your friend sold out after all.” Zalfron agreed.

“Is the line even moving?” Joe asked.

The four headed down the middle of the street, watching the mob like it were a snake. The line was moving but at a snail’s pace. The building of their desires was massive – definitely the biggest single establishment on the bar-crowded street that Joe had noticed and possibly the tallest building in all of Portville – reaching up what looked to be six stories. Above the second floor, the building was broken into four stumpy towers with a gap in between them, allowing for a courtyard or a rooftop bar or something else that Joe couldn’t see from the street. Though there were many exits, there was only one entrance and it was on the second floor, up a fat, double sided stone staircase. As soon as one group stumbled out the exit, another group pushed their way in the entrance. The entire line shifted forward a foot, lurching, like a driver in traffic mistakenly thinking the gridlock had been broken. Aside from the size, Joe was surprised by the aesthetic. The walls were made of pale stone cinder blocks, wedged in between beams of mahogany. Velvet curtains, with excessive amounts of fabric to allow for fancy voluptuous folds, draped the windows. Marble outcroppings extended from the wall, ever so often, to lift bestial gargoyles that seemed almost to dance in the bouncing firelight of the streetlamps.

Seems more like a government building than a saloon, Joe thought. He asked aloud, “Was it like this when you lived here?”

“Hell no!” Grandfather crowed, “The place was tiny compared to this! He’s bought out the entire street!”

“Upscaled it too, yea?” Zalfron asked.

“We’ll see.” Grandfather said, “It was always fancy on the outside. The inside has the more seedy feel. Hence the name.”

“Da name?”

They were passing alongside the line now, receiving plenty of nasty looks but standing a good yard or two away so as to dodge any outright confrontations – far enough away that they could be mere observers, rather than four disreputable line cutters plotting their atrocity. Grandfather pointed above the stone staircase, the sign couldn’t quite be read from their current distance but the humanoid-bodied barren standing atop it could definitely be seen. Standing on its hind legs, the barren posed as if pre-bow, one paw over its heart with its head up and snout towards the clouded heavens. The statue’s head was topped with, not just the typical horns, a bronze hairdo – tarnished by age so that it now appeared green – cut short in the front, professional, like a freshly trimmed Clark Kent, but allowed to flow gracefully down its shoulders in the back like a young Brad Pitt.

“Is that a mullet?” Joe asked.

“Indeed!” Grandfather said, “Welcome to the Barren’s Mullet, my friends. The icon is more than just a name, it describes the place – least, the mullet part does.”

“Business in the front?” Zalfron asked.

“Mhm.” Grandfather nodded.

“Party in da back.” Nogard finished, smiling.

“Alright now, y’all,” Grandfather said, hastening his pace a bit, “stay right behind me. Figure if we’re gonna fight tonight, we might as well get started early.”

“Huh?” Joe yelped.

“Thank wae’re bouta cut in lahn.” Zalfron explained.

The elf wasn’t wrong. Grandfather continued to speed up so that by the time they made it to the stairs he was full out sprinting, forcing the boys into a jog. Being roughly three feet tall, he was able to squeeze into the line like a wedge, opening space for the three to follow in his wake. Folks began to curse, shove, and snatch at them as they passed but they moved quick. By the time the people around them realized what was going on, they were out of reach. That is until they made it to the top of the stairs and found themselves between a bouncer and a livid crowd of feening alcoholics. The bouncer, despite his snarl, might’ve saved them, as the angry line-abiders waited to see what would happen.

The bouncer was armed to the teeth. He wore a full suit of armor which appeared to be excellently tailored. The thing had so many joints and plates that it reminded Joe more of Star Wars than it did Lord of the Rings. There was no lightsaber, however, instead he was armed with a sword sheathed at his hip, a smaller dagger alongside it, what looked to be the limbs of crossbow hanging from his shoulders, and he held a long, gnarled wooden staff that was topped with a gem that glowed red in a similar manner as did the one in Joe’s chest – almost as if fire swirled beneath its stone surface. His face was visible, framed by a helmet that extended down to protect his cheeks, but there was no nose guard as – unlike a human or an elf – instead of a nose he had more of a snout. To Joe it seemed piglike. The snout plus the beady eyed glare and the curling lip that revealed rows of sharp teeth all served to unsettle Joe, though it was more out of a sense of empathy for the poor fellow’s appearance rather than out of intimidation.

Noticing Joe’s expression, Zalfron leaned down to whisper to Joe, “That’s a moleman. Ugly, ain’t they.”

Nogard, on Joe’s other side, overheard this whisper – which likely meant the bouncer overheard it as well, but hopefully his helmet fit snugly around his tiny molish ears – and leaned over to whisper, “Elves be racist, Civ.”

To which Zalfron whispered back, “That’s kahnda racist to say-”

“BACK OF THE LINE!” The mole snarled.

Grandfather growled back, having to yell to be heard over the grumbling crowd behind them, “TELL BUDD GRANDFATHER IS HERE.”

A bullet shaped bug suddenly began to rattle on the moleman’s shoulder – bringing it to Joe’s attention for the first time. He recognized it as a cicada, though it was slightly bigger than those he’d seen on Earth and its eyes glowed an almost luminescent green which oddly gave Joe the impression that it was smarter than the average insect.

“What’s that?” Joe asked Zalfron in a whisper.

“A signal cicada,” Zalfron said, “prollay tellin someone insahd bout us.”

“Dey signal to one anudder.” Nogard chimed in, “Normally only see dem in Sondor.”

The moleman’s right hand tightened around his staff, his left shifted to the pommel of his hilt at his side, he reiterated, “BACK OF THE LINE.”

“SEE THIS ELF,” Grandfather said, grabbing Zalfron by the hips and shaking him, “THIS IS TABUH SENTRY’S BROTHER-”

The cicada began to screech on his shoulder as the guard retorted, “AND I’M DAFEEGA SHELBA. BACK OF THE-” He looked down at the bug, apparently understanding the shrieking sound. When he looked back up at the four, all expression had drained from his face. His eyes were dull and defeated. He bowed – just slightly – then stepped around the four to stand between the next group of people and the door.

As the line erupted in outrage, Grandfather strode through the door with his shoulders hunched like a sullen Frankenstein’s Monster, grumbling, “No one ever godi believes I’m Grandfather.”

“What a polite mole.” Zalfron remarked as they followed the Knome inside.

Grandfather hadn’t been kidding when he said a mullet was an excellent metaphor for the tavern. In fact, if the same bar had been on Earth, Joe was sure that many a patron would’ve sported such a fashion statement. It was seedy to say the least. A layer of alcohol, thick like syrup, coated the floor and was constantly replenished as drunkards collapsed into bar maids, toppling their trays and soaking their fellow customers. Glowing enertombs dimly lit the place as they hung low over the sea of bobbing, blottoed brutes. The lights swayed like pendulums, throwing those patrons lucky enough to have a seat at the tables beneath them in and out darkness. Smoke hung in the room like the mist had outside and Joe was pretty sure he smelled tobacco in the mix. As they forged forwards, Joe actually found himself thankful for the sticky scent of secondhand smoke because it helped mask the good ol’ working class must resonating from the regulars. All this was a lot to soak up, but there was one element of the entire experience that, once Joe noticed, harnessed the entirety of his focus.

Music diffused from across the room. He could see a chidran guitarist, standing on a stage about the same height as the bar, strumming her instrument, and gyrating to the beat of the drummer behind her. The drummer sported a pair of horns, curled like a rams, and his long tail squirmed behind him, vaguely dancing like a semi-lucid hipster at a music festival. But Joe didn’t even stop to revel over novelty of seeing his first gmoat. Nor did he hardly notice the other members of the band, the earth elf with some sort of alien saxophone and the other with what appeared to be an upside-down base guitar, instead he honed in on the lyrics the chidran rocker belted into a glowing orb, hanging from the roof.

“Somewhere outside that finish line I square up and break through the chains!”

Joe knew those lyrics. *Don’t I?* There was definitely an alien element to it, but he almost felt as if he knew the words. *Impossible.* Nevertheless, he couldn’t help but murmur the very next line as it flew off the guitarist’s tongue.

“And I hit like a raging bull...”

He gasped.

“Anointed by the blood, I take the reins.”

“Flesh and Bone.” He mumbled. His eyes wide. He could even remember the last time he’d heard the tune. He’d been sitting in his car, flying through an intersection, and then-

“GET A TABLE, I GOTTA FIND BUDD!” Grandfather yelled over the clamor.

Zalfron and Nogard led the way, Joe following after them in a daze. His eyes and ears were still fixated on the band. *Am I imagining this?* He looked around him. Most of the patrons were occupied otherwise, but as they got closer to the stage he found more to be watching the band and some to be singing along. Singing the words that he heard.

“Cut from the cloth...of a flag that bears the name.”

If he had doubted it before, he couldn't now. Half the bar stopped shouting in unison as the lead singer lifted her spherical mic towards the roof.

"*BATTLE BORN!*"

Joe even noticed Nogard amongst them.

"What is going on..." He muttered.

But he would have to wait until they found a table to even try and ask. *Did the Big Boom provide Solaris with washed up millennial rock albums too?* He couldn't help but scoff at the thought. He'd gone quite a while without being plagued by such a thought but he found himself again questioning the reality of the world around him and wondering if this was – after all this time – still just a dream. *It can't be.* But at the same time. *Why?* By the time they found a table – slipping in just as the previous patrons staggered off – the band was playing some other, alien tune, but Joe was still stuck on getting to the bottom of how a Tadloen cover band came to play the very song he was listening to when he wound up in Solaris.

"YOU KNOW THAT SONG?"

"DIS SONG?" Nogard asked.

Zalfron shrugged.

"NO THE OTHER ONE." Joe cleared his throat, singing the title as it was sung in the chorus, "FLESH AND BOOONE!"

Nogard laughed, "OFCOURSE, CIV!"

Zalfron seemed annoyed, "EVERAYONE KNOWS THAT SONG."

Tired of yelling, Joe sat up and leaned over the table. The others did the same.

"That's an Earthen song." Joe explained.

"Oh yeah?" Nogard smiled as if he didn't know whether Joe was trying to be funny or...or what exactly Joe was doing.

Zalfron was just as clueless, "What do you maen?"

"I *know* that song." Joe stated.

Zalfron frowned.

"You know dat song?" Nogard's indecisive smile remained.

"I was listening to it before I got here!" Joe nodded aggressively, "Before I came to this planet!"

"Jaesus!" Zalfron crowed, rocking back from the table, "Whah's everayone love that song so farakin much!"

Nogard smirked, "Who wrote it?"

"The Killers." Joe said, "Who do *you* think wrote it?"

"Lo." Nogard chuckled, "It be like...da most popular pop song out, right now, Civ."

"And it has been." Zalfron lamented, leaning back in, "For lahk ever."

"Ever?" Nogard scoffed, "It hasn't even been a year yet, Civ."

"Yuh-huh!" Zalfron argued, "The crimpstin tiad bars were already playin it nonstop fore ah went to prison."

"You went to prison, Civ?" Nogard's interest in the odd phenomenon immediately dried up as a more interesting topic made itself available, "We talkin prison or prison camp?"

"Prison, prison." Zalfron said, rocking back in his chair once more and folding his arms across his chest as if his stint in a correctional facility was some sort of medal of honor.

"Where?" Nogard rolled his eyes, "God's Island?"

"HA!" Zalfron laughed, "ICELORE."

"GODI TIAD, DAS A LIE!" Nogard roared.

Joe sighed. The mystery would have to wait. It was probably an Ekaf question anyways. As Nogard continued to discredit Zalfron's claim, Joe looked around the bar. He saw all sorts of new types of people, some dressed as if they came from a hunter gatherer tribe and others dressed as though they came from a far more technologically advanced land than his own. There was fur, scales, dark skin, light skin, translucent skin-

He froze.

There was a spirit in the corner. The man was encased in a robust suit of armor wrapped in decorative vines of metal and topped with a one horned full helm. A translucent silver sash was wrapped across his chest, holding a quiver and bow to his back. He leaned back against the wall and observed the crowd. Joe could see his silver eyes through the slit in his helmet, gleaming as he scanned the room back and forth. *He isn't looking for me is he? Could he be a part of the Knights of the Light?* But as quick as the panic had hit Joe, it melted away and a smile crept into its place. There was no sun-symbol on his chest. He was just a spirit in a suit of armor. *Not every spirit is in the Knights of the Light.* When he noticed the little finger sized cicada perched on the man's shoulder Joe relaxed further. *He's just security.* He looked away from the spirit and turned back to his comrades.

"FAELIN JUNGLAY TONAHT!" Zalfron proclaimed, "AH'LL TAKE A GULP OF FRUIT BAER!"

A waitress had come to the table. She was a bearn, like many others Joe had seen before, except rather than being dressed for combat she wore something similar to that of a Germanic dirndl dress – a white blouse under a corset-like bodice-and-dress-one-piece. Though her dress was more of a skirt and, instead of a white blouse, she let her skin – or rather fur – show. It surely would've piqued the interest of any bearn attracted to furry females but, for Joe, it was more comical than sexy. *Don't laugh.* Problem was, her get-up made him think of an Oktoberfest-styled teddy bear and, with that image in the back of his mind, looking at her only made matters worse. *Don't laugh! Don't laugh!*

"FOR YOU?" She asked Joe.

Joe hung his head and his body trembled as he used all his might to repress nervous laughter. The barmaid slouched, leaning her beer tray on her hip and rolling her eyes. Fortunately, she took the behavior to signify inebriation.

Zalfron, however, knew what it really was and quickly jumped in to save the day, "THRAE FRUIT BAERS, MAM...JUS A SIP FOR THE FUNNAY GUY."

The woman left the three with a disgruntled grunt. The three leaned in again to speak civilly.

"Ya don't wanna make a bearn mad, Civ." Nogard warned.

"Trust me." A red faced Joe said, "I didn't mean to."

"It happens. Everayone's racist til they've been around awhahl."

"I'm not racist!" Joe yelled.

Nogard grunted. Zalfron raised an eyebrow.

Joe went on the defensive, "I'm an alien, I'm just responding to things I've never seen before."

But neither Nogard nor Zalfron were interested in proving Joe's participation in the structure of racial prejudices that infected the social systems beneath Solaris, nor were they interested in granting Joe absolution as an alien. They knew racism for what it was, a virus they were all infected with – albeit to different degrees, they all emitted those bigoted germs wherever they went, whatever they did. They were born sick; all they could do was strive to get well.

Telling someone they were or weren't the problem would not help the matter nor would it be true. But I digress.

Zalfron shrugged, "Ah pissed off a bar tending bearn when ah first turned thirtaen. Shae just straight whooped mah ass. Parents didn't aven stop her. Sure learned mah lesson."

"What were you doing talking to bar tenders at thirteen?" Joe scoffed.

Zalfron laughed, "Drankin, look ah ain't Saint. Ah wasn't trahina bang-"

"No I mean...wait..." Joe's head unconsciously cocked to the side, "You started drinking at *thirteen?!?*"

"Yea," Zalfron shrugged, "it's legal-"

"*LEGAL?!?*"

"Da state ain't dere to baby sit, Civ." Nogard laughed.

"And if ya can carry a sword, then you can drank." Zalfron shrugged, "How old ya gotta bae to drank on Earth?"

"Twenty-one!" Joe cried.

"*TWENTY-ONE!*" Zalfron and Nogard exclaimed simultaneously.

"Where I'm from." Joe nodded.

"What about for swords?" Zalfron asked.

"Well we don't really use swords." Joe said.

"What do y'all use?" Nogard asked.

"Guns? I guess?"

"How old for them, then?" Zalfron asked.

"I don't know." Joe shrugged, thinking on it a bit, "Well I know where I'm from you can buy guns as a teenager pretty young, but as far as how old you gotta be to own one or use one...I'm not sure we've got an age limit on that..."

"So y'all dink beer be worse for you dan war?" Nogard scoffed.

"Well you gotta at least be eighteen to join..." Joe cut himself off, "Well, actually, yea...I guess so."

"Do dey put an age on da gogo?" Nogard asked.

Now it was Joe who rocked back in his chair. He could foresee the outrage that his revelation would produce. Smirking, he leaned back in, "Get this, where I'm from, tobacco is legal and gogo isn't!"

"*WHAT!?*" Nogard jumped to his feet, knocking his chair over. No one seemed to notice his outburst aside from Zalfron and Joe who both nearly fell out of their seats laughing. After picking his chair up, Nogard continued, begging, "Tell me it isn't so, Civ!"

"It is. People can go to prison for life if they get caught with gogo too many times...well, that is if gogo is what I think it is...gogo is weed, right?"

"How dare you call my babbit a weed!" Nogard cried, sitting back down and patting his chest pocket, "It's okay babies, he didn't mean it."

"And you can smoke tobacco before you can drink." Joe continued.

"Dey letcha go to war and get shot at and inhale poison butcha can't inhale da miracle plant – not even in a hospital?!" Nogard crowed.

"Can ya at laest aet it?" Zalfron asked.

"Wee-" Joe caught himself, "Gogo? Nope."

"I don't get Urd, Civ." Nogard stated.

"Make more sense if they'd banned em both, but banning gogo over tobacco?" Zalfron shook his head, "Y'all got problems."

“You don’t even know the half of it.” Joe agreed. Little did Joe know that *he* didn’t know the half of it (This was written before the 2016 Election. So...yea...we got problems.).

“ENOUGH PROPAGANDA.” Grandfather said, joining them at the table, a massive mug of ale in his hand, he leaned over the table – having to stand on the chair and on his tiptoes to do so – and added, “This is fantasy fiction, not a criticism of the hypocrisy common in the evangelical white supremacist heterosexual patriarchy that manipulates and exploits Joe’s people.”

“What?” Joe asked.

“TWO GULPS, ONE SIP?” The bearn barmaid said as she returned to set the pitchers down on the table, “THAT ALL?”

“NOT QUITE YET, MAM.” Grandfather shouted, turning from where he stood on his chair. He bowed a little to the server then continued, “FOUR CHICKEN PLATES, SWEET FRIES, BACON BEANS, WITH BLOOD APPLES.”

Grandfather tossed a few coins onto her empty tray and she offered the first authentic smile the boys had seen from her. As Zalfron, Nogard, and Joe thanked her, she curtsied, winked at the old man, then skipped off. The “gulps” were bigger around than Grandfather’s head – what bars where Joe was from called liters. As for Joe’s “sip,” it was roughly half that of their gulps (probably a sixteen ounce). Eyeing the glass as if it were an adversary, Joe took a deep breath and then lifted the drink to his lips. *I’ve never was much of a drinker back on Earth, but, then again, I was diabetic. I really wasn’t supposed to drink too much.* Closing his eyes, he took a giant swig then set it down. When he opened his eyes he found the elf, chidra, and Knome staring at him with widespread grins.

Nogard leaned in to ask, “Dat ya first beer, Civ?”

“First fruit beer!” Joe nodded.

“How ya lahk it?” Zalfron asked.

“A hell of a lot more than I thought I would!” Joe admitted as he took another sip, almost in disbelief, “It tastes like soda – is this soda?”

“Soda?” Nogard and Zalfron chimed.

“This has alcohol in it, right?” Joe asked.

“Nah, Civ, beer doesn’t have alcohol.” Nogard said.

“Oh...” Joe frowned, “Oh wow, I guess that makes so much more-”

Nogard and Zalfron burst out laughing. Grandfather shook his head.

“Ah.” Joe blushed, “Okay. Fair enough.”

“Drink up boys – but no more than you can handle!” Grandfather warned, “I don’t need y’all getting too drunk. Gotta keep our eyes open for trouble.”

If any of the boys heard him, then none acknowledged it.

“My boy!” Nogard said, grabbing Joe’s hand to stop him from taking another sip, “We must toast. Give it a go, Civ!”

Smiling, Joe raised the glass, “You know just a few days ago I would’ve died if it wasn’t for this Knome right here’s friend! I say we make a toast to him.”

“Screw him,” Grandfather chuckled and raised his beer, “let’s toast to Solaris.”

“To Solaris!” Joe cried.

“TO SOLARIS!”

And after the first toast came another, then another, and another, the boys had started on their second drinks before they ran out of things to toast (even toasting once to, “Not drinking too much!” after asking Grandfather for a suggestion). Then they moved on to talk of girls.

Nogard and Zalfron downed their third gulps before they finished barraging Joe with questions regarding the beautiful Earthen female. Joe beat his first gulp asking the chidra and elf about the women of their races (including questions like, “Are chidras *really* reptiles?” to which Nogard replied, “Can’t say I’m a scientist Civ, but I tell ya dis – I can make sweet love to you skinned folk widdout da fear of fadderhood, my boy!”). Once the food came, all three boys replaced their gulps for chugs. Excluding Grandfather, it didn’t take the three long to get thoroughly and enjoyably wasted. Grandfather stayed somewhat calmer than the three younger boys (despite drinking a guzzle!) and kept an eye out for danger. As the boy’s sobriety withered and died, so did the sobriety of those around them and, as the moon sunk further beneath the clouds, the pub submitted to complete rancor. People tangoed across tabletops as the voices of the bar united into hundreds of horrendous hymns sung in half-hazard harmony (as the band had long since left). Joe, Nogard, and Zalfron were standing on their table, each holding their beverage (Joe had to use two hands), arms wrapped around each other’s shoulders as they bounced back and forth singing along as best they could.

“Hol up, hol up, hol up.....MAH BOY!” Nogard yelled the last two words at the top of his lungs then held his arms up, which incidentally provided his companions with a brisk shower of booze, “I hasomedina say.”

Joe blinked and looked at the red scaled man who, although they met hours ago, seemed now to be one of his dearest friends. Zalfron, however, kept on singing, switching songs.

“Aaaah waaas born bah uh Sentray ah’m proud ta say, ah drank all naht an ah work all day!” Zalfron sang at the top of his lungs, oblivious to the fact that the people in the bar had begun to quiet, “Gotta pale ol face an big blue ahs, lahk mah dames with big ol thahs.”

Nogard looked at Joe, gestured to Zalfron, burst into laughter, then lifted his mug to his lips. Joe grinned from ear to ear, clasped Zalfron’s shoulder, and danced with him. Zalfron continued, “Shae ain’t blonde, shae ain’t for mae! If shae ain’t for mae, shae maht as well bae...uh donum,” he paused, cleared his throat and bellowed, “DONUM!” then he paused again and a few other elves, some electric but mostly earth, throughout the bar chimed in, dropping it down a couple octaves, “IPAAA-TAAA-VAAAY!”

Zalfron continued on alone, occupying the attention of the entire bar, “Nooow maaah momma once said ah gotta lump of a head! Ever hit the straet, bae good as dead! Ain’t no lass dumb enough, tuh fix mae bread an show mae love.”

Nogard began to tap his foot loudly on the table in beat with Zalfron’s chorus. People around the tavern began to clap in rhythm.

“Yas, mah boy!” Nogard said, nodding, “Sing it, Civ!”

“When ah hit the straet, shae sure weren’t raht! Met mae a traet bah the end of the naht! Shae had rael dark hair and rael dark skin! Tahd, Momma weren’t there an she were a ten. Ah’m just a pale elf with a dark elf girl. Momma says that make her wanna hurl. At the end of the day, don’t give a daaaaamn!”

Complete silence.

“Cause unlahk momma, shae made mae a man!”

More of the reluctant electric elves chimed in along with a few chidras and bears as Zalfron finished.

“Hae-hoe! Hey let’s go! Drank til wae ain’t got money to throw! Hae-hoe! Hey let’s go! Drank and let the troubles slooow,” he slowed, Nogard stopped the beat, Joe stopped dancing, and then, “Screw Ipativy! Let Iahtro blow!”

The bar erupted with applause. Zalfron turned to Joe and Nogard with a crooked smile.

“That there’s the pale elf song!” Zalfron said proudly, “Ah sang it ery tahm ah get drunk!”

“Encore, encore!” Someone roared.

“Naw, naw, naw, ah’m drunker than a Darkblade!” Zalfron shook his head solemnly and swatted at the air, “Sahds, cain’t sang it twice, that’s bad...bad...look!”

“Look?” Joe asked, genuinely curious, as the crowd lost their appetite for Zalfron, “Where?”

“Luck.” A red-faced Zalfron corrected himself.

“Oh,” Joe nodded, his brow furling with understanding as if in the middle of a dignified conversation then he suddenly jumped from where he stood off the table, “Wait! Nogard had something to say!”

As the other two stepped off the table, attention turned to Nogard. The chidra hit his bare scaled chest with his fist, cleared his throat, adjusted the unbuttoned robe that was draped over his shoulders, and shook his head so that his tangled tails fell down his back.

“I, Nogard Odukab,” he proclaimed, paused, then corrected himself, “I, Nogard...Ot...Ooh...Bak, had decided to consider,” he cleared his throat and winked at his new friends, “traveling on to see da Emperor wid my new brudders!”

“To save the Mystakle Samurai?” Zalfron asked, raising his chug into the air with both hands, his arms sore and shaking.

“And damn Creaton to hell!” Nogard agreed, raising his.

“And damn Creaton to hell!” Joe cried, following suit.

“Guys!” Grandfather said, “Sit down and sober up.”

It was the first time they had heard Grandfather speak in a long while and the three exchanged embarrassed glances. They’d almost forgotten the old Knome. Throughout the three’s shenanigans, Grandfather had stayed in his seat, eyes on the crowd around them as he drank down his beers. Though he had drunk as much as the three boys combined, Grandfather was still in his right mind. Most of the people in the bar were celebrating life – happy, drunk, and carefree – but not all. There was a table of elves around the center of the dining area, right in front of where the band had been. Ever since the four had walked in, the table had their eyes on Nogard. Grandfather had watched them silently until he saw another group walk in to stand around the table in question. That’s when he told the boys to chill out.

The table was now a peculiar combination; there was a young human woman, two earth elves, and two electric elves. The woman was dressed in all black leather, with two slender daggers sheathed sideways on her back and long dark brown hair falling around her face to hide one of her eyes. The earth elves looked a little nervous and every so often they would pull their eyes away from Nogard and scan the rest of the congregation of drunkards. The group that joined the table stood with their backs to the corner in which Grandfather and the boys sat. From what he could tell of them, two were of the nellaf race, the third was electric elven, and the last two were bears. Many people in the tavern looked conspicuous and there was nothing especially particular about the group to make it stand out. But Grandfather recognized the long-haired human female, the one with the daggers, and knew something was up.

The woman was Catherine Meriam, known to most as Catty. She was a big enough character for the Trinity Nations to produce posters with her face and name along with a hefty sum of gold in exchange for her timely demise. Few veterans of the current wars wouldn’t recognize her and Grandfather wasn’t the only one in the bar that had noticed. Four veterans sitting at a table in the opposite corner from Joe and his friends spotted Catty when she and her

crew walked in. They also had noticed Grandfather, Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard for few things escaped the eyes of the stoic Sniper.

When the bearn, Sniper, met Grandfather with his eyes, he nodded. From across the tavern, Grandfather returned the discreet salutation. Then the bearn motioned with his hand to the chidra woman sitting beside him – Peshkova Fang, or Ms. Peshkova as Grandfather had called her on the road to Kemplor. As Grandfather’s blue eyes met the reptile’s purple, she began to mouth and her voice spoke into his ears as if she sat beside him.

“I see ya picked up ma kin. Who he be to you?”

Grandfather had rudimentary knowledge of the Sacred Tongue, but he knew enough to recognize the spell the mage had used. She was eye whispering. Luckily for Grandfather, this was low energy spell casting requiring only a basic magical vocabulary – young students in magic schools used this spell to chat with friends during class – and, more importantly, little if any ritualistic meditation in order to have the stamina for such an incantation. The old Knome muttered a sentence of the Sacred to get the spell started,

“Mai kaeps ot iameh ras nock canelpeop fashi gaga iam ehdie kaeps ot miameh ras,” One reason the spell took so little from the caster was the length of the incantation. Grandfather continued, “He was hitchhiker with Pact smugglers, he helped us steal their cart.”

“You be a fool to trust him.” Was the swift and sharp response, followed by, “See you’ve caught da Cat’s eye.”

“We can handle her, though help would be appreciated.”

“No promises, Civ.”

“I knew you retired from the Samurai’s Army,” Grandfather said, “didn’t know you quit being Antipa.”

“I respect Cadderine,” Peshkova shrugged, “and she respects my friends and I.”

“You respect her coworkers, too?” Grandfather pressed, “Cause I figure they don’t respect y’all.”

Peshkova shrugged again.

“I doubt you’ll be shrugging when they start trouble and innocent people’s lives are at risk. You’d be wise to work with us and we can have some control over what’s going to happen.”

However the chidra took Grandfather’s warning, the Knome didn’t know. His eyes were jerked back to the table as Zalfron shook him by the shoulders.

“Ya talkin to yerself?” The belligerent elf asked.

Grandfather took a deep breath to keep from snapping at the boy and looked back over his shoulders, in search of the purple eyes he’d been speaking with, only to see Catty and the four that had been seated beside her get to their feet, those standing around her took the empty seats. Then, Catty and the two earth elves and two electric elves made their way through the staggering customers towards the corner of the bar where Grandfather and the boys resided.

“We’ve got company.” The Knome said as he turned back to face the three, “Don’t say a word.”

Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard watched the dark clothed group approaching and sat soundly in their seats. Grandfather stood on his chair as the five neared so that the woman wouldn’t be able to look down on him when they spoke. He held the Suikii by his waist, the blade running down by his ankle. Though only the woman’s left eye was visible beneath the long dark hair that spilled down her face, that single eye glared with a fierceness that would’ve been enough to silence the boys even without the Knome’s command. When she arrived, Catty glared at Nogard for a painfully quiet moment before turning her attention to Grandfather.

“Where are-” she paused, cocked her head to the side, and squinted at the sword in the Knome’s before returning her gaze to the little man, “the earth elves.”

“In their room.” Grandfather shrugged.

“We watched you enter off the street. The earth elves were not among you.”

“We parted ways when we entered the city. They were nothing more than a free ride to the city.” Grandfather looked back to Nogard who nodded in confirmation, “We had no business with them.”

“And yet you say they’re in their room.” Catty replied.

Grandfather coughed a bit.

“We had no business wid dem, Civ, but dey wanted to have business wid me.” Nogard interjected, “Dey wanted to win back some of der honor after I slaughtered dem da udder day.”

Catty raised an eyebrow.

Nogard puffed up his chest, “Blind man’d have better luck beating me in spades.” He took a swig, “Told us dey be stayin here if I wanted to give em anudder shot.”

Her brow fell back into her perpetual, one eyed scowl.

“Room?”

“201.” Nogard spat the number out as fast as she’d spit the question.

“Urta, Bron, go check the room.” She spoke without looking back.

The two earth elves headed for the stairs.

“Shall we take a walk?” She gestured towards the door.

Grandfather turned to the three behind him, about to ask if they were capable of “a walk” but the woman interjected before he could.

“Just you and I, *Grandfather.*”

The Knome sighed. *Only ever get recognized in the worst situations.* He eyed her. *If you were to rank the greatest one hundred warriors alive on the face of Solaris, he thought, she’d be on that list. Cut it down to the top ten and, even then, I wager she’d be amongst them.* That said, *I’d obviously be at the top spot on the leaderboard,* Grandfather rolled his shoulders, *but when folks in the top ten go at it, all it takes is a flinch for someone to get replaced.* Grandfather gulped. *She can beat me.* Of that, Grandfather was sure, but there was something else he was sure of. *She can’t catch me.* The Suikii wiggled in his grasp, as if concurring. However, he side eyed the drunken threesome beside him. *Running might not be an option. Unless...* He glanced past Catty and her elven accomplices, searching for Peshkova and Sniper and their comrades but when he spotted the veterans’ table his stomach sank. The soldiers were gone. *Damn that godi Knome! Why couldn’t he handle this chapter?!* But there was no more time for internal crisis. Cats aren’t known to have much patience.

“Boys, this young lady and I are going outside for a bit.” Grandfather said at last, adjusting the cone on his head.

The three watched the Knome and human woman leave then turned to look at the two electric elves in front of them. One was a hunk of muscle, not as tall as Zalfron but at least six foot and, when it came to width, he definitely outmuscled the Sentry. He wore a kite-shaped shield on his back and there was a sword in a sheath at his belt, not quite as long as Nogard’s but the blade still tickled the man’s calf. The other fellow was shorter and appeared to be scrawnier though one couldn’t tell beneath the thick robes she wore. The collar of her crimson and black coat reached almost to her jaw and her hood was pulled halfway up, resting just below the pointed rim of her ears.

A nellaf woman from the table they'd left came to whisper something in the robed lady's ears. She passed it on to her electric elf companion then the blonde-haired warrior addressed the three.

"Come up stairs with us. The room number you provided was incorrect." The man's voice rumbled like thunder.

Zalfron stood. Joe hesitated, looking to Nogard. The chidra shared Joe's concern but he slid his sheath off the chair and strapped it around his waist, nodded to Joe, then got to his feet. Joe followed his friends and the group slowly made their way over to the stairs. When they passed the middle of the room, the nellaf messenger took her place back at the table. The two earth elves were waiting at the base of the stairs. On their way over, Zalfron lagged back with Joe.

"How drunk are ya?" He asked.

"Drunk." Joe replied with wide, glazed eyes.

"Good." Zalfron said, "Maht help ya do what ya gotta do."

"I don't know if I can fight like this." Joe whispered.

Zalfron nodded and clapped Joe on the shoulder, "You can."

Once at the stairwell, the earth elves turned and led them up three flights of stairs before stopping. On the way up, Joe observed that one of the earth elves had a sword and the other had a bow, strung and slung over one shoulder. Joe also noticed that all the rooms down the hall started with a three, this was definitely the incorrect floor for the room that Nogard had lied about.

"Which one are they in?" The muscled electric elf asked.

The three exchanged glances then Nogard spoke up.

"At da end of da hall." Nogard said.

The chidra took big steps, speed walking, towards the far side of the building. Joe and Zalfron had to practically jog to keep up. The elves didn't budge from the stairwell.

"Dey gonna kill us," Nogard stated, under his breath so that only Zalfron and Joe could hear, "Y'all drunk?"

"Yup." Zalfron said.

"Very." Joe replied.

"Least you got to try a fruit beer. Alright dough, it be now or never." Nogard came to an abrupt stop. Drew his sword and spun with a lackluster battle cry of, "Selu to you, Civs!"

PYEW!

An arrow flew past Nogard's face, continuing on to burst the window all the way to the end of the hall. Zalfron and Nogard charged. Joe froze. The arrow had broken through his stupor as only fear can. Death was once more over his shoulder, waiting to sweep in. But the sobering sensation wasn't one that instilled action, instead it froze him in his tracks. His heartbeat rapidly, his blood turned cold, the world seemed to rock beneath his feet – but his chest stayed warm.

Fire! Joe closed his eyes and shut out all thoughts but one. *Fire!* He could feel the flames in the enertombs that lined the roof of the hall and those identical flickering embers that swung inside stone containers below the roof of the bar room – he could even feel the touch of the flames bouncing on the streetlamps outside. Feeling all that, he pulled. *Fire!* The fire came to him, slipping through the wood and cinder block, surging towards him like a river bursting from a shattered dam. In mere seconds, the tavern fell dark and Joe's chest shone like Solaris.

The earth elf with the bow could hardly make Zalfron and Nogard out, but she could see Joe plain as day. She'd been marching forwards, towards her prey, when the lights went out, knocking an arrow as she moved. Even in the dark, she'd had aim at the electric elf charging her

and could've easily thrust the bow forward, yank the string back, and plant an arrowhead in the boy's scalp but her composure had been fractured.

Joe was wearing the ring Bonehead gave him.

Before, he looked like any normal human to the Pacters. So normal in fact that they didn't even see the velvet cloth flowing down from his neck. That changed when all the fire in the general vicinity was suddenly slurped up inside of him. Their minds were thrown for a loop. The ring was enchanted in such a way that observers would see precisely what they expected to see of the person wearing it. With pyromancers being essentially extinct, that was the last thing they expected. Instead, their minds immediately leaned towards the extreme. Extraordinary fire – banshee. Though Joe stood at the end of the hall in a white button up shirt, red tie, and black slacks with an admittedly remarkable glow emanating from his chest, he was in no way shape or form formidable. But with that ring, the members of the Pact before him saw a giant. A skeletal demon wrapped in black armor engulfed in blood colored flame.

She flinched as she launched the arrow.

It still hit, but it did not kill. It almost did. The arrow would've struck Zalfron's chest had he not incidentally swung his bicep in the way as part of his charging gait. It slid straight through the muscle, rendering his right arm almost useless but not stopping him from slamming into the archer and driving her down. He scrambled to get on top of her. He grabbed her right arm, the one not holding the bow, with his wounded arm and, with his good arm, he hammered her face with his fist – pummeling her head between the floor and his balled-up fist – until she stopped struggling beneath him. Meanwhile, Nogard brought his sword down from over his head, smacking down the blade of the larger earth elf before him – who had been equally daunted by what he imagined was Joe. Nogard let his momentum push him forward, spinning so that he slammed into the brute with his back. Then, as they staggered back, he brought his sword up and down, backwards, over his shoulder, chopping into the man's collar. The earth elf collapsed and Nogard fell with him.

With the first two foes incapacitated, the boys knew two more were waiting. Unfortunately, that number had just increased by three. While their comrades had fallen, the Pacters had summoned three beings of bone, their pale ivory glowing in the blackness of the passage. Lipless, the skeletons almost seemed to be grinning, an eerie quality almost as daunting as the bone-made blades in their hands.

Leaping from the ground like a frog, Zalfron lunged at the nearest undead as it stepped forward. The skeleton tried to stiff arm the elf but he pushed the arm out of the way. With its other arm, it swung down its dagger – aiming for Zalfron's neck. Out of drunken instinct, he raised his left arm to block the swing. Thankfully, the sword was no Knomish blade. The edge slit the flesh of his forearm but only went as deep as the bone. The combination of alcohol and adrenaline kept the pain from incapacitating the elf and did not stop his progression. He grabbed the undead's skull then rocked back to deliver a kick to the vertebrae between its pelvis and its ribs. The skull popped off the spine with the sound of a cork pried off the top of a bottle and the undead crumbled to the floor.

While Zalfron fought his first skeletal warrior, Nogard faced his. He thrust his sword forwards and – like Zalfron had – the undead lifted its arm to block. His sword stuck straight between the two bones of the forearm and when Nogard tried to yank it free, the undead's arm came with it. The skeleton took one look at its missing appendage then stepped forward to angrily swing its decrepit dagger at the chidra. With the arm still stuck on his blade, he swung at the undead's other arm and snapped it off at the elbow before it could complete its attack. The

undead looked down at its arms, or lack thereof, then back up at Nogard. Nogard recovered from his previous swing with a third attack, swinging up from below the skeleton, slicing through the ribs, and knocking the undead's head clean off its body.

Zalfron strode forward, aiming a punch at the final creature's skull as Nogard slid the arm off his blade. The undead opened its mouth and caught Zalfron's punch in its jaws, biting down with rows of here-and-there-teeth.

"WouaaAAAAH!" Zalfron howled.

"Watch out!" Nogard cried as he sprung forward to swing at the undead.

Before he could swing it was gone. Well, most of it. The head was still biting down on Zalfron's fist but the body had been launched across the room by a blinding light, a fireball, shot by Joe who had rejoined his friends.

The skeleton shattered on the body of the brawny electric elf as he strode forward and thrust his blade through the Zalfron's abdomen. For a split second, time seemed to stop. Both Nogard and Joe watched during that mere half a moment as Zalfron, seemingly in slow motion, collapsed. The blade yanked from him, tearing a spray of blood and threads of flesh with it. Zalfron gaped, almost like a hiccup, and his chest doubled over his now emptying belly. Then he hit the wall, clutching the gash as he slid to the floor of the hall.

Fury tore their eyes from their friend.

"NO!" Joe roared.

Nogard jumped out of the way as tendrils of flame burst from Joe's chest, engulfing the hall ahead of them. Joe's inferno blotted the two electric elves from view until Joe managed to get a grip on himself. When he did, what he saw further infuriated him. The necromancer had stepped to stand in front of the warrior and she was holding up what looked to be a pane of purple glass which created a wall from one side of the hall to the other. It had completely protected them from the fire.

"Watch out, Civ!" Nogard hollered.

He strode forward and brought his sword up into the transparent purple barrier. It shattered, like ice struck by a hammer, but then dissolved into the air rather than falling to the floor. Undaunted, the necromancer spun out of the way and let the warrior leap towards Nogard. Nogard parried the warrior's swing then swung at the man's waist. The man blocked the attack but Nogard was ready with another assault, raising his arms and rolling his wrist to target the man's opposite flank. This time, the elf blocked too late and Nogard managed to slice through a good portion of thigh before meeting the man's blade.

"Duck!" Joe cried.

Nogard lowered his sword and ducked, spinning on his heels as fire shot over his shoulder. The elf was hit square in the chest. The fire rolled up his shoulders, wrapped around his neck, and torched his long blonde hair, but not before he got a hit on Nogard, cutting him in the thigh, just above the knee.

As the warrior fell down the stairs behind him, his face still aflame, Nogard collapsed onto his side. Still, the fight was not over. The necromancer strode forward. Her sleeves hung low over her hands but as she approached Joe her sleeve rolled back to reveal a long-bladed dagger held tight in her fist. Joe leaned back to dodge the woman's stab then grabbed her wrist with both hands. He stopped the elf with the dagger inches from his throat.

But Joe felt weak. He could feel the fire tumbling over and over in his chest, bouncing within his body, begging to be released, but he couldn't. He couldn't give it the command. His

muscles twitched, his eyelids drooped. He could hardly hold the dagger away from his throat and he could see the necromancer reaching for another weapon hiding in the depths of her cloak.

“Let go!” Nogard moaned from behind him as he tried to get back on his feet, “Let go!”

It was too late. Joe couldn't release the woman's arm, he couldn't even control his own muscles. Then, as quick as the feeling had come, it left. The necromancer's blue eyes grew wide. A bump appeared at the center of her forehead. *What the?* Joe released the necromancer's wrist and the elf dropped the dagger. Joe backed away from the mage and she fell to the floor. Joe jumped back. There was an arrow sticking out the back of the woman's head. Looking into the shadowy stairwell, Joe saw his savior: the armored spirit with the one-horned helmet, the one he'd spotted downstairs.

“Go get Grandfather!” Nogard cried as he had crawled his way over to Zalfron, “He's not lookin so hot!”

Joe turned to see. His knees got wobbly. Zalfron lay against the wall with his arms wrapped around his gut as blood continued to spill from his body. The arrow in his bicep and gash in his forearm now seemed relatively insignificant. In the low light provided by the fires that had started along the hall, Joe couldn't be sure how much blood there was but, even underestimating, it didn't look good. The elf's head hung limp, his face pale as a full moon yet to hatch.

“Joe! Go!” Nogard commanded.

Flinching, Joe ran for the stairs.

“Don't move.” The spirit demanded.

Joe came to as immediate a stop as he could.

“Listen, we're here with a Knome, he's friends of the owner-”

“Grandfather?”

“Grandfather!” Joe nodded, “Yes!”

“Go.” The spirit said and he stepped out of the way.

“Thanks!” Joe said as he fled down the stairs. He ran past the face down body of the electric elf he'd slain, still on fire, but he didn't slow. He didn't truly realize that he had taken a man's life, at least, he had yet to give it thought. The fact sat in the back of his mind like a tiger crouched behind a bush. All his mind could think of was finding the old Knome and getting him to his friends before... Joe shuddered and kept moving. *Grandfather will save him. Just get to Grandfather.*

Shrouded in darkness, Joe staggered into the dining area. Despite the light pouring out of his chest, he immediately ran into some form of a hurdle that tossed him, sprawling head over heels, onto the booze drenched floor. He attempted to scurry to his feet but caught a foot to the stomach that sent him rolling into the legs of a table and gasping for breath.

“Joe the Pyromancer.” The kicker muttered, approaching him in the darkness. Before Joe could stand, a heavy boot pinned him to the hardwood. “Don't move.”

Joe wasn't sure he had heard the voice before but he recognized the figure. Lit from below, the man looked like a furry demon. It was the bearn that they had seen with three women traveling dragon back on the road earlier that day. The bearn that Grandfather had called Sniper. The bearn that was supposedly on the same side as he.

“My friends, my fuh...” Joe was so flustered he could barely put an idea together. *Zalfron and Nogard are dying, get ahold of yourself!* He forced himself to take a deep breathe then continued, “The electric elf, the brother of the Samurai, he's dying, I have to-”

Sniper withdrew his foot and Joe hopped to his feet. As soon as he was up, he bolted for the exit, where he'd last seen Grandfather go, but he didn't make it far. A furred hand grabbed hold of his arm.

"Hey," Sniper said, "give us some light."

Light? Joe grumbled to himself. *Y'all want light?* He shot flames pouring from his chest in thick threads, flowing up and around the dangling enertombs around their heads. *My friends are dying and you don't give a damn. I shouldn't-*

As the enertombs began to glow once more, Joe saw the remains of the mayhem that had taken place in the tavern three floors below where he and his comrades had fought. Toppled tables lay on their sides amidst shards of glass and the bodies of casualties. Sniper's allies, the two elves and the chidra, were busy finding wounded civilians and lifting them onto upright tables. Barmaids, armored bouncers, and even kitchen staff had joined in the effort. Only five bodies were left untouched to lay limp on the tavern floor.

"You're lucky that we passed you on the road," the bearn released Joe and gestured to the five bodies, "or you'd be lying with them."

Joe couldn't say anything. He just staggered into a run towards the door, fighting back the thoughts that were now starting to tug on the lobe of his conscience's ear.

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Grandfather didn't speak until he was walking out the door, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but could you be Catty?"

"I thought you were retired. What're you doing interfering with the Pact?"

They were standing in the street now, outside the bar. All precipitation had stopped and clouds were slowly fading into the distance. The line was gone as well, replaced by the slow trickle of exiting guests – too drunk to notice the intensity between the two bantering in the middle of the street. Grandfather looked at her, she wasn't tall for a human. But short was still a good twenty-four inches more than the three-foot Knome.

"Retired?" Grandfather laughed, "What gave you that idea?"

"I can think of a couple of instances in which the Samurai could've used that Suikii of yours." Catty stated.

"I saved those fools more times than I can count!" Grandfather snapped.

"Oh yeah? Twelve times too few it seems." Catty retorted.

She stepped towards him, asking, "Who are the boys?"

Grandfather stepped back, "The first three of Saint's new heroes."

Catty smirked, "Let's hope they fare better than the last bunch!"

Grandfather crossed his arms, bluffing through his own uncertainty, "Oh, don't you worry."

"I can't help it." Catty brushed her bangs back from her right eye to reveal the black marble that sat in the socket before letting her hair fall back into place, "The crow eye doesn't lie. He's no stronger than the goons I had with me."

"Then why'd you bring me out here?" Grandfather asked.

Wiping the grin from her lips, she stiffened her shoulders, took another step forward, and her voice returned to its serious state, "Even if my little gang of idiots are capable of defeating your friends, I saw the four soldiers across the way. I doubt you missed them."

Grandfather rolled his eyes. *I pray those four bastards 'll stick up for my boys. Otherwise, he shook his head, we'll have to start this back all over again.* He continued to walk backwards, keeping Catty from closing the distance between them.

"I figured it'd be in my best interest to get out of the tavern."

"And you took me with you, because...?"

"I still have my duty to consider. Now, where is the marrow?"

"Gone." Grandfather said, "Seeping between the bricks beneath our feet."

She stopped. Even in the dark, Grandfather could see the anger flare up in her one visible eye. She flipped her hair out of her face and tied it up behind her. Her sacrificed eye glimmered in the night light like the surface of a lake. Grandfather sighed. *I'm getting too old for this.*

"I respect your work," Catty said, her voice as cold as ice, "can I keep it if I kill you?"

"I'd rather give it to Iahtro." Grandfather replied.

Suddenly, Grandfather was on his back. It felt as though he had just ran full speed into a stone wall. *Damn shadows!* Grandfather rolled onto all fours and leapt to his feet. The Suikii squirmed in his right hand. Catty smiled, drawing the hilts from the sheathes strapped to her back. Initially, they were bladeless. At the end of each hilt, bulging out of the hand guard, were two translucent stones – enchanted enertombs. As she held the handles, the stones filled with black then two, one-sided, obsidian blades shot out. Her weapons were as dark as the ring of shadows surrounding her, just a little darker than the night. It was then that he noticed, during their short conversation, she'd moved him into the darkness between the streetlights. The darkness would be a great disadvantage.

But as a Knome, he was used to disadvantages.

He was about to attack when the streetlights began to flicker. The flame jumped from the posts, flying towards the bar and seeping through the walls. The Barren's Mullet had lost its lights as well. Screams replaced the unintelligible rancor of the inn and customers stormed the doors, trampling one another as they scurried drunkenly down the stairs. *Joe!* Grandfather thought, but he didn't have time to baby sit. He had a situation of his own. As the late-night partiers fled into the street around them, Grandfather charged.

Catty smirked but didn't move. *Her shadows!* He noticed it at the last second, speeding towards him in a swirling ball of darkness. Swinging the Suikii up he easily cut through the ball of lightless energy and kept running. Grandfather swung his black-bladed sword at her leg. She blocked the blow with one sword then swung at him with her right. Moving fluidly, the Knome spun, blocking her second attack with the Suikii before jumping up to grab her left forearm, plant his feet on her abs, then run up her chest and deliver a solid kick to her jaw. He followed the momentum of the kick into a flip that landed him back on the ground a yard from where she stood.

She fell back a step, rubbed her jaw with the back of her hand, then came at him. Swinging her right then her left, Grandfather had to parry one, block the other, then spin around and get ready to repeat the same. But after her third barrage, she switched it up and delivered a low kick that swept the old Knome off his feet. He rolled to his right just as the blade of one of her swords smashed against the cobble stone. He brought the Suikii up to block Catty's next attack then rolled back to where he had been before, using his sword like a crutch for support to help him back onto his feet.

Once again, the two were staring at each other.

"Where's your shadows?" Grandfather asked, panting.

"I'm trying to collect more." She snapped.

She looked as if about to charge but stopped. At first, Grandfather was baffled but then he understood. The ground beneath their feet had begun to shake. Both took a step back. The cobble stone shuddered then exploded. Dirt and rock flew into the night sky.

“The dark marrow...” Catty and Grandfather murmured in unison.

Reaching out of the ground, like the massive arm of a zombie pulling itself from its grave, was a worm. Its body was segmented into gooey rings. Soil and roots clung to the mucus that covered it. Its head ended in a four jawed mouth that opened in an X. Rows and rows of teeth filled the jaws and for each there was a tongue that squirmed and writhed as the beast opened its mouth to scream.

“That godi chidra was right...” Grandfather mumbled.

For a moment, the people that had been in the doorway to the *Barren’s Mullet* fought their way back inside only to storm right back out as the mob of drunken customers knocked them back. The only person seemingly unaffected by the giant worm, was Catty. She used it to her advantage, leaping around it to slice at Grandfather. Grandfather stopped her first attack, ducked and dove beneath her legs. She was about to turn and pursue him when the nematode head stopped before her. It opened its jaws and shot out its four tentacle-like tongues.

The tongues grabbed her, wrapping around and around her before yanking her back towards the mouth. She didn’t budge, her heels were planted, digging in on the cobble stone.

“You disgusting faraking-”

One swing of her sword was all that it took to slice straight through all four of the creature’s tongues. With an ear-splitting shriek, it reached up towards the sky, forgetting Catty as it howled in pain.

“Farak!” She cursed, observing herself and grimacing at the sight of the goopy saliva that covered her.

When she looked back up, there were two baby-sized feet in her face. BAM! She was on her back. But so was Grandfather. The kick had left him with no way of landing except on his shoulder. *My back!* Grandfather forced himself to get up, ignoring the wailing vertebrae of his spine. Catty had made it to her feet as well. He took a step forward and swung for her knees. She blocked it, forced him back, then sliced towards him with her second blade. He managed to parry but just barely, he was getting forced closer and closer towards the worm.

The worm!

That gave him an idea. He looked Catty in the face, winked, then turned away from her and leapt onto the giant invertebrate, his sword disappearing into thin air. Wasting no time, he began to climb, using the layer of goo to hold him to the worm’s body.

The worm stopped screaming and thrashing and looked down. No longer seeing Grandfather, the closest living thing in its line of sight was Catty. She crouched, barring her swords. The worm lunged, Catty turned, and Grandfather held on for dear life. She ran until she felt the warm breath of the beast behind her then leapt into the air, back flipping over its mouth. And there was Grandfather, staring at the human from where he sat on the back of the worm.

She landed on her feet, glaring at the Knome, as the flabbergasted worm looked about. *Some help you were, worm,* Grandfather thought as he leapt off his butt, balancing on the slimy round back of the creature, and summoned the Suikii back into his hands. Catty attacked, swinging left then right, left then right, forcing Grandfather to duck and block and slowly but steadily take steps backwards. And just as Grandfather began to seriously worry about falling into the slimy creature’s pit, he saw the face of the beast, worming up and twisting around to stare at the two of them.

Catty was focused on the fight. *She doesn't know it's behind her*, Grandfather realized. He bid his time, feeding her attacks and back pedaling as little as possible until the creature finally opened its mouth and surged forward. Catty and Grandfather were launched into the air but, with a swing of the Suikii, Grandfather disappeared leaving Catty to face the worm alone.

Twisting in the air, she turned to the beast just as gravity began to pull her down. It lunged upward, jaws gaping. The shadowmancer sliced as she fell, arms spinning in circles, slicing the enormous invertebrate chunk by chunk until she landed on the cobble stone street. She stood there for a moment, lumps of worm raining down around her, her boots in puddles of blood, slime, and rainwater.

Grandfather appeared about three yards in front, holding the Suikii. He looked around at the biological debris then his eyes found Catty and stayed.

“Not bad.” He said, “Truce?”

She scoffed through her teeth, an act oddly similar to a cat's hiss.

“Step away from the Knome.”

The voice came from the tavern doorway where Joe now stood with a chestful of fire. His shirt was drenched in sweat, clinging to the glowing stone in his breast. One hand was pointing at his sternum, the other was holding the silver ring. For the first time, Catty saw Joe for who he was. Not only did she now see the chest stone with her living eye, her crow eye was finally able to see his true power. And though Joe's voice had been anything but strong and commanding, the power that emanated from his person – whether or not he knew he possessed it – was thoroughly compelling.

“Where'd you find him?” She murmured.

“I'm going to give you five seconds.” Joe said.

“Donum.” She swore then she turned back to Grandfather, “You got lucky old man.”

“One...” Joe growled.

With a mock curtsy, Catty spun and dashed down the street. She didn't go far before suddenly shrinking. Joe blinked to make sure he was seeing what he thought he was seeing. He was. Her leather clothes grew fur as she shrunk to stand on all fours, a tail sprouting out her back and ears shooting out from her hair. By the time she reached the closest remaining streetlight, she was nothing but a small black cat, tail rising up into the night as she tip-toed back into the darkness.

“Zalfron's dying!”

Joe's voice tore the Knome's eyes away from the cat woman.

“What?”

“Nogard's hurt too!” Joe cried, hopping up and down on the stairs before the bar.

Grandfather ran off the street, sprinted up the stairs, and followed Joe back inside. The tavern was in tatters. A few armored guards wandered about assisting the barmaids with picking up smashed beer mugs and flipping overturned tables. The bodies of the members of the Black Crown Pact, those that had joined Catty's table late, lay where they'd been slain on the floor, chopped up and bloodied. The earth elf and electric elf that accompanied Sniper and Peshkova were tending to wounded customers and employees. Sniper watched Joe and Grandfather hurry across the bar, pausing from his work of cleaning the blood off his arrows. As Joe led Grandfather past, the Knome called out to the chidra he'd spoken to earlier but made sure not to slow his pace.

“Can we get a healer?”

The chidra was busy reciting spells and healing an arrow wound some drunken teen had acquired on his shoulder, but the earth elf woman beside her responded to Grandfather's request. "Go to hell, Knome!" The electric elf cried.

"You brought this upon these people, your friend's gonna have to wait." The earth elf woman chimed in, her glimmering eyes angled in outrage, "Hey pyro, you'd best ditch the old man. Knome's are nothin but trouble."

Joe had no intention of responding. In fact, he didn't even hear the comment. He was hustling for the stairs. Grandfather grumbled under his breath as they climbed. Fear began to grow in the old smith's chest as he thought about Zalfron and Nogard. *How bad are they hurt?* He wondered. *Does this happen every time?* Grandfather felt the Suikii animate itself in his grasp. The hilt rattled in his hand as if the sword itself whispered, *Run! Restart! You did your time, this isn't supposed to be your responsibility anymore. You can't help these boys!* but Grandfather banished the thoughts from his head and let the sword fade from existence. Watching Joe's sweat drenched back as they hurried towards the third floor of residency, he felt the fear begin to drift away. *He doesn't even understand what we're fighting for. Not yet, not fully. But look at him. This is our Joe. He clenched his jaw. This is the Sun Child.* And though Joe was far more afraid than he had ever been, he gave Grandfather courage. He gave Grandfather hope.

Everything is going to be okay.

- - -

The spirit with the one horned helmet bust open the door to the room numbered three-hundred-thirty-three with one solid kick. Running to Zalfron's side, he fell to his knees then gently picked the elf up and made his way back into the room. There were six beds, three on one side and three on the other, and a door to another room that had a toilet, sink, and shower. A mild flame swirled to life within an enertomb hanging in the center of the room, lighting the spirit's way as he placed Zalfron down on the closest bed.

"I'll be back."

With that, the bowman turned and ran out the door. Nogard was sitting propped up against the wall beside the room, clutching his leg.

"I'll be back!" The spirit cried again as he disappeared down the stairwell.

"Aye, Civ, I'll be fine." But the spirit had left. Nogard hit his head against the wall he leaned on, moaning, "I'll be fine but Zalfron..." He shook his head and smacked it against the wall again, "...donum."

Joe and Grandfather beat the spirit back, Joe in the lead by a good thirty feet. Running past the bones and bodies scattered about the hall, some of which were beginning to stir, the human and Knome rushed over to the chidra.

"Nogard?!"

"I'm okay, I'm okay, but Zalfron--"

"Where is he?"

"In da room, in da room!" Nogard replied, nodding in the direction of the door.

Joe didn't bother to ask how he got there. He bolted into room three-hundred-thirty-three. Joe approached Zalfron on the bed then, after putting his hands to the elf's temple, strode away, cursing beneath his breath. Zalfron was out cold but still breathing. Grandfather arrived. He gently removed Zalfron's hand from where it covered his stomach-wound then placed it back.

“Well, that’s some good news.” Grandfather said with a sigh, “He was hit more on the right side and the blade missed the aorta. If it hadn’t, he would probably already be dead. But we still have to find a healer.”

“Don’t you know magic?” Joe said.

“Very little and healing is complicated, if you do it wrong you can easily make things worse...we’d probably both die...” Grandfather cursed, “but we really can’t wait for a healer...”

“Pardon me,” the spirit was back in the doorway, “we have a healer.”

Joe turned to see a dwarf. He was completely bald but not due to old age, for he looked to be no older than Joe. His skin was an orange-tan shade and looked to have the texture of new leather, tough and rigidly wrinkled where his brow furled. Although not as short as a Knome, he stood only a foot taller, four feet and some change at most. His gut hid behind a grease-soaked shirt and hung out over his dark brown pants. He smelled of garlic, beer, cooking oil, and must.

“Aevnan,” he said with an accent more similar to Zalfron’s than Nogard’s. He waddled over to the bed and observed Zalfron for a little before slipping his backpack off his shoulders, pulling out a large purple book, and setting it on the bed beside the elf.

“Is that a dwarf?” Joe whispered to Grandfather.

Grandfather had been thrown into a daze at the sight of the dwarf. Memories were flooding back to him. He knew the dwarf, in fact, he knew the spirit too! A wave of relief numbed his nerves, tainted only by the bit of shame he had for ever doubting fate to begin with. Joe snapped him out of his head.

“Grandfather.” He said again.

“Mm?”

“Is he a dwarf?” Joe asked.

“Indeed, a rock dwarf,” Grandfather replied quietly, “quite rare to see them outside of Vinnum Tow.”

Joe recalled what Zalfron had told him of Vinnum Tow during the fall of the Hundred Empire Alliance. He asked, “Is slavery still...”

Frowning, Grandfather nodded. The spirit that had saved Joe and brought the healer saw the Knome’s frown and attributed it to a distrust in the dwarven cook’s ability to heal.

“No worries.” The bouncer said, speaking in a level tone so as not to accuse Grandfather but, rather, console him, “Bold trained at the Munkloe School of Modern Healing, under Lenga Ruse.”

“Impressive!” Grandfather feigned ignorance.

“Uh culd hael the gut wound farst,” the dwarf turned away from his patient and looked to Grandfather as if asking permission, “but uh’ve found it best tuh start smull far advancin to the extraeme, gives me tahm tuh see how the boday lahks tuh hael cause not ull bodaes act the same to muhjical proddun and pokun.”

Grandfather strode over to the opposite side of the bed to watch as he spoke, “Do what you believe is best.”

The dwarf nodded and closed his eyes. He waved one hand over the gash in Zalfron’s forearm and the other over the open pages of his purple tome. As his hands hovered, he began to murmur. Flames spat up from the ink on the yellowed pages of the indigo ledger, burning in rhythm with the dwarf’s incantations and licking the palm of his left hand. Light rained down from his right hand, which hung above the wound. Joe joined Grandfather’s side and knelt down so he could be at the same height as the Knome. He watched as the blood rolled away from the

glow and the skin pursed and resealed itself. Though Joe didn't speak, Grandfather could feel the boy's curiosity and decided to do his best to explain.

"The dwarf is using scripture so as to preserve some of his own energy." Grandfather spoke quiet so as not to disturb the healer's work, "Those who use tomes to cast spells still should meditate to keep from overexerting themselves but it's far safer than free verse magic."

"Like you do?" Joe asked.

"Eh," Grandfather hesitated, "I use magic carefully. Having a weak vocabulary and little time to meditate, not to mention being an old coot, it wouldn't take much for even the simplest of spells to wring me out. I'd much rather have a book or an enertomb before resorting to spell casting."

Joe thought back to the tussle in the hallway and another question came to mind, "Can mancers use their energy, like bones or shadows, when casting normal spells?"

"Yes, that's what makes them so dangerous. You see, most forms of magic have harsh limitations. Elementalists have to recharge their elgroons, mages must memorize vocabulary and meditate or constantly copy scripture to add pages to their volumes. However, mancers need only to kill to replenish their stock."

"Except for pyromancers." Joe said, then he remembered the sensation he'd felt when touching the necromancer in the hall, "Grandfather, if you touch a necromancer, do you go limp?"

"Not always. Many mages, especially necromancers, will recite a short-term curse if they have time before a fight. The spell is called chilled marrow and it refers to the cold sensation that overcomes the victim when coming into physical contact with the caster." Grandfather explained, "However much energy they put into the casting of such a spell determines how long it will last. Though, one can't easily tell whether or not the mancer has used such magic so it's best to keep your distance when dealing with necro and shadowmancers...or any spell caster for that matter."

The last line on the page ignited into flame then the paper crumbled into ash and blew away. As the dwarf moved his hand away from Zalfron's arm, Joe gasped. There wasn't even a scar.

"Impressive!" Grandfather exclaimed, "We have a professional!"

"Jus doin the best uh can do." The dwarf grinned and blushed as he flipped through the pages of his book, "Uh'll get the arrah last. If uh dun't get tuh his bellay soon..."

Grandfather and Joe nodded as the dwarf's words trailed off. Gently moving Zalfron's hand away from his belly, the healer got back to work. Joe craned his neck to look in the wound and a chill ran up his spine. It felt wrong to look inside someone else's body and watching tiny cords of tissue twist around and reach out to grab threads dangling across from them was thoroughly unsettling, but he couldn't look away. Blood beaded up and scurried out of the way like a gang of beetles suddenly exposed. Then, the beetles returned, washing back over the wound, some to be slurped up by the tissue others to wrap around bone or muscle as flesh was pulled up over them. Brick by brick, cell by cell, Zalfron's body was being rebuilt.

"Since they were from the Black Crown Pact," Joe began, trying to get his mind's eye off the sight of Zalfron's exposed organs, "Creaton wouldn't be here too, would he?"

"You've got a lot to learn my friend." Grandfather chuckled, "Creaton is locked in his fortress back in Hormarah. With both the Trinity Nations and the Order wanting him dead, he'd be a fool to leave Darkloe."

“With all due respect, sir Knome,” the spirit chimed in, “Creaton Live is not afraid to leave his armies. He has been seen across the globe on numerous occasions.”

“Which occasions are legitimate would be a question worth asking.” Grandfather replied, immediately regretting the harshness of his dismissal – especially after the spirit had been so respectful – a dignity that he as a Knome was not accustomed to. He quickly added, “Yet, you are right. He does leave Darkloe, though I doubt he’d let himself be seen near something like this. Something so open. Too many people out for his head and there is far too much treachery between the Order and the Pact for Creaton to trust even his own followers outside of his black fortress.”

“Sounds like the Trinity Nations could sit back and let those two destroy each other.” Joe remarked.

“Without the Trinity Nation’s military pressure, these brawls – like the one tonight – would be battles.” The spirit stated, “Blood wouldn’t just stain the bar room floor, it’d be flowing in the streets.”

This statement made Joe think back to the seen outside the tavern – the blood and goo and the woman in the leather suit with the two swords made of shadow, the woman that turned into a car.

“Who was that cat woman you fought?”

“Catty or rather Catherine Meriam,” Grandfather said, “she’s one of the Pact’s agents. One of, if not the most, well known. There’s not a city in the Trinity Nations that hasn’t got her face pinned up somewhere but, like a cat, she’s almost impossible to catch.”

“We saw her when she first came in.” The spirit admitted, “We’ve unfortunately grown quite used to seeing members of the Pact and Order. The disgusting reality is that we’ve learned to tolerate their presence for the sake of the more immediate good of preserving the lives of the rest of those beneath our roof.” He shook his head, “All the while, how many lives do we threaten in the long run, allowing such scum to share our air.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, kid.” Grandfather said, “Least you and your team try and keep folks safe, more than I can say for the guardsmen in this town.”

Suddenly, Zalfron sat up, making the dwarf jump nearly as high as the roof.

“Did we win?” the elf asked.

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It took a little over two hours for the cook-healer to finish up Zalfron’s wound. Zalfron managed to stay conscious through the remaining process. It took about thirty minutes for the dwarf to tend to the cut in Nogard’s thigh (by the time it was his turn the poor chidra was delirious from blood loss). Puffing away on a fresh bowl of gogo, Nogard blabbered complete gibberish until Bold finished him up. Finally, he got the arrow out of Zalfron’s arm in a record twenty minutes. It wasn’t until after all the healing was done that the spirit and dwarf introduced themselves.

“Cull me Bold,” the dwarf said, ejecting his hand first for Zalfron to shake.

Zalfron took the hand then, squinting his eyes and tilting his head, he asked, “You ain’t Boldarian Drahkcor?”

“Uh am.” The dwarf nodded and Zalfron’s jaw dropped.

The elf’s hand went limp in the dwarf’s grasp. He exclaimed, “You can’t bae!”

The dwarf couldn’t help but grin, “The Fifth not the Farth, lad!”

“I knew you looked familiar, Civ!” Nogard cried, “Da son of a Samurai, da spittin image, too!”

“And just as good with the book.” Grandfather added with a wink.

“Aye, sir, thank ya!” He turned to the Knome, “Budd told mae yar the legendary Grandfuthar, farger of the Far Swords. Yar an insparation far shart folk everaywhar!” Boldarian said turning to shake the old Knome’s hand.

Grandfather smiled, clasped the dwarf on the shoulder, and said, “Your ancestors were great men. I knew the first Bold, he’d love to see that his great, great grandson is a free man.”

Bold nodded solemnly, “Pitay but a few of us are...”

“That it is, son, that it is...” Grandfather turned to the spirit, “And you are?”

“Bluffgiganaricharo-imulse-recatchertimretanerepisto-”

“Cull him Zachias,” Bold interjected, “Zachias Shisharay. Ya know how spirits are with thar names and ull. They’d luk to resahrt thar whole famlay trae everytoim ya ask far thar name!”

The spirit, having finally removed his helmet, smiled shyly and lowered his eyes as if embarrassed.

“Shisharay?” Zalfron asked, “As in *a* Shisharay? From the Woodland Ridge Monastery?”

“Aye, hae knew the Samarai fore shae war a Samarai.” Bold said.

Zachias nodded humbly.

“Dis unbelievable, Civs,” Nogard said, finally dragging his eyes from his now non-existent wounds to the two in front of him, “I’m Nogard Otubak, from da same fadder as da Samurai Sharp!”

“And ah’m Zalfron Sentry, Tabuh Sentry’s brother!” Zalfron said.

The dwarf and spirit exchanged bewildered glances.

“And you, lad?” Bold asked Joe.

“Joe,” Joe said, “from Earth.”

“Bones! Damn bones layin around in the hallway! Who in farakin hell do I pay to clean this place!” There was a pause, then, “Young lady, get your Pact lovin ass outa my bar!” The roar came from the hall and no sooner did the outburst reach their ears than did the owner of the voice stride into the room. The beer bellied, glossy scalped bar owner froze when his eyes found Zalfron Sentry laying in tattered, blood drenched clothes in the bed beside the door, “What in the hell? I’ll be.”

“Sam...” Grandfather said.

But the human had little interest in whatever the Knome had to say. He strode over to Zalfron, grabbed him by the chin and wiped the filthy bangs away from his face, “I can see your sister in your eyes...” Releasing Zalfron, he turned to Grandfather, “You know I been answering questions with the Tadloe Guard for the last two hours? Tiad, I wound up payin em off with free meals just so they’d leave me the farak alone.”

“What were they gonna do?” Grandfather asked, “Arrest you?”

Budd shrugged, “Turns out there was trouble with a pyromancer the other day in Suinus so when those vets mentioned a pyromancer, the Guards started acting all official and tiad.”

Grandfather and Joe exchanged glances.

“But those bastards are too full to care now...If you’d have told me there’d be trouble, we coulda been ready!”

“If we’d known, we woulda never came through!” Grandfather lied.

“Mhm, sure, I’m just glad nobody died – none of the folks worth a life that is. Thank heavens for them vets. That Peshkova Fang’s one hell of a healer. Second only to our good

friend here.” He slapped Bold on the back, “Selu! Those four with the help of my security, those Pacters didn’t stand a chance.” Sam Budd laughed and wiped the sweat from his temple with the back of his wrist then divided his attention between Nogard, Joe, and Zalfron, “And farak, y’all made short work of the folks up here too. Y’all all right?”

“Ah naerly dahd!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Ya Civ, he woulda died if not for your cook der!” Nogard added.

“Boldarian? Told ya boy’s brilliant. Damn genius. He’s a miracle worker and if you think he’s good at healing, wait til you taste his cooking!” Sam cried and patted his belly, “Thank you Zachias for taking care of my friends.”

“It was my honor.” The spirit bowed.

“He’s a modest one. Bout as damn patriotic and loyal as the Emperor’s late father.” Sam turned back to Grandfather, “Have you met my star employees before? You know they came to me by way of one of your brothers, fancy that, a Knome bringing ya something – old ass proly hauled something off when my back was turned, but I can’t say it wasn’t a damn good deal. Bold here is my head chef and Zach, well tiad, half my bouncers were recruited by Zachias. We got about six straight from Woodland Ridge and I try and have least two workin every night. Some of the best archers you’ll ever meet, plus, unlike most of my other employees, they tend not to partake in alcohol.”

“You didn’t tell me you had legendary lineage in the tavern!” Grandfather said.

“Yea, cause if I told ya I’d never get them back!” Sam said good-heartedly before turning his attention to Grandfather’s company, “Let me formally introduce myself,” as he spoke he wiped his hands on his apron, “The name’s Sam Budd, nice to meet you.”

“I’m Joe.” Joe said, taking the man’s hand and shaking it.

“Just Joe?”

“Hae’s from Earth,” Zalfron stated as if that explained it, “Ah’m Zalfron Sentry.”

“I still remember the day I met your sister,” Sam said, shaking Zalfron’s hand, “she was drippin wet from head to toe but still as gorgeous as Solaris setting on the sea...and terrifying, that gaze of hers was sharp...shoot, that day changed my life forever...”

“And I’m Nogard Otubak,” the chidra said.

With introductions out of the way, the seven sat on the beds, except for Zachias and Nogard who leaned against the wall.

“The reason we came through, as I told Sam,” Grandfather said, speaking to Zach and Bold, “was because I was taking Zalfron and Joe to God’s Island. We caught up with Nogard on the way.”

“Like I told ya before, Selu to you in hitchin a ride in that direction anytime soon,” Sam interrupted, “the Iahtro Storm’s been in the way for a while now.”

“There will be someone willing to sail.” Grandfather said, then he replaced his focus to Zach and Bold, “I’m planning on taking the boys to meet the Emperor. You see, we think Joe might be the Sun Child and Saint has the names of the Mystakle Knights – those foretold to travel with the Sun Child to bring back the Samurai. It was such a bizarre coincidence that we’ve run into Zalfron and Nogard that we kinda figuring that they’re both likely to be on the list. Now here we are with the son of a Samurai and the monastic sibling of a Samurai and, well...I’ve lived on this planet for long enough to realize that coincidences tend not to be coincidental.”

“Didn’t I say it?” Budd cried, “Didn’t I say it! He’s trying to rob me of my best men! Can’t trust a Knome, never trust a Knome, all they do is steal and get the town guards on you.”

“The town guards come here every night, Knome or not! You’re always letting in the loudest lot!” Grandfather snapped in reply.

“You ain’t got no business being a hero anymore – if you ever were – look at your old ass! I heard that you nearly got beaten by some girl out front!” Budd went on.

“Really?” Grandfather sputtered at the comment, “Budd, the sexism shtick has been dead since the Queen, you’d best stick to ugly-jokes cause you and I both know you’ve got something like a half-dead hamster running that wheel in your brain-”

“That’s how you want it? Alrighty then!” Budd roared before piling on the insults, “You old crusty, scrotum-faced, white-haired midget!”

“Midget?” Grandfather yelped, “It looks like you fit an entire family of midgets inside that bulbous belly of yours!”

“Family?” Budd scoffed, “You people don’t have families, y’all just pop up outa the gutters like alley rats.” He turned to the others as if they’d concur, “Y’all ever seen a lady-Knome? No, right?” He glared back at Grandfather, “That’s cause they all killed themselves when they saw what the good Lord gave em to mate with!”

The two continued to sling inconsequential insults at each other, some bloodier than others, leaving Joe and everyone else in the room to wonder whether or not they were old friends or old enemies. Finally the duel cooled and the two men were left panting, waiting for the blood to descend from their flushed faces. Once they regained their composure, they attempted civilized conversation once more.

“I’m not trying to steal your employees,” Grandfather said, “I’m trying to end this war.”

“Well then, don’t ask me. I ain’t their keepers, they’re grown men, let them decide for themselves!” Sam Budd suggested. He turned to the spirit and the dwarf, “You want to go with the smelly-ass Knome or keep working for me?”

The dwarf and spirit exchanged glances.

“I’ll double your pay.” Sam Budd added.

Grandfather shook his head, muttering, “Dry-titted bum.”

“Uh’m farevar in ya debt, Mastar Budd,” Bold said, “If it warn’t far you, uh’d loiklay bae in shackles. Uh’ll go whar ya want mae.”

“Zach?” Budd asked.

“I am as Bold.” Zach said.

Budd turned back to glare at the Knome, arms crossed, with a triumphant smile stretched across his lips.

- - -

“I hate that fat bastard!” Grandfather roared as soon as the barkeep, cook, and security guard left, “He’s so damn stubborn!”

“Maybe it wasn’t meant to be.” Joe shrugged.

“Hah...” Grandfather muttered.

“We’ll come back later, Civ,” Nogard grinned, “who wouldn’t mind anudder night of free beer.”

“Free?” Grandfather coughed, “I payed for-”

“Grandfather, did ya haer? Nogard’s agraed to come with us!” Zalfron said.

“Woh, woh, woh, I said I was considering it.” Nogard said.

“You did just say ‘we’ will come back.” Joe said.

“Pertty sure ya promised to tag along.” Zalfron said.

“Bull shi-”

“Calm down guys,” Grandfather said, “we needa start winding down. We’ll be leaving tomorrow by boat to God’s Island. We can drop you off in the ocean, Nogard, if you still want to leave. But either way, you three boys need some sleep. It’s late and we need to be up early.”

The Knome was right and the boys didn’t need much convincing.

For once, sleep came swift and easy for Joe. As soon as he laid down on one of the straw mattresses the weight of his eyelids doubled and the recent memories floating near the top of his mind slowly sank to the bottom. Whether it was due to the final effects of the alcohol he had consumed, returning as the adrenaline left, or pure exhaustion, Joe left consciousness and dreamed happily of Earth, of home, and of his family and friends. For a while, his dreams stayed light and warm but there was a part of his subconscious that held Joe back, keeping him from believing whole heartedly in the world constructed by his sleeping mind – keeping him from really experiencing and enjoying the comforting frivolity. It still felt like a mere excursion – a short and bittersweet visit. He might’ve not understood well enough to express it, but Solaris was his reality now and even unconscious his mind refused to let him forget that. What little bit entertained the idea of doubt had been muffled by the all too real violence of the yester day. And memories of said violence eventually rose up to sabotage his happy-go-lucky dreams.

Ever so often, his dreams were interrupted by the body of the face-down elf, charred and smoking, lying across the stairs like a discarded marionette. This image straightened the smile on his sleeping lips and yanked him out of REM. If he was being honest, it wasn’t the fact that he had taken a man’s life that so terrified him. It was the lack of guilt that irked his soul. *Shouldn’t I feel something?* It was as if his conscious didn’t believe it had happened – yet at the same time, it wouldn’t let him forget it. *I should feel different.* He felt the opposite. He felt natural. Often, just before he would wake up, he’d find himself in the stairwell, see the body at his feet, and kick the limp elf in the gut with a triumphant shout of left over rage. *Is it natural? This unabashed hatred... This shamelessness...*

What Joe didn’t realize was the very fact that this supposed lack of guilt that troubled him so was evidence of the existence of his guilty conscience. Though his wary body attempted to convince him otherwise, Joe still knew there to be blood on his hands. Necessary as it might’ve been, that didn’t mean it was necessarily okay. And as much as he hated the elf for trying to kill him and his friends, he hated the elf for forcing him to kill the elf.

After one of these dream encounters in the stairwell, Joe woke up and heard Zalfron whisper to him from the bunk beside his.

“Hey, Joe,” the elf said, “Ah can’t slaep.”

“That’s a first.” Joe said, keeping his eyes closed.

“Yea...” Zalfron hesitated, contemplating whether he should tell Joe what troubled him. He decided to, “...when ah took that sword to mah stomach...ah thought ah was gonna dah.”

“I was worried too.” Joe admitted.

“And that’s all ah can thank about...”

Joe didn’t know what to say.

Zalfron spoke up, “Can ah continue the story of Saint? It helped mae fall aslaep on the road, ah thank it helps.”

I’m not sure if I’ll make it through the whole thing, Joe thought as he yawned but he went ahead and gave Zalfron the green light, “Sure.”

Joe's mind, drifting in and out of consciousness, added the elf's words to the churning bowl of dreams in his brain. Slowly, directed by Zalfron's steady jabber, Joe slipped into a state somewhere between waking and sleeping where his dreams danced to the elf's words.

Zalfron's Tale 3: The Forsaken Savior⁴

The Stone of Krynor sent Saint and Creaton to a place in time and space where neither would have the advantage. This place was Castletown, the capital of the Antaran kingdom which sat in a hilly corner of the continent Midabbim beneath the Delian sun. A war had been waged on Midabbim for almost two hundred years between the Thaians, the Dravish, and the Antarans. The earth elves of the Antaran hills were a people of peace who had been reluctant to join the conflict but had been unable to tolerate the Dravish exploitation of the Ramlans (a minority in Drave that had once been one of Antara's greatest allies). By the time Saint and Creaton arrived, Ramla had been liberated and the Antarans had retreated from the forefront, content merely to defend what land they held.

The aristocracy of Antara, who ruled the twelve greatest cities, had surrendered their military power so that even if they wished to go on the offensive they could not. Instead, a group of vigilante patriots defended their ancient state through a policy that would come to shape the Trinity Nations' military. It was based upon the Samurai Principle: that violence, war included, was unjust and that a government could not engage in violence without making their people guilty of said violence. All that said, violence, like war, is sometimes necessary. To solve this dilemma, the aristocracy entrusted twelve great combatants, twelve honorable and loyal patriots of Antara, with their militaries. These defenders of state, the Antaran Samurai, would protect Antara at all costs. But they were defenders, not offenders, and as long as a war threatened foreign lands the Samurai rarely batted an eye.

Thus, in the Delian year of 3765, approximately two hundred years after the war began, Saint and Creaton appeared in Castletown where the mass destruction, collateral damage of the epic duel, in the royal city attracted the Antaran Samurai. Before Saint could defeat his opponent, Creaton used the dark magic of a banshee to flee and left Saint to face the wrath of the Samurai alone. Three of these defenders took Saint down, Belisarius of Paulter, Silverius of Palmora, and Vigili of Emor. He was tossed into the dungeons of Castletown and the Mystak Blade, whose transport led to many a casualty – as no one but the ritual-endorsed wielder can touch it and live –, was hidden away. The rest of the Samurai convened to discuss what to do. They were less worried about their captive than the one that had been fighting him, for this was not the first time Antara had met Creaton Live. In fact, the last time he appeared in Delia, less than a century ago, the wearer of the Black Crown had died. His return, or resurrection as the Delians saw it, did not bode well for Antara. As the Antarans panicked and the Dravish celebrated, and Saint sat locked away.

If you had to pick one dungeon in which to be jailed, between the three dimensions: Earth, Solaris, and Delia, most would choose the prison beneath Castletown. Ran by the peace loving Antarans, each prisoner was fed, supplied with a cot, allowed fair access to a defecation

⁴ For a map of the Nations of Midabbim check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

hole, and permitted the use of clean running water up to three times a day. There was a group of villains that, if given the option, would have preferred to avoid this accommodating oubliette: mancers, specifically necromancers and shadowmancers. Being opposed to killing of any kind – Antarans didn't even kill plants, they were scavengers! They used magic to draw the nutrients from deceased beings, beasts, and brush into a tasteless substance called mana – the necromancers and shadowmancers were forbidden to use their dark arts. The necromancers' noses were cut off – leaving them unable to sense and, therefore, manipulate bone – and shadowmancers' eyes were plucked out and sealed shut – rendering them unable to store shadow.

Fortunately, with their energy storage system – their flesh – still intact, the consumption of unharvested-bone left in mana provided necromancers just enough to survive. Unfortunately, without their crow eyes, the shadowmancers could not store shadows. They lived on the edge of death, weak and frail, limping and crawling. What shadows they gained from the mana could not be stored so they had to ration out their supply, swallowing crumbs all throughout the day. They clung together in a heap in the corner of the prison, nibbling mana and exchanging their own shadows between one another as they slowly withered away. Few lasted longer than a month. They called themselves the Sharemen.

Their pitiful state intrigued Saint and he befriended them. Having shared so much of their energy, the group seemed to share a single consciousness. It was as if their souls had compiled into one. With their supernatural state – though some historians claim it was more so delusions brought on by their depravation – came a supernatural sense: foresight. For as long as the prison guards could remember, the Sharemen prophesized that a messiah would come and release them from their bondage. They hoped Saint would be this savior, for few in the prison prior to his arrival had felt the need to acknowledge the Sharemen's existence, so from his first act of kindness they begged him to become a shadowmancer. Saint was reluctant, after all, he had nearly become a necromancer due to Creaton's trickery in his rebellious campaign through Solaris. But there was no other way out. So, in the darkest corner of the Castletown dungeon, Saint converted to shadowmancy, donned the crow eye, consumed the Sharemen's shadows – for it took the final life-energy of many souls to fuel the following spell – then teleported himself out of the dungeon, out of Castletown, and into the rolling hills of Antara.

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“Saint's a shadowmancer?!”

“Hush! Yer gonna wake em up!” Zalfron urged, glancing around the room before addressing Joe's shock, “But yea, hae was a shadahmancer.”

“But he's the Emperor of the Trinity Nations!” Joe crowed. He was so offended by this great leader's hypocrisy that he was unable to heed his elven friend's advice, “What about the Order of Mancers? What about all that nonproliferation bullshit?!”

“Now you jus calm down, ya ain’t aven gotta clue whatcha talkin bout.” Zalfron defended, “Hae plucked that ah raht out soon as hae returned to Solaris, had to replace it with an enertomb jus to kaep from buhcomin lahk the Sharemen.”

“I still think its messed up! Didn’t his friendship with the Sharemen show him that not all mancens are bad?”

“Now come on Joe. Ain’t they got politics on Earth? Hae maybae Emperor but this ain’t no dictatorship!” Zalfron’s voice rose as he forgot his prior reprisal, “The Trinity Nations is ruled by thrae votes: one from Saint, one from the monarchs, and one from the dahnastaes.”

“Well did Saint vote for or against mancy?” Joe asked.

Zalfron stroked his chin, “Ya know, ah’m not sure. Ah bet that one of them would know, should wae wake em up?”

“No!” Joe yelped, as if afraid Grandfather would reprimand them for their late-night whispering, “I’ll ask later! You can keep going.”

“Cool,” Zalfron nodded, “so, Saint escaped...”

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Most, though not all, of the Sharemen were of Saint’s mother’s kind, electric elves, hailing from the west, Thaia. Thus, as Saint fled from Castletown he headed west towards the Sulareemian Mountains – a winding isthmus between Antara and Thaia. However, their escape from Castletown did not go unnoticed. The Antaran Samurai were hot on their trail and finally closed in on the escapee near the ruins of an ancient city known as Niek-Rebas.

The dilapidated town had once thrived under a young Thaian Empire. Legend was, as the Sharemen told Saint, that this was the birth place of Delian necromancy. The dark art grew and matured among the richer villagers in the eleventh century. These powerful families of the city, rich from trade, grew jealous and a violent feud broke out. Instead of drawing blood from one another, they sent the townsfolk, their tenants and employees, to fight for them. Soon after the bloodshed began, the villagers turned on the rich, slaying the women, men, and children and chasing those who fled to a tower, the funeral pillar, in the center of town. Locking themselves in, the villagers cursed the cowering royalty, made sure the aristocrats could not escape the tower, then left the city to fester.

Even Thaians, loving encouragers of dark arts, feared the place and the Sharemen were almost unwilling to suggest Saint use it to escape the Samurai. The Sharemen would not have considered it an option if their peculiar gift had not called them to the city. They knew not why nor what but that something was waiting for Saint in Niek-Rebas, something that Saint would need for the coming battles. Saint took refuge in the ruins and found it anything but abandoned. It seemed that any living creature who ventured into the city had been tainted by the haunted aura and transformed into hideous, blood thirsty versions of their original selves. At first, Saint fought the creatures but for each he stilled more came and finally he was backed into an abandoned waterworks where the adventure only became more terrifying.

Saint had noticed the monsters all seemed to be spawning in the center of town where the mighty black tower loomed. With the Samurai waiting for him on the outskirts, he saw no other option but to push forward – towards the tower – to face what spawned these abominable foes.

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“Couldn’t he just teleport away?”

“Sure,” Zalfron chuckled, but as his snicker petered out and Joe’s silence continued, the elf realized Joe didn’t know any better, “Oh no, Joe, it takes a ton of energy to teleport.”

“But he did it before?”

“Yea, and it took half the Sharemen out of existence!” Zalfron exclaimed, “Ah maen, it takes lahk a dozen lahves worth of energy to pull off teleportation. Hae had no choice in the dungeon...and ah suppose hae coulda done it all the same in Nake-Raibas, but hae’d bae lahble to lose what was left of the Sharemen – his onlay hope of survahvin in that alaen world.”

“Ah,” Joe nodded, “that makes sense.”

“Raht? Anyways...”

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He deciphered the labyrinth of pipes until he came out beneath the dark monolith. It was there, in the tower, that Saint found the master of the curse that plagued the town – a thing known as a Nachzehrer. Like the Sharemen, this being was not one but many souls melted together over the years by a forsaken magic forged by haunted hearts. Having locked themselves in the tower, the royal family slowly devoured the graves that filled the funeral pillar (this sort of structure, a vertical graveyard, is common in Thaian culture). This fueled their curse. The energies of what they consumed within the tower grew and spread from the base of the great column, corrupting any creatures unlucky enough to wander near. Even as Saint faced the fiend, he could feel the pressure of the curse calling to him. Still, Saint pitied the Nachzehrer. Even as it sought to kill him, it begged him to put it out of its misery. So he did. Though, in the fight, Saint nearly succumbed to the Nachzehrer’s vulgar strength after his own sword, not the Mystak Blade but one he’d acquired on the road, was knocked out a window. At the last second, a blade appeared in his hand. This was what the Sharemen had foreseen. Without the Mystak Blade, Saint had relied on his newfound mancy to be his fulcrum but, once again reunited with a legendary blade – made as much by magic as by metal – he could fight to his fullest. Not to mention, this was no normal blade, this was the Suikii.

The Nachzehrer slain, the curse of Niek-Rebas was lifted. It was as if dawn had broken and the Delian sun, for the first time in centuries, shone again upon the forgotten city streets. Immediately, the Samurai knew. They descended upon the city just as Saint’s new weapon delivered him to safety, out of the city and across the mountains.

Saint appeared outside the tent of an old, grumpy Knome. The Knome told Saint the story of how he had gotten there. As it turned out, he, like Saint, was from Solaris but had been dragged into Delia by a, unlike Saint, friend. Unfortunately, the associate, a dragon hunter, had been hauled off and arrested by the Dravish and left the poor Knome to wander the alien world alone. All this was more interesting to Saint than to the Sharemen, who listened from within Saint's sacrificed eye, but the next part of the Knomes tale attracted the dead Thaians' attention. The supposedly reincarnated Creaton was now hailed as Warlord of the Dravish and had taken over the leadership of their military campaign. The Knome believed that Creaton sought to take Thaisia's capital, Korana, in order to retrieve the Delian twin of the Stone of Kyrnor, Sari's Stone. Using this stone, Creaton would have the Knome's friend create a portal that could send him back into Solaris where he could continue to feed the chaos left in the wake of Saint's rebellion. While the Sharemen could care less about this foreign world, they feared the fall of their homeland's capitol. Before Creaton and Saint arrived, both Thaisia and Drave had been losing interest in their seemingly endless battles but with this new leader, this new drive, the Sharemen feared Thaisia might truly succumb. The Sharemen and Saint agreed they must travel on to Thaisia to stop Creaton before it was too late and they now knew exactly where they needed to go. According to Grandfather, the northern city of Canaamah, which had been under Dravish rule for over a hundred years, would be the likely starting point of the new campaign.

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"Grandfather?" Joe croaked, "You mean the old Knome was Grandfather?"

"Well duh!" Zalfron said. His golden eyes rolled over Joe as if the question were yet another pointless outburst serving only to disrupt his thought process. He attempted a quick explanation, "Whenever you haer about the Suikah, you can bae sure that old Knome ain't far bahind."

"Yea but..." Joe sensed Zalfron's impatience, "...with all this talk of us going to see the Emperor, you'd think he would have mentioned this."

"Huh?" The boredom left his voice as he sat up, suddenly intrigued.

"You know," Joe continued, "with all the questions I ask him, you would think he would mention how he was around Saint during his rise to power?"

"You met Grandfather?!" Zalfron exclaimed.

What? For a minute, Joe was struck dumb. He watched Zalfron with eyes narrowed in befuddlement.

Just as Zalfron hadn't recognized the Knome, he didn't recognize the look of flabbergasted awe across Joe's face. He asked, "Was hae maen?"

"You've met him too!"

"No ah haven't-"

"He's right there!" Joe jabbed his index finger towards the sleeping Knome's cot.

"That old hag?" Zalfron yelled, "Hae never said hae was-"

“Yes he did! Half a million times!” Joe cried.

“Well...” Zalfron slumped back down in bed, “Ah’ll have to ask him tomorrow...hae was prolly just pullin yer arm...you know how they lah...”

“He...” Joe stopped himself with a deep breath that he loudly exhaled. *This is why alcohol shouldn’t be legal for thirteen-year-olds.* Shaking his head, Joe told Zalfron to continue, “So what happens next?”

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Saint, with the spirits of the Sharemen held in his eye, continued with Grandfather west and made it as far as Stormpass – the most eastward city of Thaia. They didn’t last a week within the city before the Antaran Samurai caught up to them. It appeared the Samurai had no intention of taking him prisoner a second time, they seemed immune to the moral code of their trustees, and Saint might’ve met his match in a duel against six of the Samurai if the others hadn’t shown up and saved him. At first glance, the only one of the second half Saint recognized was the minotaur, his adopted father, Theseus Icespear. Yet, under closer inspection, Saint realized he was staring at his Solarian companions: Shirahama Kemplor, Vali Kou, Takia Eninac, and, his true love, Eir Ipativy. The reason he hadn’t recognized them was because they had endeared quite a bit of change since he’d last seen them, approximately one hundred years of change.

Few understand the mechanisms of the Voidstone and the same goes for its dust, such as Sari’s Stone (Delia’s version of the Stone of Krynor). Though Saint’s friends struck the stone after he and Creaton, they came to Delia one hundred years prior. Arriving on Midabbim at a time when Antara had been actively involved in the war, they helped Antara fight their way into Ramla alongside Thaia against Dravish aggression. Meanwhile, the aristocracy of Antara developed the samurai-system and nominated the five to be among the original dozen. The Solarins agreed and retained such positions even as they grew old and wary, almost forgetting the reason why they arrived in Delia to begin with.

It was not a happy reunion. Even if they had found each other as allies, tears would’ve still been shed, for, or so it seemed, his friends had lived out the majority of their lives without him. Now those who had been his peers were close to death while Saint still had his prime ahead of him. Most painfully of all, the love of his life, Eir Ipativy, had grown so old away from Saint that she was hardly the same as the person he’d originally fell in love with and she was not the same person that had fallen in love with Saint.

After this lackluster reunion, he conceded to their demands and was toted back to Castletown to once again be imprisoned – though his friends kept the Antarans from plucking out his eyes – and in the dark alcoves of that dungeon he mourned, not for himself, but for the loss of those who had become his closest friends. After he was captured, Stormpass fell to the Dravish and Grandfather was taken. The old Knome found that his friend, the Dragon Slayer, had been traded to the Antarans. The Antarans had learned that the Dragon Slayer knew dangerous information about Sari’s Stone and did not want the Dravish to possess such

knowledge. What the Dravish didn't tell them was that, even after years of torture, the Dragon Slayer refused to cooperate and most likely would've continued to refuse until his death. Under Antaran control, the Dragon Slayer was no more compliant. Frustrated, the Antarans cast him into the dungeons of Castletown where Saint would meet and befriend him.

As Saint and the Dragon Slayer begged the Suikii for help, Saint's friends in the Samurai argued with their comrades for Saint to be released. Only Saint could wield the Mystak Blade and the only one left in Delia they believed strong enough to beat Creaton was Saint. If Creaton was not defeated, his friends warned, the Dravish would not be stopped.

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"Hey, I've been meaning to ask, does Mystakle mean something other than mystical?" Joe's question was met with silence which he translated to be confusion, so he elaborated, "Why do y'all call the Mystak Blade the Mystak Blade...and the Mystakle Samurai the Mystakle Samurai?"

"Way back when, the elves of Thorakle and Sentrakle spoke what we call Ancient Elven and some folks still do. It didn't catch on lahk Etihwy did, so the language kahnda dahd out...though some of the more upper-class electric elves still spaek it." Zalfron shrugged, "Ah sure as hell ain't fluent but ah know that the 'akle' kahnda maens land – lahk 'loe' maens land in Knomish."

"That's why there was Thorakle and Sentrakle," Joe pondered deeper, "Sentrakle for Sentry, Thorakle for..."

"For Thor Ipativy. And Mystakle was their word for everaywhere else. It meant something lahk homeland. They called this world Mystakle Planet."

"Instead of Solaris?" Joe asked.

"Yup, not the Sentry and Ipativy at laest."

"I haven't heard that once!" As soon as the words left Joe's lips, he frowned. *I have heard that*, yet he couldn't recall where or when or if it had even been in Solaris that the term had come up, "Mystakle Planet..."

"After the First Void War, Creaton and the Tadloe way of doin thangs rahplaced the old ways. Alotta electric elven culture stuck but it turned out the world preferred to call itself Solaris."

"So why'd Saint call them the Mystakle Samurai?" Joe paused, then added, "Have there been samurai around before everyone started calling it Solaris?"

"Nope, they're definitelay somethin new but ah ain't never thought about whah hae called em 'Mystakle'...maybae it was cause Tenchi Kou held the Mystak Blade...maybae cause his ma was a Sentry...I dunno..." Zalfron paused a little, thinking before adding, "At the tahm of the Foretellin, Assload was on the verge of the coup. The corrupt Congress that ruled us fore the coup, they made themselves a part of the Trinity Nations, maybae Saint hoped usin ancient elven maht quell the buddin rebellion?"

“Huh, so the Samurai were named the Mystakle Samurai just to make Iceload happy.”
Joe chuckled, “And it didn’t even work!”

“Ah was jus speculatin,” Zalfron warned, “don’t take mah guess to bae the word of God, now.”

“Well it makes sense.” Joe stated, “Wanna finish the story?”

“Sure!” Zalfron cleared his throat, “Alraht, so, Saint and the Dragon Slayer were still in the dungeon beneath Castletown...”

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As the Antaran Samurai continued to argue over what to do with Saint, Saint and the Dragon Slayer began to gather a following among the forsaken of Castletown. Many of the prisoners had been around for Saint’s first incarceration and those that hadn’t had heard tale of his escape. Believing he would do it again, there wasn’t a prisoner in the dungeon that didn’t attempt to get on his good side. Saint didn’t flee from the attention. He began to teach a strand of Christianity, Mystakle Christianity – *not Thoran Christianity* which the Bishopry had practiced, but that of the Sentry, the Kou, and the spirits of Manaloe, the one fixated on treating each other with love rather than on getting into Heaven – which he had spun to fit well with his ambitions. He taught that violence was evil but, sometimes, good men must take on the position of the sinful, of the evil, in order to make the world a better place (Yes, this was the Samurai Principle, the same logic by which the Antarans had handed over their military to their Samurai). Thiaia was crumbling and soon Antara would follow. Saint taught the prisoners that they could redeem themselves by adorning the ways of war and defeating the Dravish. They, already the sinful, would accept their evil ways to combat evil abroad so that the righteous, peaceful people of Antara might be spared (Saint hadn’t come up with this on the fly, obviously, he’d heard it from his friends in the Samurai before his return to the lower intestines of Castletown – he merely adopted it for his own situation). With these words, Saint began to draw many of the prison guards to his side and gained enough trust from the jailers that he began to baptize his followers in the ways of shadowmancy – as a sign of commitment. The jailers snuck extra mana to Saint’s disciples in order to keep them healthy as Saint taught them to fight.

Above the dungeons, the politics of Antara began to lean in Saint’s favor. Emperor Maurice Constantine was in a constant power struggle against his mother and the old aristocrats who had worked for his father. The elders, many of whom remembered the brutality of past battles against the Dravish, sought to preserve their peaceful ways and to avoid war at all costs. Whether or not Maurice disagreed, he was at odds with the old folk, whatever he did they opposed and whatever they did he opposed. Thus, he became a fan of the idea that Theseus and Saint’s other friends in the Antaran Samurai proposed: release Saint and unleash him, with the aid of the Samurai, against the vulgar Dravish. Maurice had the power to free Saint, but this move would be unpopular among many of the people of Antara, half of which sided with his mother. Without popular support, the aristocracy might gain the courage to attempt a coup. What

finally encouraged Maurice to act was the return of the Erifs to the war (these were a people from a continent north of Midabbim). Erif, with Dravish help, captured Sularamoh, an Antaran port that held thousands of Thaian refugees. Now the fear of Dravish invasion became very real. Of the eleven remaining Samurai, three more joined Theseus' side leaving only three opposed and giving Maurice the leverage to free Saint without the fear of assassination.

Saint rose from the dungeons and, despite the aristocracy's complaints, took the prisoners with him. Word spread that Maurice had set free the entire population of the Castletown dungeon and it seemed that his decision would, after all, be the end of him. The citizens amassed around the walls of Castletown, ready to storm the gates and revoke their oaths of passivity. Then, Saint appeared atop the wall and gave a speech. He said what he had said to the prisoners. He condemned violence but said, "We, the defilers of civilization, should not be forgiven for our sinful ways nor should we be pitied by you, the peaceful and righteous, but send us north against the wicked who threaten these tranquil hills! Let our evil poison the enemy and let us redeem ourselves in the only way we know how!"

Needless to say, the people saw reason in Saint's plea. Saint named his followers after those that had originally lifted him from the darkness of the dungeons: the Sharemen, and made plans with the Samurai. Saint, the Sharemen, and his friends among the Samurai would high jack a Dravish airship and travel to the capital of Gira. There they would wreck the Giran airport so that the rest of the Samurai could safely sail in with troops, not having to risk being shot down. Saint would find Creaton and kill him then he and the Samurai would take the Dravish capital. With Drave beheaded, they would continue the fight inflicting as much damage as possible until acquiring a surrender, which would include, as motivation for their enemy's compliance, the return of their capital. They would have to move fast, for soon the resistance in Thaisia would be wiped out and all of Drave and Erif's attention would be focused on Antara.

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"Wasn't that the Samurai's job?"

"Huh?"

"Since Antarans didn't believe in violence, they appointed the Samurai to be their guardians." Joe said, "They were the ones supposed to defend Antara and bear the sin of what that defense might include."

"Yea, but sae the problem was the Samurai were defenders. If they waited until Drave and Erif attacked them, then they would face far worse odds. If they attacked whahl the two empahrs were distracted by the war with Thaisia, they'd have better odds – they'd have a hope."

"And it took Saint to convince them?" Joe cried, "They're useless!"

"Eh, more waek than useless." Zalfron critiqued, "Alotta historians blamed the Antaran Samurai for the failure to stand up and face the Dravish before the Erifs returned to the fray. Saint defended them bah explaining that whahl the Samurai were excellent fahters, the numbers of their troops were few – far too few to invade Dravish lands."

“And yet they just agreed to do so with Saint!” Joe exclaimed, “This can’t end well.”
“Oh, it won’t...”

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Saint and the Sharemen sailed to the independent city-state of Roymoorass which sat on an island floating between the peninsula of Sularamoh and the Dravish coast. The Roymoorassians had never been conquered, though attempts had been made, and by this time in Delia’s history their island’s sovereignty was respected by all Midabbimians. What made the island peculiar was the matriarchal government in which only woman could vote and hold power. Many of the men fled the island as they grew older which left the nation sexually-lopsided. As native men emigrated, foreign men immigrated, lured in by the legendary beauty of the inhabitants and the prestigious sex trade. Roymoorass was a regular stop for militant airships departing from Drave on their way to Sularamoh or Thaia and offered Saint and his comrades a neutral spot to intercept a Dravish ship.

There was but one hiccup in their journey: Saint’s lover’s heart. He fell in love with the youngest of the queen’s daughters, Mariluke, after meeting her in a brothel. The poor romantic got a free trial and believed her affection to be far more than a mere advertisement which led him to ask her to run away with him, bring her lady warriors, and pick up arms against the Dravish. Little did Saint know that such a proposal was an insult to Roymoorassians, they saw it as an attempt to rob a woman of her rightful power by asking her to succumb to the patriarchy of the outside world. In short, Saint, the Samurai, and the Sharemen had to leave in a hurry as Mariluke and her crew of elite prostitutes chased them from the island. Stealing half a dozen Dravish airships they sailed on to the great desert city of Gira.

The Giran Airport sat on a floating island above the capital. It, like the airships, was powered with massive, refillable enertombs programed with elaborate enchantments. The plan was simple – aim the ships at the airport’s center and hop into escape vessels before the wreck. Their crash caused quite a bit of damage, but still the airport didn’t fall. Thus, Saint and his companions had to turn around and fight their way into the center, destroy the hovering devices themselves, then escape before they went down with the sky-island. Many Sharemen died or were captured, as was one of Saint’s closest friends: Vali Kou. The explosion severed a fourth of the city and Saint and his team regrouped in the rubble they had made. The plan was to wait until the Antaran Samurai arrived with their armies, within the week, but the Samurai never came. Instead, they were forced to watch from their hiding place among the wreckage as their friend was executed. Creaton said she would be spared if the terrorists made themselves known but even as the blade was put to Vali’s neck, she begged for Saint not to surrender until Creaton was dead and gone. Betrayed by Antara, it would be only a matter of time before they were discovered. So, Saint, the Dragon Slayer, his friends in the Samurai, and the Sharemen fled into the treacherous mountains, which only the bravest Dravish dared traverse, known as Calkoniya.

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“Where the hell were the Samurai?” Joe demanded.

“Remember Marahluke?” Zalfron asked.

“The prostitute?”

“The *princess* prostitute,” Zalfron corrected, “well, shae was so mad at Saint that shae told her momma and her momma told Craeton. When Craeton heard that a blonde headed, brown ahd shadahmancer had stolen his ships hae raelahzed that Saint would soon bae on his doorstep and decahded to forget Thaia, at laest for a little whahl, and attack Antara to force the Samurai to pick betwaen offense and defense.”

“So the rest of the Samurai stayed in Antara to fight off the Dravish!” Joe exclaimed.

Zalfron nodded, “Laevin Saint and half the Samurai to dah.”

“Couldn’t he have fought his way to Creaton though? I mean, after all he’s gone through, he probably could’ve done it.”

“Hell yea,” Zalfron agreed, “Ah thank hae could have...but his friends? Ah maen, his buddies from Solaris could probably handle it but the prisoners that looked up to him lahk hae was a prophet? Ah bet a buncha them woulda dahd...if not all.”

“Man,” Joe muttered, “that’s a tough decision. So what happens in the mountains?”

“They all dahd...”

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The desert mountains belted the Dravish peninsula creating a nearly impenetrable barrier between Drave and Ramla split only by the Starsee Road. According to legend, only a handful of adventurers foolish enough to stray from the road ever escaped the treacherous peaks. Supposedly, the Starsee Road was originally a series of spirals because the builders constantly lost direction and went in circles. One mountain looked like the next, basically barren aside from scattered brush and a bit of desert bunnies, and a seemingly supernatural force bamboozled any technological or magical directional devices. Once lost within the mountains, if you didn’t fall to your death or succumb to the cave dwelling dragons, then dehydration or starvation would eventually claim you. What few water sources existed were jealously guarded by the carnivorous Calkoniyans and as far as food, it was dry leaves or rodents. The name of the mountain range made no attempt to mislead, Calkoniya was Dravish for Mountains of Death.

Saint, Eir, Theseus, Shirahama, Takia, the Dragon Slayer, and the Sharemen had exchanged one danger for another. They spent the first week wandering in circles. It wasn’t until the third week that they began to accept that there would be no escape. By then, half the Sharemen had died. A dozen had fallen to their deaths and another dozen had been dragged away by the sneaky Calkoniyan dragons. Others had died of poison after consuming berries from the wrong plant. One night after a month in the mountains, the group holed up in a cave where they found a natural spring. Unfortunately, once the Delian sun set the original inhabitants of the cave

returned – a murder of dragons. They defeated the reptiles, though not without casualties, then made the mistake of eating their defeated enemies. The entire group became horribly sick and by the time the wretched food poisoning passed, only a quarter of the group that entered the mountains remained. Fortunately for those that had managed to survive, they had a cave with water and, as they soon learned, a form of mold that clung to the walls which provided enough food to live on. The only problem was that, aside from three of the Samurai and the Dragon Slayer, they were shadowmancers and while the mold could fill their stomachs, the tiny fungi did not supply enough shadows to satisfy their eyes. One by one, the Sharemen died off and those left consumed the shadows of the dead in order to last just a little while longer.

After three months of subsistence, it seemed that, even if they survived, Calkoniya would be their home forever. Then, they caught sight of earth elves marching through the mountains far below their damp shelter. At first, they believed they were Antarans but, under closer inspection, they realized it was the Erifs. They managed to catch one of the scouts and drag him back to the cave. From him they learned that Antara had surrendered to Drave and Erif and that the party of earth elves was led by the Erifs' warlord king, a dark skinned harpy named Notreac, who sought to find the remains of Saint and his team, who were presumed dead.

Notreac was after the Mystak Blade. At first, Saint and his crew mocked the scout because they believed Notreac would suffer the same fate as they. The scout assured them this was not the case. This was their third attempt to find the sword, each time they returned home without difficulty. The continent of Erif, north of Midabbim, was nothing but mountains. They had developed ways to navigate that worked just as well when applied in Calkoniya. Hearing this, Saint decided to follow Notreac and his war party until led out of the mountains. He would find Creaton, one way or another, and he would have his revenge.

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“They didn't attack the Erifs to use their shadows?” Joe asked, “They could have kept a few alive as guides!”

“Trust mae,” Zalfron sighed, “thas what they wanted to do, but the voice of the original Sharemen told Saint not to.”

“Why's that?”

“Well, they told him the Prophecy. Ya know, the one that Saint resahsted in the Foretellin?”

“What's that got to do with sparing the Erifs?”

“The Prophecy wae know from the Foretellin, and the one the Delians know too, is just a tidbit of the original Prophecy told to Saint bah the Sharemen.”

“Why? Did he censor it?”

“Nope, hae forgot the whole thang but recognahzed it when the riddle was carved on the roof of the Cathaedral by a rogue lahtnang bolt.”

“Hmm,” Joe frowned, “but aren't the Sharemen still in Saint's eye?”

“Nope!” Zalfron said again, “Hae plucked it out remember.”

“Then I geuss we’re lucky there was that lightning bolt.”

“Wait,” Zalfron frowned, “actually, hae did kaep the ah...”

“See!”

“Yea but...” Zalfron’s words dwindled until he admitted with a shrug, “farak, yer raht.”

Joe was puzzled. *There’s no way I’m the first person to realize this. Maybe this is just one of those things that’s slipped Zalfron’s mind.* So he asked, “Has no one pointed that out before?”

“Most folks don’t know hae kept it...” Zalfron muttered, still preoccupied with trying to sort out the novel point Joe’d just made, “Ah onlay know cause my sister told mae after shae met him.”

“So then Saint was lying at the Foretelling?!”

“The Emperor would never lah to us!” Zalfron exclaimed, “Buhsahds, aeven if hae did, that’s not raelly a lah...” the elf shrugged off the uncomfortable revelation, “...more so just not the full truth.”

“Seems like Saint’s as bad as Ekaf...” Joe muttered.

“Who’s Ekaf?” Zalfron asked.

“You don’t know him.” *And if you did, you’d probably have forgotten who he was.* “So what happens next?”

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Though they now had a way out, Saint and his companions were still in a dire situation. Once on the move, they’d lost their source of water and were forced to hunt and gather whatever they could wherever and whenever they came to a stop. Only five of Saint’s Sharemen were still alive by the time they reached the edge of the mountains. All they had to do was wait for the Erifs to march out of sight, then they could leave Calkoniya, but Saint and the five remaining shadowmancers had run dry of shadow. As they made camp that last night, the shadowmancers knew they wouldn’t see another sunrise. Without telling the others, Saint decided to kill himself so that they could live (despite his body being so weak that his own shadows would be barely enough to save his loyal disciples). The Mystak Blade was against his throat when the Dragon Slayer came running, it seemed his sacrifice would be unnecessary. Shirahama Kemplor and Takia Eninac had beaten him to the punch. Bleeding out, Shirahama was still alive when Saint arrived. He told Saint not to be sad, that he had already lived longer than he ever believed he would, and that the worlds, Delia and Solaris, needed Saint more than he. He made Saint vow to never kill again but died before Saint could bring himself to promise. For there was still one soul he was intent on sending to the sun.

Saint, Theseus Icespear, Eir Ipativy, the Dragon Slayer, and the five last Sharemen left the mountains after burying their friends. They snuck back into Gira the same way they’d left and wasted no time. They made it straight for the palace. While they had wandered the

mountains, Creaton and his prisoner, Grandfather, had labored to create a portal in Gira. Grandfather stalled as best he could but, eventually, succumbed to the pains of torture and conceded. However, he did his best to have the portal open to one of the most treacherous places he could imagine in Solaris: within Mount Ahsik in the Black Mountains of Darkloe. It just so happened that the day the construction of the portal was complete, was the day that Saint and his companions found Creaton.

Three of the Sharemen met their fate whilst invading the palace. Thus only six: two Sharemen, the Dragon Slayer, Theseus, Eir, and Saint, made it to the chamber in which the portal stood. While Saint fought Creaton, the others slayed the guards then held the doors. Unfortunately, Notreac was within the palace. He, like Creaton, was a banshee and when he heard of the commotion he used his dark magic to teleport within the chamber. Notreac appeared, killed the last two Sharemen, then lobbed the head off Eir Ipativy to provide the distraction needed so that Creaton could slip by Saint and through the magical doorway. Saint could not restrain his fury. He turned on Notreac with the same rage that had propelled him after Creaton killed his father. Even as the Dragon Slayer and Theseus pleaded for him to stop, he could not. Despite what the Sharemen had warned and despite what Shirahama had asked of him, Saint intended to kill Notreac and he would have had the warlord not fled, breaking out a window and flying away.

Now Saint turned to the Portal of Mount Ahsik through which he pursued Creaton back into Solaris. In the belly of Mount Ahsik, surrounded by lava, Saint fought Creaton as his companions destroyed the portal. As they fought, Creaton told Saint the story of how he himself had first come upon power – how his love had been stolen from him and how he had been denied revenge, how he and Saint were so very similar. It was these words that finally broke through the fog of hatred that had entangled Saint’s mind for so long. Inside that mountain of fire, Saint swore never to kill again and, using the creative magic of the Mystak Blade, his shadowmancy, and the magma that surrounded them, Saint locked Creaton in a pillar of fire and let it harden to rock.

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“And then...” Zalfron yawned so broadly his jaw popped, “and then hae went to slaep.”

“But what happens next?” Joe was intent on getting an epilogue, “You said he left Solaris in chaos, so what’s he do? How’s he become Emperor?”

“Well, ya know how the moon dragon hatched but didn’t come down? Yea, hae came down after Saint left. So, the first thang Saint had to do was dael with that.” Zalfron rolled over so that he no longer faced Joe. Tucking himself into the blanket like it were a cocoon, he continued to speak but softer and with sloppier breaks between words, “But Saint cain’t kill so he sends the Dragon Slayerto-illitbuh...”

“Zalfron!”

“But the Dragon Slayer cain’tandfoofum...”

“Zalfron!”

“Anbanabumbamudda...”

There would be no more intelligible words from the elf until he got his sleep. Groaning, Joe rolled onto his belly and smothered his face in his pillow. *Incredible how much Saint changed from how he was in Radderock to when he left Delia. I wonder how much I'll change...* Joe thought about the crumpled body draped across the stairs... *or how much I already have.* The image wouldn't go away. It sickened his stomach. His body got cold but sweaty and he clamped a hand over his lips. With all the fighting, Joe had forgotten about all the beer they had consumed and the alien dinner with portions enough for a weeks worth of food. His bloated stomach, mixed with alcohol, guilt, and shock became a nauseous concoction that, for some reason, had taken a while to culminate. Bounding from the cot, Joe ran to the window and frantically grappled with the latch just managing to swing the pane open as the contents of his stomach soared out of his mouth. Clutching the windowsill, Joe let his head fall limp as another convulsion projected bile down on the city streets. The fit lasted only a few seconds, but still he remained at the frame.

I killed a man. He forced himself to accept it. Still, a voice in his mind attempted to justify his actions. *It was life or death, him or me. Come on, Saint's the savior of this world and he killed hundreds!* But the loudest voice in his head remained strong. *That doesn't make it right.* Taking the weight off his arms, Joe stood back up and closed the window. *You're the savior now, Joe,* he told himself as he marched back to his bed, *don't let this conflict change what you know is right.*

Chapter Eight: Sabotage on the Sea Cuber

As the clouds dissolved into the night sky, the three moons were revealed to be nothing more than slivers. Only the stars and fiery streetlamps lit the city of Portville. Morning was on its way in, slowly bringing Solaris back into view, but in the hours preceding dusk ruled with supreme darkness and, in the twilight, two youngsters milked the shadows for quick shots of adrenaline. They crept between the slabs of stone that read with addresses of the dead, flinching and giggling with every unexpected sound.

A wisp of white scurried by. Both jumped back, clasping one another as their hearts flopped like fish out of water. It could've been the ivory tuft along a skunk, but in the darkness of the cemetery the children knew it could be nothing other than the residue of a discontent soul. This was what they feared but it was also what they came for. As their hearts returned to sinus rhythm, their terror turned to tickled laughter and they pressed onward.

Their parents had forbidden them to visit the graveyard. After all, this was a day in which mancers of the Pact and Order loomed around every other corner. A graveyard was typically a magnet for such miscreants. What their parents had wrong was that most graveyards, especially Portville's, had long since been picked dry. Unfortunately, their parents weren't all together wrong, for there was a mancer roaming the grounds that night. He had figured there would be no shadows left to consume. He wasn't visiting for shadows. He'd spent his first memories roaming the Portville cemetery and had waltzed through for sentimental reasons. That said, when he saw two shadow-filled youths stumbling about the graves, he wasn't about to say, "No."

The children heard him coming – his armor clinked like distant church bells – but they chalked it up to hype-fed hallucinations. It wasn't until the girl slipped in a patch of mud, fell onto her butt and spun to suddenly be positioned to look behind them, that they realized.

She screamed.

The boy went to help her up but was split in half. A breeze had rushed by, whistling like a gust but cutting like a blade through the earth and tombstones and the little boy. His two pieces were tossed into the air like Autumn leaves swirled up by the wind. The little girl didn't even see this though. Her eyes were transfixed on the man that approached her. He was wrapped in green flames. They didn't quite illuminate him but there was an odd, iridescent emerald glow about him. There was no flesh. No meat to his bones, only bones. Bulbous and warped bones, swollen and scarred. A wolverine danced about the bulging metal that plated his chest, it was animated but seemingly alive and trapped on the façade of his armor. It would stop occasionally to lean down, putting its head between its front paws to growl, then it would get back up and continue pacing around the chest plate. The last thing of note was the Staff pinched between his body and a rope wrapped around his waist like a belt. The Staff was sapphiric in color, topped with a crimson gemstone.

She screamed again but no sound came out. Instead, blackness was torn from her throat and pulled from her mouth. She convulsed as if the act of this essence escaping her was turning her inside out. She writhed, moaning a silent moan, wishing she could see her parents one more time, wishing she could give them the comfort of telling them herself that they were right. The cemetery was not safe. The little girl did not suffer long, no where near long enough to satisfy the banshee that stepped over her crumpled body.

He left the graveyard and reunited with his guide: The Bard. The Bard wasn't a mancer, nor was he necessarily a member of the Black Crown Pact. He was a brilliant mage – if not the

best to ever live – that enjoyed luxury and thus his skills were often up for sale. As a part time agent for all sides of every conflict, he was a good man to have accompany you on a mission into no-man’s-land, especially with his particular skillset. He was – surprise! – a musician. His musical instruments enchanted and his lyrics coded so as to allow him to spew magic as he sang, waltzing through life under a spell he spread as far as his voice could reach. His body was covered in ancient ruins, invisible except when their luminescent glow was activated by his melodious ramblings – which was nigh incessant. Still, their glow was often covered by the layers and layers of flamboyant crimson. He wore an entire wardrobe of scarlet: suits, scarves, skirts, and scarlets all somehow fashioned together in a stylish fashion. On this particular night, or rather, early, early morning, he was armed with a banjo. He strummed it fiercely, singing and skipping, his scarlet chidran tails dancing about beneath his fedora.

“Heyi, eyi, oh! Eninac, Meriam both!” The Bard sang, “They’re bound by fate to fall to waves, in midst of our final days! Tragedy, sweet tragedy, why oh Lord did it have to be! Tragedy, sweet tragedy, they’ll die together happily!”

Hermes hoped he wouldn’t have to spend much longer alone with the musician and, fortunately, his hope was well placed for almost immediately after The Bard finished that last lyric a black cat ran out of an alley across the street and came to stand before the burning skeleton and his reptilian musician.

“Hello, Catherine,” Hermes said, having to speak loudly as The Bard continued to sing, “How’s Route 15?”

“Is this about last night?” Catty asked as she left her cat form in a shadowy poof. Once more, the stunning, slender dark-haired human was staring defiantly into the eyes of, what she believed to be, an opponent. She was pissed, thinking, *They’re here to punish me? They didn’t even give me time to fix it. Creaton knows I always fix it!*

“Last night?”

Clink, clink, clink, clinkclinkclinkclink –

Cobblestone was chipped and churned, zig-zagging a course through the streets. Catty’s first thought was that they had another marrow-cursed worm upon them but the tunnel was far too small and her crow eye assured her this was not the case. After the initial surprise she recognized it for what it was - a mailmole. The tunnel hit a nearby house and the mole burst to the surface. Its nose twitched, whiskers vibrating like the strings of The Bard’s banjo, then, after a quick sniff around, it ducked back into its hole and dug over to where the three stood. Again, the subterranean rodent breached the surface. The creature puffed out its chest, lifted a dirt-speckled sheet before its snout, cleared its throat, and spoke clearly in common tongue.

“Mole Hershel reporting for Aeschylus with orders from Our Lord to a Catherine Meriam! You are no longer Boss of Route 15.” A faded green turtle shell sat low over the little creature’s beady black eyes bouncing with each syllable of his message. “You are to intercept Hermes Retskcirt as he arrives in Portville with the Bar-” The mole stopped abruptly, coughing as if he choked on a fly, he continued, “*The Bard*. In order to ensure the safety of your beloved F-”

Catty snatched the sheet from the mole. The Bard and Hermes exchanged curious glances. With his beetle like eyes, the mole stared at Catty as she read. His whiskers had stopped twitching. A tear budded in the rodent’s eye. Finishing the letter, she tucked it into her collar then strode forward, between the mole and the banshee.

“Tell Mr. Roq I will do just that,” Catty knelt down and lifted the little guy’s helmet to scratch the cowlick on his scalp, “thank you, Mole Hershel.”

The mole cringed with pleasure then, with a tip of his helmet, he disappeared back down his tunnel.

“Tardiness should never be rewarded.” Hermes growled, “As a fellow rodent, I assume you empathized with the rat?”

“Rodent?” Catty hissed, “I assume when a banshee loses their flesh, they also lose their brain.”

“The allies meet and sparks fly, contemptive glares, parallel crow eyes!” The Bard declared, “Wolverine and cat working for a fox. Backstab and attack her, if her guard drops!”

Hermes and Catty turned to The Bard. His strumming slowed as he saw that the annoyance once directed at each other was now aimed at him. With a grin and a few plucks on his banjo strings, he sang, “Goodbye fair folk, I’ve earned my gold! So now I head home fore my songs grow old!”

“May I never see you again.” Hermes prayed.

The Bard danced off.

“Hmm...” Catty murmured, “Wonder if that’s why Aeschylus uses him.”

If Hermes’ lips hadn’t long since rotted off, Catty would’ve caught him smirking.

“We might actually get along, Meriam.”

“We might have no choice.”

“What happened last night?” Hermes asked as he gestured for Catty to follow him into the alley from whence she had come.

“You know of Grandfather?”

“The Knomish smith?”

Catty nodded, “He intercepted one of my shipments of dark marrow. Poured it out.”

“What a waste.” Hermes muttered, “Odd as well... he’s never been much trouble before... Are you sure it was him? Knomes all look alike, after all.”

“You can’t mistake the Suikii,” Catty responded, elaborating, “He wasn’t alone – had three young men with him, two of which come from families closely associated with the Trinity Nations.”

Catty took the lead, guiding Hermes through the narrow back-passages, taking him deeper into the city.

He asked, “And the third?”

“He was a pyromancer.”

Hermes perked up, “He wasn’t human, was he?”

The sun was rising, the stars and moon were slowly being painted over by blue skies. This stripe of sapphire, wedged between rooftops, was all that could be seen above them.

How’d he know that? Catty wondered. Of all the races, a human would’ve been Catty’s last guess. She asked, “What is the reason for me meeting you here?”

“Our Lord has instructed me to hunt down a human boy from Earth.” Hermes answered, “A boy that some in the Bastard Emperor’s tightest circle believe to be the Sun Child.”

“He’s in the Barren’s Mullet!” Catty exclaimed, “Right now! As we speak!”

Before she could take off towards the infamous tavern, Hermes halted her with a shout.

“Wait!” He strode around her, blocking the alley before her, “We must wait.”

Despite her hatred for being told what to do, Catty knew he was right. After the battle at the bar, it was sure to be crawling with heated patriots. Even with a banshee around, it would be quite risky to try and fight their way to the pyromancer – especially if the four infamous veterans

still lingered. Sniper and his crew would love to get a chance to kill the man who had defeated the last Samurai. Yet, Hermes didn't know they were there – *Foes he?*

“Why?” She demanded.

“I have a plan.”

Rolling her eyes, she took his bait, “Which is?”

“Aren't you curious how Creaton heard about this Earthboy?”

The woman replied with an impatient glare.

Hermes continued, “Of course you are! Curiosity is your kind's weakness, isn't it?”

Her eyes, already rolled, couldn't afford another despite how much his words deserved such.

“Well, Our Lord sent me to find one of his old boneguards and destroy an old book that belonged to the undead – a book of prophecies.”

Catty scoffed, “Do you believe in the boogiemán, too?”

“I have no choice but to!” Hermes argued, “I've been ordered to kill him!”

“Then let's get on with it!” Catty cried.

“If the book is right, then we will have plenty of chances to and, if the book is right, then letting the Earthboy run for a little while longer will work to,” here he lied for, from what he had read, delaying the murder of Joe would benefit himself but it would ruin his new partner, “our advantage.”

“And if it is wrong?” Catty asked.

“Then he isn't Saint's savior and will be no trouble to us anyway. We will abandon my plan, swoop in, and kill him as easy as a spider kills a fly.” Hermes concluded.

“When will we know?”

“Today,” Hermes said, “we will meet them on board a ship. The Earthboy and his friends will escape, but we will capture Grandfather.”

“Not as long as he has the Suikii!” Catty laughed.

Hermes shook his skull, “Precisely. Iahtró knows it seems nigh impossible to capture that weasel which makes this all the better for testing the reliability of the book.”

Catty didn't trust Hermes. Yet, she also knew that returning to the tavern would be suicidal. Approaching the pyromancer on the high seas – away from the help of radical Antipas – would be the most practical approach to the mission. Even less than Hermes did she trust the word of fortune tellers. Her hatred for prophecies gave her a sick desire to shatter such predictions. But then there was the curiosity. How long had it been since she'd seen a pyromancer? Wouldn't there have to be something to this boy to get a skittish character like Grandfather to stick his neck out in a war he'd been essentially avoiding? *Might as well ride it out*, she figured.

“As soon as you find a word of that book untrue, we end this silly game and kill the pyromancer as we were ordered.” Catty stated.

“Deal. Now, how's your eye on shadows?”

Rising with Solaris, Joe, Grandfather, Zalfron, and Nogard left the Barren's Mullet. The quickest way to God's Island would've been by dragon but, ever since Talloome Icelore attacked

the capital, security had been increased and only ship traffic was allowed into the city. They could've flown to a nearer port but the boys wanted to see Nogard off personally and so Grandfather figured they might as well book the long ride to the capital. Still there were two options: sail north or south. To head north from Portville would have taken roughly two days (approximately four naecos). However, the eternal foe of sea goers, known as the Iahtro Storm, had been orbiting God's Island for a week now and, for the last few days, he'd been hanging out in God's Ocean – the body of water they'd sail into as they moved north of Tadloe. The other option, to travel south, would take at least three days (approximately six naecos) and have them approaching God's Island through Iahtro's Ocean which – despite the name – had been free of the Storm for the last few days. Either route was risky – simply approaching God's Island with Iahtro in the vicinity was risky. The Storm had a will of its own, as it was in fact its own being (but that's a story for another day) and not only could it move far faster than a ship, it could change direction at any moment. Most ships were simply refusing to sail anywhere near God's Island for the time being. Most but not all. There was one ship, the *Sea Cuber*, that was ready to brave the waters troubled by the great hurricane.

This peculiar braveness was due in whole to the cargo: Knomes. Sense the vast majority of the Knomish race came from beneath the world's crust, in a place called the Under, most Knomes on the surface were there as tourists or vacationers. Knomes would've loved to settle in the light of Solaris, and some did, but widespread discrimination discouraged it. Solarins saw Knomes as liars and thieves and treated them as such. Few businesses catered to Knomes. The *Sea Cuber* was one of the only vessels in the harbor of Portville willing to permit Knomes onboard and, in doing so, it quickly was overflowing with the little people. Especially considering the fact that Shield Day – a week-long Knomish holiday – was due to begin Monday (which would be tomorrow for Joe and his friends) on the island of Knomeloe. Like the rest of Solarins, Knomes didn't much care for Knomes. Though they were forced to live amongst their kind, Knomes tended to find amongst themselves in a manner that, to an outsider, appeared almost instinctual. Even without their reputation to non-Knomish Solarins, the fact that a flock of Knomes guaranteed mayhem made it highly unlikely a Knomish boat would be admitted into the capital, but Grandfather assured his followers that they'd find a way to switch ships before their arrival.

The piers were packed, as was the harbor. Fat bellied ships shifted into port and down the river. Their bulging wooden guts and tall slender masts reminded Joe of swans. Between these large vessels, smaller boats slipped in and out of the way – like ducks darting between the bevy of larger birds. Some pulled right up to the artificial shore made of cobblestone road trimmed with large cinderblocks split occasionally by fat, thumb-like cleats, others tethered themselves further out, dropping ramps onto gangly wooden piers that stretched out into the bay, while the largest of ships anchored in the distance and sent small tendering boats of passengers into town. Joe's head was on a swivel as they weaved their way down the crowded seaside street. The gangplank Grandfather brought them to was eerily empty. Joe felt as if they'd just surfaced after a long dive as they left the masses behind and headed down the rotting dock the *Sea Cuber* floated beside. Not a soul was in sight – neither tall nor short – and as they marched up the ramp, Joe realized they hadn't even had to pay.

“Anything you don't want stolen,” Grandfather said, “go ahead and throw overboard. And if they steal something, don't act out. That'll only identify you as an easy target. They'll likely assault me upon our arrival, y'all just keep going. Get below deck and find yourselves an empty room and don't let anyone in except for me. Can't trust these bastards.”

“He be right, Civ,” Nogard nodded, “Racist, but right.”

“Of all the Knomes ah’ve met,” Zalfron said, “cain’t remember one good thang bout em.”

If you can remember anything about them at all, Joe kept the quip to himself. He asked, “It seems like we might not have much to worry about, the ship looks empty.”

“Don’t let my punctuality fool you. My kinfolk run on banshee time.” Grandfather continued his hate speech, “Trust me, the ship will surpass capacity and I’d like for us to be locked away in a cabin before it does. No time for lollygagging.”

No sooner had they set foot on the deck than did a trumpet blow from above the helm. As if they spawned out of the scaffold itself, flocks of Knomes were on the boys’ heels before the tone ended. The four were now wading through a mob of bobbing cone hats. They alternated between swatting prodding phalanges and keeping their hands clamped over their pockets. Fortunately, most of the kleptos were too preoccupied with bullying one another. Many a Knome was thrown from the ramp before they made it up onto the deck.

Despite being surrounded by their own kind, it seemed that when they accidentally made eye contact it ignited a bewildered rage. For instance, halfway up the ramp a Knome turned and found himself facing Grandfather. His eyes widened and he sputtered for a moment before they narrowed again.

“You! You’re...I know you...” the Knome growled.

Grandfather seemed captivated by the urge as well. For as the boys tried to nudge him along he stopped in his tracks to face down the challenger.

“Farak off, son,” Grandfather growled, the Suikii appearing in his hand.

“You godi, crimpsin tiad...”

The Knome, armed with a Shield Day shield charged – shoving other Knomes out of the way as he did. Grandfather spun, slicing open a portal and disappearing only to reappear behind the charging Knome as he skidded to a stop at the edge of the ramp.

“Godi Knome!” Grandfather bellowed as he planted a foot in the back of the Knome, sending him toppling off the ramp.

Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard were quite alarmed. Even more so when they saw that those Knomes disturbed by the shield toter’s charge were now charging towards Grandfather. The old, black garbed Knome didn’t have time to turn before he was bashed in the back by shield and tossed off the ramp after his foe. A moment later, he appeared amidst the Knomes, higher up on the ramp before the three boys, stepping out of a portal.

“Just get up and below deck!” Grandfather roared, raising the Suikii above his head to assure them, “I’ll meet you there!”

This only served to draw Knomish attention to the unnaturally darkness of his blade. Whispers and gasps of awe began to circulate as they realized it was the infamous Knomish blade – and realized it’s weilder must be none other than Grandfather. The hero of all Knomes. That said, even heroes have debts.

“Aye!” One Knome shouted, hidden in the sea of cones, “You owe me money!”

“I owe y-” Grandfather cut himself off to roar back, “YOU OWE ME!”

“We don’t owe you!”

“You ungrateful...”

As the mosh pit resumed, the boys trudged onwards.

Zalfron leaned towards Joe and whispered, “Ever sae anythan lahk this on Earth?”

“I don’t dink I’ve seen anyding like dis benead Solaris.” Nogard noted.

Zalfron concurred, “This manay Knomes in one place could put an end to the world.”

By the time they made it below deck and into a cabin, no one had any desire to leave.

The room was rectangular, with a booth by the window in one corner, two sets of bunk beds in the other, and a kitchen table in the third. Thankfully, the vessel had not been built for Knomes. It was tight, the roof was still too low for Zalfron to stand up straight, but perfectly tolerable for someone of Joe's own size. Sitting across from each other in the booth, they entertained themselves by talking and taking turns peering out their single porthole. It didn't take Grandfather long to join them, Suikii-ing in. He was *not* in a good mood.

They were heading west and were expected to see the frosty banks of Oreh Island by noon. It was around that time when Grandfather noticed that something was off. Nogard was puffing his pipe, Zalfron was snoring, and Joe was leaning over him to stare out the porthole at the fuzzy outline of Iceload hiding behind Oreh Island. Yanking off his cone, Grandfather shuffled through the contents of his hat with one hand and scratched his curly white hair with the other. He felt as though he was forgetting something, the same nagging feeling that occurs when you can't remember a word, and though he couldn't place it he knew there was something off.

His eyes grew wide.

"Farak!"

Nogard choked on smoke and Zalfron sat upright so quickly that the back of his head clocked Joe in the chin.

"The warp cube! The one I gave you!" Grandfather dove forward and shoved his hands into Joe's pockets, "Where is it?"

Joe looked down at the Knome who stood a little too close for comfort. *I swear I guarded my pocket*, but from Grandfather's expression he could tell it wasn't there. Grandfather retracted his hands, returned back to his side of the booth, slipped his hat back on, then slammed his head on the bench.

"My key..." Joe muttered, digging in his pocket for himself. It was gone. As was the ring on his finger. He shook his head.

"Did you lock it?" Grandfather asked.

"Lock it?" Joe asked.

Grandfather's temple returned to the bench, "Farak."

Nogard nudged the Knome with the stem of his pipe and Grandfather accepted the offer.

"Thank you could get it back from em?" Zalfron asked.

"Get it back? Get it back! Did you not just endure the insanity? Even if I could get them to listen, they all look the same! I'll end up searching the same Knome a hundred times over!" Grandfather moaned.

"Ya know Civ, you may be a Knome and you may have a point, but dat's pretty racist." Nogard stated.

"Ain't gotta crah about it." Zalfron tried to shrug off the emotional toll of Grandfather's ridicule, "Ain't no sense in crahin over spilt baer."

The elf propped his feet up on Grandfather's empty seat and slumped back down to go to sleep. Grandfather's tiny hands balled into fists. He was one second away from storming over to Zalfron and pummeling the elf. Nogard pacified the old man by handing the pipe back his way.

"He be right, dough." Nogard admitted.

"We've got to find it!" Joe said, standing, "If they get ahold of those keys..." he shuddered, "would they know how to use them?"

“It isn’t exactly Voidstone science! But you sit down.” Grandfather commanded, “You three stay here, I’ll go.” Grandfather marched over to the door but before he left he repeated his order, begging, “Please, do not leave this room, okay?”

Joe and Nogard nodded. Zalfron was already half asleep.

“Zalfron?!” Grandfather demanded.

“Alraht!” Zalfron jerked upright, “Ah ain’t gonna laeve the room!” He slumped back down, mumbling, “Tahd...”

Satisfied, Grandfather opened the door and shut it swiftly behind him to keep the curious river of Knomes from flowing in.

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Standing before the door to the suite, Grandfather slipped off his hat and tossed Joe’s warp cube (inside of which he’d put Joe’s ring) in with the rest of his trinkets – most of which were other warp cubes – then he looked around. The passageway was empty aside from a few Knomes here and there, none of which seemed to notice him or particularly care about the room he stood before which was a drastic difference from the hall he’d left. *Those blasted boys!* He put on the hat, flung the door open, and strode in. He was right. The boys were gone. As soon as his brain translated this into thought the door slammed shut behind him. His smile dropped dead as something excruciatingly hot wrapped around his neck. A split second later, he was lifted off his feet and pinned against the wall.

“This time your pyromancer won’t come to your rescue.”

Catty’s voice chilled his nerve endings but not enough to compensate for the burning grip. It wasn’t her hand holding him, though her hand was raised as if she was, it was shadows. Across the room, she stood in the corner by the table. A ray of darkness stretched from her fingers to the Knome, pressing him to the wall with a steaming embrace.

Round two, here we... Grandfather jostled his wrist...go? The Suikii didn’t answer. The interdimensional blade had only abandoned him a few times before but normally there was some kind of warning, a short break up before the absolute rejection, *Great timing.* He’d have sighed if he had the breath to do so. *If that sword ever comes back I swear I’ll...I’ll...*

“Where’s your toy?”

Lowering her hand, the shadow chokehold remained around Grandfather’s throat. She drew one of her hilts but then hesitated.

“You are Grandfather, aren’t you?”

The Knome squirmed. He swatted at the hot blackness that pinned him but only accomplished burning his palms. As if she actually were part cat, she took her time. She took each step torturously slow.

“Whether you are or not, you are a Knome, and this is the room the Earthboy was-”

The sword came!

He sliced through the shadows binding him to the wall. Catty lunged but was too late. Before he even touched the ground, Grandfather had sliced open a portal, fell through, and the sword shut it behind him. Catty cursed. The Suikii dropped the old Knome behind her and Catty whirled around at the sound of his boots on the tabletop. He ran off the table and jumped, swinging the Suikii. She parried and ducked, allowing Grandfather to roll over her shoulder and slam against the far wall as she yanked her second hilt out of its sheath. Once again, Grandfather

opened a window through which to fall before hitting the floor. Catty backed into the corner she'd hid in before and let her blades swell with shadows.

When the Knome reappeared, above the booth seats by the porthole, she swung her blades in the air and launched darts of wispy shadow. He sliced through the first, deflected the second, ducked under the third, leapt over the fourth, swung the Suikii beneath him as he hung in the air, then disappeared before he could be struck by the final.

"Cheating!" She hissed.

Appearing beneath the table, Grandfather sliced her across the back of her calves (which was truly merciful seeing as the Suikii was sharp enough to cut both her legs clean off). She buckled but twisted to stab under the table as she fell. The Knome was already gone.

"And shadowmancy isn't?"

Grandfather had spoken to soon. As soon as the first syllable reached her ear she realized that Grandfather had reappeared in the corner above and behind her. Dropping her swords, she put her palms to the floor and, ignoring her bleed legs, she swung her body heels-over-head to deliver a beautiful double-mule-kick straight into the old Knome's groin. The kick threw him against the wall. This time, he was in far too much pain to open a portal before sliding to the floor.

The two glared at each other from opposite sides of the suite.

I underestimated him. She forced herself to stand, *No. I underestimated his sword.* Grandfather didn't budge. Catty marched forward, refusing to flinch as each step wracked her body in pain. She drew back both her swords. Still Grandfather remained on the floor, holding the Suikii in one hand and his balls in the other. *What's he up to?* She was right in front of him and he still remained motionless. Even as she crisscrossed her blades and pushed the crux up against the old man's neck, he didn't move.

They stood there for a moment before Catty finally lowered her weapons and staggered back a step.

"I'm not going to execute you."

"Why not?" Grandfather shrugged, "I'm done."

"What?"

"I'm done!" Grandfather exclaimed, "That kick!" He adjusted his hand and shuddered, "I'm done. Do what you must," he bowed his head, "kill me."

"You're not done."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not."

"Wanna bet?"

"Yea." Catty strode forward, flipped one of her swords upsides down in her grasp, then stabbed Grandfather through the foot. The Knome howled in pain. Catty yanked her sword free and retreated back to the other side of the room.

"CRIMPSIN TIAD, you godi crow!" Grandfather was up, hopping on one foot, "You gonna torture me if I don't fight?"

"Yes."

"You wanna fight?" Grandfather roared, "Here's your fight!"

He sliced at the air. Nothing happened. He paused, cursed his blade, then ran – or hopped – to the door. Catty didn't bother stopping him.

"The legend's true." Catty sighed, "The great Knomish smith is nothing but a coward."

Grandfather ignored her, hobbling onwards.

In the passageway, a crowd of Knomes had gathered to listen to the fight. Some had even taken to collecting money for any Knomes willing to place bets, despite having no clue who was actually fighting within the room and how one would decipher who bet on who. Some had merely been passing through, got caught in the crowd, forgot what they were doing, and decided to stick around to see if they could make anything of the awful commotion going on behind the door. All in all, over fifty Knomes had gathered in only a few minutes and by the time Grandfather appeared in the doorway, either due to gambling disputes or simple Knome-on-Knome aggression, the cluster had devolved into a shield-bashing brawl.

The brawl paused momentarily as they turned to see Grandfather.

“He has the Suikii!” One of the Knomes said.

“Grandfather’s on our ship?!” Another said.

“You didn’t know?”

“Yikes...” One grimaced, “*That’s* Grandfather?”

“Yes, I’m Grandfather!” Grandfather snapped, “Get out of my way.”

“Hey!” One Knome crowed, “He owes me money!”

“He owes me too!” Another shouted.

“GET OUT OF MY WAY!”

Grandfather would’ve been reunited with Death, falling prey to the assaults of a dozen shields but the arrival of Catherine Meriam in the doorway saved him.

“That’s Catty.” One stated.

Another echoed louder, “That’s Catty!”

Catty tried to wade forward but the Knomes were so excited to see such an infamous celebrity that they tightened around her, tiny fingers extending in the hopes of being able to touch her.

“Step aside.” Catty snarled.

They were literally climbing over each other, pushing each other out of the way just so that they could return home and brag that they’d not only gotten to see Catherine Meriam, but they’d gotten to touch her.

“Step aside!” Catty had had enough, “STEP ASIDE YOU GODI MIDGETS!”

“*MIDGETS?!?*”

The entire ship shuddered at the sound of the outraged mob of little men.

Feeling somewhat guilty for slinging a racial slur, Catherine did her best not to hurt the raging Knomes too much as she fought back their fury. After all, she’d already lost. Grandfather was nowhere to be seen.

He’d booked it through the crowd when the attention had shifted, wincing each time his foot hit the floor boards. He took a turn down the first intersection he could find then stopped. *The boys!* No sooner had they crossed his mind than did he hear something tremendous. Again the ship shook, only this time it was for an unnatural reason. The sound was so sudden and short, like a clap, one almost could’ve missed it had it not been so eerie. Like fingernails on a chalkboard combined with the pound of canon fire. Most were unfamiliar with the sound and immediately wrote it off.

Most of those that continued to ponder it stopped after a second or two anyways as the *Sea Cuber* began to fall apart. Fissures craved through the ship like a lightning bolt, appearing so suddenly it was as if some god had commanded the ship to split apart. Water could be heard smashing up through the cracks in the base while tearing wood and metal echoed throughout the rest of the vessel. Diced into pieces, the ship would soon be submerged.

Grandfather acted quickly and the Suikii was ready. A portal opened on his first swing. Darkness, pure darkness, like the shadows Catty had thrown at him, was all he could see on the other side. Grandfather tried to swallow his spit but his throat had run dry.

Nonetheless, he hopped through.

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“Nogard, that a new robe?” Zalfron asked, he’d given up on trying to sleep barely a minute after Grandfather left and had begun to ask questions that made both his travel mates wonder whether or not he had ever looked at them twice. Before this question, he’d asked Joe if his hair had always been brown.

“Dis?” Nogard looked down at the robe, orange polka dotted with green and yellow flowers, “Nah Civ, same as da one ya met me in.” He split a mischievous grin, “When dat nose of yours get so pointy, Civ?”

“Saerassly, you look diffrent.” Zalfron replied.

“I don’t know about lookin different, Civ, but I do feel like I be forgettin-”

“Where’s your sword?” Joe asked.

Nogard reached down and patted the leather sheath that hung by his side – the empty leather sheath. His eyes bulged.

“Could ya have left it back at the tavern?” Zalfron suggested.

“Na! I remember having it when Grandfadder said-”

“The Knomes!” Joe exclaimed.

Zalfron’s eyes widened, “The Knomes!”

“Da Knomes!” Nogard roared, storming out the door of their cabin, “Dose donum Knomes!”

Joe and Zalfron stared at the door, looked at each other, then followed. Nogard hadn’t gotten far. As soon as he opened the door, he was swarmed by Knomes. Trembling with rage, he grabbed the closest one, lifted him off the ground, and slammed him against the wall. The Knomes that filled the hall around them stopped their bickering to watch, with appalled gasps, this unprovoked act of aggression.

“Where’s mah sword, Civ?”

“Your sword? What do you mean? I didn’t steal your sword! I don’t have a sword. Did someone take your sword? I would never-”

“WHERE’S MAH SWORD, CIV!”

“Jimboob Perrywinkle took it!”

“And where be dis Jimboob Perrywinkle?”

“On the deck! You’ll spot him. He’s the only one with your sword-”

Nogard dropped the snitch and began to work his way through the Knomes. Joe and Zalfron followed as the Knomes began to disperse, half of them murmuring about the incredible rudeness of chidras’ while the other half raided the boy’s room in search of anything worth stealing. They began fighting with one another over the loot before they’d even found anything.

“Maybe we should wait for Grandfather?” Joe suggested.

“A very important man gave me dat sword.” Nogard growled in response.

“Yer daddy?” Zalfron asked.

“Never met me fadder.”

“Your brother?” Joe asked.

Nogard nodded, "Sharp Otubak," his voice was so strained by rage that he was practically hissing, "I'd radder die dan see someone hold dat sword widdout bearin da name Otubak!"

The closer they got to the stairwell, the tighter the mass of Knomes became around their hips. Unlike the passengers they'd encountered in their passageway, these seemed less interested with the boys and, instead, moved in the same direction as if they too sought to see Nogard's sword. Their desire to get above deck was so strong that the flock was relatively peaceful towards one another. Moving with the current of the Knomes propelled the boys along. It was like riding a stampede of baboons. Even if they changed their minds and chose to turn back and wait for Grandfather they would've been trampled by a hundred tiny feet the moment they tried to do so. The afternoon sun was blinding on their way up the stairs. When they came out onto the deck it took them a few minutes of blinking and squinting before they could see. What they saw froze them in their tracks.

There was Nogard's sword but it was not in the hands of a Knome. Joe had never seen the man who stood before the mast, holding the sword, but he recognized him. The bear-like skull, dented and fractured, and the emerald flames that enveloped the man gave it away in a heartbeat: Hermes Retskcirt. The wolverine on his chest plate pranced about impatiently, eyeing the boys with wild silver specks for eyes.

"How do you kill a banshee, again?" Joe whispered.

"Lop off their noggin," Zalfron replied, "or stab em through the heart."

"And he has our only sword." Joe muttered.

Nogard was undaunted, "I'm going ta kill him, Civ."

Human-like figures made of shadows formed a perimeter around the banshee, keeping the congregation of curious Knomes at bay. There was more than a few of the passengers that were considering risking their life to dash in an attempt to yank the blue rod of the Soul Staff out from where it was strapped to Hermes' body by a knotted loop in the rope around his waist, but somehow they held back. When Hermes raised Nogard's sword, squeaks of excitement emitted from the audience.

"Nogard Otubak," Hermes said, his voice made Joe's brain throb, "what a nice sword."

"Drop it if ya know what's good for ya!" Nogard demanded.

"I came to kill the pyromancer, but first, I think I want to fight someone else." Hermes said, dragging each word out, ensnaring the three with anticipation, "It's not every day you meet one of Dresdan's bastard sons."

He tossed Nogard his sword and drew his own, a larger, broader weapon. The symbol of the Black Crown Pact was carved in red upon the hilt. Nogard caught his sword by the handle and the blade hit the deck. Yanking it from the gash the heavy weapon made in the floor, he strode forward, leaving Joe and Zalfron a step behind. The two glanced at each other, gulped, then moved up to stand back beside their comrade.

"You aren't fighting him alone." Joe stated.

"Wae've gotcha back." Zalfron nodded.

"Ha!" Hermes crowed, "A pyromancer and...what? A peasant? And not a blade betweenst them. Stand aside."

Four of the shadowy figures left the ring around their séancer and glided through the air. Losing their humanoid shape, they wrapped around Joe and Zalfron's bodies, pinning their arms to their sides. The shadows pulled them away from Nogard. They struggled beneath the dark energy's scorching grasp then Hermes pointed his blade at Nogard and everyone froze.

The stillness was ushered in with a sound something like teeth grinding accompanied by a deep resounding thud. Everyone, even the Knomes, shut their eyes tight, covered their ears, and cringed for the brief duration. It could have lasted for an hour or for only a few split seconds, but when it was over it almost felt as though it had never happened at all.

When Nogard opened his eyes it was dark. At first he thought he had passed out and woke up twelve hours later, but he wrote that hypothesis off pretty quick. He was still on the ship, only the ship was a shade of darkness. The entire world had been translated into differing degrees of two colors: black and white. Joe and Zalfron behind him were glowing silhouettes of white distinguishable only by the darkness around them. Even the herd of Knomes beyond them shone with a brilliant glow. Before Nogard, Hermes' had melted into a singular shadow of light in a world of dark, a pure white silhouette of what the banshee had been.

The fury-induced resolve Nogard'd had beneath the light of Solaris had suddenly abandoned him. A wave of chills swept over the chidra. He was alone, in the dark, juxtaposed against a giant.

"Welcome to Total Darkness, Nogard," Hermes said.

The ocean water was blacker than the ship, the distant shoreline was but a glowing string on the horizon. All things were still. The waves, the ship, the people, including Joe and Zalfron were frozen. Only he and Hermes seemed to be able to move.

"What you see is power. You're seeing with the eyes of a banshee." Hermes continued, "Some are brighter than others and some are so bright that their power emanates from their body like fire."

Hermes' flames were no longer green, but instead white. *What about me?* Nogard looked down at himself and his eyes widened. He too was covered in white flame. *Woh!* Looking back, he realized his comrades were too. What he'd taken to be the shadows that bound them he now realized to be radiant auras that almost blotted out their dark bindings completely.

"In this realm, I am the way in and I am the way out. As long as we're here, only you or I can die." Hermes explained, "There is nowhere to run and no one to defend you."

Nogard swallowed his spit and raised his sword.

Hermes was upon him as if he hadn't even taken a step, as if he had simply teleported to stand a yard from Nogard. Hermes swung. Nogard raised his sword to block. The sheer force of the undead's swing almost bowled the chidra off his feet. The swipe tore open the air itself. It was as if the wind rushed forward by the swinging blade continued after Nogard's parry, carrying with it in that fierce gust the same sharpness and threat as the physical edge of Hermes blade. The gusts shot past on either side of Nogard, cutting through the planks behind him.

Nogard jumped back but there was no getting space between him and the ivory silhouette before him. Again, Hermes swung, aiming at Nogard's legs, then his gut, then his head. Each attack Nogard was forced to deflect and stumble backwards. Each attack, sharp winds broke off from where he blocked and crashed into the deck, bursting wood into splinters. After one particular stroke, Nogard risked a glance back – sure that one of the sharp winds would've been in line to strike his frozen allies. He saw the narrow wisps of energy hit their glowing facades, but it did nothing. Just as they couldn't move, they couldn't be harmed. That appeared not to be the case for the soulless exterior of the *Sea Cuber*.

It didn't take long for Hermes to have forced Nogard past Joe and Zalfron and into the doorway above the stairs that led below deck. He was forced back into the narrow stairwell, where the walls were already riveted, some even collapsed, as collateral damage of Hermes'

assaults. Nogard knew he would have far less options for evasion the further down into the ship they went. In the even thinner halls below, he knew the fight wouldn't last another minute.

I have to find a way past him. As soon as the thought graced his mind, he knew the only way. Between the burly white figure's legs – through the silent thrashing flames. Nogard was tall but the banshee had a good two feet on him, not to mention the extra couple inches Hermes got thanks to his heavy armored boots. It'd still be passing through the eye of the needle but Nogard couldn't think of a better plan and it was now or never. He parried a final blow from the banshee then dropped his sword, tucked his head, and dove. He scurried across the deck for a little way on all fours before managing to get to his feet and turn to face the ex-Doom Warrior.

But Hermes was gone. Nogard was left staring at the empty doorway and the frozen silhouettes of Joe and Zalfron. For a moment, he noticed the destruction of the deck. The planks were split, rearing up like the frozen waves below, but despite being cracked and shattered, the ship still held together. It was as if the Knomes and his friends, with their bodies frozen and immovable, kept the ship from caving into the sea.

"I control this realm."

Nogard spun around, his heart clinging to his ribs. Hermes stood behind him, Nogard's father's sword in one hand and the banshee's own in the other.

"I am everywhere and I am nowhere. I could jump to Mount Krynor and leave you to wander the frozen sea for centuries until I chose to appear back behind you, to deliver what, by then, you'll be longing for. Maybe then you'd be worth a fight, not now." Hermes raised Nogard's sword, "It is unfortunate...It looked as if you'd be just as strong as your brother, but it seems you're too afraid to harness whatever promise you've got trapped inside you. You're all talk. Nothing but a waste of time."

The sword, which had once belonged to Captain Dresdan of the *Obsidian Sail* and had been handed down to Sharp Otubak the Mystakle Samurai before it came to Nogard, wavered in Hermes' hand as if it were a flag rippling in the wind. Nogard watched with terror, gasping as he realized what was happening a split second before the blade burst into pieces. The shards shot into the air, twinkling like stars against the black ether that had replaced the sky. With a haunting laugh, that echoed through the dark world as if it were a cave, Hermes threw the hilt at Nogard's feet.

Now the fear swirling about in Nogard's belly died, not because he was no longer afraid, but because there was no longer any hope. His gut sank, his throat throbbed, and his heart fluttered like a dying moth. His sword was gone. He was useless. He was completely powerless against Hermes without a sword. Nogard fell to his knees and closed his eyes. *It's over.* Nogard took a deep breath and Hermes raised his sword – *I'm done for.* – then brought it down-

CHINK.

"Get up, son!"

Nogard opened his eyes and gasped. Though the figure before him was nothing more than a three-foot silhouette, Nogard knew immediately who it was. The little Knome was glowing as bright as Hermes, brighter even, and the sword in his hands was shining just as bright.

"The Suikii," Nogard murmured, "Grandfadder!"

The Knome and the bearn's flames smashed against each other, the Suikii blocking the swing that would've been the death of Nogard Otubak.

"You should know better than to duel a friend of the Suikii!" Grandfather growled.

Hermes took a few steps back and readied himself for the Knome to attack, asking, “Two on one is it then?”

“Zero on zero,” Grandfather replied, “Nogard, let’s go.”

With one sweep of the Suikii, a portal opened in the colorless dimension. Grandfather didn’t have to repeat himself, Nogard grabbed his blade-less hilt and dove through the portal. Grandfather followed. Color returned to the world as the damned dimension closed and the two returned to the realm where time kept ticking. To Joe and Zalfron, hardly a second had passed.

“There’s a dome below us,” Grandfather said as he limped forward to slice the boys from their burning, shadowy bondage, “Y’all can swim, right?”

“Why?” Joe asked, blinking as if he could blink away the confusion he felt at the sudden appearance of his miniature savior.

There was no need for an answer. At that moment, there was another gut-wrenching roar – again it was something like a thunder but there was also a tearing of metal mixed in with it and, this time, it was not unnatural or mysterious. It was immediately evident what caused the noise. The deck of the *Sea Cuber* had been broken into pieces, cracks split the surface like the fissure preceding the collapse of a sink hole. These gashes in the floorboards ran deep. The entire ship quaked and shifted. The flock of Knomes began to dance about, screaming and yelping and running this way and that with their shields held high.

“RUN!” Grandfather commanded.

The boys ran, Nogard leading the way.

Grandfather turned to stand between his departing comrades and the banshee, keeping his weight on his left foot. Watching the three run away, the banshee snickered.

“You can’t protect them forever,” Hermes hollered, “Knome.”

“One day, I won’t have to.” Grandfather whispered, aloud he shouted, “Go ahead, chase them.” Now it was he who chuckled, twirling his legendary sword.

With a roar, the banshee strode forward and swung for Grandfather’s head. At that moment, the floor fell beneath Grandfather and he disappeared from the deck. Hermes whirled around to avoid falling as two sections of the floor split between his feet. The whirl was perfectly timed, for Grandfather had just hopped out of a portal behind him.

“Walk away.” Grandfather warned, “You’re young. Too young to be a Pacter.”

“Too young? I’m undead, Knome.”

The banshee laughed but paused in his attacks to jump to higher ground as an entire chunk of the ship dropped two feet. Most of the port side of the ship had already peeled off into the ocean. Rumbling, the ship began to pitch west as waves crashed into its exposed façade. Knomes dove overboard into the thrashing ocean, shrieking with delighted joy in the face of the chaos. Grandfather continued to distract Hermes, hoping that the boys would be far away by the time the banshee got tired of their banter.

He yelled over the commotion, “Why’d you go to Creaton?”

Hermes launched a sharp wind at Grandfather. The Knome dove to safety only for the floor beneath him to be yanked away as the boat pitched to the portside – cancelling out its earlier lean and leaving Grandfather falling straight down towards the sea. He quickly swiped the Suikii and slipped headfirst through a portal. Again he appeared on the collapsing deck before Hermes.

“Have you not read the book?” Hermes asked.

Grandfather’s glare narrowed. Though he wasn’t staring at Hermes. There had been a particularly loud wine concluded by a SNAP! It would’ve seemed no more significant than any

of the other clamor had Grandfather not spotted the culprit: the main mast, which rose far down the deck but directly in line with Hermes.

“I’ve read what not even Creaton himself has read.” Hermes said with his armored chest puffed out like a rooster.

Grandfather let him talk as the mast began to lean.

“I know what not even Creaton himself understands, that is, what this Joe of yours means for Solaris.”

Finally, the great sail-hoisting telephone pole left its base and toppled down.

“Save your lies for younger ears.” Grandfather snapped.

Hermes reared back to launch another sharp wind but his arm was stopped mid-rear as the mast came crashing down to sever it. It tore through his armor, yanking him to the side, leaving him open to Grandfather who happily capitalized. After all, the rest of the mast smashed the chunk of planks he stood besides, launching him up as if he stood upon a see-saw. With the flat side of his blade, he clubbed the undead bearn’s cracked and broken cranium off his spine.

As he landed on the mast, which was still plunging downward, through the ship, finalizing what Hermes had begun by splitting what was left of the *Sea Cuber* in two, he wasted no time to look back and bask in the glory of his victory. He’d just killed Hermes Retskcirt. And, for all he knew, his delinquent Knomish comrades might’ve successfully distracted Catty for long enough that the Meriam may have met her own demise by the unforgiving, all-consuming sea. Still, he had to get out. Running up the mast as it tipped increasingly perpendicular, it’s severed rear jutting up towards Solaris, Grandfather sliced the Suikii this way and that.

It wasn’t until he slipped off the sail-sporting trunk after his wounded foot finally gave out, that the Suikii complied. Though it complied, opening a portal beneath the falling Knome as it had many, many times before, one might argue that it wasn’t really complying with Grandfather. More so with those that pursued him.

Catherine had not met a maritime fate. She’d escaped on a dingy to watch the *Sea Cuber* crumble into the sea like an eroding sandstone bolder. Even after it sank, she waited about near its surface watching the shadow energy of the Knomes swimming towards the shore of Oreh Island. She would remain loyal to her Lord and wait to see if the hot headed undead had fallen prey to the old escape artist, she stood waiting, even as her wounds begged for her to kneel.

It was there that Grandfather appeared. Before her, on the dingy.

A wild smile stretched across her face.

“Truce?” Grandfather grinned back.

“Ha!” Catty crowed.

“I cut Hermes’ head off. He’s dead.” Grandfather said, “Come on, I won’t tell Creaton.”

She rolled her eyes as she pulled her sheathes from their holsters and manifested both blades with shadows.

“Let him live.”

Grandfather pivoted to see Hermes pulling himself up out of the sea with shadows. Not only had the banshee’s arm *and* armor been re-attached, but his skull was also firmly back in place as well. The prancing wolverine on his chest plate was going crazy at the sight of the Knome, as where the green flames that engulfed the ghost.

Catty took a deep breath and let it out slowly, “Why?” Catty’s voice was even more heart-stopping than the undeads. She turned to stare coolly at her partner, sheathing her swords, “Do you want the pleasure?”

“No.” He turned from Catty to Grandfather, “You will make me a sword.”

Re-drawing a sword, Catty took another step towards Grandfather but her words were to Hermes, "You're an idiot."

Grandfather didn't budge. He plopped down on his butt, content to let the two decide his fate – that is if the Suikii didn't offer him an out. He continued to swipe it back and forth but continuing the fact that it had taken him there, he figured he was screwed.

"I will kill you if you touch the Knome." Hermes stated.

"Ha!" Catty laughed but even as she did she wondered. *Can he?* She looked at Grandfather. *If he managed to cut off the cocky oaf's head, then Hermes must not be stronger than I?* She couldn't be sure. *If Hermes lost his head and didn't die...would stabbing him through the heart even do the job?* Either way, disobeying Hermes would be disobeying her Lord and that was not an option. She sighed and obeyed. She didn't take another step towards Grandfather. But she did hiss a warning at Hermes, "Threaten me again and I'll take it as a challenge."

She sat down at the end of the dingy as Hermes came to a floating stop in between the two.

"Why shouldn't I leave you with Catty and go after the Earthboy?" Hermes asked.

"Well, first off, she'd probably kill me and you wouldn't get your sword." Grandfather growled.

"Secondly?"

"You tell me," Grandfather shrugged, "you read the book."

"Ah, but I won't spoil it." Grandfather could hear the smugness in the banshee's voice, "Just wait and see, in due time, he and his friends will come to me and, when they do, I will evolve into a new level of greatness."

For the amount of faith Hermes placed in the book, he really should have read the whole thing.

- - -

Three boards gave out under Nogard's weight and Joe, right behind him, instinctively shoved him forward so that he landed on a somewhat stable platform beyond it. This platform was slowly sinking with the rest of the port side of the ship, lowering Nogard towards the ocean. His comrades weren't without troubles. The rest of the boards that were connected to the parts that gave way to the chidra began to give out underneath Joe and Zalfron.

"JUMP!"

Now it was Joe who needed the push. Zalfron grabbed his pyromaniac friend and dove into Nogard's embrace. AS their bodies slammed into his, the boat began to tilt in that direction, knocking him off balance. The three staggered towards the edge of the ship as it now not only sank away from the rest of the vessel but began to lean away. Soon the waves would reach up and sweep them off the splintered boards of the late somewhat-great *Sea Cuber*.

"Jump out and swim down!" Nogard commanded, staring hard at first Zalfron, then Joe.

A frayed rope lined the edge of the ship, strung through banisters that were mounted on a short lip. In less than a minute, it seemed, that railing would be parallel with the sea.

"Don't wanna get sucked down with the debray." Zalfron explained.

Nogard pointed to Oreh Island to their west, "And dere's an Aquarian Dome right benead us, Civ. Swim down!"

"Sae y'all on the sae floor!" Zalfron shouted.

As the elf dove over the rope, Nogard reached out to stop him but was too late.

“He’ll be fine.” Nogard said with a shrug before turning to Joe, “See ya dere, Civ.”

The chidra followed the elf’s example. The surface of the water was less than twenty feet away. The thrashing waves made it so that some crests even caught the edge of the platform that lowered him, yanking it down a couple of seconds faster.

Placing one foot on the banister before him, which now jutted out diagonally above the sea, he took a deep breath then dove after his allies. Forcing his eyes open as he punched through the surface, Joe scanned below him for whatever he was supposed to be looking for. *The Aquarian Dome*. He didn’t see anything peculiar but he didn’t see his comrades either. There looked to be only sand beneath him, but he had a limited supply of breath so he quickly began his swim downwards. At the edges of his vision, he could see shadows of creatures lurking further out in the water. He could hear the faintest moaning cries of what he hoped to be whales. He didn’t turn his head, he had no time to dilly dally and no time for distractions. The longer he held his breath, the more he began to panic. His strokes had started out smooth and precise but, as he neared the seabed, they became rapid and chaotic.

Then he saw something strange. A school of silvery fish swam up out of the ocean floor, turned, and swam back in only to swim back out again. The sandy bottom that Joe had thought he’d seen before was no bottom at all. As he drew closer, he could tell that it was rounded, almost like the side of a hill sloping downwards. *The Aquarian Dome!* The dome was sprinkled with sand and ocean salt, a thin layer of what was not heavy enough to pass through it. He tore through the water, arms moving with renewed vigor, legs pumping at full speed, ignoring the bubbles budding in his ears. All he could think of was breathing. It took him a matter of seconds to reach the edge of the dome and he didn’t hesitate when he got there. He just kept on swimming.

His arms went through first, clawing forward but finding nothing to pull back. *No water?* A chill ran across his spine, *Is that air?* But it was too late to stop. He slipped through the membrane and was no longer swimming, he was falling with a puff of sand and salt raining down behind him. Taking a giant gulp of air, he gasped it right back out.

Joe was in free fall.

He spun around and around, one second he was looking up at the purplish, translucent film of the dome then he was looking at the rainbow display of coral shooting up from the ocean floor. Having fallen before, he could tell something was different about the atmosphere beneath the dome but, that said, he was quite sure the speed – albeit slower – that he was dropping was more than enough to flatten him like a flapjack.

“HEY JOE! WAE MADE IT!” Zalfron yelled as he slipped through the dome and began his fall.

Joe looked back at his elven friend. The school of fish drifted back through the dome, but instead of falling they began to flap their fins like wings and they glided about for a little before swimming back out – peppering the elf as he tumbled. Joe cleared his throat and yelled back to Zalfron.

“WHAT NOW?”

“WHAT DO YA MAEN?”

“WE ARE FALLING!”

“AH DON’T KNOW! AH AIN’T NEVER DONE THIS!”

Another sharp jab of ice struck Joe’s spine and it wasn’t the cold chill left from the cool ocean water or from the cool ocean air that barraged him. It was a burgeoning panic. The ground

below him was sprinkled with an insane assortment of coral. Every color was displayed and even more colorful were the little fish-birds that swam in and around them. It was impossible to tell how far he was from the ocean floor, distance-wise, but timewise, he had a guess and that guess was less than a minute.

He also was no longer sure if he'd be flattened. It seemed quite likely he might be skewered instead.

Well Death, he thought, looks like I'll be seeing you sooner rather than later.

Then he hit something and was flung back up. Cartwheeling, he passed above the still falling Zalfron. *What the...* he managed to stabilize himself and look down in time to see Zalfron hit the same thing...*a jellyfish!* They were huge, as big around as trampolines, and yet completely see-through except for the stringy purple organs knotted up inside their gelatinous bodies. Now it was Zalfron that was flying up past Joe. Looking around, Joe saw there were hundreds of jellyfish – an entire school – beneath them! They floated in the air like giant stinging clouds moving with the breeze of the current. After falling for another ten seconds, Joe bounced off another. Then another and another until Joe's stomach was screaming out, "Uncle!" and he was left wondering if he would ever reach the sea floor.

After almost two minutes of bouncing, Joe hit something that was much more solid – sand. On his back, he lay there for a minute, letting his stomach calm as he watched Zalfron be pinball-ed across the ocean. Beneath the fog of jellyfish was a forest of coral. Giant orange and pink branches soared up out of the sand, disk-shaped purples stretched diagonally out of the arms of porous green spheres. Tiny, manatee-like creatures with stumpy legs shrouded in wrinkled webbing hobbled around the skeletal jungle-gym, gliding from one polyp to the next. Winged reptiles sat perched, high above the seabed, watching the wildlife with hungry yellow eyes. Polka-dotted rays soared between the reefs among the flocks of flying fish. It was beautiful to say the least and for the second time in a matter of minutes Joe found the Aquarian Ocean had taken his breath away.

Zalfron would have fallen on Joe if the Earthboy hadn't rolled out of the way.

"Selu," Zalfron said through a goofy smile, "that was awesome!"

"Yea, but I wouldn't do it again..." Joe was looking through the heard of jellyfish hovering above them, "Where's Nogard?"

"Hae ain't hare?" Zalfron jumped to his feet and whirled around. Looking up, he squinted for a moment then pointed through the giant jellyfish to a small red shape of a man who had just made it through the sand dusted dome, "Look!"

The jellyfish were moving up, towards the sun, and instead of Nogard falling further down he was being juggled upwards. As soon as he fell through the dome he was bounced right back out. Soon, Nogard would break through the membrane without the slimy trampolines beneath him to break his fall. Joe and Zalfron exchanged helpless glances before turning their gaze back on Nogard. After the last jellyfish left the Aquarian Dome, the tiny red speck re-emerged and began his free fall once more. Fish fluttered out of the way as the other creatures of the ocean floor watched in silence. The chidra disappeared from view, into the canopy of coral, and the two waited to hear a distinctive SNAP!

But there was no SNAP! And there was no splat or crunch or thud. In fact, the only noise they heard from Nogard's direction was an embarrassing, girlish squeal as the scaled man was flung back into view. He landed back on the same coral, getting off three more good bounces before finally coming to a complete stop. Chuckling, Zalfron headed over to the yellow dish shaped coral as Nogard crawled to the edge.

“De fall,” Nogard paused to lean over the edge of the slab of polyp and puke, “always gets me, Civs.”

“There had to be a safer way.” Joe stated.

“Of course.” Nogard replied, “But dere normally isn’t a banshee on our tail.”

Nogard rolled over the edge of the coral to land in Zalfron’s outstretched arms. Despite the weaker strength of gravity within the dome, the fall still knocked Zalfron to the ground, stealing the air from his lungs. Now it was Zalfron who needed some time but after he recovered the three began to make their way through the coral jungle. Nogard had no clue where they were. Normally, a week or two before his annual visit, his friend would send a mailmole with a description of the plan: where they would meet and when. The letter hadn’t come this year but still Nogard had his mind set to make the journey, the lack of a letter only encouraged him. If his friend was hurt, a trip through Aquaria was the only way Nogard could find out. Thus the three were forced to wander until someone, or something, stood out to Nogard as familiar.

Unfortunately, it would not be someone and it would not be helpful.

They walked until their feet were sore then kept walking. Unaccustomed to the atmosphere beneath an Aquarian Dome, their heads were throbbing and their stomachs were sickly when Nogard, to Joe’s relief, declared that they were stopping for the day. The ocean was dark and cold. Solaris had long sense set over head. Thanks to the fire still swirling in his chest, Joe was the only one that wasn’t shivering. In the sand, they plopped down on their soggy butts but only got to rest for about a minute before a sound caught their attention.

“Did y’all haer that?” Zalfron asked.

“Ya, Civ, be plenty of animals down here, don’t be surprised.” Nogard shrugged, “Let’s get a fire going and chase away dis cold.”

Joe frowned, bubbles rising from his chest, as he said, “No fire, apparently, this is still underwater.”

“Aquarian Domes make an atmosphere where bode air breaders and water breaders can breade.” Nogard explained.

“Sorray but ah ain’t fixina braed with aither of ya.” Zalfron snickered.

Nogard slapped the elf on the back of the head and finished what he was saying, “It be more like water dan air in some ways. Red fire won’t work, you need blue.”

“Blue fire?” Joe murmured.

“Hey y’all, ah thank whatever’s makin all that noise is comin this way...” Zalfron noted.

They stared into the dark branches of coral.

“It sounds big...” Joe mumbled

“Or strong...” Zalfron suggested.

The cracking and popping sounds continued, growing louder. There was no question, the noises were getting closer.

“Be ready to fight my boys!” Nogard warned.

“Good luck,” Joe said, standing, “I’ll be useless.”

“Wae got fists,” Zalfron said, “don’t-”

CRACK! This time, they saw the cause of the noise. A giant branch of coral, cut clean off, soared over the underwater jungle towards the three. They dove out of the way. Sand exploded into the air and floated around them. Through the settling fog of dust, they could see the polyp piece sticking out of the ground like a flag and behind it, shooting out of the cloud of sand, a massive orange pincher. SNAP! The pincher opened and closed as another appeared. SNAP!

“Is that,” Joe murmured, squinting through the settling particles, “a crab?”

“Not just a crab, Civ!” Nogard hollered, “I don’t know if we’re lucky or cursed, but dat dere is a blue fire crab!”

Once the sand had fallen back into place, the three stood to face the giant arthropod. One segment of its spike covered legs was as tall as Joe and its serrated pinchers were thicker than Joe was wide. Altogether, the creature stood almost two stories tall. It was bright red, the same shade as Nogard’s scales, and it had two knobby blue eyes that shot up from the front of its shell-like giant thumbs. It stood there for a moment, its little eyes teetering back and forth, pinchers opening and closing.

“I don’t think punching’ll do anything to this guy, Zalf-”

Joe’s comment was too late, Zalfron had already charged. The elf dodged one sweeping swing of a pincher, leapt onto the second, then pushed off it to get close enough to the beast’s face for a good solid punch in the eye. But before he could deliver the blow, Zalfron was thrown backwards by an explosion of blue fire. He hit the ground, completely engulfed in the flickering sapphire flames.

“Farak!” Nogard cried running towards the elf, “Joe put it out!”

“How!” Joe cried, running after the chidra.

“Fire, fire puts it out!” Nogard exclaimed.

“That’s a horrible...Wait!” Joe raised his hand, his palm facing Zalfron. He focused on the blue fire, closed his eyes, and called it to him. He could feel it twisting around his fingers and seeping into his chest. It provided the same familiar warmth as red fire as the two mingled inside him, coexisting within his magical stone, turning from red to purple. Zalfron lay trembling in the sand. Nogard dropped to his knees, rolling Zalfron this way and that to check the damage.

“Nuddin dat can’t heal-”

Joe had turned during Nogard’s discernment, just in time to watch the crab’s arm swoop down towards them, “Look out!”

Nogard was swept off the ground in the grasps of the giant shelled monster.

Joe ran towards the crab then stopped. *My punches won’t do anything to it!* It reached out to grab him with its left arm but he jumped backwards, falling on his butt. Scrambling to his feet, Joe retreated, running back towards the giant splinter of coral in the center of the clearing. The crab looked at Joe for a moment longer before it turned its attention back to the chidra in its grasp. *I have to hurry...* Joe spotted a low hanging offshoot of coral...*something!* He reached up, grabbed the branch, and put all his weight on it. The limb snapped off easily, breaking in a jagged edge.

“Hey crab!” Joe cried as he ran towards the monstrous sea creature, raising the polyp spear above his head.

The crab paid him no attention. It held Nogard before its open hanging mouth and the chidra screamed, “Hurry, Civ!”

Joe hurried. But there was no way he would be able to get there, climb up the creature, and stab it before Nogard would be, at least partially, digested. He was going to have to throw it. Leaning back as he continued to run forward, he did his best. Though he wasn’t necessarily an athlete, he *was* an American. As part of citizenship, Americans were required to know how to throw a football and get a decent spiral out of it. Though he had never mastered the art of javelin toss, he felt his chances were pretty good if he just lobbed it like it were a football. With a grunt, he did just that.

It soared. Though not anywhere of use. In fact, the coral spear was gliding straight for Nogard's back.

"NOGARD, LOOK OUT!"

Nogard turned, eyes wide, but the crab lowered him, just in time for the spear to miss. The spear hit the crab's hard-shelled face and fell to the ground without leaving so much as a scrape on the sea creature. Before Joe could flee to retrieve another spear, the crab rushed forward and snatched him with its free pincher.

The pinchers held him tight around the waist, squeezing, as it raised him and Nogard before its face. Its eyes wiggled with excitement and its mouth slowly opened to reveal the hundreds and hundreds of teeth hiding inside. The monster's breath reeked of rotten fish and warmed the moist atmosphere around them.

"Nice one, Civ..." Nogard grunted.

"What else could I have done?" Joe asked.

"Killed it!"

"How?"

"Don't ask me, Civ! I'm not da Sun Child!"

"I'm not the one that got myself caught in the first place!"

"Oh, second place be much better?"

"Yea, I'd say so-"

"FIRE!" Nogard screamed.

Swirling in the back of the crab's throat were those familiar blue flames. As soon as Joe turned to see them, the fire exploded around them. It disappeared within seconds, leaving them both unharmed and filling Joe with energy. *Fire!* He could feel it inside him, two separate rivers meeting in his chest, churning over each other as if two snake-like dragons swam within him, waiting to be released. Flinging his arms before him, palms stretched out towards the arthropod's hanging mouth, he released all the red-fire he had creating such a stream of flame that it was able to survive – at least temporarily – in the Aquarian atmosphere. Directing it into the crab's jaws, he snuffed out the blue fire that was once again building up inside it then pushed it further to boil the crustaceans organs. It dropped Nogard and Joe as its legs fell out from under it. The crab hit the ocean floor with a dull thud.

Sand swirled into the air once again, hiding the crab as it desperately began to swallow the salty water-air around it in a feeble attempt to cool it's roasting insides. Nogard wrapped his arm around Joe and ran his knuckles through the human's hair.

"I knew you'd pull drough, Civ!" Nogard grinned.

"I like the confidence," Joe began, rolling his eyes, "but I don't think this is over."

The sand had just begun to settle again when Joe spotted the top of the crab's crimson armor rising through the murk. Its blue eyes glared at the human and chidra with agony fueled rage. One pincher was dug into the sand, used almost as a cane to keep it on all eights, and the other held the burnt body of Zalfron.

"Help!" Zalfron cried as the beast brought him closer to its charred jaws, "Ah don't wanna get ate!"

"Damn crab just won't die!" Nogard moaned.

"We need a sword!" Joe exclaimed.

And there it was. In Joe's right hand. The Suikii with its black blade as dark as the sky far above them, almost invisible in the deep blue darkness of the night. Joe looked from the sword to Nogard and then back at the sword.

“Freak out later, Civ, da elf’s medium-rare right now and I dink da big bad crab wants him well-done.”

Joe nodded and ran forward. Bubbles flew out of the crab’s maw as it attempted to force just a little more blue fire from its charred-insides. With the eloquence of a monkey, Joe scurried up the big clawed arm, which was still stuck in the sand as a crutch, and stepped out onto the hard body of the crab. As Joe mounted the beast, Zalfron found himself staring at a growing ball of blue flame in the back of the arthropod’s throat.

The eyes stuck up before Joe like giant mushrooms. Bringing his arm back like a peasant with a sickle about to hack at a bunch of wheat, Joe sliced through the quivering sensory organs in one quick, easy swing. Instead of fire, the crab let out an ear-splitting scream, yanking its pincher up out of the ground and reaching, as best it could, for the human on its back.

“Finish it, Civ!” Nogard cried, “Finish it!”

SNAP! The pincher jerked about blindly as Joe raised the Suikii above his head, holding it with both hands. SNAP! It grabbed hold of Joe’s leg and yanked just as Joe brought the sword down. Joe was flung off the shell and out into the sandy clearing, leaving the Suikii stuck between the bleeding stumps of crab-eyes, the blade buried in the shell of the beast.

Joe’s flailing body hit Nogard in the chest and the two hit the ground. They held their breaths as they turned to watch the crab. It staggered to the right, then to the left, dropped Zalfron, then stumbled to the right one last time before falling against a disk-shaped coral and snapping it with a horrible CRACK as it collapsed – dead.

“Jesus...” Joe mumbled, rolling off Nogard and onto his back.

“Joe,” Nogard said, sitting up and shaking his head with a grin, “you got da luck of a deity – da luck of da Sun Child, my boy!”

“Please tell mae that thang’s dead?” Zalfron moaned from where he lay.

“Looks to be,” Nogard said as he got up and offered a hand to the still-adrenaline-high human, “danks to our alien and dat old Knomish sword.”

Joe took the hand but as soon as he stood and put pressure on his right leg he fell back to the ground. It was as if his leg had disappeared out from under him. Nogard cocked his head to the side, knelt down, and pulled back Joe’s pants leg.

“Oh...mighta spoke too soon bout your luck, Civ.”

“What?” Joe asked.

“Your leg,” Nogard shook his head, “it’s broken.”

It was as if Nogard’s words were the keys to some invisible gate in Joe’s mind that was holding back the pain his nerves were dying to transmit. As soon as Nogard told him, Joe was positive that his leg was broken. Then again, from the sudden pain that wracked Joe’s body, Joe would’ve believed Nogard if he said that his leg had been ripped clean off. Tears welled up in Joe’s eyes but he never got to the point of crying, at least not consciously, because he passed out.

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The cell was supposedly Knome-secure, as in, not even a Knome could get out of it. It was somewhat suggested in the marketing of the product that all Knomes came with a natural ability to pick locks and could do so without any supplies at all. This, of course, was true for Grandfather but most Knomes did not have the patience to fiddle with such things. Most Knomes rarely had a need to. *Knomes are like cats*, the old man thought. Most people compared Knomes to rats or mice and Grandfather, too, normally labeled all Knomes vermin but, in reference to

their ability to escape just about any enclosure, Knomes were cats. Grandfather did not appreciate the term Knome-secure, but he respected the fact that this was indeed one of the only Knome-secure containers he'd ever been locked in (and he also knew he had no right to criticize Knomophobic rhetoric). It was nothing but a square made of bars. Incredibly uncomfortable, he was forced to sit on the cold metal rods with his legs dangling through the gaps. There was no gate, it could only be disassembled with a magic password – a password Hermes had devised.

The cage was carried by four shadow-summons, one on either side, and progress was slow through the snow powdered taiga. The dirt was brown, soggy, and balding. A few strands of tall damp grass rose in between patches of snow, though most laid flat weighed down by thawing beads of ice. The terrain was flat, flat for as far as the eye could see. Snow creeks and the occasional shrubs tried to give it some character but only seemed to highlight the bleakness that was Winter in Middakle, Iceload. And they had a way to go.

Normally, Knome-secure did not mean Grandfather-secure but on this particular occasion it did. The Suikii was being exceedingly difficult and would not open a single portal for the old Knome. He'd sat in the cage swinging it all day to no avail. In fact, Grandfather had the feeling that if he were to send it back to wherever it went when he wasn't wielding it, he would never see it again. The blade's hesitation to his calling back on the *Sea Cuber* had been a sign of the direction in which the Suikii was heading. Though it didn't happen often, there were times when the sword, which he himself had fathered, abandoned him for another wielder. The blade usually only took a short excursion. Still, without it, Grandfather felt like a puppy without his master.

As he became more and more sure that the Suikii was destined to ditch him, dread began to fill his old, dry bones. Lying the sword in his lap, Grandfather asked, "Now, come on. Can't whoever just find a different sword? What if I'm dead by the time you come back?"

The sword did not reply.

"You really can be ungrateful sometimes."

The sword was beginning to fade.

"Whoever they are, they better be up to par!"

The handle had left and the blade was now floating in thin air. Fading in and out.

"Don't let him mistreat you!"

The sword disappeared.

"I love you..." Grandfather murmured.

It reappeared for a split second, as if to say, "Ditto!" and then it was gone.

Catty shook her head.

Hermes laughed, "Leave it to a Knome to talk to his sword."

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Joe woke up and immediately decided he was dreaming. The ocean, instead of being that dark blue hue, was now swirling red and purple neon, as if he were inside of a lava lamp. Zalfron and Nogard beside him were but watery figures – their skin squirming, eyes bulging – and their voices sounded like the forlorn call of whales – distant and unintelligible. It took his mind a little while for it to be able to decipher what exactly his friends were saying.

"You thank wae gave him too much?"

"What be too much, Civ? It do da same no matter how much you be takin. I don't dink it matters how much you take..."

Seeing his eyelids flickering, his friends turned to him and laughed. In Joe's eyes their smiles didn't stop spreading, their lips continued to pull back and their teeth began to grow. Closing his eyes, Joe knew it before they even said it.

"You feel it, Civ?" Nogard snickered, "He's gone!"

"Hah?" Zalfron laughed, "Hae's blown, man!"

"He be completely baked!" Nogard agreed, "How's it feel to be trippin, my boy?"

"Off what?" Joe managed to ask though his lips weighed a hundred pounds and his mouth was so dry that his bloated tongue felt like a beached porpoise.

"Aquannabis."

"It's sae waed, get it?"

Despite the name, aquannabis was an herb very different from Earth's beloved cannabis. Aquannabis was an Aquarian found hallucinogen that was mainly used, at least by doctors, for pain. The plant, disguised as a dangerous type of coral, could be torn open to release the gel-like cream inside. One would rub the cream on the injured area then wouldn't expect to feel that spot for hours, maybe even an entire day depending on how strong the particular aquannabis plant was. Not only that, though the numbing would apply only to where the gel was administered, the drug would distort the perceptions of the mind in all of its senses.

Joe couldn't feel his right leg at all and his brain was so loopy he didn't even remember that it had been broken. Though neither of the boys were healers, they had no problem accurately diagnosing the wound. Miraculously, the bone hadn't broken the surface but the leg was bent almost at a right angle in the middle of his shin. While he was out cold, Nogard splinted it with coral and Zalfron manufactured a kelp rope to bind it. Nogard nearly passed out himself when they reset the bone, as best as two amateurs could. Then, as Zalfron watched the sleeping Joe, Nogard gathered firewood – consisting of ship-wreck-debris and dead sea weed. In doing so, he stumbled across a grove of aquannabis (Nogard tried some himself to make sure he recognized the plant correctly). They cut up the crab for meat and used the remaining exoskeleton and broken polyps to create a simple lean-to shelter. After Joe woke up, it took the boys almost an hour to get the inebriated pyromancer to light the fire. As Nogard and Zalfron cooked, Joe's high began to dim. His leg still remained quite numb and his mind quite boggled, but he was able to follow Nogard and Zalfron's conversation.

"You remember dat loud boom, Civ?" Nogard asked.

Zalfron scratched his wild blonde hair and shook his head. Joe did remember, he'd heard it shortly before Grandfather appeared out of the blue, between them and Hermes, and told them to abandon the ship.

"Maybe I just heard it," Nogard shrugged, "but when it happened, everyding went dark and time sorta...well it froze, Civ."

"Huh?" Zalfron held his crab-on-a-stick away from the fire to peer at Nogard up close, checking his scaled face for any sign of jokery.

"I swear! Time froze and everyding went black and white. You and Joe were white. Even I was white, Hermes too. It was in dat dark where he broke my sword."

"Was it some kahnda magic?"

"He called it Total Darkness," Nogard explained, "Some kinda banshee magic."

"Jaez," Zalfron shuddered, "do you thank hae'll come down hare?"

"Na mon, dis is da fishfolk's domain." Nogard shook his head.

"If hae can fraeze tahm," Zalfron said, "ah don't thank some fishfolk will scare him off."

“Da whole ocean would be at his droat!” Nogard argued, “If you aren’t invited, you be in hot water comin to Aquaria.”

“Wae ain’t in hot water, are wae?” Zalfron asked.

“Na mon, I be your invitation.” Nogard smiled.

They were quiet for a moment. The gentle current of the strange atmosphere came and went. The darkness of the submarine world made midnights spent in the forests of Tadloe seem bright. Joe wondered what they would do about his leg. He wondered if Hermes had killed Grandfather or if he had gotten away. He wondered if there would ever be a complete eight. Then he found himself thinking about the man from the buggy on the road outside of Kemplor, crumpled over and bleeding. An image that was quickly followed by the charred elf’s corpse in the stairway of the Barren’s Mullet. He shuddered.

“Hey,” Joe said and Zalfron and Nogard flinched, he had been quiet for a while, “how’s my leg look?”

“Well,” Zalfron bit his lip, “it’s still a leg.”

“If we don’t get you a healer,” Nogard admitted, “it might not be a leg for much longer.”

“Eh...I always figured I’d lose a leg anyways, just thought it’d be from diabetes,” Joe shrugged, smirking, “I think a fake leg would be kind of cool.”

“That’s the spirit!” Zalfron laughed, “How about ah finish that story whahl wae cook?”

“Saint’s story?” Nogard asked.

“Yes sir!” Joe nodded.

“Yup yup,” Zalfron said, “Ah’ve gotten Joe up to the point where Saint locked Creaton in a pillar of stone.”

“Slidder back to da shadows, ya bastard!” Nogard quoted.

“Isn’t that what Cannon said when he beat Creaton?” Joe asked.

“Saint said it too.” Zalfron explained.

“It be what everybody say when dey beat da Moon Dragon Man.” Nogard laughed, “Aye, when you beat him, you gotta say dat.” He turned to Zalfron, asking, “Da Sun Child beats Creaton, right Civ?”

“Shiiit,” Zalfron shrugged, “don’t ask me.”

Nogard shrugged back, “Well if we da Mystakle Knights den I say we beat Creaton.”

“Deal.” Joe smiled.

“Alrahty then, this is the story of how Saint finally became the Emperor of the Trinity Nations. There’s a lotta war talk in this one. That countray takes them, they take that country. Since you ain’t raelly gotta clue where this or that is, it may bae a lot lahk gibberish to you...esheshallay with yer drugs...but don’t worry bout it, just skim over it-”

“Skim over it?” Nogard laughed, “What’s dat mean?”

“An old Sentray sayin. Maens lahk...just go with it, ain’t that daep...look it up later when you care? Ya know? ‘Just skim over it, it’s onlay ten pages’. Supposedly a Knome came up with it and-”

Nogard raised a silencing hand, “Only got time for one story tonight, Civ.”

Zalfron nodded, cleared his throat, and began, “This is the Tale of the Bastard Emperor...”

Zalfron's Tale 4: The Bastard Emperor⁵

In the Spring of 1501, the rebels invaded Iceload, stormed Zvie Castle, and slayed Loki Ipativy the Archbishop of the Hundred Empire Alliance. With the mastermind of the theocracy dead, the remaining bishops and deacons met with the rebel leaders in Zviecoff, Iceload to figure out what to make of their world. Unfortunately, not only had the Alliance lost its greatest leaders but the rebels had too. Munkloe's Apache Dreb and Icelore's Heimdallure Darkblade 10 had died while Mannistan's Queen Takia Eninac disappeared along with the one Ipativian on the winning side of the revolution, Eir Ipativy. The man the world had assumed would replace the Archbishop, Saint, was gone too. While many of the delegates at the Zviecoff Negotiation sought to eliminate foreign control over their sovereign nations and keep further violence from developing, others sought to exploit the resolution for their own gains – one in particular being Saigo Fou.

After days of negotiations, a treaty was formed that wouldn't last a year. For the most part, territories were still divided as they had been in the Hundred Empire Alliance, the main difference was that the Ipativy Dynasty's influence was practically non-existent. Brahim Phinn kept Manaloe, Ardik Vinn kept Vinnum Tow, Barenchi Kou kept Koustan in northern Sondor, Zion Cage 3 kept Cagistan and Coristan in central Sondor, and Saigo Fou kept Tadloe. The Fang Sacha, a chidra Empire that had risen before the Bishopry, remained intact. Adalyn Fang ruled Batloe and Abhidhara Fang ruled Foxloe. New leaders stepped up to the plate as well: Jasmine Eninac, a cousin of Takia, received Dogloe, Kentrel Eninac, another cousin, received Mannistan in southern Sondor, and Apache Dreb's son, Rokee Dreb, received Munkloe.

Dividing Iceload was a little more complicated seeing as the royal bloodline of the Sentry was dead and no one wanted to give the last true members of the Ipativy bloodline, Gerda Ipativy and her children, Loki's descendants, a position of power. Many felt the same about the Sentry, as they had been anti-Saint up until the last chapter of the rebellion. The majority of Solarins recognized that the Ipativians and Sentry had to hold some power or else they'd risk alienating the two dynasties. And alienation, many of the negotiators argued, caused the entire rebellion to begin with. They compromised and divided Iceload into five pieces. The southern peninsula, Azunu, was given to a bearn, Pueblosa Azuran. The Vanian Mountains and western Etihwy went to the Icelore who, after Heimdallure's death, were ruled by Cathedra Icelore. The middle peninsula, Middakle, went to the Oreh family with Tristan Oreh. The northern peninsula, Thorakle and Sentrakle, was divided up between ten Sentry families and two Ipativian families, all of which held no pure claim to royal blood. The fifth chunk was the one little bit of the negotiations that made no sense. It was a section of land east of the Etihw River between Azunu

⁵ For a map of the States of the First Zviecoff Negotiation check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

and Middakle that wasn't, by itself, really that important. In order to get Saigo Fou on board, this territory had been given to Tadloe.

Saigo wanted Iceload. Iceload had more enertomb mines than any other continent whereas Tadloe had next to none. If Saigo wanted enertomb rich territory, Iceload was really his only option. There were only two other nations with exportable enertombs – Foxloe and Vinnum Tow – both of which left the rebellion almost unscathed. Invading either would be preposterous. There was one other nation with a large stockpile: Munkloe. Unfortunately, the jungle-continent's reserves were tucked away in holy caves. These caves weren't just revered for sentimental reasons, the roots of the great treehouse cities were intertwined within the cavern walls. Mining the enertomb caves of Munkloe could potentially cause the entire continent to cave in upon itself. Not to mention the fact that the entire world would likely turn against Saigo if he were to attack Munkloe. The people of Munkloe were seen as the primary martyrs of the rebellion. Thus, Iceload was his only option. Unfortunately, the little sliver of Etihwy he'd obtained in the Zviecoff Negotiation was not a part of the enertomb rich Iceload, those lay across the Etihw in the Vanian Mountains and north into Thorakle, and Saigo wasn't brave enough to invade unprovoked. He waited for the opportune moment and this moment came at the end of the year.

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“Always be one person who ruins everyding.” Nogard stated.

Zalfron grunted in agreement then looked to Joe as if expecting a question. Feeling the silence, Joe looked up at Zalfron. His head didn't stop there, he'd lost control. It went on, lulling back as if his spine were made of wet noodles. For a while there, things had begun to clear up but like the tidal breeze which came in waves, the aquannabis' delirium came and went. Finally, Joe rolled his head around to face the elf again.

“No questions?” Zalfron asked.

“Look at da boy!” Nogard chuckled, “He still trippin balls, Civ!”

“Hunggray?” Zalfron offered Joe some blue-fire fried crab on a stick.

Joe could only respond with gibberish and a nervous laugh.

“Jesus!” Zalfron turned to Nogard, “Should wae be worrahd?”

“Nah Civ, can't die from da stuff. Can drive a man insane but can't kill em.” Nogard shrugged, “He alright.”

Zalfron looked back to Joe, “Can you aven understand what ah'm sayin?”

Though the part of his brain in charge of communication seemed to be asleep at the wheel, Joe could comprehend Zalfron's story quite well. In fact, his inebriated state made the tale all the more better. Translating this to Zalfron was difficult but he gave it his all. With spit bubbling at the edges of his mouth he reached out and grabbed Zalfron by the arm.

“Con...” he stared at the elf hard, “...tin...” it took such effort that tears began to bud in his eyes, “...ue!”

With a nervous chuckle, Zalfron obeyed.

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Cathedra Icelore had no interest in ruling any lands east of Icelore. As Ipativian families began to complain in Thorakle, believing they'd been stiffed by the Zviecoff Negotiation, Cathedra met with Gerda Ipativy and offered her the city of Ipativy. Of course Gerda agreed, Cathedra merely had to get the acceptance of the global community. The other empires were not fond of this idea but when she compared her foreign rule to the very type of colonial imperialistic government they'd fought to upend, they could not deny her logic. Saigo was the only world leader unwilling to approve but he was ignored and on January First, 1502, when Gerda Ipativy returned to the birth place of her dynasty, Fou soldiers crossed the Etihw. They occupied Zviecoff, and a few other cities, but were unable to break through the fortifications at Ipativy.

Enraged, Cathedra Icelore summoned all the help she could get. The Sentry and Ipativy of northern Iceload, Tristan Oreh of Middakle, and Pueblosa Azuran immediately joined the fight – even the Kou and Eninac sent aid. It seemed Saigo would be cast out of Iceload within the month if not the week but Cathedra wasn't the only one with allies. Saigo began discussions with the two Fang queens, urging them not to let Loki's descendants return to their former prestige and tempting them with ideas of world domination. Even before Saigo came to them, the Fang Empire had been mulling over the idea of expanding their conquests. After the rebellion, aside from the Fou and maybe the Vinn, the Fang were the strongest empire under Solaris. If Fou and Fang worked together, what could the rest of Solaris do but bow? Before the month was out, troops from Batloe had taken Azunu, capturing Pueblosa, and troops from Foxloe had won victories that greatly crippled the allied Ipativy and Sentry in the Northern Islands.

With the help of the humans, Tristan Oreh managed to keep hold of Middakle but Saigo, with his creative ambition, tested these foreign defender's allegiance to the plight of the electric elves. Ardik Vinn, King of Vinnum Tow, had been rubbed wrong by the Zviecoff Negotiation. First off, when discussing who would inherit Icelore, his name wasn't even considered despite being Heimdallure Darkblade 10's son-in-law. Instead, they chose a daughter-in-law to head the Icelore Dynasty. Secondly, many of the leaders, like Brahim Phinn, Barenchi Kou, Jasmine Eninac, and Cherokee Dreb ridiculed his state's practice of slavery and seemed bent on forcing him, by threat of war, to emancipate the free work force that was the foundation of Vinnum Tow. Vinn avoided this by reminding the negotiators that Vinnum Tow had been promised one hundred years of peace by Saint himself. When Saigo's messengers came to Vinnum Tow, telling Vinn that the Fou and Fang had teamed up against the supporters of the Zviecoff Negotiation, he was eager to join. Vinn's first move was to invade the southern edges of Dogloe: Headistan and the Marble Cape.

Also at this time, Zion Cage 3 and Kentrel Eninac were at each other's throats. The short war that had begun with the Mannistan Revolt had been called off when Saint and the rest of the

revolutionary leaders threatened to turn their focus on Zion. In the following peace, Zion wasn't eager to return to that war but when he noticed weakness in the Eninac royal family he used his connections to start trouble. The Cormac family was the strongest clan in Sondor without official state power and the household head had a daughter, Adira Cormac, who was rather interested in Zion's son Hannibal. During the short Sondorian War, the Cormac family had been captured by the Mannistani and Hannibal had been unable to liberate them before the archbishop died and the war settled down. Adira's family was held hostage by the Eninac that ruled Mannistan and her parents actually gave in, proposing Adira marry the Eninac King. Though they knew Adira loved another man, they wanted badly to link their Clan with real, internationally recognized power and saw tying the knot with their captors as the only way. As the decrees of the Zviecoff Negotiation were dissolving around the world, Zion saw an easy opportunity to expand his territory, one he thought he could do ethically and was urged to do so by Saigo.

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"Not sure ah'd consider it ethical though." Zalfron noted, "Wagin war so yer son can get his girlfriend back doesn't saem awfullay fair to all the other folks yer gonna bae sendin to dah."

"Humans, Civ," Nogard said, shaking his head and looking over at their bamboozled brother, "hard to believe we evolved form such savages."

"Ah'm with ya on that one," Zalfron said, adding a complimentary, "Civ."

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In February, Zion Cage 3 revamped the Clan War. Eloping Adira and invading Hannibal led Cage forces into Mannistan. In no time, they'd forced the Eninac to abandon Sondor and flee to Dogloe. With the Eninac gone, the only lands of Sondor not bowing to the Cage were the Kou in the north and as Zion turned his attention to the deserts of Koustan, Barenchi Kou was forced to withdraw his forces from Iceload to defend.

Without the support of the humans, Middakle, Iceload fell to the Fou and Tristan Oreh was forced to hole up on the nearby island of her namesake. Simultaneously, the Fang continued their expansion. Abhidhara Fang conquered Sentrakle, northern Iceload, and Adalyn Fang sent troops into Manaloe to take control of Riverwood. As for the Fou, after taking Middakle they hit a brick wall trying to force Icelore out of the Vanian Mountains nor could they overcome the Ipativian and Sentry forces united in Thorakle so they turned their gaze north to attack Dreunu, central Munkloe – forgetting the original desire for enertombs in the pursuit of world domination. It was during this Munkloe campaign that his troops took the islands of Jungloe and Panta. Shortly after Panta bowed to the Fou, the infamous historians there revealed the same information they had revealed to Loki Ipativy that had been one of the major factors leading to the rebellion: the location of the Well of Youth. But Saigo wouldn't yet have the time to seek out the mythical spring.

April 14th, 1502, now that Solaris had allowed the memory of the Second Hatching to fade from the forefront of their minds, the second moon dragon made landfall. Her name was Semar and she chose the mountains of northeast Foxloe – which thereafter were named Mountains of the Moon. The people of these hills fled as dragons from all under Solaris flocked to meet their new deity. Aside from the occasional hamlet, the islands of Babasachaloe, Dragonrok, and Fox Island represented the closest concentrated areas of civilization and encountered the worst of Semar’s initial assaults. Once these cities fell, she turned north which would put her on route with Mystwood – the city that was, at this time, Foxloe’s capital.

The South Fang had no choice but to retract their forces in Iceload and devote all their attention to stopping the moon dragon. North Fang was too busy keeping the nonviolent protestors of Manaloe inline whilst trying to keep from losing their now defensive position in Azunu to send any support to Foxloe let alone Sentrakle thus the northern end of Iceload was given to Saigo lest it be returned to the electric elves. The new territory was more of a curse than a blessing. The change of flags revived the enthusiasm of the Sentry and Ipativian elves and they fought the Fou with renewed vigor on two fronts: the northern V of the Etihw and the southern shore of the Black River. Struggling to keep his grip on Sentrakle, Saigo was unable to spread his control over Munkloe past the Sereibis River and into the jungle lands of Nevomnu which hid his coveted magical spring. Before he could restabilize his empire, the Forbidden Child, the Renegade Crusader, the Forsaken Savior, Saint himself, returned to Solaris.

According to the rest of Solaris, Darkloe was uncivilized. During the age of colonization that occurred before the Fourth Void War, the empires of the South felt they’d successfully brought civilization to the North – except for Darkloe, which had been widely ignored. After an event called the Sachacomp in the mid-800s, the goblins of south Batloe abandoned the Southern Hemisphere and found a new home in this neglected land. There were no large deposits of ore or enertombs, no grand forests of timber or plains of game-beasts. Darkloe was nothing but slate colored soil with brittle branched, spikey shrubbery and terrain carved up by monstrous mountains and writhing rivers. Yet, to the goblins, it offered solace from the overbearing ambitions of the peoples and their empires on the other side of the world.

In the Spring of 1502, when Saint, Theseus, Grandfather, and the Dragon Slayer emerged from the fiery depths of Mount Ahsik they would’ve met the same fate in Darkloe’s Black Mountains they nearly met in Delia’s Calkoniya if not for the local goblins that welcomed them into their villages. Despite being ignored by the world, they did not ignore the world. The goblins kept themselves up to date on the wars that afflicted the other races. They told Saint of the failed negotiations and of how Saigo Fou, along with the Fang, Cage, and Ardik Vinn, seemed to be attempting to split the world amongst themselves. There, amongst the goblins, the four strategized and planned their return to Solarin civilization. The Dragon Slayer went to Foxloe to deal with Semar, Theseus Icespear went to Iceload to spread the word of Saint’s return to the south, and Saint with Grandfather went to Manaloe.

From Brahim Phinn, they were told that though peaceful resistance was slowing the spread of the Fang invasion, and causing confusion and chaos in the lands already captured, the

Shisharay Brothers and Sisters of the Woodland Ridge Monastery presented the biggest hurdle to Queen Adalyn, still, Brahim was not convinced it would be enough. Led by Father Shisharay, the monks of the Woodland Ridge could outshoot any archer in Solaris and could do so on dragon back. Their steeds were lion dragons. These slender, flexible beasts had lizard-like bodies that fit perfectly with the guerrilla style combat the small band of spirits utilized in order to succeed against the much larger forces of their enemies. Saint met with Father Shisharay and fought alongside him and his monastic children until the end of May when he began to believe what the Father had told him from the beginning. To expel the Fang, they needed an army. When Saint and Grandfather left in June, they left with a regiment of Father Shisharay's dalvary and headed to Dogloe, determined to find a way to give Brahim Phinn his nation back.

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“Wait!”

Joe's sudden intelligible outburst startled Zalfron onto his back. As the elf struggled to return upright, Joe quickly articulated his question before the clouds of aquannabis drifted back into place, shrouding the lightbulb glowing in his brain.

“I thought Saint had made a vow of nonviolence?”

“Nah, Civ,” Nogard answered, “he only promised not to kill.”

“Yup,” Zalfron nodded as he dusted the sand off of the crab meat he'd dropped, “hae'll faht, hae just ain't gonna kill nobody.”

Joe was skeptical, “How does that work out in the middle of a battle?”

“Dat be why he had Grandfadder wid him.” Nogard explained.

“When takin folks prisner wasn't uh option, Grandfather would step in so Saint could kaep his word.” Zalfron elaborated.

Joe gazed wide eyed as Zalfron's skin began to shift and slip around his head as if a high-powered blower was directed at his face.

“Huh?”

He looked over at Nogard. His scales seemed to have been reorganized, rather than sitting in staggered rows, they sat in spirals forming intricate patterns.

Joe blinked but the daze remained – only getting funkier. He sat back and let it crash upon him, managing one last question before incapacitation, “so what happened?”

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In Dogloe the war was practically at a stalemate. Headistan was solidly under Ardik Vinn's grasp who had fortified along the Collah River. The vast majority of the fighting took place along the Marble Cape but even there the skirmishes were rare and brief. Every other week the Eninac would get riled up and clash hard against the estranged nellafs, gain no ground, and lose their zeal. Then, on the weeks in-between, the troops from Vinnum Tow would believe the

time ripe for another attempt at invasion only to find as much victory as their enemies had a week before. Jasmine Eninac welcomed Saint's return but doubted his presence would have much effect. Having only just shown up, Saint had the benefit of perspective – and dragons. He took his dalvary, which he had come to call the Lion Dragon Guard, and soared the skies over the Bleak Sea where they intercepted, commandeering or destroying, Ardik Vinn's supply ships until the troops of Vinnum Tow were starving. Before the month was over, Ardik Vinn called for peace so that he could bring his ladies and gentlemen home. Jasmine Eninac was so grateful she was willing to keep her soldiers in the war and sent them on with Saint, commanded by General Kentrel Eninac, back to Manaloe.

Saint and the soldiers, both from Woodland Ridge and Dogloe, barely had to fight five battles before the Fang left Manaloe. This was not thanks to Saint and his followers alone, but partially due to unrest at home. Almost half of Batloens were molemen and they despised Adalyn and her war and were beginning to feel the same way about the entire Fang Empire. To make matters worse, the Fang Empire seemed to be heading in two different directions. While Adalyn Fang of Batloe stuck with the ways of her predecessors, Abhidhara was coming to terms with Saint's return and not necessarily by choice. When the Dragon Slayer went to Foxloe, Abhidhara had only refrained from executing the cocky fool out of the hilarity he provided. He, one man, claimed he could solve their dragon problem, alone, while she had devoted all her military strength towards eliminating Semar. Already, Mystwood City had been burnt to the ground and the capital had been moved to Hawk Eye. His pride hurt, the Dragon Slayer wisely got the Queen to promise she would bow to Saint if he kept his word. Not in the least bit worried, she vowed. On June eleventh, Semar left Solaris. Despite his name, the Dragon Slayer had removed the moon dragon without killing her and a humbled Abhidhara became bound to Saint.

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“Godi tiad, mah boy!” Nogard crowed, “Dat dragon dead as dirt!”

“Nuh uh!” Zalfron cried, “Shae flew back to the moons!”

“You sure Joe's the one that's trippin, Civ?” Nogard asked.

“Then where's her ramains?” Zalfron turned on the chidra, “The Icelore got the skull of Kor, where the hell is Semar's?”

“If da dragon went back, den why she ain't been seen since?” Nogard challenged.

Zalfron rolled his eyes, “Cause shae made a dael with the Dragon Slayer.”

“Sure, Civ...” Now it was Nogard who rolled his eyes before turning to Joe. With glossy eyes, the human had watched the two debate. He'd been able to follow the story but the banter between his friends became complete gibberish in his ears. Instead, all he could focus on was the tails, the ones that hung below Nogard's nostrils, that seemed to be growing longer the longer he stared. Ignoring the distant, uncomprehending look in Joe's eyes, Nogard continued, “Nobody knows where Semar went. Some say she be on da moons, some say she was killed, buried by da waves of da sea.”

“Aither way, it ain’t a big dael. Point is, the dragon was gone and Queen Abhidhara was indebted to Saint and his crew.” Zalfron snapped, “Now, where was ah?”

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A month later, once again on the eleventh, the stronghold of the North Fang bowed to Saint. After weeks of unrest, and one week of all out revolt, the molemen succeeded in casting the Fang leader out of Batloe, a day after Adalyn had formally abandoned her claims in Manaloe. Those family members with any sense tucked their tails and fled to Foxloe but Queen Adalyn, and a few others close to her, fled instead to Azunu. Unfortunately for Adalyn, Saint had done all he could for the northern hemisphere and, now that his attention was directed south, Iceload was next on his list. Once Saint and his troops from Foxloe, Dogloe, and Manaloe met with Cathedra Icelore, Saigo Fou got jumpy. With his allies crumbling around him, he realized that his reign might not even finish out the year. He made a risky move that bought Queen Adalyn and her Fang-ruled Azunu some time.

Saigo pulled the brunt of his forces from Sentrakle and Middakle to launch them all at Nevomnu – the outer ring of jungle in Munkloe in which lied the Well of Youth. He whisked these soldiers away in the dark of night, leaving few numbers to stand against the Iceloadic when the sun rose the next day. With the Lion Dragon Guard, Saint followed the Tadloen dictator, catching him in the ruins of the pyramid that filled the legendary spring. There they fought and there Saint gained the nickname that is still used today, in good humor by his allies or with spite by his enemies. During his duel with Saigo, Saint urged the earth elf to surrender. Saigo responded, “And let a bastard Emperor rule Solaris?” In the end, Saint subdued the conqueror and gave him back to the Fou in exchange for their compliance at a second peace negotiation. The people of Tadloe eagerly agreed and were so pissed off from the unnecessary war, especially Saigo’s abandonment of many Fou troops in Iceload when he fled to Munkloe, that they had him executed publically almost immediately.

Solaris still was yet to find peace. Oblivious to the world, which was now almost completely in league with her enemy, Queen Adalyn Fang continued to hold fast to Azunu. Refusing to surrender, she and the few troops that didn’t desert died on the battle fields of southern Iceload before August, marking the end of the Fourth Void War.

At the Second Zviecoff Negotiation, the Trinity Nations, the nearly five-hundred-year-old alliance which still rules the solar system of Solaris to this day, was forged. Saint called upon not only the monarchs but he called upon leaders of all kinds: tribal chiefs, shire governors, military warlords, dynastic patriarchs, matriarchs, and atriarchs, and even ex-deacons (and a select few ex-bishops). The first topic was to address all disputes, the old and new. The GraiLords witnessed to their oppression as did the Iceloadic bears. The molemen of Batloe reminded the chidras they shared Batloe and that whether or not chidras enjoyed the privilege of the Fang Sacha, they still enjoyed the privilege that was being scaled in a Fang Empire. The Fou were forced to acknowledge the glorification of their people in exchange for the exploitation of the

tribes south of the Rah River. The Cage confessed to their incessant attempts to conquer their continental neighbors. Then the peaceful spirits of Manaloe harkened back to their own fault for serving the Queen in the Knights of the Light to compare it to the way the Thoran Christians had followed the archbishop. A handful of dwarves that had escaped slavery in Vinnum Tow and a large mass of factory workers from Foxloe verbally illustrated the atrocities they endured to fuel the global economy with cheap resources and products. By the end of the first week, almost everyone felt culpable. For whom hadn't at least indirectly ignored or benefitted from the problems that plagued the people beneath Solaris. When the negotiations began, there was something like a level playing field. Unfortunately, it didn't last very long. As actual actions to fix Civilization's sickness were proposed, excuses arose and selfishness triumphed over empathy.

Half the indecencies that were brought up not only went uncured but were explicitly enforced. The GraiLords were given one city – one city of sovereign minotaurs in all of the Vanian Mountains where their people still made up the vast majority. The Iceloadic bearns were returned Azunu but the north, northern Sentrakle, where just as many bearns had lived as elves since before people cared to keep record, went entirely to the Sentry. The Dreb and Nevomn Dynasties of northern Iceload were essentially told that if they wanted to rule themselves then they could do so in Munkloe. Though the rule of Tadloe went to Shirahama's brother, a Kemplor, the capital remained deeply set in Fou lands. When Barenchi died during the final days of the war, his predecessor, who wasn't a Kou, agreed to combining Koustan into one solid Sondorian state under Cage rule. And aside from Manaloe, where Brahim Phinn remained the dictator, though with power limitations that left him and his bureaucracy more of a figure head than an actual government, the north remained bound to the crown of their colonizers. On the other hand, one main transgression was overcome. The Selter Sacha, a moleman family, became the soul rulers of Batloe. One way or another, the lines were redrawn and the leadership formally established so that there would be no misconceptions beneath Solaris.

The final step was Saint's creation. Those who had grown to love him since his rise a few years ago, both leaders and layfolk alike, demanded that he take a role of leadership in the new world order. This is how Saint became King of God's Island and this is when he created the Trinity Nations.

It began as a simple alliance. All the kings who wished to join this conference could. The only requirement was that members were to communicate their needs, wants, and differences rather than demand them. They would rule their domains independently but they would obey a certain set of rules agreed on and established by the participants. Saint organized it in two councils. The first was a council of monarchs, the Diamond Council, which originally included Bira Sentry of Sentrakle, Sadurn Oreh of Middakle, Pueblosa Azuran of Azunu, Heglara Selter of Batloe, Tojo Kemplor of Tadloe, Abhidhara Fang of Foxloe, Jasmine Eninac of Dogloe, Brahim Phinn of Manaloe, and Saint of God's Island. The second was a council of leaders, most of which lived within the territory of queens or kings, that controlled enough power to be considered social monarchs. The Crystal Council included one atriarch from each of these twenty

groups, organized under these families: Aznaru, Azuran, Kakal, Oturan, Fang, Baba, Fou, Row, Ein, Sentry, Oreh, Etihw, Anura, Fasthoof, Habba, Kou, Eninac, Pow, GraiLord, Shelba, Darkblade, Phinn, Petara, and Ruse. Together, these councils would solve their problems and when the entire organization needed to make a decision, a commandment to be followed by all the bits and pieces beneath the Trinity Nation's umbrella, these two councils had one vote each. It was Theseus' idea to add a third vote, Saint's – so that his vote counted in the Diamond Council and in a council of his own – and though Saint would have rather this not be the case this was how it was agreed upon. The “Trinity” was in reference to the three votes, one vote from each council and one vote from the Emperor. Though some nations have left and some tribes have joined in, and vice versa, this was how the Trinity Nations began and roughly how it looks as it continues today.

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“That's pretty-” Joe winced, “-cool.”

“Da pain comin back, Civ?” Nogard asked.

“Want more?” Zalfron offered.

Despite the uncomfortable distortion the drug put on Joe's sensory perceptions, with the pain in his snapped leg beginning to return, Joe did not protest. Gently, they smeared the gel of the plant across his shin and before he knew it, whether or not it could be considered sleep, Joe slipped out of consciousness and did not wake until the morning sun breached the Aquarian Dome.

Chapter Nine: The Castle in the Coral

Despite the fact that Solaris was still waking up, the Barren's Mullet still had a fair share of customers. Most patrons were those that had slept the night in one of the rooms above, but many had come solely for breakfast. Solaris shared many things with Earth, one thing they didn't share was brunch. If you wanted to find a meal with eggs in a restaurant, you had better arrive before 10:30 – earlier on a slow day, though slow days were few and far between at the Barren's Mullet. Ever since Sam Budd had hired Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth, the food quality at the Barren's Mullet had increased from occasionally edible to absolutely indelible. Even if the tavern hadn't made a name for itself as “that place where Tou Fou and Tabuh Sentry met Daernar Darkblade,” it would have surely found fame through the flavors put forth by its rock dwarven cook. A cook who never would've known Sam Budd had it not been for a certain customer. On this Monday morning, the dawn following Joe, Nogard, and Zalfron's first night in the submarine jungle, this very customer sneaked between the legs of the drowsy door guard and strode into the bar. Ignoring the protest of the employees around him, the little man stormed into the kitchen where he finally stopped to explain himself.

“I am here to speak with Sam Budd and I need to speak with him right now!”

The cooks tightened their grips on their utensils and leaned protectively over their dishes as they glared at the speaker, a Knome. Only one seemed to know what to do: the Mullet's culinary messiah.

“Hello, thar, lil brothar,” Bold placed himself between the intruder and the kitchen, keeping him from leaving the doorway, “we don't let folk in the kitchen n-”

“Boldarian!” The Knome cried, “You're going to kick *me* out?”

Bold's name swept the dwarf's composure out from under him.

“*I'm Ekaf!*”

“Mr. Reppiz!” Bold strode forward, fell to his knees, and embraced the old man, “Whot brangs ya tuh Partville?”

Putting aside his initial offense, Ekaf accepted the hug but remained stern, pulling away after a moment to get down to business, “Serious business, I'm afraid. I really need to talk to Sam but, then again, I probably should run this by you and the Shisharay boy first. After all, it does concern the two of you just as much as it concerns Sam. Well, actually, even more so-”

“Whot's thot, lad?”

“Yesterday, Grandfather and three young men were sailing on a Knomish ship called the *Sea Cuber* and Hermes Retskcirt attacked them-”

“No?!” Bold gasped.

“Yup! Fortunately, the boys escaped but, unfortunately, the great Knomish smith was captured. I can't say how. After all, with the Suikii, Grandfather should've been able to zip-zap-zop right out of that banshee's range but, regardless, he is in the custody of the Pact and my young friends are on the run.”

“That's harble!” Bold exclaimed, “Ya don't thank thull kill em, do ya?”

“No, I don't think so. Not yet at least. Word on the Knomish-grape vine is that the banshee plans to have Grandfather make him a sword. Then again, that's coming from a bunch of Knomes. Grandfather could be dead for all I know.”

“Lard...” Bold was shook his head sadly, “anothar Knomish blehde...and in the hands of uh devil. Hae'll sharlay kill em once the blehde is mehde.”

“I’m not too worried about Grandfather, if he can escape Iahtro he can escape Hermes, but I am worried about those three boys he had with him. You see, I’d entrusted Grandfather with the task of getting those goons to God’s Island and now they’re wandering around Aquaria getting into who knows what kinds of trouble! As I’m sure you well know, this is no time to be backpacking across King Lacitar’s sea floor.”

“Indaed.” Bold nodded solemnly.

“So I figured I best go after them, but I can’t do so alone. I need back up. A few old friends, warriors, ready and capable of making the best out of a bad situation-”

“That’s the best ya can do.”

“Indeed! Being in the Hyzoh Zou, Zouzu area, y’all immediately came to mind. Plus, I swear I could smell your cooking halfway down the Saluman River and that...”

As the Knome rambled on, Bold sat his spatula down on a counter behind him and turned to his coworkers, “Aye lads, y’all moind if uh step out far a bit?” Shrugs and shaking heads were the responses, “Thank ya!”

Turning back to Ekaf, he ushered the still blabbering Knome out of the kitchen and pushed him along until they got to an empty table.

“Listen, Mr. Reppiz,” Bold began, “Grandfathar asked Zach and oi to go with em and the boys the othar noight.”

“Oh? What’d you say?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

“But...” Bold sighed. He looked away and turned his eyes on his toes, “Oi’ve been thankin...Uh thank it wos a mistehke.” Despite Ekaf’s natural inclination to respond immediately, he hesitated, sensing Bold had something he needed to get off his chest. Bold continued, “When Grandfathar came, uh felt called to go with em...uh didn’t. Thank uh was scehred. Uh told muhself, uh said it’d bae a wehste of toime. Uh said they’d bae just as loikelay to do the dwarves some good as uh was back in the kitchen, just loike the Samurai...even with muh fathar with em, they didn’t do uh thang far the dwarves. Can’t raellay blehme em, they saw whot happened when wae troyed, donum, when anyone troys to do somethin bout it.”

Ekaf nodded along. Bold was quiet for a moment. He stared into the flames of the nearest fireplace. A family of molemen were gathered around, the mother holding the little one from behind by his collar as he leaned towards the fire with arms extended as if he could pull the warmth in. Bold looked back at Ekaf.

“Uh dunno.” He said, “Somethin bout that poyromansar.” He shrugged, “Sposed oi felt called the farst toime, yaers back, when wae failed, but-”

“We saved your father.” Ekaf interjected.

Bold shrugged. His father had been saved. So had a few others. But most of those that had trusted them in the Failed Revolt of 93 had been slain or captured to later be slaughtered. Then, for every dwarf involved, the Vinn publically executed ten innocent dwarves. To make matters worse, the Vinn had gotten ahold of Bold’s blood, allowing him to be tracked by magic in an age where allies of the Vinn – whether they be Pact or Order – loomed around every corner. Only in Budd’s tavern could Bold feel somewhat safe. It was the same reason the Samurai Daernar Darkblade had sought refuge under Budd’s roof. The Barren’s Mullet had enchanted walls. Impenetrable like the walls of the Cathedral in the capital. Bold didn’t have to elaborate to Ekaf, Ekaf knew that no one with respect for dwarven lives could’ve considered the Revolt of 93 anything but a failure. Still, he hated to see the shame Bold felt for standing up

against evil and losing. There is something to be said for someone that makes such a stand, even if they only draw a bit of blood – they stood and they stabbed.

But if they then sit back down, Ekaf wondered, do they lose that credit?

“Uh thank when it happens,” Bold continued, “when wae frae arselves, all of us, uh thank they’ll bae a lot mar of us dead than frae. Uh thank thar meh aeven bae a lot mar of em aloive than us frae. But wae still will have won. Thar is no win, until all moy paeple are frae. Thar is no end until all moy paeple are frae. Til evray braethin dwarf is frae.”

Ekaf nodded, “One day-”

“Not unless wae mehk it happen.” Bold stated, “Uh dunno whot it was, but that boy had something bout him that mehd mae thank twice bout sittin on moy ass, hoidin from it all, wehtin far the Lard to brehk his soilence and send uh miracle. Now haer uh am thankin thard.”

“Hello.”

Ekaf turned to see a suit of armor with a horned helmet standing behind them both.

“Hey, Zachias!” The Knome exclaimed, “Remember me?”

Zach looked past the Knome to Bold who mouthed the name, “*Ekaf Emanlaer Reppiz.*”

“Mr. Reppiz,” Zach nodded.

“Wow.” Ekaf blinked, looking between the dwarf and the spirit, “You actually remember me?”

Zachias lifted his visor to smile at the Knome.

“Anyways, I was telling Bold-”

“I heard.” Zachias stated, “I’m with Bold in whatever he decides.”

Ekaf turned back to Bold.

Bold looked up at Zachias, “Whot do ya thank?”

“I’m with you.” Zachias said, pausing to look around the tavern, “We’ve sat for far too long.”

Bold nodded and looked back to the Knome, “Now ya just naeda convince Budd.”

Ekaf gulped.

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“Ya know ah been thanking...” Zalfron paused to burp and the gamey odor of their crab dinner and recent crab breakfast wafted out of his mouth – almost visible in the Aquarian atmosphere, as a floating shimmer like an oil slick, “...bout that banshae yesterday-.”

“Yea?” Nogard asked.

“Well, hae was a banshae, raht? Evraythang ah’ve ever heard bout banshaes is that if ya come across one yer done for! Wah didn’t hae kill us?”

“Pretty sure he tried, Civ,” Nogard said, “he chopped da boat to pieces.”

“Still...” Zalfron shrugged.

They’d woken up with the sun. The plan to take shifts throughout the night had ended not long after midnight but their fire kept other Aquarian Dome animals at bay. After a quick breakfast washed down with coral-cacti juice, they lubed Joe’s leg with more aquannabis and hit the trail (that is, what they hoped to be a trail). With his arm draped over Nogard’s shoulder – the chidra was six inches closer to his height than the electric elf – the three made slow progress. Despite the bleakness of their situation, Nogard assured them that it would not be long before someone associated with his friend noticed their presence and paid them a visit. Nogard’s submarine associates maintained near omnipotent surveillance of the polyp graveyard. By noon,

the effects of the pain killer that coated Joe's right leg were beginning to wear off. To get his mind off the increasing pain, Joe joined the conversation.

"Is Craeton a skeleton like Hermes?"

"Nope," Zalfron said, "sae Craeton was turned bah the Well of Youth."

"If you believe in dat sorta ding," Nogard remarked.

"You don't buhlieve in the Well?" Zalfron scoffed.

"People be talkin bout da Well of Youd for two dousand years, Civ, if it were real, den it'd be on a map by now."

"Oh yeah?" The elf rolled his eyes, "Just cause it ain't on a map doesn't maen it ain't rael, ah maen, farak, yer the one takin us on some wald duck chase through this underwater wasteland! Whah ain't you got yer buddy's place on a map?"

"Nobody heard of dis place, of course it isn't on a map, but everybody be talkin bout da Well of Youd – and where is it?"

"Ah thank ya naeda lay off the drugs for a whahle."

Nogard shot back, "I'd radder rot wid mah plant dan be brainwashed by a fairytale."

"Hate to interrupt," Joe lied, "but, *assuming it is real*, according to the tale, do banshees that haven't touched the Well all look like Hermes?"

"Yup," Zalfron nodded, "their flesh rots raht off. Aven their bones would prolly turn to sand if they lived long enough..." He turned back to Nogard, "Explain whah Craeton hasn't rotted."

"I can't explain how magic be," Nogard laughed, "I got a sword, Civ, not a staff."

"So how do ya get off buhlaevin one thang and not another when ya—"

"Guys, shut up!"

A creature tumbled across their path, less than fifty yards ahead, stirring up a plume of sand. No sooner did it crash to the ground than did it hop back up. It's twiggy legs pumping, the creature propelled itself from the cloud of sand only to run headfirst into the trunk of a thick purple staghorn coral. The impact must've snapped the organism's spinal cord – if it had one – for when it hit the ground this second time it did not get back up. As it lay, it trembled and its protruding blue eyes wiggled on their stems. The body was covered in a rainbow of fur starting with yellow by the tail then turning, green, blue, purple, before finally becoming red by the head. Beside the eyes, antennas or antlers – Joe couldn't decide which they were – stretched out to create a field goal shaped U. From what Joe could tell, he was looking at a giant furred shrimp.

"What is that?" Joe cried.

"An oceantelope," Nogard said, then he exclaimed, "GET BACK CIV!"

Nogard threw Joe off his shoulder and into the sand behind a grove of pillar corals. Landing on his left side, Joe's ankles collided, rattling his right leg so that blinding pain consumed his mind. When the stars in his eyes faded, he peered around the edge of the hydroid and realized why Nogard had freaked. Flopping forward with impressive speed, using a motion strangely similar to what Earth folks would call "the worm", was a massive, Tyrian-colored fish. A bulbous red-purple oval, the creature was more belly than anything else. It humped its way across the path and landed on the paralyzed crustacean. Opening its fat-lipped mouth, the fish slurped the oceantelope in, slowly, swallowing one segment at a time as if savoring the taste. Joe was almost certain he could hear a faint, high-pitched scream as the giant shrimp was swallowed whole.

"Selu, that's a fishippo, ain't it!" Zalfron asked.

The two boys cowered in the sand behind Joe, peaking over his shoulder at the spectacular scene before them.

"These names are ridiculous." Joe muttered.

"Ya boy!" Nogard nodded, "In all my years, never seen dem eat before! Rarely even seen an oceantelope inside da dome!" He patted Joe on the shoulder, "Joe must be good luck, Civ!"

However, the show was not over. Just as the fishippo finished its meal, a spear shot out of the polyp forest, striking the fish in one of its big stupid eyes. The beast flopped forward only to have the end of the spear smack against the coral above it, pushing the point deeper into its brain. After one more flop, the obese bottom feeder was dead. Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard didn't budge but they didn't have to. Whoever had killed the giant fish had already seen the three.

"Who are you?" Came a voice from the jungle of dead cnidaria.

"Zalfron Sen—"

Nogard slapped a hand over the elf's mouth and whispered, "We don't know who dey are yet!"

"Thought your friends ran this place?" Joe whispered.

"What made you dink dat, Civ?" Nogard laughed before raising his voice and addressing the hidden speaker, "Who are *you*?"

"Answer our question or die."

Our? Joe looked around the clearing. *How many more are there?*

"Guess we got no choice," Nogard admitted, "but let me do da talkin, Civ." Nogard stood and walked out into the open with his hands up, "Nogard Otubak."

Now it was those in hiding that hesitated. As they waited for a response, Zalfron helped Joe to his feet then assisted him in walking over to where their scaled comrade stood. After a few minutes, the speaker emerged with four others. They hopped down from above, having been posted up in the branches of coral that spread over the deceased fishippo. They were blue skinned and dressed in loose fitting blood-dyed tunics that were draped over undergarments of tightly wrapped cloth. Like chidras, these beings had no outward protruding ears. Instead, they had two mesh-looking ovals on either side of the head, reminding Joe of the tympanum ear that sat behind a frog's eyes. That wasn't the only alien-like distortion of the beings' bodies, their noses were replaced with mere nostrils, their heads more diamond shaped than oval, their collar bones were crowned with gills, and their eyes were black, pit looking, similar to that of a shark's.

"Fishfolk..." Zalfron whispered in awe.

The speaker yanked his spear from the eye of the fishippo, "Hello, Nogard Otubak, you and your friends will be coming with us."

As the stern-faced hunter watched them, with a faint trail of blood still rising, like steam, from the blade of his spear, the other fishfolk tended to the body of the great fish. One of the men was busy using a pale dish-shaped razor to slice the giant fish's muscle into slabs that he then shoved in the leather pouch on his back. Another came behind this fellow to saw the organs from the flesh, collect the scales, and pluck the eyes from the sockets. A third was busy chopping at the bones with a coral-handled ax. The final fellow had the most peculiar job. Once enough of the ribs had been snapped and removed from the cage, the fishfolk cut a bulging indigo sack loose, quickly tying the sleeve-like intestines that sprouted from either side of the bag into knots to stop the orange liquid from leaking out. Then, he slid a bone-made contraption off his back, pried it open, plopped the bouncing bubble-like organ into the harness, then clamped the bones tight around it before hoisting it onto his back again. With his thighs bulging, the man leaned

forward to keep the organ from dragging the ground then led the march onward through the coral forest. The other three followed his lead and the man watching the boys, the man holding his spear, came last, beckoning for the three to follow. There was hardly a carcass left behind, just a few scraps of flesh and a dissolving cloud of blood.

“So...Nogard...these guys our friends?” Zalfron asked.

“Yea Civ, don’t worry abo-”

“Quiet!” The spear toting fishfolk demanded, whirling around to face them. The boys didn’t argue. The fishfolk didn’t move for a minute. His black eyes observed the trio. It was impossible to tell where he was looking. Finally, he spoke again, “Your leg, it is hurt.”

Joe nodded, “Yes sir.”

The man stabbed his spear into the ground and lifted the skirt-like apparel that covered his groin. Strapped to his left thigh was a suede pouch, which looked remarkably similar to some of the organs Joe had seen the hunters remove from the fish. Without a word, he squirted some gel from the bladder then knelt beside Joe’s leg (Joe’s pants leg was rolled up so that the makeshift brace wouldn’t have to be removed every time Nogard applied more psychoactive painkiller) and gently applied the gunk.

“Aquannabis?” Joe asked.

Standing the fishfolk corrected Joe, “Warmsap.”

“Dat comes from anodder type of coral tree.” Nogard explained.

“Quiet!” The fishfolk demanded, then he turned to Zalfron and offered more, “You too, you’re burned.”

“Ah’ll bae alraht,” Zalfron muttered, looking at the milky substance with distrust, “Ah’m not so sure that-”

“Quiet!”

The man strode towards him.

Zalfron reared back.

“Zalfron!” Nogard snapped, “Don’t be dumb, Civ, chill out.”

With a sigh, the elf closed his eyes and allowed the fishfolk to rub his face and neck with the cream. When the task was done, the fishfolk turned and continued to follow the hunters now way ahead of them. As soon as he turned, Zalfron did his best to wipe the gel onto his charred shirt before jogging to catch up.

The further they walked the denser the coral foliage became. Eventually, only slivers of Solaris’s light managed to reach the sea floor. They would’ve been walking only by the light of Joe’s chest if not for the growing brilliance of neon tattoos that covered the fishfolk. When they’d first met, the tattoos hadn’t even been visible but as the journey continued they became brighter and brighter. To further light their path, the fishfolk stopped and set down their bags then unbuttoned their blouses, so that the clothing fell limp over their belts, to allow more of their light-producing body art to show. No one set of images were the same though Joe could recognize a few similar symbols between the images depicted on the men. They seemed hieroglyphic to Joe but, as much as Joe wanted to, he did not dare speak up and ask.

Eventually they left the sand and began to walk on shelves of polyps. After a few hours in the coral tunnels, Joe began to notice lights flashing in the distance, like an approaching thunderstorm or fireflies blinking in the woods, and as they drew closer he realized that the lights weren’t flashing but rather slipping in and out of view. They were slender luminescent zigzags and they drifted back and forth within a large structure. Until they got within fifty yards, Joe couldn’t tell whether the building was in fact a building or a peculiar polyp because the walls and

roofs were adorned with ocean life – barnacles and bushes. Sitting on a hill of the ancient cnidarian skeletons, the palace was wider than it was tall and was almost entirely enclosed in the great reef around them. The only opening was through the coral bridge the fishfolk led them in on. The castle was built much like a layer cake, one story topped by a trapezoidal roof with the next story stacked on top. The walls were of thin materials, the roaming lights could be seen glowing within them.

“Nogard!”

The cry came from a man, dressed nearly identical to the boys’ guides except his tunic was white, on the steps of the temple. Their entourage halted as the fishfolk ran to meet them on the bridge. He slammed into the chidra, who shoved Joe off him and onto Zalfron at the last second to embrace the fishfolk.

“Janwe!” The stern, spear toting fishfolk snapped, “Fonwe da neda chan!”

“Dan-”

“JANWE!”

Releasing Nogard, the fishfolk trotted back across the bridge and up the stairs, returning to his post across from another guard. Nogard looked back to Joe with an apologetic grimace, Joe responded with a deep breath. Zalfron shifted Joe back onto Nogard’s shoulder and they continued to follow their guide as they marched the rest of the way across the bridge, up the stairs, and stopped at the door so that “Janwe” and the other guard could slide it open. Once they had, the boy’s stern guide turned to the fishfolk that had recognized Nogard and once again spoke to him in their language.

“Wo Chiang neda chan.” He said.

“She-she, sheenshong.” Janwe said.

“Tada twe shoshong.” He said, “Chiang ta da gay shu jenso.”

The stern man and Nogard’s friend switched places so that the friend was the one who now guided them forward and into the Aquarian temple. Once the doors shut behind them and the other hunters disappeared, heading their separate ways, the goofy fishfolk nearly re-embraced Nogard.

“Wait, Civ,” Nogard nodded to Joe, “a blue fire crab got his leg.”

“Oh, yes, Yiangui said.” Janwe bowed apologetically, “I am so sorry,” then he brightened up, “but we have the best healers, you are in good hands.” His grin grew even broader as he looked back to Nogard, “It has been so long, friend!”

“Good to see you too, Civ!” Nogard laughed.

The fishfolk turned to Joe and Zalfron, “I am Janwe. Welcome to Shelmick’s Stronghold. Any friend of Nogard’s is a friend of ours. What are your names?”

“Joe.”

“Zalfron.”

“Nice to meet you both!” Janwe said, offering another sharp toothed grin before frowning and looking down at his webbed toes, “I apologize about my brother, Yiangui. He can come off as rude.” He looked the boys back in their eyes, “He doesn’t like funny business.” He began walking again, “How’d you know where to find us?”

“I didn’t Civ, I knew y’all’d find us.” Nogard laughed, “Dey were hunting a fishippo and de beast ran right in front of us!”

“You were just wandering around Aquaria?” Janwe asked.

“Dought we were in Mirkweed...” Nogard shrugged with a smirk.

“You’re crazy!” Janwe laughed, “This man is crazy!”

“Crazy works, my boy!” Nogard laughed back.

“Only because you have the luck of a god’s son!” Janwe said.

“Dis one’s da lucky one!” Nogard replied, shaking Joe before realizing what he was doing and quickly apologizing sheepishly, “Farak, sorry Civ...”

One of the floating lights swam by them and Zalfron jumped out of the way (Joe would’ve too if Nogard hadn’t tightened his grip on the cripple). Janwe and Nogard laughed. Even if the beast hadn’t surprised them, Joe and Zalfron would’ve still thought it horrifying. The snake-like creatures were as thick around as a grown man’s thigh and their jaws were like an alligator except they lacked teeth. But the reptile paid them no mind and swam on.

“What is that?” Joe asked.

“A glow eel!” Janwe explained, “They eat bugs and tiny crustaceans so there is no need to be afraid!”

“Where be Machuba?” Nogard asked, “He alright?”

“Well...” Janwe’s shoulders slumped, “He’s alive.”

“What do you mean, Civ?”

“He’s been captured...”

“No!”

“Afraid so...” Janwe sighed, then he picked his shoulders back up and said, “but we will soon be sending a group of men to get him back! I am sure Sidon would be glad to let you accompany them!”

“It’d be an honor...” Nogard spoke with a sense of urgency Joe had yet to hear in his voice.

Janwe stopped before a door and slid it open, “This is our clinic. May we let them see about your leg.”

Joe nodded. Three female fishfolk stood in the room, one busy by a cabinet, another cleaning off a cot, while the third approached Joe. The doctor knelt by Joe’s leg and remarked something that did not sound too promising in the Aquarian Dialect. Standing, she turned to her companion by the shelf and asked, “Shamian yea.”

Closing the cabinet, she opened a drawer by her waist, then withdrew a stone box similar to one where a person might keep their jewelry. Coming over to the doctor, she opened the box and the doctor took out a blue leaf. Before Joe could consent, the fishfolk pried open his mouth with her index and middle finger, tossed the leaf in with her other hand, then clapped his jaw shut. His body’s first reaction was to gag but the woman pinched his lips closed. The leaf began to bubble then it dissolved completely, turning almost to a gas. Despite Nogard’s support, Joe staggered backwards sneezing. He glanced back at Zalfron and Janwe but they were nothing but blurs, a blue blob and a peach one. Joe turned back to Nogard but never saw his friend because his eyes fell shut and he drifted out of consciousness.

- - -

“What makes you think Flow Morain won’t just bash another hole in that crumbling skull of yours?” Grandfather asked, “Something else you read in that silly book?”

Though the banshee didn’t answer, his silence provided Grandfather with enough information to form a guess.

“You’ve got no clue what’s going to happen!” The Knome laughed, “Did you actually read it or just look at the pictures?”

The banshee's emerald flames flared but he didn't say a word. The only response Grandfather received was a smirk from Catherine. With a grunt, Grandfather plopped back onto his butt and glared at his shadow-made pallbearers. He had spent the majority of their trek across the muddy taiga annoying his captor as best he could. In all honesty, he was surprised Hermes had tolerated him this long. *He must really want that sword.* Grandfather sighed. He would rather die than forge the undead bear a magical blade. Then again, these days, Grandfather rarely found himself unwilling to die. He considered himself way past his expiration date and, in the grand scheme of things, he was admittedly unnecessary. Solaris didn't need him, not anymore. If he hadn't realized that himself, the Suikii had promptly informed him by her absence. But, at the same time, after having lived so long there was an urge in Grandfather, an urge that grows in each of us over time, the desire to survive and more often than not, no matter how much he believed he was ready to die, he found himself fighting death tooth and nail.

Catty staggered a bit and cursed beneath her breath.

"Your calves still giving you trouble," Grandfather asked, "You really should've seen a healer, cauterizing wounds like that is a surefire way to get a permanent limp."

Catty ignored him.

Grandfather continued, "Might be hard to kick like you do with a permanent limp."

"Would you like me to stab your other foot?" Catty hissed as she turned to glare at the caged Knome.

Averting his gaze, Grandfather cleared his throat, "This forest is even colder than the taigas."

"Suppose that's why they call it Frostwood." Catty remarked.

Frostwood was somehow just as bleak as the rest of Middakle. The soft mud was hidden beneath a much more all-encompassing carpet of snow, glazed in a very thin layer of ice. This blanket was disrupted only by the gray trunks of the pine and spruce trees. Despite being supposedly evergreen, the trees looked sickly. Their needles were nearly the same shade as their wooden shafts and their branches were spread so far apart that they did little to keep falling snow from crowding their roots. What really drove home the eerie, unsettling nature of the wood was the silence. The only sound being the three travelers' voices and their feet along with those of Hermes' four cage-carrying minions.

"You know, Catty and I could freeze to death out here." Grandfather said.

"I'll thaw you out when we arrive." Hermes said.

Grandfather chuckled, "If Flow doesn't kill you."

Catty smirked.

Hermes snarled, "I'd like to see him try."

"Would you now?"

The voice was not Grandfather's nor Catty's. It was so chilling that it made Hermes' demonic voice seem prepubescent. Flow Morain emerged from behind the three, having somehow avoided the far-reaching sight of the banshee he now loomed before. Cloaked in armor from head to toe, the Doom Warrior was as tall as Hermes despite the fact that his skeleton was elven. Their flames were an identical shade of sickly emerald. Two factors made it easy to decipher between the two, Flow wore a closed helmet that hid his entire skull and the engraved beast that romped around his chest plate was a wolf rather than a wolverine. Catty and Hermes staggered away from the imposing figure before freezing in their tracks. Grandfather slinked to the back of his cage.

"What brings you back to my neck of the woods?" Flow asked.

Catty spoke up, “We need-”

Within a second, the tip of Flow’s sword was poking the shadowmancer’s neck. The blade was one sided, much like the Fou-style Suikii, only far bigger and the edge was serrated like a saw. If it were to have pierced her flesh, even if it was but a scratch, the magic infused weapon would’ve ensured Catty’s death within a day.

“I am speaking to Hermes...” but Flow paused before turning back to his fellow banshee, “You went to Creaton now too, eh, Catherine? Seems you mancer’s have the loyalty of felines!”

Catty didn’t respond, she only glared. Flow lowered his weapon and turned to Hermes.

“Sir,” Hermes said, “I’ve come to ask for a favor.”

“And you come bearing the gift of a Knome?” Flow cackled.

Hermes looked to Grandfather who merely smiled in response. Hermes was about to respond but Flow had already started walking away, deeper into Frostwood. Hermes then turned to Catty. She too had started to follow the Doom Warrior. Grunting, Hermes directed his cage-bearing shadows to follow.

“Are you going to let him take me?” Grandfather asked, still grinning.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Hermes asked, not looking at his prisoner as he responded.

“Because that would completely defeat the purpose of us coming here.” Grandfather responded, “And prove that you’re just as weak as you were when you ran away from this damned forest.”

Hermes froze in his tracks and Grandfather found himself, for the first time, truly grateful for his cage. Hermes continued to walk.

“The more you talk,” Hermes growled, “the less I want your sword.”

“Kill me then,” Grandfather snapped.

“In time,” Hermes replied, “in time...”

They traveled the rest of the way in silence. While Hermes, Catty, and Grandfather sweated, wondering whether Flow Morain would spare them, the Doom Warrior savored their fear. His icy castle came suddenly. The trees grew all the way up to the towering walls of Fort Dunvar. The castle, looming beyond the black façade, was easily visible between the needled canopies. There was no gate but, as Flow approached, the bricks wiggled out of the way. Catty, Hermes, and the shadows carrying Grandfather followed and the walls closed behind them.

Inside, the forest continued as if it had never been stopped though now a trail, paved with ice coated cobblestone, twisted through the trees. Crumbling dark towers rose here and there, like the foliage – unkempt and unorganized – as if the fortress had sprouted spontaneously from the muck and had been deserted ever since. There were people, they just weren’t living. Engulfed in the flames of the banshee and draped in the armor of a Doom Warrior, Flow Morain’s followers could be seen here and there, guarding a doorway, watching them from a rostrum, or wandering away from the road and into the piney groves – groves far denser than the wood that surrounded the twilight walls.

“You’re rebuilding your army?” Grandfather asked.

Flow didn’t respond.

“Whose side will you be on?” Grandfather asked.

Flow answered, “My own.”

Not another word was spoken until the road ended abruptly at two large, black marble doors that sealed a tunnel which protruded from the base of a massive monolithic building. The base of the minaret was in the shape of a cross, with four equal sized halls, like the tunnel before them, enclosed in ebony stone extending from a box shaped center. At the middle, where the four

legs met, was a square shaped ring of arches that covered an open-air walkway which surrounded the actual trunk of the tower. The round bodied tower rose way above the tree line to be concluded by a snowy roof-top courtyard with four small, single-story, watch towers. This great structure, called the Rook Belfry, was almost as legendary as the knight that defended it.

Flow stepped forward and the doors parted to let them through. He marched them down the long hall, past the arches, and into the chapel that sat at the bottom of the tower. There, he stopped and asked Hermes the question.

“What is it you want?”

“I want void-dust.” Hermes said.

“Why?”

Hermes wished he didn't have to say. The fact that Flow himself wielded one of the Knomish Four Swords made Hermes doubt the Doom Warrior would be willing to assist in the creation of a fifth. Not to mention the fact that Hermes had once tried to slay the ghost. Still, Hermes knew better than to lie and knew that no answer at all would at best guarantee a denial.

“So that Grandfather can make another sword.”

“Grandfather?” Flow Morain turned to the Knome.

Without warning, Flow Morain raised the Ruikii and pointed it at Grandfather. An ear wrenching roar tore through the quiet chamber and the world, which had already been dark in the confines of the Rook Belfry, fell completely black. Only matter with energy was intelligible, taking on varying shades of gray and white. Catty and Hermes were frozen stiff, Grandfather, one the other hand, was not. The two were in the realm of Total Darkness.

“Where's your Suikii?” Flow asked.

Grandfather replied with a hateful stare.

Flow chuckled, “Calm down, I know I've tried to kill you in the past but I'm not Iahtro, I harbor no hate for you. Outside of the Storm's ridiculous tournaments I've got no reason to beef with you. Not like I do with this one,” he nodded to Hermes then glared at Catty, “and despite your Knomishness, I surely trust you more than she – which is why it's you I targeted. I've got a question.”

“May I ask a question first?”

“Are you not asking one now?”

“Why did you save Hermes?” Grandfather asked before hurriedly adding further, “Then when he betrayed you, why did you spare him?”

For a moment, the Doom Warrior was silent and motionless. As if he had dropped out of his own spell to be frozen alongside Grandfather's shadow escorts. Finally, he answered, “You of all people should know the terror that is leaving this forsaken life alone. Dying with no one left behind to remember you.”

“Flow,” Grandfather scoffed, “I don't think you'll be forgotten anytime soon.”

“I'll be remembered as a monster-”

“You aren't?” Grandfather shot back.

“I don't mind being remembered for what wrongs I have done. But the idea of my name remaining on Solaris as nothing more than a caricature of my past – a boogey man, a myth, for people to debate over like I was some sort of catastrophic event rather than a being that once lived and breathed just as any other man or woman.” He shook his head and clenched his fists, “I'd rather be hated, than forgotten. I'd rather be reviled than painted to be as black and white as every other hero and villain who's legacy rots away in the annals of Panta's Pillar of the Past.”

Grandfather was a bit taken aback and quite tempted to dig into what the Doom Warrior was unloading upon him, but he was also unsure if picking the brain of such a traumatized soul would be in his own best interest. He settled for a far more surface level question, “You plan to die soon?”

“I never planned to live forever.” Flow replied.

“Ah,” Grandfather nodded, “I feel like you and I have a lot in common.”

“Hermes was a lot like me,” Flow continued, “I saw promise.”

“Apparently you were mistaken.” Grandfather jabbed.

“You aren’t born with power, Grandfather. You earn it. With the proper teacher, Hermes could be as strong as he believes himself to be.” Flow said, “If he had stayed here, I could’ve made him a true force to reckon with.”

“So then why’d you allow him to leave?” Grandfather asked, “Did you hope he’d one day return?”

“He’s here now.” Flow shrugged.

“You know he isn’t here to stay.” Grandfather said, “You’d take him back?”

Flow strode over to stand before the frozen silhouette of Hermes.

“I don’t know.” Flow shrugged, “I’d probably humiliate him and he’d probably run off again.” Flow turned back to face Grandfather, “There was no reason to kill him. He’ll kill himself soon enough.”

“If you can’t bury your pride,” Grandfather agreed, “you might as well bury yourself.”

“Wise words.” Flow said, “Now, for why I wished to speak with you. Are you really going to make him a sword?”

“Are you going to give him void-dust?”

“Ha!” Flow crowed, “No, but I’m sure he’ll find some somewhere.”

Grandfather nodded, “Icelore, probably. Though Shalis’ll make him bow for it.”

“And he’ll stab her in the back.” Flow stated, shaking his head before continuing, “Whatever you make, just know it better not beat mine.”

“You do know the Ruikii was probably the weakest of the four.”

“After your own.” Flow retorted.

The two were quiet for a minute.

“If the new sword is better than mine, then don’t expect civility next time we meet.” Flow warned before asking, “Shall I heal your foot before we turn time back on?”

Grandfather frowned. He cocked his head to the side and hesitated for a moment before asking what he wanted to ask, “I know my memory isn’t what it used to be, but...you’ve changed. You were never necessarily evil, I wouldn’t say, but...you definitely were never very helpful. Not to me anyways.”

Flow remained silent, forcing Grandfather to form an actual question.

“What’s changed you?”

“Bale Morain died.” Flow stated.

“Ah...”

“My forefather.” Flow laughed, “Likely I’m closer related to Creaton than I was to Bale.” He shrugged, “Still...he was a bit like a father...maybe more like an uncle.”

Grandfather smiled, joking warmly, “Whole family of undead, huh.”

Flow nodded, continuing, “Bale – what is it your people call him? Bonehead? Yes, anyways, he visited me before his death. Months ago. He was fond of your kind...anyways, when he died, I knew something was happening. Live a couple centuries and you start to see

things as they happen, feel movements long before they roll into fruition. You know, I'm sure you know, I'm sure you feel it too. It's coming."

"What?" Grandfather asked.

"I don't know." Flow admitted, "The end? I don't know. Could be a beginning. Something...maybe there is something to Saint's Foretelling after all."

"I thought you weren't a fan of prophecies?"

"Maybe it isn't a prophecy. Maybe what the common folk believe to be the foresight of a prophecy is nothing more than the hindsight of a time traveler." Though he had no lips, Grandfather could hear the old banshee's smirk in his voice, "Now, as I heal your foot, is there anything else you'd like to ask me?"

"Yes, actually..." Grandfather pulled a small warp cube out of his hat, "can you hold on to this for me?"

- - -

An hour later, Joe woke up in another room. The floor was a taut fabric of some kind, similar if not identical to the material that made the walls. Both the floor and walls were adorned with the hieroglyphs that scarred the flesh of the fishfolk Joe'd met. Sitting on the floor across from him, suckling at leathery red bladders, sat Nogard and Zalfron.

"Good mornin!" Zalfron exclaimed and as Joe sat up the elf tossed him his own flask, "Drank up!"

Joe took a sip and grimaced. *This is what alcohol is supposed to taste like.*

"Underwatermelon wine!" Nogard explained.

"They gave it to us to tahd us over til dinner." Zalfron added.

"So it isn't really morning, is it?" Joe asked.

"Nah, Civ." Nogard smirked, "You know Zalfron, elf be on somedin."

"What ah'm on is trahin to figure out xactlay what wa're doin hare." Zalfron said, "Ah know wae're sposed to go to God's Ahsland *but...*"

"Yea?" Joe asked.

"Ah don't know if ya know who this is but Nogard's friend is Machuba Gill. *Gill!* Hae's a nephew of a Samurai!"

"No way!" Joe exclaimed.

"We didn't meet by chance, my boy!" Nogard grinned, "Not sayin it was by some prophecy, dough...dough, it is strange."

Joe looked down at his body. His pants, shirt, and tie were gone and replaced by a blue full body tunic of the same style as the ones worn by the fishfolk around them. These were enchanted garbs – as Joe would come to learn – that helped one maintain homeostasis in the underwater-not-underwater world that was existence beneath an Aquarian Dome. When hot, the cloth turned cold. When cold, the cloth turned hot. And though the outer layer might feel drenched, the inner was sure to maintain dryness. The fit was comfortable, but snug – which led Joe to check something. He lifted his skirt and glanced beneath. *They even changed my underwear!* He couldn't help but chuckle a little. Then his eyes fell on his legs. His left leg was covered in a silky white sock and slipped into a sandal. His right leg had the sock too though it was nearly hidden from view. A rubbery, bluish black creature was coiled around his shin.

"Jesus Christ!"

“Calm down, Civ!” Nogard grabbed Joe's hand before he could begin to pry at the long-bodied creature wrapped around his leg, “Dat be der to help ya!”

“It’s uh haeler slug!” Zalfron explained, “That pertty blue haeler from the clinic, the one that knocked ya out with that laef, shae explained it to us. Sae, they ain’t got a haeler as good as Bold was. To hael a broken bone ya naeda laaaaahhta training and what not.”

“Dey didn’t wanna risk farakin up your leg.” Nogard interjected, “Dey got natural healin meddods.”

“The slugs live off yer filth, sweat and dirt and tahd...well, not actual tahd, just meant tahd as in...tahd...” Zalfron lost his train of thought and took another swig.

“Insteda deir moud being stuck to ya, like a leach be, deir ass be.” Nogard said.

“Huh?” Joe was unsure whether he heard correctly.

Nogard’s statement nudged Zalfron’s mind back into action, “Ther tahd haels ya!”

“And dey hold on tight which help keep your bone set right!” Nogard added.

“Weird but...also cool.” Joe smiled and petted the slug affectionately. “How longs it take?”

“I dunno.” Zalfron looked to Nogard.

Nogard shrugged, “Dey said when it’s done it’ll let go and crawl off.”

“Yeah, they come from all over, not just Aquaria, so ya can kaep it on once wae go back above water.” Zalfron said, “They said those thangs could aeven survahve in lava...sorta wanna try settin it on fahr just to sae if they were exaggeratin...”

With Joe questionless, it was Zalfron’s turn. He gave Nogard a grin that made the chidra thoroughly uncomfortable – the same expression Zalfron had given Joe when he first noticed the rock in his chest in the library of Bonehead’s cave.

“*Machuba Gill!*” He murmured.

Now Nogard understood the look, he laughed, “Yah Civ, didn’t wanna tell you when we first met. Not somedin you can tell a stranger, ya know?”

Joe asked, “Why not?”

“He be a Gill, Civ. Can’t have dat last name in Aquaria. Dough I doubted a pyromancer and an electric elf would have anything to do wit King Lacitar, you can never be too careful.” Nogard took a swig from his flask, licked his lips, then finished what he was saying, “I wasn’t about to tell some strangers I would lead dem to da last remaining Gill!”

“This got mae grinnin lahk uh mosqaita on uh moon dragon!” Zalfron eutheized, “Ah ain’t got no doubt, yer one uh the eight – *Saelu!* – you and Machuba both!”

“Yea, if he’ll come, he’s gotta big bounty,” Nogard sighed, “got half of Solaris after his head.”

“Why does the king hate the Gills?” Joe asked.

“Do you know anyding about da Gills?” Nogard asked.

“Fish use them to breathe under water.” Joe retorted.

Nogard smirked and said, “Da Gills are a legendary fishfolk dynasty, Civ.”

“Yea, lahk the Sentries or the Ipativaians.” Zalfron added.

“So what happened? Why do the fishfolk want the Gills dead?” Joe asked.

“Cause the kang ain’t uh Gill.” Zalfron said.

“Yah Civ, da king be scared of da Gills because da people love em,” Nogard elaborated, “and because der is a growin group of people who dink dat ol King Lacitar ain’t all he be cracked up to be.”

“Sounds like it is time for another story!” Joe said with a smile.

“Sorry, Civ,” Nogard laughed, “I’m no good wid dat sort of ding. Zalfron?”

“Sorry guys,” Zalfron held his hands up, surrendering the title of storyteller, “if it ain’t uh story bout Saint then ah ain’t got uh damn clue.”

A knock on the wall put an end to the dying conversation. The door slid open and there was the silly grin of Janwe. Spreading his arms to welcome the guests, he bowed.

“Dinner time, friends.”

- - -

With Ekaf Emanlaer Reppiz in their group, the amount of available ships willing to sell them tickets greatly diminished. They arrived at the docks of Portville around noon and spent the rest of the light of Solaris begging clerks to allow their passage. The dwarf and spirit got so desperate they were willing to sneak Ekaf onboard in Boldarian’s backpack. The plan would’ve succeeded if the Knome had kept his mouth shut. A fight nearly erupted when he was discovered and the three had to leave the vessel in a hurry. In the end, they were forced to settle for a Knomish ship called the *Cinatit* (despite the fact that Knomes seem to hate each other more than any other race bothers to, they still wound up carpooling with one another). The *Cinatit* was departing for a glacier-engulfed island just north of Morainakle called Knomeloe. This was the only above-land Knomish safe haven and it was nothing but a chunk of ice littered with igloos – it was also apparently where Knomes celebrated Shield Day (hence the reason passengers came equipped with shields). Ekaf struck a deal with the captain, a fellow by the name of Emanla Erymton, that they would sail to Kilko after taking the rest of the passengers to Knomeloe.

Kilko was a double city. Above water, it consisted mostly of a mixture of Iceloadic peoples and Tadloen elves. Beyond the beaches, below the waves, was another side of Kilko which was made up of Aquarian fishfolk. It was a city-state, independent of Iceload, Tadloe, and Aquaria, ruled by the Electress Morrigan Oreh and, her husband, Dagda – a fishfolk that had taken her surname. Ekaf claimed he would be able to sneak the boys into Aquaria through Kilko. Otherwise, they would be forced to answer questions at the border of Aquaria. The two young men’s relation to Samurai would garner suspicion that they might be, somehow, affiliated – or at least friends – with the Gill family. Whether or not Ekaf’s claim was valid, they wouldn’t make it to Kilko until the evening of the following day at the earliest.

The worst part about the trip before them was the fact that, partially due to it being a night cruise, the Knomes onboard weren’t there to sightsee. They were there to party and, antagonistic as Knomes tend to be towards one another, after a few drinks the entire ship had devolved into one large bar fight. Ekaf, Bold, and Zach locked themselves in their suite, below deck, and were forced to listen to the constant clamor of violence pounding overhead.

“I miss those days...” Ekaf sighed, looking at the roof, eyes cloudy with wistful nostalgia, “though,” he admitted, “I can’t recall a night spent partying with Knomes where I woke up the next day without something stolen. Once I even lost my sword-”

Ekaf flung himself from his seat and slapped his belt, making sure that the Duikii was still clinging to his side. With a deep sigh he sat back down and continued his monologue.

“I wonder how drunk Captain Erymton is by now. Bet-”

“Ya don’t maen the captain is actualay drankin, do ya?” Bold asked, his normally tan face pale.

“Don’t worry!” Ekaf assured the dwarf, laughing, “This isn’t like driving along a city street. Out on the deep blue sea you can be drunk as a Darkblade and not worry a bit!”

“Uh didn’t peh him to get drunk, uh paid him to sehl this blasted boat!” Bold grumbled.

“He hates boats.” Zach reminded the Knome.

“It’s fine!” He patted the dwarf’s thigh, “Bold, don’t let the fear get to you! There’s nothing to crash into except the shore and you’d have to drink an awful lot not to see that coming!”

“What about icebergs?” Zach asked.

Bold’s eyes grew wide, “Oicebargs?”

Ekaf’s eyes narrowed, “Thanks a lot, Zach.”

Zach attempted damage control, “They’re rare!”

“Yea, so no need to worry!” Ekaf added.

But there was a need to worry. Zach had spoken of the devil.

The ship lurched and the ocean screamed. RRREEEEAAA OOOHHH! They tumbled against the opposite wall. Bold’s head put a hole in the planks. The sounds of the music above had stopped and in the silence the three could hear high-pitched screams that each ended with splashes. Ekaf and Zach had to work together to get Bold’s head out of the wall. When they did the dwarf looked at them like they had pulled him out onto another planet.

“Whot was that?” Bold yelled, his voice squeaky.

“Probably just a prank by the captain,” Ekaf’s words spilled out of his mouth as he did his best to stop the rising panic in Bold’s soul, “you know, he hit the brakes real quick to give us all a good fright!”

Zach was peering through the porthole, “I think it was an iceberg.”

“That’s ridiculous! You heard the captain when we set sail! He said not even God could sink this ship!”

Ekaf ran over to Zach and tried to get a look out the window but the spirit wasn’t budging. The door to their cabin flew open and an old Knome dressed in the blue and white colors of a sailor appeared. A smile stretched across his lips and his eyes were wide with anticipation.

“Iceberg! You won’t believe it, we hit one! Just now!” He was so excited, he even forgot to harass the Knome in the room, “How thrilling? Come on! We’re going to capsizel!”

“Get your stuff!” Ekaf cried as he ran to follow the Knome, “Look on the bright side!” He stopped at the door to wait for his friends, “I’ve ridden with drunken captains a million times and never before have we hit an iceberg. This is a once in a lifetime experience!”

“Boi God, if the captain don’t doie uh’ll kill em!” Bold was trembling with both fear and rage, “Uh’ll take him to cart!” Bold rambled on as they darted after their Knomish leader, “Damn oice! Damn ships! Damn the ocean! This lad wasn’t mehd far the ocean. Nevar trusted boats, nevar naeded boats, not til the hellbrutes farced us to flae ar homeland!”

They ran above deck with a herd of Knomish passengers. Ekaf disappeared in the tide of little people and left the dwarf and spirit to fight their way onward alone. Zach held tight to his bow and quiver as they went. Bold’s furious banter was enough to keep kleptic hands of fellow passengers from slithering into his knapsack. Once above deck, they could tell the boat was beginning to lean. The bow was slowly sinking towards the chilly waters of the Aquarian Ocean. Soon they’d be bobbing out of the water like a humpback whale in mid-breach.

“Whar are the aemargensay vessels?” Bold cried.

Before Zack could reply, the captain did. He had no microphone or intercom so the boys were lucky to hear him. He stood on the platform above the stairwell that they’d just fled through, yelling over the railing like a pastor at his pulpit.

“I’m sorry to inform you, my Knomish brothers, but there are no more emergency vessels!”

Bold began, “That son of a-”

“To be completely honest,” the captain continued, “I hadn’t the slightest clue that icebergs were real!”

“War gonna doie.” Bold plopped down on his butt, nearly squashing the Knome standing behind him, “This is it.”

The announcement was not yet over, “I’m terribly sorry. Fortunately, it is only about a two-day swim to shore and an Aquarian Dome is right beneath us. Though not only are Knomes prohibited from the submarine world, but this is a no drop zone. Directly above Aquaros.”

Instead of an outraged cry, the passengers, those who were close enough and quiet enough to hear, applauded for a moment or two before continuing to fight one another for the best vantage point to take on the epic sinking. The simple twelve-hour trip had just been turned into an adventure – and at no extra cost! Bold was at a loss for words and Zach wasn’t quite sure what to do either.

“No vessels?” Zach muttered.

Bold could only reply with a nod.

“So we swim.” Zach stated.

“Aye, you swim, lad,” Bold corrected, “Oi sank loike uh rock.”

Ekaf reappeared, chattering like he had never left, “Isn’t this incredibly exciting? I spoke with the captain and he says that not only will we sink, we’ll actually capsize! That sailor wasn’t kiddin! Come on!”

Ekaf disappeared almost as quickly as he had appeared.

“Thot was Ekaf, roight?” Bold asked.

Zach shrugged, “I think so?”

Zach lifted Bold to his feet and the two did their best to follow the old Knome’s voice as he continued to ramble, “I’ve got an idea. Since you’re a rock dwarf I figure you can’t swim...not to be racist, I just meant that you weigh a lot...not because you’re fat, but because you have such thick skin...though I don’t mean that you’ve got no feelings, just that-”

Tired of Ekaf’s antics, Bold swept his fellow passengers out of the way and grabbed Ekaf by the back of his tunic. He demanded, “WHOT THE HELL’RE WAE TO DO?”

“We’ll go to the end of the ship – stern if you know your ship jargon.”

“The stern is about to be perpendicular.” As if validating Zach’s observation, the tilt on the deck shifted to nearly forty-five degrees. Dozens of Knomes lost their balance and came tumbling down from the back of the ship, rolling by like bowling balls. “I’m not sure that’s wise.”

“On the contrary, that’s exactly why we must go to the stern!” Ekaf exclaimed, clawing at Bold’s grip but failing to pry himself free, “The higher we are, the further away we can jump and the less likely we are to be sucked down with ol Captain Erymton!”

It seemed that each second the incline grew steeper, but Bold still wasn’t letting go.

“*JUMP?* Ol Captain said it’d bae a two deh swim! *TWO DEHS!*”

“I know you can’t swim but you could always sink to the bottom and walk to shore.”

Ekaf shrugged.

“*WALK?* How the hell am uh supposed ta hold muh breath far two dehs?” Bold crowed, flinging his hands into the air.

His act of bamboozlement freed Ekaf and once again the Knome took off towards the stern. Zach and Bold had no better options than to follow him – Bold was hell bent on continuing his rant, especially after Ekaf’s next comment.

“It may be a two-day swim but it can’t be more than a one day walk.”

“One deh? One deh hae tells mae!” Bold chuckled hysterically, “Lad, uh can’t hold muh breath for foiv minutes, let alone uh deh.”

“What’s the longest you’ve ever held your breathe?” Ekaf asked.

“Uh doubt longar than a minute!” Bold exclaimed.

“So you’ve never held your breath for as long as you could?”

“Uh maen uh have but-”

“Then what stopped you from going longer?” Ekaf asked.

“Uh gave up baecause-”

Ekaf snorted “Then don’t give up this time!”

They had made it to the back of the *Cinatit*. Ekaf slipped between the banister-bulwark, which was over halfway to being parallel with the ocean. Zach grabbed the railing and placed a hand on the dwarf’s back. Bold sputtered, spit flying from his lips, eyes wide and wild like a bull that’d just been branded but when he looked to his friend, Zach, he calmed somewhat.

“Make the best of it,” Zach said, a phrase that normally came from Bold’s lips not his own, “that’s the best you can do.”

After a deep sigh, Bold climbed over the railing and Zach followed him. Below them, Knomes jumped overboard left and right, high fiving one another before taking the plunge. Zach spotted the captain floating away on a little bitty rowboat but decided not to mention that to his companions. Even if he had wanted to, he didn’t get the chance, the boat had taken too much water. Now came the final heave. The ship flipped up to stand perpendicular to the water, putting the three nearly fifty feet from the waves. Knomes rained down like fleas jumping from the fur of a dog.

“Alright boys,” Ekaf said, “it is time to jump.”

Bold could only stare at Zach, tears budding in his eyes, lips quivering. Zach gently pried the dwarf’s fingers from the railing, placed a gentle hand on his back, and gave him the slightest of shoves. No sooner did Bold begin his fall than did the spirit and Knome jump after him. Bold prayed as he fell but he never got to, “Amen” because he passed out.

This was fortunate for Ekaf, for a second after Bold went limp, Ekaf got his parachute bag situated on his back. Holding tight to the dwarf and spirit, he pulled the string and their descent was abruptly stopped. Realizing they’d been saved from smashing the surface of the water like a couple of pumpkins onto pavement, Zach wrapped his arms around the Knome and dwarf, the embrace came half out of necessity and half relief.

“Ekaf.”

“Yes, Zachias?”

“Why didn’t you tell us you had a parachute?”

Ekaf laughed, “Y’all thought I had us jumping from the highest part of the ship without a parachute?”

Rather than berating the Knome, Zachias bit his nonexistent tongue. They didn’t have long before they would hit the thrashing water below. He asked, “Do you have a boat?”

“Yup, ri-”

Looking down at his hand, Ekaf realized he’d just dropped his warpcube.

Zach passed out.

A mountain of miniscule mint-green eggs, trickled with a thick teal paste, rose from a salad of shredded red seaweed. Surrounding the caviar volcano and its kelp forest were slabs of salmon-colored meat, striped with sinew, that sat like the fruit of a flower surrounded by petals – the petals being hundreds of tiny purple minnows soaked in the same azure gravy that doused the fish eggs above. Initially, Joe wasn't sure whether it was a work of art or dinner.

Janwe led the way. It seemed the entire population of the Stronghold was present, crammed into the dining hall, all sitting patiently on the floor. Those at the inner circle, which bordered the assorted delicacies, picked up the chrome scales stacked before them, filled each plate, then passed them back to those sitting out of reach of the food. Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard, who sat at the inner circle with Janwe, followed the example of the others (though those unfortunate enough to sit behind Zalfron received dishes glossed in electric elven drool). Only after everyone behind them was eating did the men and women in the center of the room begin to scoop food onto their own dishes.

“Ah thank these scales are from a fishippo!” Zalfron noted through a mouthful of caviar.

“Very astute of you, friend,” Janwe complemented, “we polish them down to make them lighter, that's why they lose their purple color.”

“It looked like y'all planned on using every last bit of the-” Joe choked on his words as a plate of half-melted eyeballs was slid in front of his face.

“Mayo she-she ne, mayo she-she ne!” Janwe said hurriedly, though with a smile, to get the fishfolk maiden with the plate of eye-Jell-O to go away then he apologized to Joe, “Sorry, friend, eye-flam is popular among our people.”

Joe didn't speak. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly until the nausea subsided.

“What all you use fishippo for?” Nogard changed the subject.

“The pink meat you see there, some of that is from the beast you saw.” Janwe said, “Not only do we eat the muscle and eyes but we eat most of the organs too. The intestines we don't eat we find other uses for – like the flasks we gave you earlier!”

Joe couldn't help but grimace at this revelation.

“What was that big ol honkin balloon ah saw yer folks pull outa that fish?” Zalfron asked, “Was that the stomach?”

“It was.” Janwe nodded, then explained further, “Before Yiangu speared the fishippo, you saw it eat something, correct?”

“An oceantelope!” Joe recalled.

“Yes!” As he continued, he scrounged about the inside of his robe, “Oceantelope are impossible to catch outside of the Dome but inside they are clumsy and foolish and often wind up in the mouth of a fishippo.”

“Why do dey come inside da Dome den?” Nogard asked.

“They lay their eggs here. See, the oceantelope has a very tough exoskeleton.” He pulled a medallion adorned with a slender blue disk from within his tunic. Shaking it, the shell wiggled, “Hard as metal yet flexible.” He put the necklace back and continued, “Only two creatures can hunt it: the fishippo and the sumarii. Only the sumarii will eat oceantelope eggs, which are as tough as the shell of their parents. A fishippo won't even notice them.”

“They risk ther lahvs to birth ther babaes?” Zalfron said, “Thas kahnda sweet.”

But Janwe wasn't finished, "Sumarii manage to break through the shell with their powerful jaws and sharp teeth. The fishippo just swallows the giant shrimp whole and let their stomach juices do all the work."

"So Yiangu and the others took the stomach for the oceantelope?" Joe asked.

Janwe nodded, "Even our hottest fire isn't strong enough to soften the oceantelope's shell. For us to forge what we want out of it, we have to go to work as soon as we draw it from the fishippo's stomach acid. It stays soft for a matter of minutes."

"Dats why all de Soldiers of Shelmick have cool colored armor!" Nogard exclaimed.

"I explain this to you every time you visit."

Nogard scratched his tails and grinned, he would've been blushing had his scales not already been that shade of red, "Da gogo, Civ."

Janwe beamed nonetheless, "Still, I am always pleased to teach someone something new!"

A hush swept through the room as a man stood across the food pile from the boys. He looked much the same as any of the other fishfolk, his tattoos were no more elaborate and his muscles were no more massive. The largest defining feature was his tunic and even that was only peculiar because of its color. It was the only black dress the boys had yet seen. Other than that, the clothing appeared no fancier than those of his peers. If not for the attention his actions seemed to demand, Joe and Zalfron might've never thought him any different from the others.

"Welcome back into our home, Sheenshong Nogard Otubak," the fishfolk said, "please introduce your friends."

"Dis be Zalfron Sentry, brudder of Tabuh Sentry," Nogard said, "and dis be Joe, from Urd."

"It is a pleasure to host the both of you." The man bowed then continued, "I am called Sidon. We call ourselves," he gestured to the fishfolk that filled the room, "the Soldiers of Shelmick. It would be wise not to mention your stay here to others once you leave, even wiser to forget how you got here. Even above the oceans, Lacitar has more allies than we have sympathizers."

"Don't worry, Mr. Sahdon, wae ain't gotta farakin clue how wae got hare." Zalfron assured him.

Sidon smiled politely – which was a little creepy coming from a sharp toothed fishfolk who didn't possess half the warmth that Janwe exuded – then wiped the expression from his face and asked without portraying any emotion, "Your friends are our guests and I trust them because I trust you, but in times like these..." he folded his arms, "I cannot help but be suspicious. I must ask – why did you bring these men?"

Joe and Zalfron exchanged glances then turned to Nogard. The chidra didn't blink, he kept his eyes on Sidon. His posture and tone remained steady, as if they were engaged in small talk – as if he hadn't noticed the cold edge to Sidon's voice and the warning in his words.

"Our ship was attacked, Civ, we had to jump." Nogard replied.

"I see." Sidon bobbed his head, licked his dark black eyes, and let his arms hang down by his sides, "These are dark times for us, Sheenshong Otubak."

"Janwe told us Machuba was captured." Nogard said.

Almost two dozen outraged cries of, "JANWE!" shot from all corners of the room and the fishfolk that sat beside the three boys ducked his head in embarrassment. Sidon ignored the outburst.

“Nearly forty of Lacitar’s men are transporting him back to the royal palace where he will be executed by the King himself. His death will signify the end of the Gill family in all its entirety. We have a counterattack planned, an attempt to intercept the caravan tomorrow.”

“Please, I want to help.” Nogard said.

Sidon nodded, “And your friends?”

“Sure.” Zalfron shrugged.

All eyes fell on Joe. He squirmed.

“I wouldn’t be much help...”

Sidon disagreed, “While you slept, your friends told Janwe their story and, as you will soon learn before you leave our company, Janwe keeps no secrets.” Quiet chuckles circled the room. “Word spread and I was told you wield a famous blade, a blade we call Changjio, which the Knomes call the Suikii, meaning Deliverer.”

Though Joe didn’t will it, the black blade appeared in his lap. An awed murmur shifted through the gathered crowd much like the silence that had spread earlier when Sidon first stood. The rebel leader’s eyes, dark and empty, wouldn’t allow Joe to look away.

“That weapon could do for our brother what all our soldiers and all our mages cannot.” Sidon continued, “Lacitar Te-Naryt knows we stand between him and his captive. He knows we have the strength to stop the transport.”

Across the room, the stone-faced Yiangu spoke up, “He is as evil as he is wise.”

“His men carry Machuba in a cage with bars that cannot be bent and with no locked gate that we could pick. Only magic can free our brother, whether it be the magic word known only by Lacitar or the magic sword that now lies in your lap.”

“You see, friends,” Janwe spoke up, “just as you believe fate brought the three of you together, we believe fate brought you to us.”

Once again, all eyes were on Joe. Even the eyes of his two comrades bore down on him but he was still hesitant. He fidgeted. It was Zalfron that broke the quiet.

“Whah don’t ya wanna help?” He asked in a whisper, “Are ya scared?”

“No! Well...actually...yea.” Joe admitted, raising his voice for all to hear, “I am scared.” Those in the room that understood common tongue gasped. Some even shook their heads in disgust. The looks some of the fishfolk gave him suggested that Joe might have a limited amount of time to explain himself before he was thrown out of the fortress. Joe did provide his excuse and, though it wasn’t what the audience expected, it was an acceptable response, “Two nights ago was the first time I ever killed someone.”

There were some scoffs from the room – maybe even some eye rolls though no one would be able to tell what with the pure-blackness of a fishfolk’s eyes. But Sidon nodded, he said, “It is a horrible thing to do.”

“It is.” Joe agreed, then admitted, “And if I have to, I probably will do it again.” He sighed, then continued, “But before I get in another situation like that...I want to make sure I’m doing the right thing. I’m new here – to the Aquarian Ocean and to Solaris – and things are happening really fast. I need to know what’s going on before I agree to get involved.”

“Understandable.” Sidon said.

“If I fight for anyone who asks...who’s to say I wouldn’t wind up accidentally fighting for the Pact or the Order, not even knowing it.” Joe shrugged, “That’s all. I trust Nogard and Zalfron, so I doubt they’d lead me astray. And, Mr. Sidon, even though we just met, I want to trust you. Your people took us in, gave us wine and food, and healed my leg. *But* before I give you my word, I need to know what’s going on.”

As tongues flopped out to skim black eyeballs, the attention switched back to Sidon.

“Where are you from?” He asked Joe, “Where is Urd?”

“It’s another planet, from another sun,” Joe said, “*the* Sun.”

This answer garnered another round of gasps. The majority of the Soldiers of Shelmick were Delians and, to them, the proper noun version of “sun” was almost only ever mentioned in reference to the Sun Child.

“Whether or not you join us tomorrow,” Sidon said, “I respect you, Sheenshong Joe. Sometimes the bravest man is the one who is not eager to fight. The one who is willing to question the tsunami of mob’s rage. Though, if you listen to the evil I am about to describe to you and still wish to keep your blade sheathed, then this first impression of you has deceived me. Now, please, allow me to explain...”

Sidon's Tale 1: Purging the Gills

No family has ruled Aquaria more than the Gills but, in the late 1500s, the royal Gill family bore only daughters. Even the less legitimate lines of Gill ancestry failed to produce any male heirs and, unlike the nations above water, only kings can rule in Aquaria. For almost five hundred years since, not a single crown beneath the water's surface has graced the head of a Gill. Although they weren't official monarchs, the family retained some forms of power in the many shires within the Aquarian Domes. The longer the fishfolk went without a leader from the great dynasty, the more new ruling dynasties began to fear the Gills. With assassinations and excommunications, the dictators of Aquaria did their best to erase the name from the ocean floor and they nearly succeeded.

In 1979, the Gills almost met their end. A group of their own guardsmen, paid off by the new King Lianghow Hiyan, set fire to their estate. All the elders and parents died. Only four managed to escape: one young man and his three siblings. Of the two youngest, one was a little baby girl named Cassandra – not yet a year old – and the other was Paud – who was only four and would later become one of the Mystakle Samurai. Of the two older ones, the younger was a boy named Nerthruk, who was nine, and the other was named Machuba Gill and was thirteen. Clever enough to keep their identity a secret, Machuba guided them to the safety of a religious orphanage in Aidaros.

The next year something so peculiar, so ironic, happened that it made many stubborn hearts see the light of Barro. King Lianghow had no son. Since he had taken the throne, the royal advisors constantly asked who he would designate to follow him as king. Too afraid of betrayal, even from his own family, he decided to adopt a child rather than pick a cousin or nephew. As the sickest of jokes fate has ever pulled, King Lianghow blindly chose Machuba and, of course, the boy would not go without his siblings.

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“How did Lianghow not recognize them?” Joe was so horrified he blurted the question before stopping to think – this wasn't Ekaf or Zalfron he was interrupting. He added, “I'm sorry! I didn't mean to interrupt!”

“Do not be afraid to ask questions, Sheenshong Joe,” Sidon raised his palms to assure Joe that there was no offense taken, “this story is told for your understanding. As for your question: no one knew what the children looked like. No one knew their names. The Gills kept the very existence of their children secret because they knew of the potential for assassination.”

“What about those traitors?” Zalfron asked, “Didn't they know bout the kids?”

“They knew there were children, but not how many, how old, nor even their names. Only the most trusted guards were allowed to protect the children, and rightly so, for if not the Gill orphans would have never escaped.” Sidon explained.

“And da bad guards told da King der be no survivors,” Nogard added, “even dough dey never saw dem all die, dey weren’t about to report udderwise.”

“Did the kids know Lianghow was behind the murder of their family?” Joe asked.

“Not at first but as they grew up they figured it out.” Sidon said, “The night of the fire, they had almost been captured but Paud Gill, the four-year-old, bit off the finger of a guard. This man became Lianghow’s most trusted crony, obtaining a job defending the king’s own security, and the four kids saw him often but never recognized him thanks to the glove that he wore which made it appear as though he had all his digits. Now, shall I proceed?”

“Yes sir, please do!”

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The Gill family wasn’t the only threat to the throne. By this point, the people despised the government. Every decision made was designed only to improve the quality of life for the rich and powerful rather than that of the majority. Lianghow Hiyan was well aware of the widespread disapproval but rather than attempting reform he sought to strengthen the foundation of the corruption, eliminating opposition and reviving a positive public opinion, under the guise of nationalism.

Lianghow got lucky. After a series of murders in Men, a town on the border of North and South Aquaria, there was a standoff between the town police and the group responsible. Many police died, as did many more civilians. All in all, fifty souls had been sent to Solaris, not including the five belonging to the causes of the violence. The crimes were committed by a group of necromancers and, though the bodies were never seen by the public, the police claimed the perpetrators were mermen. These facts fit with the public assumptions and were not questioned. There were few mancers in North Aquaria, even fewer out of the closet, for they shunned the art much like the world did above them. South Aquaria, which was ruled by the mermen who called their land Mirkweed, was another story. Their perception of mancy was far different. They saw it as just another form of magic, just as capable of evil as the next, and, consequently, one third of their population practiced some form of mancy.

Just as the fishfolk despised mancy, they despised mermen. The hatred trickled down over the ages from a source that the common person could not identify but it was reinforced in every other generation by fruitless wars declared and designed for the benefit of the elites. This hatred became the only common link between the aristocracy and the citizens of North Aquaria. The Men Massacre made it hard for even those that opposed such racism to deny the need to respond to their troublesome neighbors to the south.

Plus, in 1979, the Queen of Mirkweed, Maylee Laroc, died and, before her young son could ascend, the once loyal General Yaimon Ren staged a military coup. He and his soldiers took control of South Aquaria. Not only did he openly condemn the government of the north, but he was a shadowmancer. As the self-proclaimed “Men Murder Boys” went to “trial,” Yaimon Ren made some very heated comments about the lack of value of fishfolk life in defense of the

actions of the convicted – feeding into the propaganda that Lianghow spread, suggesting Yaimon Ren had been behind the massacre. Tensions were high and it was a lie that people wanted to believe, because unlike their other problems, they knew how to deal with barbaric foreigners. Not a week after the massacre, King Lianghow Hiyan declared war on Mirkweed.

The guard that had betrayed the Gill family, the guard that then got a job in the king's personal circle, now got the job of Chanjung General – the head of the North Aquarian Military. Initially he was successful. His men forced their way into the Wobniar Woods and made it to the merman capital, Coraljen, before facing a single setback. After a year, the Chanjung General was hungry to have at least one merman city under his control, even if he couldn't take the capital. So he divided his troops and led a regiment against Sanction in the southeast. In 1982, they took the city which soon became their strongest outpost in South Aquaria. They wouldn't have been able to take the city if Yaimon Ren and his men hadn't been late. They arrived after the city had been raised. Yaimon was furious but he had his troops hide in the coral and wait for the opportune moment. After stamping out all resistance in Sanction, leaving many troops behind to maintain control, the Chanjung General hit the road to return to the battlefields outside of Coraljen. On his way, Yaimon Ren and the forces that were supposed to have stopped them from taking Sanction descended upon the fishfolk regiment and the General was captured.

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“The Changjung General is Lacitar!” Zalfron was so excited at the idea that the words exploded from his lips, “Ain't hae?”

“Lacitar Te-Naryt, you are correct.” Even Sidon couldn't help but grin at the delighted expression of the elf.

Joe was thankful Zalfron had interrupted, he had been holding back a question of his own, “What's the difference between the fishfolk and the mermen?”

“Technically, modern mermen are still fishfolk. That said, not all fishfolk all mermen, mermen are a minority.” Licking his eyes, Sidon slipped his shoulders out from his tunic and let the blouse fold over the belt at his waist. After whispering a spell, the neon tattoos that laced his chest faded until only his skin was visible. He spun around, slowly, so that Joe could see his chest and back. His back was a deep blue compared to the lighter, almost sky blue, shade of his belly.

“Mermen have dark backs and pale fronts.” Sidon explained.

“But I thought you were a fishfolk.” Joe stated.

The gathered crowd chuckled quietly at this.

“The only true difference is cultural.” Sidon gestured to some of the females sitting around them, “If you look at our women, who we keep inside, you will see that they are colored more like the fishfolk. If I were to stay inside, I too would lose some of my darkness, but just as the pale skinned races of the surface tan, so do we on the ocean floor. And over the years, those who tanned easier or were merely born with darker backs survived to reproduce more often

among the fishfolk of South Aquaria, of Mirkweed, and thus they became what is meant in modernity when someone calls another a merman. Even if the light of Solaris never touched my skin, I would still be darker than my fishfolk kin.”

“Why’d the difference come about?”

“The fishfolk of the north were the first to live under Aquarian Domes. The mermen of the south avoided such a life for centuries. Beneath the domes, man is the apex predator. There, one’s complexion was not a factor in natural selection. In the open water, man is nothing but another link on the food chain. A dark back helps swimming mermen blend in when a predator is looking from above and the light belly does the same from predators lurking below.”

Joe was impressed, “Y’all know about evolution, about natural selection?”

Sidon smiled, “It is common sense, is it not?”

“True.” Joe nodded.

Sidon continued.

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Machuba and Nerthruk begged their adopted father to let them join the war and, after Nerthruk’s thirteenth birthday in 1982, King Lianghow Hiyan consented. He might not have if he’d known Machuba’s girlfriend would soon be giving birth to his first child, but he would not learn that until later – well after the child was born (by this time, the Gill children knew well what their adopted father was responsible for). The two boys went first to Fort Gonchi where they excelled in training and were sent to the front lines in 1984. When they passed through the Submarine Canyon, a long crack in the ocean floor that goes about half the distance from Fort Gonchi to Sanction, mermen attacked their convoy and those that survived were forced to flee into a barren strip of sea floor between the Submarine Canyon and the Wobniar Woods – a strip that had yet to be domed. the Wobniar Woods – and this was before the Dome that sits over the canyon and much of the woods was built.

The two oldest Gill boys would’ve been swallowed by a sumarii, torn apart by a shamoo, or impaled by a spear-toothed ray if they hadn’t been saved by a shell-masked, dark skinned fishfolk known to all Aquarian children as the mysterious warrior, the super hero, the deity: Sidon (he was, of course, a merman but the North Aquarians believed him to be a non-merman fishfolk as he was far too virtuous to be a merman). Their savior brought them to his layer, Shelmick’s Stronghold, hidden in the coral jungle of the Wobniar, and introduced them to a merman boy a year older than Machuba named Leord Laroc. Leord was the only child of Maylee Laroc and the rightful heir to the throne of Mirkweed. The masked fishfolk, merman prince, and the rest of those gathered in the secret pocket within the polyps were collectively known as the Soldiers of Shelmick. They’d been planning to sneak within the blockaded capital to assassinate Yaimon Ren and, with Leord as the new king, bring peace to all of Aquaria. The two boys were offered a place in that mission and they eagerly accepted.

Everything went according to plan except that Yaimon Ren escaped and fled the city. Leord came before the mermen soldiers of Coraljen, who by then were near starvation from the months spent under siege, and they listened to him. Dropping their weapons, they opened the gates to the North Aquarians. The fishfolk expected a trap but were met by Machuba, Nerthruk, Sidon, and a freed Lacitar Te-Naryt who all assured them that Mirkweed, with the true king on the throne, would do the north no harm. To top it all off, Machuba had been cut during their raid. His blood, due to the Curse of the Gills, was made of molten steel unlike that of the mermen and fishfolk. Not only did the people see them as the King's adopted sons and as saviors of their Chanjung General, but now they saw them as the remnants of the beloved Gill family. That day, North Aquaria fell in love with the four orphans who could now drop the surname Hiyan and reclaim the name of their ancestors: Gill.

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Zalfron jumped in, "So yer tellin mae that yer part god?"

"No." Sidon's tone told them this was not a laughing matter, "I am telling you that many people believe I am a deity, just as many believe me to be a non-merman fishfolk."

"Sidon was a character from an Aquarian fairy tale-"

"JANWE!" Yangu shot up from where he sat to scowl at his brother.

"Yangu, pingjing ne-tsuji." Sidon calmly rebuked Yangu then continued speaking once the man sat back down, "My parents were hard people. They raised me to see that the world was violent and corrupt and that there was no one to defend me but myself. That what the politicians and the wealthy claimed was not true. My experiences growing up validated this and it haunted me."

Again, an excited Janwe interjected, "So he donned the shell mask of his favorite fairy tale, he-"

"JAN-"

This time Sidon cut the two off by merely raising his palms, "I decided to become my hero and, in doing so, I became a hero to many others. Every man and woman here shares that dream and shares that role of hero. I go by Sidon, yes, but we all go by Sidon when we put on the mask."

"Saaeeluuu..." Zalfron's jaw nearly hit the floor.

"Any question regarding the story before I continue?" Sidon asked.

Joe spoke up, "How'd the king respond to finding out that he'd adopted the survivors of the very family he'd attempted to eliminate?"

"He began to fear them." Sidon answered, "The people praised the four Gills as if they were characters much like the one I strive to embody. The people even began to soften towards the mermen seeing the Gill's friendship with Leord. Without a war to distract them, Lianghow feared that soon his people would be ready for him to die and pass down the throne."

“Ah bet Lianghow was madder than a banshae in a buffet with that Lacitar!” Zalfron cackled.

“Oh, he was.” Sidon assured him, “Lianghow publically humiliated Lacitar under the guise that Lacitar had cooperated with Yaimon while in captivity. This action threatened to destroy Lianghow, half of the people loved Lacitar at this time. Lacitar was a rags to riches story at a time when these were few and far between. The king redeemed himself by giving Machuba the position of Changjung General. He quietly moved Lacitar to Vice Jeencha General, second in command of the police, which reinforced the people’s belief that Lacitar had not been a traitor and that Lianghow was a horrible king. But Lianghow could not expel Lacitar, even if the people didn’t love Lacitar, because Lacitar was his most trusted (and dirty) servant, he needed Lacitar in case the Gills manifested a legitimate threat. Which it seemed they might, because not long after the end of the war, to make matters worse, one of Lianghow’s wives became pregnant.”

“No way!” Joe and Zalfron exclaimed.

“It wasn’t his kid.” Sidon said, “Lianghow knew this but the people didn’t and he sought to keep it that way. He was determined to be replaced by someone who bore his own name and terrified that, if not, he would die by the blade rather than in his sleep upon his throne. But after our involvement in Lorac’s return to the throne, we became more able to speak openly to the people on the streets. No longer were we the counter to the boogeyman, we were real. Where police had bothered us before, they now aided us and, in doing so, they aided our message – a message they once punished us for. We, from the beginning, had advocated for democracy in North Aquaria. Finally, the concept of an election began to take root amongst the populace. Fear once again gripped Lianghow and he put Lacitar on the task of making the people abandon the idea of democracy.”

“How’d hae manage that?” Zalfron asked.

“He needed to trick the people that a vote was not what they wanted. So he hosted a fake election,” Sidon said, “a vote for a vote, he called it. If the people wanted to vote, then all they had to do was vote for it. If more than two thirds of the population didn’t vote, then there would be no election.”

“But Lacitar picked the people who counted the votes.” Janwe sighed, ignoring the fiery glare his brother shot from across the room.

“We believe at least half of North Aquaria voted that day,” Sidon said, “but Lacitar reported less than an eighth.”

“I remember hearin bout dis,” Nogard smiled, “Dis started riots!”

“Those who had been leery of Lacitar, now outright opposed him. They lumped him in amongst the other politicians. These riots weren’t just against Lacitar, but also against their king. Once again, Lianghow turned to Lacitar, after all, the vote for a vote had been his idea. Lacitar begged Lianghow not to give in to the mob’s demands, claiming he had a solution in the making. Lianghow resisted as long as he could but by the end of the year he succumbed. He scheduled another vote for the Spring of 1986 only to have it canceled when Lacitar’s plans came to fruition...”

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As Vice Jeencha General, Lacitar delt with pirates on a regular basis. The most powerful of these smuggling gangs was the Aquarian Sea Lords led by the beautiful Ching Shih. After capturing the pirate captain, Lacitar offered to release her if she would have her men attack Sanction – which the mermen had agreed to let the fishfolk keep – but make it out to look like they’d been paid by Leord. The mermen hadn’t neglected to comment on the Voting Riots, Leord himself claimed to be considering democracy as he explicitly sympathized with the rioters. Lianghow and the elites and the working-class folks that identified with Lacitar but not so much with the rich orphaned Gills that supported the monarchy had begun to gossip of the possibility that the rioters might flee to Mirkweed, organize, and invade North Aquaria as rebels. Aware of this, Lacitar sought to create another Men Massacre. But Captain Ching Shih refused, knowing her men would soon break her out. She did, however, tell Lacitar she knew of someone that would work with him on this sort of scheme. This man would meet him on the northern most Dragon Island.

At this time, approximately five years before the Pirate Wars began, the Order of Mancers was divided into hundreds of factions that rose and fell and combined and split with the weather. The ex-general turned king, Yaimon Ren, had managed to gain the loyalty of quite a few landlubbers in the Order of Mancers’ Dragon Islands. This was how Ching Shih knew of his whereabouts. It was through Yaimon that she obtained the materials necessary to convert individuals into mancy, materials which she smuggled into anti-mancer areas like North Aquaria. Though he and Lacitar had been enemies, both saw the benefit that an alliance could offer. It was ironic. Lianghow’s lie came true as Lacitar and Yaimon joined forces.

Lacitar arrested thousands of rioters. Those who seemed weak-willed, those that had contributed to the chaos not out of civil unrest but for pure joy, he forcibly converted into mancy, convicted them of mancy, then provided them with an ultimatum: execution or Dragon Islands. By the end of the year, Lacitar and Yaimon were ready.

During a Spring fishfolk festival in 1986, on April 3rd, a day that would forever be remembered as Shu Tin, or Blood Day, Yaimon and his troops, wearing shell-masks, slaughtered hundreds of civilians celebrating in the town square of Sanction. It was no coincidence that the Jeencha General had been there that night and died in the violence, making Lacitar Te-Naryt head of the police. Lacitar demanded Leord Laroc give them the whereabouts of the Soldiers of Shelmick’s hideout so that he could have them tried for the crime. When Leord refused, claiming it was a setup, even rightly guessing that Yaimon Ren was behind it, King Lianghow Hiyan declared war and told the people that an election would have to wait until there was the peace and safety in which to do so.

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“But even if it was y’all,” Joe complained, “how could they attack the mermen?”

“They claimed we were a group of radical merman supremacists, as the attackers had been mancercs, and that we were probably encouraged to do so by Leord considering his rhetoric about the Voting Riots and our involvement in his coup.” Sidon answered.

“They call us fishfolk when they like us.” Janwe jumped in to explain, “And call us mermen when they don’t.”

“And technically, they didn’t declare war on South Aquaria, on Mirkweed, they declared war on us.”

“But they still invaded, didn’t they?” Zalfron asked.

Sidon nodded.

“But Machuba Gill was your friend!” Joe exclaimed, “Wasn’t he the military general?”

“Yes and he refused to obey Lianghow’s orders. Lianghow locked him up and gave Lacitar control of the military and the police.”

“Woulda been aesier to jus hand em the farakin crown!” Zalfron remarked.

“Did the mermen refuse to fight?” Joe asked.

“Leord was reluctant for the first month but the fishfolk thought it a guise because Yaimon Ren’s faux-Sidons continued to terrorize civilians every other week. After a month, Lacitar abandoned all civility with the support of the misled majority.”

“Wait...” Joe was half in awe and half disgusted, “did they start targeting regular mermen?”

“Indeed.” Sidon sighed, “They destroyed many merman buildings and killed many mermen, claiming it was all in order to eliminate us – the violent extremists that we were. And when mermen, unaffiliated with this hidden castle, lashed out in frustration at these foreign invaders, they were considered my affiliates.”

“Did they find y’all?” Joe asked.

“No,” Sidon shook his head, “we turned ourselves in.”

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After a few months of violence, the Soldiers of Shelmick turned themselves in. Each hour Lacitar executed another soldier, publically, from sun rise to sundown. All the while, he tortured Sidon, demanding he provide the names of the members that had not come forward and promising him death only when he snitched. Sidon swore there were no others but still the attacks on fishfolk by masked mancercs continued. They had long since left the annexed city of Sanction. By Summer, Yaimon and his fiends carried out attacks throughout North Aquaria. They bombed temples and burned schools, they kidnapped children and sold them like animals. Though it worked to his favor, this had not been a part of the plan Lacitar had discussed – the attacks were to stay out of North Aquaria. From the beginning, both Lacitar and Yaimon planned to betray each other. Neither wanted the other to rule Mirkweed nor North Aquaria. Thus,

Yaimon broke the rules of the secret agreement and truly became the terrorist organization that Lianghow had declared war upon.

Without Lacitar's help, Yaimon realized that his gang couldn't stand a chance against a full-sized nation. In desperation, he made a fatal mistake. In his shell-mask, he broke into the dungeon in Aidaros and freed Sidon in hopes the masked vigilante that he had imitated would now side with him. As soon as he was unshackled, Sidon killed Yaimon and the mancers he'd brought with him. He escaped from the prison with the body and left it in the street so that the next day the people saw the corpse of the man they had come to recognize as Sidon and realized that it was Yaimon Ren. The people didn't know what to make of this. Sidon should have stuck around to explain but Lacitar Te-Naryt did instead.

He claimed that Leord Laroc had been in favor of Yaimon Ren's coup after the death of his mother. When it seemed the mermen were doomed to fall to the fishfolk, Yaimon maneuvered for Leord to take the throne and Yaimon to disappear disguised as the masked vigilante. The two Gill boys weren't saved by a hero named Sidon but instead captured by the tyrant named Yaimon and they turned on their people to join the vile plot. But the Gills had one condition: if all went well in South Aquaria, then the next plot would be to put them on the throne of North Aquaria. Gills, just like any other dynastic family, insatiably lusted for the crown. When the people failed to comply, the conspirators orchestrated riots until they lost their patience on April 3rd, 1986. Those who argued against this logic were quickly silenced, accused of mancy and never heard from again. The skeptical learned to keep their mouths shut and the majority, as if only years before they hadn't worshipped the ground he stood upon, hooped and hollered as Machuba Gill was beheaded on July 7th.

Before this, Leord Lorac had only been willing to defend his nation, he hadn't entertained the idea of much more but the death of Machuba and the blasphemy of Lacitar drove him mad. He announced that the war would not end until Lacitar, Lianghow, and anyone in league with them, were dead.

The rest of the Gills had been in hiding since Machuba was first arrested. Nerthruk led what remained of his family to Shelmick's Stronghold but disappeared – never to return to the Aquarian Ocean again – after his brother's execution. Cassandra Gill stayed for a year but eventually had to leave. Her curse pained her too much to stay. Paud Gill, the third brother, found her a hiding spot within the Wobniar Woods then saw to it that she felt as little pain as possible until the day that she died. Machuba's wife died but her son, the one she bore when Machuba went off to war, survived. His name was Machuba Gill Juji and he was the only Gill to still be there when Sidon returned.

Leord Laroc held out until the year 1990. To save the people of Coraljen from starving in another siege, he snuck out of the city, delivering his family to safety, then surrendered to Lacitar. He was beheaded but the war was not over. Though many of the mermen left, traveling out of the Aquarian Ocean in search of a better sea, the majority of the mermen fought to their deaths. Even today bands of merman continue to harass the fishfolk as they attempt to raise their Aquarian Domes over wide expanses of the Wobniar Woods.

Lianghow was killed by a wife in 1995, his only son was assassinated two years prior. Lacitar Te-Naryt took the King's place – even took the king's wife. By then, almost all the fishfolk had heard something of the truth, though many wrote it off as rumors spread by a people unhappy with their current monarch. Most followed their dictator's rules or were struck down by the swift, unforgiving blade of Lacitar's executioners. If someone were to ask Lacitar about the vote that was promised them after the war was over, then the King would remind them that the war wasn't yet finished. In the words of Lacitar Te-Naryt, "As long as there are mermen, there are Soldiers of Shelmick, and as long as there are Soldiers of Shelmick, the fishfolk of Aquaria are not safe."

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After absorbing all this information, Joe was left with only one question.

"How'd they get ahold of Machuba Gill Juji?"

"Enough people in Sanction had come to see the truth. The war there, as it had been in Coraljen, had been brutal to all civilians, no matter what side you were on. Even as it quieted down over the years, the truth remained." Sidon began, "Eventually, Lacitar believed he'd taken care of all the enlightened minds in the city." He returned to his spot at the inner circle and sat back down as he continued, "Then the people of Sanction hosted a protest, a march on the streets much in the style of the spirits led by Brahim Phinn during the reign of the Hundred Empire Alliance. Lacitar responded by ordering the governor to block all roads to and from the city – to starve the people back into submission. Though I discouraged him from going, Machuba believed that the people of Sanction were ready to rebel – to take it a step further than peaceful protest – but merely too afraid to move forward by themselves. Wearing a shell-mask, he traveled to Sanction as Sidon."

"The mob received him with fervor and he led them to the main gate where he demanded the governor show himself. He told the governor that the people of Sanction could rule themselves. 'Not as long as I live!' the governor snarled. 'Then let us fight to the death!' Machuba responded. And they did. Machuba won but the people were scared. The troops that surrounded the city picked up their weapons when they saw the governor hit the ground. Whether or not they would have attacked those people, we will never know, but the people bowed and left only Machuba standing. When the soldiers approached, he did not resist. He went with them peacefully."

"Where are they taking him?" Joe asked.

"To Fort Gonchi then to Aidaros, to Lacitar." Sidon said.

"What will they do with him?"

"They will try him, then Lacitar will cut off his head."

Joe bit his lip. He trusted Sidon. He believed this story. *But can I fight? Can I kill? Can* wasn't the right question. *Should I?* Nogard's hand clasped Joe's shoulder. Looking back at his friend, he saw a solemn expression the chidra had not shown before. Joe's eyes fell to the sword

in his lap. *His friend will die without the Suikii...the last Gill, hunted just because of who he was born...If I'm the Sun Child, then I'm going to have to get used to fighting. If I'm not...well...there's no going home.* Joe nodded to himself then looked back into Sidon's dark eyes.

“I will help you save Machuba.”

Chapter Ten: Submarine Warfare

Nogard stepped into a room that had been chiseled out of a cluster of pink pillar polyps. A dim light resonated from a chest in the center of the chamber, illuminating the walls which were painted to depict ancient Aquarian battles. Machuba paid the murals little attention. His eyes were on the trunk made of magically interwoven, luminescent coral. The chest looked to be worth a fortune by itself, Nogard could only guess what magnificence hid within.

It was early morning. Sidon had woke Nogard up and taken him from the Stronghold alone. He led the chidra into the courtyard between the two buildings that made up the fortress. Between these two, protruding into the wall of coral, was a pathway. The path curved and twisted as it wove naturally through the polyps, like a cave through the crust of the planet, and it came to a conclusion with the room in which they now stood, a room lit by a glowing chest.

“This is where we keep our most valuable relics, relics of the very man who built this fortress.”

The fishfolk paused, hesitating before proceeding towards the chest.

“Do you understand why we hold Namrem Shelmick on such a high pedestal?”

“He united da mermen...” Nogard raked his brain for an additional guess but Sidon cut in before he could continue.

“He united a group of oppressed peoples against a far larger and stronger oppressor. Though he and his people lost, with his dying breathes, he created a knew future – one that still has yet to come into fruition but might have never been possible without his sacrifice.”

He strode forward and stopped beside the chest. His glowing tattoos sprayed their cursive-designs across the walls.

“...Do you know the meaning of the word, ‘chuang’.”

“Shuang?”

“Chuang.”

“Suang?”

“Chuang.”

“Chuang?”

Sidon nodded, “These words all come in and out of the same ancient meaning. Suang meaning to wound, shuang meaning to curse, chuang meaning-”

“Delia!” Nogard exclaimed, proudly, “Dat’s like da one word I know!”

“Not just Delia – yes, that is our word for Delia, but that is because ‘chuang’ means ‘to create’.” Sidon paused, letting that sink in before adding, “But also to wound or curse.”

“Must cause a lotta trouble, Civ...having all dem different definitions...”

Sidon smiled, then continued, “Creation is not free. There is a cost. A child is not born without a mother’s labor, just as Delia – the solar system – would not have come to be had it not been for the sacrifice made by the Spark and the Blaze who challenged the lords and gods and created a sun that would not die but rather light the Delian Abbim for all eternity. Delia is not just their sun, Delia is not just the Spark and the Blaze, Delia is birth and Delia is pain, simultaneously. That is what chuang is.”

Sidon turned to Nogard. He pulled back his sleeve. He pointed to a symbol on the underside of his left wrist. There were three pieces to this glowing calligraphic tattoo. One was curved, like as though a backwards ‘S’ and ‘Z’ were smashed together – the Z’s tail becoming

the S's head. Next to this squiggle there was a tiny apostrophe before the third symbol: an upside-down scythe.

"Chuang." Sidon murmured, "With his final breathes, Namrem Shelmick cursed Thompthou Gill and those who would descend from him to endure the burning blood of a Gill until they righted the wrong he and his people had committed. For many years, it seemed his curse was in vain. It seemed the Gills were so stubborn that they would continue their tyranny in spite of their suffering but, alas, there came the generations of daughters."

The fishfolk turned back to the chest. He reached into the folds of his cloak and produced a key. He knelt by the chest and unlocked the lock that held the rough rainbow walls of coral. The chest slowly opened on its own as he turned back to the silent chidra.

"Ironic that the patriarchy established by the Gill family when they conquered the peoples of Aquaria centuries ago, would one day wrench them from the throne. Ironic that those cursed for tyranny would now be the only hope of liberating those that live beneath the surface."

"You really think Machuba will save Aquaria?" Nogard asked.

Sidon shrugged, "Not if we don't save Machuba."

He nodded at the chest. Nogard looked and his eyes grew, asking his question before his vocal cords could spit it out.

"I am not giving this to you, Sheenshong Otubak, I am lending this to you. For when you die, these weapons will be returned to the depths of the ocean."

Dented and scarred, the shield Nogard lifted from the chest looked as ancient and war torn as the Emperor Saint, though it was much older. Nogard slipped his left arm through the straps and grabbed the handle, holding the round shield in front of him like a member of a Greek Phalanx. It was light, almost unbelievably light, and yet it felt solid and sturdy. He felt as though the entire reef that filled the Wobniar Woods could collapse on him and he'd be fine as long as he was beneath that shield.

"Shelmick's Shield," Sidon said, "and his sword."

Nogard adjusted the straps which – fortunately – were not as old as the hardened metal they were bound to - then slung the shield across his back, before reaching in to grab the sword. He flipped it over in his hands, it was an Aquarian-style sword, broad bladed and one sided. Like the shield, it was light as a feather and, whether made of it or not, completely golden.

"They were said to be forged in the center of our world," Sidon said, "The blade is destined to be Machuba's, but the shield must go to his closest ally and that is you, Sheenshong Otubak."

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"Consume to your heart's desire!"

Sidon stood before a whipping tongue of fire, spitting out of a glowing orifice and reaching so far that Sidon hardly dared to move closer than a couple yards. The sapphiric flame lashed out of the belly of a tall, smokestack. Its base was round and wide, plated with a bronze colored metal façade. Behind the haze of thrashing flame, massive bolts and wheels popped from the golden face of the furnace, but aside from that it seemed to be about as simple a structure as a giant fireplace, standing alone on a slab of ruck tucked away in a clearing at the end of a tunnel carved through the reef.

"This is about as hot as we could get it," Sidon explained, "we wanted to make sure to send you out with plenty of fire."

Joe was about to partake but something itchy in the back of his mind gave him pause. *What's with this generosity?* Nogard had woken them up, just before Sidon took Joe to the burner, to show off his knew weapons – weapons over two thousand years old, possibly the most legendary tools to grace the sea floor. While Joe could understand Sidon trusting Nogard – as Machuba's best friend – with such items, it still seemed odd. *Does he expect us to stay and join their cause after we free Machuba?* He frowned. *So much for Nogard leaving with us.*

Sidon asked, "What is it, Sheenshong?"

"Nothing." Joe said, though he went on to discredit his claim, "Just sorta flustered by your generosity, is all."

Sidon smiled, "Do you know what the Sun Child means to my people, to Delians?"

Joe shook his head.

"You know of the Foretelling, though, yes?" Sidon asked.

Joe nodded, adding the disclaimer, "Vaguely..."

"In the Delian religion, people existed long before the three Lords found them. The Lords were created by the very same force that created people and the Abbim – Abbim is what they call their planet. The Lords were lonely and they wandered the universe until they found the Abbim. They were glad to have the company of the people that lived there. Originally, the people were immortal. That is, until one Lord, Hormah, gave the people the gift of death."

"Doesn't seem like too great of a gift." Joe noted.

"The Lords are not perfect." Sidon admitted, continuing, "Hormah proceeded to spread violence across the Abbim while his brother, Girn, tried to stop him. The third Lord, Antari, helped Girn. She was the Lord of Life and she was able to create alternate universes which they used to form mazes of different dimensions through which they tried to trap Hormah."

"Was that y'all's Big Boom?" Joe asked.

Sidon nodded, "The plan failed. Girn and Antari created infinite universes, so many so that every conceivable possibility was tested but to no avail. Only then did Girn decide to end it all, even if it meant destroying the Abbim with it. He dropped the Abbim's star, their sun, on the Abbim. But the Spark and the Blaze stopped him. The Spark caught the sun, but he could not carry it. Before he buckled beneath its weight, in came the Blaze – the Sun Child. Together, the Spark and Blaze carried the sun and, before it's power could overcome them, and they took it with them as they shot off into outer space."

He nodded solemnly to the blue thrashing claws of flame lapping out of the mouth of the furnace, providing Joe with an image of the fate of the two saviors.

"They became Delia – a sun that would never die."

"So the Sun Child becomes the Delian sun?" Joe asked.

"Yes." Sidon said, "Though this has obviously already come to pass for Delians, this has not yet happened here beneath Solaris. The great battle between Girn and Hormah continues..." he looked at Joe, his black pit-like eyes staring so hard Joe nervously shifted his weight from one foot to the other, "...for now."

"You think it's going to end soon?"

"Strange things are happening." Sidon stated, "The half-brother to Sharp Otubak, a Samurai, the brother of Tabuh Sentry, a Samurai, and a human from the Sun wielding the Changjo, the blade named Deliverer, have come willing to help save the nephew of Paud Gill, a Samurai?"

Sidon looked away from Joe as he continued speaking. He stepped in towards the furnace, daring the tongue of fire. The flame bounced around him like a ribbon and he danced in its wake.

“The third moon has hatched, the Black Crown is back, all we’re missing is the Queen and the Spark.” Sidon spun to face Joe. Standing still, trusting the inferno to spare him. He continued, “There is something swirling above the sea, sheenshong, something cooking on dry land. Though separated from the surface, we are not oblivious. We can feel it in the atmosphere, taste it in the salt, smell it in the currents, hear it in the lashes of the Iahtro Storm, and we can see it, a part of it, or so we think, in you.”

Joe nodded though his frown from earlier had manifested itself once more beneath his furled brow. *Everyone has these gargantuan ideas of the future – of me.* He watched the fire twist around Sidon, coming close, but never touching the man. *What if they’re wrong? What if they’re helping the wrong guy? Would it be my fault for not quitting sooner?*

Sidon stopped playing with fire and moved to stand alongside Joe, so that they both stared into the furnace.

“People aren’t born heroes. Heroes are the results of trials. Where there are trials, there will be heroes. Though Saint knew the names of the Mystakle Samurai before they assembled, the Samurai weren’t born the Samurai. The Lords did not make us and do not divine our fates – that is our own doing.”

“So you think I *can* be the Sun Child?” Joe asked.

Sidon shrugged, “There is one thing we know for sure: You will never be the Sun Child if you aren’t brave enough to get up and try.”

It was like a sack of bricks had been slung into Joe’s gut. “*Brave enough to get up and try.*” As those words left Sidon’s lips, Joe could’ve sworn he hadn’t heard Sidon’s voice but instead his grandfather’s. Papa’s. The dream – the warped memory – of that moment he shared with his brother and his grandfather in a field beneath a show of shooting stars washed over him. The same dream he’d had during his operation in Bonehead’s cave. “*The biggest thing in your way is fear. You have to be brave.*”

He stared into the blue fire of the furnace. His mind’s eye turned to the scene in Papa’s study and the letter from his brother that he’d found in the drawer.

Earth, Solaris, Delia, the whole fucking universe, we’re all depending on you! You ARE the Sun Child.

All the while, Sidon continued – continuing to echo the words of Joe’s Papa, “Brave enough to keep on – to never give up, to rise up-”

“-like the sun.” Joe chimed with the warrior.

Joe stepped towards the sapphiric scorching flag of flame and let it curl around him as he pulled it into his chest. The warmth rushed through him, sending hot chills through his nervous system, and, in that moment, there was not a single bit of doubt to spare in his consciousness. It wasn’t quite confidence, more so determination. He was and likely never would be fully convinced that he was the Sun Child or the Blaze or whatever name people chose to give their savior, but he was determined to keep on, nonetheless.

Sidon smiled and walked away, leaving Joe with the flames.

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The sword flew across the courtyard to stick into the sandy ground within inches of the coral that infringed upon the lawn. Zalfron, dressed in the robe-like, tunic-skirt get up that seemed to be the trademark of Sidon's disciples, faced the tatted vigilante with his knuckles barred. Sidon looked over his shoulders to the brothers that stood at the edge of the garden. They shrugged. As Sidon returned his gaze to the elf, he caught an uppercut to the jaw and stumbled backwards. Zalfron didn't stop there. His right arm was already swinging but Sidon wasn't the type to be fooled twice. He caught the fist and brought it down with a twist then delivered a heel-kick to the pit of the elf's knee which sent Zalfron into the ground.

"You fight with the clumsiness of a seabear," Sidon grunted, rubbing his chin, "but the viciousness of a sumarii."

Zalfron did his best to jump to his feet but the bruise on the back of his leg was worse than he'd expected. No sooner did he get upright than did he crumble back to the sand.

"Calm down, sheenshong," Sidon order, "we are friends."

"Ya? Then whah ya insultin mae!" Zalfron argued.

"That was an observation, as much an insult as it was a complement." Sidon chuckled, "Sumariis are the fiercest creatures in the Aquarian Ocean. Their jaws can crack the shell of oceantelopes, their teeth can cut through steel hulls, and their tails can propel them across the ocean faster than the zoomers of Space City."

"Oh..." Zalfron had gotten on all fours, ready to pounce on Sidon's ankles, but after hearing this he plopped down on his rear-end, "Well...thank ya!"

"But a clumsy sumarii is a dead sumarii." Sidon stated.

"So what? Swords ain't for mae." Zalfron shrugged, "Big dael!"

"Nor an ax or a trident or a-"

His hands once again balled into fists as he stood from the sand.

Sidon laughed, "You're as good with a blade as you are with constructive criticism!"

"Ah don't naed a weapon." Zalfron crossed his arms, "Ah faht better with mah fists."

"You aren't a rock dwarf." Sidon smiled, "And these are *armed* men we will be fighting."

"Ah'm fast and the Aquaraian Dome makes mae all the faster! Ah'll be lahk uh minnow, zig-zaggin through the ranks of the enemay, baetin em down fore they can aven draw their weapons!"

"I'm not going to force a weapon upon you," Sidon assured Zalfron, "but I must warn you, Sheenshong Sentry, my men will be focused on getting to Machuba, not protecting you. If you can't defend yourself, no one will come to your rescue and we are counting on you and Nogard to keep Joe safe until he opens a window into our brother's cage."

"Plaese," Zalfron scoffed, "this ain't mah first rodaeo."

"I've said my piece!" Sidon raised his arms, assuring Zalfron that his lecture was over...well, almost over, "One day your fists won't cut it. You need to find a tool you can take into battle – even if it is nothing more than an armored gauntlet."

"Got it captain," Zalfron said, cracking his knuckles, "wae ready?"

Sidon looked at the glimmering sunlight that barely made it to the courtyard through the cracks in the reef that surround them. He nodded, "I do believe it's about time."

- - -

Bold woke up to the incessant chatter of a Knome. Memories hit him like the sudden head throb of a hangover. He was no longer in the Barren's Mullet. It hadn't been a dream. *Uh*

left the tavern, but still he was puzzled, *Uh should bae bloated and blue loying at the bottom of the ocean.* The last thing he could recall was the *Cinatit* capsizing and the three of them, Zach, the Knome, and himself, jumping into the deep blue sea. Laying there, listening to the Knome blabber, he couldn't tell if the voice was familiar or not. *Is this the Knome wae left the Mullet with?* Then again, he wasn't even sure if the Knome he left the Mullet with had been the Knome he'd known, the one that got him a job at the Mullet in the first place. There had been something different about him.

"I still can't get over you coming across us like that!" the Knome continued.

Sitting up, Bold looked around. The room he was in was not the room the Knome was in. The walls were made of ice and he was sleeping, bare-chested, on a thatched rug that sat on a grass floor, coated in a thin layer of ice. Only then did he realize how cold he was. *Boy God, uh slept in a rae-frigaratar!* He stood, stepping off his carpet. The crunchy ice snapped beneath his sandals, sending flakes up to chill the tips of his toes. He lifted the animal-pelt door to his makeshift bedroom. The room he stepped into was circular with a roof that was unusually high, even the doorways were all at least ten feet tall. At the center of the room was another weed-woven thatched rug but this one lay beneath a large round wooden table. There were four wooden chairs situated around the table and one of these chairs was empty.

Zach and the Knome sat side by side next to their host – a minotaur. Bold had seen a minotaur once or twice in his life and the sight of the looming creatures had always enthralled him. There Bold was, a rock dwarf standing not much higher than four feet, next to a man twice his size. Not only was their mere height intimidating but their horns curved up above their ears reaching another foot or so. Then there was the fur which made their commonly muscled physique look even thicker.

"I thought you'd never wake up!" The Knome cried, hopping out of his chair and hurrying to pull the free seat out for Bold to sit, "This is Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth, son of Boldarian Drahkcor the Fourth. That's right, Zach here is a Samurai's holy-brother, by way of monasticism, and Bold is the son of a Samurai." He turned from the minotaur to Bold, "This guy saved us. He was out fishing and saw the ship capsize. Thank the universe he got to us in time. Otherwise we'd likely be in Aquarian prison by now – if not in the belly of a Sumarii! And you'd never guess who he is!"

"Acamus Icespear." The minotaur said, his voice so deep that Bold could feel it in his bones.

Acamus extended his hand to Bold.

Bold trotted across the carpet of frozen grass to shake the massive hand, asking, "Son of Thaesaesus Oicespar? The Guardian and Kang of the Grehlard?"

The minotaur nodded then scooted an ice-made plate over to where Bold sat, "Fish and bread, my friend, that's the best I could provide. You, my guests, have truly caught me off guard."

"Uh could aet the oice off the walls roiht about now, brothar," Bold took a massive bite of bread and swallowed without giving it a chew, "You musta been rael close to the ship...imagine oi sunk loik uh rock!"

"Ah, well you probably would have but your little friend Ekaf here," Acamus winked at Ekaf, "made sure that wouldn't happen. You see, I saw the ship rise and plummet and made my way over as quick as I could. Most of the survivors were happily sinking to the Aquarian Dome...Knomes..." Acamus chuckled, "...I'll never get them."

"Nor will I." Ekaf agreed.

Acamus grinned, “Anyways, after getting turned down by every Knome I rowed by, I caught sight of a floating rock dwarf and a suit of armor.”

“Not uh common soiht, aye?”

Acamus nodded, “I rowed over, found this Knome treading water like a fishfolk to keep y’all afloat. Quite impressive to be honest. Not sure how long he was underneath y’all, must’ve been holding his breath forever! Startled the hell out of me when he came out from under you two.”

“Guess it’s true whot they seh bout Knomes and banshaes,” Bold said, raising an eyebrow and giving the old Knome a flabbergasted, though appreciative, smirk.

“What’s that, my friend?” Acamus asked.

“Thar’s an old dwarvish song in which folks often switch the ward banshae out far Knome and it warks all the sehme!” Bold explained, clearing his throat before proclaiming, “If ya ain’t uh blehd, best baray the spehd, cause ya ain’t barayin uh Knome tomarra nar todeh...”

“You should sing the rest!” Ekaf exclaimed.

Bold opened his mouth, cast Ekaf a nervous glance, then closed it. He looked to Zach for help. Zach was watching the minotaur intently. Finally, Bold said, “It ehn’t the most politicallay carrect jangle out thar...”

Zach saved Bold, asking a question that completely changed the subject, “Mr. Icespear, why were you there?”

“He was fishing!” Ekaf interjected.

“No, my friends...” Acamus looked from the spirit to the other two, “While the Trinity Nations fight their war, Iceload fights hers. As you may know, once Talloome was removed from Icelore, Shalis Skullsummon took his place. The War on Mancy never ended for us, all that changed is now we fight it alone.”

“What about the elves?” Zach asked, “The Ipativians hold Zviecoff, which stands between Icelore and Recercoff, do they not?”

“My friend,” Acamus was amazed, “the Samurai never went to Zviecoff and the Order never left. Some say the city’s worse off now than before the Samurai invaded Iceload. Nothing but a battlefield now. And last I heard, it does not bode well. The Coalition still exists. They’re still fighting hard for the city. I believe they’ve got ahold of the northern end but recently a number of their soldiers, both elven and minotaur, were trapped after an attempted invasion of Rivergate. Among them, my father – and he’s wounded.”

“No!” Ekaf cried, “Not Theseus, my old pal!”

Acamus frowned, “You knew my father?”

“Oh,” Ekaf stuttered, “uh, well, yes...I fought a little with the Samurai.”

A twinkle sparkled in the minotaur’s eye and his furred snout parted in a grin, “*Oh, I see.*”

“Then why are you here?” Zach pressed on, “In Middakle?”

Acamus narrowed his eyes, “The names you’ve given me tempt me to trust you, but the bizarre coincidence of this encounter suggests that I shouldn’t. This is a matter not to be shared with anyone. Who knows who could be working for the Order?”

“Oi’d doie far uh’d join the Ardar!” Bold snapped.

“I as well.” Zach said.

Acamus calmed, “And I suppose the Order would hardly resort to hiring Knomes.”

“True,” Ekaf agreed, “you can trust us.”

“If you betray me, my friends, you will regret it.” Acamus warned. His tone was not cheery but not accusing, simply honest and that sort of honest threat was chilling, but the three looked past it. This was wartime after all. The minotaur’s voice grew quieter, as if someone might hear from outside the frozen camp, “I’ve stayed clear of the battle front. I serve my nation on the high seas, hunting down the privateers that work with the Order. These ships prey on the Black Crown Pact pirates that smuggle dark marrow.”

“Funny,” Ekaf remarked, “the Trinity Nations pays pirates to disrupt the operations of Pact ships too!”

“Ah, they do indeed,” Acamus said, “and what do you think those ships do with the booty they’ve looted from Creaton’s vessels? Throw it into the ocean?”

There was silence for a moment, broken by Bold, “Are ya sehin the Trinitay Nehtions pehs the sehme lads as the Ardar?”

“Yes, I am, my friend. These pirates get contracts for Black Crown Pact vessels from the Trinity Nations and bring Saint the captains to be locked away. The Trinity Nations hands them a sack of gold. Then those same ships sail to Icelore and sell the Order every single thing they found aboard Creaton’s ships to receive another sack of gold.” Acamus said, “The Trinity Nations is feeding our enemy.”

The very idea that this could be true sickened the three.

“What is your plan?” Zach asked again, his voice cold.

Bold was alarmed. Zachias rarely got worked up. But back in Tadloe, people didn’t tend to bad mouth the Trinity Nations – not unless they were affiliated with the Pact or the Order. Even Antipas would tend to keep anti-Imperial talk, in the wake of the fall of the Samurai, to a minimum outside of their tightly knit circles. Looking at Acamus, Bold could see by the minotaur’s smirk that he’d noticed the agitation in the spirit’s voice. Bold made a mental note to watch Zach and Acamus. It seemed Acamus was not afraid to play with fire and Bold wasn’t so sure Zach wouldn’t draw his bow to defend the honor of the Emperor if the minotaur pushed him. For now, the minotaur conceded. Answering the spirit’s question.

“I’ve been trailing a ship called the *Monoceros*.” Acamus said, “You’ve probably heard of her, but these days she’s in the hands of a bunch of Aquarian Ocean exiles that call themselves the Sea Lords – another name you probably are familiar with. They used to be the biggest name in Solarin piracy until they had a run in with my father.”

“And the Admiral!” Ekaf interjected.

“When my father-”

“And the Admiral!”

“-destroyed the Sea Lord fleet, he spared the *Monoceros* but he warned them never to threaten the Blue Ridges. He wouldn’t spare them again. By using the name of their Delian God, Barro, the Sea Lords took that threat to be a curse.”

“Though it seems their Captain doesn’t buy it.” Ekaf inserted.

“Indeed it does, my friend, for there are Sea Lords in Zviecoff fighting against the minotaurs and the elves right now – and the *Monoceros* is heading there. They just heisted a massive Pact shipment. They’re going to resupply the Order’s forces. Not only would this endanger the Coalition, but this would further doom my father – especially if Theseus is still holed up in Rivergate, which he was last I heard.”

“They thank they can sehl a renown poirate ship down the Etihw, all the weh to Zvoicoff, without Ipativay or the GrehLard stoppin em?” Bold asked.

“Not down, my friend,” Acamus said, “Up.”

Ekaf nodded, "Southbay, Condatus – they're warzones too."

"And Triskele Point is currently a neutral zone." Acamus said, "The Order's been sailing that route for a while now."

"Then we must stop the ship." Zach stated.

"No," Acamus grinned, "we must steal it."

Bold groaned, "Oi heht boats."

"Well then, brother," Ekaf said to Acamus, "there's no option. We're coming with!"

"Whot about the boys?" Bold asked.

Ekaf frowned for a minute before an idea slipped into his skull, "We'll hijack the *Monoceros*, then hop off into the Aquarian Ocean. It'll be on the way! Come on, we can't leave the son of Theseus Icespear hanging!"

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The Wobniar Woods, the massive coral reef that encompassed nearly half of the Aquarian Ocean, wrapped around the head of Middakle and filled out the southern end of Tadloe's gulf. Sanction sat five and a half selims south of Fort Gonchi, a distance that could be traveled in two long hard days if the Aquarian troops weren't marching through the rainbow-colored jungle. It seemed they were on schedule to arrive in Fort Gonchi late on the third day – technically early on their fourth morning – since leaving Sanction.

The long crevice known as the Submarine Canyon would be the last the selims of their journey. Fort Gonchi rose out of its northern end. The southern end of the canyon was shrouded in a true forest, not one made of polyps but instead of actual plants. Tongues of red, green, and yellow kelp rose from the dirty dark sand, nearly hiding the crags ahead. As the soldiers began marching through the mighty tangle, their nerves were on edge. They'd expected an attack by the mermen separatists led Sidon since they left Sanction. With less than a day left to go, it had to happen soon. Of course, the terrorists had waited until the canyon. Where better to bury the bodies of Lacitar's loyal patriots than on Fort Gonchi's front lawn?

Six scouts had been sent ahead to scan the rift for peculiarities. These men were swift and agile, they jumped from one side of the cavern to the other with the ease of a monkey traversing between branches. The scout in the rear had the job of keeping his eyes on the five in front of him. Holding on to the rocky ledge, feet wedged against the rock wall beside him, his other hand was cupped over his eyes as he made sure his comrades were accounted for. They were. Behind him, he could hear the jingling of armor echoing off the earthen facades. The caravan couldn't be more than twenty minutes from the bottom of the canyon.

The crevice was violently gorgeous. The rock walls had been so polished by the surging tides that they were made up of flat sheets, divided by sharp blade like ridges. The walls of the canyon mirrored the surface of the sea, with the crests and troughs of waves smashing against one another only, unlike the sea, this violence was static. A still statue sculpted, a 3-D portrait painted by Mother Nature, paying her respects to the rushing waves with shades of indigo and azure. But the beauty was eerie to the soldiers pushing through, the jagged walls a warning, the dark colors foreboding. Was it the water pressure that weighed on their hearts or was it clairvoyance?

Despite being unable to find anything wrong, the last scout couldn't help but feel something was off. He didn't budge from his vantage point. His blue fingertips tap-danced across the conch shell horn sheathed at his waist. Leaving the horn, he reached for his dagger. Far ahead

of him, he could now only count four scouts. He'd had all five in his view half a second ago. One had simply disappeared, as if the deep blue sea itself had swallowed him and erased him from existence. Slowly removing his dagger, he watched as another guard disappeared before his very eyes.

“Shenma gay deyu...” he murmured, meaning, “What the hell...”

A third scout evaporated, followed quickly by the fourth, leaving one more scout aside from himself. He should've blown his horn when the first had slipped into the blue, but it'd happened too quick and now it was too late. Whoever, or whatever, was taking his comrades would soon be on him. He had to act and he had to-

The ground was shifting on the cavern floor nearly fifty feet below him. *That's not the ground!* He realized he was staring at the dark blue back of a merman! How long had he been crawling right beneath his nose? Letting go of the cavern wall, he dove towards the earth and not a second too late. Above him, he heard a crack, like that of a rock being broken. Without looking back, he was sure that another merman was hot on his tail but that didn't matter. He knew he was doomed. He just didn't want to float up to Solaris empty handed.

The terrorist below him still crawled onward, completely oblivious. His grip tightened around his dagger as the ground rushed up to meet him. Slicing downwards, he put all his weight on the unaware terrorist below him, using the man's bare chest to cushion his fall. The merman collapsed but just as the scout hit the cavern floor, so did four other mermen.

He had missed his mark. His victim, who squirmed in pain, clutching the blade in his shoulder, would not die if he did not attempt another blow. Three more daggers waited at his belt but the time it would take to yank one free – or the time it would take to wrench his first dagger from where it was lodged in his foe's bone – would be the time it would take for his adversaries to finish him. So he jumped away. Arms reaching out before him, legs fully extended, he smacked against the wall of the cavern like a tree frog then leapt for the opposite wall. He could hear his pursuers tailing him but he didn't dwell on it. He was not running to survive but running to see what he could manage to do before being caught.

The horn at his waist slapped impatiently against his thigh.

He leapt again, having lost count of how many times he'd jumped from side to side. This time he missed, his fingertips tickled stone as his body began to fall back towards the sea floor. Drawing the horn from his belt, he put it to his lips and took a deep breath. He could hear the mermen jumping up to meet him. He knew he had only a few seconds left to live. But that was all he needed. He blew the conch-shell horn with all his might then his breath was torn away from him by a cold steel blade.

The call of the scout's horn echoed through the canyon.

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The end of the armed caravan had just made it out of the kelp forests and into the canyon. At the sound of the scout's horn, they came to a complete stop. The rear of the line was a good twenty feet into the crevasse. The entire line had yet to reach the bottom, they were still in the process of descending and this process required them to use the narrow and winding trail that clung to the sides of the great walls.

“TINGSHE!” The captain roared from the head of the line, his voice drowning out the last echoes of the late-scouts horn. His men obeyed, stopping in their tracks. They could quickly scramble up the walls, ignoring the path, but that would then rob them of their organization and

it would take the cage bearers far longer, making them far more vulnerable – which might be exactly what Sidon wanted. Another option was to scramble down. The cage bearers would still take longer but not as long as it would be if they were fighting against gravity. Then, on the canyon floor, there was room for a battle – room unadulterated by stalks of giant seaweed. His mind had been made up – after a few seconds of consideration – but then something happened to make him doubt his decision.

A rush of heat, accompanied by frightened yelps and crackling sparks, emanated from above.

The captain turned, craning his neck to look up the ridge.

Blue flames shot out over the edge, the heads of writhing kelp could be seen dancing above the way they'd come. The forest had been set ablaze, there was no going back. That meant that Sidon wanted to face them on the canyon floor – which meant the captain shouldn't. That said, there was no real alternative at this point. Turning back to scour the floor of the rift, he saw the enemy. The soldiers watched as an army of naked mermen, so tanned they were hard to discern, rose from the sandy bottom.

Unsheathing his sword, the captain raised the weapon above his head and commanded, "CHOFAY!"

The Aquarian warriors charged. Sidon, who stood in front of his soldiers, knelt in the dirt. His men followed suit. Together, they prayed to their god. Then, before rising, he dug through the sand by his knees and lifted a silver trident and round shield. Having arrived at the canyon hours before, they'd had ample time to prepare for this attack, planting weapons and forging firebreaks, which made the odds of defeating the vast escort from Sanction seem favorable. Sidon rose to his feet, as did his men, and stepped forward into the surging enemy. Blue skin clashed against cloth and armor, pitchforks clanged against blades, and blood floated up, twirling in the atmosphere of the Aquarian Dome like dust in the wind.

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Zalfron and Nogard watched from above, laying on a peninsula of rock that jugged out over the canyon's edge, so far that it nearly reached the other side. Joe stood a few paces back, swinging the Suikii.

"What if the Suikah doesn't cooperate?" Zalfron asked.

"It will." Joe stated.

Zalfron was unsatisfied, "But if not?"

"We try until it does, Civ." Nogard said.

"What if, with it baen a legendaray blade and what not, what if it can chop through the bars?" Zalfron proposed.

"Well, if we can't get a portal," Joe shrugged, "I'm sure we'll try."

"How long til wae give up?" Zalfron rolled onto his back to face Joe, "Wae have to wait til after the battle?"

"Zalfron, you don't even have a weapon!" Nogard laughed.

"So? Ah didn't naed one in the tavern or when wae jumped them gahs from the carriage...or with the crab the other day!"

"You didn't contribute at all with the crab." Joe muttered.

"Not mah fault it burnt mae," Zalfron replied, turning back to the scene beneath them with his bottom lip hanging out like the ledge they peaked over.

“Burnt?” Nogard cried, “You were in shock, you weren’t burnt!”

“Shock! Ah ain’t never been shocked! Ah don’t know bout chidras, but wae electric elves-”

“Civ. Even if we go down, we sure as hell ain’t going fore da seabears come out.”

Zalfron rolled his eyes, “And what if that doesn’t work, huh?”

“You dink da Soldiers don’t know what dey’re doing?”

“Ah didn’t say that! Ah…”

As they argued, Joe gave the Suikii a break, approached the edge, and scanned the gulch. One glance at the cloud of blood and sand that hung around the battle like a fog and Joe had to avert his gaze. Looking away, further north down through the crags, Joe saw movement. Around roughly three hundred yards away, more armored fishfolk piled out of a daughter ravine of the Submarine Canyon. Joe did a quick count and concluded that there were about as many as had been in the first caravan. Far more than the couple dozen the Soldiers of Shelmick brought. And, to make matters worse, as part of the plan, the Soldiers were drawing Lacitar’s troops deeper into the canyon – they were backing towards the King’s reinforcements.

“Guys.” Joe interrupted their banter and pointed North.

“Farak.” Zalfron gasped, “Wae have to go down there.”

“Dree of us, Civ?” Nogard frowned and sheathed his sword, “We’d just wind up dying wid em.”

“Maybe the seabears will get them?” Joe suggested.

“We’ll see, look, Civs.”

Now it was Nogard pointing – pointing south.

They moved like rolling boulders, pouring out from under the blazing kelp forest to tumble down the steep entrance to the canyon. They came in all the same shades as the rocks of the crevice walls, from gray to purple, but they came in only one shape: massive. Most of them were too big to even use the path down, they simply bounced down and hit the floor of the canyon with a cloud of sand. The fall didn’t hamper them long, soon they were back up. Their black eyes wild, their fat legs stomping as they pranced about, taking in the scene. The gills that crowned their thick shoulders flared like their boorish nostrils. They had little time to gather themselves as more and more poured down behind them. Lest they be smashed by their kin, the seabears were forced forwards towards the battle – the battle that had paused upon this development as Soldiers of Shelmick moved to stand against the walls and the Soldiers of Lacitar stared wide-eyed at the crescent-moon horned beasts, beasts who now lowered their horns as they charged.

The nude Soldiers of Shelmick guarded the walls until the seabears came close, then they scaled them themselves. The beasts bashed the Aquarian soldiers out of the way. Their arched horns capable of splitting an Aquarian helmet in two. Even those that raised a shield or blade to block were still tossed to the side or thrown to the ground to be trampled as the rest of the herd bashed its way through the canyon. It wasn’t a trump card – many Aquarians survived, having successfully fought for space clinging to the cavern wall or for behind fortunate enough to dodge the smashing feet of the stumbling beasts – but it was definitely an equalizer. And it had done the job of disrupting the group put in primary protection of the cage hoisting Machuba – that said, neither Joe, Zalfron, or Nogard could tell because the entire mouth of the canyon was now nothing more than a cloud of blood and sand. The boys could only watch as the sandstorm spreading bears pushed on to trample the Aquarian reinforcements. Unfortunately, at least half of these new forces were able to scramble to safety up the walls of the rift. More likely survived

though the trio were unable to tell as the veil of dust spread to shroud the aftermath of the stampede.

“Donum.” Nogard murmured.

“How many do you think are left?” Joe asked.

“Too manay.” Zalfron stated.

“We have to do someding.”

“Let’s go down!” Zalfron suggested.

“Someding dat’ll make a difference, ya dingus.” Nogard snapped.

Joe looked around, fidgeting with the tunic that the fishfolk had given him as he fumbled for an idea. Finally it came, he said, “Hey. This ledge, they’ll have to walk under us, right?”

Zalfron nodded. Nogard grinned. The ledge almost bridged the two sides of the canyon and, though it wasn’t very thick, it was decently wide.

“You dinking what I dink you be dinking?”

“If we could manage to break it and time it right...we could do some real damage.” Joe suggested.

Nogard smirked, “Dought you didn’t want to kill anybody?”

Joe rolled his eyes, “I’m not just going to sit here and watch the Soldiers of Shelmick be slaughtered.”

Nogard got off Joe’s back with a shrug, “Good man, Civ.”

“So...” Zalfron muttered, his golden eyes as wide as the sun, “this maen wae’re goin down?”

With a solemn nod, Joe said, “Yup.”

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The planks of the piers peeled back from the supports as if reluctant to lay flat. The rusted nails, stooping in the face of the waves, had long since wiggled their way out of their homes. Some of the boards had splintered in half and some sections of the docks had been torn away all together, yet somehow Hermes, Catty, and Grandfather, with his entourage of cage-carrying shadow-summons, had made it to the end of one of these wharfs.

“Who’re we sailing with?” Catty asked, glaring down the Frosted River at a vessel that wasn’t much more than a speck on the horizon.

“John Pigeon.” Hermes answered.

His response was lacking in detail, Catty dug deeper, “Captain of...”

After Hermes declined to answer, ignoring his coworker and watching the approaching ship instead, Grandfather spoke up, “That’d be the Aquarian Sea Lords, son.”

Catty would have snapped at Grandfather for referring to her with a masculine noun, as she normally did for this was not the first incident, but her curiosity took over.

“The Sea Lords don’t work for the Black Crown Pact,” Catty stated, she turned to Hermes who was still looking away, “I assume this is just a misunderstanding?”

“What is it you’re misunderstanding?”

“We are about to ride on a ship that works for the Trinity Nations.” Catty said.

Grandfather muttered, “That’s not their only allegiance.”

Hearing this, her eyes narrowed. Though Hermes, as a banshee, could not tell whether or not her eyes were opened or closed, he could sense her leeriness. He chuckled, “Meriam, you’re as gullible as your Lord!”

“So you still work for the Order?” Catty’s lip curled and she spat into the frothing river water, “Where are the Sea Lords taking us?”

“Icelore.”

Catty didn’t like this answer. She took a step away from the skeletal bearn, back towards the shore. Suddenly, he whirled to face her. He yanked the Staff from the rope around his hip. The red jewel that crowned it twinkled, as if daring Catty to run.

“Am I your prisoner now too?” She hissed.

“You do not have to be.” Hermes growled.

“If we go to Icelore, they will kill me.” Catty replied, “I have no choice.”

“Not if you are with me.” Hermes promised.

Catty scoffed, “And I’m supposed to trust you?”

“Yes,” Hermes said, “that is not a choice.”

Taking her silence for submission, Hermes let the Staff slide back into its loop on the rope wrapped around his waist then set about unlatching his chest plate. Once the armored shell was opened, he reached within his rib cage, pulled out a small crate the size of a shoebox, and tossed it to Catty. As he re-straped his chest plate, Catty opened the box. Inside, wrapped in cloth, was a few of the shattered pieces left from Dresdan’s Sword, the one Hermes had broken on the *Sea Cuber*, the blade Nogard had wielded.

“I am my own man, Catherine, I make my own way. The petty allegiances I’ve claimed – the Ipativians, the Mystvokar, the Order, the Doom Warriors, the Pact – they are nothing but a means to an end.”

Catty could care less, “What’s with the box?”

“There are three reasons why we are going to Icelore. First, the book said that the Earthboy will come to me in Zviecoff. The city is a war zone. If I wish to enter the capital, then I must be with one side or the other. I must obtain Shalis’ blessing before returning to her turf, otherwise I will find myself at odds with all the parties fighting to claim the city.”

“You’re willing to bow to her?” Catty laughed, “Thought that’s why you left?”

“Willing only because of the second reason.” Hermes grinned, “The book said that if I take Joe to Shalis, I will become stronger than I could ever imagine.”

“Maybe you’ve just got a weak imagination.” Grandfather suggested.

“And how will this happen?” Catty asked.

“I do not know,” he admitted, “but I believe it will be thanks to the sword this Knome will make with the void-dust Shalis will lend me.”

“Why would she give you void-dust?”

“Because I will give her the Sun Child.”

The banshee had a point. Still, Catty had one more question, “What is your third reason for taking us to Icelore? I still don’t see what these pieces of blade have to do with any of this.”

“If the book is wrong, then I still must capture the Earthboy, for I cannot bear to stay within the Order and Creaton would never take me back without the human. Even if the book is right, Zviecoff is a large city. It is possible I could miss him. Thus, my third reason: in Icelore, they have one of Kenchi Kou’s mechanical creations. Do you know what I speak of?”

Despite having been previously employed in Icelore, Catty had no clue.

Grandfather, on the other hand, had a hunch, “Atlas.”

Hermes said, “Catherine, you’ve heard of mapworks, correct?”

Catty nodded.

“What about globeworks?”

Catty shook her head.

“That is probably because Shalis Skullsummon owns the only one in existence.” Hermes explained, “Using Atlas, we can track the Earthboy across Solaris. Prophecy or not, if I can get Shalis to cooperate, Icelore is key to us finding the pyromancer. Now, here she is...” he turned away from Catty to face their ride. The vessel was much closer now, its details finally discernable. The ship was nearly all in two colors, maroon and navy, except for the marble figurine of a horse, whinnying above the ocean, that mounted the bowsprit. A horn protruded from between the ivory steed’s eyes. It was from this figurehead that the vessel claimed its name, which Hermes murmured, “...the *Monoceros!*”

- - -

“HMPH!”

Zalfron slammed his fists down on the rock ledge as if his appendages weren’t made of soft, mammalian flesh. This must’ve been his tenth attempt. The rock didn’t budge. A bloody imprint of the elf’s brutalized hands was all that remained as a sign of his efforts. Taking a break, he peered over the edge into the canyon. South of the outcropping he knelt upon, the shroud had essentially cleared. Zalfron could now make out the blue bodies of the Soldiers of Shelmick toiling with the last remaining members of the prison transport. Still outnumbered – by just a little – it was clear the battle would soon be won. And in the middle of the tussle, lay Machuba’s cage. A giant black square in the middle of the cavern.

“They’re almost to Machuba!”

Nogard was doing his best to keep track of the progressing army of Aquarian reinforcements through the fog of sand and blood but all he could really do was listen. The enemy was closing in, Nogard was sure, but it was hard to tell how close they actually were. The echoing didn’t help nor did the clamor coming from the concluding battle to the south. Still, Nogard could tell it was now or never. They couldn’t wait for visibility, they couldn’t really wait another second. Then a sudden rushing tide curled the dissolving, earthen mist, rushing it a couple dozen yards further, revealing the first ranks of fresh foes – standing still at attention, their leader standing before them, facing them, barking words in the Aquarian Dialect. Nogard reared up from where he lay.

“Dey’re bouta charge!” Nogard exclaimed.

“Get back!” Joe commanded.

Both Zalfron and Nogard turned to see Joe. While Zalfron had watched the Soldiers and Nogard had kept tabs on the reinforcements, Joe had been getting ready. Thirty seconds before this moment, Joe had come up with an idea and he’d immediately incorporated it. He spun the fire inside him then let it swim out from his chest and extend from his arms, twirling outward like a drill. He brought his arms together, combining the two spiral tongues of flame into one, then raised his arms. *Focus*. He sculpted the fire, turning the uncontrolled limbs of sapphire blaze into a solid pole shape. *Hammer*. The end of the column of conflagration shifted, molding into a cylinder perpendicular to the pole. His creation was complete right as Zalfron made his report and Nogard saw the first line of the enemy.

“They’re almost to Machuba!”

“Dey’re bouta charge!”

“Get back!”

His comrades turned to see his mighty fiery bludgeon and jumped to the side. Joe swung both his arms down. The fiery hammer hit the rock and the ledge shuddered.

“Saelu, that was awesome!” Zalfron fist pumped the air, “Yer a baest!”

As Joe sucked his flames back into his chest, he asked, “Did it work?”

Nogard grabbed Joe by the shoulder, turned him around, and pointed as a crack continued to crawl across the outcropping of rock, bulging out to split even some of the rock along the more regular lip of the canyon. The earthen peninsula shifted. The entire edge of the canyon shuddered.

From below came the reinforcement captain’s, “CHOFAY!” as the Aquarian forces charged.

“Perfect tahmin!” Zalfron was beside himself with excitement, “Y’all ready?”

The tremors were now constant, their side of the canyon was trembling.

“What do we do?” Joe yelled, raising his voice as the quaking grew to a roar, “DO WE HOLD ON?”

“NO, JUMP!” Nogard cried.

With one last quake, the boulder bridge fell, tearing a chunk out of the canyon side with it. The three jumped and they hung in the air for a moment, watching the tongue of stone smack the side of the canyon, smashing even more debris free as it shattered, and tumble with the rest of the refuse onto the heads of the unsuspecting, charging fishfolk.

Then gravity wrapped its heavy fingers around the three and all coordination flew out the window. Arms pin wheeling, they fell to the ground. Joe hit a chunk of stone on its flat side and rolled down it like a ramp. The impact would’ve done considerable damage if not for the forgiving atmosphere that existed beneath the Aquarian Dome. Nogard hit the same rock and came to a rolling stop beside Joe. Zalfron landed flat on the ocean floor.

Joe and Nogard stumbled to their feet, about to check on Zalfron, when they realized that the twenty-five or so fishfolk not compromised by the seabear stampede nor the falling rocks had them surrounded, backed up against the debris. Nogard drew his sword and pulled his shield off from where he’d hung it around his shoulders.

“You ready?” Nogard asked.

Joe gulped, “Ready as ever.”

“FARAK!” Zalfron roared, jumping to his feet, “That hurt so damn ba-”

“CHOFAY!” The reinforcements roared before charging with their weapons held high.

Joe moved his arms like he was pulling two curtains apart. He forced his chest forward and sprayed blue-flame over Nogard and Zalfron’s heads then brought it crashing down before the charging fishfolk. The fire did little to the armored men except stun them. Joe didn’t keep the hose open, having launched only enough to smash a line in the sand before the fire evaporated. But this was precisely what Nogard needed. The chidra ran forward, through where the wall of fire had been only a moment before, and bashed the closest fishfolk with his shield before stabbing him through his chain mailed gut as he fell backwards. Zalfron charged too, grabbing a nearby guard and yanking his helmet off his head. As the disoriented fishfolk stumbled away from the smoke and the elf that had burst through it, Zalfron reared back and smacked him across the head with his own helmet.

By then the shock of Joe’s wall of combustion ran out. Nogard went on to the next man, raising his shield to jar the fishfolk but the warrior twisted out of the way and swung at Nogard’s unprotected side. The chidra barely managed to raise his sword and block in time, but when he did another fishfolk warrior was on him, striking his shield with such strength that he forced

Nogard to stagger backwards. Zalfron had to back pedal too as a sword wielding fishfolk inched towards the tall elf, ready to lunge.

“FALL BACK!” Joe yelled, “OVER THE ROCKS!”

Joe didn't need to tell the chidra twice. Nogard turned and ran past Joe, scaling the rocky mound with ease. Zalfron was less convinced. He swung the helmet back and forth, discouraging the fishfolk from attacking but soon, with Nogard gone, he would be surrounded. Joe cursed beneath his breath.

“ZALF! RE-,” he released a tendril of blue flame from his chest, it leapt up into the air, over Zalfron's head, and came smashing down onto the guard directly in front of the elf, “-TREAT!”

This time Zalfron listened. He turned and followed Nogard on his hasty climb over the mound of rubble. Joe followed too, after launching a wave of fire at the line of armored fishfolk to give him and his comrades an extra second or two. As soon as the three reached the crest of the mound, they saw Sidon's men coming up the other way. At least fifteen of them, all nude aside from the shields now strapped to their backs and the tridents in their hands. There were over a dozen of the remaining prison transport trailing them.

“SWITCH?” Nogard yelled to Sidon.

Sidon raised his trident in acknowledgement before leading his men down the other side towards the un-suspecting reinforcements. Joe released a line of fire upon the equally unsuspecting caravan. The confused fishfolk skidded to a stop as the blue fire swept through them, scorching what skin wasn't protected. Before they could regain their composure, Nogard leapt from the top of the mound, throwing his shield to knock two of the prisoner escorts off their feet. He came down on another soldier and slid the edge Shelmick's Sword across his neck. Zalfron tackled the downed guards and tossed Nogard his shield, hollering, “CATCH!”

“DANKS!” Nogard caught the golden disk and whirled on the next enemy. Meanwhile, Zalfron kicked one of the downed guards and slugged the other in the nose.

“JOE,” Zalfron yelled as he knelt by the stunned guards, “NEEDA HAND!”

Joe nodded and thrust his hands forward, palms out, crying internally, “*Kamehameha!*” as a ball of blue fire the size and density of a bowling ball was launched from his chest, hitting a guard in the head as he approached the elf. The guard stumbled backwards, wiping at the inferno that wrapped his face.

“THAT GOOD, ZALF-”

WHAM! The fire went out and the guard hit the ground, his flat nose now a bloody indentation in his face. Joe cringed at the sight. Wearing the gloves of the fishfolk he'd rendered unconscious, Zalfron held the man's sword by the blade – he had used the hilt as a hammer to pound Joe's victim's face in. WACK! He spun on another nearby guard and the pommel of the sword clanged against the fishfolk's helmet.

The brutal blow Joe'd seen broke through his adrenaline-induced iron stomach. Suddenly, he felt dizzy and sick. He staggered in place but had no time to collect his thoughts. His eyes looked towards Machuba's cage. The soldiers had dropped it in the sand and it sat in the middle of the mayhem – between Nogard and Zalfron. Joe could see Machuba, sitting cross legged, still as a statue as he watched the battle through the bars. Both men's eyes met and a chill ran down Joe's spine. There was something hopeless about the fishfolk's blank, black stare.

“JOE!”

Nogard's yell tore his eyes from the prisoner. Five of the guards were climbing up the mound of rubble towards him. Joe looked at his hands. *Suikii*. It appeared. Joe crouched and

swung at the hand of one of the fishfolk reaching up for the next block of rubble. An armored hand grabbed the blade. Joe's eyes met the gaze of the fishfolk guard.

They were black – pure black. Something so alien that at first glance his mind sought to dissociate the being with its personhood. His subconscious whispered, "It's a beast. A beast about to slay you. Like that barren back in the woods of Zouzu, Tadloe. Kill it." But then again, they hadn't killed the barren. They'd pacified it and they lived to fight another day. That whisper was whisked away as the snarl on the lips of the man below him changed to mirror the slack-mouthed frown of desperation on Joe's own. Pure fear. Such a dehumanizing emotion. *It* robs you of your personhood. Everyone is a monster in a world of fear. In that split second all this shot through his mind. In the very next second, he felt as if he was looking down at a reflection of himself.

Then he blasted the soldier. He pointed his finger and sent a blast of chainmail-rattling flame right into the fishfolk's face. The guard fell to the ground screaming as the other four climbed higher.

"GUYS, WE CAN'T FIGHT THEM ALL OFF!" Joe cried.

"WAE'RE FAHN!" Zalfron yelled.

"NO CHOICE, CIV!" Nogard roared.

There were three left pacing around Nogard, four on Zalfron – counting the two that limped, and four climbing towards Joe. They were outnumbered. Not to mention the twenty-something they'd left the Soldiers to face. Joe looked once more to the cage.

"Machuba," he whispered, swearing to himself, "we'll get you out of there!"

Another hand reached up towards Joe's feet. Taking a step back to get out of reach, Joe swung the Suikii in the air. Finally, the sword did its job. A hole in the universe opened before Joe revealing a window into Machuba's cage! He was staring right at the back of the captive fishfolk's head but the prisoner was oblivious.

A hand wrapped around Joe's ankle. Joe fell onto his butt and reached out to grab a stone that shot up from the pile with his free hand to keep from being yanked down.

"GUYS, WE GOT IT!"

"GO!" Zalfron hollered back.

As Joe hacked at the armored hand gripping his ankle, he considered taking Zalfron's advice. *But what if you go through, get Machuba, then come back out and, in that time, Zalfron or Nogard is killed? Or both?!* Joe couldn't risk it. They had to move together.

"GET OVER HERE!" Joe demanded.

But Zalfron was surrounded. He swung the pommel into a limping guard's gut then, when the soldier lurched forward, he brought the handle up to clock him in the chin. Hurdling over the collapsing guard, he ran in the only direction that was open: towards the stone façade of the rift. As he did, he noticed a jagged slit in the cliff side – a slit that wiggled its way for a good distance, parallel to the rift floor. Raising the sword over his head, he swung the hilt into the wall, chipping a decent sized rock from the crack before turning back to his encroaching opponents.

"NOGARD," Zalfron yelled, gesturing towards the crack above his head with his sword, "THROW YER SHAELD!"

"WHAT?"

Nogard had managed to get past the guards that surrounded him and had just pulled a guard off the mound of rubble after stabbing him through the back.

"THE CRACK," Zalfron swung at the guards surrounding him, "ABOVE MAH HEAD!"

“WHY?”

“DO IT!”

Nogard slit the calf of another guard scaling the rock pile then turned back to Zalfron. He glared at the crack above the elf’s head, spun, and launched the shield like a discus. It soared over the elf’s scalp and hit the fissure, sticking there. Zalfron faked a jump towards the three guards around him, then ran back to the wall. He leapt, with the sword still upside down in his grip, and swung. He hit the shield with the hilt of his stolen blade which both drove the golden wedge deeper and rattled it, vibrating the cliff side.

The wall shifted. A lightning bolt of cracks spread up from Shelmick’s Shield.

“ZALFRON-” Joe yelled.

Zalfron turned. Nogard and Joe were now both standing atop the rubble, fending off the guards. A pebble fell behind the elf. Shadows, like that of clouds, stretched over him. The canyon wall was collapsing.

“-HURRY!”

He yanked the shield free then ran, zigzagging past the now fleeing fishfolk. Boulders fell behind him, one after the other, crushing the armored guards like ants. Zalfron didn’t look back. The guards at the rubble pile turned away from Joe and Nogard and looked at the falling wall of stone. Then they turned to Zalfron.

“Oh farak.”

Zalfron skidded to a stop. They took a step forward. Zalfron took a step back. The elf was tall and though he had strong arms, he had stronger legs. With a gulp, he tossed his sword-hammer at the soldiers then charged with the shield before him. Massive boulders continued to rain down around him, some as big as his forearm and some as big as the elf himself. He ran at one of the ducking guards then, at the last second, he held the shield out of his way and jumped – at least five feet. He could’ve cleared the flinching fishfolk’s head but instead he kicked off the man’s helmet for an extra boost. The elf slammed against the pile of rubble and Nogard yanked him up.

“Ya gutsy bastard!” Nogard chuckled.

Giant fragments of canyon wall continued to fall. If they’d stayed behind for one more second, they would’ve been swallowed in the rubble. Instead, they dove through the portal and slammed against the bars of Machuba’s cage. It was dark as midnight. And quiet – aside from the pebbles trickling down above them.

“Where are wae?” Zalfron mumbled, “Ain’t this supposed to bae Machuba’s cage.”

Nogard asked, “Machuba?”

“I’m here.”

The fishfolk’s voice was strong and forcefully deep. There was a certain firmness in it, Joe noted. Turning to face Machuba’s voice, the indigo light in his chest revealed the young fishfolk. What first struck Joe was the man’s age. From afar, he hadn’t noticed, but up close, Machuba looked almost like a child (though with notably well-defined muscles). The light in his chest didn’t just reveal Machuba, it also revealed the cause of the incredible darkness.

“We’re under the rubble, aren’t we?” Joe hypothesized.

Machuba nodded.

“Well then,” Zalfron lay back against the metal bars and let out a deep sigh, “looks lahk wae did it.”

Sidon yanked his silver trident from the face of his enemy and turned to evaluate the damage. He licked his eyes and peered through the red dust cloud that filled the rift floor. Not a single Aquarian guard remained on their feet. A few crawled here and there, many lay trembling, squirming or moaning while others lay perfectly still though their gills pulsed as they breathed unconsciously. A long stretch of canyon wall had collapsed, burying the rest of the bodies. At the moment, Sidon was not worried about his men, many of whom had become casualties themselves, that would come later. He was not worried about the blocked entry way, for they could easily climb out. He was worried about Machuba Gill.

With his lips set in a firm line he marched past comrades and corpses to the edge of the debris. At the pile he squatted, placed his hands beneath a stone, and lifted with his legs. His soldiers watched as the merman's gills flared and veins bulged. Thirty seconds later, Sidon collapsed to his knees.

Behind him, Yiangu cried to the heavens, "Barro! Barro, don't forsake us!"

His voice bounced off the canyon walls. The soldiers followed Sidon to stand at the edge of the rockpile.

"BARRO!"

A tiny pebble rolled down the pile, coming to a stop at Sidon's knee. He looked up. At the top of the rubble, a stone lifted. Floating in the atmosphere of the Aquarian Dome, it rose then plopped over onto its side to roll down the hill and out of the way. Another lifted. And another. As Sidon rose to his feet, they watched the pile disassemble itself. After a minute or two, the cage rose from the wreckage and levitated over to where Sidon stood before coming to a rest a foot or two from his toes.

Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, and Machuba sat wedged behind the cold, unmarred metal bars. The wide black-eyed stares of the Soldiers of Shelmick didn't know where to focus, on the Gill or on Joe. Whispers spread through the ranks like wildfire, "A miracle," a fishfolk murmured, "Barro smiles upon us," a merman whispered, "Isn't he from the Sun?" One asked, "He is the Sun Child!" Someone declared. Then, a soldier pointed to the ridge above, crying, "Barro has come!"

Joe turned to Nogard.

"A Delian god, Civ," the chidra whispered, "he rules over all water, takes da shape of a turtle."

"Look!" Zalfron exclaimed, pointing to a dark silhouette that seemed to peak over the lip of the canyon, "Saelu, its raelly Barro?!"

Joe followed Zalfron's finger. There was something high above them, but it could have just as easily been a strange rock rather than a turtle.

"Dat was just a turtle." Nogard rolled his eyes.

"Then who pulled the rocks off us?" Zalfron demanded.

The chidra glared at the elf, "Dought you be a Christian, Civ?"

"Yea, well," Zalfron shrugged, "mah god doesn't do miracles, so maybae its due tahm to convert."

Sidon strode forward and spoke so everyone got quiet.

"Sheenshong Machuba Gill Juji." Sidon said.

Machuba bowed his head, "Sheenshong Sidon."

"Joe, please assist Machuba from his cell." Sidon said.

“Alright,” Joe raised the Suikii. The other three inched away from Joe’s corner of the cage to give him ample room. He swung. Then he swung again. After the nineteenth swing, he surrendered, “I think we have a problem.”

“What’s wrong?” Sidon asked.

“The Suikii has a mind of its own,” Joe admitted, “I can’t make it open a portal.”

Sidon gave Joe a blank stare. Behind him, Yiangu fell to his knees, lifted his head, and roared as he had before, “BARRO!” but the shadow that had lingered over the edge of the cliff was now nowhere to be seen.

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The sun set and the perfect darkness of night on the sea floor descended upon the Soldiers of Shelmick as the group hiked back to the Stronghold. The controlled forest fire they’d set to channel the herd of seabears into the canyon had almost gone out and what continued to burn was quickly consumed by Joe to permit safe passage. It took ten to hold the cage. They constantly alternated so that no one man would have to bear the weight for the entire journey. Sidon alerted the four that King Lacitar would already be well aware of Machuba’s escape and would stop at nothing to try and prevent them from returning to their hidden abode. As they neared the monastery, the Soldiers’ tattoos began to reappear, glowing brighter and brighter with each step. Joe realized that their tattoos hadn’t been glowing during the battle.

“How do those tattoos work?” Joe asked.

Machuba answered, “The closer we get to the Stronghold, the brighter they glow.”

Hearing Joe’s question, Sidon strolled up to walk alongside the cage so he could look Joe in the face as he spoke, “We use them to guide us home. A spell was weaved in their glowing ink, their very shape elicits magic as well. Similar to that which was lost with the death of the original mermen...the ancient runes of Mirkweed...most of these tattoos have other charms beyond their glow.”

“Lahk what?” Zalfron jumped into the conversation.

“Some help you sleep, some lessen pain, some heighten certain senses,” Sidon shrugged, “there is no limit to what magic can do, only a limit to our imagination and discipline. These tattoos are also a weakness. If Lacitar had captured Machuba, then my brothers and sisters and I would’ve had to abandon our home, for Lacitar would use our brother as a compass.”

“Interesting.” Though Joe’s interest in tattoos died immediately as he noticed the three, elongated bundles being toted over the shoulders of the Soldiers at the very end of their procession. The packages were wrapped in kelp, in what was obviously a makeshift manner, for still small clouds of blood seeped out. Joe’s mouth ran dry but the question scratched its way out of his throat nonetheless, “How many did we lose?”

“Three.” Sidon said.

His voice was bland, devoid of emotion, and his gaze was distant. Joe had to look away. Though the death count would’ve undoubtedly been higher had it not been for his participation, he still felt guilty. Three beings not much different than he, gone from existence – he couldn’t even begin to swallow the loss of life that had occurred on the other side of the battlefield. He glanced at Machuba through his periphery. *Does he feel that weight?* Joe wondered, after all, Joe felt guilty for participating, he couldn’t imagine how Machuba felt for being the soul reason the fight had taken place. Machuba’s face gave no sign of any emotion at all – his face was limp, like Sidon’s, his eyes staring off at nothing. *All this violence and he’s just a kid, how?* Joe

shuddered, then glanced over at Zalfron. Zalfron was obviously older but not by much. The elf's eyes were also glazed over and his face was slackened but expressively, there was obvious relief in the hint of a smile across his lips. *Survival*. Joe surmised. Finally Nogard caught his eye. The chidra was holding his gogo pipe, extending it to Joe – requesting the obvious with need pouring from his pursed eyes.

Joe complied. As he held a tendril of blue flame above the bowl, he was surprised to see Nogard move the pipe first to Machuba. The young man moved swiftly to the piece, his gills snapping shut as he inhaled deeply.

“Da curse.” Nogard explained, “His pain meds.”

As Machuba exhaled, his face finally took on expression and one that very closely matched Zalfron's relieved looseness. Then Nogard put the pipe to his lips.

“My brain meds.”

Joe could see the reflection of the kelp mummies on the shoulders of the soldiers in Nogard's eyes as he took a long drag. The pyromancer gladly accepted when Nogard handed the pipe to him next.

Sidon spoke, “Wushiangu, Feng, Zoushia. Their spirits now reside within Solaris. Their memory we will celebrate with their wives upon our return. But their lives,” he turned his eyes upon Machuba who immediately averted his own, “did not end in vain.” He looked back to the Soldiers carrying the corpses, “For we would all die to save the life of a brother.”

The dead bearers nodded solemnly. Joe couldn't help but watch them a moment longer in awe. They stood with the same posture as Death. Their shoulders rolled over, their chests looming out like a cliff over their concave guts as if they had no vital organs beneath their ribs to take up the space where their bellies should've been. They were empty and their burdens were heavy. Their eyes, black as were all mermen and fishfolk's, were especially black now. Like black holes. Though Joe had not known them previously, he could tell they were shells of what they'd been before. Those were not strangers wrapped in seaweed draped over their shoulders, they were loved ones. Kin. At the same time that Joe couldn't even begin to understand the despair, he couldn't help but grimace at the toxic taste of tragedy that now soaked the air around them. It did not feel like they had won.

Nogard pulled Joe out of his head.

“Hey, Civ, give da Suikii anodder shot.” Nogard requested.

Joe complied, having to switch to his left hand as the muscles of his right arm were so sore they'd stopped cooperating. After the twenty-ninth attempt, he decided to get his mind off the uncomfortableness of the situation by giving his curiosity reigns over his consciousness. He turned to Machuba, asking, “I'm not sure if this is a rude question or not, so feel free to decline, but your curse...it's the same Gill curse your dad had right.”

Machuba nodded.

Joe's curiosity had rubbed off on Zalfron, “Blood of molten stael!” With wide eyes and a mystified smile, the elf asked, “When'd all that start? Ah maen, ah know it was the ancient mermen and Shelmick and all but...what's the storay?”

Machuba took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Would you rather I tell the story?” Sidon asked.

Machuba nodded.

“Consider this a prequel to the tale I told last night,” Sidon licked his eyes, “though this story began a couple thousand years before...”

Sidon's Tale 2: Curse of the Gills

Thirty centuries ago, the first Aquarian race began to record their own past. During this time, a dozen city-states rose to prominence, populated by fishfolk, mermen, and a dozen other races, each inhabiting their own city. The two modern capitals of Aquaria, Aidaros and Coraljen, were then but young kingdoms no different than the other city-states that held a claim to the lands on the floor of the Aquarian Ocean. Though Aidaros' influence is now dominant, Coraljen was the first to expand beyond a polis.

After mastering the art of ocean floor farming, mermen began to explore. When the initial pioneers returned, they brought with them gold and magic. The gold came from Aidaros where it was essentially unvalued by the fishfolk. The identity of the giver of the magic was lost when the mermen histories were burned. The mermen believed the god Kuru taught their most daring explorers the secret language, which was not the Sacred Tongue but a similar dialect they called the Holy Vernacular. All that is known for sure is that none of the other blue skinned races of the Aquarian Ocean knew a lick of magic and none would know, thanks to mermen efforts, for many, many years.

The Golden Trade Route created a bipartisan elite in Coraljen, one of the academic magicians and the other of the athletic explorers. The first mermen magicians refused to spread their mystical wisdom to any merman that had not yet shown their worth to Kuru by slaying a sumarii, an act that only one in ten had accomplished (and an act that the original academic elites had never even dared to attempt). Even without the prerequisite, the common people of Coraljen had little time to learn magic or adventure, but they coveted the efficiency magic goods brought into their society and the pleasures of luxuries imported from across the sea floor. While magic, once amongst the mermen, wasn't going anywhere, the stock of exotic goods required constant replenishing. The explorers coveted gold because most of the Aquarian city-states valued the metal, which gave mermen the upper hand when trading with foreigners and this upper hand intern made their influence amongst their own people more affordable.

Originally, Aidaros mined for Coraljen, but over time the fishfolk miners and mermen wayfarers found a better way, the Indention Mining System. Peasant-workers were brought to Aidaros from Coraljen by the adventuring elites to work for the mine owners of Aidaros. These workers were lured into the mines by contracts promising to send them home with a large sack of gold so that, those that didn't die on the journey or in the mines, would never have to work another day in their life. It was this exchange that swelled the power of Coraljen and Aidaros above those of the other ancient ethnic kingdoms (granted, the poor of their city-states paid the price).

While this system gave the magicians and adventurers even more power in Coraljen, these groups did not appear in Aidaros. The mermen would not share the Holy Vernacular and the fishfolk were unable to travel like the mermen. In the days before the first Aquarian Dome, the oceans held ten times as many of the giant, three finned sharks known as sumariis. In both

regions, the cities were essentially safe. Great nets had been constructed around them. But in the wilderness, it was dangerous. In the south, between the rigid coral branches of the Wobniar Woods, the peoples had learned how to fight, or at least escape, the beasts. As many sumarii killed men as men killed sumarii. However, in the north, along the flat lands where there was rarely more than a tangle of kelp to hide behind, the people rarely even tried. If a northerner ran into a sumarii, outside the nets of their city, they almost always wound up in the beast's belly.

Despite the dangers of travel for both peoples, only more so for fishfolk, King Ju Gill of Aidaros sent his son to Coraljen with an army of hired mermen to guard his passage. The growing power of mine owners in his city-state had begun to worry Ju that eventually his authority would be bought out from under him. He decided that if his royal family had magic, the people would need them to stick around. Knowing how prude the magicians of Coraljen were, he hoped Thompthou could force them to overlook racial prejudices and recognize, by economic threat if necessary, how much Coraljen needed Aidaros. What good would magic do them when there was no gold to pay for it?

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Using Sidon's rhetorical pause, Joe interjected, "If this was before there were Aquarian Domes, then...was everything sort of...uh...just floating around?"

"Ya," Zalfron concurred, "did everayone have to swim everaywhere?"

"Indeed." Sidon nodded.

This brought on a slew of other questions, Joe settled just to ask one, "How'd the cities work?"

"Think of the treetop villages of Munkloe," Sidon turned to observe the coral that walled their trail, "just as many avenues run perpendicular to the sea floor as they do parallel. Rather than walls, they enclosed their settlements in nets. Still today, there is an Aquarian city outside of an Aquarian Dome – Malpirendaw. Outsiders often describe it as an artificial reef, populated with people and industry instead of plants and fish."

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Prince Thompthou Gill left Aidaros with a band of other royal family members guarded by mermen paid off by the king. The group made it to Men and from there halfway to Coraljen, having fended off two sumarii attacks before being overcome. Even the mermen mercenaries were bested. Only Thompthou survived. By then, they were near enough to Coraljen that mermen scouts had been watching. They revealed themselves after both sumarii had been killed, which thoroughly infuriated the prince who could've used their help, and guided him onwards into the city. The people of Coraljen were captivated by Thompthou and his Shway Renchu combat style – a style that would ultimately become the most respected form of martial arts beneath the sea if not above as well. As a fishfolk that managed to kill *two* sumarii, he was yet

another exotic commodity they could not get enough of. The magicians were less excited, except for one: Jawow Hwali.

The masters of Holy Vernacular were reluctant to strike a deal with Thompthou and the prince himself, with his contempt for mermen, was not the most diplomatic. One of the newer masters – a young woman who had killed a sumarii on the way back from her indentation and used her gold to learn the Holy Vernacular – was interested in helping as much as she could. She was tired of her people’s self-induced suffering in the mines of Aidaros and believed the process could be made safer through magic. Jawow showed Thompthou some of the magical inventions she’d devised in hopes that he might see the potential benefits (unfortunately for Jawow, fishfolk didn’t feel the same about preserving the lives of the miners as many merman did). It was one of her less altruistic ideas that caught Thompthou’s attention. In one of the merman expeditions, the mermen ventured onto land using enchanted necklaces which let them breathe above water. They brought back plants and a few birds and kept them in tiny magical domes. When Thompthou, without a necklace, walked inside one to look at the novelties, Jawow had thought he wouldn’t be able to breathe but, as it turned out, he could breathe above and below the surface. Intrigued, Jawow wanted to travel back to Aidaros with Thompthou to investigate further – was Thompthou unique or were all fishfolk capable of amphibian life – and Thompthou wanted to bring a dome back to Aidaros to explain an idea to his father. Through this dome-technology, Thompthou envisioned a submarine world safe from sumarii.

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“So you can’t breathe above water?” Joe asked.

“No, remember this was long ago, Thompthou was born over five hundred years before the First Hatching,” Sidon explained, “Whatever the gene that caused this phenomenon was, it was dominant. As domineering as the fishfolk were themselves one might say. Modern mermen and ancient mermen are very separate organisms – more fishfolk than ancient mermen in actuality.” Sidon cleared his throat, “Back in Aidaros...”

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Thompthou asked Jawow if the mermen were capable of building atmosphere-altering domes large enough to enclose an entire city. She told him that if there was enough gold on the table then there was no limit to what her people could create through the manipulation of their Holy Vernacular. Thompthou had her repeat this to his father and within a week after this proposal, construction began on the first Aquarian Dome. These were far less complex than the domes that stand in modern times. These domes completely cut out the ocean water, leaving the atmosphere exactly like that above the ocean. As mermen worked on the dome, fishfolk worked to reconstruct the city for this new lifestyle. It took ten years to complete the project (during

which Jawow and Thompthou got married). Centuries before the first moon dragon landed, the first Aquarian Dome was built.

The fishfolk had many difficulties adapting to this new lifestyle. The fishfolk had believed that their food needs could be met by landlubber crops and cattle grown within the dome and regular submarine food stuffs raised in the traditional-style suburbs outside the dome. It took the fishfolk years to perfect the techniques of above-water farming and by then the fishfolk villages outside of Aidaros-proper had been abandoned. With a large chunk of previously-free ocean off-limits to marine life, monsters began to cluster around the edges of the dome. This led to common instances of sumariis breaking into the netted suburbs outside the dome to kill unassuming civilians. As those farmers within the dome approached competency, farmers outside the dome abandoned their lands to start from scratch in Aidaros-proper. Even before the entire population had crammed themselves beneath the magical membrane, the fishfolk had been unable to sufficiently provide for themselves and had relied, at least to some extent, on imports – this spike in population and decrease in necessary resources threatened to bring with it a famine.

The initial solution was to prohibit merman access to Aidaros, except for under special circumstances (such as for the king's daughter-in-law). This came naturally, after all, the mermen could no longer breathe within the city. Instead of paying mermen to mine, they began to pay mermen for their crops. The poor fishfolk took the mermen's place in the mines since now many were unable to farm (there just wasn't enough space within the dome). Rather than using the typical method of trade, paying with each purchase, they stuck to the same method they had used in the Indention Mining System. After ten years of service, they would receive a fat sack of gold. The rich land-owning farmers of Mirkweed were outraged and refused to comply. Unfortunately, the thousands of suddenly jobless mermen that had left Aidaros with the rising of the dome were willing to obey. Fishfolk enticed more by paying them half the sum up front, though this meant they would only receive half of the second half after the ten years. Mermen peasants, with no real alternatives, complied. Still, this exploitative racket was not enough to sustain Aidaros. Ju Gill's second solution was to conquer.

Thompthou Gill and the Aidaros Army were sent to invade Men which was ruled by a race called the shiyans. In the eyes of their contemporaries, the shiyans were fools. When the first merman travelers wandered north and discovered them, Men was more of a cluster of small hunter-gatherer villages than an actual city. But, since the shiyans sat at the midway point of the Golden Trade Route, as Coraljen and Aidaros grew, Men did too. A division of labor was formed and a city center was created where the female chiefs could maintain a traveler's market for adventurers and laborers. These chieftesses did not hoard their profits, instead, they splurged what they did not need on the villagers of their individual tribes. This maintained a similar peacefulness to the egalitarian society they had enjoyed before. The fishfolk and mermen saw this as a weakness, just as they saw the shiyans' matriarchy, and, in the context of these competitive, imperial neighbors, Men's lack of a guard and military proved to be fatal. The first battle concluded in a tragic defeat of the shiyan people. What little resolve the shiyans had to

resist was squelched on the battlefield. When Thompthou approached the nets for a second time, he found the gate open and the people on their knees. As a fishfolk territory, half their crops were to be shipped to Aidaros. As Thompthou left to target the next victim, his wife remained to work with the new leaders to construct another Aquarian Dome.

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“Wait...they took over their neighbor because they couldn’t produce enough food under the new dome, but then they built another dome over the city they captured?” Joe ran a hand through his hair, “Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose?”

“Men is not in North Aquaria, its located in the Wobniar Woods of Mirkweed. Despite their peaceful relationships with other Aquarians, the shiyan were more apt at fighting sumarii than the mermen.” Sidon explained.

“So...those living outside the new dome were able to handle it?”

“No. Though mermen, shiyans, and other inhabitants of the Wobniar Woods were able to fend off sumarii at least half the time, whether it was pride or arrogance, they claimed to have far better records. And the fishfolk, most of which never had heard of shark attack survivors, took their southern cousins’ claims at face value. King Ju figured that some of those crowded beneath the Aidaros dome would relocate to Men while the shiyans would live happily around the dome, ably protecting travelers from the increased sumarii aggression.”

“And the shahans didn’t say somethin?” Zalfron piped up.

“I wouldn’t have, dink about it, Civ. Dats all dey had up on da fishfolk.” Nogard said.

“And,” Sidon added, “though folks knew that Aquarian Domes could protect a city far better than any net, at this time, few outside of Aidaros realized the danger the dome brought to its borders.”

“Hold up, ain’t the fishfolk the only ones who can braethe under them?” Zalfron asked.

“Correct,” Sidon nodded, “the wealthy shiyan, those chieftesses, were able to afford some of the enchanted necklaces that the mermen explorers had used to go above the surface but they could not afford one for every villager. This eventually shattered any semblance of egalitarian society among the shiyan and, eventually, dissolved their culture altogether.”

“To get beneath a dome, shiyans tried to marry in. Though marrying a fishfolk would not save them, it would guarantee their children access to the domes. Unlike the mermen, who feared diluting future generations of their ethnicity, most fishfolk were eager to mate with other races. This doesn’t mean the fishfolk were any less prejudiced than the mermen, in fact, the fishfolk saw interracial marriages as a way to replace other races with that of their own. King Ju even began a program called the Amphibian Movement, this provided enchanted necklaces for non-fishfolk parents in interracial couples. Over centuries, this program would be responsible for the merging of the Aquarian races.”

“The new dome rose in three years, there was minimal reconstruction necessary thanks to the smallness of the actual city center of Men, plus, Jawow and her team were getting

increasingly quicker.” Sidon turned back to the story, “But, Men was still not enough for King Ju and his people...”

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After Men, Thompthou and his soldiers moved north to attack a city parallel to Aidaros: Rendashu. Like Men the people of Rendashu, the shiyu, lived in a society of hunter gathers. Unlike the Men, the society was ordered in a strict patriarchal hierarchy. The most notable difference was that while the shiyans had accepted travelers with open arms, the shiyu did their best to repel outsiders. Rendashu was not the shiyu name for their little state, this was a name given to them by the fishfolk which translates roughly to “People of Blood”. Needless to say, shiyu resistance was far stronger than what Thompthou had faced in Men but, with superior numbers and armaments, Thompthou completely obliterated the shiyu warriors in less than a month. But Rendashu had no intention of surrendering. Wielding pots and pans, the citizens met Thompthou and his troops as they entered the city. After two weeks of trying to subjugate and pacify the population, an order came from King Ju to exterminate the city. Once nothing was left but ashes and sand, the fishfolk founded a new settlement, Aquaros, and it was to be domeless. A city devoted to the growing of crops and the training of soldiers, who could then defend the farmers from the sumarii.

With three cities under the growing Gill Empire, Thompthou now turned west. His father’s heart was set on two rival sea elven city-states that had been feuding with each other since the dawn of time. The first, Shwayjen, bowed without a fight. They had heard of the destruction of Rendashu and the defeat of Men. Those in Shwayjen that opposed this decision put their differences aside and fled to join the ranks of their arch nemesis: Gongchan. Initially, the citizens of Gongchan were determined, like the shiyu, to go down fighting, even after witnessing a series of brutal defeats. They were finally cracked after a battle, the first battle where it looked possible they could have a victory, that was interrupted by a pride of sumarii. The sharks routed both armies. After this, Thompthou came, unguarded, to the gates of Gongchan and requested the audience of their leader. The leader had died in the retreat, swallowed by a sumarii, so instead the royal family met him. He offered peace and, in honor of their loss, he promised them an Aquarian Dome if they bowed to King Ju. The family, distraught from the loss of their patriarch, knowing that their only options were defeat or surrender, conceded.

Finally, Ju’s hunger drove his gaze south, into the Wobniar Woods and the territory of the mermen. Ju did not want a war with Mirkweed. After all, the majority of what Mirkweed’s mermen produced was shipped to Aidaros and the other cities of the Gill Empire at a price that could not be matched anywhere else. In fact, at this point, Ju could have quit and maintained his empire easily *but* Ju had long been jealous of the luxuries enjoyed by the rich and royalty of Mirkweed – specifically the magic. So, for the second time, he sent his son to Coraljen to bring back the Holy Vernacular, only this time, Thompthou went armed with the threat of war.

Thompthou met with Mirkweed's king, Wooshin Linja, and proposed that he join in alliance with Aidaros so that he would not have to worry about the fishfolk military attempting to steal his city as they had four others. This alliance would cost Wooshin very little, all he had to do was send a group of magic teachers to Aidaros to teach a handful of students the Holy Vernacular. Wooshin saw this for exactly what it was: Ju was demanding the blueprints to their magical technology under threat of war.

Wooshin was a smart man. He knew that Ju could not afford to go to war with the mermen. If he did, his mermen indentured servants would drop their hoes and pick up blades. The fishfolk would not only be bearing the toll of battle but they would also be forced to endure a food shortage. Wooshin was confident that Ju was bluffing. Even if Ju wasn't, Wooshin was unwilling to cooperate. His devotion to Kuru was so strong that he was known for expelling mermen that worshipped other gods from his city, he perceived the fishfolk worship of Barro as barbaric. Then there was race. Wooshin believed mermen were Kuru's chosen people and that mermen, thanks to Ju's Amphibian Movement, might soon be the last pure race on the sea floor. If the messenger had not been Thompthou, Wooshin would've sent him back as a head on a platter. Instead, he sent Thompthou back alive but with a bold and undebatable, "No!"

While Thompthou marched back to Aidaros, Wooshin changed his mind. He sent troops after the prince. To dodge the assassins, Thompthou had to change course, heading east of Men. Then, to make matters worse, Thompthou accidentally ate some aquannabis and wound up wandering out of the Wobniar Wood and into the Submarine Canyon where his hunters finally caught back up. He managed to fight most of them off before being struck down. If it weren't for Namrem Shelmick, then Thompthou would have died then and there. Fortunately, Namrem and his disciples had stumbled across the Gill, recognized him, and followed him. They swooped in at the last moment, killing off the assassins and toting the foreign general back to the safety of the Stronghold.

As Namrem's healers tended to Thompthou's wounds, the fishfolk and merman became friends. Namrem explained that he had been exiled by Wooshin. Namrem had been taught the Holy Vernacular in his youth but, once older, he came to favor Barro and the ability to manipulate the mystical never abandoned him. For this reason, many considered Namrem a prophet. He taught Barro's words in the streets of Coraljen and other Mirkweed cities. Once his popularity grew, Wooshin plotted to get rid of him. To protect himself, Namrem fled and, ever since, had been hiding out with a group of devout worshippers that seemed to grow daily. Namrem even admitted to planning a coup on Wooshin – to make Coraljen a place open to all religions – once his movement got big enough. Thompthou offered to take Namrem to Aidaros saying that his father might be willing to work out a deal and provide the extra reinforcements needed to make the coup happen as soon as possible. Namrem thought about it then, once Thompthou was healed, he agreed and together they traveled to the ancient capital of the Gill Empire.

No one knows what was said between Ju and Namrem but they left the room in agreement. Together, Namrem and Thompthou invaded Coraljen and with minimal casualties.

Early into the siege, Wooshin fled then, not long afterwards, his soldiers laid down their weapons and sang the name Namrem Shelmick. Namrem and Thompthou shook hands then the prince left him to consolidate his new rule. Thompthou returned home to find Jawow happier than he'd ever seen her. She considered her husband as one of the key factors in what she claimed was the liberation of her people. Sadly, Jawow would never be this happy again.

Not long after the coup, Ju had Thompthou take their team of dome building magicians to Mirkweed. They began construction around a portion of the city without saying a word to Namrem. Ju claimed this was part of the deal but when Namrem heard this he was livid. He warned Thompthou that he would not be forgiven if they continued but Thompthou would not disobey orders (and disliked Namrem calling his father a liar). A week into the project, which was moving along at a snail's pace because the magicians themselves were nigh unwilling to cooperate, Namrem mobilized his troops and marched towards the construction site as the sun rose over the ocean. When they arrived, they found that the rising walls had already been destroyed. In the night, Jawow had snuck out and, with the magicians to help her, destroyed what progress they had made. Thompthou attempted to restart but the magicians would no longer obey him – even for more pay. Instead, he returned home empty handed. Surprisingly, Ju did not retaliate. Still, from this incident onward, the friendship shared between Namrem and Thompthou would twist into a bitter hatred.

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“Seems like Namrem and Thompthou's relationship wasn't the only one taking a hit.” Joe muttered.

Zalfron concurred, “Sounds lahk Jawow was fixina rahlaeve ol Thompthou of his marital dutaes.”

“The couple stayed together.” Sidon stated.

Joe and Zalfron's awe was simultaneous, “How?”

“Love, my boys!” Nogard smirked, “Love be a terrible, terrible ding.”

“I must agree.” Sidon nodded, “Historians still debate over why and how. Some argue it was a political marriage and nothing more. From what little texts that remain from this era, most of which I have read, it seems that the two genuinely loved each other. They disagreed on just about every level except for their mutual affection.”

“That seems unhealthy.” Joe remarked.

“Aye, Civ,” Nogard smirked again, “sometimes, it ain't da love dat keeps a couple togedder...sometimes it be da love making.”

Sidon concurred, “They say no mortals have been better at making love since.”

“Wait,” Joe smirked, “seriously?”

Zalfron snickered.

“Indeed.” Sidon nodded, unperturbed by the caged young men's insecurities, “Shall I proceed?”

“One more question.”

“Go ahead.”

“Why did Ju want to build a dome over Coraljen?” Joe asked, “I thought this entire conflict with the mermen was over magic, how would a dome help?”

“No one knows exactly why,” Sidon responded, “but it is known that Namrem did not agree to immediately give the fishfolk the Holy Vernacular. Many people believe there was some sort of vague agreement – either teach the fishfolk magic or make a fishfolk-section or domed-section of Coraljen – or maybe it was a threat and, in the absence of Wooshin, Ju thought he could bully Namrem into compliance since Namrem felt so strongly about his son.”

“Ah, I see.”

Sidon nodded then proceeded.

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The longer Namrem ruled, the more outspoken he became. He denounced the Aquarian Domes as blasphemous behavior, spitting in the face of Barro, and put King Ju on blast for the exploitative practices that had enslaved the mermen for decades. Meanwhile, Ju was back to scheming for new territory. His eyes had set on a city-state in the middle of Mirkweed called Sanction. Ju’s army received permission from Namrem, thanks to Jawow’s influence, to use Coraljen as a base of operations and sent a regiment led by Thompthou to the city. The invasion failed. The rennians of Sanction were small in number but, as long as they remained in the confines of their city, they were far too able fighters to force into submission. So many of Thompthou’s men had died that he was determined to find another way. He would force the rennians out to fight him on his own terms. Jawow’s crew of magicians would no longer work for the fishfolk but Thompthou was able to find a group of mermen more loyal to their wallets than to the policies of their people. With his soldiers stationed around the edge of the netted city, he began the construction of an Aquarian Dome around Sanction which, the magicians claimed, would take an estimated amount of months rather than years.

Again, the rennians proved themselves a worthy adversary. A group left the city unnoticed, somehow slipping within the ranks of the fishfolk, and kidnapped Thompthou Gill. Taking the prince hostage, they warned the soldiers of Aidaros that if they completed the dome then their beloved general would die with the rennians.

As soon as word reached Aidaros, Ju sent reinforcements but construction of the dome was not halted. Jawow was devastated. Jawow pleaded to Namrem for his help and the king succumbed to the pressure. Not only was Namrem and his mermen able to free the prince, but they were able to defeat the rennians. Without meaning to, Namrem had conquered Sanction.

Ju was more furious that Namrem now owned the city than he was relieved that his son had been saved. Instead of thanking the King of Coraljen, he demanded the king hand over Sanction. Offended, Namrem sent word back to Aidaros that if Ju wanted it, he could take it himself. Ju planned to. No sooner did Thompthou make it to Coraljen than did he turn back

around. Armed with the forces that had arrived from Aidaros – the forces that had originally been sent to liberate him – he marched to Sanction and laid siege to the city once more. Before any blood was spilled, Thompthou and Namrem spent a week trying to talk things out.

What is known of that conversation is only what Thompthou reported. Thompthou claimed not to want to fight Namrem, Namrem was unconvinced. Thompthou claimed that if he didn't, Aidaros would send another general, but still Namrem would not concede. Ju sent the entirety of the fishfolk military. "I have the armies of five cities gathered here to take one," Thompthou said, "to fight us is suicide!" But the prophet would not back down. The merman king had grown tired of the way the fishfolk treated his people and Ju's lack of appreciation for all that Namrem had done for the fishfolk was the shell that broke the oceantelope's back. Namrem refused to bow, to show any respect, to anyone that refused to respect his people.

The night after the final discussion, Namrem told all his soldiers to go home, that only those willing to die should remain. Many did remain, but most left and Thompthou ordered his men to let them pass. If more had stayed, then the mermen might've stood a chance in the battles that would follow but no one will ever know.

The battles were brutal. The soldiers of each side despised each other. Each blow was meant to inflict as much pain as possible. With the dome soon to come up, there would be no captives. On the third day of fighting, Thompthou came face to face with Namrem. The two drew swords against one another. Neither man could dupe the other. Legend has it they were the last two still to be fighting and that the rest of the soldiers gathered silently around to watch the sword play. Mesmerized. Then, before blades could decide it, the Aquarian Dome went up.

Thompthou sheathed his sword as Namrem gasped for air. The fishfolk rushed forward, ready to offer his breath, to blow it into the merman's gills and force it into his lungs but Namrem refused. He claimed that he had died the moment Thompthou had raised a weapon against him. Supposedly, tears rolled down Thompthou's cheeks – the first and last time tears would ever stream from the eyes of a fishfolk. Then, with his last breaths, Namrem Shelmick cursed Thompthou – the most powerful adlibbed curse ever recorded.

"One day the Gills will breathe through my gills and become the righteous champions of liberty, one day they will repay the debt they owe to all peoples who share the sea floor...but until then their blood will boil with molten steel and their nerves will never know what it is to not feel pain." This is what he said, in the Aquarian Dialect, with Thompthou pleading for forgiveness the entire time but to no avail, as Namrem continued on to use the Holy Vernacular to bind his promise by magic. Instantly, Thompthou Gill fell to the ground, writhing in pain, and thus began the Curse of the Gills.

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"Jesus," Joe murmured.

"Does it hurt?" Zalfron asked Machuba.

The fishfolk's lip curled in what was either a snarl or a smirk, "Nah, feels great."

“What happened after Namrem died?” Joe asked.

“The soldiers of Aidaros conquered Sanction, then Coraljen.” Sidon said, “Jawow went about burning all texts containing Holy Vernacular so that fishfolk could never learn their magic then she and a group of merman rebels set to destroying the domes.”

“She still didn’t leave Thompthou?” Joe asked.

“No.” Sidon shook his head, “After his cursing, Thompthou rejected civilization and went to live somewhere in the Wobniar Woods, supposedly taking Namrem’s place at the Stronghold. By the time Jawow assassinated his father, Thompthou might’ve even approved.”

“Have there been any attempts to end the curse?” Joe asked.

“Millions.” Machuba stated, “The one evil of Namrem Shelmick was that he lied when he told Thompthou his curse could be reversed.”

Joe frowned but when he glanced back at Sidon, he could tell from the merman’s silence and his expression – pursed lips, arched brow, and folded arms – that Machuba’s response might’ve been more opinion than it was fact. Settling back into his corner of the cage, Joe thought over the story he’d just heard and continued to swing the Suikii.

Chapter Eleven: Hijacked on the High Seas

Solaris had set by the time they arrived back at Shelmick's Stronghold. The three moons' pale, second-hand light barely made it through the canopy of coral, leaving only the glowing tattoos of the soldiers to lead them through the Wobniar Woods. As their ink got brighter, Machuba began to get more and more active. He'd been quite rigid when Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard first joined him – as if he'd been holding his breath. After a few rounds of gogo, he'd loosened up, but only as they got closer to the castle did he start fidgeting. Nogard, watching his friend with a concerned scowl, hurriedly packed another bowl.

"You okay?" Joe asked.

Grinding his teeth, Machuba shook his head.

"Machuba." Sidon said.

The two exchanged eye contact. Sidon nodded.

"His curse is warning us." Sidon stated before announcing to the caravan, "SHAN SHOHU!"

As Joe lit the pipe and Nogard held it to Machuba's lips, the chidra explained.

"Dis happens sometimes. Da curse be weird, Civ, it'll flare up randomly like dis."

"Not randomly." Sidon corrected, "There is always a reason."

Nogard waited until Sidon looked away then locked eyes with Joe just so that he could roll his. The rest of the journey was quiet, the troop on high alert. Nogard kept Machuba smoking until they got to castle. Even still, by then, Machuba was stretched out, fighting back fits of convulsions. Nogard, Zalfron, and Joe were squeezed up against the opposite side of the cage, the skinned ones doing their best to stay out of the scaled one's way as he tended to the fishfolk. Once they made it to the polyp bridge, in sight of the eel-lit castle, the fishfolk amongst them began to grumble in the Aquarian Dialect. Initially, the boys had no idea why until Zalfron spotted the cause of their discontent. At the top of the stairs, a white robed guard lay fast asleep beneath the doors which lay wide open.

"JANWE!" Yangu roared.

The scrawny fishfolk leapt to his feet, his diamond face pale.

"Dojo yo ne eechi shamien?" Sidon cried, flying up the stairs after Yangu.

"Boo...boo ty chang..." Janwe shuddered as the nude warriors charged him.

Yangu got to Janwe first and, grabbing him by his collar, he lifted his little brother off his feet and slammed him against the wall. Reaching the fishfolk's side, Sidon put a hand on Yangu's shoulder to keep the man from striking his kin. The rest of the warriors came to a halt, their glares sparing Janwe no mercy. A wave of collective sighs shamed him.

Looking over his brother's shoulder, Janwe's face lit up, "Ma-" that light died as he saw Machuba's state, "-chuba Juji..."

Patting Yangu on the arm, the fishfolk lowered the incompetent guard but did not release him. Sidon asked, "Were the doors open when you fell asleep?"

Janwe fell pale again. Realizing now the extent of his failure. Yangu released his brother so that he could pull his trident and shield off his back. Those that were not carrying the cage or the bodies of the fallen, followed Yangu inside. Sidon turned away from the boy, and looked to Joe, Zalfron, Nogard and Machuba. He stepped aside and beckoned for the cage-bearers to march on but stop in front of the door. There, they put the cage down, drew their weapons, and escorted those carrying the dead into the Stronghold. Sidon and Janwe stayed on the porch with

the cage. Sidon pulled his trident and shield off his back, his eyes boring through the entrance, his chest rising and falling slow and steady.

Quietly, Janwe asked, "Who'd we lose?"

Sidon's voice was cold, "Wushiangu, Feng, Zoushia."

"Feng..." Janwe looked down at his feet. After a moment, he rolled his shoulders and brought his chest back up. He looked to the cage, saying, "Not in vain. Our time is coming. One day soon, it is inevitable."

"No." Machuba barked.

Having not spoken since his curse started acting up, this surprised everyone. Even Sidon jumped a bit.

"Don't let it get to you." Nogard said, wiggling the pipe at him, "Take anudder hit. Keep ya head up, Civ."

Trembling, Machuba pushed the piece away and forced himself into an upright position. Speaking in forceful grunts, he continued, "It has...never been...more...uninevitable."

Janwe said nothing, only frowning in response.

Sidon frowned too, "Never? Machuba Juji. The present is bleak, but no bleaker than the past."

"And dinking like dat gone make sure it be uninevitable." Nogard interjected.

Machuba shook his head. With his tremors, the simple head shake became quite violent. So much so that Nogard scooted in to help him still. Fighting back the shakes and the frustration that slipped in all the cracks of his consciousness not preoccupied with physical torment, Machuba began to yell. Leaning over himself, he yelled. Nogard kept his hands on Machuba's shoulders. After a moment, the fishfolk got control of himself again.

"Thank you, Nogard." He whispered. He licked his eyes. Then he looked back to Sidon, "No matter how...how dark the past was...the darkness now..." It was still hard for him to speak, he had to spit out words in bursts, "...is a darkness such that... We have no numbers...no support."

"The people support us, they're just scared." Janwe argued, his brow furled.

"Support?" Machuba attempted a scoff, it came out more as a whimper, "Like children...to a dying parent...like a master...to a dying dog..."

"You're wrong." Sidon stated, "You're ignoring the messages Barro's planted in the tides."

"And the people..." Machuba retorted, "...are ignoring us."

"Dey were wid you in Sanction!" Nogard said, "Until..."

"Until it mattered." Machuba agreed, "They're scared to fight."

"Maybe violence isn't the answer." Joe interjected, "Maybe y'all could do it like Brahim Phinn?"

Machuba turned slowly to face Joe. His body was still for the first time in hours, only his lips continued to quake. As blood rushed to his face, Joe felt as if he could actually feel the heat of the fishfolk's glare. Joe's conscious began to consider pre-emptive defensive action, the flames in his chest rumbled, but he resisted even as he wondered, *Is he about to attack me?*

Before anything else could happen between them, Zalfron jumped in on Joe's behalf.

"Joe's from another world." Zalfron explained, "Hae ain't so used to vahleence lahk wae--"

"Violence...is the way...of nature." Machuba said through gritted teeth.

"Nature." Joe said, "Not civilization."

"You're a fool...to think...there's a difference!" Machuba crowed.

The fishfolk's frustration was contagious, Joe was beginning to get a little heated, "You're a fool to act like there isn't!"

"I dink y'all forgot what we were talkin about." Nogard cut in, backing Machuba as he said to Joe, "Besides, Joe, if da Aquarians ain't brave enough to fight wid da Soldiers, den dey sure as hell ain't brave enough to lie down and die wid em."

"Sorry." Joe apologized to Machuba, "I didn't mean to offend you..."

Machuba licked his eyes. He waited for a wave of shakes to apss, then asked, "Who are you?"

"Joe." Joe said, "I'm from Earth."

"Where is Earth?" Machuba asked.

"Under the Sun."

Machuba raised his head, the way that eyelid less folk express suspicion without the ability to squint, he mumbled, "A pyromancer from the Sun..."

"He and da elf, Zalfron Sentry-"

"Sentry..." Machuba muttered.

"Be on der way to God's Island," Nogard explained, "dey took a detour to help me save you."

"God's Island..." Machuba lowered his chin and looked at Joe straight.

"Met em on da road to Portville," Nogard said, "a few days ago."

"Wae were headin in the same dahrection," Zalfron shrugged, "wound up rahdin together, then wae ran into trouble."

"The Black Crown Pact is after me." Joe said.

"Why would that be?" Machuba asked.

"Ta sho gay Sun Child." Sidon said.

Before Machuba could investigate further, Yangu reappeared in the doorway.

"The intruder was but a friend," he said before turning to Janwe to mutter, "Ne zoy-how she-she Barro way su eega."

The Soldiers lifted the cage once more and followed Yangu, Sidon, and Janwe inside the castle.

"Iesop Shell." Yangu elaborated.

"Ah!" Sidon chuckled, "Or should I say, 'Ooooh!'"

"Explains da curse." Nogard noted, turning to Joe, "Iesop always makes it act up."

Janwe turned to explain further to the incarcerated guests.

"Iesop Shell is the oldest member of the Soldiers of Shelmick. He was on a journey through the southern end of the Wobniar Wood and around the southern leg of Iceload-"

"Azunu." Zalfron interjected.

"-seeking out the mermen that fled during the Second Aquarian War on Mancy."

"Y'all speak wid dem?" Nogard asked, "I dought dey was on bad terms wid y'all, seein as dey ditched y'all..."

"We no longer have a position hospitable to the maintenance of our pride." Sidon admitted, "As young Machuba suggested, we may soon be forced to abandon the Stronghold."

They went through the building and into the courtyard where they found the entire community gathered around a single individual that Joe correctly assumed to be Iesop Shell. The old fishfolk was sitting atop a giant sea turtle. Well, it looked like a sea turtle but it had the feet of a tortoise rather than the fins of a sea turtle (it was of a species known as ampherrapins). The reptile was as ancient as its rider, its leathery wrinkled neck shook as it struggled to hold its head

up. It's eyelids drooped making Joe wonder if it could even see as it looked here and there. The fishfolk atop had a similar expression, his eyes slightly squinty – relative to his wide-eyed comrades – from sagging skin. The wrinkled little blue man held an ornate umbrella over his shoulders and wore only short shorts and an unbuttoned coat that hung loosely about him. Joe couldn't help but wonder if the old man had inspired Nogard's eccentric fashion choices.

In Iesop's presence, Machuba's curse was on the frits. Fortunately, he had quite a bit of gogo clouding his mind but still he had to focus almost all of his energy to maintaining some sense of consciousness and muscle control as the magma within him seared and seared. Machuba was as used to it as he could be, having shared the same roof with the ancient fishfolk on numerous occasions, but that didn't make the pain any less real, it only meant that Iesop and Machuba had such a relationship that Iesop no longer needed to apologize for the agony he put the boy through and the boy no longer needed to assure Iesop that the pain was worth it to spend time in the presence of an old friend.

"Oooh!" Iesop said, "We have visitors?"

Sidon nodded, "Nogard brought them with him and we brought them with us to liberate Machuba. I assume you heard about Sanction?"

Iesop bowed his head in confirmation. Then he asked, "But they're all in the cage?"

"The Suikii let us in," Joe said, swinging idly, "but she won't let us out."

"The Suikii?" For a moment Iesop's voice lowered. His brow flexed, pulling the wrinkled flesh back from his black eyes so as to get a clearer view of those before him, then he was back to squinting with his head tilted towards the heavens, "What are your names?"

"Joe."

"Zalfron Sentry."

"Oooh! What names!"

Sidon turned the attention back on Iesop, "Tell us of your travels!"

"Oooh! There are many mermen – many more than those that recently fled!"

"Along the Frosted Coast?" Sidon asked.

"Oooh! A few selims south – yes, indeed!" Iesop nodded, "Thousands. Beneath a dome. They call it Sitnalta. I brought with me a visitor of my own, the Savior of Sitnalta."

On cue, color began to fizzle to life between the turtle and the cage. The ever-present blue haze of the Dome's atmosphere darkened to navy and took on the texture of cloth as a vest materialized. The vest was studded with golden buttons and embroidery that followed the path of the buttons from the belt to the sternum. A billowing maroon jacket hung over one shoulder. The flashier red inside of the collar was flipped out and pleated with orange-yellow bands. Though her right arm was in the sleeve of the jacket, her shoulder poked out, showing off the three clovers clustered beneath the anchor on her shoulder mark. Below that sleeved arm was both a holster and a sheath, cradling an extraordinarily short but fat firearm and a long, sea-dragon hilted broadsword. There was a third appendage as well, another sheath, though this one was empty. She held the weapon – a weapon that excited Zalfron and Nogard as much as her presence.

The Staff looked to be made of gray rock, like the very stone that walled the Submarine Canyon, and held together by ribbons of ivory that looked to have the texture of rough bone. At the top of the Staff, the stone shaft broke up. The crumbs hovered around the head, wrapping around a bright blue gem that levitated directly above the head of the rod. An ephemeral gray-blue fire engulfed the entire weapon, like the flames of a banshee, but they seemed not to bother the woman as she held it. The only reason the boys knew it was the Staff's flame and not her

own was because, as she slid it into a makeshift sheath beside her sword, the flames that had been engulfing her disappeared, dancing only around the Staff.

“Da Staff of Seas...” Nogard murmured as Zalfron murmured, “Zaria Ein...”

A smirk cut across her face, severing the thick red scar that stretched from her right cheek to her left eyebrow, then she bowed low before them.

“I figured you for dead.” She stated, speaking to Zalfron, “The attack on your family’s estate...” she shook her head, “my sympathies.”

Zalfron bowed his head.

“I figured *you* for dead, Civ!” Nogard exclaimed, “But here you are – and wid da Staff of Seas?!”

“Sorry,” Joe interjected, “but who are you?”

The earth elf cocked her head to the side, definitely not taking Joe’s question seriously but also unsure of how to take it.

“Shae’s the Strategay Admiral!” Zalfron exclaimed, “The Strategay Admiral of the Imperaial Navay!”

“*The* Admiral,” Nogard corrected, “after da passin of Zalfron’s pa.”

“I was.” Zaria said, sighing, “What’s left of the Navy?”

“Still pirate killing.” Nogard said, “War’s mostly on land now though.”

“What’re you doin down hare?!” Zalfron asked.

Again, she cocked her head to the side with a good hearted, “Huh” sort of smirk.

“Aeven in da dungeon of Icelore, you musta heard of da Grand Duel?” Zalfron nodded. Joe shook his head. Nogard raised his hand, showing Joe his palm and saying, “Dat’s a story for anudder day. Long story short,” he looked back over at the Admiral, “da Iahtro Storm attacked da Navy to make da Samurai turn demselves in cause he wanted to speak wid dem.”

“He?” Joe was now even more confused, if possible, “Is the Storm an actual he?”

Now Nogard’s palm clasped his own face.

“*That’s* another long story.” Zalfron snickered.

“Who is this guy?” Zaria laughed, “Delian?”

“Close.” Sidon nodded, “Earthen.”

Zaria choked on her laugh as a new chuckle canceled the first out. After coughing through the mix up, she said, “An Earthen pyromancer, the son of Onotna and sister of Tabuh Sentry, and,” She pointed at Machuba, “I’m guessing the boy writhin in pain’s a Gill.”

“Machuba Juji.” Sidon hadn’t stopped nodding.

Her pointing finger moved to Nogard, “He wouldn’t happen to be an Otubak, would he?”

“Oooh!” Iesop chimed, “One of Dresdan’s sons.”

Zaria put her hands on her hips, reveling in the revelation.

Nogard interrupted, “So Iahtro destroyed your ship, but spared you?”

“Yup.” Zaria said, “Apparently, he’s known about Sitnalta for centuries.”

“*Centuries?*” Sidon pressed.

“Oooh!” Iesop nodded.

“How’ve we never heard of them?!” Sidon exclaimed.

“The Leviken, oooh!” Iesop explained, “A terrible beast, it plagued them since their Dome was first built.”

“But plagues them no more!” Zaria boasted, patting the Staff at her waist, “Liberated Sitnalta and took the Staff as my trophy.”

“The Staff of Seas was long ago swallowed by the Leviken.” Iesop explained, “The Sitnaltan’s dug it out of the beast for Zaria after she put an end to the monster.”

“Gross, Civ.” Nogard stated.

Zaria concurred, “Yea, I felt bad about that...even though I did save them.” She shrugged, “Thus, I’m here now. Doing them all one last favor.” She paused, turning to Sidon before saying, “They sent me to take you.” She looked around at the other fishfolk, “Y’all, I suppose.”

“Take us.” Sidon frowned, he looked to Iesop.

“Oooh! I have business above the surface to attend to. I got her here, now she will get you there, oooh!”

“All of us?” Sidon continued.

Zaria and Iesop looked at each other, nodded, then looked back at Sidon. Before the merman could ask again, Machuba interjected.

“You should go.” He said, trembling, “Aquaria is lost...North and South...Mirkweed...Mirkweed is Lacitar’s...”

Sidon began, “Machuba, Lacitar-”

“The people,” Machuba continued, “are Lacitar’s.”

“Machuba, we must-”

“We are doing...” Machuba ignored him, “nothing here...”

“Gotta say,” Zaria interjected, “the Gill has a point. You ain’t really got the numbers to go leading a revolution. Now, if you get the Sitnaltans on board,” she shrugged, “they sure talk up Mirkweed, I bet they’d love to actually see their ancestor’s homeland.”

Sidon frowned, “This is an issue not to be decided in one night.”

“Hate to say it but, this really isn’t an opportunity that’s going to stick around much longer than one night.” Zaria offered a sympathetic grimace, “I got pirates to kill.”

Joe wasn’t paying attention. He had far too little of a clue to participate in the conversation and hardly enough to really follow what was being discussed. Instead, Joe faced a thought that had been lingering on the fringes of his mind all night. As he swung the Suikii this way and that, he let his memory bring back a scene from the battle.

An armored glove gripped his blade, jolting Joe. He looked into the eyes of the man. The fishfolk looked young, no older than he – in fact, probably younger, and though his lidless eyes were perpetually wide, Joe could see fear in his adversary’s expression. Wild animalistic fear. And Joe thought, this man is going to kill me. It was simple as that. Joe could lay down and die or fight the man off. The kid had a life, a family, and friends – he was a person – but that didn’t matter because, at that moment, it was kill or be killed. So he shot a bolt of flame into the man’s face and the fishfolk fell to the ground screaming in pain.

Joe felt queasy. Not bad enough to spew as he had the night after the fight in the Barren’s Mullet, but bad enough to make him wish he’d throw up. It was like each little skirmish he’d been through had never fully ended, they just kept playing – over and over – in the back of his mind. When there was downtime, if he closed his eyes the faces of those he’d fought – those he had hurt and those he had killed – came back, plastered to the inside of his eyelids. *How many have I killed?* He wondered. He knew he killed the elf back at the tavern but how many guards lay dead at the bottom of the sea because of him? *Three? Six?* A good chunk of wall had fallen – the number had to be higher. *A dozen?* Even that seemed like a low estimate. Joe shuddered but was saved from his thoughts by Zalfron.

“Guys!”

Zalfron pointed to Joe's side of the cage. The Suikii had just torn open a portal. The hole revealed a small wooden room filled with shipping crates, chests, and large kegs.

"Where is that?" Zalfron asked.

"Could be anywhere," Joe shrugged.

"It be dry, Civ, dats for sure." Nogard said.

"Do we go?" Joe asked.

"Oooh! If the Suikii offers you a door," Iesop cried, "then you take it!"

Joe turned to Sidon.

"We will not be able to assist you if wherever you go leads you into trouble, but Shell is right. You cannot afford to question the Suikii." Sidon said. He turned to one of the women nearby and ordered her to, "Duhdow gay bow."

As the woman ran off, Nogard asked Machuba, "You coming?"

At first, the fishfolk didn't respond. He stared vaguely at Iesop. Finally he turned to Sidon and spoke, "Will you go...go with Zaria?"

Sidon stared hard back, "We will decide tomorrow." He turned to Zaria, "Okay?"

Zaria nodded.

Machuba sighed, "I've never left Aquaria."

There was quiet for a minute. Not a soul budged, not even a gill flared. The sadness of the group could be felt in the atmosphere, as if the wetness was the physical manifestation of their mood.

"Will we see you again?" Janwe asked.

"Of course..." Machuba said, "Wo noyan, I promise."

"Don't miss the revolution." Yangu said.

Machuba smiled, "I'll be there, brother."

"Barro be with you." Sidon stated.

Machuba bowed his head, "And with you. All of you."

Then, without another word, he rushed through the window. The three left in the cage exchanged glances. Then they thanked Sidon and the Soldiers, said good-bye to Iesop and Zaria and then followed their newfound fishfolk friend. Joe was the last to go and before he did, the fishfolk woman Sidon had sent off returned. She slid a leather pack through the bars to Joe. Joe looked to Sidon, puzzled.

"Your clothes, Sun Child," Joe flinched at the nickname, Sidon continued, "and a fishippo scale medallion, should you ever need to find us."

"How will it work?" Joe asked.

"Just as our tattoos, only it is linked to me. Now go, protect our prince," Sidon smiled, "and protect yourself. Good luck, Sheenshong Joe."

"Go kickass, little Sun Child." Zaria smirked.

"Oooh!" Iesop proclaimed for whatever reason.

"Thank you," Joe had one foot through the portal when he paused, looked back, and promised, "Sidon, after we find the Samurai, we will come back and help you," He turned and gestured to the rest of those clustered around Iesop and the cage, "all of you."

Sidon nodded, "Thank you, brother."

Then Joe stepped through.

- - -

Pain greeted him when consciousness returned – it felt as if scorching talons were clawing at him both inside and out. He tried to move. Agony was the only product of this attempt. Surrendering to lay where he'd awoken, he looked around. The ocean was dark, everything was colored in bleak shades of black. Craning his head, he found himself staring at a strange object. It was long and cylindrical ending in five limp tentacles. The tentacles were small and creased, bending in two spots all except for the fifth which had only one real bend.

That's an arm. If he hadn't been a fishfolk, his eyes would've widened. *That's an arm!*

Recognition was a cold grip on his gut and when that icy hold unclenched, chills washed over him as he remembered what had happened. They'd been transporting a man who claimed to be Sidon when the mermen terrorists struck. Fire. Seabears. Avalanche. His team was torn apart as were the very walls of the rift around them. They'd tried to scale the debris and get out from under the falling stone, they knew reinforcements would soon arrive on the other side, they'd even routed the mermen only to be thrown back by a squad of land lubbers. They had been dressed like mermen – probably servants of Creaton, probably all mancercs, after all he knew one was. He could clearly remember every detail about the pyromancer and his peculiar black sword. He remembered the young human's eyes – the last thing he saw before a blast of sapphire flame pounded down upon him, engulfing him, feeding on his flesh until it was finally snuffed out by the falling canyon walls.

He looked back at the arm beside him. The arm's owner was smashed beneath the massive pile of stone. So was he. His leg was pinned. Laying his head back down, he stared at the heavens and cursed. On the bright side, thanks to the bolder on his kneecap, he felt no pain beyond it whereas the rest of his body felt as if the pyromancer's fire had only just gone out.

A noise caught his attention. It sounded like shuffling feet. Once more he craned his neck, trying to see who moved behind him. What he saw shriveled his heart like a raisin. The man was dressed in black robes that dragged about his feet. A hood was thrown over his head, hiding most of his face in its shadow, only the portion of his face from the nose down was visible in the dark atmosphere of the submarine night.

The man's face was nothing more than a skull – and it was not a fishfolk skull. The wounded soldier watched as the stranger approached a slain comrade. The skeleton man knelt down and pulled back his sleeves then submerged his right hand in the dead man's chest. Pulling his hand from the man's chest, the skeleton now held a key. The undead stood up, pocketed the key, and moved on to the next.

Is this a banshee – some other kind of ghost? What is this?

The man was now heading his way.

He offered up a silent prayer to Barro.

The footsteps stopped beside him. The skeleton's bones creaked as the man knelt down, coming back in view of the fishfolk. Reaching out, the undead slid his hand within the soldier's chest and withdrew a key. The soldier gasped.

The skeleton's jaw dropped.

As swiftly as he had removed it, the skeleton shoved his hand back in the fishfolk's chest and yanked it back out again, keyless. Still the fishfolk could only gape.

"I apologize."

Despite not being a fishfolk, he used the Aquarian Dialect as if he'd been raised on the sea floor. The skeleton spoke slowly. Each word was pronounced with such little emphasis that it was as if the man were reading a script for a role he had no interest in playing. The only frightful

thing about the skeletal figure was his skeletal figure. So as the initial shock left the fishfolk, he felt the courage to pop the question he was dying to ask.

“What – Who are you?”

The skeleton stood and began to walk away.

“Hey wait! I’m stuck! Help!”

The skeleton paused.

“What’s your name?” The skeleton asked.

“Aqa Eniram,” the fishfolk said.

“Aqa? Well I will see you in a couple years.” The skeleton responded.

“Who are you?” Aqa asked.

The undead didn’t respond. His back was still turned though he had come to a stop.

“Are you Hormah’s aid?”

“That depends on who you believe Hormah to be.” the skeleton said.

“Are you Death?”

“That is a question no living should ask.” Death stated, turning to face Aqa.

Aqa replied, “No living should ever see Death, either.”

“Sometimes Death makes mistakes,” Death said, once more walking away, “and sometimes fate changes but forgets to tell me.”

“If you leave me, I *will* die here!” Aqa yelled after him.

“No...” Death replied, “no, you won’t.”

And that was the last Aqa Eniram saw of Death but that would not be the last Death saw of Aqa Eniram.

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“You’re heading to Icelore for a mapwork?” The man leaned back, both hands on his oversized belt buckle, and released a boisterous laugh, “You don’t need to go to Icelore for a mapwork! Check any vessel bearing a skull and cross bones and you’ll find yourself a mapwork!”

John Pigeon’s tongue had no respect for rank nor did his brain seem to have any sensibility when it came to reading a crowd. Some attributed his behavior to his career path while others blamed it on the fact that he was constantly oiling himself with aquannabis. The man was so used to the symptoms of hallucination and bamboozlement that he was able to work through it and maintain some level of competency. That said, his inebriation was obvious. Pigeon couldn’t stand still. His feet would be planted but his body was constantly gyrating and squirming, as if he was trapped in that moment when you first begin to lose your balance. Whether or not the screw had been loose before the great binge began, few could say, but that screw was now so warped that it’d sooner fall out than be tightened back into place. With a complete lack of social awareness, he was quite the acquired taste...and like the drugs he loved, once that taste was acquired, a great deal of tolerance had to be built up to not feel something like a hangover after a run in with Johnny, the Captain of the Sea Lords.

Not only was he unaware that Hermes liked to be feared, he was completely unafraid. Hermes was fully armored, aside from his mutilated skull, and engulfed in green flames. He was armed with both a sword and a legendary staff, the Soul Staff, the very tool that had defeated the Empire’s heroes. Hermes stood nearly three feet taller than the buccaneer. Still, Johnny was utterly undaunted. If anything, he was more flustered by Catherine Meriam’s presence.

“You.” After each word he poked the banshee’s chest plate, an act that put his life at serious risk as extended exposure to even just a banshee’s flames could prove fatal, “Silly. Badger.”

Hermes tolerated him. The Sea Lords were key to the Order’s operations and had been since Johnny had become Captain. If he were to be replaced, then there was no guarantee his successor would continue to serve Shalis. Johnny’s loyalty was one reason why she tolerated him to begin with.

“Follow me,” Johnny strode past the two, out of his office and zig-zagged down the hall as he told his fishfolk guards, “we’re going to the mapwork room.”

When they’d boarded the *Monoceros*, Johnny had been sound asleep. He had a bad habit of staying awake for a couple days then sleeping for a couple more only to rise and repeat the same cycle. Thus, it wasn’t until the following morning that Hermes and Catty actually got to speak with Captain Pigeon.

Before the Sea Lords found John Pigeon he’d been a loner. An independent aquannabis grower and smuggler. He’d sneak below the surface of the Aquarian Ocean, using his elemental magic to provide oxygen, and grow aquannabis in undomed-sections of the Wobniar Woods. As he perfected his product and his trade, he made enemies on land and in the sea. One of these enemies was Captain Ching Shih of the Sea Lords. Numerous times he’d been captured and numerous times he’d been set free thanks solely to his charm – despite his ability to annoy 99% of people beneath Solaris, Ching happened to be his outlier. Ching could never bring herself to kill the man, instead, she fell in love with him. (To defend her affection, she once was quoted to have said that though Johnny never seemed quite able to walk in a straight line, he was “more than able in battle and bed.”) When Theseus Icespear and Zaria Ein destroyed the fleet, Ching Shih died and in her will she passed the mantle on to John Pigeon. At first, the Sea Lords had no intentions of fulfilling this final wish but, once their partners in the drug trade turned on them, they had no choice but to seek out the flailing fiend. That was how Johnny ascended to the helm of the *Monoceros*, becoming not only one of the only non-fishfolk crew members but the actual captain of the Lords himself.

“You may have maps, Johnny, but Icelore has something you don’t have. Have you heard of a globework?” Hermes prodded.

“Ah yes, a portable-mapwork,” the pirate scoffed, “they act as though that’s some kind of novel idea. Let me ask you this, Hermes, what do you think the *Monoceros* is? Stationary? So what, it’s a good size or two bigger but why would anyone need a mapwork they can fit in their pocket anyways? Especially you. Just,” he held out his arm as if he was pointing a sword at someone, “BOOM! Walk around the world twice if you need to. Patience is a virtue, Hermes, you’re a Doom Warrior now, you’ve-”

“A banshee.” Hermes corrected.

“Oh right...” Johnny chuckled, “Listen, if you don’t want to use my mapwork you don’t have to.”

“We’d love to use your mapwork.” Catty assured him.

Johnny froze in his tracks, looked back at Catty, and grinned. Then he looked down at his feet and shuffled them a bit before regaining the courage to meet her eyes again.

“Any time,” he said with a wink, “any time.”

The map room was one of the least furnished Hermes and Catty had ever seen. Hermes caught himself about to comment on its poor organization but remembered how his prior comment had hurt Johnny’s pride and refrained. Mapworks took a lot of machinery but in

Solaris' modern day and age, they were seen as necessary on most vessels. They normally sat on top of a desk while the machinery reached up into the desk from a room below where the true magic-powered mechanization hid. The map room of the *Monoceros* was different only because the mapwork was added to the ship long after the vessel was created. Assembly lines of gears covered the walls. Long chains of interlocking contraptions created a narrow hallway to where the actual map of the mapwork lay. It was like walking in the top of a clock tower.

"I can see from your skeletal expression," Johnny sighed, "you're disappointed."

"A mapwork is a mapwork, Captain." Hermes replied.

Johnny approached the map. The cartogram was a giant rectangle of wood plastered against the wall. Each valley, each mountain, each river was carved with the finest of details. The map was truly a geographical masterpiece. On the floor, before the map, a cylindrical tube closed by a small metal lid protruded from the floorboards held by a curved mechanical arm. At the end of the metallic extremity, three fingers pinched the base of the foot-long, four-inch-wide vial. The fingertips of these phalanges were made of enertombs. Johnny tapped the lid and the metal pulled apart like the jaws of a shark.

Catty opened the crate she carried. Hermes plucked one of the shards from Nogard's sword out of the box and dropped it into the tube. The shard fell to the bottom of the vial and the trio of orbs that clasped the cylinder began to buzz. The wooden oceans, the wooden forests, and the wooden clouds of precipitation carved across the map on the wall suddenly began to move. Tiny little brown tides flowed in and out, minuscule carved trees blew in the breeze, and microscopic wood shavings began to rise and fall like rain drops on the wooden representation of Solaris.

The three stared at the map for a minute in complete silence. Finally, Johnny spoke up.

"I don't see them." He said, "You sure that belongs to someone?"

"Positive," the lack of results frustrated Hermes and Johnny's sure-minded behavior wasn't helping, "maybe your map is broken?"

"Maybe the people you are looking for are dead." Johnny suggested.

Hermes glared at Johnny. Johnny looked back, oblivious as to why his mapwork wasn't working as he was to the growing contempt in Hermes' posture.

Catty rolled her eyes as she continued to scan the map. She said, "You might want to look again."

Hermes and Johnny looked back. Their eyes grew wide. They could see the tiny wooden figurine of the *Monoceros* sailing through the Dragon Gulf, south of Middakle, Iceload. It had been there before but now there was something new. The once mahogany brown boat was now ruby red.

"I thought you were the ones looking for someone," Johnny laughed, "looks like they came to you."

"How the-" Hermes began.

"The Suikii." Catty stated.

CRABOOM! The *Monoceros* shifted violently, nearly throwing the three into the web of machinery on one side of the room before rocking back to jerk them towards the other side.

"What the hell!" Johnny cried.

After catching their balance, Catty and Hermes exchanged glances.

"What was that?!" Johnny demanded.

But neither answered. They were busy trying to find out themselves. Hermes began to scan the floorboards of the ship. His eyes saw in the same manner as the eyes of the living do

when within the spell of Total Darkness, a sort of energy vision. One sweeping look across the ship revealed the position of every soul on board. But something else troubled Hermes: there were two bright shining clusters that demanded his attention, clusters that had not been there before. He'd been surprised on the *Sea Cuber* when he saw Joe. Though Hermes had seen many that emitted a brighter light than most, he'd been appalled by the ferociousness of Joe's glow. There was a certain uniqueness to it. It seemed he'd never seen a purer shine. He had thought one thing was for sure, he'd forever recognize it, but this was not the case. There were two similarly brilliant glowing figures onboard the *Monoceros*. One in both of the groups of new arrivals.

Catty, with her crow eye, saw it too.

"I'll take those by the front of the ship." She said.

Hermes nodded, "And I'll get the ones at the back."

As Hermes and Catty headed out the room, Johnny yelled after them, "Reinforcements will be on their way!"

- - -

As soon as all four were in the room, the portal closed behind them. The apartment was lit only by the ocean-colored fire in Joe's chest. They found themselves crammed between barrels and boxes that were stacked so high the walls of the small chamber were barely visible. When Joe arrived, Zalfron was already climbing over a stack of wooden containers. Once he reached the top, he alerted the others, "Ah found uh door!" then scurried over the crate-tower and out of view.

"Hold on one second!" Joe demanded.

Machuba and Nogard turned to listen but Joe could still hear Zalfron clambering through the cartons and casks.

"There's uh door!" Zalfron exclaimed.

"You too Zalfron!" Joe waited until the room was silent then continued, "Are you guys with me?"

"Selu, yea!" Came Zalfron's cry.

"Huh?" Nogard asked.

Joe elaborated, "I mean, are y'all coming with Zalfron and I to meet the Emperor?"

Machuba looked back to Nogard.

Nogard shrugged, "Of course, Civ, what'd you think we were doing?"

Now Joe shrugged, "I don't know." Looking at Machuba, "Guess I didn't really know if you were just going through the portal to get out of the cage or if you're coming with us?"

"I don't know for how long," Machuba admitted before shrugging with the rest of them, "but I will go at least as far as God's Island."

Joe stuck out his hand, "Glad to have you on board!"

Machuba shook it.

"Zalfron?" Nogard called.

"Yea, man?" The elf hollered from the other side of the cargo.

"Check out dat door-"

CRABOOM!

The floor tilted beneath them. The kegs and crates slid to one side of the room – threatening to sandwich Joe, Nogard, and Machuba. They scrambled up onto the top of the stacks as the sliding receptacles collided, reuniting with Zalfron. Then the room shifted the other way,

then back again, before rocking reduced to a level that didn't drastically shift the contents of the room. As things stabilized, the four – wedged together in awkward positions between the roof and the columns of cartons – exchanged suddenly enlightened expressions.

Joe gave their realization words, "We're on a boat!"

"And apparently we just hit somedin." Nogard added.

"Or wae're under attack." Zalfron suggested.

Machuba licked his right eye, adding fuel to the fire Zalfron started, saying, "Pirates."

"Whatever it is," Joe said, "we should get out of here."

No one was arguing with that. Zalfron scurried down from his vantage point back to the door he'd found. As soon as he opened it he was launched back into a stack of boxes and barrels which splintered upon impact, releasing gallons of alcohol and cannon balls. As Zalfron tumbled backwards, drenched in ale, the stacks of boxes that had leaned on their brother for support now topple over, spilling Joe, Nogard, and Machuba onto the floor of the now beer-soaked storage room.

A woman stood in the doorway. She was dressed in a black leather jump suit, the same color as the dull stone that sat in place of her right eye, the same color as the hilts of her two Fou-style blades sticking out from their sheathes on the small of her back. Joe's eyes grew wide. He recognized her instantly: *the shadowmancer that fought Grandfather at the Barren's Mullet.*

We're done for! Was his first thought, but his second thought gave him hope as he remembered, She *ran from* me. He hopped to his feet, hands extended out towards her in a universal gesture of, "Hold on, now!" Still, he put it into words.

"Hold on," Joe said, "I'll give you one chance-"

Catty launched a ball of shadows into his chest, throwing him back to the ground. Joe's heart thumped like the foot of a flee covered dog as he struggled to his feet, his robes steaming from where the shadows struck him. Zalfron was already back on his feet, bounding over the debris to charge Catty with balled fists. The shadowmancer shot another searing orb of shadows and, after the elf dodged it, spun to deliver a round house kick to Zalfron's jaw. The elf hit the floor once again. But she had little time to rest, Nogard with Shelmick's Shield and Machuba with Shelmick's Sword came right after Zalfron. Nogard raised his shield and dropped his shoulders. Machuba reared back and swung. Catty drew a sword, the blade materializing as she did so, and spun to parry Machuba's blade then continued to spin into a jump where she twisted so as to plant her feet on Nogard's shield and spring off it. Trampolining off Shelmick's Shield, she soared towards Joe as he charged back in, catching him in the gut.

Joe fell to the ground gasping for breath. Nogard and Machuba were still on their feet, nervously creeping towards Catty. She turned to them and pointed at the kneeling pyromancer behind her with her sword.

"This is the boy who will bring back the Samurai?" She scoffed.

Nogard and Machuba said nothing.

"Do you know how powerful my Lord is?"

"Ah'd kick Craeton's ass!" Nogard and Machuba turned. Zalfron was standing between them, chest puffed out like a rooster prepping for the morning tune. "And Joe would too!"

Zalfron lunged, Catty ducked and twirled, sweeping Zalfron off his feet with one extended leg. Before he hit the ground she grabbed the elf by his greasy lochs and brought her knee swiftly to his forehead then let him fall onto a crate.

She hissed, "Am I fighting children?"

As soon as she finished speaking a blast of blue fire hit her square in the back, projecting her forwards, past Nogard and Machuba, and into one of the last standing stacks. Joe was back on his feet, cracking his knuckles. Zalfron staggered upright, smearing the blood that dribbled from a gash on his forehead. Nogard and Machuba turned to face Catty.

“Four on one,” Joe said, praying silently that his voice sounded intimidating, “last chance to run.”

“Back up has arrived!”

A human stood in the doorway. He was dressed precisely how one would assume a pirate to dress: a proud tricorne hat, a curled mustache, a baggy undershirt, a faded vest, a gaudy belt, a pair of loose trousers, sea salt-stained boots. The only thing the man lacked was a hook, a patch, peg-leg, and a parrot. In the hallway behind him stood at least a dozen Sea Lords. Catty pulled herself out of the shattered boxes, glanced back at the pirate and his loyal fishfolk, then looked back to Joe with a smile.

“Sixteen to four,” she smirked, “and you’ve got nowhere to run.”

- - -

Nowhar to run. He looked left. He looked right. North and south too. *Oh Lard, nowhar to run.* He knew the answer before he even asked. Deep down, Boldarian had known the answer before they even embarked. Acamus was an Icespear. He’d undoubtedly inherited the unassailed (and arguably irrational) courage of his ancestors. Though it made no sense for someone – even if they possessed a magic spear – to think they could hijack a ship all by their lonesome, it made equally little sense for Bold to have assumed Acamus had planned it any other way. Still, he clung to the hope that Acamus wasn’t crazy and so he asked:

“Whar’s the back up?”

The four, Acamus, Ekaf, Zach, and Bold were holding onto the sides of a tiny dingy, propelled by a humming enertomb engine. By the time Bold posed his query, they were already smashing through the waves alongside the great Sea Lord vessel. The waves weren’t too awfully drastic, though for their little boat they were quite enough. They caught a little bit of air each time they reached a crest then dropped back into the trough. Spray from these waves went unnoticed as the salty assault of the *Monoceros*’ wake had already thoroughly drenched them.

“Back up?” Acamus laughed.

“Right?” Ekaf concurred, “Who needs back up?”

Zach chimed in on Bold’s behalf, “You must have insiders? You were prepared to venture here alone before you stumbled across us.”

“I’m an Icespear, my friends,” Acamus assured the dwarf and spirit with a wink, “my father took down the entire fleet of Sea Lords single handedly!”

“Oi thank yar fargettin bout the Admaral.” Bold stated.

“You’ll see, my friends.” Acamus continued.

“Not to mention Paud Gill.” Zachias added.

“We’ve got the Lord on our sides.” Acamus assured them.

“If our Lard’s fehvar did us anay good.” Bold muttered.

“We may share the same Lord,” Acamus was undaunted, “but our faiths are very different.”

“And besides,” Ekaf shrugged, “we’re here now anyways. Little too late to turn around.”

Shaking his head, Bold whimpered, “Lard?” He turned to the heavens, “Is this how oi doie?”

“What you should be asking...” Acamus paused to point his spear at the façade of the *Monoceros*. The spear extended rapidly, piercing the side of the ship and holding fast. The weapon anchored their tiny rowboat to the *Monoceros* while keeping them far enough away to not be crushed. Then the minotaur continued, through gritted teeth saying, “...is how you are going to get on.”

“Mae? How will any of us get on?!” Bold crowed.

“The spear Acamus is holding,” Ekaf said, “is the same that Theseus Icespear wielded in the Third and Fourth Void War, the same that he held while fighting alongside the Samurai. The Vanian Spear, crafted by Zannon Sentry – crafter of the Mystak Blade.”

Bold and Zach exchanged embarrassed glances.

“Uh’ve hard of the Vanaian Spaer, lad,” Bold said, “but whot does it do?”

“Well as you just saw, it can extend,” Acamus said, “but my friends, that is not its strongest power. When activated, anything it touches will freeze.”

“So what’s the plan?” Zach asked.

Acamus explained, “I freeze the wall of the ship, shatter it, then stab the spear back into the ship so that the two of you can run across it and onto the *Monoceros*. Knomes and spirits are nimble-”

“That’s racist.” Ekaf stated.

Zach nudged him with his elbow, “It’s not true.”

Ekaf nodded, “True – but racist.”

Acamus continued as if there had been no interruption, “Problem is, my friend, I don’t see you running up this spear.”

“Uh doubt ya could aven hold it far mae to troi...” Bold muttered.

“Another valid point, my friend.” Acamus chuckled.

“Well, I’m glad that’s settled,” Ekaf said, “let’s get started. Acamus, if you would, pull the spear.”

“Settled?” Bold exclaimed, “Lad, its anythin but set-”

Ice began to spread from the spearhead, freezing the facade of the *Monoceros*.

“Hey, come on now,” despite being soaked to the bone by the cool ocean water, Bold was sweating, “weht a minute!”

Acamus set his feet on the rowboat and twisted then yanked the spear free. The section of frozen wall shattered with a horrible thundering CRABOOM. As the chunks of frozen wood fell into the ocean, the mighty ship rocked violently and the rowboat lost what little stability it had offered before. The waves tilted the boat back and forth so that it was almost perpendicular to the sea floor. Acamus nearly fell out but he was used to this. Taking aim at the wall, he harpooned the ship once more. The spear struck the vessel just below where the minotaur had torn a hole.

“Hurry, Zach, Ekaf!” Acamus roared, straining to keep both his dingy stable and his spear head imbedded.

Zach and Ekaf obeyed, hustling up the spear-bridge as if they’d done it many times before. Now it was just Acamus and Bold on the boat. The two looked at each other frowning.

“How did we say we were getting you on the ship?” Acamus asked.

“Wae didn’t.” Bold growled, “Oi’ve been duped boy yar donum hubris and the impehtience of that blasted Knome...”

As Bold grumbled on, Acamus pondered. He sized up the distance between their tiny dingy and the wound in the façade of the pirate ship. Then he sized up the dwarf. No doubt, this dwarf would prove to be quite heavy. It seemed he'd likely even be heavier than he appeared. Despite the man's voluptuous gut, the minotaur knew that most of the dwarf's bulges were muscle and not fat. That said, Acamus was just about as brawny as a being could be. And the only aspect of Acamus that topped his muscle was his opinion of his own abilities, thus – as ridiculous as it was – he figured he had come across a solid solution.

"I've got an idea." Acamus stated.

"Laddae, thar's no weh in hell uh can run cross that spaer!" Bold cried.

"Another idea."

Acamus grinned. He yanked the spear free – which sent their rowboat sailing straight for the hull – and let it shrink to a size that he could slip through the loop on his belt. He turned to the dwarf. Before the stocky man could resist, Acamus bent over and wrapped him in a bear hug. In seconds, their dingy would be smashed against the bottom of the *Monoceros*. Ignoring the chaos around them, Acamus focused on the fear-frozen dwarf in his arms and the hole in the ship nearly ten feet above them. As they came to the crest of a particularly large wave, Acamus roared, "Fly, my friend!" then lobbed Bold with all his might.

The throw couldn't have been better. Bold disappeared inside the *Monoceros* with a long, indignant shriek. Stretching his arms, Acamus took aim once more with his spear. He hit nearly the same hole he'd used to create a bridge for Ekaf and Zach. Instead of using his spear as a bridge, he made his spear shrink, yanking him off the rowboat and pulling him quickly towards the ship just as his dingy was crushed beneath the smuggling vessel.

Half a minute before Acamus arrived, Ekaf and Zach found themselves in a tavern of sorts. The tables that filled the room had been undisturbed by the rocking of the ship, as they were bolted to the floor. The case was not the same for the chairs. They'd toppled over and slid across the room. There were no sailors in sight, but the room didn't stay empty long before Hermes Retskirt arrived in the doorway opposite the gaping orifice Acamus had created.

He said, "Another godi Knome..."

"You must be unlucky." Ekaf said.

Hermes drew his broadsword. Zach knocked an arrow in his bow. Ekaf yanked the dagger from his belt and climbed on top of the bar before them.

"Knock his skull off," Ekaf said, "I'll distract him."

Zach put the arrow back in his quiver and pulled out a separate one. This arrow had a blunt head, rounded and flattened on the end like a hammer. He had made the arrow himself, it was a trademarked Shisharay projectile that they had, long ago, donned the hammershot.

Ekaf approached. The dagger in his hand grew to match the size of Hermes' mighty blade. The fiery skeleton nodded.

"I know that blade."

Ekaf raised an eyebrow, "Then why aren't you running?"

Hermes charged, bringing his sword down from above. Ekaf's weapon shrank to a dagger and he ran beneath the banshee's burning legs. Hermes spun and swung. Ekaf's dagger was once more a sword and he blocked the attack easily, but Hermes had made one mistake. He had turned his back on Zach. Zach's hammershot flew through the air, hitting the back of Hermes's skull and sending it flying into the corner. The skull glared at Zach while Hermes' body staggered back.

“Grandfather made the same mistake,” the skull said as it began to levitate, “continue to underestimate me and I will continue to win. You are a mere Knome, the day I lose to a Knome is the day d-”

As his skull returned to his body, Hermes turned to look at Ekaf. He had expected to see some sort of awe in the Knome’s posture or at least a glint of disappointment. Instead of slackened shoulders of despair, he found the Knome’s shoulders to be trembling with repressed laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Hermes demanded.

“What were you going to say?” Ekaf asked.

“Huh?”

“The day I lose to a Knome is the day...” Ekaf started.

Puzzled, Hermes finished, “The day dwarves fly.”

At that moment, Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth flew into the ship screaming at the top of his lungs. He hit the armored Hermes square in the back. Bold rolled away then got up and, seeing Zach, scurried to get behind the bar. As the dwarf clambered over the counter, Acamus arrived alongside them.

“Whot’d uh hit?” Bold shivered, “Uh block of oice?”

“A banshee.” Zach answered.

Bold’s eyes grew wide.

Hermes was back on his feet.

“Boldarian Drahkcor I assume, what are you? The seventh?” Hermes asked.

“Fifth.” Bold corrected.

“What a pity, because now you’ll be the last.”

- - -

Hidden behind the Shelmick’s Shield, Nogard charged with Machuba and Zalfron at his heels. Joe, behind them, released a column of blue fire, directing it over his comrades’ heads. Then, Joe felt something in his hand and looked down. *The Suikii!* He swung the black blade and the room tore in half before him. All he could see through the interdimensional window was darkness, pure and absolute.

Meanwhile, Nogard, Zalfron, and Machuba came to a skidding halt – Catty was gone. In actuality, she had gone nowhere but instead she’d shrunk into the form of a feline and slinked off into the maze of toppled boxes. The wiggly pirate captain stood in her place. Grabbing his belt, he roared, “GET OFF MY SHIP!” and a jet of red fire surged from the gem on his buckle, racing forward to smash into Joe’s blue fire where both tongues of conflagration fizzled out. While Nogard kept his eyes on the pirates, who were frozen like front-line soldiers awaiting the order to charge, Zalfron and Machuba scanned the room for the shadowmancer.

Catty had snuck behind Joe, reclaiming her true form without the pyromancer noticing. She aimed a kick at his spine.

“JOE!” Zalfron cried.

But it was too late. Catty’s foot hit him square in the back which sent him stumbling through the portal the Suikii had just opened. Without Joe, darkness returned to the chamber. The only light came in from the doorway, which was thoroughly clogged with fishfolk. Nogard, Machuba, and Zalfron stood in the center of the storage room looking between the silhouettes of Captain Pigeon and his men to Catty.

“Johnny, take these three. I’ll get the mancer.” Catty ordered.

Johnny’s eyes were as wide as the smile that had suddenly took hold of his lips, “No problem, Beautiful.” with a flamboyant arm motion he bowed.

Ignoring his gesture, Catty strode through the interdimensional window.

As the magical hole closed, a thunderclap rattled the vessel. It was as if hell itself had open and all the forsaken had lifted their heads in one harmonious, “OOM.” The three pulled their eyes away from where Catty and their alien leader had once stood and fixated on the pirates blockading the door.

Johnny clapped his hands and an enertomb embedded in the roof came to light.

“I see that you were giving the beautiful Catherine Meriam a hard time,” Johnny said, checking his nails as he spoke, stilling himself for the battle to come, “We Sea Lords don’t tolerate ungentleman-like behavior, right boys?”

Taking this to be their cue, the fishfolk swarmed into the room, piling in around their captain with their mismatched weapons raised high. Despite their confidence, they weren’t Sea Lords like the Sea Lords of the past. These were greenhorns – peasants from Aquaria that had been kidnapped by Lacitar’s regime, converted then framed for mancy, and finally shipped off to serve Order under the sails of the *Monoceros*. Though the boys didn’t know it immediately, the goons surging forward would’ve made even Zalfron look like a blademaster. This was something they soon discovered – Nogard ran forward to meet the blue buccaneers. He swung his shield, sideways, hitting the closest pirate in the neck, forcing the man to stumble back with blood gushing from his throat. Machuba had the next, stabbing him through the gut. But Zalfron didn’t have the third. Nogard had to fall to one knee in order to get his shield in the way of his attacker’s swing. Machuba was able to wrench his sword free and slice Nogard’s foe across the chest but then there was the fourth and the fifth. In a matter of seconds the two would be completely surrounded. Though inadequate in combat, they made up for it in numbers.

“GET BACK!”

A keg rolled across the room, spewing alcohol in all directions. After those in the way jumped back, all eyes turned to what ran behind it: a bloodied elf spinning forward with his arms fully extended, his hands grasping a cannon ball. Zalfron released the cannon ball. It caught a fishfolk in the gut and knocked him into the blade of the comrade behind him. Nogard charged again, grabbing the head of the pirate before him and slamming it into his shield. Finally they’d carved their way to the captain and Machuba was able to swing at him.

Johnny leaned back and clutched his belt. The buckle radiated an amber glow. All the dust that had once caked the barrels and the floor boards had coalesced like metal fragments to a magnet, manifesting into a fist of stone. A fist of stone that slammed Machuba in the gut, knocking the breath from his gills as he fell back, barely managing to keep hold of his sword. As the stone fist turned back into the dust from whence it came, Nogard approached, raising his shield and bringing it-

-Johnny stumbled out of the way, slipping, but as he staggered he directed a wave of water to sweep Nogard’s legs out from under him. And as Johnny fell onto his back, he closed his eyes to focus. The water curled back towards Nogard and hardened into a steaming bolder of ice to flatten Nogard on the floor.

However, once more, no one had accounted for Zalfron. As Johnny hit the floorboards, Zalfron landed on top of him. Zalfron slammed fist after fist into Johnny’s face. Two punches landed before the fishfolk could react. Four total landed before they aimed their assault. Zalfron pounded into his face two more times before Johnny knocked Zalfron off him with a club of

solid ice. The elf landed beside Nogard and Machuba as they struggled to stand. Neither wielder of Shelmick's weapons could stand up straight, both had hands clutching their broken ribs.

- - -

Bold felt the sound in his bones. His heart flat lined for that excruciatingly long second. Disoriented terror. It was a sensation similar to that of being woken in the night, sure that something physical had done it but being unable to discern what or where this invader was – unable to immediately discern anything amidst the terrible darkness, a sensation that causes even the most rational mind to imagine the worst. Just as his greatest nightmares crept into the realm of reality, he recognized something – something that fit into the narratives forged by his horrified brain. The vibrant towering silhouette of Hermes Retskcirt rose before him. Bold had heard of this before. Encountering a banshee typically brought with it the promise of death. Facing one in Total Darkness – so few had survived such an ordeal that the very idea of such a spell was often considered as conspiratorial as the Well of Youth, the Key Library, and the Knome named Zipper.

“Why me?” Bold asked, his lips dry despite the sweat and sea water that coated the rest of his body.

“Why not?” Hermes responded, “Why not kill every last one of you today?”

The chills that ran up his spine and the tingling that caused his fingers to tremble somehow took the fear from Bold's mind. Maybe it was the hopelessness of the situation or maybe Bold was simply becoming immune to terror after having been scared senseless so many times in the last few days. Even more likely, something had switched the trauma-modified wiring in his brain, warped by a childhood under the lash in Vinnum Tow, that made him suddenly able to welcome death. Whatever it was, he found himself chuckling. When the dwarf managed to speak, he mocked Hermes, “Selu to you with that, lad!”

“You're laughing?” It was Hermes that now took a step back.

“Uh'm honored actualay!” Bold was becoming hysterical, “Ya wehsted this on mae, lad,” he had to pause til the spell of laughter subsided, “Oi'm a godai haeler! Thar's Zach and Ekaf and Acamus left to foiht. Ya ehn't got a shot in hell.”

Hermes roared and with a swing of his massive sword he launched a beam of white straight for Bold. It was a direct hit. Instead of the plain blunt force Bold expected, the shot hit like a blade, slicing across his chest and shoulder as it pounded him. The dwarf was thrown back. The pain ended the hysteria. Bold murmured spells of healing as he rose. It was hastily and painfully constructed though it still took a vast amount of energy. Having missed a day of meditation, Bold was unsure how much energy he had to spare. He still wasn't scared. His emotions had shut off entirely.

“Dragging it out I see.” Hermes stared at Bold for a moment.

Bold cursed the silence.

The white silhouette flared as Hermes broke the quiet, “Well I think I know how to end it. Blades just won't do on a dwarf. That sort of bloody pain is too casual for your kind, used to it aren't you.”

Though his heart had run cold, his mind still petered on. He had left the Barren's Mullet knowing that danger would be on his heels. The whole reason he'd stayed for so long was so as to stay alive. Without him, who outside of Vinnum Tow would lobby for his people's liberty? Though his mind was making him willing to face fate then and there, his mind was also

reminding him, over and over and over, why his death would – in a sense – be betrayal of his people. Of himself. *Whoy'd uh get moyself into this mess?* But it was too late for regret. *Oi must steh aloive!*

He stared Hermes in his unintelligible white face.

“You probably like it.” Hermes proceeded, “But I know what you aren’t used to. A hell that you desert slaves never got the privilege to endure: water.”

The word broke through Bold’s resolve, it shattered his subconscious’ defense mechanisms. His heart sank.

“Do you, Boldarian, know how to swim?”

Bold ran for the door. Hermes stepped in front and launched another beam with a sweep of his sword. A second slash ran across his chest, slamming him into the delicate remains of the *Monoceros*’s wall. Bold fell, bruised and bleeding, beside the gaping hole Acamus had created. As he healed himself, his eyes turned pleadingly to the static glowing blobs of his allies. He said a quick prayer. When he opened his eyes, Hermes was gone.

“Dirty, dirty slave boy.”

The banshee was back looming over him.

“Time for a bath.”

A swift kick shot Bold through the hole in the wall behind him. When he landed, he did not land on a liquid. He landed on an incredibly solid surface, it was jagged and serrated, enough so that it thoroughly scraped his spine. If the initial pain of the slice and the fall hadn’t been enough to rip his consciousness away, the fall on this new rugged turf would’ve done him in then and there had he not been a dwarf. Bearing the pain, he didn’t even bother to examine the odd arena in which he landed – it was the ocean surface, only each wave was frozen in time, each ripple and rivet had become teeth in a crescent curved saw – instead he fixated on adlibbing enough spells to seal the new wound and stop the contents of his abdomen from continuing to pour out. After the magic was cast, he barely had enough energy to keep his eyes open. When Hermes spoke, Bold could tell he still stood on the ship.

“All I have to do,” Hermes said, “is snap my fingers.” Hermes paused. “I don’t know what I’m waiting for…” he cocked his skull to the side, “…wait, I see something. Two scars across the chest? How symbolic would it be if I were to add a third.”

Hermes disappeared.

Hermes reappeared before Bold.

- - -

Darkness. Complete darkness aside from one glowing orb that stood in the center of his view. That was the first thing Joe noticed when Catty knocked him through the Suikii’s portal. The second thing Joe noted was the absence of the ground beneath him. Wind rushed up and gravity pulled down. Joe rolled over. Now he knew where he was.

Though everything was carved out of different shades of black and white, Joe could now recognize the scene. He was high above the ship, falling towards the ocean. There was a brilliant figure standing out on the water. The person must’ve been a child for he wasn’t very tall – though his width was another story.

Hearing movement behind him, Joe balled up. No sooner did he tuck his head than did a luminescent ball fly by, dissolving into thin air soon after it missed him.

Still in free fall, Joe rolled onto his back to face his foe. From the ivory silhouette, he could tell it was Catty and, by the look of the gray glowing orbs surrounding her white shining hands, she was ready to attack once more. Two more radiant balls flew at Joe. Joe shot out two blasts of blue fire – though they were white in this weird new world – and the two projectiles melted upon collision. Undaunted, Catty raised her hands.

Only a thin gas of shadows came out.

Now she was daunted.

And Joe was relieved. Turning from the shadowmancer, Joe noticed that the ground was quickly rising to meet him. Joe now could tell that the figure standing on the ocean, which reached up towards him with jagged peaks of frozen waves, was not a child, but – *Bold?*

Then another figure appeared beneath him, a giant, standing before Bold.

Joe was only a few yards from hitting the hard ocean surface when the Suikii reappeared in his hands. The giant swung his sword, slicing Bold across the belly for a third time.

Catty yelled from above, “Hermes!”

The bulky white silhouette turned just quick enough to see Joe swing. Off went Hermes’ skull. Darkness disappeared. Color returned to the world. The sky was once more blue, the *Monoceros* was once more trimmed with the maroon and navy, and the ocean melted back into a liquid.

Joe, Bold, and Catty fell into the thrashing salt water. Blood poured out from Bold’s chest as he sank like a rock. Joe turned from the dwarf to the shadowmancer behind him. For a moment they stared at one another, hovering beneath the ocean’s surface. Then Joe released some blue fire, letting it engulf his body – maintaining his glare, daring the renown mancer to pursue him. The display worked. Catty swam up to the surface and disappeared.

Joe turned to the sinking dwarf, swimming after him without even stopping to ponder how the hell he would manage to swim a person with such an impressive density back to the surface.

Above the water, Hermes retrieved his skull then went about retrieving his partner. Using a disk of shadows he levitated above the surface and lifted his female companion from the waves with a shadowy arm. His skull was back on his head and Catty could instantly tell he was in a bitter mood.

“The dwarf will sink like a rock,” Hermes stated, “and so will the human if he tries to help him.”

“What’d the book say?” Catty asked.

“I don’t know,” Hermes growled, silently cursing himself for having skimmed over so many pages (in his defense, the author is undeniably excessive), “but I know that this is not where we will catch him. That will come in *Zviecoff*.”

The banshee dropped Catherine onto a plate of shadows that hovered beside his.

“You’re out of shadows?” Hermes noticed, “Let’s go.”

“We can’t leave.” Catty said.

“Why not?” Hermes snapped.

“Johnny.”

“I thought you were Catty,” Hermes retorted, “Not Ching Shih.”

Catty’s response was a glare.

Hermes was puzzled by her sudden loyalty to the gentlemanly drug addict. This suspicion was well placed. Catty had no desire to save the horny sea dog but with each step she took, Hermes brought her closer to Icelore. Sooner than later, she knew she’d find herself standing

before Shalis Skullsummon and when she did she needed someone to watch her back. The undead bearn certainly wouldn't. John Pigeon, on the other hand, would fight alongside her like she were his wife. Despite being skeptical, Hermes also feared the coming reunion with the necromancer Sheik. And, like Catty, it didn't take him long to see the potential benefit Pigeon's presence might offer. It definitely would not be wise to leave the Captain of the Order's most useful gang of privateers to die.

Fixing her with a glare of his own, he conceded.

"Fine."

- - -

"Where'd Bold go?" Zach asked.

"Where'd Hermes go?" Ekaf asked.

"There!" Acamus pointed out the whole.

The three watched as Hermes and Catty hovered through the hole in the wall and over the bar to land in the center of the room.

"Your dwarvish friend is taking a little trip to the sea floor." Hermes chuckled.

"Acamus," Ekaf asked, "do you think you can handle saving Bold?"

The minotaur and Knome looked at each other.

"You two are going to take on the banshee and the shadowmancer?" Acamus asked.

Ekaf didn't turn. His eyes were locked on his two opponents.

"Acamus, you go help Bold. Zach, give me cover and I'll manage."

Acamus turned to Zach. The spirit nodded, "Please."

Acamus nodded back, "Selu to you, my friends."

Without any more discussion, Acamus took three long steps then leapt out of the hole. The spear expanded in his hand as he jumped. He couldn't see Bold but he could see something below the ocean surface, a dark sapphiric glow, and he decided to aim for that. Acamus hit the water and dove down. He now saw where the glow originated – a young human pyromancer, the stone in his chest shining a brilliant blue. Acamus hadn't expected this. Nor did he expect to see the pyromancer kicking with all his might while hugging Bold to his chest. Acamus didn't pause to ponder, the pyromancer was obviously trying to help.

He activated his spear. The water around the tip of the spear hardened, freezing and spreading. After only three seconds a sphere with a radius of ten feet had frozen around the end and three seconds was all Acamus needed to swim alongside the mancer and dwarf. He ended the spear's spell and wrapped the human and dwarf against him. The magic gone, the ice began to float – quickly – and the three shot to the surface.

Holding his spear with one arm and hugging the dwarf and human with the other, Acamus introduced himself as they burst the surface.

"Acamus Icespear," he said, "Boldarian is my ally so I assume you are too."

Joe took a gulp of oxygen and nodded then said with eyes wide, "You're a minotaur!"

"Indeed." Acamus watched the human for a moment then spoke, "My friend, we need to get Boldarian on the ship."

"Yeah," Joe glanced back at the *Monoceros*, "Do you have any idea how we could do that?"

Joe looked back to the minotaur. He wasn't watching, he was staring at a chunk of debris, made of wood and machinery, that was floating, slowly but steadily, their way.

“I have an idea.”

- - -

Blood covered John Pigeon’s face like war paint. His once elegant mustache was now frayed. Despite being brutalized, he was apparently still drugged up enough to maintain his trademark squirm. As he spoke, he held his hands out before him, palms up, fingertips curled over so that he could scrutinize the condition of his fingernails – somehow, he managed to reek of nonchalance.

“I wasn’t going to kill you boys but the elf ruined all hope of peace.”

Nogard, Machuba, and Zalfron looked each other over. They’d already taken quite the beating from the captain and his men and it looked as though there was more to come.

“Come at me!” Pigeon snarled.

Nogard threw his shield. The pirate captain reacted in time to block, summoning a stone pillar to take the blow. By this time, Machuba was back in sword-range and the fishfolk didn’t hesitate. He swung. A Sea Lord stepped up to block the attack. Johnny turned and launched a column of ice into Machuba’s chest. As Machuba staggered back, Zalfron charged forwards. A pirate stepped between him and the captain. The elf grabbed the buccaneer’s sword arm and punched him square in the nose. No sooner did he land the punch than did Johnny land a punch of his own. As the pirate before Zalfron hit the ground, Johnny strode forward, fire engulfing his fist, and slugged the elf in the stomach. Zalfron fell back and Nogard took the plate, shield back in hand. Before Johnny could recover from his attack on the elf, Nogard smacked his shield against the captain’s face. Johnny fell into the arms of his men. Nogard tried to fight his way to the captain but all he did was get himself surrounded. By the time Johnny was back on his feet, the fishfolk pirates had Nogard held down.

“Always going for the face,” Johnny spit out a wad of blood, “time to return the favor.”

His belt buckle glowed white and, as Johnny stepped towards Nogard, ice engulfed his right foot. Johnny kicked Nogard in the jaw with such force that the ice shattered. Nogard fell onto his side. Johnny strode up to the chidra, his foot now encased in stone. This time Johnny kicked Nogard in the gut. Nogard rolled over onto his back, coughing. Johnny knelt down and straddled the chidra just as Zalfron had done to him.

By this time, Machuba had sliced up another buccaneer and Zalfron had gotten to his feet, ready for another go around. They charged with Zalfron leading the way. Wielding a cannon ball over his head he smashed it into the closest pirate. Then came Machuba, jumping in on Zalfron’s right and slicing through the gills of an enemy. Zalfron whirled on the next pirate, smacking the cannon ball across the ear-like-membrane on the side of his head. With a spin, Machuba had severed a jugular and cut the fingers off the sword hand of his next attacker.

Johnny tried to ignore the chidra’s comrades and he landed three good swings into Nogard’s face before he accepted the fact that his pirates could not handle the elf and fishfolk. Standing from Nogard, he waited for his men to get out from between him and the two boys before sending a bolt of lightning from his belt to strike the two. Zalfron fell backwards. Machuba fell forwards – right in front of Johnny.

Before Machuba hit the ground, Johnny’s foot, sparking with electricity, slammed into Machuba’s jaw. Machuba’s body twitched like a fish out of water until Johnny kicked him once more in the belly. Johnny paused for a moment, checking on Zalfron. The elf was back on his feet, his body quivering with rage. Two Sea Lords stood before him. Johnny smiled, he would

make the elf watch. Squatting, Johnny picked up Machuba's head with one hand then punched him where his nostrils were.

"Ouch." Johnny shook his fist as Machuba's metallic blood sizzled his knuckles.

Zalfron roared. Johnny looked up. The elf tackled the pirate before him and, scurrying over the surprised Sea Lord's body on all fours, he leapt towards Johnny. Johnny leaned back, grabbed his belt buckle, and shot Zalfron in the gut with a ball of fire. Zalfron skidded across the storage room floor. Johnny chuckled. Nogard lay still on his stomach. Machuba squirmed quietly on his back. Johnny laughed again, punching Machuba once more.

"Weaklings."

"It ain't over yet."

Johnny turned and was genuinely surprised to see the elf back on his feet. Without another word, Zalfron charged. Johnny waited until the elf was a yard away then stepped smoothly to the side. The elf tripped over Machuba and hit the floor. Johnny grabbed his belt and the dust scattered across the room rushed towards his groin as if he had a shop vac beneath his britches. The dirt collected before the pirate, fusing together to form a large, cinder block of stone. It hovered over Zalfron as he scurried to get back up but then Johnny dropped the stone. It pounded Zalfron to the ship floor with a crunching sound.

"Now please, stay down!" Johnny kicked the rock off the elf, "You'll be worth a lot more to Shalis if she gets to do the killin."

Nogard still lay on his stomach, but his head had turned so he could watch Zalfron. Machuba too had positioned himself to watch his comrade. Both silently prayed that Zalfron would stay down. He didn't. As soon as the boulder rolled off him, his palms were flat on the floorboards as he tried to push himself back up. Johnny strode forward and kicked the elf in the face. Zalfron fell onto his back.

"Give up." Johnny laughed.

"Ah never," Zalfron rolled onto his side then his knees, "give up."

Raising his hands to the heavens, as if to say, "I tried!" Johnny kned the elf in the nose. Zalfron was back on his back.

"Give up," There was no more humor in Johnny's voice.

Zalfron rolled onto his stomach.

"Stay down, Civ!" Nogard begged.

Zalfron got onto his side.

"Zalfron, stop!" Machuba pleaded.

He pulled himself to a knee. Johnny sighed, took a step forward, and -

- Zalfron punched. It was a beautiful punch, accurate, quick, and clever. Zalfron hit where he knew Johnny to be weak: the genitals. Johnny managed to deliver another kick to the elf's face before clutching his pride and doubling over in pain. After a moment, Johnny was back on his feet but Zalfron was already on his. The elf, covered in blood, was hyperventilating, his fists balled and twitching and his eyes were wide but rolled back so that only white could be seen.

No longer were Nogard and Machuba worried about Zalfron, now they were scared of him. So too were the last few uninjured fishfolk, who watched from where they knelt tending to their comrades. Johnny attempted some sort of snide threat but his words were drowned out by the elf's scream.

"WouaaAAAAH!"

The cry was like that of a furious baboon and Zalfron's behavior could've been described similarly. Zalfron flung himself forward. Johnny gripped his belt but he didn't have enough time to get a spell off before Zalfron had a hold of him. Grabbing him by the shoulders and wrapping his legs around the pirate's chest, Zalfron brought his head back then slammed his temple against Johnny's nose.

They hit the ground. John Pigeon didn't move but Zalfron slowly crawled off him. Remaining on all fours he stared, with his white eyes, at the remaining pirates. They stumbled away from their mates and staggered towards the doorway. Zalfron's blonde hair was plastered to his face by blood and sweat and his lips were curled in a dog-like snarl. Pigeon's pirates were so appalled they froze halfway out the room. Bounding forward like a bear, Zalfron dove on one of the fishfolk's legs. As the pirate fell to the ground, his remaining companions, the only two that hadn't fled and weren't dead, unconscious, or bleeding on the floor, stepped in to stop the elf.

By now Nogard had gotten to his feet. He chunked his shield at one of the last the pirates, conking him in his diamond shaped head. With a clunk the Sea Lord hit the ground. Machuba was up too. Though he was halfway doubled over from his wounds, the Gill straightened up for a second and pointed his sword. The last Sea Lord froze. With the fingers of his sword-hand cut off, he stood awkwardly holding a blade in his left. He looked from the elf before him, who was still bashing the lifeless body of his comrade into the floorboards, to the chidra and fishfolk, then he ran out the door.

"Zalfron?" Nogard called.

The elf stopped beating the corpse but didn't look back to acknowledge his friend. Instead, grunting like an angry boar, he took off out the door.

"Dat boy ain't all right in da head." Nogard stated.

"When'd you realize that?" Machuba asked.

The two limped out the doorway, down the hall, and turned to the right. They'd come into a room maybe nine times the size of the cellar they'd just left. It had obviously once been an eating hall of sorts but now it lay in complete disarray. The chairs were almost all toppled and scattered about the room in clumps after having slid from one side of the boat to the other. Most of the tables still stood, clamped to the floor, but many had been demolished. On some, only the legs remained. Even the walls weren't fully intact. A massive hole had been torn out of the hull just behind half of the L-shaped bar. Nogard took this in quickly for what really garnered their attention was the culprits of such destruction, two of which he recognized.

Hermes Retskcirt was caught in the middle of a heated sword fight with a man less than half his size. With this valiant Knome was an armored spirit – *Zachias*, Nogard realized – that stood behind the bar shooting arrows at a tightly-dressed human shadowmancer that deflected the projectiles with her two slender, shadow-bladed sword. Then there was Zalfron. The elf had just picked up a chair and was running at the woman that hadn't seemed to notice this new threat. Zalfron smashed the chair across her back and she crumpled to the floor but when the chair splintered, one of the legs popped off in just such a way that it clocked the elf in the noggin. As Catty hit the ground, an unconscious Zalfron followed her.

The fighting stopped. The Knome stepped away from Hermes, back towards the bar, and Hermes stepped away as well, towards his fallen comrade. Nogard and Machuba did their best to hide their pain and look as menacingly as possible.

"Look who it is!" Hermes cackled, "We meet again, Otubak."

"Who are you?" Machuba asked, looking at the Knome.

“Ekaf,” he said, then he gestured to the spirit behind him, “this is Zach.”

Nogard wasn't paying attention to the others, he was focused on the banshee.

“Where's Grandfather?” He demanded.

“Don't worry,” Hermes snickered, “he is in good hands.”

“Is that Nogard?” Zachias asked.

Machuba nodded.

“You mean you four don't know each other?” Hermes was puzzled.

“Now we do.”

This speaker was not Nogard or Machuba nor Ekaf or Zach though it did come from behind the bar. It was Joe. No sooner did he speak than did Bold come flying back through the hole in the wall. Once again the dwarf slammed into Hermes' chest like a cannon ball. The banshee was flung backwards and Bold rolled to a stop beneath a table – the dwarf was still out cold. Using the flying dwarf as cover, Catty harnessed what little energy she had to spare to turn herself into a cat and scamper off, past Nogard and Machuba, out of the dining hall. When Hermes stood, he was his only ally in the room.

“You best surrender, banshee,” Acamus Icespear said as he climbed in through his hole, his spear still shrinking in his hand, “you're quite outnumbered.”

But the minotaur had spoken to soon. The rest of the Sea Lord crew came marching into the chamber – almost twenty men strong. Before anyone could move, Acamus reared like a quarterback and lobbed his spear, impaling the foremost fishfolk through the ribs. As the Sea Lord fell, his body began to turn to ice. Avoiding the spreading frost, the pirates surged around their fallen comrade towards their closest foes: Nogard and Machuba. Acamus hurdled the bar and ran, past Ekaf and Hermes, to his spear.

Machuba stepped forward, still stooping, and blocked the blade of a buccaneer then slit the offender's throat. Tucking himself against his shield, Nogard rammed the next fishfolk that approached Machuba. He and the pirate tumbled to the ground. Machuba stepped over Nogard, who was wrestling with the man he'd tackled, with his blade raised. Machuba parried two swings from two different pirates but a third delivered a chop to his arm. The blow would've severed the limb if the blade had been sharper and Machuba's blood hadn't been made of liquid metal. Machuba fell to his knees. Magma poured from the wound, dripping to smolder on the floor boards. Three Sea Lords in front of Machuba brought their swords back for the finishing swing. Nogard was still tussling with his pirate and Acamus was still a few yards away.

When the Sea Lords stormed in, Zach had only one arrow left. Joe had noticed the spirit hesitating to launch it. In a swift moment of brilliance, Joe reached below the bar and grabbed a quarter of a handle of liquor and a cloth napkin. Using the handkerchief to open the bottle – his hands were too sweaty to twist off the lid bare – he shoved the cloth inside the bottle's throat – as he'd seen done in movies – then popped it over the top of the arrow in Zach's hand. Using the sliver of red fire he had saved throughout his journey on the ocean floor, Joe lit the end of the napkin and slapped Zach on his armored back.

“Fire!”

Zach adjusted for the weight and landed the arrow in the midst of the three guards who had almost been able to slay the last Gill. As the trio was sprayed with glass and fire, Machuba, whose left arm – his dominant arm – had been unharmed, sliced through the burning flesh before him.

After jumping the bar, Acamus ran head on into the fishfolk. He stiff armed one, then ducked his head and bowled at least three over with his horns, goring a fourth in the process. By

the time he made it to Machuba's side, the Molotov had landed. Before anymore Sea Lords could rush Machuba, Acamus grabbed his spear, twisted the grip, then yanked it free. In the seconds that the Vanian Spear had been activated, the ice had spread to not only freeze the entire body of the original victim but also encase two more up to their hips in ice and one more unlucky pirate by the ankle. After he ended the spell, he twisted the grip which activated the mechanism to vibrate the rod and shatter the ice – destroying a chunk of the floor, killing two more foes, and obliterating the foot of the third victim. This third barely had time to feel the pain before Acamus had jabbed his spear through his face. A pirate ran around this footless man and the hole in the floor screaming with rage fueled by the horrors he'd just seen only for Nogard – who had finally deceased his opponent – to tackle him and begin the process of bashing yet another buccaneer into capitulation. Four more pirates stood in the doorway. They looked at the bodies of their comrades, those bleeding, burning, and what bits and pieces were left of the others, then took off back the way they'd come.

After Zach shot his final arrow, he turned to Joe and said, "I need more."

Joe nodded, the Suikii held tight in his hand, and said, "I'll go help Ekaf, stay behind me!"

Climbing over the bar, Joe came to stand alongside the Knome. Frustrated, Hermes roared. He was now faced by the edges of two legendary Knomish blades. Lowering his own weapon, he stepped away from the two and towards the handful of reinforcements that had made it past the doorway. These four pirates had only just recovered from being run over by the minotaur but now they were ready to aid the banshee. With a quick glance around the room, Hermes realized that the battle was already lost. He cursed Catty. *That bitch abandoned me!* Then, as his help charged forward, he stepped back. He spun his skull around again. *Wait a second...* the banshee would've grinned if he could have. *She just saved my life*, but he would only ever admit this in the secrecy of his own mind. Turning, he sliced his blade through the air, sending a beam of what looked like wind towards the Knome. The wind cut through the fishfolk between them. Ekaf stopped it with the blade of the Duikii, driving the gust into the floorboards which it cut through as easily as it had the flesh of the Sea Lords. Dashing for the bar, Hermes launched another blast.

"Joe, get back!"

Ekaf shoved Joe behind him as he blocked the gust again, redirecting the power into the floor. Zach stepped up to stand beside them, a recovered arrow knocked in his bow, but by the time he took aim Hermes had already fled out the hole in the wall. Instead, he turned his bow on the bleeding pirates, keeping them from trying anything, as Joe and Ekaf ran to the cavity.

"Will you ever learn to fend for yourself, Sun Child?"

Hermes was hovering ten yards out, level with the orifice, standing on a plate of shadows.

"Run away, little badger." Ekaf growled.

Hermes snarled back, "You can't hide behind Knomes forever."

Ekaf scoffed, "Keep running!"

Hermes ignored the retort and floated down to the ocean surface where a vessel was waiting for him. John Pigeon lay, still as a corpse (for once), in the floor of the small ship and Catty stood at the helm. The machine was made of dull chrome and looked similar to the fishing boats Joe had often seen zipping across the bass laden rivers and lakes of North America. The main difference was that the rear end was lacking a motor and propeller but instead was armed with what looked like a cannon. This cylinder was adorned by a glowing enertomb locked in the spidery legs of a metal contraption. Catherine Meriam stood at the front of the ship, gazing at the

assortment of nobs and levers that surrounded the steering wheel. Finally, she found the right button, mashed it, and the cannon roared to life, breathing fire. The vessel raised itself from the surface of the water then skidded west across the waves.

“What the hell is that?” Joe yelled.

“A zoomer,” Ekaf explained, “one of Space City’s renown inventions.”

“Damn...” Joe muttered.

“Alright then!” Ekaf whirled away from the hole in the wall to examine the outcome of their skirmish. Five Sea Lords were left, the others were dead or had fled from the ship’s tavern. Of the five, only one looked likely to survive. The rest, three of which had been nearly split in half by Hermes’s sharp wind and the fourth had been gored through the gut by one of Acamus’ horns, lay quietly on the floor. They stared at Nogard, Machuba, Zach, and Acamus, at least those who were conscious enough to, but when Ekaf turned to address them they gave him their undivided attention. He raised his dagger menacingly, “Surrender Sea Lords, this is our ship now!”

Chapter Twelve: Hearts in the Hull

The remaining Sea Lords didn't put up a fight, not after witnessing the majority of their crew be slaughtered. Zach, Ekaf and Acamus searched the ship to gather the rest of the pirates. They found one five-fingered Sea Lord cowering beneath a bunk, stumbled across three other buccaneers that had been tripping so hard on aquannabis they had missed the entire fight, and four others that had fled from the skirmish to draft a swift declaration of mutiny in an effort to obtain the mercy of the hijackers. All in all, thirteen fishfolk were carted off to the brig. In the bottom of the ship they found another tenant of the *Monoceros*, a cockatune (the same species of bird that Joe had seen on the soldiers of the Tadloe guard in Suinus). As they organized the pirates into pairs the singing bird provided a merry ambience. Ekaf promised a healer would come to the aid of those who were wounded just as soon as said healer was able (the healer himself had been left in pretty bad shape). When they left the brig, they tried to get the parrot to follow but it only watched their gestures and continued making music for the incarcerated Sea Lords.

Rounding up the living was followed by disposing of the dead. The toll rose to an even twenty. Zach prayed over each corpse before they dropped them into the ocean. If the bodies made it to the ocean floor, they'd be mere bits and pieces of their previous selves. There were far too many a hungry beast below to let fresh food go to waste. Acamus peered over the side of the ship for a few minutes after the last Sea Lord was tossed over, as if he thought he might catch a glimpse of one of the pirates being mutilated by a sea monster. Ekaf left the deck in search of soap and water, ready to wash his hands then move on to the next task. Zach followed the Knome but parted ways as he went to find Bold. As a spirit, he couldn't wash his hands. It was his mind that needed cleansing, but rather than dwelling on the ethicality of the hasty mass-burial at sea he let his fear for Bold flip over into rage, a rage that was then satiated by the disgusting manner in which they had flippantly discarded the dead devils.

Joe, on the other hand, was a brooder. Though he would never know what had been done with the deceased – nor would he know just how many there had been – he would be haunted by the cost of life their arrival brought. He would be, but later. First he was haunted by the comatose body of the man that had saved his comrades' lives mere days ago.

Somehow, the dwarf had healed his final scar before passing out. Before dealing with the defeated and dead, the gang had gathered around the healer to inspect him. Ekaf started off the inspection by claiming the dwarf wasn't breathing. As the others rushed over, they took his word to be gospel – Joe especially. He slid to his knees by the man's body, slapped his hands across Bold's bloody torso, and began chest compressions. The others looked on quite perplexed but didn't interfere. Then Joe rocked Bold's head back, pinched his nose, and attempted to give mouth to mouth.

That was when he realized the Knome had been wrong.

Bold was definitely still breathing. Joe's CPR had only granted Bold the benefit of another fractured rib. Though the gang was slightly concerned with Joe's alien behavior – and Joe was thoroughly pissed at Ekaf – they were all relieved to find Bold breathing. Breathing meant he would live. When Zach, Ekaf, and Acamus then left to do what they had to do, Joe stayed by Bold's side. There were definitely more comfortable places where he could've recovered but Bold was a heavy man and Acamus claimed his arms were done with lifting dwarves for the day. Zalfron, Nogard, and Machuba got to rest up in a cozier spot. The ship's

sleeping quarters, directly above the brig, were vast. Though some of the beds felt a little fishy, the three boys were hardly conscious enough to care.

Joe was fine aside from a few bumps and bruises. When inspecting his body, he was impressed to find his healer slug still in place, tightly coiled around his shin. Aside from that snapped leg, he'd dodged any real damage in all the fights they'd been in thus far. *Luck of the Sun Child*, Joe smiled, thinking of Nogard.

Acamus sailed the ship. Though the vessel was an ancient one, the Sea Lords continually renovated the *Monoceros* so that it had the most recent innovations. This meant that one man could sail the entire ship. As long as the enertombs were filled with energy, magic would adjust the sails and shrouds accordingly. Once Acamus had some time to play around with the gears and gadgets of the helm, he'd be able to set the craft on autopilot.

With the pirates locked away, the dead discarded, the wounded resting, and Acamus on the bridge, Ekaf was finally able to sit down and talk with Joe. They sat in the tavern around the unconscious body of Boldarian. Zach had beat the Knome back. He sat by his buddy's head, watching his wounded friend with sad silver eyes. The spirit was dressed only in his undergarments, a translucent set of a shirt, pants, with thin gloves and toed socks, his hair – greased with oils – lay pooled around his crisscrossed legs. For the first time, Joe saw the purple flame within Zachias, pulsating like a heartbeat. The spirit's armor lay beside him, near the large hole in the wall of the ship through which sea water sprayed the three with a cool mist every time a large enough wave bashed into the façade of the *Monoceros*.

"How was Aquaria?" Ekaf asked as he moseyed behind the bar, "See any sea critters? How bout mermen? Did that old bastard of a king give you any trouble, he's a real crow, that one."

"We sure gave him some trouble." Joe replied, "Sidon and the Soldiers of Shelmick found us and we helped them free Machuba who'd been captured by Lacitar's people. Then the Suikii brought us here."

"Look at you. I was worried you'd have trouble after I lost you in the Library, maybe I was just holding you back!"

Ekaf returned from the bar with a fat bottle of pink liquid. Plopping down across the dwarf from Joe, he unscrewed the lid and took a swig. Grimacing, he passed the handle to Joe. Joe accepted the drink and lifted the nozzle to his nose. The scent stung his nostrils. It was like sniffing gasoline.

"There's your first mistake!" Ekaf cried, "Never sniff it first! You gotta close your eyes, open your throat, and let that puppy slide down the hatch otherwise you'll never-"

"What is it?" Joe asked.

"Fairycane rum, now drink!"

Joe put the bottle to his lips and took a gulp of the poison. It burned going down his throat but hit the pit of his stomach like a warm ember. It wasn't as bad as he expected. Blinking away a few tears he passed the beverage to Zach. Zach was uninterested, he handed it back to Ekaf. The Knome took another sip then put the bottle down beside him.

"When'd you get the Suikii?"

"After we jumped off the *Sea Cuber*," Joe answered – *This is Ekaf, right?* – he took a leap of faith, asking, "have you heard from Grandfather?"

"Unfortunately, no...which isn't a good sign. Another bad sign is that he wasn't here with Hermes or Catty. Last I heard, he was in their custody." Ekaf took another gulp from the fairycane, "Either they did away with him or-"

“Really?!” Joe yelped.

“Coulda.” Ekaf shrugged, “More likely they shipped him off somewhere-”

“To Creaton?”

“Wouldn’t be surprised...”

Joe reached across the dwarf and grabbed the rum. Saying a quick prayer for the old smith’s safety, Joe sealed it with the taste of sweet alcohol then passed it back. Ekaf told Joe how he had heard about the destruction of the *Sea Cuber* and that he had gone to Bold and Zach fully intending to take them into Aquaria to search for Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard but fate had chosen otherwise. They’d hit an iceberg. They were driven even further off course when they met the son of Theseus Icespear and accompanied him on this hairbrained boat heist. Though in the end it seemed they never strayed from the path because now they were all here.

“So as soon as we help Acamus rescue his father,” Ekaf spoke quietly, as if hoping Joe wouldn’t notice the mention of such a detour, “we’ll go see the Emperor. Who knows, maybe Acamus will join us. But enough about all that, how ya been? Getting used to Solaris? Ready to be the Sun Child? To lead the Mystakle Knights to liberate the Samurai?”

“I don’t know about all that,” Joe laughed, scratching his salt-water soaked scalp, “but I do have a million questions.”

“Hit me!” Ekaf chirped.

“The Earth.” Joe’s eyes narrowed as he watched the Knome.

Ekaf averted his eyes and took an impressive swig.

Joe continued, “What happened after I left?”

Suddenly, Ekaf burst into a fit of coughing. So violent was the spell that the little Knome fell flat on the floor, rocking back and forth as if he could roll the coughing away. Joe waited for it to pass, his glare not relenting. Finally the Knome recovered and faced Joe.

“What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

Ekaf lifted the bottle to his lips once more.

Joe went ahead and filled in the blank, “The explosion. Death said that’s how I die – not in the car wreck.”

Ekaf looked uneasily over at Zachias whose silver eyes glittered with intrigue.

Joe continued, “He said that’s how Earth dies.”

“He said that’s how Earth dies?!” Ekaf yanked his attention back to Joe.

“Mhm.”

Ekaf sighed, muttering, “Death may not be a liar but he sure can’t keep a secret.”

“So you do know?” Joe asked.

Ekaf nodded.

“You won’t tell me though, will you?” Joe asked.

Ekaf shook his head.

“Can I stop it?”

“You can.” Ekaf said, “It’ll be up to you.”

“When?”

“Huh?”

“When can I stop it?!” Joe demanded.

Ekaf shrugged, a short scoff escaping his lips, “Well it hasn’t happened yet.”

“I *saw* it!” Joe exclaimed, “I was there!”

“No, what you saw was a vision of a fate – like as though you grabbed hold of a key.” Ekaf said, “If you were there, Death would have your key now, wouldn’t he?”

“I honestly don’t know.” Joe let out a little burp of nervous laughter, “I don’t know anything, I don’t even know if I can trust you.”

“Then why are you asking me?” Ekaf chuckled back.

“Because you’re the only one I can ask?!” Joe cried. He turned to Zachias, “If you found out Solaris was doomed and the only one that knew how or why or anything about it was,” he jabbed his finger in the air over Bold’s belly, metaphysically pinning Ekaf down, “him. What would you do?”

Zach looked from Joe to the Knome then back at Joe to state bluntly, “Ekaf saved my life.”

Joe’s shoulders fell.

“Joe.” Ekaf said, “You’ll get the chance to stop it. I can’t explain it all, but I promise, I’m not lying.”

Joe sighed. Ekaf passed him the bottle. Joe took a swig and passed it back.

“Sorry.” He said, “I do trust you, Ekaf. I feel like you’ve saved my life a million times in the last week-”

“You’ve got no idea...” Ekaf muttered.

Joe continued, “I owe you. Big time. I just...you know, there’s a lot of people on Earth. And if that’s how Earth dies and if I can stop it...then I *have* to.”

“I know.” Ekaf said, “What we’re doing here,” he gestured to the room, waving his arms as if he was scooping a puppy up off the ground, then scooping and scooping again to include the ship, then the ocean, then the entire world if not the universe in his gesture, “this whole quest thing – it’s getting us there, Joe. It’s getting us to where we can save *everything*. Today, it’s Theseus. Tomorrow, it’s the Samurai. After that,” Ekaf shrugged, “...you’re the Sun Child, Joe. This is all a part of the plan.”

“Who’s plan though?” Joe asked.

“Fate’s plan.” Ekaf replied.

The Knome said it in such a manner that, though it in no way shape or form gave any sort of real answer to Joe’s question, he knew there would be no more useful information out of the Knome for the time being. Maybe if he confronted him in private he’d have better luck but Joe had the feeling that Ekaf had revealed as much as he planned to reveal. *Thank God Death let that little bit slip*, Joe thought, *else I’d never have known...then again...kind of wish I didn’t*. He looked over at Zach who offered Joe a translucent smile.

“You believe in God?” Zach asked.

Joe nodded.

Zach bowed his head slightly, “God gave us the means to maintain this world. We must have faith in that as we do what must be done.” He looked over at Ekaf then back at Joe, “And in the end, you’ll see, everything will turn out alright.”

Bold sat up right, “Lard!”

“Bold!” Joe, Zach, and Ekaf exclaimed.

“Uh just had the strehngest draem...” his eyes wandered down to his robust belly. His shirt had been torn to shreds and his flesh seemed to have been as well. Three diagonal scars stretched across his abdomen like the claw marks of a dragon. Even Joe recognized the ironic symbolism of the wound – it matched the symbol of the Black Crown Pact. Bold could only whisper, “...oh.”

“We’re safe now.” Joe promised.

“Aye...” Bold looked from Zach to Joe to Ekaf then his eyes landed on the alcohol. He snatched the bottle and took a quick gulp, burping as soon as he put the jug down, “...Aye.”

“There’s a handful of Sea Lords in the brig in desperate need of your services.” Ekaf stated, “Then there’s Zalfron, Nogard, and Machuba in the sleeping quarters. Zachias and Joe know the way, are you feeling up to doing some-”

“Ofcarse!” Bold hopped to his feet but flinched as the motion strained his poorly healed battle souvenirs. He had to stoop over in pain but he played it off as an awkward attempt to adjust his drenched backpack.

“Your books!” Joe exclaimed.

“Theh’ll bae foine lad,” Bold promised, “magic kaepts em sehf. Now, whoile uh hael, how bout ya go cook us some dinnar?”

“Deal!” Ekaf cried.

“You haven’t had time to meditate, which means that magic,” Zach gestured at the twisted knots of flesh that had sealed the lacerations across the dwarf’s chest, “was done at your own health’s expense.”

“Indaed,” Bold didn’t try to lie, “but now oi’ve got toime and uh can use muh text far the rest of the haelin.” Zach seemed unconvinced so Bold continued, “Oi can’t let ar friends suffar cause uh’m tarred.”

“Your body needs time to rest and heal as much as theirs.” Zach argued.

“It will,” Bold agreed, “aftar uh sae to thase goons and ar brothars!”

Zach groaned.

“Whot? Come on now. Wae gotta mehkh the best of it,” Bold reminded his old friend, “thot’s the best wae can do.”

Finally Zach gave in knowing that the dwarf had his mind set and, once that happened, not even the Emperor himself could get Bold to budge it. Zach and Bold made for the brig but the dwarf stopped in the doorway. Joe hadn’t moved.

“Ya comin, lad?”

Joe shook his head, “I’ll be there in a minute, I’ve got to ask Ekaf something.”

Bold nodded and left. Joe turned to Ekaf. The Knome averted his gaze, looking out the gaping hole in the wall of the ship, whistling as if he hadn’t heard what Joe had just said.

“I’ve got another question...” Joe said, “...about something I saw in the Key Library?”

“What?” Still Ekaf avoided eye contact.

“Some sort of execution...” Joe said, “...an earth elf had stabbed me, I think...I think it was that Shalis Skullsummon person.”

“Wouldn’t doubt it.” Ekaf said.

“It was me.” Joe got right down to it, “It was me that was being executed.”

“Yea,” Ekaf sighed, finally meeting Joe’s eyes, “she gets you sometimes.”

Joe’s head cocked to the side like a dog hearing another dog on TV – the concerned stare of one approaching an existential revelation, Ekaf recognized such all too well and, to his relief, this was a bit of darkness he could afford to shine a light on.

“You don’t always make it.” Ekaf said.

It immediately clicked in Joe’s mind but he was unwilling to swallow it.

“You don’t always die, either. Sometimes you just quit.” Ekaf frowned, “Then sometimes you join up with Creaton or Shalis – which, I’ve got to tell you, does not turn out well for anyone – *and then* there was a time where, I swear on the universe itself, there was a time where you up

and quit and went to work for Sam Budd.” Ekaf snickered, “The old bastard had you cleaning dishes for a solid month before he let you on the floor. And then he’d only let you bus tables!” He shook his head, “To be honest, sometimes when you really frustrate me, I go back to that timeline just to pester you. Worst part is you were a terrible busser. Couldn’t carry a tray of glasses if your home planet depended on it. Think the likelihood of you fulfilling the Foretelling is a lot higher than the chances other-you has of ever becoming a server.”

Joe’s head had straightened as his jaw dropped. Ekaf offered him the bottle, which snapped him out of it. He refused the drink, asking instead, “I have made it through though, right?”

Ekaf kept his offer on the table, his silence and uneasy expression giving Joe all he needed to know. Upon the realization, Joe decided he would have another sip of the fairycane rum.

“See, this is why there are things I don’t tell you.” Ekaf stated.

Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, Joe asked, “What’s the farthest I’ve ever made it?”

“That’s a Grandfather question!” Ekaf chuckled, “You’ve got a ways to go before you’re even close.”

“That’s comforting.” Joe scoffed.

“It should be!” Ekaf assured him, “It means that we’re still in the honeymoon phase! Enjoy it while it lasts.” Then he added under his breathe, “Cause Part Three’ll be here fore we know it...”

- - -

One by one, Bold dragged a wounded prisoner from their cell and, with Zach watching down the notch of his bow, he healed them as best he could. The pirates didn’t struggle. They knew they were defeated and knew that without the rock dwarf they would either die or survive to live life forever crippled. The only Sea Lord that gave them trouble hadn’t even been in the fight. One of the buccaneers that was still bamboozled by bathing in way too much aquannabis attempted to escape. When Bold opened the cell to remove the druggie’s cellmate, he made a run for it. Zach was ready to end the poor soul’s existence but it wasn’t necessary. The smuggler missed the open gate and ran straight into the bars that surrounded him. He went down immediately and, after healing the cellmate, Bold had to treat him for a concussion. Afterwards, Zach and Bold attempted to goad the cockatune out of the dungeon but once again the bird refused all efforts and the two gave up, assuming that eventually it would get hungry and fly out on its own. The sky was beginning to color, painted by a setting Solaris, by the time Bold finished with the POWs and moved on to tend to his friends.

Despite their afflictions and the pain it caused them to do anything but remain in a fetal position, Nogard and Machuba sat on the edges of their beds, one on either side of Zalfron’s cot. Joe and Zach sat with them – the human beside the fishfolk and the spirit beside the chidra. Bold was next to Zalfron with his purple boarded tome of healing. He had already healed the wound on Machuba’s right arm, but the rest of the fishfolk’s and chidra’s wounds would have to wait for later. They’d all been thoroughly brutalized. It was quite likely that all three had incurred some sort of permanent brain damage. Despite Nogard’s smoking habits and Machuba’s youthfulness, they were fortunate in having healthy enough brains to spare a few cells here and there. Zalfron, on the other hand, seemed already to be running on a limited supply and, to make matters worse, he definitely had endured the most extreme case of cranial pummeling.

Zalfron hadn't cleaned himself up at all, as Nogard and Machuba had tried. His left eye was pinched shut by a goose-egg sized swelling that had ballooned up on his cheek and a yet-to-color bulge on his eyebrow. His beak of a nose was bent to the right, having gushed a trail of blood over his lips which were split and busted. Bold had the boy remove his shirt, a task that ended up being immensely painful which did not bode well. The pale skinned elf's chest and abdomen looked like the peel of an overripe banana. Bold started with the brain. As he skimmed through the pages he asked the boys to question the elf to measure the extent of the damage.

"Ah member that woman throwin mae cross that cellar," Zalfron stated, his voice nasally, "and that bastard pahrate, bowed up lahk a banty cock, raht about there is where ah lose it."

"You lost it alright, Civ..." Nogard remarked.

"His eyes rolled back in his head." Machuba explained to Bold, clutching his throbbing ribs as he spoke, "He howled like a beast and then just went ballistic."

"Wae won though, so it worked." Zalfron shrugged and immediately regretted the motion.

"Hold still..." Bold began to recite the Sacred Tongue as he ran his left hand over the texts and gently placed his right hand on the elf's melon. As flames came to life on the ink of the page, the dwarf's hands glowed and Zalfron's mane, despite its blood and sweat greased condition, shimmered. When the page had all burnt up, Bold dropped his hand, sighed, then continued to flip through his pages asking Zalfron questions as he did.

"Who is the emparor?"

"Saint."

"How many Samarai?"

"Twelve."

"Who is the Black Crown?"

"Craeton...no wait," Zalfron hesitated, "the Quaen of Darkness?"

Bold paused in his page turning and looked to Zach, "Uh'm not sure?"

"Both." Zach answered, "Though I doubt the Queen would claim it."

"Yea, she won't even claim the name Queen of Darkness." Joe noted.

"I wouldn't call her da Black Crown." Nogard said, "Feel like da Black Crown isn't just about being a major crow, it be bout more dan just Creaton too, you know?"

"Anarchay." Bold agreed.

"Yea, Civ." Nogard nodded.

"Except the anarchy is governed by Creaton." Zach jumped back in, "Just as a Catechized world would be governed by the Queen."

"Zach has a point." Joe admitted.

"Wonder if dey'd work togedder if dey bode were around." Nogard murmured, "Dey'd make a cute couple." This got him snickering, which only agitated his broken ribs and led him to double over in pain.

"Don't jynx it." Joe warned.

"Alroight, last question lad," Bold cleared his throat, "what yar is it?"

"Farak me," Zalfron moaned, "ah ain't gotta clue!"

"In his defense," Joe spoke up, "I asked him that when we first met and he didn't know back then."

"1996." Machuba stated.

"April 10th." Zach added, "Wednesday."

Bold shrugged, “Don’t worry laddae, ya passed the test. Thar is somethin in that noggin of yars keepin that brehn sehfv, ya must bae charmed.”

“We all must be charmed, Civ,” Nogard whispered as if the volume of his voice might agitate his wounds, “we just ran off a banshee!”

“And Catherine Meriam.” Zach added.

“And we stole the *Monoceros*.” Machuba reminded.

“Da luck of da Sun Child, boys!” Nogard couldn’t resist raising his voice.

“And all we need is two more.” Joe stated.

“Huh!” Zalfron jerked, nearly jostling Bold out of his spell.

“There’s you, me, Nogard, Machuba, Bold and Zach,” Joe said, “that’s six of us.”

“Y’all’re going to God’s Island as well?” Machuba asked.

“We’re headed to Zviecoff.” Zach corrected.

Nogard frowned, “Zviecoff?”

“Aye,” Bold had finished another spell, having reduced the bruises on Zalfron’s belly to barely noticeable dark patches. Once more flipping through his book he explained, “to help Acamus sehfv his fathar.”

“Deseus!” Nogard exclaimed, he turned to Joe, “Gotta say, Civ, I wanna be der for dat!”

Joe looked to Machuba. The fishfolk shrugged. Then to Zalfron whose wide eyed expression assured Joe that the elf would not be opposed to such an idea. *Even if we went straight to the Emperor, something else would probably come up.* He sighed. *Seems like going with the flow is the best option in this chaotic world – Ekaf’ll turn us around if it’s a bad idea anyways.*

“Sure, after all, it is possible that Acamus is supposed to be a part of the team too.”

“Saelu! That’d bae awesome!” Zalfron exclaimed, leaping from the bed.

“Calm down, lad!” Bold roared as he slammed the elf back down, “Chroist!”

“He’s pretty old, Acamus.” Zach stated.

“Machuba’s pretty young.” Joe countered. Machuba nodded. Then Joe asked, “Is Acamus really that old?”

“You can’t tell with just a glance.” Zach said.

“Minotaurs age like dwarves and nellafs, Civ.” Nogard explained.

Joe turned to Bold, about to interrupt his spell before stopping himself and redirecting his query to Zachias, “How old’s Bold?”

“Twenty.” Zach answered.

“Yea, but his faddar had him when he was a couple hundred years old.” Nogard noted.

“*Couple hundred?*” Joe gasped.

Zach and Nogard nodded.

Machuba had to real the boys back in, “I doubt Acamus would abandon Iceload – unlike Aquaria, they’ve got the odds in their favor.”

“Aye,” Bold said between spells, “uh don’t know lad, the news comin outa Zviecoff ain’t been so good.”

“So y’all all think we should go?” Joe asked.

Bold and Zach exchanged glances before Bold revealed, “Wae sart of got roped into it with Aekaf.”

“Ah thank it’s a great adaea!” Zalfron let it be known.

Nogard snickered, regretted it, then said his little quip anyways, “Da elf dinks it’s a good idea, which means it probably ain’t.” Then he shrugged, something else he came to immediately regret, “I’m down, dough.”

Machuba didn’t make the mistake of shrugging though he essentially shrugged verbally, “I’d find Zviecoff more interesting than God’s Island.”

“Well then.” Joe said, “I guess it’s settled. We’ll put the prophecy on the back burner and lend the Iceloadic a hand. I don’t know about y’all, but things are starting to feel like they’re coming together. Yea?”

- - -

Eventually, Bold got so frustrated working on Zalfron that he decided to take a break and finish up Machuba. Bold was surprised, and thrilled, to find that the fishfolk had no broken bones – only a few small fractures. It turned out that though his cursed blood constantly subjected him to pain, the molten metal protected the flesh that lay beneath the surface. The defense wasn’t perfect. A strong blow could still sever a limb or break a bone (in fact, Bold warned Machuba, his right arm had been substantially weakened and another similar blow could chop the extremity clean off). On the other hand, healing bruises of liquid steel turned out to be just as arduous a task as putting one’s rib cage back together. While Bold worked, he asked Joe and Nogard to take Zalfron around the ship to not only keep them from distracting the dwarf but also so that the chidra and elf could reassess what areas on their body still pained them. The walking was slow and awkward, even Joe had somewhat of a limp. They staggered forward like a couple of old crones stooped and shuddering from pains left over from an excessive youth.

“What all do you remember from da fight?” Nogard asked as he held the door out of the sleeping quarters open.

“Lahk ah said,” Zalfron grunted, knowing better than to shrug, “jus the beginnin.”

Nogard pushed deeper, “Ya remember gettin knocked down and hoppin back up again bout a dozen times?”

Zalfron thought for a moment as he opened the next door.

“Kahnda.” He concluded.

“Why’d ya do it, Civ? Why didn’t ya stay down?”

They’d come into the tavern. They crossed the sea-water slicked floor in silence. Giving Zalfron ample time to answer, Nogard busied himself with packing his pipe. Joe was hardly paying attention to the conversation. He was busy watching his friends hobble along, ready to lunge forward and catch one of them if they were to suddenly fall. After packing the bowl, Nogard looked back to Zalfron but the elf remained silent. Nogard scoffed and looked to Joe for support. The pyromancer shrugged, determined not to participate in the chidra’s investigation. As they left the tavern and came into the stairwell, Nogard nudged the elf in the shoulder with his fist.

“Hae was gonna to kill us,” Zalfron snapped, “someone had to get back up!”

“Nah, Civ,” Nogard disagreed, “even before you went berserk, der was someding in your eyes...I got da vibe der be more to it.”

Joe could tell that Nogard’s questions were angering the elf. He gave Nogard a stern glare but the chidra waved it off and defended his interrogations.

“Don’t answer if you don’t want to, but if we’re gonna be fightin togedder I dink I gotta right to ask. Just curious. Seemed to me you had it out for dat man, like as dough you had someding against him...like as dough dis wasn’t your first encounter wid Captain Pigeon...”

The elf was quiet until they reached the top of the stairs. There, he gave in, “It wasn’t.”

Nogard looked to Joe as if to say I told you so. Joe jabbed the chidra in the ribs. Nogard resisted the urge to howl in pain, displaying immense self-control.

Zalfron continued, “After mah sis baecame a Samurah, fore the War on Mancy broke out, some folks broke into our estate in Yelah...they, uh...they killed mah parents. They took mae back to Asslore...Guess what ship wae took.”

Neither of the boys needed to guess. They followed Zalfron down the hall, heading towards the bow.

“Ah remember saein Pigeon.” Zalfron stated, “Ah don’t thank hae ever said a word to mae. Ah don’t aeven know if hae knew who ah was.”

“Still can’t believe you were in the dungeons of Icelore...” Nogard remarked. He said to Joe, “Dey’re renown. Like...no one gets out of dat prison, dat place be suuuper tight.”

“What is it like?” Joe asked.

“All ah know is the room ah was in. Square, bout as wahd as ah am tall – jus long enough for mae to lay flat. No windows.”

“Yea, Civ, dat’s cause it be like *selims* underground.”

“The food comes through a hole in the door everay other day. At first it was hard to swallow but, bah the end of it...”

Zalfron paused for a moment. He continued walking but the words had shriveled up on his tongue. Now Joe was giving Nogard the glare again. Nogard did feel guilty.

“Sorry, Civ,” he muttered, “you don’t have to-”

“Nah...” Zalfron cleared his throat, “Ah never got to talk to anyone about it, not yet at laest...haven’t had anaybody to tell honestalay...can ah kaep going?”

“Course!” Joe exclaimed.

“Brudder,” Nogard said, “let it out.”

Zalfron chuckled a bit, “Ya know, that slop baecame the hah laht of mah day. But ah didn’t raelly appraecaiate it til they started forgettin us.”

“You had a cell mate?” Nogard asked.

“Yea but...but they killed him after a bit. Then ah was alone.”

“How...” Joe couldn’t help but ask, “how long were you down there?”

“Not a yaer, ah don’t thank.” Zalfron said, then he frowned, “Ah dunno...Ah know it was 1995 when they killed mah parents...but this is the first day ah’ve heard the date since.”

“How’d you get out?” Joe asked.

Nogard swung wide the door before them, revealing a hall walled by the whirring machinery of a mapwork. The conversation came to a temporary halt as the boys’ wonder took hold. They limped forward. Spread across the bow-side wall, the map continued to depict the *Monoceros* as a ruby jewel scooting across the Dragon Gulf. After the initial shock of their curiosity faded, Nogard returned to the topic at hand.

“Tell us how you got out, Civ! Nobody escapes Icelore!”

“Mah jailor let mae go.” Zalfron shrugged, “Ah never gotta name...but ah remember her face. Shae was short, human, slanted ahs lahk Catty, prollay round our age, and shae was a shadowmancer. Ah told her one day ah would return to Asslore and kill everay last mancer there

but shae didn't saem concerned. Shae almost saemed glad to haer mae say it...Ah don't thank shae saved me cause shae felt bad for mae. Ah thank she saved mae cause shae hated the Order."

"Musta been an undercover agent, Civ." Nogard said as his eyes turned back to the map, "She musta been working for da Pact."

"Aither way, ah share no pitay with those who work for the Order." Zalfron stated, "Undercover or not."

"Do you know how long you've been out?" Joe asked.

"Not long, maybe not aeven a month." The elf began to drift out of the room, stern-ward, "Soon as ah got out ah went lookin to join the war."

Joe followed him, "Damn."

"Ah sorta lost mahself, with all those months spent in the dark. Ah couldn't go back to studyin, not after that. Ah thought bout startin a blacksmith shop."

"You're a blacksmith?" Joe asked.

"Everay Sentray is a blacksmith, laest in mah familay lahn they are." Zalfron explained, "Ah prollay would've stuck with it, smithin, had ah not got the ahdea to trah out for the Kou Knahts and ran into y'all. You've given mae a maens to faht, Joe, a maens to get revenge."

Despite the appreciation, Joe couldn't help but feel uncomfortable. He did not get positive vibes from the word revenge. Yet how could he blame Zalfron? *If someone had killed my parents, wouldn't I be out for blood? Did that excuse it? What if the folks that killed his folks only did it cause his folks had killed theirs? Wasn't his dad in the Imperial Navy? Is all this violence just perpetuating itself? Is there any way to stop it without more violence? Will it ever stop?* Joe didn't know. All he knew was that with each coming day there was more and more blood on his hands. And, as the layers of blood got thicker, Joe was beginning to find the sickness that came with it subside. *What am I becoming?*

The elf walked out the doorway. Joe followed. Looking back, he realized Nogard was still by the map. The chidra had opened the vial that jutted out from the geographic façade and was withdrawing a shard of metal from the tube.

The cartogram went still. The symphony of clicking and rattling wound to an end.

"What is that?" Joe asked.

As Nogard joined him in the doorway, he answered, "A piece of my fadder's sword."

- - -

Dinner consisted of burnt bread and a collection of baked animals.

"One creature a person!" Ekaf declared.

This wasn't a problem. The smallest specimen was a pretty good-sized chicken – something called a wooly chicken – enough to feed Joe for a week. Nogard picked first, taking a mighty drumstick that looked to have belonged to an ostrich (which the chidra called a thrasher or a "drasher" rather). Machuba chose a slab of fish known as fofo. Zalfron contested but then submitted after realizing there was no neuni sauce. Instead, he latched onto a ridgeback flank. Despite being disgusted by the abomination that was Knomish cooking, Bold's belly ached so he bit the bullet and grabbed the deep-fried frost elk neck. Joe played it safe and ate the chicken. Acamus came down from the wheel, proudly proclaiming that the *Monoceros* would be sailing herself, then took the bowl of Batloen chili. Ekaf settled upon a tan gelatin-like substance that no one dared pick (especially after Bold swore on his soul that it was just a bowl of solidified grease). Zach ate nothing.

“Why aren’t you eating?” Joe asked.

“Spirits don’t aet, lad.” Bold stated.

“I told you that when we first met!” Ekaf cried with a mouth full of dried grease, shaking his head, “No one ever listens...”

“All they naed is air.” Zalfron added.

“My flame runs on oxygen,” Zach explained, “much like traditional flame.”

As Joe gnawed his chicken, he thought about this. *No wonder he is always in armor. I would be too if my life hinged on something so fragile.* Joe had thought diabetes was bad. A new question struck Joe, “Does water put it out?”

“No, it’s purple fire.” Machuba explained.

“Ah,” Joe nodded, “so it’s like blue fire?”

“A combination of red and blue.” Zach concurred, “Only a lack of air and bad intentions threaten me.”

“Bad intentions?” Then Joe nodded and looked to reassure Ekaf, “Oh yeah, I do remember you saying that.” He turned back to Zach, “So can I touch your fire?”

“Take da Civ out to dinner first, my boy!” Nogard cried.

Everyone laughed except for Zach, Machuba, and Joe, though the spirit couldn’t help but grin.

“My people mate by touching flames,” his smirk grew to a chuckle, “and I apologize but I am saving my flame for marriage.”

“Dese pyromaniacs always be after folks’ fires!” Nogard couldn’t stop laughing and his cackling kept Ekaf and Zalfron going too, “Don’t go to sleep, Civ!” Nogard slapped Zach on his armored back, “You might wake up in Joe’s chest!”

Blushing, Joe apologized, “Sorry Zach, I didn’t realize-”

“It is fine,” Zach nodded, still unable to stop smiling, “but it is a little funny.”

“It was...” glaring at the chidra, Joe rolled his eyes, then raised his voice with a grin, “maybe if you worked more on your fighting than you’re joking you wouldn’t have to get a weaponless electric elf to save you from a couple of Sea Lords.”

Stunned, Nogard’s laughter stopped and his smile took a sideways twist.

“Green horn Sea Lords at that!” Acamus joined Joe’s defense.

“Green horns?” Nogard was indignant, “Pigeon ain’t no green horn!”

“No but the rest of the crew, my friend,” Acamus chuckled, “all new recruits.”

“Raelly?” Zalfron asked.

Acamus nodded, “The majority of the Aquarian Sea Lord pirates are already in Zviecoff, doing what they can to assist the Order and finish off the Coalition’s resistance. John Pigeon was out to steal some goods from the Pact and he picked up some new troops from one of his training camps while he was at it.” Lifting his bowl of chili to his lips, the minotaur slurped down what was left then dropped the bowl to the table and got to his hooves.

“How do ya know all this?” Zalfron blurted.

“Suspicious are we?” Acamus chuckled.

“Ah didn’t maen-”

Acamus waved his hand, “No harm, my friend, can’t help but give pale elves a hard time.” He nodded to Ekaf, “When I ran into your friends, I’d just gotten back from Aquaria.”

“No way, Civ,” Nogard jabbed Machuba in the arm, “Can you imagine a minotaur in Aquaria?”

“Oh, my friend, the looks I got.” Acamus chuckled, “As I was saying, I went under to find me a Sea Lord. See, last I heard, my father was in Rivergate, that’s the harbor there in Zviecoff, and the whole port was crawling with Sea Lords. So much so that he wasn’t sure he’d be able to get word out again. Somehow, he got a shield dragon out of there and – as those little critters do – it found me and gave me his message. He was wounded...and if I could get a boat in their...I’m...*he* is confident I could get him out. That’s what got me to focus on the *Monoceros* which is what led me to the Sea Lord base in Aquaria. I had to be sure the ship was headed back to Zviecoff before I committed to sieging it and it wasn’t hard to get the Sea Lords Pigeon left behind to talk. Poor fishfolk nearly died at the sight of me.”

“You planned to take the *Monoceros* yourself?” Machuba asked.

“Initially,” Acamus nodded, “til I ran into Boldarian, Zachias, and the Knome.”

“You’re crazy!” Nogard crowed.

“I’m an Icespear.” Acamus shrugged, then he changed the subject, “I must be getting back to the helm.”

“But the autopilot?” Ekaf complained, “You sure you don’t want to stay down here and chit chat? I’ll share my sou-”

“No, my friend, I’ve got no idea how much energy is left in the enertombs nor do I know the flaws in this vessel’s enchantments, every ship has its quirks.” Acamus moved towards the door then paused, “If you seek my company, my friends, you know where I’ll be.”

Acamus left and the boys went back to their dinners. Zalfron waited until he was sure the minotaur was out of earshot then addressed his companions, “What do y’all thank bout him?”

“Who?” Bold asked.

“Acamus!” Zalfron exclaimed.

Bold shrugged, “Uh noice enough lad,” then his eyes grew wide, “and hae’s strong as an ox!”

“He threw Bold!” Ekaf nearly screamed the sentence he was so excited to tell the others.

“And his spear is as powerful as a Knomish blade.” Zach stated.

“On the contrary,” Ekaf had to interject, “no weapon is stronger than a Knomish blade!”

“Da Mystak Blade, Civ!” Nogard countered.

“Aside from that one.” Ekaf admitted.

Machuba brought the discussion back on topic, asking Zalfron, “Why do you ask?”

The elf frowned, “Somethan bout him saems off...lahk hae’s a few arrows short uh quiver...”

“You’ve just met the guy!” Joe cried.

Zalfron shrugged, “It was just a vahb.”

“Aye, the vary thought hae could take this boat boi himself...uh bit delusional, oi’ll say...” Bold admitted.

“You don’t think he could’ve!?” Ekaf exclaimed.

“We went with him,” Zach said, “do you think we’re crazy?”

“Nah, you were jus followin a Knome.” Zalfron shrugged.

“Besides, Civs,” Nogard waved it off, “everybody’s crazy.”

“I think Zalfron and Bold are onto something.” Machuba said.

“Ya?” Nogard scoffed.

“The look in the minotaur’s eyes...” Machuba said as he licked his own.

“Yea!” Zalfron nodded, “Kahnda made mae...made mae fael hopeless, ya know?”

“A look I’ve seen in you, Boldarian, just today.” Machuba stated.

“Whot?!” Bold jumped out of his seat, he looked to Zach, “Oi’m not crazy...am oi?”

“I’m not saying you are.” Machuba was quick to speak, probably the quickest Joe had yet seen him, “I’ve been there too.”

“What are you talking about?” Zach demanded.

“When you fear something and aren’t sure if that thing can be stopped,” Machuba said, his black eyes locked with Bold’s brown ones, “you’re almost more afraid of the inevitability than the thing itself.”

Nogard sat back in his chair, withdrew his pipe from his coat, and began to pack a bowl.

“That sort of desperation,” Machuba continued, “but see with you, Boldarian, it is not there all the time. It comes and it goes...”

Bold slowly got back in his chair.

“Cause ya still got hope.” Zalfron suggested.

“But with Acamus,” Machuba frowned, “it hasn’t left his eyes all day.”

“Desperation makes a man dangerous,” Ekaf acknowledged, “to his enemies and his friends.”

“Should we speak with him?” Zach asked.

“Aye, if anay is to spaek with him, to give him hope,” Bold spoke up, “it should bae Joe.”

“Ya Civ, tell him bout da luck of da Sun Child,” Nogard said bitterly before he lit his pipe and took a puff.

“What can I say?” Joe asked, too concerned about his new acquaintance to notice the coldness in Nogard’s voice, “I can’t just tell him it’ll all work out? Even if I did, he’d probably laugh at me.”

“Just talk to him, lad.” Bold stated, “Let him know hae’s not alone.”

“I’ll help!” Ekaf promised.

“Mae too!” Zalfron declared.

“Oh no you won’t, laddae, oi’ve finished with Machuba and Nogard, but uh’ve still gotta finish you!” Bold said.

“Donum.” The elf cursed.

Ekaf got up from his chair. Joe was hesitant but it seemed that the decision had already been made. Swallowing one more bite of chicken and washing it down with the magic-strained sea water, Joe grabbed his backpack, got up, and went with the Knome to the bridge.

Acamus sailed the great vessel north. The plan was to sail the ship around Middakle to Etihw City, where the northeastern mouth of the river lied. Spared both by the Samurai and Talloome Icelore, Etihw was one of the few cities left practically unscathed by the War on Mancy. In the Mystvokar’s absence, the city became one of the strongest supporters of the Vokriitoff – the peoples of Iceload that united to oust the Order. With the fate of the greatest Iceloadic city in turmoil (Zviecoff), the Etihwy made sure to closely regulate all those that sought passage onto their river and no ships were admitted after Solaris had set. Thus, in the slow hours after midnight, Acamus was forced to anchor alongside a collection of other patient crafts.

The high rising bluffs of Etihw’s harbor joined the heavens in twinkling as citizens took to the sea-side bars and clubs. Faintly, Nogard could hear thumping bass and garbled singing. He sat alone, straddling the bowsprit above the headsail. Jutting out from beneath his squirming

mustache was the stem of his corncob pipe. The bowl was lit and every minute another plume of pungent smoke poured out of the chidra's nostrils to be shredded by the ocean wind. With each coming puff, his blood cooled. With each coming puff, the ache in his soul eased.

Reaching into his robe – as he had long since discarded his Aquarian garments – Nogard withdrew the shard of blade he'd recovered from the mapwork room. He flipped it over and over in his hands. *How many nights did you sit like dis, smoking gogo, on da Obsidian Sail?* He wondered. *Did you ever dink about me? Did you even know I be?* His lips curled in disgust and he had to pinch the pipe in his teeth to keep it from falling into the sea. He recalled an old, Foxloen factory worker proverb: *Da wise man knows it's better to lose dan never to have.* Unfortunately for Nogard, he knew his father but never had a father. The shard in his hands shimmered in the star light. He spat on the reflective surface – *I wish dere were a hell, Dresdan Otubak!* – then threw the metal into the ocean.

As the sliver of sword hit the water, he noticed the weight of the blade-less hilt sheathed between the Shelmick's Shield and his spine. Reaching back, he withdrew the crimson, X-shaped handle. Not an inch of blade remained within the hilt. He hoisted it over head, ready to do with it what he'd done with the shard. But he hesitated. This was the last artifact he had of the father he'd never known.

Could he really blame his father? Solely? He'd been conceived consensually. His mother knew who she was getting into bed with and she had abandoned Nogard just the same as Dresdan. In fact, it was because of his father – not his mother – that he had anything related to his parentry. Sharp Otubak, the Samurai, had sought him out. Having heard of him from Paud Gill – for Paud Gill had been a buyer of Nogard's home-made strain of gogo – Sharp had sought Nogard out and given Nogard Dresdan's Sword. Nogard, like Sharp, knew nothing of his mother. Nogard, like Sharp, knew little of his father, but they both knew he'd held that sword. Sharp was gone now, with the rest of the Samurai, but when they had met, for a very brief moment, he felt as though he had a family. Dresdan had given him a brother. Now a days, with Machuba and maybe even with his newfound comradery in Zalfron and Joe – possibly with Bold and Zach too – Nogard had found his real family, but still...knowing where he came from, as much as it hurt, was somehow, someway, something he appreciated.

He replaced the hilt in its harness between his shield and his spine.

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With his best friend off blazing and brooding, Machuba decided to tour the *Monoceros*. He had never seen the ship before but he'd run into Sea Lords on more than one occasion. The life of a Sea Lord was lusted after by many young, mischievous fishfolk. Like Sidon and the Soldiers of Shelmick, the Aquarian Sea Lords were one of the few groups willing, and able, to work outside the law of the submarine monarchy. However, instead of sneaking below the law, they operated above it. Though Lacitar never explicitly endorsed the pirates, the enlightened eye could easily see what was going on. Their smuggling survived thanks to the corruption of the dictatorship. Wandering through the brig, Machuba was curious to see if any of their captives bore familiar faces. As soon as he came into the dungeon, the cockatune fluttered over to land on his shoulder. As he walked by the cells, observing the scowling, dark eyed buccaneers the parrot clicked, whistled, and chattered a popular sea faring song.

"Body of a siren, a heart kind and faithful." The bird's voice was surprisingly deep, "Will firm as iron, grace of an angel."

Machuba was enjoying the bird's musical talent so much that he continued to walk around the cells, straying away from those that were inhabited, and idly moseying towards the bow into the deepest darkest corner of the ship.

"Sees who I strive to be, knowing what I am." The bird continued, "Confides her trust in me, loves me when I can't."

"Gill?"

Machuba spun, flinched, then froze. He'd known a person was in the cell but he had not expected the person to possess a voice so feminine. He walked up to the speaker's cell. He licked his eyeballs to assure himself he wasn't hallucinating. She had the complexion of a Soldier of Shelmick though Machuba didn't recognize her. He assumed her to be one of the mermen of the late great Mirkweed Empire. But his double take wasn't because of the woman's ethnicity rather it was because of her beauty.

"Take me away! Take me away! Oh wind and wave, take me away!" The cockatune recited the chorus, "To where she stays! To where she stays! Oh take me away to where she stays!"

He was puzzled. *How does she know me?*

"Those eyes," she murmured, "they're like your father's."

"What do you know of my father?" Machuba demanded.

"You sound as though I've insulted you." the merman replied, slinking away from the front of the cell, "Perhaps I should've stayed quiet."

Now Machuba was confused. He licked his eyes.

She continued, "You've taken the *Monoceros*, you've locked the Sea Lords in their own brig. It was foolish of me to assume we could be on the same side. Even though you are a Gill."

"What're you talking about?"

"You're working for King Lacitar."

Machuba's confusion turned to rage, "I would never!"

"Then we *are* on the same side," she approached the bars, "I am Lela Laroc, your father and mine were friends."

Her elaboration was unnecessary. Machuba recognized the name.

"What happened to you," Machuba asked, "after your father died?"

"We went to a man named Iesop Shell who brought us, my siblings and I, south. We lived in a small merman village." She replied, "Outside of Mirkweed, under the waves of the Dragon Gulf."

"Safe from Lacitar's reach?"

"Yes, but not safe from the Sea Lords." Lela didn't skip a beat. Machuba could tell the pain had long since come and went. He knew all too well the numbness that fills the gaps after the loss of one's kin.

"What happened?"

"The Sea Lord's had always taxed the village but after Captain Ching Shih died, they began to ask for more. When we couldn't pay, they razed the town. My brothers were killed. My sisters suffered worse. I was fortunate. I was younger then. They let me remain alive as a slave."

She took a pause to eye Machuba once more. The way she scanned his body, from head to toe, thrilled Machuba but he held back from his petty emotions. He wanted to see beneath that pretty face and he wanted to be sure this was not some clever ruse.

"Just last year I turned thirteen and bought my freedom. I remained amongst the Sea Lords by my own free will. Where else had I to go? It was a tough life, but it was a life

nonetheless...until it turned sour. The new recruits were never much more than fools. A few months ago, one was bold enough to impose himself upon me.” She shuddered, licked her eyeballs, then continued, “I killed him.”

If she told the truth, then her character intrigued Machuba as much as her appearance.

But now it was her turn to interrogate, “Why are you here?”

“*I don’t know.*” He almost said, but he bit his tongue. A second later came a separate but truthful answer, “I’m here to help Acamus Icespear save his father in Zviecoff.”

“What drove you from the sea?” Lela asked, seeking an answer like the one that he had repressed, “Iesop said that you were in the Soldiers of Shelmick.”

Machuba sighed, his gills flaring. He did know. He left out of despair. But how could he tell that to a Lorac. That he, a Gill, had given up. Then again, looking into her eyes, how could he lie?

“It felt like I was swimming against a dam.”

“I understand.” She admitted, looking down as if she shared his shame, then returning her gaze to say, “We are young. I wonder if our father’s fates might’ve changed had they had a break from the relentless pressure below...”

After a moment of silence, she asked, “Why are you helping the minotaurs?”

“Before I left Aquaria, a human saved my life.” Machuba explained, “To repay this debt, I am fighting with him and his comrades and they have chosen to help the minotaurs.”

She nodded and Machuba could tell she understood.

“Wait here.”

Machuba strode away from the cell before she could respond. His quickness was partly because he didn’t want her to point out how pointless a statement like “wait here” was when spoken to someone locked in a prison cell and partly because he wanted to act before he had a change of heart. At the entrance of the brig, he grabbed the key and went back to the merman’s cell. Sea Lords hooped and hollered as he ran by, praying to Barro that the key he held was for them.

“You’re going to set me free?” She asked.

“I trust you.” He shrugged, “You are the daughter of Leord.”

She retreated from the front of the cell, suddenly skeptical of the resemblance she believed she saw, “But I haven’t given you any proof...”

“No one below the sea knew I was with the Soldiers of Shelmick, no one below the sea knew I was alive, except for the Soldiers of Shelmick and,” Machuba said as he fiddled with the lock, “except for Iesop Shell. No one who is a friend of the Soldiers or a friend of Iesop Shell is an enemy of mine. Whether or not you are who you claim to be, I know you are not my enemy.”

“There.” She offered a sharp tooth smile, “Now I know you really are Machuba Juji.”

Without another word, Machuba unlocked the cell and Lela strode out. Listening to the cockatune’s singing, they left the brig, ignoring the yells from the pirate prisoners, and made their way up three flights of stairs to the deck – the bird, yet again, refused to follow them outside of the dungeon. They walked over to a railing and there they stopped. Machuba observed Lela in the moonlight. From her dress, Machuba inferred that she’d been taken straight from the crime to the prison cell. She was dressed much like a man, trousers, tunic, and boots, though her tunic was cut a little lower than her comrades’. Her front side was a very light shade of blue, her back side was so dark it was almost purple. Machuba had never been attracted to another person before. He had never felt romantic in his entire life. But right then, right there, he felt like swimming away with her.

He knew before she even said it that she wasn't going to stay.

"Where will you go?" He asked.

"I'll find Iesop," she shrugged, "maybe join the Soldiers."

"They're heading south, to a dome that lies below Azunu. A forgotten merman civilization that calls themselves Sitnalta."

"I'll find them."

Again silence fell around them. Encompassing them. Machuba didn't want to break it because he knew that the sooner the conversation was over the sooner she would be gone.

"Why don't you come with me?"

Biting his lip, Machuba looked away. He had hoped she wouldn't ask. He glanced on down the ship and there, walking slowly towards them from the bow, was the dark figure of Nogard. The chidra hadn't spotted them yet, but soon he would. Again, Machuba sighed deeply.

"I can't."

"I know. It was a silly thought." She smiled sadly, "Goodbye, Sheenshong Machuba Gill Juji."

Lela leaned forward and kissed Machuba on the cheek. Machuba pulled her close and held her tight, their cheeks smushed up against one another's. She was the first to pull back. When she did, they didn't speak. They watched each other with their big, black eyes for a minute. Then she turned, climbed up on the railing, and jumped off the *Monoceros*.

Nogard arrived alongside his friend, nudging him with an elbow and nodding in the direction of where Lela had just left. Machuba didn't speak. He only licked his eyes. Nogard nodded, smiled a sad smile much like Lela had, and patted Machuba on the shoulder. After a long while of staring into the distance, the chidra spoke.

"Come on, brudder, let's get some sleep."

"Yea," Machuba agreed.

And they headed below deck together, in silence.

- - -

"Hello Aqa."

Aqa Eniram awoke to the face of a red fox. The creature sat on his chest, watching him with its head cocked to the side. It was peculiar to spot a fox on the sea floor, let alone one that spoke the Aquarian Dialect! The fishfolk's heart raced. Only hours ago he'd seen Death and now he was visited by the very avatar of Hormah. He prayed to Barro.

"Are you going to lie here praying until you die?"

The fox's mouth didn't move but the words were undoubtedly coming from it.

"What are you?" Aqa asked.

The voice replied, "I am a fox."

"Who are you?"

"That is a question you know the answer to thus it is a question I refuse to answer. Right now, I've got questions for you."

The fox trotted down his chest, across his belly, and leapt onto the bolder that pinned his legs. There it spoke again.

"Who did this to you?"

"The Soldiers of Shelmick!"

“The Soldiers of Shelmick?” The fox shook his head, “They might’ve slaughtered your brothers but who did this to *you*?”

“There was a group of land lubbers, one a human, a pyromancer,” Aqa said. Anger began to well up inside the fishfolk. The pain that covered his face and legs was quickly forgotten as an unadulterated hatred consumed his body. He could see the human’s face as if the pyromancer stood before him.

“What would you do if you ever met this human again?”

Aqa shuddered.

“If I lift this bolder and you follow me then everything you ever wanted will be yours – starting with the opportunity to meet that human again. All that I ask of you in return is your loyalty.”

“I am loyal to King Lacitar!”

The fox chuckled, “And look where that got you. You think Lacitar doesn’t know what happened here? You’ve lied here for twenty-four hours, mere selims from Gonchi, and yet not a soul has come to aid you. This is not to say the Soldiers of Shelmick have a point, though...if you think loyalty in a king such as Lacitar is well placed...”

Aqa watched the fox. He could leave the Aquarian Ocean and no one would know the difference. He would be pronounced dead with all the other soldiers buried beneath the crumbled canyon. He didn’t really have a choice. Fore if he stayed he would be pronounced dead *and* he would actually be dead. The fox was right, they had been forsaken by their government. Aqa knew this. The only chance he had to avoid death was to place his faith in this fox but – if the fox told the truth and could indeed lift the stones off his legs – then what exactly would he owe the fox. What was the cost of “loyalty”.

The fox seemingly sensed his question.

“I will tell you to do things and you will do them. Each assignment I give you will make you stronger. You will become the strongest fishfolk to walk the dusty surface. Your name will be revered among my followers like Tidalus is amongst the Trinity Nations. You will be a part of a team to counter the human pyromancer’s, but you alone will get the privilege of killing the human and once he is dead you will be free and by then you will have the power to do whatever you please.”

“What do you have against this human?” Aqa asked.

The fox replied, “It is not the human I despise, but his fate. Whether or not we leave here together or I leave here alone, if that human lives then there will not be a part of this world, above or below, that will escape the evil that he will release.”

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Stiff as a board, Acamus stood at the helm of the *Monoceros*. Before him, monoliths of frosty earth rose hundreds of feet from the mouth of the Etihw River, staggered in rows, like the trees of a forest, and wedged between the vast cliff faces that shored the delta. The earthen pillars were speckled by snowcapped structures which were scurrying with elven life. Bridges of wood and stone passed from column to column. These were lit with jumping flames so that the dragons that weaved in and out of the geological peg board could spot the overpasses through the twilight and the smog that twisted and twirled upwards from the chimney stacks of the buildings. Though his glossy eyes rested on the spectacle that was Etihw City, he saw naught. All Acamus could

think about was Zviecoff. *Soon, father.* He was so lost in his thoughts he didn't notice as Joe and Ekaf clambered up the stairs onto the bridge.

"Hey there Acamus-" Acamus whirled around with wild eyes and Ekaf's words died.

Joe picked up the slack, "How are you feeling?"

"Feeling?" Acamus barked.

Joe hesitated then decided to go with the truth, "At dinner, some of the boys mentioned being worried about you. They've been through a lot of similar situations and-"

"My friend," Acamus scoffed, "I doubt their fathers have been trapped in a city crawling with powerful adversaries who would leap at the thought of lobbing off their heads!"

"On the contrary," Ekaf raised an index finger towards the constellations, "this is Machuba Gill Juji and Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth we're talking about. Their fathers never made it out of such environments! Even Zalfron. Tiad, Zachias too. You know what happened to Father Shisharay-"

"I'm feeling fine." Acamus glared at the Knome, "Thanks for the reassurance, *Knome.*"

Joe sputtered for some dialectical avenue in which to take the conversation and break through the minotaur's icy exterior but ultimately surrendered. There was nothing to say. Lest he pollute the science with Knome like babble, Joe decided to simply stand. Bold had said to talk to Acamus to let him know he was not alone. Joe felt like the best way to do that was to simply keep the old man company.

"I don't believe in luck." Acamus stated, surprising Joe so that the Earthboy was quite vulnerable when he proceeded to ask, "Do you?"

"No." Joe said without a pause.

"I do." Ekaf interjected, "Luck is a thing – it's a fact. Some say it's a conspiracy, but I've seen them: fairies. Good luck and bad luck fairies. We're surrounded by them now, in fact, they're merely invisible..."

As Ekaf rambled on, Joe thought about his initial response, then interrupted the Knome to elaborate, "No, I suppose I don't. I mean, I'm human, so sometimes things happen and I can't help but think it was luck but..."

"Do you believe in God, my friend?" Acamus asked.

Joe nodded, "Yea."

"He's Christian." Ekaf added.

"You think he'll help us in Zviecoff?"

Joe bit back his immediate answer only to mull it over and find that there was no better response – none that was true, at least, "No. Figure if God was in the business of interfering, then we wouldn't need to go to Zviecoff in the first place."

"There a lot of Mystakle Christians on Earth?" Acamus asked.

Joe smiled, sadly, "No, probably more Thoran Christians than anything else."

"But they call themselves Southern Bad Tits." Ekaf claimed.

"No." For some reason, Ekaf's bullshit set Joe's eyes off rapidly blinking, "No, they don't."

"Seventh Day Advertisements?"

"No that's-"

"Church of the Saturday Hate?"

"Eka-"

"Evangelicals?"

“Actually...” Joe scratched his head, “Yea they do call themselves that.” Then he turned to Acamus, “Though all those other names he said are wrong and probably offensive to potential readers-”

“*They’re evangelicals, Joe.*” Now it was Ekaf eye rolling and rapid blinking, “How can I offend them when they can’t even read this book – they aren’t even allowed to read Harold the Child Wizard!”

Acamus took control of the conversation once more, “I’m a man of the Quran, myself.” Acamus said, “We think similar as you. Though we believe the Lord moves through us – his will manifests in the acts of his true disciples, but, my friend, that will is mysterious and we mortals are fallible.”

“If everyone followed their faith to a T, even if they were just made-up cults, we’d be living in paradise.” Ekaf muttered, before raising his voice and saying, “Don’t worry, the will of the Lord sure moves through Joe. He’s been here for – what? A day and a week? And without any sort of experience with combat he’s fought off a barren, a school of shamoos, a squad of Tadloe Guards, a handful of the Knights of the Light, a gang of smugglers, Black Crown Pact goons, a giant fire breathing crab, soldiers of the Aquarian Army, and, as you know, a boatload of Sea Lords!”

“It seems to me that if God were working through you, you would’ve avoided all that trouble in the first place.” Acamus countered.

Joe couldn’t argue with the minotaur’s logic. A bit of silence fell back between them. Acamus strummed his fingers across the wheel. A murder of dragons soared over head and the minotaur craned his neck to watch their silhouettes eclipse the distant stars. Joe looked to Ekaf. Raising a finger, the Knome’s mouth opened as if to speak but he was cut off by the minotaur. Looking down from the sky to watch Joe intently, he said, “The weather will get rough. Whether we are successful or not, before this is all over, blood will be spilt by the gallons.”

This made Joe feel sick to his stomach. He already had enough blood on his hands, but he couldn’t turn around now. Still, it didn’t feel right. It felt wrong killing the smugglers and the highwaymen, it felt wrong killing the Pacters in the tavern, it felt wrong killing the prisoner transport – but it felt right saving Machuba. It’d likely feel right saving Theseus. *Is this what it they really mean when they talk about the Samurai Principle? You’ve got to crack a few eggs to make an omelet? No.* Joe couldn’t swallow that. *It feels wrong and it is wrong. Necessary? Maybe. But still wrong.* The dark eyed minotaur could sense the debate swirling in Joe’s mind, his distraught expression keyed Acamus in.

“You’re afraid.” Acamus noted.

“You aren’t?” Joe almost laughed.

“Not for the same reason, my friend..” Acamus murmured.

Joe was rushed by a sudden gust of honesty, “I’m just worried...all this violence...What if we’re becoming no better than our enemies, resorting to the same tactics...What if there is a better way...is killing all our enemies really the only way we can end these wars?”

Acamus chuckled, “You sound like Eirene GraiLord, my friend!”

“Who?” Joe asked, turning to Ekaf.

“The last true GraiLord to rule the minotaurs.” Ekaf explained.

“Few who hail outside the Vanian Mountains have heard of Eirene, but I’m sure you’ve heard of the First War of the Blue Ridges?”

Joe shifted his weight between his feet and took a guess though he knew he was wrong before the words even left his lips, “The First Void War?”

“By God!” Acamus crowed, good heartedly, “You weren’t kidding about being knew to the light of Solaris.”

“Tell him the story!” Ekaf suggested, “He’s got to learn!”

“It’s quite a long tale.” Acamus warned.

“I don’t have anywhere to be.” Joe laughed.

“Suppose not,” Acamus agreed, “well, my friend, it is a sad, bleak story but one imperative to understanding the peoples of Iceload. This is the story of Eirene GraiLord...”

Acamus' Tale 1: The Queen of Peace

She was born before the First Hatching and came of age around the same time that Creaton Live and Chane landed on the shores of Azunu, Iceload. Argolis GraiLord, son of the great dragon slayer, Mycenae GraiLord, had already begun to woo her before the Quran reached the Blue Ridges. As Islam swept across the Vanian Mountains, she held fast to her Christian heritage as did much of the Recercoff nobility but the love of her life did not. Argolis adopted the religion brought by the Black Crown Pact and lost his place among the aristocracy. Argolis GraiLord became Argolis Muhammad. Still, their love was too strong to be broken by theology and a couple hundred bitter royals. In the midst of the First Void War, Eirene GraiLord and Argolis Muhammad became husband and wife.

Not long after their wedding, Creaton Live was defeated at the Battle of Krynor. With his disappearance came the armies of the elves, nellafs, and bears. The minotaur empires had to decide whether they would fight or adopt the position that they'd been duped – that the Moon Dragon Man was not the next and final-final prophet. Most of the northern minotaurs, led by Argolis Muhammad, decided Creaton had been an opportunistic blasphemer but retained their faith in Islam – they called themselves Rational Muslims. Most of the southern minotaurs, Kurrs and Lunas, refused to admit that Creaton had conned them – they called themselves Original Muslims. With the help of the foreign powers, Argolis, his father, and the GraiLords fought Chane and those who still supported the Black Crown Pact. Meanwhile, Eirene and many of her fellow Christians remained in Recercoff. Her deep faith prevented her from promoting violence and in letters she pleaded for Argolis to convince his father to find another way.

After the war, Argolis wished he had. Though they won, expelling all those loyal to Creaton from the Blue Ridges, Mycenae had died on the battlefield. After the Pact Expulsion, the dynasties of the minotaurs were in shambles and the one empire that was still strong enough to rule, the GraiLords, had just lost its king. What remained of the southern minotaurs wouldn't bow to a Christian and the GraiLord royalty wouldn't bow to a Muslim – this made Eirene and Argolis the perfect compromise. For the first time, the Vanian Mountains were united under one banner: the banner of the GraiLord Empire.

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“Sorry, I’ve got to ask,” Joe interrupted, “aren’t they like...cousins?”

“HA!” Acamus roared, “No, my friend, they may be closer to cousins than say...a GraiLord to a Kurr, but cousins? No!”

“There wasn’t a single royal family.” Ekaf interjected, “Don’t they have nobles on Earth? Aristocrats? A class of historically wealthy and powerful elites?”

“Yea, but they don’t all use the same last name!”

“There is a reason for this!” Acamus assured Joe, “Roughly one hundred families built the city of Recercoff many years before history began, these families took the surname GraiLord as founders of the dynasty.”

“It’s sorta the same for all the dynasties.” Ekaf rambled on, “And the tribes, and the sachas, and the clans, and the-”

“I get it.” Joe smiled, “I got it.”

“Shall I proceed?” Acamus asked.

“Please do.”

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With the shift of the minotaurs towards Islam and the fall of the spirits of Grantara, the majority of Christians in post-war Iceload no longer hailed from the Blue Ridges but lived in the Sentry Empire. Many of Eirene’s subjects were beginning to perceive Christianity as an elven religion and even she could not deny that it was quickly becoming so. The problem was that this association meant the minotaurs’ opinions of the electric elves was beginning to affect their views on Christianity – and the elves weren’t making a good name for themselves.

When Vanii was sacked by the Black Crown Pact, Ipativy lost their control over much of their territories. The war-ravaged tundra of central Iceload were liberated but had no means of self-sufficiency. The king of Sentrakle, John Sentry, saw opportunity and swept these lands up. The Sentry Empire provided them with the resources they needed to get back on their feet in exchange for taxes that seemed to get heavier and heavier by the month. Before long, the people of northeastern Etihwy found themselves deep in debt to the conniving, Christian king of the north. The GraiLord were well aware of these tricky dealings and a stereotype began to circulate describing Christians as wealthy money lending, debt inducing, capitalists. It didn’t help that the only Christians left in the Vanian Mountains were the wealthy GraiLord nobility. Eirene saw the growing animosity and worried for the future of GraiLord Christians.

Shortly after ascending to the throne, Eirene left the mountains and traveled north to visit the First Church in Black Lake City. Bluff founded this monastery a few months after the Battle of Krynor in order to facilitate the spread of Christianity through the electric elven nations. There Eirene and Bluff discussed her fears and made plans for Bluff to lead a mission into the mountains to reconnect with Recercoff Christians, get to know the Rational Muslims, and show the minotaurs that Christianity was more than a tool used by power hungry dictators.

Argolis Muhammad, as leader of the Rational Muslims, stayed with the missionaries at this mountain top convention for a week. He and the Christians got along well – too well – and one night, they decided to crack open some snowball root vodka. The next morning, as the Christians staggered out of their tents clutching their aching heads, Argolis was gone. It took a week to find him. He’d continued drinking long after his new comrades had passed out and, with the bottle still in his hands, he’d tumbled off the side of a cliff. When word spread the minotaurs were outraged, even many of the Christian GraiLord simply could not believe that Argolis had

drunken himself stupid and walked off the edge of a cliff. Argolis' brother, Perseus Muhammad, was one of the loudest proponents of this disbelief. Claiming that the king's death was a part of some elven conspiracy, Perseus led a group of Muslims and Christians on a march through the streets, protesting the foreign presence in their mountains.

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"Why'd they find it so hard to believe?" Joe asked, "Didn't you say they found Argolis with the bottle still in his hand?"

"Muslims aren't allowed to drink," Ekaf answered, "it is against their religion, as is any drug, certain foods like-

"Not just that, my friend," Acamus cut in, "Eirene had done her best to keep her husband's drinking habits secret at his own request. As a leader in the Islamic community, if the people knew of his alcoholism he'd lose all his moral authority."

"Yikes...alcoholism isn't really something you can sustainably hide..." Joe remarked.

"Indeed." Acamus nodded, "Once they decided Argolis had a problem, Eirene knew word would get out. She agreed to keep the secret so long as he continued to fight for sobriety. Which he did – supposedly, he'd been almost a year without alcohol before relapsing with the Christians."

Ekaf jumped in, "Islam may be more violent-"

"False!" Acamus barked, "There's a lot more to Christianity than the Gospels – no matter what you Mystakle Christians say – the violence you condemn in the Quran comes from the scripture in the Bible, they are the same stories."

Joe wasn't about to get into this discussion – it was an argument he was all too familiar with. But Ekaf continued as if unperturbed and presented an entirely new argument that Joe couldn't help but jump in the midst of.

"-but Christianity, as the only major religion to endorse drug use-"

"What?!"

"What was your guy's first miracle again?" Ekaf asked.

Joe crossed his arms, "If I'm a Mystakle Christian, then I don't believe in miracles."

"So you don't believe in miracles, huh?" Ekaf pressed.

Keeping his arms firmly tucked, Joe said, "As you once pointed out, they aren't the important part anyways."

Ekaf rolled his eyes, "Anyways. What I was trying to say is, as supposedly nonviolent as the Gospels are, endorsing alcohol left the doors open to a whole lot of substance abuse in Christian communities. If Muslims are violent, Christians are drunks."

"That is *highly* problematic." Joe stated.

"I think you should refrain from commenting on religion," Acamus said through gritted teeth, unable to even look at the Knome, though – by force of habit – he still added a curt, "my friend."

Acamus cleared his throat and continued the tale.

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Eirene and Bluff agreed that he should cut his mission trip short. Before leaving, Bluff and his missionaries traveled to the ruins of Grantara and, with the help of the GraiLord Christians, they began work on a basilica. Half mosque, half monastery, the settlement would be called the Argolian Temple and it would be considered a neutral zone, for both GraiLord and Sentry, Muslim and Christian, minotaur and elf. Immediately, Christian and Muslim leaders flocked to the convent to begin a dialogue on the relationship between the sibling religions. One of these leaders was Perseus Muhammad who, honoring his sister-in-law's attempt at reconciliation, calmed the fury he'd riled up and the protests ended.

Despite the efforts of religious leaders at the Argolian Temple, the animosity between the congregations in the GraiLord cities grew steadily. Soon churches began abandoning villages and cities to take refuge in the sanctity of the late king's temple or in the capital of Recercoff. Recercoff's Christian population grew to match the size of the Muslim population and – unlike the theologians in the Argolian Temple – these two populations butted heads constantly. Ten years after the First Hatching, a fight broke out between minotaur Muslims and Christians. This brawl spilled out into the streets and escalated to an all-out battle between religious mobs becoming what was considered the first of the many Recercoff Religious Riots.

As the GraiLord Guard struggled to restore order, Eirene GraiLord watched from the palace, seeing Muslims and Christians alike striking each other, looting businesses, and defacing buildings. She was so sickened that she couldn't bring herself to eat. By the end of the week, as the chaos seemed to be dying down, one of the leaders of the unrest was captured by the guards and escorted to the Queen. Driven to his knees, Perseus faced Eirene with a defiant smirk until he saw her weakened state. Approximately fifty had died and the GraiLord Guard had only arrested half of the individuals guilty of these murders. Those they missed happened to be Christian. However, these Christian delinquents had been captured by the angry Muslim citizens and would soon be hung, according to Perseus, unless the GraiLord Guard released the Muslims they'd arrested. Eirene agreed and the two addressed the people together. As the prisoners switched places the riot ended and the trials began, Muslims judging Muslims and Christians judging Christians.

Within the year, the Christians had been tried and for almost all the verdict was exile. Among the Muslims, the courts took a while longer. At the end of the year, the decision was made. It had been proven that twenty of the arrested Muslims had intentionally killed another minotaur. Thus they were executed.

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“What?”

“They were hung.”

Joe specified his confusion, “Why the hell did he want to get them out of jail if he was going to hang them anyways?”

“He didn’t hang them all,” Ekaf jumped into the conversation, “but Islamic law is pretty straight forward when it comes to punishment. An eye for an eye, an ear for an ear, a nose-”

“Perseus was merciful, my friend, because they were punished as God demands and they were repentant, when the rope went taught they were forgiven for their crimes.” Acamus explained, “If Eirene and her Christian officials had been the ones to judge the Muslim rioters, then they would’ve received the same punishment as the Christian rioters: exile. However, my friend, though this punishment may seem preferable it would have caused them more harm than good. This punishment would not have been what God demands of us and these men and women would not be forgiven by our Lord. They would fall out of grace.”

“So by killing them, Perseus was doing them a favor?” Joe asked.

“In a sense,” Acamus nodded, “neither exile nor execution would be favorable of course, but, my friend, the punishment for murder should not be a favorable experience.”

“And being exiled from the Vanian Mountains meant being exiled from all Iceloadic Islam – nowhere else was it practiced,” Ekaf interjected, “so even if they sought to atone for their sins by returning to their Islamic brothers and sisters where they would be judged appropriately, they would’ve been unable to. They’d have to travel to Tadloe-”

“And the Rational Muslims of Iceload were none too fond of the earth elves who they half-blamed for the trickery of Creaton Live.” Acamus added, then he asked, “So now do you see how some violence can be righteous? If one kills another, then it is only fair that they too must die.”

Joe sighed. Despite the animalistic urge within him to defend revenge, to defend violent punishment, his moral compass still pointed away from violence. He knew in his heart what was true and so he answered, “Just because it is fair doesn’t mean it is right.”

Acamus chuckled, “I admire your devotion, my friend. Eirene said much the same thing to Perseus. Perseus and Eirene began meeting weekly to discuss religious differences as tensions began to rise again.”

“The Muslims felt it was unfair that the Christians got to go free when they had been just as guilty of evil as their Islamic brothers and sisters.” Ekaf explained.

“So there were more riots?” Joe asked.

“Many more, my friend,” Acamus said, “but if I were to tell you of everyone we’d be here all night. Instead, I’m going to skip ahead five years to a discovery that rocked Iceload to the core...”

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One of the Christian exiles from the first of the Recercoff Religious Riots, Prometheus Rytram, was hunting amongst the bluffs between Ipativy and the Vanian Mountains when he

stumbled across a frozen book. He took the text to Ipativy, thawed it out, and realized he'd found a copy of the Gospel. Many were skeptical, especially considering the discoverer's outcast-status and soon Bluff came to investigate. After scrutinizing the text, Bluff admitted that it was either the most spectacular hoax he'd ever seen or an authentic copy of the first four books of the New Testament.

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"Sorry to interrupt again, but didn't they already have a Bible?"

"*I told you that!*" Ekaf moaned, "They found the Gospel long ago but by the time of the First Hatching, the original text had long been lost."

"And the Gospel they'd found long ago did not have the miracles that were included in the Gospel found by Prometheus. Before Prometheus, Christianity was little more than the Golden Rule." Acamus explained, "We Muslims have always had the Quran, since the day Solaris split away from the Sun. This was both a blessing and a curse, my friend, for the more scripture the more room there is for interpretation."

"More room for justifying drug abuse and violence..." Ekaf muttered below his breath. Whether or not Acamus heard the Knome, he ignored him.

Joe asked, "So this new Gospel probably messed up the Christian community, right?"

"Oh yeeeah." Ekaf said, "Not only did it include miracles, it included heaven and hell."

"It split Christianity just as Islam split in the Pact Expulsion." Acamus said.

"Mystakle and Thoran." Joe said.

"Mhm." Acamus nodded.

"So how'd Bluff and Eirene handle the new Christianity?" Joe asked.

Acamus continued.

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The Promethean Gospel claimed the one and only omnipotent God sent his one and only son to warn the world to worship him in order to avoid the fires of eternal damnation that he invented to punish the people he had created morally inadequate. From the text, conclusions were made that polarized the church even more. Namely, the idea that since some folks deserved hell, deserved God's violence, then there must be such a thing as righteous violence because the actions of a perfect God could not be immoral. This belief became a part of a new denomination, calling themselves Thoran Christians. The Thorans spread exponentially within the old Ipativian Empire. They began to promote punishment over forgiveness and took a more nuanced approach to the Golden Rule (to them it was more of a Golden Guideline). Invigorated with renewed spiritual fervor, Aella Hydrana, one of the many exiled minotaurs that'd converted, snuck back into Recercoff and began to spread Thoran Christianity.

As soon as Aella stepped foot back in the Blue Ridges, Eirene was alerted. Rather than acting immediately, Eirene chose to ignore the exile. She didn't want to appear afraid of this new strain of Christianity. She also didn't want to persecute them because part of the Thoran's theology explicitly foretold that they would be oppressed and that through martyrdom they would assure themselves a place in heaven. But in the end, Aella forced her hand.

Aella Hydrana had drawn such a following that she even had loyal disciples within the GraiLord Guard itself. These Thoran policemen began to apply excessive force to citizens they handled and, after three years of peace in Recercoff, one of Aella's converts went too far. When an Islamic man, a known alcoholic, resisted arrest, he drew his bow and shot the man in the back. The drunk died in the street. Despite the man's low status in the Islamic community, the Muslims saw this as something that could have happened to any of them and were outraged. Before the cop could pull his arrow from the fallen minotaur, the Muslim witnesses swarmed him. Now there were two dead. The GraiLord Guard was furious. They'd been dealing with anti-police sentiments from the Muslims since the Quran first reached the Blue Ridges and they, like the Muslims, saw this as something that could have happened to any of them. Their fury spread from the municipalities to the Christian aristocracies. Soon the streets were filled with blood thirsty extremists of both religions and the second wave of Recercoff Religious Riots began.

As Eirene GraiLord's appetite shriveled and died, she commanded the GraiLord Guard to change their focus from the rioters to the source of the unrest: Aella Hydrana. Bu thanks to her connections inside the police, Aella was able to avoid capture all the while mocking Eirene and the Vanian Christians for their weakness and condemning Perseus and the Rational Muslims for their heathenistic ways. The periodic violence continued split by brief episodes of peace just long enough to allow Eirene to break fast and stay alive. As the queen was seen growing weaker and weaker, her fellow Christians became less and less enthusiastic about the violence. Even the Muslims, goaded by Perseus of all people, began to critique the violence – specifically, the violence against Vanian (AKA Mystakle) Christians. Like Eirene, Perseus blamed the Thorans and Thorans weren't doing much to help their case. So, when a handful of loyal GraiLord Guards cornered Aella on the top of a tall building and the heretical preacher jumped to her death, the majority of minotaurs were stunned but pleased and peace returned to Recercoff.

With a newfound mutual contempt for the followers of the Promethean Gospel, the result of this second phase of unrest was a closer bond between Rational Islam and Vanian/Mystakle Christianity. Muslims and Christians worked together to repair the damage of the riots, while Aella's converts trickled out of the mountains to take refuge with Prometheus in the lands that had once been ruled by the Ipativian Empire. Another product of the turmoil was that a new brand of highly trained guards entered the royal palace. These men, the Icespear Sentinels, were headed by Perseus. He'd convinced Eirene of the necessity by pointing out the corruption that had festered in the ranks of the Guard (plus it would help unite the two religions to have an Islamic force protecting the Christian monarch).

Year 22, the Thoran Christians, led by Prometheus Rytram, founded the monastery village of Zviecoff – which means New Home in Ancient Elven – overlooking the Etihw River

in the glacial valley below the Argolian Temple. Missionaries became more prevalent within the Vanian Mountains but the Thorans had better luck on the eastern side of the Etihw River. The elven settlements that had remained independent from the Sentry – claiming Ipativian, Oreh and the Etihwy roots – were drawn to the Gospel. It wasn't the theology that made this new cult so attractive but rather the fact that this denomination stood in opposition of the Sentry's Mystakle Christianity.

Both Eirene and Perseus spoke out against Thoran Christianity. Eirene pointed out flaws in Thoran doctrine, asking things like, "why would an all-powerful and moral god create life that loved yet were predisposed to wind up in an eternal hell that he also created?" Perseus was less focused on logic and more focused on conspiracies. Perseus believed that the Ipativians were so starved for power that they were attempting to use this new religion to plant anti-Islamic insurgents throughout the mostly Islamic GraiLord Empire so if they invaded there would already be spies in the Blue Ridges, willing to betray their race for their religion. Eirene thought this ridiculous but three years after the founding of Zviecoff it seemed Perseus' rhetoric had been spot on.

At the start of winter, twenty-five years after the First Hatching, an attempt to assassinate Eirene GraiLord was thwarted by Perseus and the Icespear Sentinels. All of the insurgents were captured alive and all buckled to pressure, admitting that Prometheus Rytram was the mastermind behind the plot. They were exiled and Prometheus was warned, by Perseus himself, that if he ever stepped outside of Zviecoff and onto the slopes of the Blue Ridges then his head would wind up on the end of the Vanian Spear. The heretic never got the chance. A year later, a group of anonymous GraiLords snuck into Zviecoff and killed Prometheus in his sleep. The Thorans were outraged. No longer did their missionaries loiter the streets preaching to convert, now they marched the streets of the minotaur cities preaching to condemn.

The new head of the Thoran Church was none other than the traitor Godi Morain who had sold Vanii, the city that once stood where Ipativy did now, out to Creaton during the First Void War. The Gospel-bandwagoner had been using his newfound faith to cleanse himself of his past transgressions – Baldure Ipativy even publically forgave him. Now that he had a clean slate in Post-Pact Iceload, he could pursue his lifelong aspirations for power and he saw opportunity with the death of Prometheus but the small monastery of Zviecoff did not satisfy his appetite. Prometheus' martyrdom was tragic enough to get the Thorans riled and ready for war but Godi knew he needed allies for it to be a victorious struggle. He needed something more tragic. So he began to provoke the minotaurs. Arming his missionaries, he sent them out on suicidal missions of destruction. It was the martyr warriors' duty to raise hell and stop only when incarcerated or dead. They looted, burned, raped, and killed and they heightened the anti-Thoran sentiments of the minotaurs and it didn't take long for many of the GraiLord to covet revenge.

A couple hundred GraiLord youngsters, of both faiths, gathered near the end of 27. All had witnessed violence caused by Thoran martyrs or had been victims themselves. On December 7th, these young men and women raided Zviecoff and killed every soul that refused to flee. Many chose death over retreat but their leader did not. He took a ship, along with others who chose to

tuck tail and leave, up the Etihw River to beg Baldure Ipativy to whom he pleaded to avenge the victims of what was described as the Zviecoff Massacre.

Baldure was unwilling to face the minotaurs alone. He waited to attack until he'd accumulated a few allies – which didn't take long. Etihwy and Oreh eagerly got on board. Describing their plight as a defense of the Thoran Church, Baldure Ipativy, with the traitor Godi Morain by his side, declared war on the GraiLord Empire.

Perseus Muhammad rallied the minotaurs of the Blue Ridges with talks of nationalism, speaking of defending their mountains and repelling the foreigners. Eirene GraiLord rebuked the people. Whether their actions had been fair or not, their violence had brought this war upon themselves. She begged the people not to fight, to show up to battle weaponless, to bow before the elves and plead for their forgiveness and see then if the elves would still be willing to fight. However, the people, including the Vanian Christians, did not want to hear this. Too many had been scarred by the terrorism of the Thorans. They loved Eirene GraiLord deeply but they would not obey her, not now, and so they asked her to step down from the throne so that Perseus Muhammad could rise up.

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“Was she the only true Vanian Christian?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Vanian Christians are Mystakle Christians, right? They believe what Brahim Phinn did, right? There's no excuse for violence – Golden Rule all the way, right?”

“Brahim Phinn did invite Saint and the rebels in to attack the Bishopry's folks.” Ekaf reminded Joe.

“Not to mention, my friend, even new and reformed Saint isn't what you could really call a by-the-book Mystakle Christian.” Acamus added, “Saint invented the Samurai. Committing a sin doesn't necessarily mean one believes it isn't a sin.”

“But...but...” Joe sputtered, “That's cheating!”

“I don't want to make any rash accusations...but have you never consciously committed a sin?” Ekaf asked, “I mean, I have. I'm sure Acamus has. There's no way! You must've-”

“Yes but I'm one man! One mind!” Joe beat his breast, “Not an entire church!”

“Not all the Vanians abandoned Eirene, my friend, many went with her to the peak of Mount Krynor where they would watch the First War of the Blue Ridges unfold.”

“Did she hunger strike?” Joe asked.

“Oh yes,” Acamus nodded, “before she left, she told her people that she would fast until they abandoned their violent ways and learned to truly practice love and forgiveness once more.”

“Damn...” Joe muttered, “What about Perseus? Wasn't Eirene beginning to sway him with her peace talk?”

“She was indeed and he visited her frequently. He begged her to end her self-starvation but she would not. She considered her deteriorating condition in sync with the moral depreciation of GraiLord society.”

Joe groaned, “She’s gonna die, isn’t she.”

“Wait and see, my friend, the tale is almost told!”

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At first, Perseus Muhammad struggled to hold the elves back. The city Atharta fell, becoming Vaniakle under elven rule, and the Argolian Temple was also taken. But as the year grew stale and winter approached, the elves were no longer able to push deeper into the Blue Ridges. It seemed the minotaurs would be able to hold them just north of Mount Krynor. At the start of the 29th year, a battle that, if the GraiLord won, would force the elves to retreat was to take place below the mountain. Perseus climbed the mountain to beg Eirene to come down once more. The poor ex-monarch was nothing but fur and bones. A handful of aids stayed around her, bringing her chicken broth, vegetable stock, and water, just enough sustenance to maintain her existence. Still, after having fasted for a year, the aids warned Perseus that she would not live much longer. Conflicted, Perseus marched down the mountain and led his troops into battle.

At the last moment, while standing before his soldiers and glaring defiantly into the eyes of the approaching electric elves and their leader, the conniving Godi Morain, Perseus Muhammad changed his mind. Running through the ranks, he ordered his men to lay down their weapons. Perseus then turned to Godi and proclaimed that they would not strike an elf, but they would also not step aside.

“Peace is what we seek,” he said, “and we seek it by way of peace.”

The elves stopped in their tracks. Behind the army, King Baldure Ipativy was told what was happening but was unable to make an immediate decision. He could not retreat, his allies and peers would be at his throat, nor could he advance, his conscience would forever haunt him if he ordered such a slaughtering. No one knows what Baldure would’ve decided because Godi Morain, tired of waiting, raised his blade and led the charge. They plowed into the minotaurs and the first few rows of the GraiLord were overwhelmed before those behind them surrendered to violence and defended themselves.

Despite the rough start, Perseus and the GraiLord army still won. In the end, the elves retreated. They fled the narrow mountain pass and ran on to Zviecoff. However, the minotaurs victory was also their loss – four times as many minotaurs died than did elves. Baldure Ipativy was so disgusted by the brutality of the battles first charge that he sent messengers to Recercoff to offer a ceasefire. Then, he expelled Godi Morain from the Ipativian Empire. This act was followed by the leaders of the Etihw and Oreh which, thanks to the war Godi engineered, meant he could no longer stay in Zviecoff – as it now was Etihw territory.

The messengers never returned from Recercoff. After the Krynor Massacre, Perseus Muhammad had changed. As the dead were taken care of below, Perseus climbed to the top of

the mountain once more. When he arrived, the aids came running. Eirene had heard his order and had seen the minotaurs lay down their weapons then she'd watched as the elves charged. Not long after witnessing this, Eirene's heart stopped. Perseus came down from Mount Krynor with a merciless rage that would stay with him until the day he died. He refused to end the war and led numerous fruitless battles against Baldure and his allies. After five years, Perseus died in battle and his niece, Gorgophone, picked up the gauntlet.

By then, Eirene's Christians had almost vanished from the Blue Ridges. After her death, they'd begun to trickle out of the Vanian Mountains to avoid the violence. They took refuge in Icelore with Heimdallure Darkblade. This left the GraiLord Empire completely in the hands of Muslims but, like the Christians, these Muslims were also tired of the war. Gorgophone was unwilling to compromise and absolutely refused to surrender. Just as her father had lost his last name due to his stubbornness, so did Gorgophone lose hers. The now Islamic aristocracy stripped her of her authority and refused her the right to the name of the Prophet. Without the backing of the Empire, Gorgophone continued the fight with a few hundred loyal soldiers and she took the name of her weapon – the same weapon that had been wielded by her uncles and grandfather – becoming the first in a long line of Icespears.

Though Vanian Christianity had left the mainland, its twin, Mystakle Christianity, survived within the Sentry Empire of the north. Meanwhile, the disciples of Eirene took their faith to Icelore then across the globe to Manaloe where they taught the words of their nonviolent savior to the spirits of the Phinn River.

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“That is the tale of the Queen of Peace and the birth of a hatred,” Acamus stated, “even today, the minotaurs do not trust the electric elves.”

“Even Zalfron?” Joe asked.

“Ha! My friend, that boy's head is full of rocks. Suspicion would be a waste of energy.” Acamus chuckled, “Besides, we don't mind the Sentry half as much as we despise the Ipativians.”

“Exactly, the Ipa...” the rest of Ekaf's words were so distorted by a yawn that they sounded absurdly whale-like.

“I think its time for bed.” Joe decided.

“Indeed,” Ekaf nodded, “You coming with, Acamus?”

The minotaur turned away from them to stare out over the ocean.

“No,” he said, “I think I'll man the helm until morning.”

Joe and Ekaf exchanged anxious glances. There was no reason to stay at the wheel. They were anchored in the bay outside Etihw City. But they didn't argue. The seductive siren's song of sleep was summoning them and they were too weak to make her wait.

Chapter Thirteen: Down the Etihw

She didn't know it but he did: she was walking in circles, wide circles, the circumferences nearing a quarter-selim in length. From atop a totem of coral, Aqa watched the oblivious wanderer. The shadows of larger animals, floating high above the cnidarian graveyard, drifted over them like clouds. These beasts kept their distance, not because of the girl or the boy who watched her, but because of Aqa's company.

After her third revolution, Aqa felt his presence. He'd grown accustomed to the fox's ways since the stones were lifted from his legs. Using magic, the fox was able to heal his crushed limbs quickly. Never before had Aqa witnessed a being so efficient with magic. The pain was still drastic, for whether or not the fox could he hadn't healed his burns. If it weren't for aquannabis, then the pain would've been too much to ignore but thanks to the drug he was able to refrain from begging his rather intimidating savior for further aid. Keeping his eyes on the lost woman, Aqa spoke.

"Who is she?"

"That is for you to find out."

The fox that stood behind Aqa didn't look like the fox who'd saved him from the rubble of the Submarine Canyon. He'd grown from the small rodent sized animal. Now he stood as tall as Aqa on all fours. His jaws were large enough to tear a fishfolk's head clean off their neck. His fur rippled in the current of the sea, shimmering, almost as if the coat wasn't fur but fire. In this form, Aqa had ridden the beast across the Aquarian Ocean, barreling west. They'd stopped for a break and, before the fox trotted off to look for aquannabis, he'd pointed out the blue-skinned woman to Aqa.

Without another question, Aqa began to climb down from the coral canopy. From afar, he'd assumed she was a fishfolk but now, as he neared, he noticed a difference in her complexion.

"A merman..." He murmured.

The coral branch beneath him snapped. He hit another polyp shelf then landed in the sand. Pain broke through the waning walls left up from his last dosage of aquatic-pain-relievers. Lights blotted out the world around him. The coral above melted into explosions of fireworks. As the pain simmered, an object eclipsed his vision – the merman.

"Who are you?" She demanded.

Aqa tried to sit up but she pushed him back down with her foot.

"Who are you?" He asked.

"Whether I answer depends on your answer." She replied.

"My name is Aqa Eniram, who are you?"

"Not good enough." Aqa tried to rise once more but her foot still held him, she repeated herself, "Who *are* you?"

"An Aquarian Soldier."

Her lips curled.

"At least...I was."

"Then what are you now?"

"A knight." The fox said.

Lela leapt off Aqa and fell on her butt, her black eyes locked on the monster before her. Aqa stood and the fox addressed him.

“Grab her, Aqa, she is coming with us.”

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They plunged into a sea of clouds, blazing a path for the light of Solaris to reach the murky citadel beneath. At the first sign of Castle Icelore – which was nothing more than the faint shadows of three towers blurred by fog – Hermes slowed the zoomer to a crawl. Dragonic shapes circled above and below them like vultures. Watching these mounted guards inspect them, Catty shuddered and shifted in her seat.

Not long after their escape from the *Monoceros*, Hermes took the reins and drove the vessel into the sky. They sailed across the tops of clouds until Solaris set and by the time the great star started to rise they began their descent. The bruised and broken body of John Pigeon had hardly moved for the entirety of the trip (when he did move, it was to check the condition of his fingernails but he forgot what he was doing halfway through and passed back out before either Hermes or Catherine had noticed him conscious). If not for her crow eye, Catty would’ve thought him dead.

Dead. She thought. *That’s what I’ll soon be.* All she could do was hope Hermes would keep his word. *If he even has a choice.* Shalis Skullsummon was not known for listening and negotiating. Not only would Catty need Shalis to spare her life, she would need Shalis to provide medical care. Her body had been poorly healed from the wounds she’d acquired on the *Cinatit* and the *Monoceros*. That said, returning to Darkloe without having killed the Sun Child *and* having to report to Creaton that Hermes deserted was not an option. She sighed. *At this point, I might as well turn myself in to Saint...*

It wouldn’t so much be the revelation that would garner the Black Crown’s rage, but more so the fact that he had done so and she hadn’t stopped him. This would lead Creaton to assume that she was either weak or a traitor – both of which were worthy of capital punishment. However, she still had time to prove that she was neither. Working to dispel the idea that she was a traitor, she’d already sent word to Darkloe.

Before leaving the *Monoceros*, on her way to where the zoomer sat dormant, she’d run across a handful of Sea Lords attaching their last will and testaments to the legs of mailbats. Shaming them for their cowardice and using the comatose body of Johnny draped over her shoulders to drive her condemnation home, Catty cleared the room in seconds then set about scrawling her own letter. She alerted the Pact that she might soon be dead, at the hands of the Witch, that her Lord’s fear had come to fruition, Hermes had turned traitor, but that she still sought to complete the mission: Kill the Earthboy – only now she also sought another objective – kill the traitor.

There was a moment in the zoomer, before she lifted the garage door and cut the machine on, where she considered ditching Hermes all together. He’d likely die if she did, he was surrounded by the Earthboy’s little gang plus they had the Prince of the GraiLord minotaurs with them. She could fly below the radar, she’d done it for years. Discard all her allegiances and live free. Then she cursed herself. She threw a ball of shadows at a button on the wall then cut the engine on as the garage door opened up to the ocean breeze.

She couldn’t betray the Pact. Nor could she fail the Pact. After all, she had sold her soul to Creaton to save someone she loved – someone Creaton could have killed at any moment – someone who she could only ever hope to see again by the grace of the Moon Dragon Man. She was thinking of that someone as they descended through the clouds to Castle Icelore – the last

time she had seen him had been not too far from the mountains they'd just flown over. With her eyes closed and her breath held, she could almost feel his embrace and – ever so faintly – taste his lips.

Soaring towards the façade of the keep, Hermes pulled the zoomer through the open archways of the dragon hold. The chamber was massive – it had to be. Iceloadic rulers not only rode dragons, but they commanded the largest dalvaries to fly beneath Solaris. This was especially so with the Icelore who, according to some, hadn't stopped worshipping the formidable reptilians since Kor first fell from the moon. Two rows of columns ran the length of the hall but aside from that, the roost was kept clear to allow beasts to have the space needed to land and take off. The first thing Catty noticed as they flew in was the strong stench of dung and sweat that hung about like the fog. The second thing she noticed, once they entered, was that the vault was completely empty.

The gates fell shut behind them.

Catty whirled on Hermes, drawing one of her hilts and cursing him while she did. Hermes had expected such a response. He slammed the vehicle into park and the shadowmancer and elementalist went flying out of the zoomer and across the floor. Johnny slid to the far edge of the room, stopping only when his body struck a column. Flopping onto his back, Johnny moaned then forced himself to sit upright. Glancing through swollen eyes at his comrades he groaned again then attempted to wipe himself clean of the dragon-waste he'd swept up in his journey across the chamber. Catty didn't slide half as far. Once she caught her breath she rolled to her feet, drew her swords, then stopped.

She was nearly out of shadows – she shoved the hilts back in their holders.

The banshee was not out. In fact, he had already started launching fire-like balls of black.

Backpedaling, Catty caught one wispy orb and took the energy for herself. She had to use a bit of her own darkness to hold the sphere in place, without having the sizzling surface touch her skin. It looked almost as if she were trying to crush a cannonball between her hands, but rather than shattering when she succeeded the shadows simply disappeared with a WOOF! Slipping into her eye so fast that the naked eye couldn't notice. Her hands clapped together – the shadows stolen. All this only took a few seconds but, in those seconds, Hermes hadn't stopped. He kept firing. She dodged until her hands were free to grab another but this came with a sacrifice. As she absorbed this second glob, she got duped by Hermes' barrage and one of the steaming globes of obsidian smashed her in the gut, sending her tumbling across the tile once more.

Hermes stepped down from the zoomer.

“Stay down. This is a part of the plan.”

Catty rolled her eyes and snarled from the ground, “You throwing us off the zoomer? Your plan or our plan?”

“You drew your swords.” Hermes snapped.

“That gate closed awfully fast.” Catty barked back.

“There is no guarantee she will kill you, Catherine.”

Catty hissed, “Ah yes, Shalis the Merciful, they call her.”

Using the shadows she'd stolen, Catty engulfed herself then dissolved into three slender obsidian felines that simultaneously charged Hermes. Hermes drew his blade and cocked his arm back, preparing to release a sharp wind that would cut through the line of critters, then he stopped. The Sheik would not appreciate him splitting her castle like a slice of bread. Instead, he reached back into his reserved shadows and, mocking Catty, transformed himself into an animal:

a wolverine – five of them. The cats were undaunted. They continued their charge but when they reached the charging giant weasels, they eluded them – slipping beneath their bellies or twirling between their paws – to focus their efforts on the slowest of the bunch. As they pounced on the fifth wolverine, their claws and fangs grew until they were hardly cats anymore, they’d become lanky black ghouls – their teeth so long their jaws came unhinged, their talons so lengthy they wouldn’t have been able to walk but luckily they didn’t need to, they used their claws like stakes to bind them to their pray as they penetrated the shadow-beast with their fangs. They subdued their target almost immediately – because Catty had guessed wrong. The wolverine exploded with a smoggy black plume then the other four mustelids were on her. In minutes, the monstrous cats had been stomped out and splattered to bits. When Hermes returned to his ethereal form, a bloody Catherine Meriam laid in a cloud of dissolving shadows at his feet.

Hermes lectured her, “There is no hope for you if you keep fighting me.”

Getting onto her knees, she retorted, “I’ve got more of a chance beating you than I do getting sympathy from that Witch.”

“You saved my life!” Johnny yelled from across the room, wincing. Clutching his aching body, he added, “That’s got to count for something – the Sheik looves me!”

“She’s got as much against you,” Hermes said to Catty as she got to her feet, “as she’s got against me.”

“Ha!” Catty crowed.

Turning from the banshee, she sprinted towards one of the barred gates of the dragon hold.

Hermes strode swiftly after her, “You won’t be able to break those bars.”

She hadn’t planned to. Using the last bits of the shadows she’d stolen, she returned to the shape of a cat once more. Half her body had slipped between the bars before Hermes stopped her, his armored hand clenching her tail. He tore her away from the gate and flung her towards the center of the room. She hit a column then slid to the ground back in her human form.

“I betrayed her, betrayed the Order.” Hermes said, “As did you.”

“I betrayed her looong before I betrayed the Order.” Catty muttered.

“When you killed Borig the Tiger?” Hermes asked.

Catty shook her head, “When I broke her heart.”

Now it was Hermes who scoffed, “You broke her heart?”

Catty ignored the banshee’s disbelief. She wasn’t one to reveal her past but she was on her last resort. She needed something to trigger the big oaf’s hubris and it seemed that pointing out a weakness in one of his rivals did just the trick.

“That’s why she wants you so bad.” He murmured before admitting, “You know, she sounded more interested in you than she was with the Knome. Couldn’t figure it out, figured the mailmole must’ve just misrepresented her message with its intonation, but now...”

She’d been suspicious the moment Hermes said the plan was to head to Icelore. The visit to Fort Dunvar had given her just enough doubt to think that maybe this wasn’t a premeditated move but, alas, Hermes pulled a Hermes. That said, as Hermes rattled on, turning his back on her and pacing away, Catty began to feel more and more that it might be possible for her to pull a Catty. She knew him to be a banshee, he could fixate his vision in any direction at any moment no matter which way his skull was supposedly looking, but still, he was an idiot. There was a chance he was so confident in his abilities that he actually wasn’t looking. Whether or not that was the case, Catty really didn’t have any other chances. She drew one of her Fou-style hilts. She had no excess shadow left, all she had was her own shadows – her own life force.

Shadowmancers can pull from such, they are replenishable, though the moment you tap into them, until they are replenished, one's life energy starts to fizzle away at a dangerously high rate. Some mancers could go on for a day before dying, others last only hours. That said, Catty wasn't so sure she had an hour to live if she didn't and so she did.

She cringed as the blade came to life then, on the tips of her toes, she dashed across the room. Just before she reached Hermes, she tossed her sword high overhead then jumped so that she could reach the undead's skull. She reached back to grab her second hilt, whipping it out and filling it with another ounce of her own soul just as Hermes spun to face her.

He blocked her strike with his own blade then grabbed her by the throat, catching her in midair.

Hermes snickered as his power overcame her like a wave of icy water. Her free hand immediately went to the rogue's wrist but soon the coldness had numbed her muscles and both arms fell slack. Her sword slipped out of her limp fingers. Its blade dissolved as the hilt clattered to the tile ground. Darkness blotted out her vision, ringing filled her ears, her mouth ran dry, her nose hairs stood stiff but she fought hard to hang on to her consciousness, at least for just a little while longer, after all, it was about time for her first sword to come back down. She had just enough sight left to see her blade pin wheel down on Hermes. Unfortunately, the blade missed but the hilt collided, batting the banshee's skull off its mount. Shocked, Hermes dropped Catty.

Fighting the chills and the deep, agonizing emptiness growing within her, she recovered her blades, scurried to her feet, and dashed past Hermes after his skull as it continued to roll across the floor.

Then she stopped.

Smirking like the devil, Hermes' skull rested before the bare feet of the Sheik.

"Catherine Meriam and Hermes Retskeirt, I can think of no worse company."

"My lady!" Johnny gasped from across the room, clutching his heart as if struck by the love-infecting arrows of a cherub.

"I spoke to soon..." Rolling her chestnut eyes, she refused to turn in his direction. Instead, she returned her glare to Catty, pursing her coal-painted lips. Half her hair was cut short and braided close to her head but the other half was left untamed, natural, covering one elven ear, the nape of her neck, and curling down around her breasts. The perk in her nose and way she held her head, tilted back, relayed her pretensions to those in her audience. She stood with her shoulders rolled back, chest out, and legs wide so that her slitted gown left little in mystery. After a minute of unbroken eye contact, she looked past Catherine to the headless body of Hermes, "Lend the bitch some shadows."

Hermes didn't hesitate. A ribbon of black squirmed out of his skull and danced through the air until it splattered into Catty's crow eye. As it did, Catty's posture improved. She rolled her shoulders back and jutted her chest out, glaring back at Shalis.

"I want you in prime condition when we pick you apart."

Shalis snapped her fingers. A dozen armored skeletons marched from the doorway in two rigid lines. They parted to walk around Shalis and Hermes' skull then surrounded Catty. If Catty hadn't recognized the symbols on their armor, she wouldn't have known whether they were with or without flesh – that's how extensively the gang was armored – but she knew. She'd even known some of the boneguards before they'd been turned undead.

She didn't resist. As they began to march back towards the door, she walked with them, limping out of the hold in silence. As they left, Hermes' skull drifted up through the air to return home atop his chest plate.

“Tell me,” Shalis addressed Hermes after Catherine was gone, “why shouldn’t I send you to the dungeons with the whore?”

Hermes replied quickly, “I’ve got something to offer.”

Shalis spat, “You’ve already told me about the Knome-”

“He’s in the mail.” Hermes assured her.

“And I could’ve caught that slut myself-”

“This is something even better.”

“My heart and soul,” Johnny had crawled over to where the necromancer stood, he was groveling at her ankles, “I’m forever yours, my love!”

“Do you want me to lock you up with Meriam?” Shalis snapped.

Looking up from her feet, he responded only with a raised eyebrow.

Shalis quickly revised her threat, “In a separate cell.”

He whimpered and rolled into a fetal position beside her toes.

Shaking her head, she turned back to Hermes. Her posture demanding Hermes’ explanation without any more bullshit. The banshee obeyed immediately.

“I’m going to bring you the Sun Child.”

- - -

Joe reached up and slapped the plank over the sliver sized gap, all that was left of the hole in the side of the *Monoceros*. The patch work had been sloppy but necessary. Taking down a wall between the mailroom and an office provided the extra lumber. This was their second task of the morning, the first had been to prepare for the shift in climate. Though Machuba claimed their Aquarian clothes would protect them from the cold, helping their body maintain homeostasis just as they had on the ocean floor, they still thought it wise to layer up. Plus, poor Bold had no Aquarian clothes. Scavenging through the possessions left by Sea Lords, the boys were able to find a couple scarves, coats, and, most importantly, boots. Unfortunately, they could find very little that fit Bold aside from a beanie and a pair of boots. In the end, they used Ekaf’s sword to trim the length of a Sea Lord’s coat so that he wouldn’t be tripping over himself. (Zalfron adopted a coat that fit so poorly the sleeves of his Aquarian tunic slipped out of the sleeves of the leather pirate coat he’d taken to). Joe redonned his interview-get up, over his Aquarian tunic, as yet another layer of clothing to put between him and the cold. After everyone was ready, Ekaf had the boys get started fixing that hole so that there might be a fighting chance of keeping the bar warm as they sailed into the heart of the frozen continent.

The job had been left up to Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, and Machuba but a little over halfway through the electric elf and chidra had drifted away to slip behind the bar. When Joe finally called them out for abandoning them, Nogard claimed they were taking inventory. The mission was progressing far more efficiently with just Joe and Machuba on the job anyway. Pushing the point of the last nail into the wood, Machuba drew back his hammer and rapped the nail three solid times. Done.

The two stepped back. As they scrutinized their abstract piece of art, Joe wiped his sweaty palms on his pants while Machuba spun the hammer in his hands.

“Smoke time!” Nogard proclaimed.

“Drank tahn!” Zalfron corrected.

“Should we see if Bold and Zach are ready to get up?” Joe asked.

“Nah, Civ,” Nogard shook his head, “Bold only be sleepin a few hours, now.”

“A few hours!” Joe exclaimed.

Nogard jumped on Zalfron’s back and began to scrape his knuckles across the elf’s scalp, “After he dealt wit dis one, he finished up wit me. By den, Solaris was risin.”

Bold had spent the entire night finishing up repairs on Zalfron’s mutilated body and Zach stayed awake with him in case the dwarf overexerted himself and needed medical attention—something that Zach had been a witness to on more than one occasion. When the healing was done, the two were so tired they barely made it into their bunks before succumbing.

Zalfron released the bottles in his hands—one shattered on the floor and the other bounced then rolled away—and he grabbed Nogard’s arms, flung him over his head, and onto the bar. The chidra hit the counter with a gasp then rolled off, wide eyed, to drop to the deck.

“I dink you broke my back, Civ!” Nogard croaked.

Zalfron hopped over the bar and began to feel up and down the shirtless chidra’s spine.

“Aye Civ!” Nogard squirmed, rolled over, and slapped at Zalfron’s hands when he tried to roll him over again, “Cut it out!”

“You okay? Your back ain’t raelly hurt?” Zalfron backed away.

“You’re liable to hurt it twice pokin and proddin me like dat!” Nogard snapped, sitting up cross legged.

“You raelly hurt?” Zalfron asked.

“Nah, Civ...” Nogard muttered as he rubbed his back, then he broke into a smile, “yo puny ass couldn’t hurt me if ya tried!”

“Oh yea?” Zalfron grinned and hopped up to sit on the bar. Raising his eyebrows he barred his fists, “Ah’ll clock ya in the Adam’s Apple hard nough ta make ya spit cahder!”

“Cool it.” Joe smiled, “Pretty sure Bold’s burned through all the pages in his book by now, he’ll need what’s left for Zviecoff.” Joe gulped, “Speaking of Zviecoff...” He turned to Machuba, “How about a drink?”

“I don’t drink.” Machuba said.

“Lahf’s too short for that!” Zalfron retorted.

“It ain’t be like dat,” Nogard got to his feet, nodding to Machuba, “da poison been known to corrupt Gills for as long as Gills been cursed.”

“You wouldn’t like me drunk.” Machuba said.

“Hard enough to like ya sober!” Nogard said then howled with laughter.

“That’s good of you,” Joe said to Machuba, “it may be legal to drink the second you come out the womb on this planet, but where I’m from, we’re pretty sure alcohol can do some real damage to a young mind.”

Machuba gestured at the elf and chidra, saying, “So I see...”

Zalfron slid over the bar, retrieved the bottle that didn’t burst then grabbed two more. Machuba, Nogard, and Joe cringed together as the elf but the bottle in his mouth, wedged the cap between his molars, then clenched his jaw til the FIZ of broken seal was heard and the cap popped off into his mouth. No sooner did he spit it out than did he start in on the second.

“Zalfron...” Joe grimaced.

“I can’t watch.” Machuba lamented.

“Yo, Civ-”

But it was too late, the deed was done. He set the bottles on the bar and gestured for Joe and Nogard to take their pick as he went ahead and bit his own open. The liquid was darker than the brown glass that encased them. The necks of the bottles had paper collars labeled: SUCCESS. Grabbing one with wild eyed primates on the body, Joe took a sip and grimaced.

“Wow!” He blinked, “Definitely not fruit beer.” He reassessed the bottle in his hands, reading, “The Loco Lemur?” He asked, “Is this beer?”

“Hell yea!” Zalfron raised his in the air, which sported what looked to be a trampled buzzard, “Straight out of Sentrakle—”

“Icelandic Pale Ale, my boy!” Nogard explained, taking a swig of his own, “da alcohol getcha like you be drinkin liquor!”

“The first one’s always rough, brother,” Zalfron burped then slammed his already empty bottle on the table, “but the second one goes down smooth!”

“And it be all downhill from dere!” Nogard giggled.

Nogard, Machuba, and Joe sat down at the bar.

“What’s that noise?” Machuba asked.

“Noise?” Zalfron asked, his pointed ears wiggling.

“The cockatune!” Machuba realized.

“Poor bird must be starvin!” Nogard exclaimed.

“Parched! Parched!” The cockatune cried as it fluttered into the tavern, “Parched! Parched!” It circled the room, fluttering so wildly that it slammed into the roof, dipped close to the floor, then recovered to shoot back up towards the ceiling, “Parched! Parched!”

“Dat bird ain’t hungry,” Nogard corrected himself, “it be dirsty!”

“Zalfron, get it some water!” Joe commanded.

“Water? Ah got somethin better than water!” Zalfron turned to the open cabinet behind him and grabbed another IPA. This one appeared to have a bear mounting a tiger on the label but Joe chose not to look twice. Opening the bottle on the corner of the bar, Zalfron set the beer on the counter then said, “Hey bird! This one’s fer you!”

“I’m not sure beer is good for birds.” Joe stated.

“Don’t worry,” Machuba assured him, “I don’t think that parrot can drink out of a bottle.”

The cockatune landed on the counter. Ruffling his wings then folding them beneath him, he tilted his violet head. The bird didn’t move, only stared at the bottle, trembling.

“This is horrible!” Joe declared, “Pour the poor guy some water!”

Zalfron ignored Joe, he addressed the parrot, “Go on then!”

“Thank you! Thank you!” The parrot exclaimed. He scurried forward, clutched the bottle in his talons, leaned back, lifted it up, and put the nozzle between his beak. As the alcohol poured down his throat, his crest of neon green head-feathers stood up.

“I was wrong.” Machuba admitted.

“I ain’t never seen noddin like dis in my entire life, Civ!” Nogard crowed.

“That can’t be good for him!” Joe moaned.

“Oh come on!” Zalfron argued, “Its a pahrte parrot! Last tahm ah was on this ship, this donum bird would flah down to the brig and taunt mae and the other prisoners with a baer in both faet.”

“Beer is life! Beer is life!” The cockatune reassured Joe.

“It gotta name?” Nogard asked.

“He,” the bird said as he happily strutted around his beer, switching his gaze from the booze to the boys then back again, “He is my name.”

“Sing us a song, He!” Zalfron demanded.

“A song, what song?” He asked.

Taking a sip, Zalfron pondered but Nogard beat him to it, saying, “Flesh and Bone!”

“Farak that!” Zalfron rolled his eyes.

“Wait, these things are like radios?” Joe asked.

“Radios?” He yelled, “Radios? *Things?!?*”

“Oh...” Joe blushed, “Sorry?”

“Cockatunes are quite smart.” Machuba warned, “And fluent.”

“Oh...” Joe recoiled into his alcohol, “My bad...”

“Still just birds.” Nogard noted.

The “bird” spat a stream of booze into Nogard’s face, causing the flustered chidra to fall from his barstool and smack his spine against the floorboards once more, spilling his beer all over him. Before he even requested, Zalfron went about retrieving him a new beverage.

“What’s wrong with Flesh and Bone?” Joe asked.

“Maeningless!” Zalfron crowed as he tossed Nogard a new brew, “Overplayed, pop music.”

“Cause it’s good, Civ.” Nogard said, catching the beer and returning to his stool. He eyed the bird warily as he popped the cap by slamming the bottle’s head down on the edge of the bar – though it dented the wood, it did not threaten his dental health. He challenged Zalfron, “You know you love it!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

Ignoring the dispute, He had already begun to produce the melody. Chirping, whistling, clicking, and clucking the parrot managed to emulate the sound of an entire band – guitar, bass, drums, piano, and possibly even a brass instrument of some kind. His head feathers were spread in a neon green mohawk and his chest was puffed out like a proud bachelor as he began to sing the lyrics with the voice of a woman.

“I’ve gone through life white knuckling the moments that left me behind,” Nogard began to sing along with the bird, *“refusing to heed the yield-”*

“You know, this was the last song I listened to on Earth.” Joe stated.

“I penetrate the force fields in the blind!” Nogard and the bird proceeded, undaunted.

“Sae.” Zalfron replied, “That’s what ah maen, Lo is *overplayed.*”

“Lo?” Joe asked.

Despite his rebukes, Zalfron had fallen to the spell of the tune and had begun singing along with Nogard, *“They say I’ll adjust! God knows I must...but I’m not sure how...”*

“She’s the artist behind it.” Machuba explained.

“An alien like you, too, Civ.” Nogard noted before continuing the tune, *“This natural selection...”*

Joe perked up, “From Earth?!”

“No,” Machuba said, “Delia.”

Zalfron and Nogard were essentially just yelling the lyrics at this point, *“picked me out to be...”*

Machuba investigated, “They have this song on Earth?”

“...a dark horse running through a fantasy.”

Joe nodded, “Though it ain’t by Lo. It’s by the Killers.”

“They’re Killers?” Machuba asked.

Joe laughed, shaking his head, “Not at all, that’s just their name.”

“Odd thing to claim to be.” Machuba noted.

Joe frowned, “You’ve got a point...”

Machuba asked, “How’d you get here?”

Joe's frown increased, "Well..."

Both Zalfron and Nogard quieted as their curiosity took hold. Even He seemed to tone it down.

"I was in a car wreck and Ekaf saved me."

"Car wreck?" Zalfron asked.

"Like a motorized carriage...uh...accident...collision." Joe elaborated.

"Some Space City tiad, Civ." Nogard commented.

"Yea?" Joe said, his eyebrows raised to note the rhetorical question mark in his inflection, he continued, "Then I come to find out that the entire Earth is doomed. So Ekaf didn't just save me from the car wreck but he saved me from the death of my planet."

"Ekaf?" Zalfron burped.

"The Knome." Joe said.

"Dat Knome saved you?" Nogard asked.

Joe nodded before stopping to admit, "It was *a* Knome...pretty sure it was that Knome...they're so hard to recognize – Is that racist?"

"Yea, but we know what you mean." Machuba admitted.

"Whah you trahin save our world when your own is in danger?" Zalfron asked.

Joe looked at the elf, took a swig, then said, "Cause Ekaf said I have to."

"Yea?" Nogard asked.

"Like Earth and Solaris are intertwined." Joe shrugged, "By saving Solaris, I should get the chance to save Earth. Figure he's got me – got us, this far and I don't really have any other options...And I owe him my life...and then some, he's saved me at least half a dozen times and I've only been on this planet for a couple of days."

"Never get in debt to a Knome, Civ." Nogard warned.

"Too late." Joe chuckled.

"Well..." Zalfron shrugged, "gotta say, Knome or not...if hae saved yer lahf, you owe him."

"Knomes are wise," Machuba noted, "tricky, but wise."

"Nah, Civ," Nogard scoffed, "Knomes are Knomes, nuddin more."

"*He faces forward,*" the bird continued, "*trading in his blindness for the world of love.*"

Machuba said, "You were listening to this song when you got into the..."

Joe nodded, "Car wreck."

"*Time is raging, may it rage in vain.*" The bird continued, "*You always had it, but you never knew.*"

"Universe tryina say somedin, Civ." Nogard claimed.

"What's that?" Joe asked.

"*So boots and saddles,*" the bird concurred, "*get on your feet.*"

Nogard shrugged, "What da song say?"

"*There's no surrender, cause there's no retreat.*" The boys then fell into the spell and Machuba and Joe finally joined so that they all sang together, "*The bells are sounding, bring this match to an end. We are the descendants of gentle men.*"

A resilient peer rose from the frozen Gulf of Heimdallure, the bay off the eastern shore of Icelore. The old dock had survived yet another winter and – despite the creaking and shuddering

that occurred as Shalis followed Hermes down it – looked as though it would live through the coming thaw in late July, early August. The moans of the gangway were nothing compared to the groans and distant tremor-causing cracks the sheet of ice made as it received the banshee’s armored boots. In comparison, the solid water seemed not to notice Shalis Skullsummon’s dainty frame as she left the peer to join him on the surface of the bay.

Through a mist of swirling snow flurries, Shalis could see a smudge of darkness approaching. Better than she could see it, she could smell it. The breeze brought chill plumes of snowflakes but it also brought the scent of energy to her flaring nostrils. It was a unique type of energy. Not for its intensity, Shalis had smelt far more powerful beings, but for its oldness. The power she sensed felt ancient. The scent had a distinguished flavor that was unlike the smell of energy in the contemporary generation – the aroma reminded her of the yellow pages of a decaying book.

“Odd they call him the Sun Child,” Shalis stated, “rather than the Sun Elder.”

“This is not the Sun Child, my Sheik, that will come later,” Hermes was grinning though Shalis would never know it, “this gift will make you laugh.”

“I hope for your sake it doesn’t.” Shalis grumbled.

As the blur approached, Shalis began to pick out the details. It was a cage hoisted by shadowy beings but the contents of the enclosure wasn’t discernible until nearly under her nose. Curled into a ball, was a small little black clothed Knome. Turning to the banshee beside her, the sheik displayed no signs of humor.

Hermes was disappointed, “You don’t recognize him?”

Groaning, the old man shifted out of his fetal position to roll onto his back and gaze up at the two beings before him. His lip curled from beneath his beard, which was far scragglier than it had been in years, but he could only whisper his words.

“Water.”

Hermes tossed a leather flask between the bars of the cage. The pouch hit the elder in the chest. Moving like a sloth, the Knome sat up, unscrewed the cap, and lifted the sack to his lips.

“Still don’t recognize him?” Hermes asked.

“No,” Shalis snapped, “why beneath Solaris would I recognize a Knome?”

“The forger of the Four Swords, wielder of the Sui...”

“Grandfather?” Shalis exclaimed.

The skull nodded.

Grandfather dropped the flask from his lips and fixed the two with his sparkling blue eyes. Slowly he brought a hand up to his throat, folding in all his fingers but the middle and his index. He put these two phalanges against his throat. This gesture was a universal symbol meaning, “Farak you!”

“Maybe I have assumed too much,” Hermes began, “but would you, by chance, like to wield a fifth and final legendary Knomish blade?”

She would’ve but there was a primal instinct, deep within her soul, calling her to resist the banshee’s generosity and this urge had been ignited by the smugness of this prodigal son. What irritated her most was that Hermes had every right to be smug – his offerings had surpassed what she’d expected.

First off, despite what Shalis had said to Hermes, delivering Catherine Meriam to Icelore was, by itself, enough to sway the necromancer. As she rose in the ranks of the Disciples of Darkness, Catherine had seduced Shalis. Had she not, Shalis would’ve likely killed Catherine long ago – she was not one to allow competition – but instead she permitted Catherine to

flourish. Catty came to be regarded as one of the strongest mancens in the Order, if not the strongest. So much so that Shalis' partner in crime – the anonymous Truth – was widely expected to be Catherine. In the end, Catty betrayed Shalis but this was no normal betrayal. This wasn't a dagger in the Witch's back, this was a claymore: the romance had been a ruse, a means to an end, and then Catty didn't leave. Truth kept her on. By the time Truth was out of the picture, Creaton had returned and had taken the feline under his wing – but that wing no longer extended over Castle Icelore.

Second, Hermes had just brought her the most famous Knome in the world – possibly the only, as the others' existences were often in question by historians – a Knome notorious for escaping. He was one of the only individuals to have been captured by Iahtro, the great storm, only to leave on his own accord – *multiple times*. The old smith was so elusive that many had ceased to believe he had ever existed at all – that he was some sort of Sidon, a folktale made manifest by random Knomes that chose to don all black and trim their beards. Yet here he was, caged like a bird.

Third, there was Hermes' promise. If not for the first two gifts, Shalis wouldn't have entertained the idea that the rumors were true, the Sun Child had come, and that Hermes could bring this messiah to her. Still, could she trust Hermes? Why was he coming to her, bearing gifts and begging for her mercy? That was not the type of behavior she'd come to expect from the bearn. After all, he like Catty had betrayed her.

“What do you want from me?” Shalis demanded.

“Creaton sent me to kill the Sun Child.” Hermes explained, “He fears the Sun Child because he believes the Sun Child may bring the Queen of Darkness back beneath the light of Solaris.”

Shalis scoffed, “And the Disciple that deserted now wants the Queen back?”

Hermes shrugged, “I want to be on the right side when the inevitable occurs.”

Shalis cocked her head to the side. Grandfather sat up in his cage.

Hermes continued, “Have you heard of ‘the book’? Bale Morain's – the reptilian boneguard of the First Void War, you know of him, yes?”

She nodded. She knew not of the book, but she wasn't about to admit ignorance to the bearn before her. She did know of Bale Morain – who didn't? It was public knowledge that the odd figure had helped train the Samurai – but his book? She had no clue. Still she nodded, squinting to scrutinize the banshee as he continued.

“I burned it.” Hermes paused to let it sink in. When Shalis didn't react, he talked on all the same, “Before I did, I read a few pages. Everything I read, almost everything, has come to pass exactly as it was written.”

“What's left?” Shalis asked.

“We're to go to Zviecoff,” Hermes said, “and bring the Sun Child back to Icelore.”

“So you've come to me because of a book?”

“Yes,” Hermes admitted, “but if I didn't believe in it, then I wouldn't be here.” He hesitated, then elaborated, “The book contained the Foretelling.”

“The Delian Prophecy.” Shalis corrected.

“I skipped around, you see,” Hermes said, “just to see what would come of the prophecies, or what it claimed would...”

“Well?”

“The cuckmancer will bring her back into this world.” Hermes said, “And when she returns, I want to be on her side.”

“You think I can protect you from the Queen?” Shalis laughed.

Hermes nodded. This was perhaps the humblest Shalis had ever seen the banshee.

“Now I cannot promise, but if you continue to prove yourself,” Shalis couldn’t help but grin, “I will put in a good word for you.”

“Thank you.” Hermes said.

Lifting the flask back to his lips, Grandfather hesitated to mutter, “You’ll both be long dead fore she comes around.” He took a swig, finishing the pouch, then tossed it to the frozen lake, “Idiot badger just looked at the pictures.”

Shalis and Hermes gazed at the Knome but said nothing. Turning they marched back towards the shore and the shadow guards that held the cage followed after them.

- - -

Stars littered the night sky like glimmering shards of mica scattered across a stream. A lone ball of gas shot across the distant swirls of solar systems, arching through space, and continuing on towards eternity. “*One day I’ll ride a shooting star.*” It was as if someone had just slugged Joe in the gut. Clutching his stomach, he looked down from the heavens and slipped inside the bridge lounge to join his friends.

Standing on top of what was probably Captain John Pigeon’s personal desk, Ekaf was pacing back and forth over a map of Zviecoff he’d laid out. His mouth was moving at a hundred words per second as he verbally pondered his plan of action. Bold stood by the desk, asking question after question, while Zach stood silently observing the layout of the great city. Zalfron was slumped in the captain’s chair, his eyes closed, his nose rattling, and his lips drooling to add to the puddle already gathered in his lap. Nogard and Machuba were gone, far below them in the brig, cleaning out the cells that were empty now that the guards of Etihw City had adopted their prisoners. Acamus was just outside the lounge manning the helm. The Etihw City police had finally admitted them earlier that afternoon, after the crew assured them they were not planning, as Acamus had claimed, to sail to the embattled city of Zviecoff.

Joe sat down in one of the chairs behind Zach as the spirit began to dispute something Ekaf had claimed about the city. Joe wasn’t thinking about Zviecoff. His mind was still stuck on the memory of his grandpa which brought him to another, but more recent, memory: *my warp cube! Did Grandfather ever find it? Now that Hermes captured Grandfather...does Hermes have it? A sad smile carved his lips. Wonder what’d be worse? A heard of Knomes with those keys or the Black Crown?* The humor died as his thoughts settled on Grandfather. He said a quick prayer for the old man.

“Boy God,” Bold sat down next to Joe and wiped the sweat from his brow, “have ya hard of the lifts in the harbar?”

“Lifts?” Joe asked.

“Great big plehts far liftin folks to the citay,” Bold shuddered, “no wolls, nothin. Just...just plehts...”

“Are there stairs?”

“Aye, lad,” but Bold shook his head, “but the mount of stehrs wae’d naed would kill mae just the sehm.”

“Aren’t you the same Bold that was willing to crawl through the Under to save a life?” Ekaf challenged, looking down on the dwarf from his vantage point, “what did Sam Budd do to you?”

“Aye, lad, watch it! Hell eh’n’t got godai taiad on uh Sunde’ brunch kitchen.” Bold snapped before saying, “But the truth of the mattar is: if oi doie in Oiceload, then who’ll doie far the dwarves.”

“Can we expect any support from the Ipativians?” Zach asked.

“The Vokriit they call themselves now.” Ekaf corrected before answering, “Not likely. Not much help from the GraiLord’s either. From what I gathered from Acamus was that Coalition forces tried to take back Rivergate and failed – only allies we’re liable to find in there are Theseus and the folks he got trapped in there with.” Ekaf stomped on the desk beneath him, “Found a buncha correspondence in Johnny’s desk that backs that up too – the South Zviecoff is Shalis’. That said, least from what I can tell, the North’s still in the hands of the Coalition.”

“You keep saying Coalition?” Joe asked.

“That’s the GraiLord and...” Zach turned to Ekaf.

“Vokriit – which means people’s army in Ancient Elven,” Ekaf shrugged, “just call em the elves. The minotaurs and the elves.” Then his shoulders sagged, “Unfortunately, from the letters I’ve found here, it seems Shalis is prepping for one last push and is liable to just about take what’s left of the city. Figure the Coalition’ll keep the Castle and maybe Mountaingate but, by the time we get there, they may not be any friends in the city-city but the old minotaur king.”

“So the elves and the minotaurs work together now?” Joe asked, “I thought there was that ancient beef or whatever?”

“The one good thing that’s come out of the War on Mancy is that the minotaurs of the Vanian Mountains and the electric elves of Iceload’s frozen valleys have finally been able to find common ground.” Ekaf said.

“A hatred for the Order?” Joe asked.

Ekaf nodded.

“And the Pact.” Zach added.

Joe gulped, “Both of which we’ll be facing in Zviecoff?”

“Just the Order.” Ekaf corrected.

“Hermes works for the Order?” Joe asked.

“He used to.” Ekaf said.

Joe was confused, “I thought the *Monoceros* sails for the Order?”

“Pahrates will wark far anayboday, lad.” Bold stated.

“But he is right,” Zach said, “the Sea Lords work for the Order.” He turned to Ekaf, “Why would John Pigeon allow a traitor on board his ship? Are the Pact and Order cooperating again?”

“I wouldn’t think so!” Ekaf crowed, “The two don’t exactly see eye to eye-”

Joe interrupted, “Neither did the elves and the minotaurs, but a common enemy-”

“There’s no way in hell.” Ekaf plopped down on his butt, squashing Zviecoff, and folded his arms, “There’s no way in hell that Creaton and Shalis would work together – not again – because the two hate each other! Not to mention, now that you’re around, they have opposing goals.”

Joe begged for elaboration, “Which are?”

“Creaton wants you dead,” Ekaf explained, “and Shalis wants you alive.”

“But why?”

“Because you could be the new Tsar of Pyromancy-”

Joe rolled his eyes, “Yes, I know that, you’ve said that before, but that doesn’t really make sense. Why’s she need me to restart the pyromancy branch? She’s got every pyromancer in

existence locked up somewhere. I'm sure she could find one of them that would obey her – shit, she could just make one! One that isn't prophesized to bring back the Samurai."

"On the contrary," Ekaf stabbed the sky with his index finger, "according to Shalis', and Creaton too for that matter, the Foretelling – or Delian Prophecy if you will – predicts that the Sun Child will not bring back the Samurai. Instead, the Sun Child will bring back the Queen of Darkness."

"What?" Joe, Zach, and Bold chimed simultaneously.

"But the fishfolk are Delains-"

"Religiously but not geographically." Ekaf inserted.

"-and they were excited about me being the Sun Child." Joe continued, "But they don't want the Queen to come back...do they?"

"No," Ekaf laughed, "they think you'll stop her after you bring her back."

"Wouldn't they just rather her not come back at all?" Zach asked.

Ekaf rolled his eyes, "We'd all rather a lot of things, but we all know she'll come back eventually."

"True." Bold said.

"Cept Creaton thinks he can stop it." Joe noted.

"He also thinks anarchy is a good idea." Ekaf reminded Joe, "He's got a third-party-vote kind of brain."

"Huh?" Bold and Zach chimed.

"It's an American joke." Joe explained.

This earned another, "Huh?"

"An Earth-thing."

"Ah..."

"Anyways," Joe said, shaking his head as if he could shake the distractions from his melon, "we were talking about Hermes and Catty – who were working for the Pact-"

"Were." Ekaf noted, penetrating the air above his head with a meaningful index finger, "However, both Hermes and Catty have a history of back-stabbery."

"I don't know about Catty, but I do know Hermes betrayed the Order." Zach stated, "And from what I know about Shalis, I don't find it likely that she'd forgive him..."

Ekaf nodded, "You aren't wrong...but it is possible that he never actually left the Order-"

"A spoy!" Bold exclaimed.

"Indeed," then the Knome shrugged, "or he's buying Shalis' forgiveness with an offer she can't refuse."

The offer Shalis couldn't refuse had been followed by an offer that Shalis hadn't really needed but had accepted anyways and this offer was sitting cross legged on a wooden cot with his shackled wrists in his lap. His beady little eyes were focused on the woman who now stood in the doorway of his cell – the other, less refusable offer.

"Well look what the cat coughed up." Grandfather chuckled.

Catty hissed, "I'm as happy about this as you are Knome."

"Please enter the cell." One of the undead soldiers begged.

Catty obeyed and the boneguard shut the door behind them. The cell was a small rectangular box carved out of the stone that the island of Icelore sat upon. A small, barred square

near the top of the door was the only orifice. The room had one cot and one hole and the hole still reeked from the deposits of the last visitor.

“Yea...I’m not too fond of the idea of sharing a bed with the likes of you.” Grandfather said, “You seem to cast a sort of curse on your bed mates.”

Catty rolled her eyes, not moving from where she stood by the door.

Grandfather scoffed, “Mind if I ask why I get the pleasure of your company?”

“Hermes betrayed me.” She replied.

Grandfather scoffed once more, “Mind if I ask why you didn’t see that coming from a couple hundred selims away?”

Catty glared for a moment, mulling over whether or not her new cellmate deserved an explanation before she finally decided to elaborate, “You’re a Knome, you wouldn’t understand what it’s like to serve a crown.”

Now it was Grandfather who was rolling his eyes as he scoffed for the third time, “Catherine Meriam putting her duty first?”

“No.” Catty snapped.

Grandfather raised an eyebrow, “Your actions beg to differ.”

“You know nothing.” Catty spat.

“I know that ring on your finger wasn’t there last year.”

Catty put her hands behind her back.

Grandfather shook his head, “Maybe you don’t curse your bed mates, huh? Maybe they curse you.”

Taking her first step away from the door, Catty strode forward and back handed Grandfather so hard that he tumbled off the bed. The old Knome landed on his face with a grunt. He managed to squirm over onto his back and lean up against the wall.

Rubbing his cheek with his shackled hands, Grandfather growled, “You gonna say I’m wrong?”

“The only man that ever cursed me is dead.”

Grandfather cringed as he realized he’d been picking at the wrong wound. He opened his mouth to apologize but stopped, the damage had been done. Illustrating the misunderstanding would only serve to relieve his conscience, something that he didn’t deserve considering the carelessness of his words.

A man had hurt Catherine when she was still a child. She had since killed that man, but nothing could heal wounds cut like that. Love helped – and she was in love. After all, the symbol of that affection was now branded on the old Knome’s cheek, but it was complicated.

Grandfather tried to send her some warmth, “How’re your legs holding up?”

She sat down on the bed and dished back coolness, “How’s your foot?”

“Better...” Grandfather intentionally misinterpreted the snark as reciprocal concern.

Silence threatened to ensnare them. Unlike the others of his kind, Grandfather wasn’t opposed to quiet. On the other hand, like his fellow Knome, Grandfather couldn’t fight his natural curiosity and Catherine Meriam was an intriguing character. The old Knome punctured the silence in an attempt to foster conversation.

“I suppose we’ll get to know each other down here.”

“Doubt it.”

“Why not?”

“These are holding cells,” Catty explained, “they are temporary. In a matter of days they’ll escort us through the castle and slaughter us before a congregation of cackling mancers.”

Grandfather's eyes grew wide then his brow dropped and he laughed, "They wouldn't kill me, I haven't even begun their sword."

"I hope you don't plan to finish." Catty remarked.

Grandfather shrugged, "Someone will come to my rescue."

"Will they?"

"Unlike you, I make friends." Grandfather snapped.

"And your friends know you're here?"

Grandfather frowned.

"They know Hermes captured you," Catty answered for the Knome, "but they think that Hermes is loyal to the Pact. The last place they'd look is Icelore."

"So I'm screwed..." Grandfather grunted before shrugging, "Eh, least I'll go out with a bit of flair."

Catty nodded.

"Tell me about this dungeon. You worked for the Order so you should know some tricks."

"The walls are charmed with the same spell that protects the Cathedral in God's Island. No matter how many souls power your spell, you can teleport into the castle above but not into the dungeon below."

"Unless you have the Suikii!" Grandfather interjected.

Catty continued as if uninterrupted, "They hold executions on Monday."

"Mondays?" Grandfather laughed.

"Yea." Catty said, "Suppose it gives them a reason to look forward to a Monday."

Grandfather grimaced.

"Every member, aside from those deployed from Icelore, are required to watch the executional festivities."

"Sounds joyous..." Grandfather muttered.

"The bodies are harvested for bone and shadow. Both of which are stored beneath the dungeon in what they've taken to calling the Twin Vials: two giant enertombs that hold the potential to store immense amounts of power. Shalis and Adora use this as their personal bank. Despite the fact that they claim it is the offering they are preparing for the return of the Queen, you know Shalis can't help herself. This whole war spawned out of her addiction." Catty rolled her eyes so hard that her eyelids batted, she continued, "Every mancer is required to give ten percent of the shadows or bone they've harvested over the week every Monday-"

"They've made mancy into a religion!" Grandfather declared.

"-if the records show you're giving less than usual, expect an audit."

"Are there any exceptions, are there any prisoners who aren't executed?"

"There is one exception. If the prisoner is a necromancer or shadowmancer they may choose to turn undead and re-devote themselves to the Order as a boneguard or shadowguard for Shalis."

Grandfather sighed, "Too bad I'm not a mancer..."

"The dungeon is shaped like a screw, starting with the narrow spiral of stairs that lead down a hundred feet before arriving at the holding cells." Catty continued, "The first floor of holding cells houses only nine, wedged together in a ring. The second floor has rooms beneath the original nine with one missing. The missing cell is instead a path way to a second ring of cells. The second floor has eight plus eighteen new cells. The third floor has a ring of eight, a

ring of seventeen, and a ring of twenty-seven. There are five floors and three hundred and five cells.”

“Where do you suppose we are?” Grandfather asked.

Catty thought back to her journey down, “Cell three-hundred and four.”

“The only way out is past the other cells and up a century of stairs?”

“Correct,” Catty nodded, “but the spiral staircase isn’t just a spiral staircase. There are no railings and it is in the center of a giant empty column carved out of the earth. The outside of the column is mounted with boneguards armed with crossbows. Even if we manage to get out of the cell, there is no chance we’d make it up that staircase.”

“Unless Shalis is killed.” Grandfather stated.

“Shalis is far stronger than Hermes. Do not underestimate the Sheik and her sister.” Catty replied, “We will not make it out of here alive.”

Grandfather grinned, gave Catty a wink, and said, “Wanna bet?”

“Bet what?” she asked.

“You decide,” Grandfather said, “you’re the one who thinks we won’t.”

Catty narrowed her eyes, “But if we don’t we die.”

“Okay, so if we die, what do you win?”

Catty thought for a moment. When she came up with an answer she couldn’t help but smirk. She took a deep breath, forced a nonchalant expression, then looked the old Knome in the eye.

“If we die, you can have the bed.”

“Ah don’t sae how this is gonna work.” Zalfron said, crossing his arms.

Rolling his eyes, Nogard turned to the elf, “Oh yea, Civ, because you know how dese dings work.”

Bold stepped forward in defense of the Sentry, “Uh don’t thank it’ll fit, lad.”

Standing in the middle of the six, wiggling his right hand, Joe stated, “Fit or not, if I can’t get the Suikii to show up then we won’t even be able to try.”

“Maybe it has returned to its master.” Machuba suggested.

Zachias agreed, “This could be a good omen.”

Suddenly, the sword materialized in Joe’s grip – almost as if just to dispel what hope had spawned in the boys’ hearts. Joe nearly sliced a hole in the tangle of metal that enclosed the passage like a mechanical pergola. The boys were crowded into the narrow tunnel that led from the door to the map face. In order to fit, they stood in pairs. Zach and Bold nearest the door, Zalfron and Joe in the middle, and Nogard and Machuba beside the cartogram. With the sword now in hand, Nogard and Machuba stepped out of the way and Joe approached the vial. There Joe hesitated.

“What do I do?”

“Just stick it in, Civ.” Nogard said.

Zalfron snickered and the chidra jabbed him with his elbow.

“Hold the blade and put the hilt in first.” Zach advised.

Bold concurred, “Aye, that blehd moight sloice roight through that glass.”

“How do I open it?” Joe asked.

Machuba bypassed Joe and knelt beside the cylinder. He inspected the steel limb and the inertomb tipped cradle the vial rested on then shrugged.

“Tap da top, Civ.” Nogard said.

Machuba poked the cap and the chevron-toothed lid slid apart. Victorious, he moved out of the way and licked his eyes.

“Here it goes...”

Carefully grabbing the blade by its flat backside, Joe stuck the hilt into the tube. Immediately, the glowing spheres that pinched the cylinder hummed to life. The map began to shift. Waves made of tiny shingles, like miniscule wooden pedals, slapped against the three-pronged continent of Iceload that reached down from the ceiling. Rather than being oriented upright, the map was sideways so that the northern hemisphere became the eastern and the southern became the western. This put the tip of Middakle, Iceload’s middle peninsula, level with Joe’s head. The boys craned their necks as two distinct blurbs of scarlet animated themselves and rose from the timber tapestry.

The first crimson they noticed rested on the tiny sliver of map between Iceload and the roof, on the lumpy-crescent shaped island of Icelore. A bloody castle stood waist high to the mountains that surrounded it.

Joe’s excitement at recognition of the alien geography was countered by the realization of what it meant for his friend, he murmured, “Grandfather’s in Icelore.”

Zach said, “Hermes *is* back with the Order...”

“God bless him, lad,” Bold patted Joe on the back, “the old Knome’s at the marsay of that wicked Witch now.”

“Those dungeons...” Zalfron shuddered.

“He’s doomed den, yea?” Nogard asked.

Zalfron nodded.

“Maybe we can break him out after Zviecoff,” Zach suggested.

“Ha!” Zalfron cried, “That’s impossible!”

“You got out.” Joe noted.

“Ah had insahd help!” Zalfron argued.

“So we just leave him to the Order?” Joe demanded, “That isn’t right.”

Machuba spoke, “Whether or not we can help him, we can’t until we finish the task at hand.”

Frowning, Joe nodded. He was about to pull his sword from the vial when Zach grabbed his arm. The spirit pointed to the map, a few selims away from Icelore there was another burgundy spec. Rather than being stationary like Castle Icelore, this blob rocked back and forth as it inched its way along the Etihw River.

“Is that us?” Joe asked.

“The blade has two masters.” Zach nodded.

“War narly thar!” Bold exclaimed.

“Saelu!” Zalfron forgot about the peril of their Knomish friend and began jumping up and down, “Trahskele Point! Y’all ever been?”

The general consensus was shaking heads.

“They say Trahskele is where lahf baegan!” Zalfron continued, “Come on!”

The elf dashed out of the room. Zach, Bold, and Nogard hurried after. Machuba followed but stopped at the door when he noticed Joe wasn’t behind him. The human’s eyes were back on the map, boring into the miniature castle in the corner of Icelore as if he might be able to pluck

Grandfather out and pull him to safety with his glare. Silently, Machuba walked back over to the pyromancer and clasped him on the shoulder. They stood for a minute then Joe withdrew the sword and, as the machines winded down, they left the mapwork room and headed upstairs.

Once out on the deck, the worry in Joe's heart was outweighed by wonder. Triskele Point, named after the Ancient Elven word for "three", was called such because of the confluence of two rivers, the great Etihw and the Medull, which split the city of Poricoff in three. Not only was the city interrupted by the white waters iconic to Iceloadic rivers, but Poricoff laid out beneath a coniferous canopy whose tremendous trunks stood staggered throughout the Point. The Triskele Forest was uncorrupted, its behemoth branches never broken by beings, as it was faithfully protected by pagans who partook in the belief which contradicted the theories of the Big Boom that, as Zalfron put, Triskele Point was where life began. In fact, the citizens of Poricoff were so infamously different that they were neither allied with the Vokriit nor the Order but rather considered a sort of free agent to be used by both parties and, more importantly, assaulted by neither – as no one really expected any more of the locals. But, it wasn't the people of Poricoff's uniqueness nor the fantastic foliage that fascinated folks who floated through the forest city, no, it was the falls.

As steam rose from the abnormally warm riverbed, water crashed down from marble cliffs. The Medull River, which descended from the slopes of the Vanian Mountains, was fed by beautiful waterfalls which the citizens of the forest city had long since fell in love with. In the first millennia, the people of Poricoff would vacation up and down the Medull, spending weekends basking in the views of the awesome cascades. This had inspired the elites of the town to hire magical engineers to build falls from where the city overlooked their converging rivers. Supernatural pumping systems pushed river water up through ice and stone to replace the streets with canals and create a fantastic display of cataracts. Amongst the six boys, there wasn't a jaw that wasn't agape.

"What're y'all doing awake!" Ekaf demanded as he came to stand behind them.

"Ya thank wae could slaep with whot's wehtin far us tomarra?" Bold asked, not looking away from the city.

"Today." Zach corrected.

"Suppose not..." Ekaf murmured as he too succumbed to the view.

"Ain't it perty?" Zalfron attempted to slap Ekaf on the back while keeping his eyes on the scene before them but he overestimated the Knome's height and instead smacked the cone off the little man's head. The elf was so lost in the spectacle he didn't even notice what he'd done.

Ekaf grabbed his hat, replaced it on his head, then said, "Zalfron, go to the kitchen and get Acamus some coffee."

"Wah?" Zalfron asked, turning to the Knome with squinting golden eyes, "And who are you anyway?!"

"I'm godi Ekaf you winged dingus!" Ekaf crowed, "And take a look at the minotaur, there's your 'why'!"

The sight seers momentarily directed their observation inward, at the brig. Acamus stood where he had stood since dinner their first night on board the *Monoceros*. This last dinner, he had refused to leave the helm so they brought him a plate (and the boys were almost sure that he'd thrown the food overboard because the plate was never returned nor found). His behavior worried them more and more. No longer did he stand on his own two hooves, but now he leaned over the wheel, one arm gripping a peg while the other hung between them. His head rolled

around on his neck, lulling for a minute then jerking upright but not remaining up for long before drooping again. He was trembling, as if shivering, despite being in one of the warmest places in Iceload. This was not the same minotaur Ekaf, Zach, and Bold had been saved by days before nor was he the same Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, and Machuba met two days ago.

“Jaesus, Lard!” Bold yelped, “The par lad’s doyin!”

“Is he sick?” Zach asked, “That can’t be pure greif.”

“Oh, it can...” Machuba remarked.

“We shouldn’t have left him alone for so long!” Joe lamented.

“Wae should make *him* get some rest!” Zalfron stated.

Nogard said, “Selu to you wit dat, Civ, dere be stubborn people, den dere be da GraiLord.”

“He will be of no help to us in Zviecoff like that.” Machuba said.

“Machuba’s right, but we’ve got no time to get him the sleep he needs – we’ll be in Zviecoff when the sun rises!” Ekaf said, “We’ve got to juice him up! Zalfron – or somebody – needs to go below deck and get that man some caffeine.”

“Wah cain’t you?” Zalfron asked.

“Because...” as impressive as the city sprawled out before them was the sight of Ekaf at a loss for words. Finally, Ekaf found the words to admit, “...I couldn’t reach the coffee grounds...”

“I’ll go.” Joe said.

As Zalfron and Nogard collapsed laughing, Joe headed below deck. Bold, who was sympathetic to the plight of the Knome, asked, “Does the lad know how to mehk coffae?”

“Maybe on his planet,” Ekaf shrugged, “but I doubt he does on ours, I’ll go-”

“No, you go to Acamus,” Bold said, “Oi’ll go help him.”

He hustled to catch up with Joe and, as they descended the stairs, he cleared his throat. Joe turned and gave Bold a salutary nod.

“Been maenin to ask ye somethin...” Bold scratched his hairless head, “bout when ya sehved muh loife...”

“Saved your life?” Joe brushed it off, “It was really Acamus, we both would’ve-”

“Uh’m etarnallay grehtful, lad,” Bold said, “but...but Zach said you war rael...er...warraed.”

“Well I was! I-”

“Aye, hae said you war so warraed, ya aeven kissed mae-”

“Huh?”

“Open mouth and evarythan-”

“What?” Joe stopped in his tracks.

“Now hae said you called it a kiss uh loife, or some sart of thin-”

“CPR!” Joe exclaimed, a blushing smile spreading across his cheeks, “Its normal procedure back on Earth, I thought-”

“No naed to get defensive, lad!” Bold raised his hands, “Ain’t pressin charges. Uh cain’t blehm ye, been told oi’m quoite the lookar but...uh...heht to brehk it to ya lad, yar not moy toype ah fella.”

“No, listen,” Joe continued to plead his case while simultaneously fighting back a fit of laughter, “that wasn’t – listen, you were unconscious, I wouldn’t-”

“Uh go far the broadar men. Closar to moy soize, ya know?” Bold explained, walking again and speaking over his shoulder, “Too big ah fella to fool with the skin and bones toype loik

you.” As the dwarf continued towards the kitchen, unperturbed that Joe had stopped following, he continued talking, “Ain’t mad though, lad, fact is uh’m sarta honored. Just thought uh should let ya know, far ya get yar hopes up far nothin.”

Joe palmed his face for a moment, took a deep breath, then followed the dwarf.

- - -

“How devious of you Shalis!” Hermes chuckled, “Locking Catherine up with that Knome!”

Silence was the Witch’s first response. She was the type of person not to make a single noise unless she intended to. Her bare feet glided across the floor making as much sound as a cat on the prowl. If it wasn’t for Hermes’ heavy boots and John Pigeon’s thick heeled galoshes, the hall would’ve been silent. Shalis debated ignoring the banshee’s statement altogether. She was growing tired of the bearns brown nosing. Rather than concur, she decided to change the subject and humble him.

“You’re lucky I came when I did Hermes, Catty nearly had you.”

Hermes froze in his tracks.

“If you keep underestimating your opponents you’ll fall to the same fate you fell to before – only I doubt Flow Morain will save you this time.” Shalis stated.

Biting his nonexistent tongue, Hermes turned the subject again, “When will the execution be?”

“In a month, possibly.”

Johnny grimaced but then quickly hid his concern by acting as if his furled brow was one of concentration as he scrutinized his fingernails.

Shalis continued, “We’re selling box-seat tickets for large donations of bone and shadows, if you’re interested. I’m expecting both executions to individually earn us more than we got for Paud Gill – though in these there will be no foolishness.”

They turned off the hall and began down a narrow staircase that ended abruptly with a door. Shalis held out her palm. A bone materialized in her hand, molding into the shape of a key. She unlocked the door and held it open for Hermes and Johnny to enter first. Johnny bowed elaborately and gestured for Shalis to go ahead of him and, rolling her eyes, she did. (His state had greatly improved from the day before. The Order of Mancers had skilled healers with unlimited amounts of energy at their disposal as well as one of the greatest libraries in Iceload. What little bit of pain still lingered was easily ignored by the vast amount of aquannabis he’d used to coat his johnson.) As Hermes stepped inside, a ball of fire blossomed above him illuminating the web of machinery that hung like stalactites. He stood on a slender stone platform extended into a hollowed-out bulb of rock. The bulb was filled with metal arms bending on gears as they hustled to arrange the panels engraved with the puzzle pieces of Solaris. Each portion was accurately painted, with color, depicting both nature and civilization. As they came together into one shape the landscapes began to take life. Wind whipped around the miniature peaks of the Vanian Mountains as white waves lapped against the shores of Icelore.

“Wow...” Johnny murmured, “Now I see why you wanted to come to Icelore.”

“The finest mapwork in the world.” Hermes stated.

Shalis strode past the pirate captain and banshee and addressed the map before her, “Namehda rashi submuloc.”

The Aquarian Ocean split before them and Tadloe was torn in two as the machine rearranged itself. Mechanical arms plucked nuts and bolts off other metallic appendages and put them back together as a part of a separate device. In a matter of seconds, a new creation stood before the three. It stood on two steel feet from which sprouted robotic shins connected by shelled knee-cap-gears to mighty metal thighs. Its artificial abs cradled a glowing stone where bright yellow energy could be seen flowing through the finely crafted veins and arteries that stretched from the robot's toes to its broad shoulders and then down to its thimble-like fingertips. Its head was a melon of metal with the globe of Solaris engraved over it. It had the jaw of a snapping turtle and the glowing eyes of an owl.

The robot walked across a bridge of hodge-podge landscapes and came to a stop by the three on the stone peninsula.

"This is Atlas." Shalis said.

The robot bowed, saying, "The one and only."

Shalis turned to Johnny, "Will we trace the *Monoceros* through hair or flesh?"

Johnny puffed out his chest and declared, "Flesh," but his confident stature diminished as he eyed the menacing metal automaton and his spastic twitching took him back over.

"Approach the globework."

Johnny hesitated, "By flesh I meant blood, no need to cleave off an arm or anything--"

"It will be gentle." Shalis promised.

The pirate swallowed his spit and approached the robot.

"I am programmed to be much less violent than my magnificent masters." Atlas said but its animatronic voice offered Johnny no consolation. The robot held its hand out to Johnny and Johnny took the handout of mere reflex. Before he knew it, Atlas had pricked the tip of his finger and had walked right back off the stone peninsula, "Please wait while I search Mystakle Planet."

"Mystakle Planet?" Johnny remarked.

"He was made by Kenchi Kou." Shalis explained, "Little brother of a Mystakle Samurai Tenchi Kou, current Commander of the Samurai's Army – he was a fan of the Ancient Elven term and taught his masterpiece such."

Hermes winced at the reference to the specific Samurai.

As the robot walked off the platform, a platform rose to carry it. The map assembled before it. The entire planet formed around them, from the deserts of Vinnum Tow and the tundra of Iceload to the volcanoes of Darkloe and the valleys of Sondor. Atlas shook its head, moving its arms much as one might when directing an orchestra. The parts of the map most distant from Iceload began to chip away, falling behind the face of the cartograph to insert themselves between the cracks, molding to match the terrain of the continent. Piece by piece, Iceload grew until the map consisted of only the frozen, trident-shaped landmass. Each peak of the Vanian Mountains could be counted. The snowy cliffs of the southern Gulf of Zannon were depicted in entirety, down to the tiniest, most recent chunk of stone that had chipped off and fallen into the sea.

Hermes began to laugh. Not far from Triskele Point was a miniature ship painted completely in red. His armored shoulders bounced with each ear-splitting chuckle, "See, Shalis, they're headed for Zviecoff."

"You put too much faith in that silly book." Shalis asked, "Why would they--"

"Acamus was with them." Hermes answered.

"The son of Theseus..." Shalis murmured.

"They say he's still in Rivergate." Johnny noted.

Hermes clasped his hands together, “The fish are swimming into the barrel.”

- - -

She was expressionless. Each secret glance Aqa gave the merman revealed no more than the first. She wore a shaggy zeal-fur coat over her buccaneer garb, the long-haired fur coming in stripes of dried blood and street mud. It saved her from the hypothermia-inducing climate, but not from the other-worldly chill of her steed. She rode upon the giant white fox that, aside from the shade, was the same form of the beast that had carried him through the Wobniar Woods. The creature’s cold could kill if it intended to. It froze the water around its submerged ankles, preventing it from rushing over the edge of the bluff they stood upon. Ever so often her steed would tilt its head and watch her with one eye, as it was doing now.

Its lips curled back into a smile and it walked over to the edge of the falls, leaning so that she could see below. A white river rolled between shelves of marble, the merman recognized it as the Etihw. She recognized something else as well. A murmur escaped the rag that gagged her.

Aqa stood watching the two before he too turned his gaze upon the river. A ship painted in the colors of the ocean and blood charged through the steamy water. At the front of the ship was a bold white unicorn, reared back with its mouth frothing. But what caught Aqa’s eyes was the small figure of a human standing on the deck. As the ship neared their vantage point, Aqa became sure that he recognized the figure.

“The pyromancer!” He said and stepped back from the cliff.

“Yes,” the fox said, peaking over the edge of the waterfall for a moment longer, “It seems he’s headed to Zviecoff.”

“Zviecoff...” Aqa muttered, “How far away is that?”

The fox rolled its muscled shoulders and stretched its neck.

“As far from us as sunrise.”

- - -

Since they left Poricoff, Acamus hadn’t stopped talking. The sleep deprivation combined with the caffeinated beverage had propelled him into a tweaky state. His ears flapped, his nose twitched, and his tongue was constantly darting out to lick his lips in between words. As if dancing to a song his hooves shifted around beneath him though the cockatune was nowhere near the bridge. Joe, Ekaf, Bold, and Zach hadn’t left the minotaur’s side for fear that the jumpy navigator might forget what he was doing and drive the vessel into the snowy ridges they sailed between. Zalfron, Machuba, and Nogard had slinked off to avoid the awkwardness of the situation and busied themselves by attempting to reorganize the obliterated storage room where they’d arrived via the Suikii days before. Every other minute, Ekaf suggested Acamus put the ship on autopilot and sit down for a moment but his comments, along with nearly everything that came out of the Knome’s mouth, fell on deaf ears. He only seemed to hear Joe, Bold, and Zach and even then it seemed he only heard them when he was asking them a brief question such as:

“Want to hear another story, my friends?”

Joe looked to Zach. Zach looked to Bold. Bold looked to Ekaf. Ekaf shrugged and the shoulder-motion was transmitted back up the line to Joe who responded.

“Sure.”

“The other day I told you of Eirene GraiLord and Perseus Muhammad,” Acamus began, “well today I shall tell you more about the ancestors of Mycenae GraiLord, the descendants of Gorgophone Icespear.”

“The Second War of the Blue Ridges?” Ekaf exclaimed, genuinely excited.

As if the Knome wasn't there, Acamus continued, “This, my friends, is the tale of one of the greatest military victories of the GraiLord Empire, do either of you know of which I speak?”

“The Second War of the Blue Ridges!” Ekaf cried again.

For the first time since they left Triskele, Acamus didn't twitch. The poor Knome was so flustered he stormed off. Fighting back a grin, Joe answered, “Um...wild guess here, but I'm gonna go with...the Second War of the Blue Ridges?”

“Indeed!” Acamus proclaimed, turning to Joe with his eyes wide and his lips peeled back in what should've looked like a smile but most certainly did not. He continued, “The tale of Solon Icespear and Flow Morain! The Tale...” he hesitated as he devised a more poetic title, “of the Furious Warlord and the Man from the Mountains...the Mountains He – the Furious Warlord – Couldn't Climb.”

Acamus' Tale 2: The Furious Warlord and the Man from the Mountains the Furious Warlord Couldn't Climb⁶

By the turn of the first century, the electric elves of Iceload had entered into the Age of the Blood Feud Confederacy in which the majority of central and northern Iceload passed the crown between four major dynasties – the Ipativy, Sentry, Etihw, Oreh – depending on which family's warrior was able to slaughter their competitors in a ceremonial duel once every hundred years. The section known as the North Vanian, taken from the GraiLord by the Ipativy during the First War of the Blue Ridges, was a part of the Confederacy's territory. The minotaurs of the North Vanian took advantage of the alternating authorities that ruled them and moved tentatively away from their occupied position. By the fifth century, their position in the Confederacy had evolved from a voiceless colony to a puppeted protectorate ruled by a committee of ten Confederacy-appointed minotaurs called archons. In the 320s, the Archonian Government earned near-complete sovereignty so long as they paid their dues to the Blood Feud Confederacy (that said, their archons – though they had to be minotaurs – were still elected by the Confederacy). After the Vaniakle Tax Revolt, early in the 400s, the North Vanians won the right to elect one of the archons themselves (called the People's Archon) but this did little to counter the animosity that had been growing ever since the death of Argolis Muhammad and there were foreign parties eager to capitalize upon this unrest.

The GraiLord Empire, though no longer ruled by the GraiLord aristocracy, exerted constant pressure on their elven-ruled brothers and sisters to the north. Every chance they got they incited opposition to the Confederacy in hopes of liberating their kin. The GraiLord Governess, Theagena Kurr, was hell-bent on reuniting the Blue Ridges. She refused the title of Queen claiming that there was no true monarch of the minotaurs until the minotaurs were once again united.

She secretly sent her youngest son, Cylon, soon after his birth, to be raised as an orphan in the North Vanian. There, a group of insurgents loyal to the Theagena raised him amongst other rebellious minded minotaurs one of which being the future archon Solon Icespear. Soon after turning twenty, Cylon attempted to lead a revolt but was captured and exiled. He fled south where he was again captured but, this time, embraced by his mother who then revealed to him his true identity. After a short reunion, Theagena armed him with GraiLord soldiers, though disguised to appear like rogue peasants unassociated with the southern nation, and sent him marching back north to attempt another revolution.

⁶ For a map of the Southern Hemisphere before the Second War of the Blue Ridges check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

Once again, Cylon failed. He and his troops were unable to defeat the united North Vanian Army and Blood Feud Confederacy troops. They tried to flee south but were blocked so they wound up back pedaling to take refuge in the Argolian Temple. As the troops of the Confederacy surrounded the church so too did the unhappy citizens of the North Vanian. Archbishop Vala Morain, the head of the now Thoran dominated Argolian Temple, knew that the people of the Blue Ridges would lose what little tolerance they had left for Christianity if she handed over the hiding insurgents and so she had her subjects peacefully prevent Cylon's pursuers from entering the sanctuary. Vala met with the Senior Archon (the top dog), elven-picked Hades Megacles, who had also realized that his power was in jeopardy. Vala coerced Hades to agree that Cylon and his invaders could return safely to the south. Unfortunately for Cylon, Hades was simultaneously pressured by the Ipativian King of the Blood Feud Confederacy, Oden Ipativy, who would not support any decision other than the extraction of Cylon and his brutes from the Temple followed by their public execution. On the road back to the GraiLord Empire, the army of the archons jumped Cylon and his compatriots. Only a few, including Cylon, escaped.

Offended by what they saw as flat-out trickery, those minotaurs who had originally protested the besieging of the Argolian Temple, plus many more converted by Hades' lies, packed up and headed south. When they neared the border they found it blockaded by the North Vanian Army. Undaunted, the fed-up civilians decided to push on through. The soldiers panicked and responded violently. Most of the citizens turned and fled before they could be harmed but a few were wounded and a handful died. This was the final straw.

Anarchy, the likes of which the Blue Ridges had never seen, consumed the North Vanian. Even the Religious Riots of the first century could not compare to the chaos that ensued in the last month of the year 490. To make matters worse, papers were circulating among the disgruntled North Vanians that stated Cylon and his mother were preparing for an all-out assault on the Archonian Government of the North Vanian – even without the papers, leaders like Hades saw such an invasion as inevitable. After the violence near Mount Krynor, the North Vanian Army was in shambles. Half the soldiers had deserted to join in the anarchy. Hades, finally speaking his mind, warned Oden Ipativy that the minotaurs would not calm until they had been liberated. Unable to see any other way to restore order other than to leave or exterminate the populace – something he couldn't likely pull off as he was currently engaged in a war with Tadloe and the Cormac Clan of Sondor – Oden devised a plan to cede power back to the people of the North Vanian with one requirement: the Protectorate Tax was to be maintained.

However, it really wasn't his plan. Since Solon Icespear had been elected as the People's Archon, he'd advocated for a North Vanian constitution so that they could be governed in their own way, in a manner in-tune with their culture rather than in the manner of the elves. The people knew of Solon's desire, after all, it had been the foundation of his election platform. Solon's Manifesto rendered the Confederacy's constitution's chapter on the governance of the North Vanian obsolete in almost all aspects. The three most celebrated changes infuriated Oden but, in order to continue siphoning gold from the Blue Ridges, he conceded. First, Solon

alleviated the tax burden for all those not participating in the benefits of the Confederacy: namely, the rural folk – or “taurals” – who did not receive protection or education. Second, he established seasonal “bulls” where citizens from each county would assemble and revise the manifesto and appeal for modification of, not just North Vanian law but, Confederate law with their chosen representative, a democratic monarch of sorts, that would replace the archons, known as the Alpha Bull. The third key accomplishment was to exile, in order to remove their influence, all past and present archons from the North Vanian – including Solon himself.

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“The elves allowed that?!” Joe interrupted.

“Not without tainting it, my friend,” Acamus paused until his eyes quit twitching then took another sip of coffee and continued, “He claimed that he agreed with the minotaurs’ right to govern themselves, *however*, the North Vanian Army was in part funded by Blood Feud Confederacy funds and trained mostly in Zviecoff and Ipativy. Oden argued that without the taurals’ money, the North Vanian Army should be underfunded...unless he could maintain control over it. He established the Supreme Bull which was to be ruled by nine and would have the power to veto decisions made by the Alpha Bull as well as maintain full control over the military there.”

“Let me guess, those nine were the archons Solon had exiled?” Joe asked.

Acamus nodded.

“I bet the people were pissed.”

“They were! They were worried that even though Solon had left them with a strong constitution, the military might force them to change the system right back to the way it had been before.”

Joe frowned, “That’s a little extreme, isn’t it? Would the military actually-”

“They did!” Acamus roared, his voice suddenly heated though his rage wasn’t directed at Joe but at the heavens, “My friend, they knew that there were numerous bands of rogues that constantly molested the mountain minotaurs. Never before had the empire needed to interfere with these peoples. After all, the victims lived in self-sustaining villages that did not produce any more than they needed – and sometimes produced less thus were driven to abandon village life and form the gangs that harassed them. They added nothing to the tax pool. Now, after Solon left the mountains, Oden had his Vanian generals approach these ruffians and pay them to turn away from the countryside to rough up the cities.”

“And they took the money?” Joe asked.

“Yes,” Acamus nodded, “but the plan failed. The Alpha Bull quickly created a police force of volunteers they called the Second Icespear Sentinels.”

“And the Supreme Bull didn’t veto it?”

“They did, my friend, but the people went about it anyways. As a volunteer self-defense organization, it needed no permission from the government.”

“Is that how they eventually got independence?” Joe asked.

“Be patient, not yet,” Acamus waved his hand, “the story changes course now – now we follow Solon east.”

- - -

The earliest settlements along Iceload’s greatest river belonged to the speakers of one language which took its name from the river: Etihwy. This dialect acted as a lingua franca between the Ancient Elven speaking elves, Vanian Runic writing minotaurs, and Azunu Pidgin using bearns so that all those in Iceload could communicate. River trade was the main factor that led Etihwy to spread and after the First Void War, when the elves of the Etihw expanded their trade routes across the ocean, their language was exported alongside their goods. By the year 400, the majority of city folk in the southern hemisphere spoke Etihwy, so much so that it had begun to be known as “Common Tongue” or simply as common. As languages were being consolidated across the globe, so to were many other structures through which the world was perceived, specifically maps, and once again the Etihw were facilitating this international, cartographical collaboration.

The goals of the Etihw quickly became the goals of their trading partners. Nations with little to no over-seas business began sending out explorers to document the geography of the planet and this data was then sold to the Etihwy patriarch Dunvar Etihw. Seeking to see the world beyond the Blue Ridges but having no real means to do so independently, Solon joined the cartographic enterprise of Captain Polo the Knome who sailed for a rival of the Etihw (the Sentry) in a state-of-the-art vessel known as the *Monoceros*.

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“This *Monoceros*?” Joe exclaimed.

“That depends, my friend,” Acamus smiled, tapping a hoof on the deck, “these boards are not the same that Polo sailed,” he nodded to the sails, “nor did those sails catch the wind of the fifth century,” then he drummed upon the wheel, examining it, “even this wheel – possibly the entire helm has been renovated as recently as when my father once called this ship his own. There is no other *Monoceros* but this, nor was there ever, but this is not the same *Monoceros*.”

“That’s a paradox.” Bold stated.

Zach leaned in and whispered to Joe, “It’s the same ship.”

Refusing the bait for a philosophical debate, Joe asked, “How’d the Sea Lords get it?”

“My father sold it.” Acamus said.

“What?”

“It was a GraiLord treasure for many years – even as our empire rose and fell and rose again – my people maintained this ship,” Acamus sighed, “but the evil of the Disciples of Darkness plagued my people as much as it did all of those on this icy continent, my own uncle,

Clymene Icespear, succumbed to necromancy. He was not alone either. Even before the Mystvokar, King Talloome Icelore, was crowned king and corrupted to be used as a puppet by Shalis and Truth and the others, the Vokarburrock – the Congress that ruled Iceload – had dealings with the Disciples. It came to a point where the mancens among the GraiLord owed the Disciples so much, it seemed that the Vokarburrock might soon look the other way and permit the Disciples to invade Recercoff – the great minotaur city – but my father paid them off with the *Monoceros*. Then he exiled the mancens from Recercoff, including his own brother, and none too soon for my uncle fell right back into debt, ultimately falling prey to die at the hands of Shalis herself.”

Bold spoke up, “Then yar fathar daestroyed the Sae Lards.”

Acamus nodded, “My father could no longer allow the Disciples to continue to grow. After the death of Clymene, he joined up with the Strategy Admiral of the Imperial Navy-”

“Zaria Ein.” Zach murmured.

“And helped her to destroy the entire Sea Lord fleet, sparing only the *Monoceros* because Icespears do not renege.”

“Yet you just hijacked-” Zach said.

Ekaf – having returned from the cabin – stomped on the spirit’s boot, causing the archer no pain, but surprising the spirit enough to cause the desired effect of shutting him up. Then the Knome blurted, “Theseus Icespear is heralded as the most honorable person beneath Solaris.”

“Aye,” Bold nodded, “Aeven the dwarves daep in the moines of Vinum Tow adore him!”

Acamus seemed not to have noticed Zach’s statement, the minotaur said, “Thank you for such complements, my friends,” he smiled in a manner that seemed painful, “I pray that one day I am half the man that he is today.”

- - -

After a year and a half, Solon graduated to Captain of the *Monoceros*. Together Polo and Solon traveled the world, mapping the five continents of the southern hemisphere then moving on to cartograph the rivers. In their travels they ran into many other Iceloadic explorers but only one of which stood out and his name was Flow Morain.

Captain Flow, the head geographer for Dunvar Etihw, was the only other adventurer whose skills in map making and navigating came anywhere near the combined efforts of Solon and Polo. Whilst competing to document diminishing virgin lands, the two teams fostered a healthy rivalry that, when back on shore after a long campaign at sea, translated into a close friendship.

- - -

“That’s it?” Ekaf asked, “You aren’t even going to touch on Flow’s childhood?”

Acamus shrugged, "It's irrelevant."

"Irrelevant? It's the context! You can't understand Flow without it!"

"If you can understand him at all." Zach muttered.

Bold said, "The Knome's roih, ya can almost empathoize with em if ya haer how hae was brought up."

Eka turned to Joe, "I'll give you a quick run down-"

"Quick?" Joe smirked.

"I'll do my best." Eka conceded, "Flow and his two sisters were orphans, probably the result of some aristocrats vacation because not only were they parentless they were mixed blood – half earth elf, half electric elf."

"I'd always assumed him electric." Zach admitted.

"They were foster kids in the Thoran Church. They lived in Morainakle until Flow was five, that's where they got their surname, then relocated to the Argolian Temple. See, Vala, Flow's oldest sister, was rising through the ranks of the Church. The move would've been good for all of them, had her younger siblings not been put under the perverted care of...of...what was the bishop's name?"

"The nehme doid with the man," Bold stated, "as it shoulda."

"I concur. The bishop was a pedophile and he was violent. The two kids were too scared of the man to report his atrocities to Vala. When Flow was ten, the middle child died by the bishop. This broke Flow and he lashed out. The boy went on a rampage through the church, killing most of those who had cared for him and mutilating the bishop before fleeing into the mountains."

"Damn." Joe murmured.

"The Thorans found him but, obviously, they couldn't keep him. Without Vala in a high position, Flow probably would've been killed but instead he was sent off to another church further north. He didn't last there long. A few months later he ran away, was caught, and relocated. A few months after that he was relocated again. By the time he turned thirteen, he had stayed in over ten different homes."

Bold sighed, "Onlay the Lard knows what sarta harrars Morain fehse in those yars."

"At thirteen, he ran away and no one came to find him. He wound up back in Morainakle where he made a living amongst a band of thieves. He excelled as a criminal and after a few years he'd become captain of a renown pirate crew. But Flow threw all that away when, while burglarizing one of the mansions of the Sentry Dynasty's patriarch, he ran into Delilah. She called him into her bed and there he stayed the night. Unable to find him, his mates wound up leaving without him."

"I was led to believe this would be a brief interruption." Acamus grumbled.

"Hush, hush, I'm almost done." Eka cleared his throat and continued, "Delilah Sentry fell in love with Flow almost as fast as he fell for her. David Sentry wasn't so fond of the idea of his daughter falling in love with an orphan – especially one baring the name of a traitor (remember Bale and Godi Morain's betrayal in the First Void War?) – but he knew better than to

make a fuss. Delilah never stuck with one man for long. When she begged him to give the bastard a job, he took it as an opportunity to separate them – he set Flow up with Polo on the *Monoceros*.”

Acamus interrupted again, “False, my friend, Flow worked for the Etihw.”

“On the contrary, before Solon left the Ridges, Flow worked for the Sentry. That all ended when his old mates found out and decided to kidnap Delilah and hold her for ransom.”

“A big mistake.” Bold chuckled.

“Flow went to them and killed them all. Folks who had once been his best friends were cut down like dogs – no one was to get between him and his girl. Unfortunately, the event stirred controversy when word spread that Flow Morain had been a pirate. David Sentry couldn’t care less, he finally had found an appreciation for the man now that he’d saved his daughter’s life (and spared his pocketbook) but the people of Sentrakle had too long been molested by piracy, so David was forced to fire him. Fortunately, the Etihw didn’t mind such reputations (most pirates had a mutually beneficial relationship with the Etihw), and that is how Flow Morain came to work for Dunvar Etihw, which is how he met Solon Icespear, now, *my friend*, the tale is all yours!”

- - -

While Solon and Flow’s friendship flourished, so too did the relationship between their financiers. Both the Etihw and the Sentry despised the Ipativy. The Sentry’s hatred was rooted in a prehistoric territorial feud but the Etihw’s contempt for the Ipativy manifested in the conflict which ended ten years prior known as the River War. With a Blood Feud right over the horizon, David Sentry and Dunvar Etihw collaborated in order to guarantee some sort of gain. If either the Sentry or Etihw won the Blood Feud, the power would be shared. If not, the two would join forces and declare war on the Ipativy to take the Confederacy by force (the Oreh were so frail at this point that David and Dunvar doubted they’d even resist). The only problem was, though the Etihw absolutely *hated* the Ipativy, not too long ago, they’d felt just as bad about the Sentry. The two patriarchs needed a way in which to ensure that their people would support this dynastic collaboration and the solution came in the unwedded statuses of their first born.

Atsub Etihw, commander of the Etihw branch of the Confederation’s army and heir to the throne of Etihw, was thrilled at the thought of a holy matrimony between him and Delilah but the sentiment was not mutual, she still loved Flow. Forced to accept the marriage, Delilah refused to accept any of the private-life implications of marriage. In protest, she locked herself in the top of a tower, the Rook Belfry, in Fort Dunvar. Atsub was determined to wait her out but, little did he know, Flow Morain was climbing the façade of the tower each night to be with his love.

After a year of this loveless marriage, Atsub was beginning to fear that there would be no breaking Delilah’s will. She seemed only to grow further determined to resist. Even her father was beginning to rethink the decision despite his belief that it was necessary. Once a month he would visit Fort Dunvar in hopes of seeing Delilah but she would not leave her tower-top refuge,

not unless her father would dissolve the union he'd forced upon her. It was during one of the Sentry patriarch's visits that Solon returned from Munkloe with wild news. He went immediately to tell David Sentry who was, at the time, in the presence of Dunvar and Atsub Etihw. Solon had found the legendary Well of Youth.

- - -

"I thought this was fact, not fiction!" Zach protested.

"What? My friend, do you not believe in the Well of Youth?" Acamus asked.

"Water cannot curse, only the living can cast spells." Zach replied.

"So do you not believe in the Voidstone?" Acamus countered.

"I believe in the Stone of Krynor," Zach defended himself, "I believe that the Stone was charmed by God – not cursed. The supposed victims of the Well catch curses not charms." Zach folded his arms, "My God, the Mystakle God, would not leave behind curses to haunt his creation, though, I cannot speak for your god."

Joe, Bold, and Ekaf exchanged anxious glances but Acamus argued on without taking offense.

"What then is it about the Winged River that spawns ghosts?"

"It has nothing to do with Munkloe-"

"Then how do you explain ghosts?!" Acamus cried.

"I believe the curse has been passed down from Creaton-"

"Since his baptism in the Well of Youth!"

"-since his crucifixion!"

"So you believe that Creaton transformed himself into a banshee?" Acamus scoffed.

"I believe that the villagers who crucified him devoted their energies in such a curse and because of the extent of that curse not a soul survived!" Zach retorted.

"What a fool! Have you not read the histories-"

"The histories? If you're speaking of the chapter on Flow Morain – you do know it was drawn from his journal? As were the chapters on Creaton drawing from the words of Chane, many of those on the Queen by a Knome, and the chapters about Saint's origin were scrawled by the Kuru worshipping Quonon – a record which the Emperor himself has never publically confirmed. So have I read them? Yes. Do I trust them?" Zach shrugged, "Not entirely."

"Lads!" Bold growled, "Oi thank wae've all hard enough of this! Zach, this is Acamus' tehle to tell, so far heaven's sehk, let the man finish!"

Zach bowed slightly and let Acamus continue. The minotaur did so but first emitted a brief, condescending chuckle.

- - -

For most Solarins, the Well of Youth was nothing but legend and this legend differed depending on who told the story. Some believed the narrative found in Chane's journal, describing the pond as cursed, others believed that the Well was charmed and would preserve the current state of the baptized. Among the elves of Iceload, Chane's tale was untrusted, the elves could not fathom that God would leave behind such a haunted lagoon-

- - -

Acamus' beady eyes bored into Zach's silver glare. Bold cleared his throat and the spirit remained silent. Acamus went on with a smirk.

- - -

Despite this, if Solon was right, the elves definitely wanted to be the ones to control it. As for Atsub Etihw, he thought that if he could dip himself and Delilah in the Well, she would be forced to spend eternity with him and would eventually succumb. While the idea was incredibly manipulative not to mention foolish, – after all, what is eternity to the stubbornness of a Sentry? – Atsub was not a fool, not completely. He knew that Flow Morain and Delilah had been an item before the wedding and he secretly feared she would eventually elope. But if he could have her baptized, then even if she did run off with the explorer, eventually Flow would wither and die with age and she would come crawling back to him.

In chains, Delilah was dragged down from her tower and taken to the *Monoceros*. After Atsub requested Solon take him to the Well, David Sentry conceded. He did not know the extent of Atsub's plan for Delilah but he did know of their marital woes and he hoped that a little bit of adventure might provide the spark needed to ignite some mutual passion between the two.

Solon didn't know of Atsub's true motives either. If he had, the minotaur would've warned the elf about the civilization that guarded the Well: the Iyan Harpies (the same harpies that had invaded Tadloe after Creaton Live united the tribes).

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“But I thought they all died.” Joe stated.

“Who?” Acamus asked.

“The Iyans.” Joe said, “The Live killed them all – or well, turned them into demons.”

“Who told you that?” Zachias asked.

“Actually, Joe...”

All eyes turned to the Knome.

“There were Iyans that lived away from the Well that were not there when Creaton and the Live came through. They stepped up to the plate to defend the Well after their brothers and

sisters were destroyed. That said, unlike those in Creaton's day, they did not live in the temple in the center of the Well – they'd made a village surrounding the waters."

"How would you know that?" Zach demanded.

Ekaf shrugged, "Quonon told me."

"Quonon." Zach pursed his lips in disbelief.

"Mhm." Ekaf said, "Where do you think he came from?"

Zach rolled his eyes. Bold cleared his throat and nodded to Acamus.

"Thank ya can keep on goin now, lad."

- - -

Impressed by Solon's maps and charmed by Polo's stories, the Iyans had permitted them to stay a few nights in the city around the Well so long as they didn't touch the water. When Solon returned with Atsub and Delilah, the harpies were anxious. They allowed them to stay, yet again, but warned Solon that this was to be the last time. The Well of Youth was not a tourist attraction. The Iyans were so serious about their rule that they swore to Solon that if any of his compatriots were to touch the waters, even if by accident, that soul would not be permitted to leave.

Ironically, Atsub himself began to reconsider his plan. They stayed in Munkloe for three weeks and each day Delilah began to warm up to Atsub. It was as if the spell was broken. Away from her tower top hide out, once forced to be alongside her husband, she began to feel a sort of affection for him. By the end of the second week, she'd apologized for her hostility towards him. In fact, it was Delilah who suggested that they sneak out to the Well and take a swim. Despite the warning, on the last night of their visit, Atsub and Delilah went to the pond that sat as flat and still as the night sky, wrapped around the ancient harpy pyramid, and dipped in the Well of Youth.

The water felt like the fires of hell.

Solon and Polo were still awake, drinking in the tavern that sat beneath their accommodations with a friend they'd made, Agag-Iyah, one of the highest ranked officers in the Iyan military. Atsub and Delilah snuck in through the back but somehow Agag knew they were there. He left Solon and Polo without an explanation and caught Atsub and Delilah in the doorway. He did not ask for their excuse nor did he utter a word, Agag took out his sword and lobbed off Delilah's head.

Atsub would've died too. He was an able warrior, but he was paralyzed at the sight of his beloved's crumpled body. Solon and Polo arrived quickly and fended Agag off, though they refused to slay the man, and fled with Atsub to the ship. Though Agag was spared, other harpies that stood in their way were not so fortunate. The fight was not over once they reached their vessel. Enraged bands of harpies bombarded them in waves until the ship reached the thrashing waves of the ocean.

A story like this would normally spread like wildfire through the noble families of Iceloadic electric elves but, fortunately, David Sentry and Dunvar Etihw had decided to keep the discovery of the Well secret, incase its powers might offer some sort of advantage in the coming war with Ipativy they increasingly viewed as inevitable (they even forbade Solon and Polo from mapping the route!). Atsub begged and ultimately convinced Solon and Polo not to tell David that his daughter was dead, arguing that, as the husband, it was his duty to tell his father-in-law. And aside from those three, no one else on the ship knew that Delilah had been killed. On the journey there, she'd been locked up in her room so much so that on the journey back the crew found nothing suspicious in her absence.

Back in Iceload, Solon and Polo escorted Atsub to Fort Dunvar where he planned to hide out, taking his late wife's place until he came up with a way to explain the incident. Polo beat them to the top of the Rook Belfry and was amazed at what he found: a happy little, mixed-race baby.

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"They had a kid?!" Joe exclaimed.

"Indeed," Ekaf answered before Acamus could, "and that child is how Atsub got Delilah."

"Huh?"

"Delilah was a brat. She loved Flow because Flow loved her more than anything in the world. She could've asked him to cut off his hand and he would've done it. But when they had the baby, she could tell, their daughter had taken her place at the center of Flow's universe."

"She was jealous of her own child?" Joe asked.

Ekaf nodded, "Flow still loved her, of course, but, like I said, she was a brat."

"And so when they were in Munkloe and she saw how much Atsub loved her..."

"She ditched Flow." Ekaf stated.

"Bold was right," Joe stated, "I'm starting to feel for Flow. He winds up going evil though, right?"

"Soon..." Acamus continued.

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Polo hid the baby and, after leaving Atsub at Fort Dunvar, showed her to Solon. They would've taken her to Flow had he not been away on a mapping endeavor so instead they took her to the Argolian Temple where they would entrust the child to Flow's sister Vala. They were leaving Zviecoff, less than a selim away from the church, when they were accosted by Ipativian forces. Tension had been building in the mountains with a few of the initial skirmishes of what would be called the Second War of the Blue Ridges. Solon wouldn't have been arrested in

normal conditions but the baby intrigued the officer that stopped him and when Solon wouldn't provide an explanation the captain smelled something fishy.

When word reached Cylon Kurr that Solon had been imprisoned, he knew the time had come. Year 495, Cylon Kurr claimed the Vanian Mountains to be minotaur territory and he declared war on any who claimed otherwise. Now, Solon definitely wasn't going to be released and Polo was stuck there with him. Even though they had refused to talk, the Ipativians put two and two together. Rumors had spread that Flow and Delilah had maintained their romance despite her wedding vows and the complexion of the infant seemed to be proof. The Ipativians didn't reveal the child just yet. They planned to reveal her at the Blood Feud to destroy the friendship between the Etihw and Sentry. For the next five years, the little girl, whose name remains Flow's secret to this day, lived in a dungeon.

As war broke out in the west, it also struck in the east. Harpies began to raid the cities along the Middakle peninsula. With the leader of the Etihwy branch of the Blood Feud Confederation's army holed up in his tower and the Ipativian branch occupied fighting the minotaurs, groups of local militias led the most significant resistance to the harpy invaders.

It was in this chaos that Flow returned to Iceload. He'd heard that Atsub and Delilah had locked themselves up in the Rook Belfry. Fearing that Atsub had found out about the child, Flow wasted no time. He snuck into the tower top. Atsub was horrified, but his shock paled in comparison to Flow's. He demanded to know where Delilah was, Atsub feigned ignorance, he demanded to know where his child was, Atsub was bewildered. Flow wouldn't have it. Using force, he coerced an answer. Atsub said the harpies had them.

Flow went straight to Yelah and told David Sentry. David refused to believe it. Not because he wasn't suspicious, but because if his daughter were indeed in Munkloe he knew there was no way they could find her. They'd ordered Solon and Polo not to document how to find the Well and Solon and Polo, the only two who knew, had disappeared. If Flow wanted to find Delilah and his daughter, his best bet was to catch a harpy.

Flow joined the loosely organized militias of Morainakle and they quickly fell under his leadership. He was a natural. Before battles, he was calm, cool, and collected, playing a pivotal role in the development of strategies. During the battles, he was the same – striking with precision, each move he made seemed thought through and purposeful – yet he wielded a sense of bravery that encouraged him to press on when his peers fell back. He was driven like no other soldier.

After almost a year, Flow Morain, now holding the position of Commander of the Etihwy Forces, managed to capture the opposing general, Agag-Iyah. None of the other harpies they'd caught would talk, but Agag was tired. He'd lost too many soldiers. He was ready for the war to end. Agag explained that the harpies would fight until Atsub Etihw was taken into their custody. Agag went further, telling Flow that Dunvar Etihw had been explicitly told of the Iyan's single demand but had refused. Agag made the explorer a map. Flow would deliver Atsub, dead or alive, and the harpies would halt all hostilities.

While the harpies had been unable to breach Fort Dunvar, Flow Morain had no trouble. Flow didn't even entertain the "alive" option. He killed Atsub happily. As the ex-explorer pondered how he might sneak the son of the patriarch's body out of the fortress, the corpse rose behind him.

Atsub Etihw's body stood engulfed in flames. He did not fight Flow. In fact, he knelt down and confessed. He told Flow that the harpies had Delilah hostage in Munkloe and Flow, enraged, once again pierced his rival's heart but, to his horror, the burning body of Atsub Etihw dissolved into a puddle of black goop that shortly thereafter evaporated. There was no body left to bring to Munkloe.

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"Is that what happens to all banshees that die?" Joe asked.

"Indeed." Acamus nodded, "All ghosts."

"Then why would the harpies tell Flow he could bring Atsub back dead or alive if they knew that would happen?"

"The harpies may have stopped the violence but not their surveillance, my friend. They had scouts posted on the edges of the fortress, scouts that were also banshees-"

"Ghosts." Ekaf interjected, "You aren't a banshee until you're all fiery. If you've dipped in the Well, you do become a ghost but you're not a banshee quite-"

Acamus continued without acknowledging the Knome's correction, "The scouts kept tabs on the hiding defiler, watching the glow of his energy, smelling it as necromancer. They witnessed Flow killed Atsub and reported such to Agag."

"Whoy didn't they just Total Darkness the lad, whoy'd they weht far Flow?" Bold asked.

"Most of the harpies didn't know how," Ekaf explained, "the ability wouldn't become a ghost trademark until Flow Morain's Doom Warriors."

"Yes," Acamus concurred, "now, shall I proceed."

The boys nodded.

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Fearing that the harpies wouldn't believe him and that he'd just condemned his people to an endless war, Flow Morain descended from the Rook Belfry and told those guarding the fort, who were startled by his presence, a lie. Atsub and Delilah never came back. The Iyan harpies were in cahoots with the GraiLord minotaurs, framing Solon as the mastermind. See, Flow blamed Solon and Polo for what had happened to his wife and child – though he didn't know what had happened, he knew it couldn't be good – and Solon and Polo's disappearance, with no attempt to explain the situation to Flow, was proof of their guilt. He felt no shame in his false claim.

The conspiracy was convincing, especially when Dunvar Etihw succumbed to the tale after searching the tower. Flow asked Dunvar for permission to lead a force of the Etihwy branch to the Well of Youth to invade the invaders. Dunvar was reluctant, for fear the soldiers would bring back word of the Well, but he trusted Flow more than Agag and could not forsake his son and daughter-in-law with all the elves of Iceload watching. After a few weeks of planning and preparations, Flow Morain left Morainakle with a fleet of zealous soldiers and patriotic volunteers.

After Atsub's murder, the harpy spies left Iceload and the Iyan's rejoiced. Delilah had been permitted to live – if you consider the life of a banshee to be living – freely so long as she did not leave. She was unhappy with her captivity but tolerated it, believing one day Atsub would return, but with the news of his death she fell into a deep depression. Her old lover had slain the new. Now, with one gone and the other mortal, she could have neither. Thus, she left a note for Agag to visit Solon and have him explain to Flow that in the end she loved both Flow and Atsub but neither could she be with therefore she chose to take her life. Agag did not try to stop her. He knew that Flow would not be permitted to join their society, not after the ordeal they'd just went through the last time outsiders visited, and he respected her decision. After her suicide, Agag left immediately to find Solon.

This meant that he was not present when Flow and his troops arrived. It took a month before word reached Agag of Flow Morain's invasion (and it also took a month for Agag to find Solon). When he returned to Munkloe, he found the Iyan civilization completely destroyed. Flow had set up base in the old Iyan capital, where the Well of Youth sat idle, from which he organized his troops into hunting parties that would brave the untamed jungle to track down survivors. Unable to believe that Delilah had committed suicide, as the harpies had claimed, and still puzzled over where they were hiding his baby, Flow was determined not to let a soul escape for one of them must know where his beloveds were being imprisoned.

Agag feared he wouldn't be able to get to Flow without being bested by Flow's comrades, but Agag was a ghost. Unlike his country men who shared the same spectral status, Agag had learned (and possibly invented) the spell now known as Total Darkness. He got as close as he could to the elven commander then, with the sound of a wrenching thunder clap, he challenged Flow to a duel in the obsidian realm. In the darkness, he reiterated to Flow what the Iyans had claimed, that Delilah was in fact no more, but this only enraged the young man. While anger made most soldiers falter, Flow's fury heightened his fighting ability. Rather than retreat, Agag chose to use one of his two lives to condemn Flow to a similar fate.

Though the Iyans had religiously opposed permitting outsiders to become ghosts or banshees, Agag had been disillusioned after seeing the destruction of his people. He had been filled with rage and sought to hurt Flow as best he could.

Flow sliced off Agag's head and light returned to his world but, before he had time to revel in his victory, the headless harpy wrapped his arms around him and sucked the life from his body. Agag could've let Flow's body lie there. Dead as his lost love. But instead, out of spite, Agag didn't just kill the man, he turned Flow into a banshee then flew off to seek refuge in the

Vanian Mountains and fight alongside the GraiLord. After that night, all communications between Flow and his soldiers and Dunvar Etihw and the Blood Feud Confederacy were cut off. Flow Morain would not be heard of again until the turn of the century.

Meanwhile, the Second War of the Blue Ridges was going quite well for the Kurr-ruled GraiLord Empire. The Icespear Sentinels morphed from a militia into an insurgent force that, working with the forces of Cylon's mother and the North Vanian Army which had almost completely deserted the Confederacy, won engagement after engagement against the Ipativian forces of the Blood Feud Confederacy. Many of the minotaurs who had fled the Blue Ridges after the first war, the Vanian or Mystakle Christians, joined their Muslim brothers to help expel the elves (meanwhile, the Thoran Christians either aided the Confederates or hid in the Argolian Temple and Zviecoff).

The war could've ended in a year, but Oden Ipativy, King of the Blood Feud Confederacy, refused to surrender. He had enough troops to keep the conflict going for decades and it seemed he planned to do so. By the Summer of 498, the GraiLord Empire encompassed all the Vanian Mountains but for Zviecoff. The city wasn't considered part of the minotaur's traditional homeland and many suggested leaving the historically Thoran settlement alone. One such suggester was Flow Morain's cousin Vala Morain. Archbishop Vala, though a Thoran, had always been seen as a friend of the minotaurs – it was her that had been key in permitting Cylon to return home after their attempted invasion in 490. And she claimed that her suggestion that Zviecoff be pardoned came not out of sympathy for the Blood Feud Confederacy but out of a deep conviction that Zviecoff was not the minotaurs' to take. Up to this point, the GraiLord's endeavor had been righteous, they were liberating themselves and righting an ancient wrong. Sieging Zviecoff would be an act of aggression, spiteful, and God would judge the movement accordingly.

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“If you ever want to take over the world,” Ekaf interjected, “don't siege Zviecoff.”

Joe chuckled, “I'll keep that in mind...”

“It can be done,” Bold added, “but it eh'n't warth it.”

“It may not stop a campaign, but it seems never to bode well for whoever led the charge.” Ekaf nodded.

“It's all just an old bachelor's tale.” Zach assured Joe.

“Mehbae, mehbae not,” Bold shrugged, “it has stood the test of toime. It carsed Sehnt, it carsed the Quaen of Darkness, and – as uh'm shar Acamus is about to tell ya – it went and cursed Soylon!”

“On the other hand,” Zach argued, “most don't leave war feeling charmed.”

“Let's hope the myth is true,” Acamus spoke up, “and the curse spreads to haunt that Witch!”

“Amen to that!” Bold chimed.

A thought struck Joe and he mumbled to himself, “Let’s hope the curse doesn’t consider us invading...”

“What?” Ekaf asked.

“Nothing!” Joe fake coughed, then turned to Acamus, “I assume Cylon did it?”

- - -

Cylon Kurr had planned to invade Zviecoff in September but an early blizzard swept in from the south, forcing Cylon to postpone the assault until October. The six or so battles that took place that month amounted to very little. Both sides suffered few casualties and by November, Zviecoff looked much the same as it had before the siege. Vala Morain’s warning did manifest, but not near the battlefield. Back in Recercoff, Theagena Kurr died suddenly of a heart attack despite being relatively young (for a minotaur) and healthy. The GraiLord soldiers were reluctant to continue the offensive, seeing her death as an act of God, and though Cylon vehemently disagreed, he bowed to the will of his people and left Zviecoff alone.

The will of the people pushed him in another uncomfortable direction. At the Winter Bull, the people advocated not only for peace with the elves but for admittance into the Blood Feud Confederacy as a ‘participant’. This meant that, like the Sentry, Etihw, Oreh, and Ipativy Dynasties, the GraiLord would be allowed to send a contestant to the Blood Feud each century in order to compete for executive leadership of the Confederacy. The ease of the war – Zviecoff aside – had the minotaurs convinced that they were not only superior to the elves in combat but also destined to rule Iceload as the elves had attempted to do so for centuries. Cylon had no desire to become one with the enemy nor was he a fan of peace. He saw the elves as fated foes. Peace was simply unfathomable for Cylon. But, as a man of the people, Cylon willingly accepted the election of Solon Icespear as the new Alpha Bull – despite Solon still being in an Ipativian dungeon – and appreciated the notion that he, Cylon, would maintain control of the armed forces (rather than replace Theagena with a monarch, the GraiLord Empire adopted the government of the North Vanian – though, in the image originally depicted by Solon’s Manifesto). In January of 499 these changes came into effect and, before the Spring, Oden Ipativy consented to the GraiLord’s demands after a series of three attempted coups led him to desperately seek peace. Solon Icespear was free, as were the Blue Ridges.

The Kurrs weren’t the only ones unhappy to see the GraiLord Empire join the Blood Feud. Archbishop Vala Morain was saddened. For over a hundred years, the Thoran Christians had openly opposed the Blood Feud and Vala Morain was possibly the loudest opponent yet. She cautioned the competitors, saying, “Our Lord will bring an army of doom upon those who participate in the barbarous ritual!” And, just as before, no one heeded her foresight. Cylon Kurr represented the GraiLords against Hod Ipativy, Tamar Sentry, Maksel Etihw, and Koja Oreh.

The fight took place in the middle of Zviecoff. As was tradition, no one fought on the first day. On the second day, Tamar and Maksel collaborated in the pursuit of Hod. They found Hod on the outskirts, in plain view of the audience on the walls (people traveled from all over

Iceland to watch from the edges, in hopes of seeing part of the action). Breaking the rules, Oden Ipativy stepped within the boundaries of the Blood Feud and presented Flow Morain's young daughter.

It would've been impossible to prove her heritage had she not been born of a true Sentry. Like all direct descendants of Zannon, Delilah's daughter was charmed. Long ago, Mycenae GraiLord had granted both Zannon and Cannon magical tattoos, markings which were invisible unless a certain spell was spoken, as a way of assuring a promise he made to the two heroes. This mark wound up being passed down through the generations, meaning that if the girl were in fact the daughter of Delilah, she too would have the mark. With the help of an Ipativian minotaur, one of the few Thoran converts, Oden had the ancient spell recited and the symbol of the Warriors of the Blue Ridges – clasped hands, in the shape of Mount Krynor – swirled to life in her eyes. Now it was a fact, she was a Sentry. Who the father was, was still up for debate, however, her relatively tan complexion – compared to the pale skin of other electric elves – suggested that whoever the father was, it was not the fair-skinned Atsub. It was likely the father was either an earth elf or a human, Tadloen or Sondoran – both of which were nations that had, not so long ago, been at war with the Blood Feud Confederacy. Not only was this proof that a Sentry had betrayed an Etihwy, it was proof that Confederate citizen had been sleeping with the enemy.

As the shock set in, Hod Ipativy – as Oden had instructed – strode forward and murdered the little girl.

Maksel Etihw turned on Tamar Sentry. Hod joined the three-way fight and defeated both of his opponents. Later that day he found Koja Oreh and, though he nearly lost, he slayed him too. During the third day, a badly wounded Hod hid. Though Cylon eventually found him, the minotaur chose not to kill him on the ground but gave him another day to recoup and face him on his feet. Cylon's mercy ruined him.

The Blood Feud began the first day of the year of the new century and Flow Morain knew this. He planned his miraculous return accordingly. During his absence, he'd initiated his troops into the ghosthood, creating an army of banshees. But unlike those who were baptized by the Well, they were turned by the touch of a ghost which had all the same effects *except* the preservation of flesh. Flow and his soldiers watched as their flesh rotted off and all that was left was bone and spectral flame. This transformation left Flow feeling as though the gods themselves had cursed him and, combined with his sorrow at having been unable to find his beloved and his daughter, had him determined to take revenge – not on the harpies but – upon life itself. He would share his hell with the world.

His campaign would begin during the Blood Feud. Sailing down the Etihw, Flow and a band of one hundred ghastly knights came to Zviecoff. The spectators had not expected to be brushed aside by skeletal fiends, covered in armor and fire, and those that resisted were slaughtered without hesitation. Flow instructed his army to remain at the periphery while he sought out the final competitors.

Cylon was waiting in an empty market square for Hod to come out but Hod never did. Flow found him first and ordered his soldiers to bring the audience over to watch as Flow easily ran him through. Then he came to Cylon. For the first time since Kor came to the Vanian Mountains, the elves of Iceload rooted for a minotaur. Nonetheless, Cylon offered Flow a deal. They could split Iceload together. Cylon did not want to win. He'd been disgusted by what he'd witness during the Feud. Then he told Flow what he had witnessed: the murder of a little girl, the murder of a little, mixed-race girl.

Flow knew immediately what this meant.

Enraged, Flow turned on the audience. This was not what Cylon had intended and he tried to stop Flow but the warrior wouldn't have it. He killed Cylon, almost slicing him in half, and continued his rampage. No one escaped Flow and his Doom Warriors except for the children who were present. Even Oden Ipativy didn't make it out of the city. Flow sent the king's severed head along with the children he'd spared up the river to Ipativy.

Vala sadly donned her brother and his following, "the Doom Warriors" and Flow embraced the name. While the electric elven world reeled, with Dunvar and David scurrying around the eastern side of the Etihw to prepare a resistance, more and more Doom Warriors arrived in Zviecoff. The city, Flow proclaimed, would be the new capital, not of the Confederacy, not even of Iceload, but of Solaris. His next move was to subjugate the governments he now claimed dominion over and his first target was the empire of his old friend Solon. Before his banshees began the hike up the mountain, Solon and an army of minotaurs came to a mountain pass between the Argolian Temple and Zviecoff.

Flow met with Solon alone and there Solon reiterated what Delilah had said. Flow refused to believe that Delilah had committed suicide and that it was his actions that induced it. He had convinced himself that Solon had somehow – and for some unknown reason – conspired against him, to take his woman and his child. Flow wanted blood. Flow attacked Solon but could not defeat the old minotaur. But, Solon did not kill Flow. Some say it was out of mercy. Some say the opposite, and others argue that both men were equals, neither able to best the other. Eventually, however, Solon's friends, Polo and Agag, came to his aid. Flow promised that he and his Doom Warriors would destroy the GraiLords, that the only way Solon could save his people would be to hand over the harpy. But Solon refused.

Flow returned to the mountains with his army but, even with their spectral state, the minotaurs were able to fend the Doom Warriors off. Rather than continue the fight, Flow decided he would turn east and defeat the elves. He hoped that this would scare Solon into surrendering Agag or might scare Solon's men into incompetence in the rematch. For the rest of the year, Flow and the Doom Warriors captured city after city. He killed David, Dunvar, and all other rulers then replaced them with his own skeletal disciples. By 501, he was ready to face Solon again but again his men faltered and again he could not defeat the minotaur.

He left a large segment of his troops fighting in the foothills of the Vanian Mountains, hoping to tire the GraiLords out as he expanded his empire off the continent. He had conquered Batloe, Tadloe, and Sondor by the middle of the year 503. At the end of the Summer, Flow

returned to Iceload. The minotaurs had managed to withstand the Doom Warriors' constant assaults. So much so that Flow had to put down an insurrection within his troops in which his warriors had begun to sympathize with the minotaurs and thought they could stage a coup. After that, Flow and a large army of his soldiers sailed around the Frosted Coast to Icelore. After defeating the nellaf regime that ruled the island, he began to execute the Vanian Christian minotaurs that resided there. As he had hoped, this drew Solon out of the mountains. In Icelore, Flow and Solon fought again. Though Solon was unable to cast Flow off the island, he was able to save the remaining minotaurs (who then sailed north to find where other Vanian, Mystakle Christians had settled off the coast of Manaloe) then retreat back across the channel to the Blue Ridges. Flow pursued, hoping this time they could crack the façade that was the GraiLord Empire but once again he failed. He was forced to tuck his tail and run.

Flow did not return to Zviecoff. Instead, he went to Fort Dunvar and sealed the gate. No one, not even his Doom Warriors, were allowed inside. The man who had conquered almost all of the known world, more than Creaton had accomplished five hundred years before, simply quit. His soldiers bickered over the territory and his empire slowly collapsed upon itself. Solon did not lead the eradication of the Doom Warriors alone, successful rebellions popped up across Mystakle Planet – the unraveling of Flow's Empire is another story in and of itself, for one of the rebellions wound up manifesting a threat just as great as the original threat it had opposed. Opposition to the Doom Warriors in Space City, Batloe manifested a massive artificial intelligence war machine that came to be known by its own self-imposed name: the Singularity. It was incredibly capable of killing Doom Warriors but began to target mortals on a large scale as well, seeing anyone without the desire for biological reproduction as a threat to life beneath Solaris. This included not only free lovers but also children, gay people, and other members of non-traditional sexual orientations – including the creator herself. Granted, the Singularity and the fall of the Doom Warriors is enough for another story all on its own, but, in the end, Flow left his fortress to help put an end to the chaos and to liberate the living from cold, undead tyranny that he had forsaken it with.

By 510, some sense of normalcy had returned to the nations beneath Solaris. Agag returned to Munkloe where he protected the Well of Youth from adventurers and Solon returned to the Vanian Mountains where he ruled the GraiLord until he died peacefully in his sleep in 552. And in an odd manner, the Singularity had in fact helped the people of Solaris to lose a bit of bigotry when it came to their understanding of sexualities that did not necessarily perpetuate or fit into the patriarchy that bound them all. But once again, that's a tale for another day.⁷

⁷ For a map of the Southern Hemisphere after the Second War of the Blue Ridges check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

Chapter Fourteen: Rivergate Run

“We’ve arrived.” Acamus said.

The bay was covered in a film of frozen posts that fit together like puzzle pieces, clinking together like windchimes, then clapping together like shivering teeth as the *Monoceros* charged through their midst and they tumbled over one another. Something about the sound or maybe it was the look of it – or maybe it was a deeper sort of subconscious recognition, whatever it was, it – made Joe avert his gaze from the water, allowing the looming city to captivate him for the moment.

The mountaintop now looked more like a volcano than a capital. Swollen arms of smoke rose from it, hanging over the massive glacial cliff that edged the city. All Joe could make out was the shadows of the bases of buildings beyond and the great dam-like façade of the harbor. Rivergate was an elven made retaining wall, holding back ice rather than soil, and it stretched the entire five-hundred-foot height of the cliff that rose from the fjord. Its sleek surface was split by four great pillars, so that the damn could curve in like the top of a trapezoid to fit the city it supported. Within Rivergate was a city of its own, housing ships, shops, and the legendary elevators that so haunted Boldarian. A web of peers extended from the feet of the sheer façade. The empty docks shooting off from the larger gangways looked like the twiggy branches of birch trees in winter. Bolts of white lightning cutting through the hail that littered the bay. As if the wharfs had accidentally fallen into place. There were no ships in the harbor – no other ships, that is – and the emptiness pulled Joe’s eyes back to the chunky ice that carpeted the cove.

It didn’t look like a frozen bay. The fragmented ice was not cut in such a way you’d expect an icy bay to have been broken. It looked instead like hundreds of frozen buoys had been tossed off the cliffs of Zviecoff to hide the black surface of the water. *What is it?* Joe couldn’t say, but he was intrigued. No longer could he look away. He squinted. The bobbing shapes were all unique, yet similar. Not uniform but of the same kind.

Then he saw them for what they really were. As did his comrades.

“Oh...oh no...” Bold muttered.

Each cell within Joe’s body squirmed. He fell to his knees. Bold did as well. They knelt together on hands and knees, staring at the floor of the ship for the moment they closed their eyes they saw the frozen corpses bouncing against the black insides of their eyelids. *Hundreds*. Joe’s stomach twisted. *There has to be hundreds*.

He wasn’t wrong. Entire neighborhoods of people bobbed in the icy bay, being brushed aside and piled over as the *Monoceros* penetrated the forsaken waters. The sound of them clanking and jingling seemed to grow louder upon the group’s realization, it was now a thunderous applause, a continuous shattering of china.

Acamus pierced the morose chorus, “They began killing civilians the moment they believed the Samurai were about to strike the capital.”

“Even if the Samurai had given in,” Zach asked Acamus, “do you think they would’ve stopped?”

“No, my friend.” Acamus stated, “No, by this point, they had no choice but to march on Zviecoff – even if they knew it was a trap.”

“CAPN! CAPN!”

The boys ducked as the outburst came over their heads. They immediately felt foolish – it was He, the cockatune. Their embarrassment was quickly replaced with dread as they watched the parrot fly over Rivergate and into the city. The bird was a Sea Lord after all.

“Well.” Ekaf noted, “They’ll soon know we’re here. We need to get the ship settled in as fast as possible.”

“Ya think Shalis is in thar?” Bold asked.

“I’d consider it luck if we catch the Witch so far from her castle.” Acamus stated.

“Come on,” Ekaf gestured, deciding to lead the effort to expedite the process, “let’s get the others.”

Acamus guided the *Monoceros* up to a pier. Before the days of magic, a winding capstan would’ve been necessary to pull a vessel the size of the *Monoceros* up to a dock but the old pirate ship was equipped with magic powered motors that let the minotaur coast the *Monoceros* smoothly into place. Working together, the crew dropped a ramp over the side, clamped it into place, hustled down to the dock, and tied the vessel off to a series of cleats. Acamus threw over the massive cushioned buoys that would float between the pier and the ship and keep the two from bashing one another then joined the gang on the wharf.

Ekaf led the way. Not a word was spoken. The piers were slick with ice. Footprints were frozen like fossils on the surface, the gang found them useful to keep from slipping and sliding. They all kept their gaze fixated on their feet, their attention focused on keeping their balance – just as worried about falling into the bay as they were about thinking of its contents. But still the sound of the frozen corpses knocking up against the wharf haunted them.

The looming wall that connected the four fat columns which together manifested the front of Rivergate reflected the bay on its façade. The group was caught between the unbearable reality, pinched between the cove and its mirror. Even the sounds were now bouncing back and forth. They actually welcomed the distraction of the frost biting breeze. They focused on the cold and the quest and did their best to thwart all other thoughts.

The great wall was pockmarked with rectangular indentions, evenly spaced along the base of Rivergate’s three panes. Ekaf led them up to one of these depressions and stopped at the end of the alcove. It was about the size of a one-car garage, similarly bland in design as well. Zalfron strode up to stand beside Ekaf. After a sigh then a grunt, he waved at the wall. The gesture was what you might expect of someone standing before a window attempting to get the attention of someone on the other side. But nothing happened.

Meanwhile, Machuba moved over to stand closer to Nogard. Eyeing their comrades, he stood up on his tiptoes as Nogard instinctively crouched to listen.

“I think there’s people in there.” Machuba whispered.

Nogard nodded but kept his ear hole low, passively demanding more information.

“Up above...I see energy...but they aren’t moving...”

“Waiting?” Nogard whispered back.

Machuba shrugged.

“Looted.” Acamus noted, drawing the two buddies’ attention back to the public discussion.

Acamus stood in the corner, pointing to the only definable feature in the mini man-made cave: a tiny square hole. The shattered edges of a glass window remained over the front of the hole.

“Good thing we have a pyromancer.” Ekaf turned to Joe, “Usually there’d be an enertomb in there, but if you pour a bit of fire in there it’ll work all the same.”

Walking over to where the minotaur stooped, Joe did as Ekaf suggested. A bit of flame slipped out of his clothes, wrapped up over his shoulder and down his arm to jump off the tip of his finger and woosh through the broken window. Immediately the wall Zalfron stood before began to slide apart. It split down the middle and both sides slid into opposing walls. Marching forwards, the gang entered Rivergate.

The first thing that hit Joe was the cold. They'd stepped into a freezer. It was such a cold that Joe could feel it's physical presence, like a breeze that didn't blow away but instead stopped and engulfed you. A cold that weighed on you like a heavy jacket you know wish you had on. Then it was gone. Almost as quick as it had arrived. It wasn't the jacket Joe had stolen from the Sea Lords that saved Joe nor was it the warmth in the stone in his chest.

"Dank Sidon, Civ." Nogard said, "widdout dis," he gestured to the navy tunic that the Soldiers of Shelmick had given them, "we'd be bout like him."

Joe followed Nogard's gaze to Bold shivering so badly that it seemed hard for him to move forward.

"Is it normally this cold?" Joe asked.

"Nah, man, you crazy?" Zalfron laughed, "You thank the port of the capital of Assload ain't got central haetin'?"

"Looters." Acamus grunted.

Joe looked back at Bold, "You gonna be okay?"

"Aye, l-l-lad. The c-c-cold eh'n't gonna b-b-bae whot kills m-m-mae, lad."

Bold nodded at the interior of Rivergate and Joe finally took it in. Though Joe didn't know it, the harbor was lit with the light of Solaris. The four columns of Rivergate had roofs of glass and beneath those transparent ceilings a system of mirrors snatched the light and beamed it back and forth throughout Rivergate. Due to the smog that wrapped the mountain above, Rivergate's light was dim and grey. That said, visibility was more than enough for the pyromancer and his comrades to get a good look around.

Empty shops were wedged up against the wall behind them, sprawled as far on either side as the eye could see. It was odd the way they were squeezed. It was probably to permit maximum foot passage before them, but it almost seemed to Joe that the buildings were trying to get as far away from the gushing stream that spat at them. The river split the chamber down the middle, running parallel to the great façade they'd just passed through. The water level was so high that it lapped up onto the floor, reaching the storefronts – even reaching as far as to dampen the stone around their feet as they entered. The river was wide enough to be a canal, Joe wondered-

"It isn't connected to the bay," Ekaf explained, following Joe's gaze, "it's from the glacier under Zviecoff. When the city is up and running, Rivergate's got a mechanism to re-freeze the runoff to maintain the glacier. Much of it still fills the bay, of course, but what's caught here is shoved back up the mountain."

"How l-l-long til Zvoiec-coff m-melts aweh?" Bold asked.

"Psh," Ekaf scoffed the thought off, "glaciers take years to melt."

"Even those with cities on them?" Zach asked.

"Volume 3 if you're lucky." Ekaf murmured.

"Psh." Now it was Zalfron scoffing, "Zvahcoff'll bae up and runnin in no tahn. Don't worry."

On the other side of the river, Rivergate looked much the same. Shops and other buildings crammed up against the black wall, stacked on top of one another in some cases. Bridges arched over the river, connecting the two sides of the chamber, and in between these

bridges were ramps. It was fortunate these were in fact ramps rising well above the floor of the great hall because the thrashing water beneath would've made what already looked quite dangerous even more unfeasible. These ramps cradled the elevators and the elevators were little more than giant plates bound to four thick metal cords that dangled from the roof or so Joe assumed for as he craned his neck he realized he couldn't even see the roof. The cords simply disappeared into the haze of the smokey, repurposed sunlight.

"Those the elevators?" Joe yelped before he could gain hold of his composure.

"Yup!" Ekaf chimed, a skip slipping into his step.

Joe gulped, "Jesus."

"A-a-aye, lad." Bold concurred.

Zalfron was apparently as tone deaf as Ekaf, "Ain't they awesome! Saelu!"

"They look incredibly dangerous." Joe stated.

"Look perfect for a fight scene, that's what they look like." Ekaf muttered.

"Same elevators they had when Rivergate was first built!" Zalfron continued.

"Seriously?" Joe squeaked.

"They've been repaired and had maintenance work here and there." Ekaf said.

"Why?!" Joe crowed.

"Well, if they didn't," Ekaf gave Joe an odd look, "they probably would've broken by now."

"No I mean..." Joe shook his head, "Do people actually use them?"

"Of course!" Zalfron laughed.

"Are Bold and I the only ones that think they're ridiculous?" Joe asked, looking wildly around.

Zachias nodded in solidarity with the alien. Machuba wasn't paying attention, his head was craned, staring at the floors that extended like balconies higher up.

"Thank you." But Joe sighed, already feeling the vibe of inevitability exerted by the Knome.

"I dink dey're kinda cool." Nogard countered.

"Y'all're insane." Joe stated.

Silence fell back around them as they followed Ekaf across one of the arched bridges. Machuba broke it, finally looking down from the floors above.

"Where is your father?"

"He said he'd find us." Acamus lied.

"W-w-w-w-what?!" Bold gasped.

"He sent the message with a shield dragon, my friend," Acamus growled, "couldn't risk specifics."

"Shield dragons send messages by smell." Ekaf explained to Joe, "They emit plumes of flame that others can smell from selims away, they code their messages in the scent of their fire."

"So if Theseus sent one, a Sea Lord shield dragon could've smelled his message?" Joe asked.

"Sae Lords ain't got no shaild dragons." Zalfron laughed.

"But the Order does." Machuba stated, returning his gaze to the heavens.

Nogard glanced back at him, anxiously.

"There's no way the Order didn't intercept that message." Zach said, a touch of aggression in his voice as his silver eyes glared through the slit in his helmet's visor at the back of the minotaur's head, "They expect us here."

“We stole their ship and sailed it up to their front door.” Acamus grunted, “My friend, what did you expect?”

“This is a trap.” Machuba said.

“Dis is exciting and all,” Nogard chimed in, “but I dink I may be starting to see what Joe’s hinting at...dis may be a bad idea...”

Acamus said nothing. He stood facing the elevator. His shoulders seemed curled over his chest, as if he were lugging something heavy across them.

They stood before one of the narrow ramps that led up over the rapids to one of the dangling dinner plate lifts. Rather than looking at the formidable foe that for many was the elevator, their eyes were on the empty shops that lined the walls. Machuba saw something. He saw energy hanging out above them, a lot of it, but it was still. It could’ve been collected potted plants, a cluster of sleeping rodents, it could’ve been anything. From this distance he couldn’t tell. But no one else saw anything. Especially not Acamus, for he didn’t even look.

“So what’s the plan?” Joe asked.

“Well,” Zalfron said, “if wae run one of them elevators, let mae tell ya, everaybody in Rivergate’ll know – includin Thaesaesus.”

“He knows we are here.” Acamus stated, “Minotaurs can sense their kin’s presence, I sense that he is near.”

Zalfron continued. “How naer is naer, ah maen, hae could be all the way at the other end of Rivergate and that’d, arguablay, still bae naer.”

Acamus’ shoulders seemed to roll further forward, his posture was nearly something like you’d expect of an old man with his spine crumpling in. But the gang was too focused on deciding what to do next to notice the odd behavior.

“If he knows where we are, then shouldn’t we hide and wait for him to come to us.” Joe said, “We’re standing out here in the open.”

“He’d never find us.” Ekaf argued, “Zalfron’s right.”

Acamus grunted through his nose but said nothing.

Bold joined Joe’s side, “B-b-but then the S-s-sea Lords-”

“If the Sea Lords are here, they know where we are.” Machuba said, still staring at the floor of the balconies above.

“The racket of the elevators might draw them out.” Zach said, “Which might be a good thing.”

“Might get dem to jump da gun.” Nogard nodded, nudging Machuba, pleading for some more intel but to no avail.

Machuba was silent and staring.

“What if this isn’t a trap, though? What if we got lucky and the Sea Lords aren’t here?” Joe suggested, “What if starting up the elevators only draws the Order back in?”

“The only way...” Ekaf let his words trailed off as his eyes fell on Acamus’ shuddering pose.

All eyes turned to Acamus. The minotaur was trembling. He knew something the gang didn’t know. That something had been tearing him apart for days now. That something was really a lack of something – the lack of a second correspondence. Though Acamus wasn’t lying about what his father had sent him via shield dragon, Acamus wasn’t telling the full truth. Theseus had promised to send another message. An update with some sort of plan. As the days went by and as they got closer and closer to Zviecoff and still no such message arrived, Acamus couldn’t help but begin to think the worst. A thought that was unthinkable. A thought he refused

so much so that he wouldn't even admit to himself he'd ever thought it. Even though it lingered in the back of his head, whispering to his mind over and over.

Zalfron had not followed the Knomes gaze like the others. Instead, he finished the Knome's sentence, "The only way the Sae Lords ain't in Rivergate is if Thaesaeus is already d-"

Acamus whirled on the elf, grabbed him by the throat, and lifted him off his feet. Nogard and Machuba jumped back and drew the weapons of Shelmick. Bow already strung, Zach had an arrow knocked in a snap.

"Acamus!" Joe shouted.

The minotaur snarled like a bear, dropped Zalfron, and turned back to face the elevators, trembling.

Zalfron hit the floor and gasped. Joe went to help him up but the elf shook him off. Once Zalfron got back on his feet, Joe's aid turned to obstruction as the pyromancer did his best to keep the elf from storming over to confront the minotaur.

"Farakin psahcho..." Zalfron spat before surrendering.

Ekaf stepped to stand behind the minotaur but stood facing the others. His arms were raised in a silent request for calm. He lowered his arms slowly as his comrades lowered their weapons and the tension died down a bit. Still, though, the tension would not die completely. For just as that thought had lingered in the mind of Acamus, so had it in the minds of the gang, only with an added worry: What would Acamus do if Theseus were in fact dead? Acamus' snap seemed only to highlight the reasonableness of their anxiety.

Still, there was no turning back now. *Wait...is there?* For a fleeting moment Joe considered it as Ekaf tried to get the ball up and rolling again.

"There are engine rooms for each elevator..."

The Knome glanced over his shoulder as his words trailed off. Everyone followed his gaze – even Zalfron this time. A giant chunk of paved stone tumbled through the air to smash into the rushing water.

"There!"

Zach pointed above them. High over their head, Rivergate's second tier extended like a balcony maybe a hundred feet overhead. There were numerous holes and craters in the edge of the terrace. Whatever war had taken place in Rivergate, it obviously had happened higher up. Though they couldn't see the third tier, there was good reason to assume the stone came from the second – according to Zach.

"I saw one."

Nogard looked over at Machuba, the fishfolk nodded. The chidra gulped.

"But it was on down the way." Zach gestured down the artificial canyon.

"Then we still have time to use the elevator." Ekaf said.

"Saelu!" Zalfron exclaimed.

"They're...they're..." Machuba looked to Nogard.

Nogard got it, "Dey probably be everywhere up dere!"

"And they probably are between us and Theseus." Ekaf said.

"Elevators it is." Acamus stated.

"We'll be sitting ducks!" Joe yelped.

"They won't expect it." Zach said.

"Exactly," Ekaf presented a broad smile, "we'll be sneaky ducks!"

"If they're up there," Acamus said, "Theseus must be. Elevators."

"Elevators." Zach concurred.

“Elevators.” Ekaf said.

“Elevators!” Zalfron exclaimed.

Machuba licked his eyes and turned to Nogard.

“We go up,” Nogard shrugged, “or we go home.”

“Elevators.” Machuba said.

“Aye?” Bold asked.

“You wanna do da stairs?” Nogard asked.

“Aye...” Bold sighed.

“We need to hurry.” Ekaf said, “Machuba and Zalfron and Joe, y’all’re start the burner – we can manually start these elevators individually.” He pointed to a stocky building that rose all the way up to the second tier. It was rather non-descript, suggesting a sort of focus on the functionality. Ekaf continued, “It’ll be in there – there’ll be little chambers like they had on our way in, just fill one up with fire and it’ll get us to the top – but we’ll wait for y’all on the second floor.”

“Wait?” Joe yelped, “We’re splitting up?”

Ekaf nodded, “We’ve got to get up there. If they get to the platform before we do, we’ll have no chance. Get it running for us, then y’all run down to the next one, get it started, and meet us up there!”

“Honestly, stairs sound-” Joe began.

“No chance?” Machuba said, “What-”

Ekaf cut them off, “There’s no time! Go! Run!”

Zalfron, and Joe took off, sprinting towards the burner building like their lives depended on it, which, for all they knew, their lives could’ve depended on it. Machuba hesitated, looking to Nogard. Nogard shrugged. Machuba nodded. He followed the elf and human.

“There’s stairs in the burner room if it comes down to it!” Ekaf hollered after them, “If we get split up, just go up! Theseus has got to be up!”

Joe’s heart was racing. *What if I can’t figure out how to start it? What if I take too long and Ekaf and them get up there too late? What if the Sea Lords expected us to use the elevators! What if-* His mind was so preoccupied he nearly tripped when Machuba and Zalfron stopped before the burner.

RIIIIAAAAAH!

Giant gears began to turn hundreds of feet above them – Joe could only imagine the terror such a sound would’ve made had they been higher up. The initial squeal was replaced by a far more mellow clunking and jingling as the elevators began to rise one by one. Joe turned to Zalfron.

The elf shrugged, “Maybae yer jus so fahry jus baein naer the thing got it goin.”

They looked back the way they’d run and watched as their comrades – Ekaf, Acamus, Nogard, Bold, and Zach – scrambled up the ramp and onto the massive stone tablet they’d been standing before. Only after clumsily making it on did they look back towards the burner. Their jaws hit the floor as their eyes met Joe and Zalfron’s.

The two boys stood their frozen staring back.

Machuba, on the other hand, was staring up at the building.

He cursed himself, “How’d I not see...”

Joe frowned, whipping back around to Machuba, “See what?”

He kept his eyes on the building but said to Joe, “They’re in there.”

A thunderous voice roared out from above, somewhere higher up in the building before them, and all three knew immediately who the voice belonged to: Hermes Retskcirt.

“GOODBYE, EARTHBOY!”

“NO!”

Zalfron tackled Joe.

A sound filled their ears, shaking the harbor, and rattling the chains that lifted the elevator.

Then Zalfron was gone.

- - -

“Go!” Ekaf cried.

Acamus was already on the rising platform. The Knome was scurrying up the ramp after him. The others followed despite their hesitation. Not only had the elevator before them started rising, but now all the elevators were rising or falling. And before they’d turn to see Acamus bound up the ramp, they’d seen their three comrades at the door of the burner. Had Joe moved that fast? But it was not the time for rational action – the platform *was* rising and Acamus *was* on it. As was Ekaf. Nogard and Zach got up in a few seconds, but by then the platform had raised enough so that Bold – with his shortness – could not so easily hop on.

“Help, lads!”

Bold slapped his hands on the platform as his belly slid off the edge. Nogard dove to catch the dwarf but as soon as he grabbed hold he was yanked after him. In two steps, Acamus was at their side, one hand wrapped around Nogard’s leg.

“Th-th-that was f-fast.” Bold stuttered a second later once he and Nogard were safe.

“Too fast.” Zach admitted.

“Farak.” Ekaf muttered, “Someone cut on the central engines.”

Nogard, Bold, and Acamus looked to the burner building.

“Crimpsin tiad...” Nogard murmured.

Then came that other worldly thunder. The steel cords shivered, the platform trembled, and all five aboard the elevator shuddered. They recognized the sound. It was so loud it was almost indescribable. It was the sound heard on the *Monoceros* when Bold’s belly was scarred. It was the sound heard on the *Sea Cuber* before Nogard’s sword was shattered. It was the sound of a Doom Warrior’s most infamous spell, Total Darkness.

“Zalfron!” Bold exclaimed.

“Farak!” Nogard cried.

“He’ll be all right. Right now, we have to worry about other things!”

Ekaf directed their attention across from them. On their left, a few elevators down, at least two dozen blue skinned men were climbing down the metal cords of an elevator that had been frozen in between the two floors before the engines had started running. They were dressed in the red and black of the Sea Lords and their eyes were focused on Joe and Machuba. Instinctively, the five then looked the other way. Sure enough, a few elevators down to their right the same was happening.

The next elevators that would be available for their two friends would be toting down a gaggle of Sea Lords with them.

Zach slung his bow off his shoulders and knocked an arrow. A second later, a Sea Lord fell from the cord, an arrow through his temple. Zach shot once more, sticking a fishfolk in the shoulder then shot a third to finish the pirate.

“Save your arrows!” Ekaf commanded.

“Sehv em?!” Bold roared, “Sehv *them!*”

“Shoot, Zach,” Nogard agreed, “Don’t listen to da godi crow.”

“Guys!” Ekaf shouted, “Joe and Machuba’ll just use the stairs – and they’ll have a hell of a head start. Right now, we need to save ourselves.”

Bold shook his head, lamenting, “This whole th-th-thang wos a b-b-big mistehk...why the h-h-godi-hell wae evar-r agrae to it...”

As he cried, Zach agreed with the Knome, “Look up.”

At least twenty diamond shaped blue faces peered over the edge of the ramp that would be the elevator’s next stop.

“Why’d we listen to a damn Knome.” Nogard muttered before smirking it off with a shrug, “This’ll be fun.”

“They have no bows.” Zach said, as if that defended the stupidity of the Knomish plan they’d now trapped themselves with, “We can take them.”

“They’re scared of minotaurs.” Ekaf reminded them, “All we’ve got to do is make them think we can take them.”

Bold was wide eyed, “Th-th-that maen ya d-d-don’t thank wae can?”

“Eh.” Ekaf shrugged, then he asked, “Whatcha always say?”

“Lard.”

“The other thing.” Ekaf pressed.

Bold begrudgingly ablidged, “Mehk the best of it...”

Zack and Ekaf chimed in for the second part, “That’s the best you can do.”

Nogard took a long drag on his pipe then put it up and adjusted his grip on Shelmick’s Shield. Zach counted his arrows. Bold, sighed, then cracked his knuckles. Ekaf let the Duikii begin to grow.

“Here we come.” Acamus murmured, tapping his hoof impatiently, “We’re coming, father!”

- - -

“What was that?!” Joe cried, jumping up from the ground, “Where’s Zalfron?”

“Total Darkness.” Machuba said, helping Joe catch his balance.

“But he said Earthboy?” Joe murmured.

Machuba shrugged, “Maybe he missed.”

They stood silent for a moment, looking from the door to the burner to their friends rising out of view on the lift. They both simultaneously spotted the Sea Lords on the descending elevators and cringed.

“The stairs.” Joe said, “We’ve got to go in.”

“We can’t-” Machuba cut himself off, then nodded, “I’ll go first. Ready?”

Machuba drew his sword and grabbed the doorknob. Joe let the fire churn in his chest. They could hear the yells and the echoes of the Sea Lords getting closer and closer behind them but neither looked back. Then Machuba realized the door was ajar was already. He threw it open.

The lights were off. He stepped into the shadows and then stepped out, keeping his eyes on the doorway.

“Joe,” he whispered, “light it up.”

FWOOSH.

Red flames burst from Joe’s chest, past Machuba and into the building. Machuba’s lidless eyes burned as the entire bottom floor of the burner was filled with fire for one split second. Desperately coughing and licking his eyes, it took Machuba a minute to speak.

“I just needed a light!”

“Well,” Joe shrugged, “now we have the upper hand.”

Smoke billowed out the now charred doorway. A few flames cackled on inside like the beacon of a lighthouse within a dense fog. And from within, there was a choir of coughing.

“Cover me!” Machuba exclaimed.

He ran into the room and Joe followed. With smoke so thick they could barely see, the two stumbled forward. A robed figure charged them. Machuba met him with a swing and the figure slid off the blade and fell to the floor coughing.

“So you are the Earthboy?”

It was a feminine voice and it was inside the room but it wasn’t near.

“It’s a pity this is where your journey ends.”

Still, the boys could barely see through the smog but they stumbled onward. Two more black clothed figures attacked, this time wielding swords of shadows. Machuba blocked one swing. Diving away from the other, Joe shot a blast of fire into the chest of the shadowmancer attacking Machuba. Then, as the second shadowmancer proceeded after Joe, Machuba turned and batted him down with his blade.

“And you, fishfolk,” the voice continued, “humor me, you wouldn’t happen to be a Gill? Suppose we’ll just have to make you bleed to find out.”

The two were suddenly stopped by a fit of choking coughs as the smoke got to them. They did their best to keep their gaze up, the room was beginning to clear but still little was visible. There was a desk before them, attached to the wall like a bar. Beside them, as the room opened up, they could see large machinery: the corners of two mighty generators that stretched like towers into the roof. That and four coughing shadowmancers.

“Behind the bar!” Joe yelled.

Machuba was one step ahead of him. As soon as the two ducked for cover, shadows splattered against the wall above them.

“Cover me!” Machuba shouted, crawling into a crouch.

Joe stood and faced the approaching four. He lit the bar up just in time to block the shadows flung towards him. Sweeping the flames off the desk top he launched them forwards, knocking the offenders back as Machuba leapt over the counter. In one more step, Machuba thrust his blade forward and ran the closest opponent through. A shadowmancer stepped toward Machuba, a shadow-made sword in his hand. Joe shot fire at his legs and the shadowmancer stumbled back, Machuba caught him with Shelmick’s Blade through the heart. The third mancer turned to the fishfolk but the fourth was focused on Joe.

He charged, black sword in one hand and a black shield in the other.

Farak, Joe’s brow furled and he frowned hard, he felt as he had when he had faced down the fishfolk in the Submarine Canyon – momentarily recognizing the violence he would soon commit for what it was: violence – then he committed to what the situation required of him. Flames coursed down his arm, swelling around his hand as he balled it into a fist. He climbed

onto the counter and released a beam of auburn fire. The shadowmancer responded with a neutralizing wave of shadows. Only three yards from the desk, he raised his obsidian weapons. Joe leaped off the counter with his arm cocked back.

The smoke cleared.

Machuba finished his enemy.

Joe thrust his arm forward, launching a fiery fist square into the chest of the shadowmancer before him.

As two bodies crumbled to the ground, Joe and Machuba realized their advantage had faded. Four generators filled the room, penetrating the roof. At least a dozen robed men and women stood here and there. One woman, clad in silvery armor, stood in the center in between the four engines. Her dark purple hair was pulled back into a bun and her right eye was a dull black marble, the same shade as her lipstick. Her skin was blue.

“I’m impressed. You’re both quite strong for a couple of boys.”

“Who is she?” Joe asked.

“That’s Adora Shadowstorm,” Machuba paused to lick his eyes, “Shalis’ right hand, the Tsar of Shadowmancers.”

- - -

Zach only managed to shoot two Sea Lords above them before the others realized they should quit looking over the edge. The ramp above – like the one below – ended with a broad circle that the lift would rise up through. Passengers could then step off onto one of two mini ramps that extended from the inside of the circle. Even Nogard was beginning to share a bit of disdain for the elevator system’s design – it was exciting in and of itself, when combined with blood thirsty fishfolk rogues, the whole thing was a little bit too much. That said, Ekaf’s point remained spot on. The system was seemingly destined to make a grand fight sequence. But until they reached the second-floor bridge, they had nothing to do but wait.

“W-w-will the lift st-stop?” Bold asked.

“Of course.” Ekaf laughed, “Not for too long though.”

“Long enough for us to fight our way off, dough, yea?” Nogard asked.

“Fight our way off?” Ekaf asked.

“We’re meeting them on the second floor.” Zach stated.

“Eh...” Ekaf grimaced, “Not so sure that’s still a good plan.”

“But that’s the plan they know.” Zach said.

Ekaf rolled his eyes, “They’ll be fiiine.”

“Farak you, Civ.” Nogard grunted before turning to Zach and Bold, “I ain’t listenin to dis Knome no more. We’ll go for Joe, Machuba, and Zalfron.”

“Get ready,” Acamus warned, “we’re close.”

“We’re still gonna meet up with them!” Ekaf exclaimed, nodding at the bottom of the bridge they were approaching, “Just not sure if fighting our way off is really a good idea. Might be better to wait til the third floor then run down the stairs to meet them in the burner building.”

“Might be.” Zach stated, “But that’s not the plan they know.”

Ekaf whirled on Zachias, “What’s with you and the plan they know?”

“Knome,” Bold said, his voice deep and heavy, “st-stop playin g-games.”

“I’m not-”

The platform came to a stop between the two narrow off-ramps. The Sea Lords stood in two groups, filling both exits. Some wore armor, some were barely dressed and shivering worse than Bold, but all held some form of a weapon whether it was sharp or dull, rusty or shiny. For a moment, those on the elevator and those who surrounded them froze. No one moved. Even the mighty gears above had come to a creaking stop.

With a guttural roar, Acamus shattered the silence, thrust his spear forward as it grew to its full length, and impaled a Sea Lord through his amphibious skull. Three opponents hopped on as Acamus yanked his spear free. Zach shot one in the temple and ducked under the swing of the second. The third was thrown off the platform by Acamus' free hand. Zach knocked another arrow and, stepping back, released it into the chest of the second fishfolk.

While Zach and Acamus defended the far side, Bold, Nogard, and Ekaf defended the side between the elevator and Rivergate's second tier. When Acamus initiated, as did Ekaf. He hopped off the platform and drew his weapon. The tiny golden dagger grew to match the Knome's height and kept growing. When three Sea Lords approached the elevator on Acamus and Zach's side, a dozen approached the Knome.

Ekaf strode forward, slipping beneath his opponents' attacks and sliding his golden hilted sword through the nearest fishfolk's gut. Spinning, he ducked, shrunk his sword, and ran between the legs of an especially tall pirate. He turned and retired the fishfolk's calves and then continued on, now completely surrounded by the pirates.

Despite being the one arguing to stay on the elevator, he was the first one off it.

With Ekaf in the midst of the enemy and a good six or seven enemies now between him and the elevator, Bold and Nogard were forced to defend their side of the elevator themselves. Nogard had only his shield and Bold had only his knuckles (Both having refused any of the weapons found aboard the *Monoceros*). Nevertheless, when Ekaf strode into battle, they joined him. Nogard slammed an enemy with his shield, Bold slugged another in the stomach. Both Sea Lords fell off the bridge but four more took their place.

Bold went for an uppercut. His opponent stepped out of the way and clubbed the dwarf across the jaw. Bold fell to the ground as a second Sea Lord raised a rusted scimitar above him. Nogard dove into the swordsman, nearly knocking him off the platform, but he caught one of the steal cords. The fishfolk with the club and two that pursued Nogard closed in.

"Bold!" Nogard yelled as the dwarf got to his feet, "Charge!"

Without a question, he did. The Sea Lord brought the bat back like a baseball player ready to hit.

CLANG!

Nogard's shield hit the clubber in the head. Bold ran over the falling Sea Lord and tackled the next. Nogard dove for his shield and rolled over to block the swing of an attacker as Bold landed punch after punch into the face of the Sea Lord beneath him. Slamming the golden shield into his opponent's shin, Nogard rolled to his knees and blocked another swing. Finally Nogard got back on his feet but before he could attack, the Sea Lord was off his. Bold stood in his place, having grabbed the pirate's legs out from under him.

"Sorry, lad," the dwarf said as he neared the edge, dragging the fishfolk with him, "Ehmin far the watar!"

With a spin, the dwarf sent the buccaneer back to the first floor.

"Si ne shua!"

Nogard turned and attempted to prepare as a tremendous fishfolk raise a broad sword high above his head.

“Nogard!” Bold cried.

The broad sword fell by the chidra’s feet, the hand that held it still held tight. The fishfolk licked his eyes as he stared at the blood now pouring out his severed wrist. Then a blade slid up through his abdomen, blood spurted from his mouth, and he collapsed as the blade was yanked free. Ekaf stood behind the pirate, blood dripping off his dagger.

With the three virtually unharmed, they looked over at Acamus and Zach. The minotaur was panting, Zach met them with a silent stare. The five sighed in unison and then turned to face the dozen or so Sea Lords who still stood before them further down the bridge. Nogard reached down and picked up the sword that had nearly slain him.

CRREEEAAKK!

The elevator jerked back to life. Gears began to rotate overhead as the cords that held the platform began moving.

“GUARD THE EDGE!” Ekaf roared.

Everyone moved to the edge, ready for round two but the Sea Lords didn't move. They stood before the elevator, watching in silence as the five rose. They didn't move until the elevator was over their head.

A group of four giant fishfolk strolled out of one of the empty shops that faced the elevator. They were giants compared to their comrades, a tall fishfolk was a rare phenomenon but these men were even taller than your typical fishfolk. Their right arms were stuck inside some sort of machine. On past where their hand would've been was a giant curved metal bar, crossed perpendicular to the arm that held it. In unison, the men pulled back the metal cord strung from the ends of the bar. With horrified fascination, Zach realized what he saw. He could only whisper.

“Crossbows.”

As soon as they had their weapons cocked each reached into a pouch in their pocket and withdrew circular disks with jagged saw-like edges.

“Whot’s th-th-that?” Bold asked.

Nogard gulped, “Razors, Civ.”

“Lard.” Bold lamented.

Zach knocked an arrow but the crossbowmen were a step ahead. As the spirit released his, the Sea Lords released theirs. A crossbowman fell but not before he’d gotten off his shot. Two of the circular blades missed but two hit their targets: the elevator cords. The razor blades sliced through the metal as if it were a spider web. The two cords whipped back from where they’d been severed. One cord flailed helplessly while the other slapped the stone bridge that was beneath them, slicing a pirate’s arm clean off and severing a large chunk of stone from the bridge. With two cords cut the elevator fell to dangle from its remaining two lifelines. Ekaf and Nogard clung to one cord as Zach and Bold held onto the other. Acamus wasn’t so lucky. He hadn’t run to the edge like the others, he’d stayed put, having confidence that one of his allies would prevent the situation.

Nope.

He fell off his hooves and rolled across the elevator to land on the ramp.

Surrounded by fishfolk, he stood. The three crossbowmen had reloaded. The other Sea Lords had their weapons drawn but they kept their distance. Acamus stabbed his spear in the ground as the crossbowmen fired. As the saw blades flew towards the last two wires, ice spread from where Acamus had stuck his spear. The handful of Sea Lords closest to the minotaur stumbled backwards only to trip over fallen comrades. Ice rushed over the corpses and swarmed

over the slowest of the fleeing Sea Lords, slowly freezing them, inch by inch, as they struggled. Behind Acamus, the last two great metal cords snapped and the platform fell – hitting the bridge on its side behind the minotaur. But when the elevator hit the frozen bridge, it stuck in place and the ice crept up the elevator platform crawling closer and closer to the four still clinging to the opposite edge.

Then the ice stopped. There was only three Sea Lords still able to move: the crossbowmen. They paused for a moment to simultaneously lick their eyes then reached to reload. An arrow nailed the hand of one crossbowman through his thigh. Zach was now standing on the frozen ramp alongside Acamus. Following the spirit, Ekaf bound down the elevator then came Nogard. Before the other two marksmen could grab another razor bladed projectile, the Knome and chidra had their sword to the gentlemen's throats.

The two able-handed Sea Lords took their ammunition and rolled it over the ledge, one by one.

“Hurry.” Acamus said, “Get off the ice.”

“Bold, dat means you gotta come down, Civ.” Nogard said.

With a pitiful whimper, Bold released the edge of the elevator and rolled down the iced slab. Unfortunately, the elevator had been frozen at a steep angle and Bold's roll didn't stop when he hit the bridge. The frosty corpses acted like a ramp on the already ramped bridge. Nogard had to jump out of the way as the dwarf flew by, finally stopping when he struck the facade of a shop.

Zach, Nogard, and Ekaf followed his lead bipedally.

Once safely off the ice, Ekaf asked, “How are you going to get your spear out without...”

Acamus grabbed his spear with both hands. Setting his hooves firmly in the ice, he pulled with all his might. His body trembled. Nothing happened. No one said a word. The minotaur paused. Then, with a furious roar, he regripped his spear and, with a twist and a yank, he tore it from the bridge, shattering all he had frozen. The elevator, the bridge, the bodies, and the legs of the crossbowmen exploded into shards of ice – including the ground beneath the minotaur's feet.

Acamus and the three crossbowmen tumbled into free fall. Before he fell more than ten feet, Acamus aimed the spear at the jagged edge of the second floor and let it rapidly expand, impaling the stone. Then he shrunk the spear which pulled him close enough to the edge to climb up

“Selu, Civ.” Nogard gaped.

“Wish you'd get to meet his father...” Ekaf muttered.

While shivering like a scared kitten, Bold attempted to dust himself off and ask a question at the same time. Unfortunately, due to the sudden increase in the ferocity of his shivering, his words came out in a garbled, unintelligible mess.

Nogard stifled a giggle.

Bold tried again, “T-t-to the burner?”

They turned to gaze at the continuation of the burner building Joe and Machuba had entered from below. No sooner did they spot it than did fishfolk begin to pile out. Disoriented as the Sea Lords seemed, they quickly spotted the gang beside the missing elevator ramp. Raising their weapons they charged.

“Lard,” Bold shook his head, “another f-f-fight?”

“No, come on!” Ekaf said, leading the way to the elevator next to them, one that had just arrived.

“We can't leave dem, Civ.”

“Civ,” Ekaf groaned, skidding to a stop, “come on!”

Acamus was the only one onboard with moving on. He marched silently past Ekaf, prepared to take the elevator by himself if it came to that. Zach looked from the approaching hoard to the Knome then back to Bold.

“That’s atlaest tharty.” Bold stated.

Zach nodded, his helmet hiding his frown.

“We can’t leave dem!” Nogard cried, staring at the two with wild eyes, “Y’all serious?!”

“Nogard!” Ekaf snapped, back by his side, “We’ll loop around.”

Bold and Zach had already started towards the elevator. Nogard looked from the Knome to the Sea Lords. There wasn’t much more time to decide. And Nogard definitely couldn’t take on thirty Sea Lords himself. He gave in.

“We’ll loop around.” He said.

Ekaf nodded, “We’ll loop around.”

Together, they hurried over to the elevator with the others. As they rose towards the third floor, watching the Sea Lords gather on the bridge below them to holler futile curses upwards, Ekaf consoled Nogard.

“Listen, I may be a Knome, but I’m Ekaf.” He said, turning to tug on Zach’s armored hand, “He can tell you,” then he slapped Bold on the shoulder, “and he can tell you,” before finally thumping Nogard’s thigh, “and honestly, you should know by now: you should trust me. I know you’re concerned. We’re all concerned. But we’ll get Machuba. Don’t worry.”

“And Joe?” Nogard asked, “Zalfron?”

“See,” Ekaf said, “for that, you’ve got to trust me. Zalfron isn’t even here anymore.”

“What do you mean?” Zach asked.

“You saw him disappear.” Ekaf said.

“Total D-d-darkness.” Bold nodded.

“Hermes took him into the city.” Ekaf said.

“How do you know that, Knome?” Acamus interjected.

“You saw him on the ship,” Ekaf said, “he’s scared of us. He’s running away but he’s using Total Darkness to do it so he doesn’t look like a loser. He can hide in Total Darkness as long as he wants – so long as he keeps Zalfron alive.”

Acamus grunted.

“You think we should go into Zviecoff?” Zach asked Ekaf.

“I think that’s where we’ll find our friends.” Ekaf nodded, “And I think that’s where Theseus will be going – because if we don’t find him on our way up-”

Acamus turned back to the Knome, the Vanian Spear silently growing in his grasp.

“-then he must be in the city.”

- - -

They dove behind the towering machinery of a generator.

“We can’t fight her!” Joe exclaimed.

Machuba agreed, “We should run!”

Two silhouettes rolled around the corner wielding obsidian weapons, made of the same substance as their bodies. Machuba slashed through one. His blade tore it apart and its body evaporated like water on hot pavement. The next raised its weapon but was melted away with a blast of fire. As the two shadow warriors faded, two shadowmancers took their place.

“Let’s go!” Joe yelled.

They ran for the door then froze as fishfolk began to march in.

Joe cursed.

“Come on!” Machuba shouted.

Joe turned back to find Machuba scaling the generator they’d cowered behind them. After launching a wave of fire left and right, Joe joined him. The roof opened up to allow the engines to continue their climb. The next floor was set like a picture frame around the industrial columns. As they climbed, Joe shot flame below them to keep the mancercs from climbing after them. Most of their opponents were smart enough to take the stairs but still the boys beat them to the second tier and continued their ascent. On the third floor they hopped onto the deck. There the columns split into a cross, with rows stretching out perpendicularly to cut off one side of the room from the other. Their walkway had a door on either side. Machuba picked one and Joe followed.

In this room, the giant arm of the generator acted as a wall. In its gear-laden and pipey façade, there was a large oven sized cubby that was bursting out of its seams with flame. Feeding the fire there was a belt buckle shaped like the head of a barren, glowing amber, held by a hand greased with aquannabis – a hand that belonged to a man that both Joe and Machuba had met before, not so long ago. The ex-captain of the *Monoceros* stood before them, He the cockatune on his shoulder.

“Well what’dya know?” John Pigeon grinned, though he didn’t make eye contact. He was busy checking his nails, “The boat thieves are back.”

Joe and Machuba hardly paid the snarling buccaneer any attention, for he wasn’t alone. Adora had appeared ferocious in her battle armor but this new woman worried not for her defenses. All she wore was a black dress. Her skin was dark, her ears pointed, and her nose was tilted to the heavens, delivering an almost comical air of pretension. Joe was sure she couldn’t see much other than the roof. Still, there was something about her that was fiercely intimidating and though Joe didn’t know much about her, he somehow knew exactly who he was now facing as if it could’ve been none other.

“You’re...you’re-” Joe fumbled.

“The Tsar of Necromancers, the Sheik of the Order, the Disciples’ Princess, the Witch of Icelore-” the woman lowered her nose to look Joe in the face as her lips parted in a widening smile, “-you can call me Shalis.”

Skeletal arms shot up from the wooden floorboards, clutching at Joe and Machuba’s feet as they danced about. The two boys stomped the boney limbs back to death and turned for the door they’d come through only to see it ajar and plugged with mancercs. They looked back to Shalis.

“Run if you like, little cuckmancer, but you won’t get far.” She shrugged, “On the other hand,” she strode towards Joe and cupped his chin in her hand., “you might rather prefer to stay here with me – I can offer you far more than the Emperor would dare.”

The door to their right opened and a Sea Lord poked his head through. His blue skinned comrades could be seen fidgeting on the stairs behind him.

“Hold the stairs!” Johnny commanded.

“Hermes has the elf boy, that Sentry.” Shalis continued. She released Joe and moved over to Machuba, “We can let him and this fishfolk walk away unscathed, but not you. You’ll stay with me.”

“Zalfron could be dead.” Machuba stated.

Shalis' head turned with such speed it was almost as if someone had snapped her neck. The sudden glare chilled Machuba's burning blood. No sooner had it done so than did the hot pain of her palm smashing against the side of his face bring his blood back to life as he was thrown to the ground. Her bare foot slammed down on his throat, pinning him to the floor. Joe flinched – as if about to jump to his comrade's aid – only for her hand to shoot out and wrap around his throat.

Lifting him off the ground, Joe was now at eye level with the Sheik.

“Let me promise you this,” she snarled, “you and your friends will be dead if you don't kill me. And if you don't kill me – if you can't kill me – then you godi well better serve me.” An ivory bracelet on her wrist suddenly clenched her forearm. The band split into a strip that coiled around her wrist. Like a snake, it slithered over her hand and around Joe's neck where it expanded and refastened. It sat cold on his collar bones. She stepped off of Machuba and let go of Joe, smirking, “That necklace will slowly suck out your fire, faster than your natural metabolism, and it won't allow you to replenish. I can remove it for you – once you accompany me back to Icelore. Until then-”

She stopped, tilted her nose back into the air, nostrils flaring. Suddenly Joe realized that she hadn't been exhibiting a posture of condescension when they first found her. She'd been smelling. As she sniffed, she stepped off Machuba's neck and released Joe's throat.

“What?” Johnny asked, pulling his eyes from his fingernails to stare at his Sheik with concern. He couldn't smell what she smelled – he wasn't a necromancer – but he certainly heard something. He turned to yell at his pirates still waiting in the doorway, “Hey, give it a rest boys!”

Joe heard it too. Some sort of melodious rambling reverberating down the stairwell. The song wasn't any language Joe recognized and the tempo went hand in hand with heavy clanging, as if the singer also strummed a war drum. The sounds echoed. Louder and louder. Someone was coming down the stairs.

Machuba, back on his feet, exchanged puzzled glances with Joe.

Shalis turned to Johnny but Johnny shrugged. Shalis wasn't shrugging. Her eyes were wide with rage.

“Get Adora.” Shalis demanded. As he scurried out the door Joe and Machuba stood before, Shalis turned back to her captives, “Who is that coming down those stairs?”

Again, Joe and Machuba looked at each other then looked back to the Sheik to shrug.

“Fine,” she snapped, “let the Sentry boy die. I'm sure he misses his sister.”

The noise stopped. For a few seconds, silence fell over the three. The silence was shattered by a thundering sound, so loud that at first Joe thought it was another banshee. The crash was echoed by the shrieks of the fishfolk as they fled down the stairs. When the singing resumed seconds later, the culprit strode into the room.

“IN HOC KRECKY MISA RISA...”

The singer stood nearly nine feet tall, not counting his long-upturned horns. His arms and legs were as thick around as Joe's waist, making the sword and shield in his hands look like a toothpick and a saucer. Grey shaggy fur hung down all over his body, twisted into dreads wherever it grew long enough. Despite his apparent age, he was definitely not balding. The only bits of skin visible beneath his carpet of silver came in the form of long, jagged scars. There was one on his right arm, from his shoulder to his wrist, left behind by the leader of the Doom Warriors, Flow Morain, like a souvenir from the Battle Grand II. Another on his snout, wrapping around his nose like an upturned mustache, which he'd acquired in the Fourth Void War, fighting alongside a young Saint. Then the most impressive of all, two narrow stripes from his

left shoulder to his hip, crisscrossed by a third going the other way. These three were earned during the fight to end all fights, the Third Void War, the conflict that stopped the Queen of Darkness. More scars likely hid beneath his kilt or beneath the belt that held it up. The buckle of said belt was massive, guarding most of his abs. It depicted the symbol of the GraiLord. It was a nationalist medallion known as the GraiLord Seal. The symbol depicted a giant – not quite moon dragon sized but giant nonetheless – dragon wrapped around the crooked peak of Mount Krynor. Joe didn't have to ask who the minotaur was. After all, he was the one they were looking for.

Theseus Icespear gave Joe a wink as he finished his song.

“...OH SHEESA ZEN NOCK ECI.”

Shalis hurriedly blurted, “Can kaepaz-dercaz-”

But she was too late. At first it looked like Theseus' breath was simply misting because of the refrigerator-like cold of the harbor but the burner room was *not* cold. A cloud poured out of the minotaur's mouth, filling the room as thickly as Joe had filled the first floor with smoke and just as fast. No sooner did the fog appear, than did it fade. Yet, it did not fade from Shalis' side of the room. Instead, it hardened into a thick wall of ice.

“With haste, my friends.” Theseus said, though the deep baritone of his voice made it sound almost like a yell, “It won't take long for her to melt through my wall.”

The minotaur strode over to the stairwell, sheathing his weapons. The Sea Lords, who had scurried back into position to watch the legendary warrior, backed away from the door. They watched him in silence.

Glancing back, Theseus chuckled when he saw Joe and Machuba both hesitating as they eyed the pirates.

“They know better than to cross blades with I, now hurry up.”

The minotaur led the two up the stairs. Theseus tripled the coverage of both boys' strides. He sang as they climbed, leaving frozen barriers behind them every other flight, which was fortunate because both Joe and Machuba were quickly losing their breath. Joe was just about to beg for a break when Theseus collapsed. Panting like dogs, Joe and Machuba came to his side.

“I'm fine, my friends, I'm fine...” his hands clutched his left leg where a lumpy, snaking scar stretched across his kneecap, looking almost like a gnarled knot on a tree root, “We may have to continue at a slower pace.”

“Fine by-” Joe had to pause as he was still gasping for breath, “-me.”

“What happened to your knee?” Machuba asked.

“Poor healing, that's what.” Theseus shook his head, “Haven't had the time to meditate properly. Got myself a gash and I figured I might be able to work a few shortcuts – KOR!” He howled, “I should've let it heal naturally. Lot easier to make ice, than it is to make flesh, my friends.”

Machuba looked to Joe but the human didn't catch the fishfolk's wide-eyed expression due to his lack of eyelids. Licking his eyes, Machuba did his best to keep his tone calm, “Your wounded and your casting...you've been meditating, right?”

“No time! Not with all these eels – excuse my language.”

Machuba couldn't help but exclaim his concern, “You can't keep casting!”

Joe backed Machuba, “We're fine now anyways. I can't even hear the Sea Lords anymore.”

“Better to be tired than *retired*, my friend.” Theseus smirked, “A minute longer, then we'll continue.” Theseus paused, then asked, “By the way, what *are* y'all doing here and why's Shalis so interested in you?”

“We were looking for you.” Joe said.

“Looking for me?” Theseus laughed, “Whatever you needed me for, you only threw yourselves into another pickle by coming here!”

Joe and Machuba couldn’t help but chuckle as blood rushed to blush their cheeks – an act which not only heightened the pain in Machuba’s face but also made his melon way an extra couple pounds.

“We thought you needed our help.” Joe explained.

The minotaur burst out laughing, stomping his hoof and shattering the unfortunate stair he struck.

“I may look in poor shape now,” Theseus interrupted himself with a few final waves of chuckles, “but I am still more than capable of fending off this bunch of winged dinguses!”

“We heard you were trapped here in Rivergate.” Joe explained.

“Trapped?” Theseus scoffed, “I only came back to Rivergate when I saw half the Order heading this way, I figured they must be up to something. What gave you the idea I was trapped?”

Joe sheepishly murmured, “Your son.”

“Acamus? I gave him my spear and now he thinks I can’t...” Theseus stood and his face grew grave, “He’s here?”

Both boys nodded.

“What a fool!” Theseus stood and paced the platform between flights just above Joe and Machuba, “Why would he come to this cursed city!” He stopped and stared hard at the two boys, “And now I’ve got the two of you to look after.”

In a continuation of Joe’s previous sheepishness, he said, “We came with a few others too...a chidra, a dwarf, a spirit, and a Knome.”

“A diverse lot.” Theseus dropped down to a squat so that his face was within yards of his knew comrades. His eyes narrowed to a squint as he asked, “A Knome?”

The boys nodded.

“*Crimpsin tiad bastard!*” He punched through the stone wall of the stairwell.

By now Joe understood how Acamus got to be so impulsive.

“There is good news, my friends.” Theseus said after a deep breath, “Knomes make things difficult but they bring good luck. Before we depart, who is it that I’m dealing with here?”

“I’m Joe and this-”

“Machuba Gill.”

“Both names sound familiar...Gill, of course, I can pin down.” Theseus said, “I knew your uncle. I knew him to be a man of honor – despite what others might say.”

“Thank you.” Machuba bowed his head.

“And Joe. Judging by the rock in your chest, you must be the one that brought the Witch to the frontline.”

“I think so...” Joe admitted.

“Why’s that?”

“I’m from Earth they-”

“Ah...” Theseus smirked, giving Joe another wink, “we’ve got a Sun Child, aye?”

If Joe got anymore sheepish, you could shear him. He offered Theseus back an embarrassed, “I guess?”

“Well then, my friend,” Theseus smiled, “if you haven’t enjoyed Mystakle Planet so far, you’re in for a treat now that you’ve reached the Blue Ridges!”

For a minute, no one said anything. Theseus picked the conversation back up.

“What is that around your neck?”

Joe reached up and touched the bone choker, it was cold as ice yet he’d almost forgotten it was there, “Shalis put it on me, she said it would slowly steal my fire.”

“Ah, yes,” Theseus nodded, “my friend, that may be a problem.”

“Can you take it off?” Joe asked.

“It would require very precise magic, magic I am not sure I have the means to cast. Shalis is clever, my friend, I wouldn’t want to underestimate the curse she’s placed, set off a trap, and wind up slicing off your head.”

“Agreed.” Joe said.

“We’ll need book magic.” Theseus concluded.

“Bold.” Machuba said to Joe.

“Bold?” Theseus asked.

“Boldarian Drahkcor.” Joe said.

“Selu!” Theseus exclaimed, “The Samurai?!”

“The son.” Machuba said.

“You came with the son of Boldarian?” Theseus gasped, then he smiled and shook his head before turning his snout to the heavens and exclaiming, “Knomes!” He looked back at the two, “Of course. Anyways, shall we?”

Machuba asked, “Where are we going?”

“Our friends said to meet them on the second floor.” Joe said.

“Oh ho!” Theseus shook his head, “We could, but that’d require a bloodbath. I assure you, my friend, your friends will not have stopped on the second floor for long. And if they did, they won’t be in any condition in which to meet you. That’s for sure. Don’t worry, we’ll find them. If they’ve got my son with them and they’ve got that Knome – if it’s the Knome I think it is – then they’ll be just fine, but they’ll be moving on up. We’ll meet them, but in the city. Rivergate’s a hornet’s nest, you may be able to stick your hand in and yank it out but if you do, my friend, you best run for the hills – and that’s where we’ll meet them, on the mountain top. First we’ll go to the North Mystakle Church, may or may not still be Coalition territory. If the checkpoint has fallen, we’ll go to Mountaingate. If the elves lost Mountaingate...” the minotaur paused, “I doubt that’s the case. Now, no more words. Save your breath for the climb. We need to get you to a healer before your flames run out.”

The minotaur once more bound up the stairs, though this time submitting to a minor limp. Joe followed, craning his neck to look above them. He nearly tripped. He couldn’t even spot the end of the squared spiral of stairs. Nonetheless, if he didn’t get moving, he soon would lose sight of the ancient hero they’d come to save. Putting one foot after the other, Joe began the climb once more. As they went up, his concern for his comrades was drowned out by the unignorable searing of his leg muscles. The three took a few more breaks before they reached the top. Each pause they’d listen in complete silence but hear no signs of Shalis or the Sea Lords. The end of their climb came so unexpected that when Theseus opened the door Joe and Machuba ran outside, stumbled when their feet expected more stairs, and hit the ground. Joe’s thighs burned like the flames in his chest.

“Zviecoff!” Joe exclaimed from the ground.

“No, my friend, not yet.” Theseus shook his head, his long ponytails swinging, “We’re still in Rivergate.”

The ground they'd collapsed upon was paved with cobblestone brick. It was a marketplace overlooking the bay. The buildings and roads were glazed in a hard crust of ice and snow. Most of the small port shops were surrounded by clumps of snow as if someone had intentionally shoveled it up and stacked it igloo style around the doors and windows.

"What's with the frozen houses?" Joe asked.

"Looters." Theseus explained further, "Zviecoff evacuated, my friend. What you couldn't take with you, you locked up. And what you couldn't lock up, you covered in snow. The Iceloadic aren't strangers to evacuation."

One structure stood out above the rest. The stone courtyard before it was covered in a multitude of frozen footsteps. The building was massive, the length of the walls of Rivergate it seemed, with thick walls of stone and long rectangle sheets of glass that reflected the noontime Solaris – which finally had found a window in the smog that billowed southeast over the river. The reflection was so brilliant that the three could barely bare to look at the façade for more than a few seconds. Four towers rose from the building, each baring flags with the emblem of Iceload upon it: a black rose encased in a crystal of ice.

However, the emblems were marred by thick black circles that surrounded the ice and rose. This was the symbol of the Order. Zviecoff and Iceload might've no longer been in possession of the Sheik, but Rivergate certainly was and the flapping flags stated such.

Theseus said, "Come, my friends, we must go."

"I can't walk." Joe responded.

"C'mon, bulk up boy, the fishfolk is standing!"

At that second Machuba collapsed, clutching his thighs.

"Children!" Theseus laughed.

The minotaur grabbed Joe and Machuba and slung the two over his shoulder like they weighed no more than a feather. Despite his handicap, Theseus dashed across the harbor top, past the empty ice-locked shops, carrying both boys with ease all the way up the stairs to the massive building. The minotaur dropped the boys and opened large double doors.

"Amazing..." Joe murmured.

"This is Rivergate Center, I'm not sure how many other cities on this continent you've visited, my friends," Theseus chuckled, "but the elves of Iceload didn't want any confusion about which city is...was their capital."

The first thing Joe saw was the giant arrow shaped window which showed the broken city of Zviecoff sloping up the mountainside. The peak of the mountain was capped by a slender tower of a castle wrapped in clouds and smoke. When Joe looked to the ceiling he saw that the shape of the window was no mistake. A true masterpiece was painted across the dome shaped roof. Three characters stood in the center of the dome, arranged in a circle with their heads on the inside and feet on the out. One was an electric elf, another a chidra, and the third a spirit. The elf stood before an anvil, a hammer in one hand, his other empty and extended to the chidra. The chidra held a Fou-style sword which he pointed at a giant dragon and in the other he held a shield which blocked the swing of an earth elf's sword. The earth elf was aflame and though he held a sword in his right hand, his left was open as if he were reaching out. To complete the circle of three figurines was the spirit, standing beside the chidra. One hand was pointing at the earth elf and the other was pointed at the electric elf's hammer. Purple light flowed from each of the spirit's hands.

"Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff..." Joe whispered.

“Notice they forgot Mycenae.” Theseus grunted before getting back to the issue at hand, “We must hurry.”

They ran under the painting, between giant stone columns, through wooden stalls, and over the bars meant to keep unchecked visitors out. Finally, they reached the double doors opposite the ones they’d entered through. Though the doors weren’t closed, in fact, the doors were nowhere to be seen. Small splinters of wood covered the ground around the doorway. The ancient stone doorframe was coated in black soot.

“We missed a fight.” Machuba stated.

“Real pity.” Joe muttered.

“Indeed,” Theseus said as he stepped out of Rivergate Center and into the city, “Now, my friends, welcome to Zviecoff.”

- - -

“Don't stop running!” Ekaf roared as he leaped into the air and planted both feet into the back of Boldarian who had stopped to pant. Instead of propelling Bold back into a run, as the Knome had intended, the dwarf face planted at the foot of the giant wood doors that separated the five from the streets of Zviecoff. They’d made it to Rivergate Center much quicker than Joe, Machuba, and Theseus had (elevators make all the difference). As Zach and Nogard helped Bold up, Ekaf bound over the dwarf’s belly and would’ve been out the door in another second if Acamus hadn’t shot the Vanian Spear out to block his path. With a snort of frustration Ekaf complained, “We need to keep moving!”

“We aren’t leaving Rivergate without my father.”

The Knome bowed his head so the minotaur wouldn’t see him roll his eyes as he responded, “We’ve been over this! If we didn’t come across him on the way up, then he must be up and out. You saw how the Sea Lords ran the second floor. If he’d gotten past them, he would’ve made it to the bay and gotten out.”

“How?” Zach asked, though Acamus seemed not to hear, nor did they seem to hear Nogard as he concurred with the spirit, “Yea, Civ, dere weren’t any boats in da bay.”

Ekaf seemed equally deaf, “If not, he’d be above them. Which if he were, we would’ve seen him.”

“Not necessarily,” Zalfron noted despite his voice apparently being of zero consequence to both Knome and minotaur, “Rivergate’s perty damn big.”

“So not only should we keep moving because the Sea Lords are on our tail, but we should keep moving because Theseus – and likely Zalfron – are somewhere in this city!”

“YA BLASTED MIDGET!”

Ekaf was tackled over the rod of the Vanian Spear and slammed into the door. Bold stood beside Acamus, rubbing his back as his sudden aggressiveness turned to embarrassment.

“Sarray, but ya raelly got moy goo-”

Bold’s apology was interrupted as Ekaf hopped to his feet and threw himself on the dwarf.

“YOU’RE A MIDGET!”

“Listen!” Zach commanded.

The two paused. In the silence, they could hear the faint heartbeat like thump of marching. Bold sat up. Ekaf stood.

“Footsteps.” Acamus said.

“Sea Lords?” Nogard asked.

“Ipativians.” Bold said.

“Vokriit.” Ekaf corrected.

“Or minotaurs.” Acamus suggested.

“They are coming this way, hold on.” Zach said.

He took off his helmet and let his long, silver bangs fall over his eyes. Holding back his bangs, he stuck his face through the door.

“Science, Civ.” Nogard stated.

“Black soldiers.” Zach said, his entire body back in the Rivergate Center, as he replaced his helmet.

“Knights of the Order.” Ekaf said, then he asked, “How many are there? What are they up to? What sort of-”

“A good bit. They’re lined up, blocking off the streets. Even some on the roofs. A regiment is marching this way.”

“Lard, war surrounded!” Bold lamented.

A new sound caught Zach’s attention, a noise that the others could not discern from the marching. Removing his helmet again, he took another peak.

“CANNONS!” Zach cried.

Zach jumped back from the doorway, silver eyes wide. The boys followed his lead, rushing – for better or worse – back across the chamber towards the rest of Rivergate. They only got a few yards before skidding to a halt. Across the building, Sea Lords were now pouring in through the entrance the five had come through only moments before.

“War surrounded!” Bold cried again.

“Where do we go?” Nogard asked.

“The trolleys!” Ekaf exclaimed, “Follow me!”

Right as the Knome took off, the doors shattered in a plume of flame and smoke, raking the backs of their necks with a toasty breeze as they booked it for the center of the room. They could hear the Knights of the Order marching in the blasted doors behind them as they reached the wall of booths that split the colossal room. Each booth had a gate and a walkway for civilians to walk through, speak to the security official, then gain admittance. Though, with Rivergate abandoned, most of the gates hung open and many of the booths had been practically un-assembled by-

“Looters...” Acamus said, shaking his head.

Ekaf slid under the gate, climbed over the counter, and plopped down behind the booth. Rivergate Center seemed to tremble as the sound of a hundred footsteps resonated throughout the chamber. Trusting Ekaf to be up to something, Nogard, Bold, Zach, and Acamus watched their approaching enemies slow their pace until they were just creeping forward, slowly closing in. Zach knocked an arrow but held onto it.

“I hope ya got some kinda secret weapon in dere, Civ.” Nogard whispered, “Dis boof doesn’t seem like a great place to make a stand...”

“Found it!” Ekaf pulled a lever that had been hidden, pressed up underneath the desk where the official would’ve been standing. It wouldn’t budge. He cursed and gave it another tug. This time, he unleashed an avalanche of profanity and gave the lever an abrupt and strong yank. The metal bar snapped off from where it was faceted to the desk and fell to the floor. No sooner did Ekaf break it than did he disappear – the floor dropped out from under him and his voice echoed up from the hole, “Down the hatch!”

Nogard hopped the gate, clambered over the desk, then leaned back out of the booth, “We got an escape, my boys! Let’s go!”

Bold climbed into the booth and over the desk with Nogard’s help. Unfortunately, that help meant that no sooner did he see the hole than did Nogard give him a helpful shove off the desktop, sending him tumbling headfirst into the hole. The corresponding THUD assured Nogard it wasn’t a far fall and he hopped hurriedly after the dwarf – who he fortunately found to have not been seriously injured. Zach and Acamus came last. Acamus was reluctant. He looked towards the bay, the Sea Lords had stopped within a few yards of the line of booths. So too had the Knights on the city-side. For a moment, he considered abandoning the others in an attempt to charge his way through the pirates and back into Rivergate.

“Acamus!”

Father.

“Come on!”

He looked north, at the Knights of the Order. *He is alive.* He could feel that in his soul – but what his soul wasn’t telling him was where his father was. He looked back at the hole on the other side of the booth then back up at the hesitating Sea Lords. *He must in the city.* With a nod, he committed to the belief and squeezed into the booth and down the hole.

The tunnel was hardly lit, a few slivers of light cut through the darkness here and there.

“Can we close it back up?” Acamus asked.

Ekaf stepped into the light of the trap door and raised the metal bar that had once been faceted to the desk in the booth above.

“Fantastic.” Bold stated.

“I’ve got it.” Acamus said, raising his spear to build a barrier of ice where the trap door had been.

“Did dey stop or somedin?” Nogard asked.

Acamus nodded, “They think they’ve got us cornered, my friend.”

“Are they wrong?” Zach muttered before addressing another sentiment of doubt, “I don’t think this is a trolley tunnel.”

“Yea...” Ekaf admitted, “this may be drainage...either way, it’s designed for escaping and thus exactly what we were looking for.” Without warning, he began to jog down the tunnel, “Follow me!”

With no other real options, the gang abided.

“This doesn’t get any narrower, does it?” Acamus asked, stooping so much that he might as well have gotten down on all fours.

“No.” Ekaf said, “Well yes. *But* we’ll get out before then. We’re going to the tower.”

“Whot?” Bold asked.

“The tower.”

“Why?”

“Because the Order will expect us to tunnel out.” Ekaf explained, “Doubt they’ll catch us if we escape up the tower.”

“How will we get into da city from da tower?” Nogard laughed, “We gonna fly?”

“Yes.” Ekaf said.

Acamus stopped abruptly, “There won’t be any left in the tower, there’s no way! Looters!”

“No, there is. There will be.” Ekaf assured him, “Now, come on, hurry. They may send soldiers to the tower just in case.”

As if to reiterate the need for haste, they could hear their pursuers beginning to take a crack at the ice block Acamus had left. Acamus paused, turned around and knelt down then held out his spear. Ice began to bead around the arrowhead tip once again, growing into a sphere as it had in the Aquarian Ocean. When the ball filled the narrow passage and began to spread back down the hall towards himself, he stopped the spell. Twisting the spear, ever so gently so as not to shatter the ice, he wiggled it free then scrambled back to catch up with the others with that odd crouching run the tunnel required of him. It didn't take them long to reach the end of the hall. Technically, the hall continued, but the passage was so narrow even Ekaf would've had to crawl. Above them was a grate that the little Knome pried open with his dagger. Nogard and Zach hopped out but Acamus had to help Ekaf and Bold.

They found themselves in a rather cramped room. The five might not have fit had Nogard and Zach not already begun the climb. A ladder of steel staples stretched up the room which was far taller than it was wide. Smokey light seeped in from above where a glimpse of the smokey morning sky peaked through.

"Up, up, up!" Ekaf said, as if there was anywhere else to go.

After the ten-story climb, they found themselves in the open air on a terrace that ringed one of Rivergate's four towers. Before the tower opened wide – wide enough for a good sized dragon to fly through.

"Ah," Nogard realized, "dat's how we gonna fly."

"Indeed!" Ekaf said, the last to join them before the keep but the first to go on in.

Zach followed next and his immediate observation led him to question the chidra's assumption.

"On what?" He asked.

Steel-barred cells clung to the walls, seemingly continuing all the way up to the roof. A staircase spiraled up the center of the room and between the stairs and the cells there were platforms ever so often to allow folks access to the cells. There was a big enough gap inside the spiral to allow dragons to ascend and descend and the cells were massive chambers themselves – large enough that even a sky dragon – with their hundred-foot wingspans, mind you – would have ample room to romp around while it waited on its master.

"Barbaric the way elves treat their beasts." Acamus muttered.

"All the dragons left with the people." Zach said to Ekaf.

"Not all," Ekaf said, "now, up, up, up!"

Ekaf dashed for the stairs and began yet another climb, not even bothering to see if his comrades followed. They did, though not quite at his breakneck speed. He wasn't just in a hurry to get out of Order occupied territory, he was hurrying to keep a secret hidden from his friends below. Once he was sure they couldn't see, he slipped a folded sheet of paper out from under his hat. Unfolding it but not breaking his pace, he checked the list. He looked from the list to the cells, scanning each floor as he rose. Still no luck. With each empty tier of cages, rechecked his list, his eye boring into the crossed-out sentence jotted down on line 432 of his sheet of paper as if he may have seen it wrong in previous glances.

~~"Leave the cripple in the tower."~~

Ekaf came to a stop. Flies and other buzzing insectoid-vultures hovered above a barrel that sat next to the cage before him. A yellow haze of stench wafted up from the contents of the bucket. Even on his tippy toes, Ekaf could not see over the lip of the barrel.

"By Kor, that smell!" Acamus groaned as he was the first to catch up with the Knome.

“Indeed,” Ekaf nodded, slipping his paper back into his tunic, “now, if you would feed that dragon for us.”

Acamus nearly fell off the stairs when he turned and saw two dull blue eyes watching him. Like her eyes, the dragon's scales were a light blue aside from the puffy, cloud-like stripes of grey that crossed her body. A large, multi-person saddle with reins attached to her chompers was strapped onto the reptile's back. The beast stared at Acamus without showing much interest, it was almost as if the dragon was looking past the minotaur. With her neck drooping low, her tongue hanging out her jaws, and her lips curled back to reveal bloodied gums, the dragon looked quite weak.

“Yar gonna faed a dragon rotten maet?” Bold asked.

“Dragons have strong stomachs, they can eat anything.” Acamus said as he grabbed the barrel, “They're like goats or sharks.”

“If it's flammable, it's edible.” Ekaf said.

Acamus threw some of the meat to the dragon but the monster didn't budge and the rotten meat landed on her drooling snout. Reaching up to the meat with her tongue, the dragon pulled the piece of cow into her jaws and swallowed without sparing time to chew.

“I'm not sure dat ding should be flyin, Civ.” Nogard stated, “It looks as old as the Knome.”

“And I'm in great shape!” Ekaf cried.

“We don't have much a choice.” Acamus stated.

The minotaur nodded to the Knights and Sea Lords now running in through the bottom of the keep. He threw the empty barrel down at them and managed to hit two unlucky armored gmoats.

The fifty-foot-long reptile inched forward as attention returned to the steed. Her snout rubbed against Acamus, nostrils flaring as she sniffed the minotaur.

“I don't dink I've ever seen a dragon sniff someone before...” Nogard murmured.

“Oi've nevar saen a dragon sniff.” Bold added.

“Don't worry about it and help me lead it up to the roof!” Ekaf demanded.

Acamus, Bold, and Nogard obeyed, following the Knome up the stairs but Zach did not. *Something is off*, he thought. He waited and watched as the dragon crawled to the stairs, dragging her feet as she stumbled forward.

“Zach, come on!” Ekaf yelled from above.

The Knome stood with his hand on a lever – a lever that he managed to pull without snapping. The roof opened up like a draw bridge, tossing snow onto the roof of the Rivergate Center below. The soon-to-be-noon-time sun shone into the tower, forcing all to avert their gaze, all but the dragon.

Zach realized what he'd sensed was so peculiar.

“She's blind.” Zach whispered to himself.

“Zach, behind you!” Ekaf cried.

Whirling around, the spirit kicked a Sea Lord square in the stomach. As the pirate fell back onto his comrades, temporarily halting their progress, Zach bolted up the stairs after his friends who'd already gotten on the back of the beast.

“Whot was that about?” Bold asked as Zach clambered onto the back of the dragon.

Spreading her wings, the dragon crouched, then jumped from the stairs.

“This dragon is blind.” Zach said.

The beast quit ascending. For a moment, they hovered in the air, above Rivergate with all of Zviecoff before them to see. Bold opened his mouth, just about to ask how Zach was so sure, when the dragon began to plummet towards the ground.

Chapter Fifteen: Zviecoff Fight Off

Pitch black fell upon Zalfron as thunder shook his body. “GOODBYE, EARTHBOY!” echoed louder and louder as his distant cry of, “NO!” faded away. Joe and Machuba stood behind him, white clouds of themselves, shining like stars. It wasn’t until he turned and saw a new white silhouette standing in front of the burner building, engulfed in ivory flames, that his confusion withered into despair.

“Donum.”

“Oh...oh poor Sentry...” Hermes growled, his voice shooting needles down the elf’s spine, “You shouldn’t have done that.”

The ex-Doom Warrior slammed his fist into Zalfron's stomach. Zalfron was thrown back, past his frozen friends and onto the pavement where he slid all the way to the curb that guarded the edge. Gritting his teeth, Zalfron attempted to stand. His body burned from where the banshee had hit him and his muscles refused to comply.

“You don’t even have a weapon,” at first Hermes sounded far away but when Zalfron rolled onto his back, he saw Hermes now stood above him, “what was your plan?”

This time Zalfron caught a kick, flinging him over the frozen ridges of the once thrashing canal. He smacked against one of the arched bridges, attempted to grab on but failed and fell. He landed on a wave, hardened as it reached up to curl over. The peak jabbed his spine. He slid into the trough between waves and rolled onto a knee. Leaning on the wave, he started to stand only for Hermes to appear before him once more and plant another foot in his stomach. Again he was on his back.

“I could suck the life right of you.”

Just as Zalfron managed to get on all fours Hermes’ boot caught him in the jaw, flipping him full circle so that he was right back where he’d landed after the last kick. Hacking glowing white drops of plasma in order not to drown in his own blood, he rolled onto his side. Grinding pain surged along his ribs. He couldn’t even squirm, all he could do was try not to move.

“But you are lucky.”

Picking Zalfron up by his throat, Hermes raised him to eye level. A fiery chill began to surge across Zalfron’s body from the banshee’s grasp. At first the pain was unbearable but just as he thought he couldn’t take anymore, the agony began to shift into numbness.

“I’m not after you, I’m after the Earthboy,” Hermes continued, “and knowing that he has the Suikii, it’s in my best interest to keep you here, alive-”

Hermes dropped the elf and the numbness began to melt back into pain.

“-but you will pay for each minute we wait.”

- - -

Theseus peaked out the doorway then sprinted across the street to ram the door of the parallel business off its hinges. Joe and Machuba hustled over behind him. The shop was empty but in good condition. Though the shelves were barren, they hadn’t been bashed to bits like those in some of the other houses they’d been through. The three were wandering through a net shops and apartments, just outside of Rivergate, doing their best to stay off the streets, as they made their way towards the North Mystakle Church. Often times they traverse full blocks without stepping outside, weaseling up one building and finding a terrace or basement that neighboring

buildings shared access to. Because Zviecoff was built on a mountain and north generally meant you were heading up the mountain, many basements sat level with a neighbor's lobby and many terraces stretched out across from one's porch. (Also, Theseus was able to bulldoze entire sections of walls down, if they felt two buildings were connected, he wasn't one to hesitate.) On this particular occasion, Joe found an unlocked door leading to a staircase and Theseus led the way up.

The final story, the fifth, was emptied out much like the first except this room had nothing – no shelves, no counters, nothing. Theseus went over to a window, busted it open with his shield and cleared as much glass from the frame as he could. It was a comical sight, seeing a nine foot beast squeeze out a window. It reminded Joe of attempting to move a table through a doorway – the careful dance with the table legs mirroring the maneuvering Theseus had to utilize to get his snout and horns out without bumping his head. Joe and Machuba followed him onto the roof. It was slanted down but not too awfully steep, enough to feel reasonably safe away from the edge. Theseus walked to the edge and paused, looking back, “Can y'all make the jump?”

He was talking about the roof of the apartments across the street. It wasn't a wide street, almost an alley and the roof was slanted down like their own so that they were level with their neighbor, but still Joe had no doubt it was well too far for him to jump. And though less athletic, Joe had a few inches on Machuba.

“Needa lift, my friends?” Theseus asked.

“Lift.” Machuba nodded.

“Uh,” Joe murmured, “by lift you don't mean—”

Theseus reached down and grabbed Joe by the waist, saying, “Hit the roof and roll.”

With no more instruction, the old man tossed Joe to the other roof. Whether or not he attempted the roll, Theseus had lobbed him like a barrel so that when he hit the roof, all he could do was roll. Joe landed, rolled, then planted his hands and stopped himself from rolling back down the roof and down to the alley below. It didn't even really hurt, thanks to the snow, but then Machuba landed on top of him.

Theseus cleared the street in one leap. The house shook when he landed and so did the minotaur. He doubled over and clutched his wounded knee, hissing through his teeth. After a moment, he sung a few lines of magic, inducing his knee to glow faintly yellow, then he collapsed again. His eyes batted but he shook it off, his lips flapping like a dog shaking itself dry. After a couple deep breathes, he stood back up and faced the boys.

“We'll run east along these roofs until we get to the narrow bit down there.” he pointed to where the gaps between buildings got smaller and the roofs got taller, “There we'll get up on those roofs and from there you'll both be able to jump roof to roof. We'll be able to do that, heading north, just about to the church.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Joe asked, nodding at Theseus' knee.

“We can't risk running along the streets.” Theseus replied, “Necessary ideas are good ideas in war, my friend.”

“What if they see us on the rooftops?” Joe asked.

“They will, they're mancercs.” Machuba agreed.

Theseus shrugged, “Unless it's the Witch or some other higher up, they won't have enough shadows and bone to fly up here after us, my friend, they'll have to break in and take the stairs. Staying up here, we're putting what? At least fifty feet between us and them – guaranteed?”

Trust me, my friends, I've been in this battle for a while now. Now, let's hurry, while my spell lasts."

Joe and Machuba didn't argue further.

The architecture changed as they got further north, so too did the population. The pocket of tall bulky buildings and narrow streets they passed through next was almost devoid of the Order's presence. In part by necessity. Large regiments couldn't fit down the narrow cobble corridors. There were scouts and lone mancers that occasionally forced the three to quell their pace or invent a detour to avoid that nasty necromancer nose and the cursed shadowmancer's crow eye, but it wasn't until they got closer to where the Coalition of elves and minotaurs had a presence, where buildings remained tall but streets became broad, that entire brigades of black garbed soldiers and dark robed magicians would march by. There, in the center of the city, halfway up the mountain, stood the tallest buildings in Zviecoff – aside from the one castle on the peak – thus Joe as Theseus' spell wore off and his leg became too much of a pain for him to trust himself jumping roof top to roof top, Joe was more than eager to trade that danger for the danger of sneaking past patrolling armies.

Ever so often, Theseus would come to a hoof scraping halt and the three would duck into a house while they waited for Knights of the Order to pass. To make matters worse, this forced a spell out of the minotaur for if he left their energy unmasked there was sure to be one mancer in the ranks that noticed them glowing or reeking behind the walls of their hideout. Even when they didn't see their enemies, they could hear a constant commotion now echoing about the city – unintelligible yells, explosions and pounding – and it was only growing louder.

Then, only a fraction of a selim away from the church check point, the clamor began to die down. The buildings had reduced in size, though the streets remained broad. More than broad enough to permit regiments to march through yet they stopped seeing troops. This spooked them, almost more so than the sounds of chaos had. Theseus promised this was a good thing – a skirmish was ending, whether victory or defeat, it meant that they'd be able to slip through no-man's-land to find some spot of safety. There was a hole in the Order's occupation carved out just for them, they just had to get through it before that hole closed. And, if they were lucky, it was a victory for the Coalition and the hole would soon be plugged with allies.

Despite the minotaur king's confidence, Machuba felt a certain dread. He sensed a threat. His blood ramped up as if affirming his suspicions. Maybe it was the gogo fading? It was likely that played a role in his awareness of it, but he was sure it was something more than that.

He stopped in his tracks.

These things happened to Machuba and, when they did, he was never sure whether or not he was in control or if the metal coursing through his veins had suddenly just hardened, forcing his body to freeze. Regardless, he stood still now in an empty street. Theseus and Joe had already crossed, ignorant to the fact that he hadn't followed. He licked his eyes and looked around but didn't see anyone, yet he *knew* someone else was there. Someone he was familiar with. His boiling blood brought him to his knees.

"Machuba."

The voice was soft but urgent. He recognized it immediately but before he could turn in the direction of the speaker, something fell behind him. He spun around to find the bound body of Lela Laroc. The merman squirmed. Her black eyes were wide and her mouth was gaping but the wind had been knocked out of her and whatever words she was trying to push out had already slipped silently out her gills. Machuba's hands moved immediately to the rope at her wrist.

"Don't move."

A fishfolk stood in the doorway of the house he'd just left. There were two initial things Machuba noticed about this man aside from his race. The first being that the fellow's flesh was rippled and striped with red, as if it had been torn off him then glued back only for the frayed edges to peel outwards. The second was his armor – it looked, at first glance, to be crafted of stone but the color was strange. Creamy, faintly tan. As the man's appearance sunk in, Machuba began to believe that it might be bone. Unsure of who the man was – and especially confused by the fact that he had not yet heard of such a unique looking fishfolk-landlubber, which aside from Sea Lords were few and far between – Machuba did not obey his order. He drew Shelmick's Sword.

“I advise you to take Aqa's advice.”

Looking up, Machuba observed the new speaker, a bulky white fox, standing on the slope of an awning above Aqa. Though unlike the snow foxes he'd seen in photos and paintings, this fox was almost the size of a bear. The creature's lips curled back, revealing rows of sharp white teeth. Leaping down to the road, the beast landed between Aqa and Lela.

“She's mine.” The fox growled.

Machuba sheathed his sword.

“Unless-”

Machuba cut him off, “Bet.”

Scooping Lela up, he slung her over his shoulder as he bolted. He made it across the street and through a doorway before he stopped, dropped Lela on an empty table, and drew his sword as he spun to face his aggressors.

The scarred fishfolk was there, sword raised and ready. Their blades clashed. Machuba attacked again, one after the other, overwhelming Aqa and forcing him out the doorway. Machuba shut the door, bolted it, and turned back to Lela. She was on her feet, holding her bound hands out for her bondage to be severed. Machuba hastily did so, then cut the ropes around her feet.

The door flew off the hinges behind them.

Grabbing her by the hand, Machuba fled. The two bound out the back door and then froze. The fox beast waited before them, smiling a ferocious smile. A moment later, the creature had Machuba pinned to the ground. The other fishfolk, Aqa, came behind Lela and wrapped his arm around her throat.

“We are going to make a deal,” the fox snarled, “kill the Earthboy and I'll set her free.”

Machuba stared back in silence.

“Aqa, back into the house.”

The fishfolk inched back into the house, still holding Lela.

“It is only a matter of time before I acquire him myself, in which case he *and* his comrades will die. This is an offer of mercy to you and your friends. I do not wish to kill the last Gill, nor the last Drahkcor or Sentry, but I will if need be.”

Machuba squirmed and the fox pressed down harder on his chest.

“I will be near, I will know when it is done, and I assure you, if you obey, no harm will come to you or her and the rest of your friends.”

Then the fox left. Machuba laid there for a while, his black eyes gazing at the skies that were once again filled with smog.

- - -

“Theseus!” Joe exclaimed, “Where's Machuba!”

Theseus turned from the window. They were in a three-story shop, one of the many that surrounded what was once a grassy courtyard. The foliage, soil, and cobble stone roads around the courtyard were destroyed. It looked as though a giant had come through, slicing through paved streets and dicing hedges and trees. As for the church the courtyard sat before, the entire front of the building had collapsed. Theseus had a bad feeling.

“How well do you trust the eel?” Theseus asked.

“Machuba?” Joe gasped, “He wouldn’t! We have to go back and look for him!”

Joe headed back towards the stairs but Theseus grabbed him by the shoulder.

“My friend,” the minotaur shook his head, “you won’t find him. This city is way too large. He knows where we were headed. We’ll give him some more time to meet us here before we head on to Mountaingate, but not long. Just long enough for me to do a little investigation and see if I can’t determine what exactly happened here...I have a feeling it may have something to do with my son and your friends.”

Joe nodded and went to move but Theseus hadn’t let go.

“Machuba is a Gill. When his uncle, Paul Gill, was executed, the world above the ocean floor learned that it’s more trouble than it’s worth to try and kill a Gill. He’ll be fine.”

Releasing Joe’s shoulder, Theseus marched silently down the stairs. Joe paused for a minute. He took a deep breath. *First Zalfron, now Machuba, a lump budded in the pyromancer’s throat, I’ve got no clue where the rest of my friends are...we should’ve never came here. Damn it, Ekaf!* He sighed. *No, it’s as much my fault as it is his. Maybe more so.*

Joe followed Theseus down the stairs.

Maybe I’m not the Sun Child after all.

- - -

Hurling towards the city below, the icy wind whipped about them. All they could do was hold on.

“IT’S DEAD, CIV!” Nogard yelled.

“SHE’S FINE!” Ekaf yelled back as he desperately yanked the reins.

For a moment, it appeared the Knome did have it. The dragon stopped her fall and flew flat for a second.

Puffing out his chest, Ekaf looked over his shoulder to boast, “Even a blind dragon knows how to fly.”

But this is not the first time it seemed the Knome had things under control. Not at all. They’d had numerous ups and downs since they left the tower top at Rivergate and, as if to negate Ekaf’s claim, this specific up was rather short lived. For a moment after Ekaf said the word, “fly” the beast nose-dived once more, launching themselves towards the ground.

Ekaf sat in front of the others, straddling the beast’s neck. Acamus, Nogard, Bold, and Zach had squeezed themselves onto the saddle – which was meant for a few but not for four – and held on for dear life. Zach sat quietly in bamboozlement. Bold had tears streaming down his cheeks and snot pouring down his chin. Nogard held tight, his eyes wide with frightened rage as he leaned over to look around Acamus and keep his glare on the Knome. Acamus was well beyond the point of glaring, he was done. No longer would he leave his fate in the hands of a Knome – especially *this* Knome.

Acamus roared, “GIVE ME THE REINS!”

“I’VE GOT IT,” Ekaf snapped, “CALM DOWN!”

Acamus began to, very carefully, crawl forward over the saddle. Using the spikes along the dragon's spine like a ladder. They were getting awfully close to the ground. In a matter of seconds they'd splatter on the street. It was now or never. Acamus stretched, reaching out with the intention of yanking the ropes from the Knome's little hands but then Ekaf jerked. This tug succeeded in forcing the beast to spiral up seconds before they would've plowed headfirst into the façade of a church, but it also kept Acamus from grabbing the reins. And it threw him off balance. As they tore upwards, the sky dragon's back nearly scraping the façade of the temple as they twisted back towards the heavens, they passed a row of gargoyles that jutted out from the building. A snarling stone lion caught Acamus in his fat, cow-like nose. The minotaur tumbled off the dragon and crashed through one of the church's windows.

"Lard!" Bold yelled.

As Acamus fell into the church, the dragon continued to climb, spinning like a drill bit. Zviecoff shrank below them. Bold and Nogard refused to open their eyes. Only Ekaf and Zach had the guts to look. Even they only caught glimpses through the smoke that billowed up from simmering sections of the city. When a gust brushed a hole in the pollution, the two were able to see the flames that polka dotted the southern half of the capital. Some towers stood decapitated or completely toppled over, half buried in snow. And during it all, tiny black dots were beginning to fill the streets, crawling out of every alley, every crack and crevice like ants in search of an intruder.

"Zviecoff is falling..." Ekaf murmured.

The dragon's wings stopped beating. Clouds wrapped about columns of smoke surrounded them, so thick they looked solid and while that was what Ekaf was watching, Zach had been watching something else: a tiny fluttering moth.

The dragon snarled as they slowed, hovering in the air as the moth slowed too. The dragon's nostrils flared with joy then the moth fell into his mouth. *Smell, he can tell his way by scent.* Zach's thought process was cut short as the dragon's eyes bulged. It flinched, shaking the four and forcing Bold to issue a seemingly prepubescent shriek. The flinch turned into a seizure as the beast spazzed like a fish out of water and, once more, they were plowing towards the frozen world below.

"WE'RE DEAD!" Nogard screamed.

"LARD HELP US!" Bold roared.

"I THINK IT'S SOME SORT OF MATING DANCE!" Ekaf hypothesized.

"WHERE DA MATES, CIV?!" Nogard replied.

"He's choking on the moth." Zach realized.

"HUH?" Bold and Nogard asked in unison.

"PUNCH HIM IN THE GUT!" Ekaf exclaimed.

Zach nodded. Grabbing one of the spikes along the dragon's spine, just behind the saddle, he climbed down towards the beast's belly. Rolling, twisting, and spinning through the sky, it was almost as if the dragon was trying to throw the spirit off him but Zach held tight. Finally, the dragon quit seizing and fell into a limp free fall.

"HURRY!" Ekaf shouted.

Sliding down the beast's right wing, the dragon began to lean to the right. Zach started climbing back up the wing and by the time he reached the beast's scaly belly, the reptile was completely upside down. His friends were holding on for dear life, screaming like the wind that whistled and tore around them. Rearing back, Zach brought both hands down like a hammer on

the beast's belly. The once limp creature went rigid then squirmed from tail to head as if doing the worm – and out of her mouth popped the tiny, blue hawkmoth.

Having saved the dragon's life, you would have thought he'd saved their own. Nope. The dragon was sufficiently startled and the bruise now growing across her belly from where Zach had pummeled her, combined with the fact that Zach was still there, clinging to her gut, led her fight or flight, reptilian brain to take hold. Nostrils flaring, her head snaked around in search of the spirit as her arms snatched for him. Not really having anywhere to run and being exceptionally predisposed against violence towards an animal – as a former monk of the Woodland Ridge, he'd once had strong bonds with cousins of their current steed's species – he sought to take advantage of his gaseous form.

He let go.

The dragon caught him. If Zach could gulp, he would've. The beast was so fixated with him, it still had neglected to start flying. They were still falling and the ground was coming up fast. Zach could hear his friends continuing to lose their minds – but now there was very little he could do. With her forked tongue, the dragon lifted Zach's visor. Her nostrils flared and she bowed her head.

Zach cocked his head to the side. *She's thanking me?* The gesture warmed his fire. But the quickly approaching ground cooled it.

Silver eyes wide, he cried, “*FLY!*”

She spread her wings.

It was far too late. Maybe not too late, but quite late. Wings spread, the dragon's descent slowed so fast that it felt as if she'd jerked them up a couple yards. The jerk did cause Zach to fly out of her hands. A fall from extreme heights could kill a spirit – it could tear them from their armor and throw them deep into the ground where they would suffocate before they could float back to the surface – but luckily they were not that high up. Fifty feet at most. As for the dragon and those upon her – she had only a fifteen to twenty or so fall. Slowed enough to suggest she might survive the impact she had as she belly flopped onto the roof of a triplex. The gang upon her were rocked but safe.

“Zach?!” Bold cried.

The three still sat in their seats – Bold and Nogard clutching each other on the saddle, Ekaf straddling the neck of the beast like a cat on a branch in a windstorm – atop the roof of a building overlooking an obliterated courtyard. Zach had landed somewhat in the center. He was struggling to his feet, which was enough to reassure Bold that he was all right. Hopping off the comatose reptile, Ekaf ran over to the edge of the rooftop to watch as Zach assessed the damage.

His armor could use repair. More than a couple arrows had snapped in his quiver but he liberated their arrow heads and slipped them in his gauntlets for later use. Then his silver eyes fell on the church at the end of the courtyard. The one Acamus had fallen into. The doorway was destroyed and his spirit-eyes could catch a rather telling glimpse of the inside.

Straightening his armor as he ran, booking it across the courtyard and up the stairs to stand just beyond the doorway alongside Acamus.

“FREEZE!”

At least two dozen men and women dressed in armor stood in the church. The get ups were not uniform, some were armored to the teeth some hardly even had much more than leather pads, but what those standing shared were black jerseys, smeared with blood and mud. Most of those in black jerseys appeared Iceloadic – electric elven, bearn, or nellaf – but there was a gmoat, a fishfolk, and a chidra. Five of them stood directly before Joe and Acamus. Another five

stood mingled amongst the pews. Six of the dark soldiers stood around the pulpit, on a stage, behind a chain of shackled kneeling soldiers. The seventeenth stood by the pulpit – he was the man that had commanded Zach to freeze. His armor was black and bulky like Zach’s but with no helmet. His eyes were blue, his hair was blonde, his ears were pointy, and on his shoulder rested a tiny little red dragon, its wings folded in a heart shaped shield.

This man held a sword to the throat of another man who was chained and shackled beside him. Like his aggressor, the shackled character also had bright blue eyes, lightning yellow hair, and pointed ears. In fact, there were only two really differentiating features between the two. The shackled man had a finely kept curled mustache *and* he was missing most of his left arm. Lodged in the nub of his arm was a socket and screwed into the socket was a plug attached to his own personal shackle. The mustached, one-armed man was the only figure whose shackle wasn't bound to the rest of the P.O.W.s – they were all bound in a connected line.

As for the other men and women in shackles, there were nine and they all looked similar to their captain. Most elven, blonde, and blue eyed though two were bears, a human, and a nellaf. All were staring at the front of the church, at Acamus and Zach.

The man at the pulpit spoke loud enough for all to hear.

“Make another move and ah’ll kill em.”

Zach already had an arrow knocked. Whether or not it would count as another move, Zach made the bet. He pulled back the string.

“You a good aim?” The man asked, “Cause ah gotta good swang.”

Every eye fell on Zach. Zach looked away from the knight at the pulpit and glanced at Acamus. The two met each other’s gaze. Acamus then turned to the one-armed mustache-man. Their stares collided. Mustache-man didn’t nod, but his baby blue eyes did seem to twinkle.

“Put the bow down!” The pulpit elf crowed, tightening the grip of his free hand on mustache-man’s mane, “Crimpsin taiad, put it down!”

Acamus returned his gaze to Zach.

Zach released his arrow.

The arrow struck the elf the pulpit in the eye, knocking him off the stand and off mustache-man – the man’s little shield dragon fled to hide in the rafters. The instant Zach released his arrow, Acamus thrust his spear through the gut of his closest opponent and then let it expand to catch a woman who stood in the pews behind him.

The captives rose up against their captors as their captors sought to cut them down. A black knight ran towards the now standing mustache-man. Mustache-man raised his hand to block but an arrow struck his opponent in the side of the head. Mustache-man grabbed the sword from the dead woman’s hand and stabbed it through the gut of a guard struggling to kill another prisoner. As the five remaining hostages strangled the last three soldiers beside the pulpit, Acamus struggled to finish his enemies.

After skewering his first two victims he froze them and yanked the spear free. Their bodies shattered like glass. He was shrinking the spear when he raised it to block an opponent’s swing but another approached him from behind. He spun, slapping the soldier across the head and knocking her to the floor before completing his 360 by thrusting his spear into the chest of the man he’d parried before. Still three Knights surrounded him with swords drawn while another was getting to her feet.

“Back you devils!”

A dagger stuck fast in the back of one of the men facing Acamus. Ekaf arrived to retrieve his thrown blade before the body hit the floor. Simultaneously a shield hit a knight in the pit of his knees, causing him to fall on the knight who'd just gotten to her feet.

Acamus was about to thank his appreciative comrades but Ekaf interrupted him.

“Save Shaprone!”

The four soldiers who'd been amongst the pews, aside from the one Acamus had kebabbed, chose to face shackled captives over the minotaur. As mustache-man led his shackled comrades to beat down the three Knights of the Order left on the pulpit stage, the other Knights of the Order snuck up behind them, slitting two elven throats before mustache-man noticed. With one broad sweep of his stolen sword, mustache-man sent blood spurting across the church from the jugular of the chidran soldier. Blood now painted his face, his eyes burned like pilot lights. The second of hesitation his intimidating presence induced led these last Knights to fall victim to the three remaining captives. They quickly hacked them down with stolen swords.

The battle was over.

As Ekaf rushed to the shackled soldier's aid, slicing through their chains with his void-dust infused blade, Bold, Nogard, and Zach glanced around and were shocked to note that the bodies of the recently slaughtered weren't the only deceased on the church floor. This short skirmish appeared to have been at least the second fight to take place in the temple that day.

Their troops leader, mustache-man approached Acamus, whom he assumed was the leader of their ragtag saviors and knelt before him. Though the elf was three feet shorter than Acamus, the man bristled with muscle. His armored shoulders looked like bowling balls.

“Acamus Icespear, I owe you my life.” Head still bowed he gestured to the others, “The Coalition and the Vokriit owes you.”

Acamus bowed, accepting the complement.

Shaprone got back on his feet.

“What happened, my friend?” Acamus asked.

Shaprone couldn't meet the minotaur's gaze, “The Coalition's been pulling out-”

“The Vokriit?”

“You're people too.” Shaprone said, “If the soldiers had no voice, the Order would be in Zvie Castle by now.”

“What happened here?” Ekaf asked.

“Part of pulling out.” Shaprone explained, “We still have troops in Rivergate – not to mention four other checkpoints now behind enemy lines. It was against the Strategy Generals' orders, but I had to try.” Looking back at his men, his bulbous shoulders sagging.

“How many did you start with?” Zach asked.

“Just myself.” Shaprone murmured.

“Aye lad, you sehved thrae.” Bold stated, “Bae proud.”

Shaprone shook his head, “Today is not a day to be proud.”

Ekaf approached Shaprone, offering him his blade's service. Shaprone held out his arms (or arm and nub) and Ekaf cut the chain.

“We've got to get out of here.” Shaprone stated, scanning the rafters before returning his gaze to his saviors, “The Order knows I was captured and now they know I've escaped – and that the son of Theseus is with me.”

“Where will we go?” Acamus asked.

“Mountaingate.” Shaprone said, “We still have the wall, all the way up to Zvie Castle.”

“We came looking for Theseus.” Acamus said.

“Selu to you finding him.” Shaprone replied.
Acamus stiffened, cocking his head to the side.
Shaprone elaborated, “He comes and goes as he pleases – as if this city isn’t on fire.”
“Den how do we find him?” Nogard asked.
“Mountaingate or Zvie Castle.” Shaprone said again, “He’ll turn up.”
“What if he’s in danger?” Zach asked.
Shaprone raised an eyebrow, “Theseus?”
“He’s wounded.” Acamus said.
Now it was Shaprone cocking his head to the side, “You’re really worried about him.”
“Hae sent Acamus a message from Rivargeht.” Bold explained.
“Something isn’t right, my friend,” Acamus sighed, “never before have I worried about my father...but now...” he shook his head, “something is wrong.”
“We’ll find him in Mountaingate,” Shaprone assured Acamus, “or he’ll find us there.
And as sure as I am of that, I’m sure that if we don’t get moving, we’ll be the ones not making it back.”

- - -

Theseus kicked the bodies, checking to see if any had survived. Despite the scorched courtyard outside and the obliterated state of the church, the scene looked hopeful. All of the bodies scattered about were draped in the black smock of the Order. Whatever had taken place, the Order hadn't won. Bending over, Acamus picked up a shard of ice, four fingertips were still incased inside.

“Acamus was here.” Theseus said, “And it seems he didn't spare a soul.”

Joe had come to a similar but separate conclusion. What he saw nearly caused him to spew. The bodies were enough to induce stomach spasms, but nothing like what he endured after witnessing the scene behind the pulpit. Up against the wall opposite the podium, a man sat on his but leaning up against the wall. His body was wrapped in black plated armor, drizzled in blood that had leaked from the wound on his face. An arrow was lodged in the elf’s left eye. Joe’d assumed him dead. The man looked silently forwards. But after catching movement out of the side of his eye, he looked back and saw that the man’s lip, caked with dried blood, quivered. He was whispering to himself. Empathy proved a weakness as Joe nearly collapsed. Instead, he staggered back against the podium and bit his tongue to curb his gag reflex. Once the spell ended, he spoke.

“They spared one...” he fought back the bile then continued, “...barely.”

Theseus joined Joe’s side, saying, “Barely, indeed.”

The man lurched forward, his right eye wide and focused on the minotaur. Theseus stuck a hoof to the elf’s sternum and pushed him back against the wall.

“Help me!” The elf screamed, “Please, help me!”

“The arrow must be in his brain,” Theseus muttered, turning to Joe, “he’s forgotten what side he’s on.”

“What do we do with him?” Joe asked.

The elf continued pleading, “Please, help me, I’m in so much-”

Theseus moved his hoof from the man’s chest to his temple. Joe jerked away but wasn’t fast enough to miss a glimpse, nor could he avoid the sound of cracking then the squish as Theseus punched a hole in the man’s head with his hoof. Now there was no holding back. Joe

fell on all fours and hurred. There wasn't much to hurl, but he spat up a bit of stomach acid nonetheless.

"On your feet, my friend." Theseus said, marching past Joe to stand at the podium, "We've got company."

Looking up from where he knelt he saw Shalis Skullsummon and He on the shoulder of John Pigeon standing – well, Johnny was so geeked out he was more so dangling from his spine like a limp noodle than actually standing upright – in the doorway of the church.

"We expected your son and the General." Shalis stated.

"It's your lucky day." Theseus growled.

"Will I get the pleasure of finally putting the old Icespear to rest?" Shalis asked.

"Don't fool yourself, my friend," Theseus smirked, "ask your Sea Lord, he knows. Y'all best turn around and leave."

"You know, he has a poi-"

"I'll handle the cow!" Shalis snapped.

So fierce was her sudden turn on the pirate that He the cockatune fled the scene, hopping from Johnny's shoulder and zooming out of the church screeching, "Unsafe! Unsafe!"

Setting her narrowed eyes on Johnny's, Shalis said, "You just worry about the cuckmancer – can you handle that?"

Meanwhile, Theseus turned to whisper to Joe, "Can you handle the pirate?"

"I'm not sure." Joe admitted.

"Be confident but play it smart. You are young and foolish, but so is he, my friend. You can do this."

Black fire filled the church. The flames danced across the corpses, bouncing in silence, seemingly uninterested in spreading from the bodies to consume the actual church. The fire didn't appear to be burning the bodies either, the obsidian inferno didn't even really register as fire in Joe's mind after a second of observation. If his stomach hadn't already been steeled by the murder of the Knight of the Order now roasting behind them, the putrid aroma the flames released would've driven Joe back to his knees. Aside from the spell and the sight, the flames seemed to bring nothing more.

"Necroflame." Theseus explained, "Do not touch it and do not speak."

Joe bit his lip as the word "why" nearly rolled off his tongue.

"No talking?" Shalis stuck out her bottom lip and clasped her heart, "Why that's no fun. What happened to the Theseus of old? The man that faced the Queen, the Crown, the Storm and the Doom Warrior? The man that destroyed an entire fleet?"

While Shalis continued to taunt Theseus from across the church, Joe continued to observe the scattered patches of necroflames. Though the bodies weren't burning, they were changing. It appeared to be a process something like expedited rotting but – though Joe had never watched someone rot before – this didn't quite describe it. Green seeped across the skin and the cloth and armor browned as it melted into the greening flesh. He shivered then tore his eyes back to his foes.

Johnny's belt can cast spells, Joe recalled all his mates had told him on their journey to down the Ethiw, of how Johnny beat them to a pulp with magic from his belt, *he can easily cancel out my fire, but what about fire that doesn't burn?*

"Theseus." Joe whispered.

The minotaur tilted his head to keep Shalis in his peripherals.

"Can I *use* the fire?" Joe asked.

Theseus nodded, saying only, "Careful."

Then, without any sort of warning, Theseus returned both eyes to the Witch and hurled his shield at her. The necromancer stepped aside as a figure came bounding into the chamber. It was a skeleton, a massive one at that, and it looked almost identical to the one hiding within Theseus' aging flesh. The only real difference was the severed left horn. The boneguard rushed forward, still dressed in the fashion of a GraiLord warrior – kilt belted to the hips by a heavy metal plate – and snatched the shield out of the air.

The undead appeared to be that of his own brother, Clymene.

When Theseus threw his shield, he charged after it. Joe followed suit. Gathering necroflames as he ran, he balled it – without touching it – then launched the orb at Johnny. Gripping his belt with one hand, the pirate shot a blast of water. The black fire was unperturbed. Pigeon dove out of the way. As the pirate got back on his feet, Joe stopped at a nearby course to reload.

"That's not fair!" Johnny cried, raising his hands up in protest.

Joe did not respond – remembering Theseus' warning – but did not yet attack. Holding the ball of necroflames so that it hovered between his hands, he kept it swirling as Johnny made his offer. The pirate's barren-head belt buckle began to glow the same color as the stone in Joe's chest.

"How bout this: fire on fire? No necroflame."

Fire on fire? His body again became aware of the cold ring of enchanted bone wrapped around his neck. He could feel his fire supply had already been vastly depleted. *I'll have to be quick.* Joe shot the necroflame back over the corpse and nodded. To be honest, he was a tad relieved to be done with the cursed fire even if it did seem to terrify the buccaneer.

"Good."

Johnny attacked, launching a ball of flames. Joe caught the fire in his hand and sent it back. Gripping his belt, the buckle absorbed the fiery projectile and the two combatants were left with nothing but their glares.

"This'll go nowhere." Joe said, forgetting Theseus' warning.

"We'll see!"

Johnny dove beneath a pew, disappearing from Joe's view. Joe frowned as he stared at the pews, hesitating from joining Pigeon below as that seemed exactly what the captain would want. Instead, he stepped back towards the stage then showered the back pews in fire. It didn't take long before the wooden benches were alight with flame, red flame, and Johnny was forced to roll out from under them, hacking and coughing.

Joe himself fought back a display of weakness as a sharp pain struck his sternum like the stab of hunger. Then the Suikii appeared in his right hand. *What?* He sliced the air before him but nothing happened. It squirmed in his grip, faintly tugging him and pointing its blade at the pirate across the church. *I can't – I'm no sword fighter.* Joe could feel the blades frustration in its rattling. *Then again,* he sighed, surrendering to trust the blade, *I've only been a pyromancer for a week.* Walking around the stage to the side of the church, where Johnny was now getting his feet, leaning against the wall away from the flames that cackled at him along the pews.

"You want a sword fight, huh?" Johnny smirked, drawing his saber from his hip, pointing it at Joe as best he could though he couldn't keep his arm extended and still to save his wiggly ass life, "En garde!"

While Joe and Johnny tussled on one side of the church, Theseus attacked his undead brother on the other. There was no negotiating with his undead kin – after all, this wasn't really

Clymene. Though he died by the Witch's hands and though she surely stole his bone, bone once consumed mixes. The skeleton was as likely to be made of bone energy from Clymene as it was to be made up of the bone energy of anyone else Shalis had consumed since. The attempt to dress up an undead like his brother was nothing more than an attempt to intimidate the old minotaur. Whether or not it did, Theseus didn't flinch. If it weren't for Shalis, he would've already ended the poor skeleton before him. Every time he bested the undead minotaur, Shalis was there to push Theseus back.

She sent a pew flying towards him, forcing him to back up and put a shoulder into it, smashing it into chunks and splinters. Again he went for his brother only to be forced to hop back, grab a strip of the shattered pew, and use it as a shield against a barrage of tiny bone-made needles suddenly darting towards him. He then threw the bone pricked wood at Shalis. She dodged it, only to get hit in the temple by the hilt of the sword Theseus had lobbed at her before diving on his undead brother.

Without her to defend him, Theseus put an end to the undead minotaur, tearing his skull off his spine. As the bones fell limp, Theseus picked up the horn and the shield and turned to face Shalis once more.

Meanwhile, Johnny and Joe were in a heated clash of blades. Joe was fairing quite well, considering his lack of experience, but his soul was in turmoil. He had begun to sincerely believe that he was about to be chopped to pieces. *Why did I think a sword fight would give me the upper hand?!* Johnny swung and Joe blocked. Johnny attacked again and once again Joe managed to parry. Joe couldn't tell whether it really was him or if the sword was saving his life by its odd sort of Knomish magic but regardless, he was still losing. As Johnny continued to barrage Joe, Joe's parries came later and later. Finally, Joe was forced to dive from the pirate's swing.

Fire bouncing around him, Johnny approached Joe laughing, flames reaching towards him from the rows of pews as if to pat him on the back. Looking up, Joe saw the inferno along the pews had now caught the rafters ablaze, but he didn't have the luxury to look up for long. Johnny sliced down at Joe. Joe rolled out of the way. Johnny swung again but once more his blade smacked the ashen church floor.

"This is pitiful," Johnny laughed, "is this how you want to die?"

The pirate attacked, more to scare Joe than to actually harm, and he succeeded. Joe rolled out of the way, and onto his stomach.

I'm going to die here.

He could feel the warmth of the fire bouncing along the pews beside them. One of the long benches collapsed inward, spewing out a swarm of sparks.

It's finally over.

He could feel Johnny standing over him once more. He could almost sense that the buccaneer was now preparing that final fatal blow. Then, something deep within him clicked. Maybe the fear had finally burned through the hopelessness or maybe the hopelessness had washed away the fear. Whatever it was, both was gone and all that was left was a surging sense of resolve.

No!

The Suikii was back in his hand. Rolling out of the way of another attack, away from the burning pews and back towards the wall. Then, without hesitation, he swung the Knomish sword and rolled again. Slipping through a portal before he even saw that he had created it.

Joe appeared behind the bewildered pirate. He raised the Suikii then swung. If he hadn't flinched, he would've sliced clean through the pirate's neck. The druggie's head would've hit the

church floor. But Joe hesitated mid-swing. In part it was another pang of agony from his emptying chest stone, but in reality it was pure hesitation. Though Johnny had been ready to kill him, for some reason, Joe suddenly couldn't bring himself to kill Johnny. That said, he still struck the man. The blade sliced through the wrist of the pirate's right arm – his sword arm.

As his hand and saber hit the ground, so too did Johnny's knees.

Staring at the stump now spurting blood, Johnny screamed.

About the same time the two had begun their sword fight, Shalis summoned four naked skeletons to replace the discarded pile that had been the undead minotaur. Just as the faux-Clymene had been armed with his own horn, these skeletons were armed with ivory claymores made of a conglomerate of the unfortunate souls that made up Shalis' stockpile of bone. The bones of their biceps and forearms were barbed, as were their legs. They were larger too, by no means anatomical, after all they shared the bone of multiple races. Unlike typical undead, which operated on a sort of often incompetent artificial intelligence prompted by their summoner's commands, Shalis exerted extra bone energy in order to puppet these four herself. Nonetheless, Theseus bashed through them with ease. Yet, after vanquishing his foes, he found himself face to face with the Witch yet again and this time she sought to attempt to strike him herself. With a long-curved bone, sanded and smoothed into the shape of a hilt-less Fou-style sword, she attacked. Theseus parried but her vigor admittedly caught him off guard, forcing him to backtrack and stumble into a pew behind him. He tumbled over it and it collapsed beneath his wait.

Shalis moved in for the kill and the minotaur threw his horn. She ignored it, as he'd thrown it to the side, and raised her own sword ready to impale the GraiLord King where he lay. What she didn't realize was that Theseus was toying with her. He'd tossed Clymene's horn at the wall. It pinwheeled there. The end hit the wall and it rebounded. Pinwheeling back. And before Shalis could get in that final blow, the blunt end of the severed horn hit her in the temple.

As she fell, Theseus stood. Retrieving the sword he'd pegged her with the first time, he took one step towards Shalis. The necromancer was dizzily getting to her feet but she never made it. Theseus took another step towards her and stabbed the staggering Sheik through the stomach. She gasped as he pulled the sword free then fell back down. Sitting in the rubble of a pew, she didn't speak, she only stared at the minotaur with the hate in her eyes.

"Are you angry because we won," Theseus asked, glancing over his shoulder to look for Joe though all the minotaur could actually see was Joe's fire, which had now consumed the front half of the church. He turned back to Shalis, "or because I'm letting you live?"

The Sheik didn't answer.

"I'm letting you live for a reason," Theseus said as he knelt beside her, "because when your Disciples learn that you were defeated and spared by the enemy, they will recognize how weak you truly are. They won't have a martyr, they'll have a loser. And you know what happens to weak leaders among your kind. You'll share the fate of Borig Baba. The Order will eat itself and so now, my friend-"

Something changed. Multiple things. For one, Shalis' expression had. She was just about to pass out, her glower was moments away from turning to a passive resting stance, but first she smiled. The pain and the blood loss might've made it reasonable for one to assume she was delirious, but it wasn't just her expression that had changed. Something changed within Theseus. And something had shifted within the church.

"Theseus!" Joe exclaimed as he joined the minotaur's side, "Come on, let's go!"

"My friend..." Theseus murmured. His eyes moved from Shalis to his hoof.

“Theseus! Come on, we’ve got...”

Joe’s words trailed off as he watched the green and brown, rot-melted corpse of the Knight of the Order stride out of the fire in the center of the church. The man was fully engulfed in flames but unperturbed. His focus seemed to be on Theseus and his march would not be stopped. He was not alone. Shoulders sagging and jaws hanging, the Knights of the Order rose. One by one, they grabbed the weapons at their feet and made their way slowly towards the two.

“Theseus!” Joe exclaimed.

“We can take them!” Theseus growled.

“But the church is-” Joe was cut off by his own shivers. Despite the oven-like climate of the church, Joe was beginning to get cold. His chest stone flickered a bit before continuing to emit its constant glow. That stabbing pain was now coming in and out, as if an invisible dagger was taped onto the end of a pendulum aimed at his chest. The sudden increase in the extremity of the pang of agony forced Joe to cringe and cringing brought his view in line with the hooves of the minotaur before him.

“Your leg!”

Black flames clung to the brain matter – left from the elf with the arrow in his head that Theseus had executed – along his hoof. The skin around his hoof was slowly turning the color of the zombies approaching them, varying shades of green and brown. Like some haunted military’s pattern of jungle camo.

Theseus smiled back at Joe, like a sick grandpa knowing there was no more denying the truth, “On the bright side, my friend, my leg no longer hurts.”

“What do we do?”

Not only were the zombies closing in, but almost the entire front half of the church was now on fire.

“We have to go.” Joe continued, “I’m useless against them. They just walk through my fire.” Joe winced again, “And I don’t have much fire left.”

“Useless.” Theseus laughed, “My friend, I saw you with the Suikii. Get us out of here.”

They began backing towards the podium and, as they did, Theseus limped around, fending off the necroflamed knights to protect Joe as he swung the Suikii. It didn’t take long. A portal opened on the first try. But the window before him was nothing but black, so eerily dark that Joe couldn’t make out one detail. Yet Joe trusted the Suikii. He nudged Theseus and the minotaur turned. Together, they stepped through and the portal closed behind them.

- - -

Mountaingate was just as beautiful as Rivergate but without having been ravaged by looters when the city fell (not to mention, nowhere near the size). The gate led to not just the castle but also the Imperial Road and so, unlike Rivergate, Mountaingate had an actual gate. The structure itself was a tunnel, a giant arch carved out of the crotch of a mountain, hurdled with numerous gates separating the city from the highway, entire neighborhoods lingering within these borders. Like Rivergate, the roof of Mountaingate was covered by a number of murals portraying Iceload’s history starting with Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff and including events as recent as Talloome Icelore’s rise to power as the Mystvokar.

Shaprone Ipativy led his troops and the others into Mountaingate and there they waited for sunset. A dozen or so GraiLord minotaurs met them in the tunnel. The furry warriors kept their eyes on the city and when Shaprone asked if any of the Order had approached

Mountaingate the tallest of the minotaurs answered, “Not yet.” They seemed momentarily delighted to see Acamus, but – like Acamus himself – they would have little emotional room available for anyone else so long as Theseus Icespear’s survival was in question. And it honestly hadn’t been in question before, but they now started to wonder if something in fact was wrong now that the King’s son had suddenly returned to the frontlines.

Ekaf, Nogard, Bold, Zach, and Acamus were to wait in Mountaingate until the sunset, then they would head up the wall to Zvie Castle. The majority of Ipativian and GraiLord troops would remain to defend Mountaingate but over a quarter of their forces were already stationed in the castle, taking care of the wounded and keeping watch on the city that sprawled out below.

When the sun finally began to set, there was still no sign of Theseus. Nor was there any sign of Joe, Zalfron, or Machuba. Brilliant colors stretched across the horizon throwing a purple shadow over the city. When only half of Solaris remained, split in half by the lumbering column that was Zvie Castle, two figures approached Mountaingate from the city. One held the other in his arms.

“Who is it?” Acamus murmured.

“Let’s find out.” Shaprone replied.

- - -

At first, all Joe could see was darkness. The urban miracle that was the glacier riding city was now just a series of faint shadows clustered together like tombstones in a graveyard wrapped in fog. Shadows dominated the world in a way that they never even came close to in a mortal’s night, this was something beyond twilight, this was something Joe immediately recognized. Total Darkness.

Though his own glow was faint, Theseus’ was enough to illuminate the entire church. He was a silhouette, pure white and engulfed in an ivory flower of flame. Staring at the minotaur was like staring into Solaris. His radiance was only marred by the flickering black creeping up his leg.

“Flow Morain?” Theseus asked.

“Huh?”

“This realm – it is the spell of the Doom Warrior.” Theseus stated.

“It’s Hermes Retskcirt.” Joe said.

“Really?” Theseus laughed, “Always in the right place at the right time.”

As Theseus chuckled, Joe took in their surroundings. At first he’d thought that nothing had changed aside from the darkness and the stoppage of time but upon second glance he realized far more had changed. All the pews were intact. There were no zombies and there was no fire. Though the inanimate objects were only intelligible by a slightly different shade of black, Joe could tell the front door of the church was back on its hinges and the front of the building hadn’t been slashed to pieces. Not only had their battle not occurred but whatever battle that had transpired prior to their arrival had seemingly not yet happened.

“Did we go back in time?” Joe asked.

“The banshee’s thunder was this morning, right?” Theseus asked.

“Huh?”

“The rumble you hear when the spell is cast.”

“Oh yea.” Joe nodded, “So this is back then?”

Theseus nodded. Then he asked, “My friend, who was the target?”

“Zalfron.” Joe said before adding, “An electric elven friend of-”

“Zalfron Sentry?” Theseus paused.

Joe nodded.

Though Joe couldn't see the minotaur's eyes, Theseus eyed him hard, muttering, “Sun Child indeed.”

Even if Joe had been able to see the minotaur's eyes, he wouldn't have. His own eyes were focused on the GraiLord King's leg – a leg which was now nigh invisible. The necroflame was spreading, even in Total Darkness. Before he could bring it up another sharp blade of agony struck him in the center of the chest like he'd just been kicked by a horse. He staggered back.

“Come on, my friend,” Theseus said, limping towards the doors of the church, “we must hurry.”

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“I told you he'd come.”

“Yer in trouble now!”

Hermes looked down at the elf. The once daunting six-foot six elf now lay crumpled on the rooftop, quivering in pain. Bruised and torn, his clothes were ripped, his bones broken, and his head swollen and bumpy. It was a miracle Zalfron was still alive.

“Did you learn nothing? You probably had more of a chance to take me down with your bare hands than that measly pyromancer will.”

“Then what...” Zalfron had to pause due to the pain before managing to spit out the rest of his question after first spitting out a wad of blood, “...are ya waitin for?”

Looking over the edge, Hermes knew why he waited. They stood atop one of Zviecoff's star pillars. From their vantage point, Hermes could watch Joe and Theseus moseying out of the church. He'd seen Theseus before but even if he hadn't the shape and glow of the figure couldn't have fit another soul. Hermes was well aware that Theseus was way above his league. The minotaur had once dueled the Iahtro Storm – not to mention having held his own with Flow Morain, the man that had made it quite clear he was fully capable of destroying Hermes. Even with the largest ego Solaris had ever seen, Hermes would never raise his sword to Theseus.

Not an able-bodied Theseus, that is.

From their vantage point, Hermes could see the minotaur's missing leg.

“Don't go anywhere, Sentry.” Hermes growled and then he disappeared.

“Oh yeah? You ain't gonna fahnd mae again!” Zalfron crowed defiantly.

In his defense, he did make it a couple more inches across the roof before his muscles began to completely ignore the stubborn conductor controlling his brain. There were simply too many broken bones and torn muscles. His body had just about shut down. He'd almost given up - unable to even keep his eyelids from falling – when a familiar figure arrived on the rooftop, a familiar figure wielding a familiar, black bladed sword.

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“Theseus Icespear!” Hermes proclaimed, “From one furred warrior to another, how would you like this to go down?”

They stood in the courtyard – not having made it far from the church. Hermes' glowing body was fifteen yards before them. Theseus stepped forward to put himself between the banshee and Joe.

"I see. We let the Earthboy go and you and I hash it out, aye?"

Theseus nodded, "If that isn't a good enough deal, my friend, you have my word, I'll use only my left hand."

"Ha!" Hermes laughed despite his secret relief but all was not yet well. If Joe was to simply sit and watch, Hermes knew he'd end up with the Suikii in his back. Even in his collar-weakened state, he needed to lure the pyromancer away. So he said, "The Sentry sits atop that tower. If you can reach him before I slay Theseus, I'll set him free and take you in his stead."

Joe looked to Theseus but the white shadow showed no expression. *Hermes isn't a real threat to Theseus, is he?* Joe's eyes fell to the minotaur's leg. *Is he?*

"Take the deal. Save the pale elf." Theseus said, "Run."

There was something in the way Theseus said it – something that Joe had heard many a time since he first found the light of Solaris – that got Joe moving before his mind had a chance to decide. "Run." He was tired of running. *If I'm the Sun Child, then shouldn't I be the one standing my ground?* Next time. This time, Zalfron needed him a lot more than Theseus and, this time, with little fire left in his chest, he had little to contribute in combat.

As Joe ran away, Theseus engaged. Bringing his sword over his head he brought it down hard. Hermes blocked and before he knew it his skull was clubbed off his shoulders by the minotaur's second swing. Taking a step back, a headless Hermes continued to fight, swinging viciously to block each attack and steadily stumbling backwards until finally he disappeared.

"My friend–"

Theseus spun, standing on one leg, and swung as Hermes reappeared behind him.

"–you're too predictable."

The swing caught Hermes in the chest plate, denting his armor. The wolverine engraved on his chest dashed away from the blow. It tossed the ghost across the courtyard. He landed by his skull. Reassembled, Hermes swung, launching a sharp wind towards the minotaur. Theseus cut the gust in two, it continued on past him to bash apart the cobble paved streets. Staggering forward, Theseus blocked another blast, then another and another until he saw a sharp wind flying towards him at just the right angle to whack it back into Hermes. It struck the banshee and he flew across the courtyard to slam into the facade of the church, crumbling in part of the wall and adding another dent to his chest plate.

"I fence with Flow Morain, my friend," Theseus chuckled, "a little gust won't blow me over."

"Seems you should've spent more time dueling with necromancers?" Hermes growled, emerging from the church.

Theseus resisted the urge to check the progress of the necroflame creeping up his hip. Instead, he swung his sword in a massive arch, launching a sharp wind twice the size of the banshee's previous attempts. Hermes shot one back, blocking the section of the wave that would've struck him while the excess cut through the church behind him. Theseus shot another and Hermes disappeared. The minotaur spun to cover his rear only to hear the heavy clap of boots on cobble behind him. Spinning back around, he blocked Hermes' swing.

"You're weak." Theseus stated.

Hermes disappeared. Then reappeared twenty yards to the minotaur's left where he launched another sharp wind then disappeared.

“You know who I am,” Theseus said as he blocked, “and you believed you had a chance?”

Hermes reappeared and launched another projectile but once again Theseus blocked.

“You are an ant, now come here so I can squash you!” Theseus roared.

The minotaur was thrown off his feet as something massive barreled over him. He rolled onto his back just in time to catch the jaws of the beast. Hermes was now a gargantuan wolverine rippling with muscle. It was holding those mighty jaws back that made Theseus realize that Hermes might actually possess the strength to kill him. Theseus was far stronger, far more skilled, far more prepared but he was also severely wounded. It wasn't that he thought Hermes might be better than him, it was that he thought Hermes might be able to kill him before Shalis' necroflame did him in. For as he waited for the Witch's spell to conclude, he'd become weaker and weaker.

In the meantime, doom was doom, why not continue to pester the badger?

“Godi,” Theseus grunted, planting his good hoof on the wolverine's belly, “crimpsin tiad,” he grabbed the beast by its throat, “*badger!*”

He flipped the situation. Now he was on top, straddling the demonic wolverine. He planted punch after punch into the beast's noggin – knowing full and well that Hermes could not feel physical pain, that said, each hammering fist took a toll on the bear's ego and that was the true aim of his punches. Finally, Hermes got ahold of himself and teleported away.

“Are you going to run all day?” Theseus roared.

Once more Hermes appeared behind Theseus but the minotaur wasn't caught off guard. He turned and blocked and then attacked, knocking the ex-Doom Warrior's skull off once more. He continued to attack. Off came one arm, then the other before Hermes teleported away to put himself back together. Theseus took this time to look at his leg. The darkness was spreading up his hip and sinking down the thigh of his other leg. The numb, dead feeling was slowly stretching up his back and towards his middle section. But he pushed the reality out of his mind.

“Is this it?” Theseus asked, “The infamous Hermes Retskcirt is slain by a thousand-year-old minotaur?”

Though Hermes had still not reappeared, Theseus could feel his growing rage. The darkness overhead began to swirl as mysterious sparks of light flashed through the shadows like heat lightning between shadows of clouds. Theseus looked to the tower Joe was climbing and prayed to God that Joe had enough time.

“Let your rage tame your fear!” Theseus roared, “Finish me off like a true Iceloadic!”

Hermes reappeared.

Theseus swung and his blade slid through Hermes as though he was made of shadows. He was made of shadows. Theseus fell to his knees. He didn't feel the pain, just the sudden weight. Looking down he saw the blade, protruding through his stomach. His legs had both died. So to had the very belly from which the head of the blade jutted out from. Hermes pulled the sword free and strode over to stand before Theseus.

“Do it.” Theseus said.

Hermes held the blade to the side of the minotaur's neck and hesitated. Even Hermes, the most narcissistic Solarin, was reluctant. There wasn't a furred folk from his generation that didn't revere Theseus Icespear. The man was respected by more Solarins than Saint – from the Vokriit to the Cagirent to the grunts and pawns of the Pact and the Order. Everyone revered Theseus. And for those like Hermes, an Iceload native who had been dismissed time and time again by the blonde haired, furless rulers of the continent, Theseus Icespear was like a messiah.

He was the father of the Emperor of the Empire that seemed sometimes not to care for those with fur. He cared. His mouth and his spear and his hooves made sure there was no mistake of that. And now he knelt before Hermes. His hooves dead. His spear passed on. And his mouth saying, "Kill me."

"I don't deserve to kill you." Hermes confessed.

"Kill me." Theseus growled, "I deserve to die on my hooves."

Hermes stared at him for a moment. As long as he could considering their very real time constraint.

"Well then." Hermes said.

The banshee approached Theseus. He lifted the minotaur up. Theseus fell back to the cracked pavement. Again, Hermes lifted him up.

"Hurry, my friend," Theseus grunted, "I want to die fore my balls freeze over."

"You were a great warrior," Hermes said, stepping back so that he would have room for the final swing, "a great man."

"And now," Theseus let his head rock back and stared into the darkness churning above, "I'll be a great legend."

- - -

Joe was a quarter of the way up the stairs, swinging the Suikii with each step, when he collapsed. His legs were tingling, his muscles were knotted and cramping. It wasn't mere exhaustion. It was magical withdrawal. His chest was sending shockwaves of ice and agony through his body, reminding him that he needed more flame.

"God, you've got me this far, but I don't know how much further I can go..."

Raising the Suikii he gave it one more swing. Then the sword disappeared, leaving Joe fireless and weaponless on the stairs.

"No..." he murmured, his hands shaking, "come back..."

The Suikii was gone. He waited a moment longer then stood. Legs trembling, the stone in his chest felt heavier than ever. Biting his lip, he continued up the stairs.

- - -

Machuba was in the cobblestone courtyards across from the church. He stood for a moment, watching the zombies stagger out of the burning building. The rotten bodies of the knights stumbled onwards and at first he thought they were heading his way, then he saw a bush. The shrubbery had been burnt in half, but it held on in the corner of the shattered courtyard and Machuba could see something in the shadow beneath the it. With the undead moving at the pace of snails and still having fifty or so yards between them and the bush, Machuba was able to walk over.

If he wasn't a Gill, he would've felt chills. It wasn't a corpse but it might has well have been. It was a kilt. Machuba immediately knew who's it was. It wasn't long ago that he'd been following it.

Something touched his hand and he reached for Shelmick's sword but then stopped, he already held a weapon.

The Suikii?

He checked the progress of the undead then swung the ancient Knomish sword. A window opened into a dark world and he stepped through. He instantly recognized the Total Darkness due to the descriptions he'd heard from Nogard. He didn't dwell on the spell. In fact, he didn't even stop to notice his surroundings. All he saw was the flickering silhouette before him.

"Zalfron?"

"Machuba?"

"I have the Suikii, I'm getting you out."

"Joe's here too."

"Where?"

"...ah...ah don't know."

Machuba hesitated.

"I'll get you out then come back for Joe."

His proposal went unheard as Zalfron slipped out of consciousness. Machuba picked the elf up and then stepped back through the Suikii's window. Machuba wandered through the city streets. When his arms grew tired, he sat Zalfron down and while he rested he swung the Suikii, praying for a portal to open. A few did, but he didn't initially note the significance. In retrospect, he'd understand that the sword was keeping him heading in the right direction, towards Mountaingate, and out of the way of Order patrols, he didn't cross one foe on his way from the North Mystakle Church to the edge of the city. When he arrived, Shaprone opened the gate and Ekaf, Nogard, Bold, and Zach ran to their comrades.

"Where's Joe?" The Knome asked as Machuba handed Zalfron to Bold.

Machuba raised his hand and the Suikii appeared in it.

"The sword left Joe..." Ekaf murmured.

Machuba nodded, "It took me to Zalfron and took us here, but now it has quit."

"Keep trying, Civ!" Nogard exclaimed.

"No." Ekaf shook his head, "No, the sword left Joe. It made up its mind. Do you know where Joe is?"

"According to Zalfron," Machuba said, "in Total Darkness with Hermes."

Acamus was making his way towards them from deep inside Mountaingate. Machuba saw him from far off. Licking his eyes, he took a deep breath. *I'm going to have to tell Acamus that his father is dead.* He licked his eyes again.

"Machuba." Ekaf whispered.

Machuba looked down. Nogard and Zach were busy helping Bold with Zalfron. Ekaf was at Machuba's side, keeping his voice low enough so that the others would not hear.

"Are you alright?" the Knome asked.

Kneeling down, Machuba whispered into Ekaf's ear, "I think Theseus is dead."

The little Knome's eyes opened wide.

"Did you see his body?" Ekaf asked.

Machuba shook his head, all the while saying, "But I know, I know it. Deep do-"

"You can't say something like that." Ekaf said, "Not until it's a fact. An undeniable fact. There is no use in spreading rumors." Ekaf then turned to Acamus as the minotaur arrived, "Hey! Look what the dog coughed up!"

Acamus gazed over the comatose Zalfron for a moment then strode towards Machuba.

"Where is the Earthboy?" Acamus asked.

"Hermes has him." Machuba replied.

"Did you see my father?" Acamus asked.

Machuba nodded and opened his mouth but no words came out.

Ekaf answered for him, "The Witch has him."

Acamus stared at the Knome for a moment. Machuba tried to read the expression on the minotaur's face but couldn't. He wore the same distant expression he'd had behind the wheel of the *Monoceros*. The fishfolk licked his eyes.

"Is this so Machuba?" Acamus asked.

Machuba nodded again.

With another grunt, the minotaur strode off back into Mountaingate. The others followed, only the Knome and fishfolk hung back.

"I'm not sure what you saw, but if something did happen to Theseus, something irreversible, it would be best not to tell Acamus, not just yet." Ekaf whispered to Machuba.

Machuba licked his eyes once more.

"As soon as Acamus finds out his father is dead, he'll lose his mind and without his help we'll never get into Icelore," Ekaf explained, "and if we can't get into Icelore, Joe will die and Solaris will sink into ruin."

Machuba nodded. He wasn't listening to the Knome. He was watching Acamus march away. *If he ever finds out that I didn't tell him what I saw, Machuba thought, he'll kill me. He'll kill us.* Machuba cursed himself for listening to the Knome, then, without a word to the Knome, he walked off, following the others into Mountaingate.

Chapter Sixteen: The Wake

Before Solaris had risen to her noontime vantage, Zviecoff was scrambling to action. Knights of the Order marched towards the harbor as the Sea Lords spilled out of every orifice in Rivergate. The Coalition hustled from checkpoint to checkpoint, using the mysterious distraction in the bay as an opportunity to get back to fortify what little territory they maintained in the northern half of the city. Ekaf, Nogard, Bold, Zach, and Acamus had begun to ride the elevator up to the second tier. Joe, Machuba, and Zalfron had just stopped before the Burner. Then came the resounding, bleak clap and the simultaneous shattering and pounding of a banshee's thunder. For a moment everything stopped.

Hermes and Zalfron wandered the city beneath the ominous shade. Souls slipped in and out. First Joe and Theseus visited. Then Machuba showed himself. As Joe lost consciousness and collapsed in the stairwell of a star pillar, Machuba stole Zalfron from Total Darkness and the spell was broken. But before Machuba came, Theseus left and he did not return to the world of the living. He left but he went nowhere.

When the spell dissolved, time hesitated, taking just a moment longer before it returned.

Not an elf nor a minotaur budged. Every black garbed soldier and every dark robed wizard froze in their tracks. Even Hermes had been rendered immobile and unconscious.

Death stood in the broken courtyard beside the bush that hid all that was left of the Blue Ridges' hero. A cat strolled out from between his skeletal legs. The feline observed the kilt then plopped down on her rump and turned to watch Death.

Death continued to stare in silence.

The black cat meowed.

Are you crying?

Death flinched. The cat paced over to the material remains. There was no body. It had melted and seeped into the earth as a black goo. She crawled over the kilt and stuck her nose into the soil around the roots of the shrub. Her nose didn't stop at the surface. The feline's head was completely submerged before she pulled out, an old, rusted key held in her tiny jaws. Taking another look at her suddenly-sedentary friend, the Librarian shrugged. Purring, she slid back into the folds of his robe and disappeared. Death stood in the courtyard a moment longer.

"Goodbye, my friend..." the reaper whispered, then he slipped into the shadows and time, once more, swept over the world.

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Murky clouds swam over the face of the moon. A handful of stars broke through the cumulonimbus' wall, but they barely held a light to the glowing ember of Zviecoff. Constellations of torches crisscrossed through the icy capital. Soldiers, pirates, and mancercs alike hastened to rebuild the structures they'd torn down. The city was being resettled.

Above the city, looming like the shadows of the clouds rolling in, rose Zvie Castle. Sitting atop the glacier-wrapped mountain, Zvie Castle was collared by the icicle-like branches of the tundralian coral known as Pikewood. A spiraling ramp wound up the peak of the mountain, cutting through the thornbush of a forest. The road sported an enertomb-canon nearly every twenty yards, a defense that had not stopped Mystvokar Talloome's coup but now helped the Coalition keep the Order's advances at bay. The road ended with the Crown Garden

Courtyard – which was similarly armored. It was lit by the radiance blaring from the monolithic window that stretched the height of Krynor’s Hold. Krynor’s Hold housed the Stone of Krynor – who would’ve guessed? – and it was that, the world’s greatest void-dust, that blared blue light down on the city below like a light tower glaring over its bay. The brilliance of the Stone made it impossible to discern any other source of light living within Zvie Castle, whether with a mortal eye or with that of a crow’s, and so even without the superb defenses, the Castle was quite safe. Shalis and her goons had no way of knowing what sort of garrison hid within the Mystvokar’s tower.

High atop the stronghold, in a large chamber that had once been a legislative battle ground for politicians, Battle General Shaprone Ipativy paced about a room filled with his most loyal subjects. He was confident that they could hold Mountaingate and that the Order could not threaten Zvie Castle. Unfortunately, he was equally confident that the Order could hold onto the city and would likely continue to rob them of what little ground they had in the North bit by bit until all they had was the Gate and the Castle. If the Coalition had not abandoned them, the odds would likely be in their favor. At the very least, they’d have found their situation to be a stalemate. But that was not the case. Instead, they were doomed to sit by and watch as the rest of the city slipped out from under them. Already Zviecoff was gone.

The people had left. The star pillars, the marketplaces, the neighborhoods, and the parks that once defined the city had an entirely new meaning since they emptied and were now being refilled with Disciples of Darkness.

Still, he had hope, but that hope relied heavily on a fantasy of disobedience. Of betraying the orders of the Strategy Generals and enlisting the aid of mercenaries and disillusioned patriots – it required something similar to what he had helped Talloome Icelore accomplish when he redeemed the Mystvokar. Something like what the Samurai had attempted to overthrow the Mystvokar. The people of Iceload had been through enough turmoil, he couldn’t bring himself to threaten what stability the Vokriit Government was bringing back just to save a city that was already dead.

Watching the brooding knight pace, Joe’s gang (without Joe) pondered as well. They’d finally gotten settled. For most of the evening they’d been helping Shaprone with the casualties. Assisting the wounded and burying the dead. Bold had spent hours tending to Zalfron until finally Bold was forced to take a break to meditate. That meditation quickly turned to sleep. The others found themselves amongst the dozing soldiers, exhausted but wide awake.

“What now?” Zach asked.

“We go after Joe.” Ekaf replied.

“Icelore? Yea right, Civ.” Nogard scoffed.

“It doesn’t seem very practical.” Machuba agreed.

“Impossible. Maybe.” Zach concurred.

“Not so, my friends,” Acamus came over, joining the conversation, “my father freed the Samurai when they were in the dungeons of Icelore.”

“Dey had an army.” Nogard stated.

Acamus gestured to the resting men and women around them, “As do we.”

“This isn’t *our* army.” Machuba said.

“They’ve got no interest in saving Joe.” Zach said.

“No,” Acamus agreed, “but my father, the Coalition would invade Icelore to save my father.”

Machuba looked over at the Knome but the Knome would not meet his gaze. Shaprone had been listening from afar but now he joined in, “Invading Icelore may not be that bad of an idea.”

From the expressions on Nogard, Machuba, and Zach’s faces, Shaprone could tell the boys were unconvinced – but he could also tell that they desperately wanted to be convinced.

“Follow me.” Shaprone said.

The boys got up and followed the knight out the chamber. They walked down a short hall that ended in broad double doors. Throwing open the doors, the General strode through as the Blue Ridges icy breath tried it’s best to push him back. Nogard and Machuba only caught a whiff of that instant, all powerful chill before their charmed Aquarian garbs overpowered it. Zach felt it tugging at his flame but rather than cold it was more of an itch. That said, his long silver hair, wrapped around his torso like a sash, which was still coated in the magical lotions that gave it the characteristics of a solid, instantly froze through.

“Careful,” Ekaf warned, “this chill’ll freeze your eyes if you keep them open too long.”

“Hear dat?” Nogard snickered to Machuba.

Machuba rolled his eyes. Then when Nogard turned back around, he anxiously licked them. For a moment, his tongue got stuck to his left – like a tongue to a frozen flagpole – but as he squirmed it about, another round of saliva liberated it.

“An old bachelor’s tale.” Shaprone assured them.

The doors had opened to a balcony, just a couple stories from the very top of the Castle, providing one of the highest views in all of the Vanian. In the darkness, they couldn’t tell where the distant mountain tops ended and the encroaching clouds began. The terrace split in two and wrapped around, both paths leading into the same room but on opposite sides. Shaprone took them down the left where he cast aside another set of double doors and took them into Krynor’s Hold.

A spiral staircase shot down from the platform just beyond the doorway. It was mirrored on the opposite side of the chamber. The two stairwells were tucked into their corners, out of the way of the double windows that stretched across the northern and southern walls, sandwiching the Stone of Krynor. This was not the gang’s first time in the room. One of the first things they’d done after arriving in Zvie Castle was book it to Krynor’s Hold. None of them had ever seen the legendary rock. It stood like a giant crystal shard, though its glow was so powerful that its shape was not sealed with rigid lines. It seemed to phase out around the edges, like the edge of a fog. The entire room was blue. Existing within its brilliance, the boys were almost scared to move. Unsure of what would qualify as touching the Stone, sure that they did not want to be whisked away like Creaton or Saint or the Queen of Darkness. The Stone reached roughly one hundred feet, though due to its odd properties it seemed to crinkle and expand within a twenty foot range of that number. That night it was relatively short, almost as if it was stooping a bit, as if the void was tired.

Shaprone had not brought them to show off the Stone, he’d brought them to show them the city. Elevators existed as alternatives to the spiral staircases. With no rock dwarf to protest, they stepped from their platform onto disks of stone, reminiscent of those lifts in Rivergate though bound to a column of magic rather than to hanging cords of metal. Once aboard, the plate lowered them in silence. As they descended, they listened to the humming of the great rock. That is, until Ekaf interjected.

“Fate Programmers can interpret that buzz.” He said.

“Are you a Fate Programmer, my friend?” Acamus smirked.

“I dabble.” Ekaf claimed.

“There is a reason the only ones who speak of Fate Programmers are Knomes.” Zach stated.

Ignoring Zachias’ doubt, Ekaf translated the Stone’s message, “It’s saying we should invade Icelore.”

“Dat so, Civ?” Nogard chuckled.

Ekaf nodded, then flinched, “Oh wow,” he blushed, “thanks!”

“What?” Machuba asked.

Ekaf scuffled his feet, holding his hands behind his back and crinkling his nose. As the plate dropped them off on the floor of the chamber he said, “I think it’s hitting on me.”

“I didn’t bring y’all for the Stone.” Shaprone said, leading the five over to the window that faced the city proper, “I brought you for the view.”

The city glimmered before them, when they got up to the sill, Shaprone continued.

“Look. The Order has put down their anchor. Do you know how many they’ve got here?” Shaprone turned to the boys, “The Samurai’s Army faltered in Icelore because they’d backed Talloome into a corner – even still,” he turned to Acamus, “as you said, Theseus and the Coalition were able to do considerable damage. Castle Icelore did not fall, but the Order’s victory was bittersweet. The Pact was successfully purged.”

“You really dink we can do it, Civ?” Nogard asked.

“I think we must.” Shaprone nodded, “I’m not sure we’ll get an opportunity like this again for a long while.”

“What makes this such an opportunity?” Zachias asked.

“Look.” Shaprone said, gesturing to the window.

Though the flames of war were simmering out in the city, new flames darted back and forth. Like a swarm of fireflies zipping and zapping in and out of the brush, torches and enertombs bobbed in and out of sight constantly throughout the streets and buildings. The Order was busy fortifying. Settling in.

“How many men and women do you think Shalis has in this city?” Shaprone asked.

“Thousands.” Machuba guessed.

“We’re talking a couple tens of thousands.” Shaprone said, “And how many men and women do you think she has in all?”

“Not much more than that.” Acamus said.

“Exactly.” Shaprone said, “This wasn’t just for your Sun Child, she sought to kill two birds with one stone here.”

“Theseus?” Acamus asked.

“Three birds.” Shaprone corrected.

“Zviecoff.” Machuba murmured.

“But the rub is – for her that is – she can’t. You can’t take the city without Zvie Castle and you can’t take Zvie Castle.”

“Talloome took Zvie Castle.” Zachias countered.

“No.” Shaprone shot back so fast that he had to slow himself down a bit so as not to come off as condescending, “Talloome took the Vokarburrock. The Castle was not taken. The Castle joined him. The men and women on the cannons had already bowed to him as their king before he arrived in the Congress Room. I promise you, the men and women that fight with me would rather die than bow to Shalis. I tell you, that Witch can’t take this Castle. The Coalition, the Strategy Generals may pull us out of the city proper but they won’t give up the Castle. And while

that means we'll let the plague that is the Order fester and rot the capitol – the battle will never end and she won't let it.”

“Especially with the Stone sitting here, just out of her reach.” Ekaf acknowledged.

“Exactly.” Shaprone said.

“So now is the time to strike?” Zachias asked.

Shaprone looked him in the eyes, “It is the best conditions I've seen for an invasion since I joined the Vokriit.”

“What's our window like?” Acamus asked.

“Not much longer than a week.” Shaprone said, “I wager she'll pull more and more back to Icelore every day.”

“How long would it take to get dragons down here?” Nogard asked.

“Depends on the size of this storm.” Shaprone responded, gesturing to the window behind them.

“We could sail.” Ekaf suggested.

“From where?” Zach asked.

“Here. Of course.” Ekaf said.

“Go back to the *Monoceros*?” Machuba asked.

The fishfolk and chidra scoffed.

Nogard asked, “You forget what happened in Rivergate, Civ?”

“The Sea Lords won't have touched it.” Acamus chimed in on the Knome's side.

This two of the boys aback.

“Theseus cursed it.” Zach explained.

This only served to further confuse the two.

“When, Civ, cause I dink da Sea Lords were fine wid da boat a few days ago?” Nogard asked.

“When Theseus spared the *Monoceros*, he told them not to mess with the Blue Ridges.” Ekaf explained.

“But he used the name of their god,” Shaprone added, “Barro.”

“That word turned my father's threat into a mystical contract.” Acamus said.

“And they couldn't tell Shalis, ‘No.’ because of their superstitions – especially when their captain didn't buy into it.” Shaprone said.

“What if Johnny and Shalis just force them back on the boat?” Machuba asked.

“Why would they?” Shaprone asked back.

Nogard and Machuba exchanged glances, both shrugging.

As the two gave in, Zach suddenly switched sides.

“But how do we get to Rivergate from here?” Machuba asked.

“The tunnels!” Ekaf exclaimed, “The underground trolley tunnels!”

“My friend,” Acamus frowned, “you know the Order must be watching them.”

“Acamus is right.” Shaprone said, but then he added, “But with the right timing...” He glanced over his shoulder at the clouds rolling towards the northern window, “...they'll have to pull out of the tunnels before the rain arrives. The whole drainage pumping system is down, the tunnels will fill up fast.”

Nogard was unconvinced, “So we make it to Rivergate, den what? We barely made it out!”

“They expected you.” Shaprone said, “Now you're the last thing they'd expect.”

“They’ve got no reason to be in Rivergate now.” Ekaf said, “Aside from scouts and maybe a few checkpoints, the harbor is theirs by and by now. We could slip in and out like we were never there.”

“Look, my friends,” Acamus agreed, “see for yourselves. The harbor is empty.”

All eyes returned to the city. Though the rest of Zviecoff flickered like fire as the Order consolidated their victories, Rivergate was a black smudge before the bay.

Acamus said, “The Sea Lords are done with that frozen harbor and they’re done with the *Monoceros*.”

“Let’s do it!” Ekaf exclaimed.

“We’re actually going to Icelore?” Machuba asked.

“Guess so, Civ.” Nogard nodded.

“Not directly.” Shaprone said, “We’ll stop in Ipativy. I’ll get the Strategy Generals on board – somehow – and muster up more soldiers – more fire power too.” He turned to Acamus, “You think you can get the GraiLord on board?”

“Of course, my friend,” Acamus nodded, “they’d move the Blue Ridges to save my father. While y’all go to Ipativy, I’ll go to Recercoff.”

“You’d have a hard time in the tunnels anyways.” Ekaf muttered.

“Dis is crazy.” Nogard stated before admitting, “Dough, I guess dis da only way.”

Zach nodded, “They’ve got Joe.”

Machuba summoned the Suikii and swung it, hoping it might open a window that would render this ridiculous plan void but when it didn’t, he submitted.

“No more crazy than this plan was.” Machuba stated.

“Didn’t quite turn out so well, eider, dough.” Nogard noted.

“Don’t worry!” Ekaf assured them, looking back at the Stone of Krynor, “The Stone says it’ll work – says that this is where the world will begin to really see what we’re about – what the Sun Child is capable of.”

“That so?” Shaprone smirked.

Ekaf nodded, “Says Joe’ll really shine.”

“What does it say of my father?” Acamus asked.

Ekaf coughed then cleared his throat, “It says a lot. Says you’ll crash the Castle and...uh...you’ll find the Seal – the Stone can be vague sometimes so I’m not sure-”

“The GraiLord Seal *is* my father.” Acamus rolled his shoulders confidently then smiled back at the others, “My people often claim that the Seal long since melded with my father’s flesh. He’s as much our king as he is our flag.” He chuckled, “It seems we’ll crash the Castle together, father and son.” He gazed out over the city of Zviecoff, “We’re coming, father. I’m coming.”

Machuba looked over at Ekaf. Ekaf looked back, gritting his teeth. Machuba swung the Suikii again but to no avail. Turning his black eyes back upon the glacial city below, he gulped. He needed more gogo. Either his high was beginning to fade or his curse was beginning to act up, whichever it was, a part of him craved it. The pain helped distract him from the guilt and dread that mixed in his head.

Nogard sensed Machuba was brooding but said nothing. He did, however, hand the fishfolk the pipe.

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“SHALIS!”

His right forearm engulfed in a blade of ice, he sliced through the scalp of a zombified knight. Pivoting, he gutted another. Still they marched away, paying no mind to the screaming man slashing through their comrades. He stopped. A steady flow of drops trickled from the tip of the ice encasing his arm and hit the stone floor only to evaporate with a hiss as the encroaching flames nipped at the one-handed man's ankles.

Johnny ran from the church, shoving his way through the zombies as he stumbled across the crumbling courtyard. His mind was split, screaming two different messages. *Shalis abandoned me!* and *Good, Shalis is safe.* They argued. *You're nothing but a pawn to her.* but *Why should I deserve to be anything more to someone so glorious?* He was somewhat subconsciously glad to have lost his hand because at least the rage he felt for the pyromancer and the despair he felt for his appendage could end the consideration of the Witch's betrayal.

MY HAND!

The image of his right hand laying alone on the church floor was branded upon his brain. *Can healers make hands now?* This was a thought debate that the two parts of his mind could agree upon: *Doubtful.* Fortunately, the giant chunk of ice around his wrist kept the pain away – and stopped the bleeding...though it threatened to claim more of his arm in the long run, if not his life entirely. Out of the over that was the church, a giant junk of ice attached to your arm in the glacial city of Zviecoff would surely expedite hypothermia.

Debating what to do, he continued to flee south. Not really aiming for any Order camp in specific, so very lost in his mind that his body had decided to get lost in the city. When he finally came to a stop, coming to a conclusion that he must melt off the ice and force the wound to scab with flame, his eyes caught movement to his side.

“FREEZE!” He shouted.

But it was Johnny who didn't move. Well, his feet didn't. His body continued to helplessly gyrate as was the way of the captain.

“Hello, Mr. Pigeon-”

The speaker was, at first glance, a white fox. However, this fox was twice the size of a wolf with teeth bigger than minotaur fingers, and upon his right shoulder blade sat He the Cockatune.

“He...” John murmured.

The fox continued, “-with my help, you may make it out of Zviecoff.”

“Are you-”

Not taking his hand off his belt buckle, Johnny turned his gaze to catch a newcomer. It was a fishfolk, dressed in bone-made armor and armed with a blade. The amphibian's face was rippled with burns starting from his forehead and continuing on down the nape of his neck.

“I am Aqa Eniram-”

“Yea, but who's the talking fox?” Johnny snapped.

The fishfolk let out a long sigh and turned to his furred companion. The fox shook its head slowly.

“He is offering you a chance to join us,” the fishfolk continued, “but first and foremost, my Master is offering you a chance to live.”

“What's it cost?” Johnny asked.

“Revenge! Revenge!” He crowed.

Johnny raised an eyebrow.

“The pyromancer.” Aqa elaborated.

Johnny didn't need to hear another word, "I'm in." Then he turned back to Aqa and asked, "Any chance you've got some aquannabis?"

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Solaris illuminated the thin fabric of the half-elf's tent. The old man stretched. His head rocked back to yawn. He ran his fingers through his silky strands of white hair and stopped. He didn't feel quite right. Hearing clanking outside, he reached for his eye patch.

"Saint," the guard began from outside the tent, "you've got a visitor."

Tying the straps behind his head and sliding the patch over his eye, he turned to face the entrance.

"Says he's the Bard?"

"Let him in."

The guard didn't question further. If this were any other noble, the guard would've never let such an odd fellow alone with his employer, but this was no ordinary monarch. The Emperor's palace, the Cathedral, was the largest man-made structure beneath Solaris, yet he lived in the garden and slept in a tent. He dressed in ascetic robes and rented out the castle to facilitate the rehabilitation of the Trinity Nation's criminals. The guards had to keep track of who was wanted for what, all throughout the Empire, because the Cathedral was the constant victim of jail-break schemes (one of which had begun the War on Mancy). Thus the guard was not ignorant of who The Bard was. The Bard was a known conspirator with the enemy, he'd defended Talloome Icelore and the Disciples of Darkness against the Samurai. Nevertheless, the guards let the criminal through as they had with many others before. It wasn't a rare occasion for villains to stroll into the tent of the Emperor of the Trinity Nations. Nor was it rare for them to stroll back out, skip back to the harbor, and sail away unscathed. In fact, when a wanted villain visited the Emperor, the guards knew they could relax a bit. Saint could take care of himself. Anyone up to no good would be avoiding the half-elf like he was the plague.

Dressed in a suit of red and black, The Bard approached Saint singing softly under his breath. The runic symbols that dyed his fur pulsed with the rhythm of his unheard song. He loomed over the old elf at nearly eight feet high (not including his upturned horns). His brawny brown eyes twinkled as he waited for the Emperor to speak. It wasn't a glimmer of joy that twinkled. No. It was an excess of tears welling up against his eyelids.

"What is it?"

The minotaur cleared his throat and clasped a fist to his chest before beginning his song.

"It is a day to mourn, as I regret to inform, a good friend of ours is dead."

He bowed his head before adding, "*My friend.*"

The words sounded off like church bells in Saint's mind and realization drove a cold blade up into his gut. The blow forced him to double over, nearly losing his balance.

The Bard continued, "The ice will be torn, old hatred reborn, for Hermes lopped off his head."

Saint looked back at the minotaur, doubt rearing its head as an unlikely savior. *Hermes killed Theseus?* Saint couldn't believe it, but he could tell from The Bard's expression that this was no lie.

"Theseus." He whispered, murmuring further, "Father..."

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly then returned his gaze to the old minstrel.

"Does Acamus know?"

“Acamus knows not, Joe has been caught, seems Zviecoff the city has fallen. Along comes the fox, as tempers grow hot, and the Knome guides em all in. As the Guardians cry, the Knome will lie, and Acamus will take it for truth. Yes, many will fight, many will die, and we'll see what the Earthboy can do.”

Saint sat back on his cot – the Emperor's bed. The Bard's song reminded him how quickly things had been moving. He wondered which hero would fall next. The Bard? Himself? Who knew? The full impact of his father's death continued to filter in. Like a chip being loosened from a dam so that a stream of river burst through, the spout was a blade thrust into the half-elf's heart. A tear rolled down from his good eye. He had tons of questions but couldn't speak. The Bard was silent for a moment. He observed Saint curiously. It had been many years since he or anyone for that matter had seen the old bastard cry.

“The minotaur lived over a thousand years. He worked to train a thousand peers and granted evil a sense of fear! Why mar his record with a tear? Drink a beer, recall his cheer, his goofy grin from ear to ear! Let sorrow have nothing to do with Theseus Icespear!”

“I'll need someone to drink with.” Saint stated.

“Ah, my friend, as our friend would say,” The Bard chimed, singing slowly and sadly as a sideways smile slipped across his snout, “I'm a busy man, but not today.”

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Screaming to the heavens above, the gate before Castle Icelore rose. Shadowmancers, necromancers, and black garbed knights stood scatter throughout the courtyard between the wall and the castle. They were sparse, the citadel was practically a ghost town, but every soul on the island wanted to see whether what they heard was true or false.

Hermes strode through the gate with his skeletal face turned to the sky. The green flames that engulfed his body stretched nearly a yard from him in every direction. The curious bystanders stumbled away to keep out of the banshee's deadly aura. Not a soul batted an eye as they all stared in absolute disbelief at the GraiLord Seal, held in Hermes' right hand by the straps that once clung to Theseus.

High up in a tower jutting out of Castle Icelore, Shalis Skullsummon stood watching. Her wound had been healed. No sign remained that she had been there, involved in the great minotaur's last fight. She couldn't chase the dry taste of jealousy. Yet that jealousy was meager compared to the fear which sickened her – the fear that her people, the people of the Order of Mancers, might begin to Hermes stronger than herself. Watching the undead bearn progress, she prayed that Hermes might begin to believe it too so that she could remind him, and the world, who ran the Order.

As for Hermes, he saw Shalis watching from high up in the castle. He knew it hurt worse than the blade Theseus shoved through her belly for her to see him take full responsibility for the kill. He also knew he was the Order's one and only banshee – which he believed gave him as much leeway as he intended to take.

“The time of legends has passed!” Hermes roared, staring straight into the eyes of the Witch way up in her tower, “New powers are rising!” He lifted the Soul Staff in his left hand, “I am Hermes Retskcirt. Pity any who get in my way. We are the Order of Mancers – the Disciples of Darkness – the only force fighting for the liberty of *all* magicians – and we will liberate Iceload from the bigotry of the piss elves and their cows!”

He paused.

The crowd was silent, they all watched Hermes as if they were children and he was their father. They looked at him, he realized, like the minotaurs would look at Theseus. *I am the new legend.* He would've felt chills if he were more than bone. *First there was Creaton, then Flow Morain, then the Queen of Darkness, could I be the fourth?* Exhilarated, he continued.

“All we have to do is cross the ocean and take it, no one can stand in our way! Together, we can tame the two headed snake that is Iceload!”

The crowd exploded. Even though the majority of the Order was not present, the cheering was so loud the foundations of Castle Icelore rattled. Hermes' name was roared over and over, while Shalis watched, silent and alone, from above.

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A scorching red light forced its way between Joe's eyelids. Blinking, what he saw made him shiver. The world around him was still cloaked in darkness but not the same sort of darkness that had shut out Solaris with Hermes' spell. This darkness was a background, there was no ground, no roof, no walls, just pure endless black interrupted only by the fiery figure of a man. They levitated across from one another, seemingly in the center of the empty darkness, as if they were floating in an empty, starless version of outer space. Joe recognized the man immediately for he had seen him the night he became a pyromancer.

“Am I dead?” Joe asked.

Agony didn't respond. The flaming figure merely took a step towards the pyromancer and raised a finger to point at the empty stone in Joe's chest. Joe was puzzled.

“You want the stone back?”

“Why are you here?” Agony asked.

Joe was unsure how to respond, “Because I ran out of fire?”

The man shook his head from side to side. The black was whisked away and the two began to soar high above a spinning blue sphere. When they stopped moving, Joe recognized the sphere as a planet. Mystakle Planet.

“Why are you here?”

“Because Ekaf brought me here.” Joe replied.

Once again, Agony shook his head. Hovering alongside Joe he pointed to the stone in Joe's chest. Then he asked a third time, “Why are you here?”

“To save the Samurai?” Joe suggested.

Agony's shoulders sagged. He began to drift away, towards the sun Solaris, while Joe began to descend back towards Mystakle Planet.

“To save the world? To save-”

“To save life as you know it.”

The fiery being was suddenly back alongside him.

“Don't forget that.”

“But how? Everyone is stronger than me. Where are the Samurai? Where is Grandfather? Where is Ekaf? Where am I? How can I of all people save the world?”

“Don't give up, don't break character,” the fire said, “rise up like the sun.”

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“WHERE IS SHE?”

Joe woke up to find himself held against a wall by his throat. An odd burning sensation followed by icy numbness slowly spread along his neck, reaching out to the rest of his body. It was Hermes who held him and though the man's scarred white skull showed no emotion, Joe could tell he was on thin ice. But he didn't know why.

"Drop him or you'll kill him." Shalis snarled.

Joe fell to the hard stone ground. Hermes stepped to the side and the necromancer stepped forward. To Joe's amazement, she walked as if nothing had happened. There was no hint in her stride that she'd been impaled through the stomach just a day prior.

"Where is she?" Hermes growled once more.

"Who?!" Joe yelped, clutching his throat as the numbness dissolved into pain.

"You know who, you little--"

Shalis cut Hermes off, "Your cell mate, the cuckmancer."

"I just woke up!" Joe cried.

"You lying sack of--"

"Joe," Shalis said, her voice soft and soothing. Crouching before him, she cupped his chin in her hand. Despite her inflection, there was a certain strength to her grasp that led Joe to fear she might tear his head clean off at any moment. Her cooing poorly cloaked the threat she presented, "you don't have to be here, you can join me up above. Where is she?"

"Who?" Joe moaned.

"He consumed her." Hermes stated.

"Preposterous," her hand flew off Joe's chin to whirl in the air.

"Look how bright he is." Hermes noted, asking, "How much fire did you give him?"

Turning from Joe, she hissed, "Should the Sun Child be dull?"

"Where else could she be?" Hermes demanded, "He is acting this ignorance."

Joe interrupted, "I just woke up! Last I remember, I was in Zviecoff!"

Shalis got up and gestured for Hermes to leave. She looked back at Joe in the door of the cell. She wasn't staring at him but at the stone in his chest. Then, without a word, she marched on out and shut the door behind her.

All alone, Joe stood and gazed about his humble abode. The cell was made of some sort of cold stone. There were two holes, one a barred window near the top of the door and the other placed in a corner. The smell immediately told Joe the purpose of the second hole. As for furniture, the cell only held one cot and the cot itself was quite spartan – it reminded him of the one he'd slept on in Bonehead's cave. A taught animal hide stretched between four wooden poles that appeared to have been sanded halfheartedly. There was nothing to do but sit and think and so he did.

What happened to Theseus? Or Zalfron? Or any of my buddies for that matter. And this fire in my chest, wasn't I out? Isn't that how I passed out and ended up here? Reaching to his bruised throat, he felt no cursed-bone necklace. *And the Suikii!* Holding his right hand out before him he waited for the cold touch of the ancient blade. The Suikii didn't come. *I'm lost and abandoned.* Gazing about the cell, he was puzzled. *If my cellmate escaped, couldn't I?* He had no answer. The cell looked quite tight. All there was to do was wait.

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"How could she have escaped?" Hermes demanded.

"She couldn't." Shalis stated.

“Then he consumed her.” Hermes stated.

“She wouldn’t.”

They were marching up the winding stairs that led out of Icelore’s abysmal dungeon. Their ascent was serenaded by the moans of the incarcerated.

Hermes pressed her further, “You’re defying logic.”

She stopped and faced the banshee, looking down from her vantage a few steps up, “Are you defying me?” Stepping down to be eye level with the bear’s skull, she continued, “Who is the Sheik?”

Hermes was silent.

“The time of legends has passed, has it Hermes? What am I, Hermes? Am I one of these legends or am I one of these new powers you spoke of?” She spat on the stair by the banshee’s boot, “Hermes Retskcirt, hero of the day, promising the people that the war has been won. Ha!” She waited but was not interrupted. Victorious, she concluded, “Don’t forget your place, Hermes.”

Hermes replied with only a blank stare. A stare that Shalis returned for a minute before reminding him, “When the Queen returns, she will know who served her without fault, who worked to prepare Solaris to glorify her and who did so to glorify themselves.”

She spun around and continued the climb. Hermes watched her walk.

- - -

If not for Joe’s chest stone, he would’ve been lost in the darkness. That said, even with the dim glow of the rock shining through his tunic, his mind was playing tricks on him. He felt as though he was under water. The echoes of unintelligible moaning that slipped under his cell door reminded him of the distant calls of whales – or some other mighty sea creature – he’d heard in the world on the Aquarian seafloor. He could see the face of the frightened soldier in the Submarine Canyon – the man he’d locked eyes with on the pile of debris. The man that he’d set ablaze.

In that man’s black eyes, he saw others. He saw the coach driver from the road to Kemplor. He saw the elven blademaker’s corpse in the stairwell. He saw the dozens of mangled bodies, waiting to be buried by the collapsing canyon. Soon to be joined by the sinking bodies of the Sea Lords – something that even though he hadn’t witnessed, after he was told the image his mind manifested was given its place in this growing slideshow of guilt. He saw glimpses of the pawns of Shalis that fell by his hand in Rivergate, short flashes of the scenes in which they charged Machuba and himself only to be cut open or burned down. Then Johnny. Wailing on the ground of the burning church, blood erupting from his wrist like a volcano.

Had he spared the pirate? *Did he die?* He wondered.

I should’ve killed him. said another side of his mind. This side, once it had his attention, it took it a step further. *This isn’t guilt, this is self-pity. I’m doing what I have to do – just like everyone else.*

Joe quickly reined in that thought process, saying aloud, “No.”

When Joe first arrived – on that first day – they’d come across a raging barren. It’d been ready to kill him and he’d been ready – though likely incapable – to kill it. Then Ekaf calmed the beast. It lived. Joe lived. No one died.

They had to do something, but something came in many shapes and forms.

He had to do something about Johnny. Was there a way to get out of that situation nonviolently? The universe is broad so probably. But there was also a more violent way to end the conflict. One Joe had had the opportunity to adopt.

It wasn't self-pity – though maybe some self-pity came with it – it was guilt, and *As much as I can't stand it, as much as it scares me...Joe thought, if it wasn't there...if I ever feel nothing...dear God...I'm terrified of what I might become.*

The cell door was slung open, shocking Joe so badly he fell off the cot. He quickly scrambled onto his butt and slid up against the opposing wall. A figure stumbled in, click-clacking on the stone, and the door slammed shut. The figure, Joe noted, was female. Leaning against the wall Joe sat against, the girl caught her breath then fell onto her butt beside him. Joe found himself staring at the hooves she'd staggered in on, then her tail as she used it to wipe the tears threatening to fall down her cheeks.

A gmoat, Joe realized, "Sunasha?"

"What?" Her voice trembled.

"Are you Sunasha?"

The gmoat watched Joe, momentarily forgetting her sorrow in bamboozlement, "What?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Lo, you thought I was Sunasha?!"

Joe shrugged, "I don't know."

"Do I look like Sunasha?"

"I don't know, I don't know what she looks like."

"She was your cell mate!"

"That doesn't mean..." Joe took a deep breath and almost laughed in exasperation before explaining, "The first thing I remember since I woke up here was Hermes' hand around my throat demanding to know where Sunasha was...I don't know anything. I don't know who Sunasha is, I don't know how long I've been here – don't even know where this is."

"Icelore."

"Shit."

"Agreed." Lo muttered, "Who are you?" She rolled her eyes and smirked, "The Sun Child?"

Joe couldn't withhold a scoff, "Folks seem to think so..."

"I'll say," she laughed, "you're all the rage in Solaris."

"Great..." Shaking his head, he let out a loud sigh, "looks like they're in for a big disappointment."

"Oh no," Lo's smirk shriveled, "you haven't heard?"

"Huh?"

"You're a joke." Lo stated.

"Thanks."

"No, I'm not trying to be mean," she scooted nearer to Joe and placed a hand on his thigh to legitimize her sincerity, "they never really thought you were the Sun Child."

This did not help.

"Not that you aren't!" Lo released a frustrated breath between her teeth, "I'm talking about the folks in the Trinity Nations...the Tenchi Kou Warriors, the Antipa and all...you haven't exactly matched their expectations."

Joe was beginning to get defensive, "Just by getting captured?"

“Girn knows what they’ll say when they hear about this...” Lo muttered before answering the question, “I’m talking about all the killing of policemen in Tadloe then-”

“That wasn’t me!”

“-running off to the Aquarian Ocean to help a bunch of rebels before-”

“We were running from Hermes!”

“-picking up arms with the Coalition in Iceload-”

“They needed help!”

“-all the while, the Trinity Nations is trapped in a stalemate with Creaton in Darkloe.”

Joe was amazed, “I’ve been doing nothing but running for my life since I got to this planet!”

“I’m not accusing you of anything!” Lo promised, “I’m just saying that’s what people are saying.”

“What the...How the...” A million excuses ran through his mind before he settled on one, “I’m just some kid from Earth, what the hell’d they expect?!”

“The Sun Child.” Lo shrugged.

“We were trying to get to Saint to figure out what to do,” Joe groaned, “but every step we took towards God’s Island sent us spiraling off in another direction...”

“Tell that to the TN casualties...” Lo muttered, as if Joe wouldn’t hear, realizing her mistake she quickly added, raising her voice, “It isn’t all your fault. A lot of people have lost faith in Saint too. They sort of expected the Sun Child to be a rehashing of the Samurai. Nothing but a big disappointment.”

Joe’s crestfallen posture remained unlifted.

Lo continued with an even softer tone, “Not everyone’s lost hope...” but the return of an earlier thought derailed her efforts to comfort as it slipped off the end of her tongue, “then again, I doubt anyone knows you’ve been captured just yet.”

Joe sighed, “I don’t understand how anyone knew about me to begin with.”

“You’re a pyromancer and this is a time where everyone is looking for something or someone to have faith in or something or someone to blame – especially the papers.” Lo matched Joe’s sigh, “These last couple weeks, we’ve been in a real drought as far as hope goes. Rumors of heroes and villains spread like wildfire in climates of despair.”

“Poetic.” Joe managed a laugh.

Lo bowed the brim of an invisible hat, “Tis my forte.”

“Are you a writer?” Joe asked.

“A bard, yes.” She gave Joe a twisted smile, “You’re kidding right?”

“Huh?”

Her smirk was replaced with a blank stare, “You don’t recognize me?”

“Sunasha?”

“Girn!” Lo cried, “You’re an idiot!”

Joe scooted away from her, “Think we can ask Shalis for separate cells?”

“Sorry,” Lo giggled, scooting back beside him, “didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, I thought you were being funny.”

“Unfortunately,” Joe admitted, “I’m just an idiot.”

“Well I told you my name, didn’t I?”

“You did?”

She rolled her eyes, “I’m Lo.”

“Lo...huh...” Joe scratched his head and offered a half smile, “still clueless...”

“What?!”

“I’m an alien, remember?”

“So am I, but I knew who you were!”

“It isn’t like I don’t recognize you on purpose!”

“Isn’t it?”

“We’ve never met!” Joe paused, a lot had happened in the last week and a half, could he have forgotten? He asked, “Have we?”

“No!” She cried. Slapping a hand across Joe’s mouth she held the index finger of her free hand to her lips and said, “Shhh...”

She dropped her hands then got to her feet. After clearing her throat, she sang, “What are you made of? Flesh and boooone-”

“Oh!” Joe realized, “You’re Lo – the musician, Lo!”

Plopping down to sit cross-legged before Joe, she bowed her head.

“I have heard of you!” Joe exclaimed, laughing, “This is crazy! I haven’t even been on this planet for two weeks and I’ve heard that song everywhere and now I’m locked up with the very artists herself!”

Lo beamed, exuberant in her victory, saying matter-of-factly, “I knew you’d recognize me.”

“You know they play that song on Earth?” Joe asked.

“Damn,” she flipped her hair over her shoulder, “I know I’m good but didn’t realize I was *that* good.”

“But it’s sung by a dude.” Joe added, “He wrote it.”

Her eyes narrowed, “I wrote it.”

“Not on Earth.”

“Right, I wrote it here.”

“And he wrote it there.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Well...” Joe shrugged, “I mean...apparently not.”

Her suspicious squint did not relent.

Joe changed the subject, “How’d you get locked up?”

“I was doing a concert in Zviecoff when the guards started attacking civilians.” Lo explained, “They would’ve let me go – considering my celebrity – but there were a lot of people there who couldn’t get out, a lot of people with nowhere to go...a lot of *my* people.”

“Gmoats?”

“Delain gmoats,” Lo nodded, “most of them were destitute. They were the main targets too. Most of the guards didn’t want to hurt civilians but by that point Shalis and Truth pretty much ruled Iceload and disobedience was suicide. To avoid killing their own people, they went for us first. Immigrants.”

“Wasn’t just guards either. By that point, they had mancercs out in the open. Folks were getting round up and syphoned for bone and shadow while they were still living. It was a donum buffet. So much so that some mancercs were straight up dying themselves, overdosing. I was among the lucky few to be shipped here.”

Joe grimaced. The image of the bobbing bodies that filled the bay of Zviecoff forced its way back from the depths of Joe’s consciousness and punched him in the gut.

“Though I wouldn’t consider us too lucky.” Lo sighed, “This is a death sentence – being sentenced to this dungeon. Sometimes I think they only spared the ones of us they did because they hated us extra and wanted to draw out our suffering.”

“Why y’all?”

She shrugged, “We’re Delian Gmoats.”

“Delian, you mean like the religion?” Joe asked.

“Yea, from the other solar system.”

“Wait...” Joe hesitated, then released his guess, “you mean all of y’all are aliens?”

“What do you mean by y’all?”

“Gmoats?”

“All gmoats?”

“Yea.”

“Not the ones from Solaris.”

“So you aren’t all aliens.”

“Haven’t you met gmoats here?”

“Yea but...I’m sorry,” Joe ran his hands down his face, “I’m completely confused.”

“Yea,” Lo let out half a chuckle, “me too.”

“Assume I don’t know anything about any of this.” Joe stated.

“Do you want me to try and explain?” Lo asked.

“Yes please, may help me better swallow my decision.”

“Your decision?”

“Shalis is seeming to suggest she’ll set me free if I work for her.”

“And you’re going to say no?”

Joe nodded.

“Ah, well then, yes,” Lo scooted forward so that she could pat Joe’s knee, “this story will definitely justify your decision to die.” She cleared her throat, “This is the story of Shalis Skullsummon, but before we get to her, I need to explain how the Order of Mancers came to be...”

Lo's Tale 1: The Rise of the Witch

After the Fourth Void War and the Second Zviecoff Negotiation, Saint, the monarchs of the Diamond Council, and the atriarchs of the Crystal Council began the process of legislating universal policies that would bind all members of the Trinity Nations. A popular issue was what to do with mancers. Since the First Void War, mancers continually wound up on the wrong side of history. The majority of members in both councils wanted outright prohibition, however, they knew this would incriminate their own Emperor – Saint was a shadowmancer.

Saint could've ignored the issue. The people loved Saint. The leaders were reluctant to discuss mancy in the meetings out of respect for their Emperor. But the respect was mutual and Saint did not allow them to silence themselves for his benefit. In a public appearance, Saint removed his crow eye and addressed the issue. He began by stating that mancy was no more evil than any other form of magic – even necro and shadowmancy – but he argued that mancy was unique in that it infringed upon the liberty of the users. All magicians require some form of energy to cast their spells, but only mancers require that energy to live.

Rather than prohibition, Saint called his solution a policy of Mancy Nonproliferation. Saint did not expect mancers to risk the curing process – the enchanted enertomb that'd replaced his crow eye was not efficient or practical for the regular, working-class individual – but he did expect a steady decline in the rate of conversions. This required the Trinity Nations to keep a head count. Saint created a neutral institution in the Dragon Islands that could double as a refugee safe haven for mancers (the Dragon Islands had only been loosely governed before this, they'd been a favorite hideout of pirates and a pain in the ass for nations bordering the Dragon Gulf). The neutrality pleased the councils who did not want to have to share their power with a monarch or atriarch from some sort of a mancer state. The mancers, on the other hand, were still cautious. Most mancers understood that mancy was a cursed form of magical art that should not be proliferated but were anxious about letting non-mancers dictate how mancy should be reduced. By controlling the “nonproliferation” themselves in their own sovereign state, they wouldn't have to worry about outsiders lack of empathy. But there was a problem. Pyromancers would've been fine, but necromancers and shadowmancers would not be able to survive on the bone and shadow of their own population.

The second element of Saint's solution addressed this but made the citizens of the Trinity Nations uneasy. Having mapped out a conservative schedule of goals for the conversion rate to drop each year, Saint promised to supply enough fire, bone, and shadow to keep the mancers on the Dragon Islands healthy. If the Order of Mancers was unable to meet Saint's demands, they could renegotiate, but Saint made it known that he was not likely to budge for he considered the schedule to be overtly careful and slow. As did the Councils. They considered it very generous and it took Saint a month of speeches to convince the constituents of both Councils not to riot if the deal went through. In the end, most of the kingdoms and dynasties ruled that their citizens did not *have* to donate the bone and shadow of their deceased to the Order, only the energy of those that explicitly noted their approval in their will would be donated. Mancers were worried the system of voluntary donation wouldn't accumulate enough to meet Saint's promises. Saint was worried too. Even after the treaty was signed, he spent many days campaigning for donations. They held off officially signing the Mancy Nonproliferation Treaty until the first round of donations had been accounted for – just to be sure the system would work – and all Saint's hard work had paid off, they just barely met the necessary numbers. Thus on January 1st

1504, the treaty went into effect and the Dragon Islands became a sovereign – albeit dependent – state ruled by the Order of Mancers.

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“With how much people hate mancers now, I’m surprised that worked.”

“You’re not alone.” Lo admitted, “There are a lot of theories out there.”

“Like what?”

“Like Saint sent undercover mancers to steal energy from graveyards or that prisoners were harvested for their energy or that Saint set up huge cattle farms in the wastelands of Darkloe where they killed thousands and thousands of animals for energy.”

“How many animals would it take to equal a human’s shadow or bone?” Joe asked.

“Wouldn’t take much to equal a human’s,” Lo snickered, “but a gmoat on the other hand...”

“No, seriously.”

“You asked about humans-”

Joe rolled his eyes, “You know what I meant.”

Lo raised an eyebrow and presented a clever smile, “Yes and now I know you’ve got a bit of a human-superiority complex.”

Scoffing, Joe shook his head, “Listen, I’m still adjusting to being in a world with a bunch of races-”

“Earth is raceless, huh?”

“Well...”

“Mhm...” Having given the Sun Child enough of a hard time, Lo went ahead and answered the question Joe’d meant to ask, “It depends. There are a lot of factors. I may be worth more than you but worth less than a dragon.”

“It isn’t by species?”

“What do you mean, ‘species’?”

“Like...I don’t know...species. You don’t know what ‘species’ means?”

“I know what ‘species’ means! Do you know what ‘species’ means?”

Frustrated, Joe thought for a moment, then said, “Isn’t one of the things that makes a species whether or not they can procreate?”

That increasingly familiar smirk returned, “You don’t think gmoats and humans can make babies?”

“I don’t know?” Joe had legitimately not thought about it before, “Can we?”

“Right now?”

“Huh?”

“Pervert.”

Joe’s face fell into his hands as he turned as red as a chidra.

“Don’t worry, as a cultural icon, I’m used to strangers asking me for sex. Apparently you’re no alien to the patriarchy.”

Joe muttered through his palms, “Cause that’s totally what I was asking...”

“So you don’t want to have sex?”

Having recovered from his blush, Joe glared back at his cellmate, “How about after the story?”

“Deal.” She cleared her throat, “For a couple hundred years, aside from a couple of controversies, the Mancy Nonproliferation Treaty seemed to be working pretty well...”

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There are three Dragon Islands. The necromancers ruled Kein, shadowmancers ruled Rein, and the Pyromancers ruled Bein. As was common in Solaris, they were ruled by democratically elected constitutional monarchs – they called these Tsars. The most populous branch’s Tsar held another title of Sheik. Originally, the Sheik had no special powers but merely acted as an ambassador to the Trinity Nations. For most of the Order’s history, this worked fine but as the politics within the Order developed the system occasionally hiccupped.

In the 1900s, after a series of fractures that had split what had been a couple of political factions into a multitude of conflicting parties, the Tsars of the Dragon Islands found themselves ruling with less popular support than ever before. As mainstream parties refused to compromise with one another, more radical parties that had previously been insignificant minorities now found a political landscape in which they could compete. One of these extremist groups, founded February 23, 1920, called themselves the Disciples of Darkness.

The group had existed for centuries, it was originally formed by a couple dozen followers of the Queen of Darkness after the collapse of her empire. They believed that the Queen would return when Solaris was ready – when Solaris was ruled by necromancers and shadowmancers. In the 1970s, the party was led by two major leaders, Truth over Kein and Borig Baba the Tiger over Rein (he was not an actual tiger but he was infamous for turning into a tiger and devouring his enemies).

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“Holy shit!”

“What?”

“Everyone was cool with a Tsar that eats people?”

“He wasn’t Tsar yet.”

“So the Tsar just let him eat people?!”

Lo rolled her eyes and groaned, “Didn’t I explain to you how the Tsar’s were losing control?”

Joe frowned, “Maybe?”

“Well they were and it was especially bad on Rein.”

“Like...cannibalism bad?”

Lo nodded.

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As both Borig and Truth found their leaders unwilling to punish them for some of their earlier offenses (murder for Borig and leaving the islands for Truth) they took their shenanigans a step further. They began to stack the deck in their favor. They’d sell dark marrow to shady regimes and smugglers and in return they’d get new converts. By the end of the 1970s, both Rein and Kein were led by Tsars loyal to the Disciples (Smra over Rein, Rotama Metrom over Kein)

though they claimed to be unaffiliated with any party. In 1982, the Disciples felt secure enough to rule openly and Borig the Tiger won the election, replacing Smra.

But the Disciples retained one last hurdle: Bein. To mask the rise in their conversion rates, the Tsars of Rein and Kein could not use their actual population numbers to trump the Tsar of Pyromancers for the position of Sheik. The Tsar of Pyromancy in the 1980s was Pyre Ein. Most of Bein's Tsars came from the Ein family, the Eins were the dynastic rulers of the Dragon Islands before Saint created the Order of Mancers. By the Fourth Void War, the Eins had lost nearly all control and had adopted pyromancy as a means to defend their final stronghold in Bein from the ever-encroaching pirates. The creation of the Order of Mancers solved the Eins' piracy problem which was one reason why the majority of pyromancers had a positive opinion of Saint and his Mancy Nonproliferation Treaty and also why the pyromancers were ever more suspicious of the other two branches (many of the citizens of Kein and Rein were descendants of the pirates that had harassed them). Pyre Ein assumed the Disciples were fudging their numbers so Tsars Borig and Rotama kept a strict privacy policy.

This became harder and harder as years went on. More numbers led to vast shortages of not only shadow and bone but other essentials like food and clean water. Outside of the Tsar's city, warlords sanctioned by the Disciples maintained a system of violent capitalism in which the most vile of individuals rose to the top, one of which was Shalis Skullsummon. Once she had gained the respect of the party leaders, she began to plot how to replace them.

One of the shady regimes the Disciples paired up with was that of Yaimon Ren, a military leader and a shadowmancer, who staged a successful coup in the Mirkweed Kingdom of the Aquarian Ocean in 1979. A few years later, there was another coup and Yaimon was exiled. He took asylum in Rein. From Rein, he continued to funnel converts into the Dragon Islands, teaming up with a military leader, Lacitar Te-Naryt, that opposed the regime with which he'd been replaced.

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"Lacitar!" Joe exclaimed, "You mean the evil king of Aquaria?"

"He wasn't king yet-

"I know that he was chief of police – no, second to the chief of police...something like the...jee...chee..." Joe shrugged, "some vice general or another..."

Laying her palms open to the heavens, Lo stared squint-eyed and half slack jawed.

"What?"

"You know the life story of the fishfolk's king but next to nothing about the Order..."

Joe folded his arms against his chest, "I just left the Aquarian Ocean."

"True," Lo conceded, "so you know about him and Yaimon?"

"Yea! Lacitar rounded up rebels, turned them into mancercs, then exiled them as terrorists – handing them over to Yaimon." As Lo nodded, Joe continued, "Then Yaimon started terrorizing Lacitar's folks and-

"That was the end of their partnership, but not the end of Lacitar's dealings with the Order..."

- - -

Shalis Skullsummon was the main go-between for the Aquarians and Kein. Both Yaimon and Lacitar had grown to like her. When Yaimon and Lacitar began to beef, Lacitar went to Borig the Tiger, Yaimon's superior, and demanded that he do something about Yaimon or he, Lacitar, would stop sending them fresh recruits. Borig could care less. By this point, the islands were crawling with fishfolk converts, so much so that even Borig was becoming a little anxious about the chaos in his and Rotama's island kingdoms. Plus, he knew Lacitar couldn't stop his purges. Borig was right. But though Lacitar needed the Disciples, he didn't need the shadowmancers, there was always the necromancers and his favorite up-and-coming homicidal maniac Shalis "the Witch" Skullsummon.

Four years after Yaimon was exiled, his lifeless body was found on the streets of Aquaria. In this same year, 1986, the number of necromancers exceeded that of the shadowmancers. Borig was aware of this, also of Shalis' undercutting, but his biggest threats came from within Rein (or so he thought). The anarchy in the towns and villages around the Tsar's city was beginning to make members of the Disciples' political elite wary of his rule. His response was to crack down. He consumed the shadows and flesh of any who was caught dissenting. This flushed many of the leading shadowmancers out of Rein, such as the ex-Tsar Smra and the future-Tsar Adora Shadowstorm.

Those fleeing Borig were welcomed by Shalis as she led a movement opposing her own Tsar. However, she didn't place the blame on Rotama, instead she placed the blame on the Nonproliferation Treaty. Rather than to fight her for dissent, like Borig would've, Rotama agreed with her. He stepped down and was gladly accepted into Shalis' cabinet as she ran for Tsar and was elected in 1987.

Almost as soon as the year began, Shalis declared war on Borig. This wasn't a war on shadowmancy, some of the most revered shadowmancers were on her side, but this was a war to oust Borig. When Shalis and her army invaded Rein, they found more support for Shalis than Borig. That said, the majority of shadowmancers were loyal to neither and continued to fight for their warlord against both sides. The war lasted two years.

The world watched in horror. The Order of Mancers' Dragon Islands, which for hundreds of years had been considered a major success, were now the site of some of the most atrocious acts against people on the planet. With Saint's guidance, the Trinity Nations contracted private investigators to assess the situation. Almost immediately they reported that both the shadowmancers and necromancers had been fudging their numbers, but what the world focused on was the reports of torture, cannibalism, and genocide. Though this fascinated the Trinity Nations' two councils, their citizens were not endangered. Why should they send troops to save the lives of shadow slingers and bone benders – especially when they brought the instability upon themselves? Saint was the only one with a say in the matter that was determined to end the conflict, yet God's Island had no army (this was before the Samurai). His initial proposal was to form a team and bring peace to Rein and Kein himself, but the Diamond and Crystal Council voted him down. Thus, Saint sought an alternative: contractors.

Despite Shalis' obvious infringements, she was the new Tsar. Though she spewed anti-Nonproliferation/Trinity Nations, pro-New Pact propaganda, Saint hoped that by lending her aid she might soften and help him to bring back the Order of old that had seemed to work so well. His mercenaries, which included the Kou Warriors, went in on the side of Shalis and by 1989 Borig the Tiger and a flock of loyalists had fled the Dragon Islands.

In the wake, Shalis agreed to return to the policy of a yearly reduction in conversion rates. Now that she held a vast majority, why wouldn't she? The new Sheik had even gotten

Saint to promise to provide for the extra bone and shadows needed to compensate for the swollen numbers (which he accomplished by paying governments to donate more – a controversial move).

The blame shifted to pirates, which was by no means misguided. Nearly every smuggler had been involved in the proliferation of mancy to benefit the Disciples. In 1990, Saint declared war on piracy. The Pirate Wars did vastly reduce the amount of smugglers, however the strongest gangs were able to stick around and did so by becoming more militant. But, through the Pirate Wars, Saint got himself a bit of military: the Imperial Navy – headed by the atriarch of the Sentry family and later Zaria Ein (adopted daughter of Pyre Ein).

Meanwhile, Shalis and Adora (the new Tsar of Shadowmancy) behaved themselves. Saint had entrusted Pyre Ein, the Tsar of Pyromancy, with surveillance. Pyromancers occupied the Tsar cities on both Rein and Kein. Shalis didn't need to shake things up in the Dragon Islands, she could operate elsewhere through Lacitar in the Aquarian Ocean and Truth on land. Truth had been an active and high-ranking member among the Disciples for most of Shalis' rise, but by the mid-1980s she spent most of her time off the island investing in personal projects. One such project was to place herself behind the throne of Batloe, where the king was soon to die and revolution was on the lips of the people. Shalis was especially interested.

In 1993 the king died and revolution followed and – as I'm sure you know...

- - -

“You don't know?!”

All Joe could do was sheepishly grin.

“The Samurai, Joe!”

“The Samurai,” Joe whapped his temple with the base of his palm, “I knew that...”

“Mhm,” Lo rolled her eyes and went ahead and explained, “the Samurai foiled Truth's plans, leading the Layman's Revolution, but Truth didn't give up. She fled to Iceload where a revolution had recently occurred. There she managed to corrupt the mind of the new king, the Mystvokar, Talloome Icelore, and create a refuge for the Disciples in Icelore...”

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Shalis wasn't quite ready for the relocation. She was determined to somehow take over the pyromancers too, so that all mancy would work together towards one end, the Disciples' end: preparing Solaris for the return of the Queen. This was more ambitious than the Disciples before her, the pyromancers had always been the odd person out.

Ever since Saint first returned from Delia during the Fourth Void War, legend spread that Chane – the first pyromancer – and his crew of exiled fire elves had found their way into Delia. True or not, it was true that the population of the Delian kingdom of Drave was renowned for having a large population of pyromancers. Not only that but it was the Kingdom of Drave that had supported Creaton against Saint during the Fourth Void War. Truth had been dabbling in interworld travel. The Soul Staff she'd created could be used to power a dormant portal like the one in Mount Ahsik – the one Saint had traveled through nearly five hundred years ago. However, this portal was under close watch by trusted companions of Saint – and the last thing Truth wanted to do was draw attention to the Disciples activities in Darkloe. Instead, Truth experimented with a portal hidden behind the isolationist walls of a pariah state: Vinnum Tow.

Using an ancient portal in Vinnum Tow, Truth came in contact with a group of Dravish refugees in another state that was not their homeland, eager to come to Solaris, or to go anywhere, where they might live in peace. Over half of them were pyromancers.

Vinnum Tow had no intention of housing refugees, in fact, they made it clear to Truth that they'd stick every last fire elf on a ship and send them sailing. However, they were still fond of the idea of bringing the aliens to Solaris. After all, the fire elves were slave holders themselves and the leaders of Vinnum Tow were interested to see how the altruistic Saint would respond to stranded Delian slave holders and the enslaved persons that would come with them. Truth and Shalis figured whatever happened, Saint would have to send the pyromancers amongst the Delians to the Dragon Islands where they might not make a majority but they may be able to put together enough votes to replace Pyre Ein with a more Disciple-sympathetic Tsar.

Saint stayed true to his principles. He demanded that the alien fire elves release their slaves or return from whence they came (they requested Saint open the portal in Darkloe for them to escape through instead but Saint obviously refused – as far as he knew, the aliens on the other end of that portal would still want to see him dead). Then Saint demanded that the mancers among them be admitted to the Order to live on the Dragon Islands. Those that remained took refuge in Dogloe where King Catch Eninac generously offered them state-funded housing in Dogloen cities and land in the Marble Plains.

Catch's act of kindness did have an agenda. Dogloe had and has the largest population of gmoats beneath Solaris and the Delians' slaves had all been gmoats. Their system was reinforced by a narrative of gmoatish inferiority. He hoped that by living in Dogloe and meeting Solarin gmoats the Dravish fire elves might learn to adopt a more Trinity Nations like perspective on racial differences. As for the liberated slaves, they weren't sticking around to find out.

Few settled in Dogloe. Before being enslaved, the gmoats came from an icy continent. They'd been enslaved by the Erifs when forced to flee the melting shores of their homeland and had been sold to the Dravish when the Dravish came to Erif as refugees. Thus, most of the Delian gmoats went to Iceload.

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“How'd that work out?”

“Not so well,” Lo stated, “King Talloome wasn't a big fan of accepting droves of capital-less freed slaves but he found a way to use it to do his bidding. If you were a Delian Gmoat that wanted to come to Iceload, all you had to do was enlist.”

“Join the military?”

“Yup.”

Joe scoffed, “Did they even speak the language?”

“Nope,” Lo laughed, “but, fortunately, we caught on fast.”

“So your folks were in the military?”

“No. That's just it, most of us enlisted then disappeared.”

“What?”

“Yea!” Lo grinned, “People would sign up, stick around for a few days, then run away.”

“And then what?”

“Just live on the streets, work where you could find work.”

“Didn't Talloome get pissed?”

“Oh yeah...” the grin died, Lo sighed, “after that, you could be arrested in Iceload for having horns, hooves, and a tail.”

“Yikes...” Joe paused for a moment, offering Lo a moment of silent reflection before getting the conversation back on task, “So, what happened with the Dravish pyromancers?”

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Shalis Skullsummon was correct. The influx of pyromancers booted Pyre Ein out of office as soon as elections came around in 1995, which initially enraged the old residents but the replacement, Sunasha Flamecall, quickly stole the hearts of the people of Bein. She agreed to work with Pyre and vehemently condemned the Disciples. To Shalis’ amazement, the new pyromancers knew nothing of the Queen. They knew the Delian Prophecy, and of the darkness foretold to return, but not of the Queen of Darkness. And to make matters worse, Sunasha didn’t just take an anti-Disciple stance, she took an anti-necromancy and anti-shadowmancy stance and argued that pyromancers deserved to rule the Order.

So the Disciples invaded Bein. Within a month, spies sent to the island reported back to Saint that not a pyromancer was left alive or dead. It was as if each and every last pyromancer had wandered into some hidden portal and disappeared off the face of the planet. In response to this action, both the Diamond and Crystal Council clamored for a stern response and Saint concurred. The Pirate Wars ended and the War on Mancy began.

The Mystakle Samurai sneaked into Bein and captured Shalis Skullsummon. Saint hoped to use her as leverage to get the Disciples to come clean about the fate of the pyromancers, but they would not. Instead, the Disciples left the Dragon Islands, finding a new home either in the Acropoliskia of Darkloe or under Talloome Icelore’s wing in Iceload where Truth already had control of the Mystvokar. Though Shalis eventually escaped – this escape defining, for some, the start of the War on Mancy – and the Trinity Nations discovered where the rest of the Order was hiding, they still have not found the pyromancers and with the return of Creaton Live to Solaris, they’ve ceased to look.

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“They’re here, then.”

“Huh?”

“The pyromancers.” Joe elaborated, “Hermes and Shalis said Sunasha was my cell mate, so the pyromancers are here.”

Lo snorted, “No they’re not.”

“Sunasha was.”

“That’s only one.”

“How do you know there aren’t more?” Joe snapped, “You’re a prisoner same as me!”

“I know because...” Lo’s tongue stumbled, “well...I suppose I don’t know.”

“Exactly.” Joe folded his arms.

“If they are here,” Lo stated, “then they’re dead.”

“I take it back.” Joe gulped, “You were right.”

Chapter Seventeen: Kingdoms of Ice

By the time they reached Rivergate, the overcast skies had begun to drop the first flakes of the impending storm. The *Monoceros* was there, bobbing amongst the bodies now frozen together over the bay in a sheet of death, a testament to the gross evil of the Order. The boys were too tired to be affected. Though they managed to get both Bold and Zalfron awake, the two could hardly stand let alone walk. Lugging the lanky elf and stocky dwarf through the trolley tunnels of Zviecoff was as exhausting as battle. It didn't help that the two were delirious, singing gibberish and thrashing about during fits of hallucinations. Having seen his fair share of bad trips, enduring many himself, Nogard was impressed by the mind-altering power of exhaustion and, to be honest, a little bit jealous. The tunnel dropped them up halfway down Rivergate and they took the stairs the rest of the way.

The *Monoceros* was able to crush its way through the crust of corpses and escape the bay. Though Zach claimed to have seen scouts watching from atop Rivergate, there was no effort on the Order's part to stop them.

Shaprone and Ekaf manned the helm while the soldiers of the Vokriit ransacked the bar. The Battle General knew that a return to civilization would be more bitter than sweet for his troops, knowing full well they'd be expected to depart to invade Icelore soon after. A booze cruise was the least he could do. The storm descended down from the Vanian Mountains, following them to Triskele where the *Monoceros* flanked the clouds and rode north up the Etihw. When Solaris set, there was not a lick of alcohol left onboard which wasn't good because that's about when Zalfron and Boldarian finally woke up and both men were aching – Bold in his head and Zalfron there and everywhere else.

As Bold meditated – his books were in desperate need of re-paging – Zalfron hobbled off, with Zach's help, in search of food. He was elated to reach the kitchen but his joy subsided when he saw who was in the kitchen. It wasn't Nogard and Machuba that turned him off, but Shaprone Ipativy.

The tension was pungent.

Nogard and Machuba turned from where they stood at the stove. Two knights that were sitting nearby scooted their chairs back from the table and sat up straight. Shaprone met Zalfron's glare. Despite the elf's desire to surge towards the General, Zach wasn't budging from where he stood hoisting Zalfron up in the doorway.

Shaprone shattered the silence with a nod saying, "Sentry-"

Zalfron flung himself from Zach's side, hoping to reach the table which he could grasp for support. His bound got him to the table but his arms were just as weak as his legs and the rest of his body. No sooner did his palms hit the surface of the table than did his elbows buckle and his upper body slam, face first, onto the tabletop with such force that he rebounded off the table. He would've landed flat on his back had Zach not jumped forward to catch him by his arm pits.

Shaprone and his fellow knights shot out of their seats, standing with their hands by their belts (where their swords would've been had they not been in R & R mode). Nogard and Machuba rushed over to assist Zach as Zalfron continued to thrash. Frothing at the mouth, all the elf could manage was mangled gibberish.

"STOP!" Zach roared.

This miraculously stilled Zalfron as if the spirit's silver eyes had caught Zalfron like he was a minnow looking into the light of an angler fish. Both Machuba and Nogard exchanged

impressed glances. Zach, slightly embarrassed at his own outburst, continued in his natural, subdued tone.

“What is it?”

The spell was broken, Zalfron’s rage returned, though this time at a controllable level. His golden eyes rolled back to glare at Shaprone, “Ya...ya got no raht sayin that name.”

Shaprone pointed to the door and his soldiers happily obeyed his orders, clawing past one another to get out of the kitchen. Once gone, Shaprone said, “You have no clue-”

“YOU SAID YOU’D PROTECT HER?!”

His words hit Shaprone like a bag of bricks. The knight staggered back from the table. He looked Zalfron in the eye once more saying only, “I loved your sister.” before marching out of the room with his eyes on the floor.

Zach hoisted Zalfron back up to a standing position and Machuba slid a chair out from under the table so that Zalfron could sit down.

“I may be ignorant, Civ.” Machuba warned before asking, “I know Shaprone was Talloome’s General, but isn’t it a stretch to blame him for what happened to your sister?”

“They were getting married.” Zalfron stated.

“Shaprone and Tabuh?” Machuba asked.

The elf nodded.

“I dought Tou Fou and Tabuh had a ding.” Nogard mumbled.

“It was complicated.” Zalfron admitted, “But Shaprone promised mae, *to mah face*, that hae would kaep her safe, then hae led an army against her.”

“Do you think he was lying?” Machuba asked.

“Uh, yea!” Zalfron scoffed.

“No, just now, when he said he loved her.”

Zalfron hesitated, then said, “Ah don’t know.”

“I will not claim to understand your pain,” Zach said, “but I do understand your distrust. Not long ago, Iceload was our enemy. The Iceloadic fought for Talloome, for the Mystvokar, but they were doing the Order’s bidding.”

Zalfron chimed in, “And ah betcha some of thase soldiers in this boat raht now were in battle against mah sister and the Samurah...”

Zach continued, “But now they fight Shalis and only Shalis.”

“And she has Joe.” Machuba stated.

Nogard threw his hands towards the heavens, half serious and half just being Nogard, “Who will save da Samurai!”

“Hopefullay...” Zalfron muttered.

Zach nodded, “Our only hope.”

Zalfron groaned, “Ah get it.”

“You don’t have to like him.” Zach said.

“Ah don’t.” Zalfron said, “Ah won’t.”

“You should talk to him about it.” Machuba suggested.

Zach elbowed Machuba in the shoulder, not a gentle action when still adorned from foot to toe in heavy armor.

“But make sure one of us be dere,” Nogard smiled, “in fact, more dan one of us.”

“Ah thank ah’ll just avoid him for a whahl,” Zalfron decided, “til after wae get Joe back.”

“In da mean time,” Nogard pulled his pipe from his robe pocket, “let’s eat, my boy!”

As the *Monoceros* crept up the Etihw, away from the blizzard, Acamus Icespear led his troops through the Vanian Mountains enduring sleet, snow, and hail as they marched unperturbed towards Recercoff. The trails between the two ethnic capitals could be traversed by the long legged minotaurs in less than a day under sunny skies but the weather slowed the soldiers down and, when combined with their exhaustion from the previous struggles in Zviecoff, Acamus was forced to stop whenever they came across a little mountain village. Though most of the Muslims of the Blue Ridges didn't consume alcohol, most weren't opposed to a little coffee here and there and so the troops would cram into small town taverns, holding their frozen hands to the fires, sipping that dark, bitter elixir as the heavens above clamored to remind all that winter rarely ended west of the Etihw.

"One more round for the whole lot, my friend."

The owner nodded and barked the order down the bar where the bar tenders had clustered to listen to the soldiers' tales of war. Though the owner scowled at her lusty employees, she herself was busy chatting up a prince with her eyes, every once in a while, drifting to the minotaur's left hand and bare ring finger.

"What do you think?"

"Me?" She almost laughed but cut her breathe short so as not to spill as she refilled Acamus' mug, "What would I know?"

"You know as well as I what my father means to our people," Acamus elaborated, "but you lack the inherent prejudice I have as his son."

"You must go to Icelore! Absolutely!" She cried, able to laugh now that the coffee pot was back on its warmer.

"But would he want me to risk the lives of our people just to save his own?"

"No," she admitted, "but if he were here and that were any other minotaur locked away in Icelore, you and I both know Theseus would advocate any means to return them."

Acamus responded with a fake smile that fooled no one but the owner didn't call him on it. It wasn't whether invading Icelore to save his father was the right thing to do or not, that wasn't what weighed heavy on his mind, it was whether or not he was being realistic or not. Would the Order actually bring Theseus to Icelore alive? *The Order is evil, not idiotic. What if we risk these souls for naught?*

His thoughts were interrupted as the tavern door was flung open with such force that it slammed back shut. Again, it opened but this time a frosted figure stood in its way as she staggered inside and over to the bar. The soldiers fell silent. With a grunt, Acamus rose and went over to the woman, setting his steaming coffee down before the traveler and beckoning to the owner for another. Another, less frozen, minotaur came in the door.

"Acamus," this second newcomer said, "she comes from Recercoff, told me she was taking word to Zviecoff, so I figured she might as well take her message straight here."

Acamus turned back to the shivering woman beside him. She pushed the mug back towards him.

Acamus modified his order "A warm water, please!" Then asked the woman, "Could Recercoff not send a mole?"

"That's what I said!" The villager that had redirected the messenger came to sit beside Acamus at the bar, "Said an Alpha Bull wanted to be sure the Coalition forces got the message."

Acamus didn't want to press the recuperating messenger, he waited in silence and let the glass of warm water do what it could. In the meantime, he speculated. The bulls of Recercoff had been anti-Icespear for a while now. The working class of the minotaur capital and the Taurals (rural minotaurs of the villages that populated the Blue Ridges) practically worshiped their King, but those that controlled the bulls in the city – those that elected the Alpha Bull – were not so fond. They disliked Theseus' investment in other plight of the other peoples of Iceload and his decisions to aid the Samurai combined with the Empire's following abandonment after the Samurai were defeated had done serious damage to the Icespear's image in the eyes of those already not so fond. This animosity created a tension between Recercoff and the Taurals, a tension that led to the Alpha Bull sending a messenger to bear witness to the transmission of a message that would likely run counter to the Icespear's pro-Coalition agenda.

Finally, the messenger had thawed.

"Rautonim Kurr," she began and Acamus cringed, Rautonim was the staunchest proponent of isolationism in Recercoff. An outspoken critic of GraiLord participation in the Coalition, "as Alpha Bull, in solemn recognition of Theseus Icespear's death--"

The house erupted as contempt spewed forth from the mouths of the enlisted men and women.

"QUIET!" Acamus commanded before turning back to the messenger to say, "My father is not dead."

"He was wounded and alone in Rivergate and no reports of him have circulated since--"

"And the Bull took that to be a death sentence?!" Acamus roared, inciting another uproar from the congregation, "Quiet, my friends," he turned back to the messenger, "Theseus Icespear did not die in Rivergate."

The messenger said nothing but reluctantly held the prince's gaze.

Acamus said, "Deliver the message."

The messenger gulped then dragged the words off her tongue, "The GraiLord will withdraw from Zviecoff and return to Recercoff."

The troops didn't need another order to stay quiet, though they still felt outrage. Acamus too was furious but he took a moment and a sip of coffee then responded coolly, "Rautonim would have us abandon Theseus?"

"The majority of the bull voted so, sir," the messenger said, her head bowed over the drink she cradled, "Recercoff thinks Theseus dead. The people are in mourning."

Acamus was appalled, "Theseus survived the Queen of Darkness, the Moon Dragon Man, and dueled Iahtro and Flow Morain both. He fought through the Disciples as the Samurai dropped like flies around him, they think he'd falter now?"

The messenger didn't respond at first but after Acamus and the entire bar for that matter remained silent, she dared to illustrate the opposing argument.

"The people of Recercoff love Theseus as do all minotaurs," she swallowed her spit then continued, "but we have no stake in Zviecoff. We have nothing to gain from this Coalition. It is the greatest news that Theseus is well, is it not also great news that no more minotaurs will have to fight for elven land?"

"No," Acamus couldn't hold back a snarl, "because now we must fight for nellaf land."

"Icelore? Let the Vokriit deal with the Order!"

"Theseus is there now."

The messenger was silenced.

“What’d Rautonim say about all us?” The villager who brought her to the tavern asked, gesturing to himself and those behind the bar.

The owner added to her neighbor’s notion, “We can’t just leave our homes and hide behind the walls of Recercoff when the Order finishes with the elves and bearns and nellafs and decides to come for us. If they got Icelore and Zviecoff, then we’re the ones that lie between. Not the Vokriit.”

Acamus placed his hand on the messenger’s shoulder, now trembling with frustration, “Stay here for the night, my friend, wait out the storm, then return to Recercoff and tell Rautonim and his friends that we will be meeting the Vokriit in Icelore to join my father, to slay Shalis, and to destroy the Order.”

“Sir?” The newcomer to the conversation was one of the troops. Acamus gave him a nod and he continued, “What of reinforcements?”

Another soldier chimed in without permission but Acamus let it slide, the woman said, “And how will we get to Icelore without dragons from Recercoff?”

“We’ll have to make do with what we have, my friends.” Acamus sighed, then turned back to the messenger, “Regardless of where you stand, it is safe to say that Recercoff won’t change their mind on the issue?”

She nodded.

Acamus frowned.

The bar owner spoke up again, “What about us folks?”

“Yea,” said the man that had brought the messenger, “there are dozens of Taural villages tween here and Recercoff and hundreds of able-bodied men and women.”

“Dragons too!” The bar owner exclaimed.

“Taurals ain’t got the luxury to ignore what’s going on here!”

“Taurals who would be honored to give their lives for Theseus Icespear!”

A soldier asked, “But can they fight?”

“Can they?” The bar owner laughed.

“Son,” the messenger’s guide chuckled, “we couldn’t survive in the Blue Ridges if we couldn’t.”

“There won’t be time for me to visit each village,” Acamus stated, he turned to the messenger’s guide, “Sir, what is your name?”

“Akiline Orest”

Acamus turned to the bar owner, “And you?”

“Kaly Aspasia.”

“Akiline, Kaly, if you would come up with a list of villages to which you can provide directions, villages all within less than a day’s reach,” Acamus gestured to the other bar tenders, fully enthralled by the conversation, “any of you that can help them would be appreciated.”

“What of villages further out?” Akiline asked.

“He’s right,” Kaly nodded, “there are many wealthy mining villages near Medullbrik.”

“I shall write them.” Acamus determined, “Do you have moles?”

“Shield dragons.” Akiline and Kaly said simultaneously.

“That’ll do, my friends, and I cannot thank you enough.”

“What if this is all for naught?” The messenger returned to the conversation, genuine concern in her eyes, “What if you fail?”

Acamus clasped her on the shoulder, “If we do, our souls won’t be haunted by shame. My only fear is for you and the people of Recercoff, safe as you may be behind your walls, if we fail it will be no fault of our own. If we fail, there will be no sleep in Recercoff.”

He turned away from the messenger, towards his comrades, “We will send twelve groups out to gather the willing and the able. We must be upfront with our people. There are no weapons to spare nor any steeds, so only those that can provide for themselves and can share a dragon can accompany us to Icelore. We won’t take young parents and we won’t take a young folk who has no siblings to leave behind.”

“Where shall we regroup?” A soldier asked.

Acamus thought for a moment, then decided, “Mount Krynor.”

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Ipativy spread across the hills where the tundra of the Vanian Mountains met the taiga of the Etihw River valley. The city had once rivaled the size of Zviecoff – both in persons and in bulk. It had never been quite as tall for while Zviecoff was confined to the top of a glacier, Ipativy sprawled out. Its sprawl had given rise to the series of villages that resided across the river. So linked to Ipativy were the Hale Villages that when Ipativy refused to take part in Talloome’s coup, the villagers stood with them. And the villagers were the first to feel the Mystvokar’s wrath. Despite the destruction of their neighbors, Ipativy maintained their resistance and for their insolence they were destroyed. Neighborhoods scorched, towers toppled, civilians slaughtered in a great, black bonfire. But the Ipativians were a resilient people. Construction began immediately upon their liberation – this liberation came only two months before Joe arrived in Solaris, so as the *Monoceros* approached heavy construction was still underway.

Scaffolds and cranes stood everywhere. The clangs and thuds of hammering, the hissing and spitting of welding, and the scraping growl of sawing created a commotion somewhat similar to that of the sound of war. The skeletons of three great walls that would split the city into three rings, each a hundred feet higher than the last, was not even the most ambitious project underway. Though not yet visible, the plans for the construction above the walls were even more radical. There was to be another hundred feet of towers atop each wall and these towers were to be connected by a series of arches which were to be connected by bridges. The blueprints designed a maze, complete with dead ends, to make invasion by dalvary nearly impossible for any force not trained in the maze itself. The Master of the City, Lanigiro Seman, told Saint, “If the Queen of Darkness returns, come to Ipativy. Not even a moon dragon could bring us down. Ipativy will never fall again.”

“Ipativy will soon be known as the Armored City.” Shaprone said to Ekaf as they sailed into port the morning after they left Zviecoff, “The City with a Cuber’s Shell.”

Once the *Monoceros* was docked, they made a bee line for Fort Vanii (the fort that sat within the third ring of walls, at the center of Ipativy). They being Ekaf, Nogard, Machuba, Zach, and Shaprone. Bold was still busy healing Zalfron and the troops had been released to do as they pleased so long as they returned to the fort by the following morning. Jaeko Road wove through the city from the front gate all the way to the heart of the fortress. The people of Ipativy lined the road staring in silence, wondering who these foreigners were that traveled with their General and praying that the soldiers in their families might be among the lucky few that returned for a day of vacation.

When they arrived at Fort Vanii, the guards hustled to lift the gate then scurried off to spread the word that the General had returned. Knights came scurrying down the scaffolds along the wall, filing out of the half-constructed towers, and jogging over bridges like children called out for recess. Like the civilians, they came to stand along Jaeko Road in silence, watching silently, keeping their questions in their eyes. The road finally came to a stop in a football-field-sized courtyard which sat at the very center of Ipativy. When they arrived in the clearing, it seemed as though every knight in the fort was present. Nogard, Machuba, and Zach were surprised to see that, though Ipativy had suffered many casualties in Zviecoff and in the battles of the war that preceded it, it seemed Fort Vanii couldn't spare room for another soldier.

As they made their way into the center of the courtyard, an earth elf in Vokriit garb with a tiny dragon perched on his shoulder plate approached. Ekaf pinched Nogard who let out a peep of a scream before stopping himself. He and Machuba and Zach turned to the Knome who then nodded at the approaching earth elf saying, "That's Commander Cedar Row – he fought for the Samurai, nearly died trying to defend this city from Talloome and the mancers."

"Commander," Shaprone addressed his fellow knight, "we need to get the Strategy Generals to—"

"Shaprone," Cedar clasped Shaprone on the shoulder, "the Generals are already on their way."

Shaprone frowned.

"We received word from the GraiLords, fumes actually." Cedar explained, giving a nod to the shield dragon on his shoulder, "It was from Acamus. It was vague but enough to give me an idea, I sent for the Generals as soon as I got the message."

"What do you think the Generals will say?"

"There are five Strategy Generals," Ekaf whispered to Machuba, Nogard, and Zach, "and they vote on military decisions that aren't isolated to the authority of the Battle General – such as recruitments and new offensive engagements. With a unanimous vote, they can command the Battle General – as they did to pull troops out of Zviecoff."

"With the GraiLord on board," Cedar said, "You might actually get your way."

Ekaf continued to give the boys the low down, "The minotaurs pulling out of Zviecoff is one reason the Vokriit decided too – that plus it reeked of stalemate."

Shaprone sighed with relief, nodding his head. His nodding stopped as he gazed about. There wasn't just curiosity in the eyes of the soldiers around them, there was an ounce of despair. Almost a pleading in their posture, begging for good news.

Shaprone said to Cedar, "I suppose I should be more concerned about the opinions of our men and women."

"Yes," Cedar switched his smile for a frown, "pulling back on the fight for Zviecoff hasn't helped."

Turning to look at the crowd around them, respectfully standing just far enough away to be out of ear shot, Shaprone asked Cedar, "How many of these gathered are fresh recruits?"

"Roughly half," Cedar answered, "more accustomed to a pickaxe than to their blades."

"Alright then," the Battle General cleared his throat, "my comrades!"

The unorganized cluster of troops stiffened into attention. Their hands slapped their hearts and stuck to their chests in the traditional Iceloadic salute.

"Zviecoff is now in the Witch's hands." Shaprone paused to allow for the collective groan, "The Castle, the Wall, those she can't take from us. No matter how many mancers and pirates and black-jersey-ed traitors she shoves atop that glacier, she won't take those from us."

She's trying hard now. Sending everything she has. And in doing so she has made a fatal mistake. She's left Icelore open to invasion."

There was an aggregate gasp. He let the ensuing silence linger in order to sense the sentiment of the crowd. There was an air of hope, an eagerness to be optimistic yet a practical hesitation, *can we truly invade Icelore?*

"Theseus Icespear has been captured. He now sits in a cell in Icelore." Shaprone didn't pause to allow a response, "The Blue Ridges tremble with rage. As I speak now, Acamus Icespear is gathering the GraiLord in preparation for this ultimate assault. With or without us, they will storm the shore of Icelore aiming at the core of the Order – I almost pity the shadow slingers and bone benders that get in their way." He paced towards one side of the courtyard, coming close enough to the soldiers that he could clasp one on the shoulder. So he did. Asking, "What is the Vokriit?"

"The people's army, General!"

"And who are the people?"

"The Iceloadic, General!"

The soldier was a bearn. Had he picked an elf, he might've gotten an elf-centric response, but Shaprone was a clever man. The bearn's answer received scattered cheers. Shaprone turned from the soldier to address all those gathered there once more.

"Are the minotaurs our people?"

"AYE!" Was the thundering consensus.

"Will we let our allies embark on this endeavor alone!"

"NAY!"

He shook a young warrior playfully, "We can't let the minotaurs hoard all the glory, now can we?" The soldier smiled, but Shaprone wanted a response, "Can we?!"

"No, General!" She shouted.

"Godi, right!" Shaprone patted her shoulder then strolled down the ranks, looking each comrade in the eye as he passed, "And with our help, together, the Coalition – the Vokriit will drive a blade through Shalis Skullsummon's wretched heart. Will it be a nellaf? A bearn? A minotaur or an elf – aye, we've gotta couple Delian gmoats amongst us that might get at it?" He turned to Cedar and shot him a heart-slapping salute, "Might even be our earth elven brother that gets to do her in. That's the only question before us: who will be the lucky bastard to get to her first!"

The troops roared. They'd been temporarily convinced. But in the night, alone in their beds, Shaprone new doubt might creep back in upon them, so he continued.

"These men I brought with me, they saved my life in Zviecoff – not to mention the lives of our comrades." The crowd quieted, "Nogard Otubak, Machuba Gill, Zachias a Shisharay of the Woodland Ridge Monastery," a wave of awe spread across the knights, "and in the harbor, on board the ship, the ship these gentlemen hijacked from the Sea Lords – that's right, the *Monoceros* once more sails for the righteous – back on this ship rest two more heroes, two more of my saviors' comrades, Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth and *Zalfron Sentry*."

The amazement escalated into cheers at the last name he mentioned.

"They came to Zviecoff following a human, a human cuckmancer, a human they claim to be the Sun Child." Shaprone chuckled so as to keep the troops from scoffing at him but rather at the idea, then he raised his hands to quiet them, "Now, now, I know, I know, we've all heard of this Sun Child, but then again...it is intriguing, is it not?" The silence suggested his comrades agreed, "This human's party has quite the characters, reminiscent of the Samurai, only, instead of

serving Saint, instead of acting in the best interest of the Trinity Nations, to the chagrin of those that recite his Foretelling, this supposed savior has come to aid those members of the alliance that Saint seems to have forgotten.”

The skepticism began to dwindle.

“And this cuckmancer is not here today, nor is he recovering from the battle back onboard the *Monoceros*. No, he was captured attempting to save Theseus and both were taken to Icelore. Sun Child or no, he and his comrades saved my life and the lives of our men and women. Sun Child or no, he is a hero and he is our ally.”

He paused, slowly making his way back to the center of the courtyard.

“We have the opportunity to save the souls of two heroes – one who has saved Solaris and one who may come to do so in the future. And if he is the Sun Child and if you believe the Foretelling was true, then even if the odds weren’t in our favor already, comrades – *we cannot lose!*”

“Too long has the Order clung to Iceload like parasites! First they stole our Mystvokar and now they have stolen our capital! How can we sit back and build up our walls waiting to mourn the next victim of that Witch’s appetite? These men behind me and the two waiting in the harbor, they are prepared to go on to that frozen island alone, to save two friends, if we do not accompany them. *Two friends?!* We stand the chance to save the entirety of this continent! To save the Vokriit! To truly redeem this state as Talloome Icelore originally intended!”

The General bowed his head. In his pause, the air grew taut. Solaris ceased hesitating for a moment. Somewhere, of in the distance, Death wondered if he’d accidentally frozen time. Then Shaprone continued.

“You may be tired, this war has worn us all, if so I understand and I will not ask you to join us. I too will go alone and the Strategy Generals can find a new-”

Shaprone’s words were drowned out by the fervent cries of the knights that filled the courtyard. Fists and blades were raised towards Solaris as the crowd converged upon Ekaf, Nogard, Machuba, Zachias, and their leader. Through all of the clamor, Cedar Row managed to shout a question to Shaprone.

“DO YOU REALLY THINK WE CAN DO THIS?”

“CALL ME CRAZY,” Shaprone shouted back, not insulted but completely aware of the extremity of the plan and the catastrophic potential if they were to fail, “BUT I DON’T THINK, *I KNOW!*”

“THEN SO DO I!” Cedar exclaimed.

“DEATH TO THE WITCH!” Shaprone proclaimed and the men and women echoed him, “END TO THE WAR!”

- - -

“Somewhere outside that finish line...”

Joe stood before the overpass. There was his car, green and crushed like a June beetle devoured by the gargantuan rodent that was the eighteen wheeler. By his driver’s side door stood Death, looking at Joe. Patiently.

A chill ran up his spine, followed by a shiver. That shiver propelled him into motion. He backpedaled frantically. Under the traffic light he’d ran, between the cars lined up and waiting for their turn, then he tripped and fell onto his butt.

“I square up and break through the chains...”

As he hit the street, the wall of fire appeared. While the rest of the world was frozen in time, this hellish sight continued thrashing and pulsating. Though it moved, it didn't budge from the line it held. As if it were stuck, somehow bound to the overpass. The red curled black then the orange plumed white. It squirmed. It was hesitating. It was seeking permission.

“I hit like a raging bull...”

Back on his feet, Joe felt pulled forward. Looking down, he saw his feet were literally scooting forward. He leaned back, digging in his heels but to no avail. His arms pinwheeled, his eyes grew wide, and then it was over. He was yanked forward to plunge into the inferno where he was embraced by its flailing heat. But that embrace never came. Rather than being engulfed in fire, he was surrounded by water. He found himself beneath the surface of the Saluman River, surrounded by little hungry shamoos. He was curled up into a ball, as if submitting to his demise, but no – he'd finally conquered the situation, at that moment he was at peace, and in the next he released everything – he became the inferno.

“Anointed by the blood, I take the reins...”

Again he was beneath the surface, but this time much farther. And this time his eyes weren't closed, but wide open as he lifted a balled fist of flame and smashed it into the land bridge at his feet, tearing it from the cliffside and sending it crashing down on the enemy below.

“Cut from the cloth...”

As he began to fall, darkness swallowed him up, plucking him out of one memory and dropping him into the next – high above the *Monoceros*. He drew back the Suikii as the glowing giant below him prepared to do the same to his friend but Joe got there first. He closed his eyes and clubbed Hermes' head off his body. When he reopened them, he was standing on the *Monoceros*, in the morning light, staring at the cold walls of Rivergate and the colder bay below.

He flinched.

“of a flag that bears the name...”

Now he was sprinting up the stairs, charging after Theseus with Machuba by his side. His thighs ached, his lungs burned, but his mind was set and his chest was warm.

“Battle Born.”

Suddenly, the stairwell fell dark. Theseus was no longer there before him and Machuba no longer beside him. He was still running the stairs, only a different staircase, and though his thighs still ached and his lungs still burned and his mind was still set, his chest was no longer warm. Instead it was cold and from it spread a stabbing pain that filled his entire consciousness. Slowly the scene faded to black.

“They'll call me the contender...”

Light returned in the form of the towering façade of fire. As if the Sun itself had crashed into the Earth just moments after his wreck. He was back on Earth, back in that timeless scene.

“They'll listen for the bell...”

Joe turned away from the inferno, looking back the way he'd driven, but he no longer stared at Earth. In fact, he wasn't staring at a place he'd been yet in Solaris either, but it was a

familiar scene. Snow covered everything. People sat in the distance watching a scrawny man on his knees tied to a cross. Before this man, between him and where Joe stood watching, was the dark figure of Shalis Skullsummon with an ivory blade in her hand.

Joe looked hurriedly away.

“With my face flashing crimson from the fires of hell.”

He turned back to the wall of fire.

“What are you afraid of?”

I’m not afraid. He began running, sprinting, nostrils flaring, teeth gritting, and he burst through the flames yet again. He was brought back to that snowy landscape, only now he wasn’t watching the slouching man and the Witch, now he was the man bound to the cross.

“And what are you made of?!”

As Shalis plunged the blade into his intestines, Joe felt no pain, only rage – righteous, indignation – and he released everything he had as if he’d brought the inferno, the mass of combustion every bit as magnificent as the Sun, there with him.

“Joe?”

Joe woke up.

Lo was leaning over him, her hands on his shoulders, her brow furled. She asked, “You okay?”

“Huh?”

“You were...” she couldn’t help but giggle a bit, “I *think* you were singing?”

“Oh...” Joe blushed a bit as he giggled a bit too, “I had one hell of a dream.”

“What happened?”

“Well...I got my execution over with.” Joe laughed.

Lo smirked, “You must be disappointed.”

Joe sat up, “Honestly, kind of. I went out like a bad ass.”

“What’d you do?” Lo asked.

“I don’t know...” Joe scratched his head, “it was a funky dream but...I think I basically...dropped the Sun on her.”

Lo laughed, “Ah, of course, you are the Sun Child.”

“Darn right!”

They were quiet for a moment. Both slouched back to lean against the wall, Joe at the head of the cot, Lo at the foot. Miraculous as it may be, they’d managed to share it. Sleeping head to foot on the tiny strip of taut fabric. It hadn’t been intentional, but the two had stayed up talking after Lo’s tale – discussing nothing of real importance, don’t worry, you just missed some character development – and before they knew it they were asleep. Despite being strangers, the dismal conditions of their short time together created a quick bond between the two. The short spells of silence weren’t uncomfortable. They just...were.

“Is it weird that I wish they’d just go ahead and do it?” Joe asked.

“Nah.” Lo shook her head, “Donum.”

“What?”

“Is it faraked for me to say I hope they wait a while?” Lo asked.

“Ha,” Joe laughed, “I think under normal conditions that’d be the opposite of ‘faraked’.”

She chuckled a bit before explaining, "It's just that...Girn knows when they'll get to me," she shook her head, "and I don't know if I'd rather they keep me down here alone or run the risk of them sticking me with some creep."

Joe raised an eyebrow, "Didn't I ask you to make babies with me yesterday?"

"Point taken." She laughed, "A more aggressive creep, then."

Another spell of silence.

"Where's 'donum' come from?" Joe asked, "I know it's a curse word, like farak, but there's a story behind farak. There a story behind 'donum'?"

"You sure you want Solarin history from a Delian?"

Joe shrugged, "You seemed to know enough about the Pirate Wars."

She smirked, flipped her hair over shoulder to that she could dust them off, "Well I don't like to brag, but I am pretty knowledgeable."

"So how bout it?"

"You're asking me to tell you the tale of the Queen of Darkness, you know."

"I know now."

"Alright..." Lo frowned for a minute then began, "It all started with the Plague..."

Lo's Tale 2: The Crow's Plague

A decade before the end of the first recorded millennia, as a hurricane ravaged the shores of Panta, an un-manned vessel washed up on the beaches. The Pantanese, water elves, searched the ship and found piles and piles of bodies. It seemed as though the dead hadn't died on the high seas nor during the storm but had been taken on board, stacked in an organized manner, and cast out upon the ocean as if the ship was to be their tomb. But there was one survivor. A little seven-year-old gmoat boy, drenched and shivering amongst the corpses. He was the first gmoat to ever be seen in the Southern Hemisphere.

Not long after the ship arrived and the boy was taken into the city, a sickness began to spread. Some died within a week of contracting the symptoms, others lasted months, a select few even survived but most of these fortunate individuals found themselves back in the midst of the illness within a couple weeks. After six months, less than half of the population of Panta was left. The water elves had never left Panta. They'd been visited by foreigners and had maps of other lands to the South and West, but never before had they felt the need to leave their home until now. They split into two groups, one sailing in the direction of Munkloe and the other in the direction of Sondor. They left the sick and dying with the boy, who they named Iahtro – meaning the Cursed One.

In Munkloe, the elves were able to make a new home. The small continent was not united but instead populated by a multitude of independent, bearn villages who lived in the treetops. Though the bearns didn't let the elves up from the jungle floor – the water elves continued to contract the sickness on their journey and had the integrity to warn the bearns of their misfortune – some bearns were brave enough to descend to them. These few missionaries helped the refugees survive and searched for ways to cure their sickness but to no avail. Fortunately, the isolation of the villages and the separation of the bearns and the elves seemed to keep the spread of the mysterious disease low in Munkloe though – even for bearns that had claimed not to have left the treetops – the epidemic seemed to pick its victims at random.

Aside from bringing what would soon be called the Plague, the water elves brought two other things. They brought a religion. The reason adventurers first called the Pantanese water elves was because their Delian faith and their blue skin led explorers to assume the inhabitants of Panta must've evolved from the peoples of the Aquarian Ocean (or vice versa). The second thing the Pantanese brought was crows. The occasional sightings of crows in Munkloe, timed with the arrival of the refugees, led many to assume that the birds were the way the Plague spread from the dirt to the canopy.

The Plague had a far greater impact on the more interconnected societies of Sondor. Just as the Ipativians and Sentry constantly warred, the Cage and Kou Clans of Sondor often butted heads and when the Pantanese Refugees washed up on the Crowned Coast – a title the coast did not yet have – the Cage seemed to be winning the rivalry. All the Kou had left was a narrow strip of jungle, mountains, and beach along the northern edge of Sondor. Egavas Kou, the Warrior

Queen of the Clan, demanded they explain their sickly condition – even in their short voyage, half the pilgrims had come down with the illness, this was blamed on the crows they kept spotting on the ship – and then, worried for the wellbeing of her people and their already delicate claim to sovereignty, she slaughtered each and every last one of them, hoping that this might spare the Kou. It did not. Even as she quarantined herself, staying on the ship, those off the ship began to fall ill.

Ironically, the Plague may have saved the Kou. For not only did it spread quickly among Egavas' soldiers, it spread quickly to her nemesis' – Zenobia Cage – troops too. Though Zenobia was forced to call off the current assault, she did not retreat. Her men and women remained stationed in a line opposite Egavas' as she shut down all of northern Sondor. Seeing the potential of the epidemic to threaten the civilians of her clan further south, she blockaded the Kou Mountains and permitted no one to cross into Koustan nor leave it.

Sick as she was, Egavas still had a people to protect and a land to reclaim. Thus, she took the plague-ridden ship she'd quarantined herself on and sailed it around – past Cage territory – to the Cormac Clan stronghold of Coridahk. From there, she traveled through the swamp that separated Cage Town from the Polestand Mountains (where Coridahk was). Cage Town was the ancestral capitol of the Cage Clan and she died of the plague on their city streets. Within weeks, the entire continent of Sondor was under attack by the disease. Chaos ensued as those once in control lost it and those without power took the opportunity to seize it.

Unlike in Munkloe where the spread was somewhat manageable, as the Plague devastated civilization in Sondor, other states noticed. Lu Row, the ruler of Tadloe, cut ties with the outside world. This had global consequences. Lu had been supporting nations all over the Southern Hemisphere. While withdrawing foreign support from folks like Kou Clan didn't contribute much to further destabilization of Sondor, it significantly impacted the peoples she'd aided in Iceload. For centuries, the Ipativy and Sentry had been at war (in fact, the entire conflict was already being called the Centuries War) and early in the war the two dynasties had sought to bring other areas of Iceload into the mix by forcibly colonizing them to demand their resources for the cause. Tadloe, anxious that one side might win and then look hungrily across the Aquarian Ocean, had come to the defense of the Etihwy and Oreh elves and Azunu bears. Without Lu getting in the way, the Sentry and Ipativy hurried to invade the nations of Middle and Southern Iceload. Many bears in Northern Iceload had fled to Munkloe to avoid having to pick a side but now as they saw the attention of the Centuries War shift away from Thorakle and Sentrakle, they began to migrate back into their homeland. Suddenly, crows began to be spotted throughout the icy continent.

Stable empires outside of the Centuries War but inside Iceload followed Lu's model, blockading their borders, and pulling out of foreign endeavors. This included the GraiLord who controlled the Vanian Mountains and the Icelore who controlled the island of the same name just off the spine of Iceload. Another powerful empire not much farther from the war than Icelore, Aquaria, instituted a lock down of their ocean floor society. The last major state in the Southern Hemisphere, Batloe, did not entirely follow suit.

Just as Iceload and Sondor had been at war before the year 990, so too had Batloe. The molemen of the north had been fed up with the magical-knowledge hogging chidras of the south. This led to the Magic War. Ever since Batloe had been liberated by the oppressive rule of the Black Crown Pact in the First Void War, the chidra sachas quickly monopolized knowledge of the Sacred Tongue and made sure not to let it into the hands of the molemen (and the poor of their own kind – most chidras knew no magic). This was not popular among molemen.

In the 980s, molemen civilians – calling themselves the Magic Moles – took matters into their own hands. Using the technology developed in Space City, they began to terrorize the unfortunate chidras who lived in northern and central, predominately molemen populated, regions. Their techniques included bombings, kidnappings, and attacks on chidras in broad daylight, on city streets. The Queen of the Wings (the chidra nations), Razel Oturan, demanded the Queen of Fire (the moleman nations), Donum Gesche, to stop the violence. Donum claimed she was doing all that she could – though she'd essentially told authorities not to prosecute moles for crimes against chidras – and that if Razel wanted the violence to end, all she had to do was share the Sacred Tongue.

Not all moles supported the Magic Moles and many molemen were incidental victims of these attacks. A moleman named Uthemarc Shelba lost his parents in a street bombing. His sister took over the role as parent. She began to speak out against the violence and Donum's role in promoting it. No one imagined the true extremity of Donum's involvement. One day, a group of radicals kidnapped Uthemarc and his sister. Donum was actually among the terrorists, she even revealed herself to Uthemarc. The Queen put a knife in his hand and, grabbing his arm, forced him to take his own sister's life.

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“No wonder she became a curse word!”

“Oh, just wait!” Lo warned, “She gets worse...”

- - -

Rather than killing the young Uthemarc, he was forced to join the military which merged with the Magic Moles in 989 as the Fire Nations went to war against the Wing Nations. Despite the fact that Donum started the war, Razel was the first to launch a major attack. She laid siege to Space City – the crown jewel of the Fire Nations. Uthemarc's regiment was involved in a campaign to force Razel off of Space City by raiding and exterminating villages in the Three-Part Desert of central Batloe. After their first raid, Uthemarc was mortified. He'd been unable to move – for which he was beaten by his superior officers – as he watched his supposed-comrades defeat the local guardsmen then proceed to massacre the civilians of the village. When they approached the next village, Uthemarc was warned that if he froze up again, he would be

executed as a traitor. Instead, he turned on his allies. He helped the local guard fight off the molemen and then, as his fellow troops retreated, his new comrades locked him up.

When word spread of what this young, scared moleman had done, Razel Oturan came to meet him. She did not want this war. Her strategy had been to capture Space City, hoping that Donum would surrender without it. Donum did not. Razel had been willing, from the start, to share the Sacred Tongue however, her supporters and the vast majority of chidras, abhorred such an idea. Her hands were tied. If she'd been brave enough to do it anyways, she would've been ousted by her people and war would've broken out nonetheless. Yet now, as war ensued with no foreseeable end, Razel was desperate to find a way to sneak magic into the Fire Nations. She specifically wanted to get the Sacred Tongue into the hands of the moles that continued to resist Donum's vulgar strategies – those members of the movement Uthemarc's sister had been a part of. Thus, she came to Uthemarc, let him live comfortably – though hidden from the public – in Space City where he could learn the Sacred Tongue and communicate with mole allies far away.

However, not long after he began his education, near the end of 991, Donum did the unthinkable. She sent soldiers to Iceload to kidnap a couple Plague-infected bears from a hospital and sneak them into the chidra city of Shametown. The Plague quickly swept across Batloe and, much like in Sondor, it was impossible to discern whether the move had improved the chances of victory for either side. The war would be won not by strategy but by endurance and the authoritarian-Donum knew that she, unlike Razel, did not have to fear diminishing popular support.

By 992, crow sightings had spread to every major nation – even those that had tried so hard to secure their borders. The Plague devastated all of the Southern Hemisphere. By 995, almost half of the population had fallen victim to the strange disease.

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“She’s evil!” Joe exclaimed, “Is she the Queen of Darkness?”

Lo laughed, “A moleman?”

“Why not?”

Lo blushed.

Joe shook his head, “Looks like you’re a little bit racist, Lo.”

“Hey!” Lo raised her hands in defense, then lowered them in defeat as she realized she had no excuse, “Yea, I guess that was racist.”

Joe nodded then asked, “So who was the Queen of Darkness?”

“We haven’t gotten there yet, but soon!” Lo promised, “Shall I continue?”

“Sure.”

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That same year, 995, a twelve-year-old Iahtro attempted to escape Panta. His timing was unfortunate. He wound up sailing straight into a hurricane. The boy had a meltdown, suffering from flashbacks to the storm and the corpse laden ship he'd taken to Panta. Though his vessel survived the weather, his mental state had been bludgeoned. He would've died by self-neglect, alone on his boat, if a fisherman hadn't stumbled across him. The angler dragged his brain up out of the depths of post-traumatic stress and took him to the nearest land mass: northern Sondor.

At this time, Hou (pronounced Hah-oooh) Row, son of Lu Row, was meeting with Ecaep Kou, daughter of Egavas Kou, as she sought to convince him that – despite the epidemic – they still should send aid. Soldiers brought Iahtro to the two, he was a gmoat, a species of being not yet seen in the South, and it was quickly made known that he had been amongst those that had brought the Plague to Panta. The popular consensus was to kill the boy. Even Ecaep was in favor. But Hou, despite the fact that his own mother had died to the disease, stopped them. He believed the boy might hold some sort of cure – after all, everyone on his ship and nearly everyone from Panta had died while he remained healthy. Not only did Hou convince the Kou to spare Iahtro, but he convinced Ecaep to raise the young man as well (he had no intentions of adopting the kid, he hardly could tolerate his own children).

Ecaep wasn't much of a parent either. She shared the task with her new wife, Zenobia Cage, who quickly became like a mother to Iahtro. Though Ecaep and Zenobia were ethnic rivals, through the Plague induced chaos they had not only fallen in love but they and their people had banded together to combat the rising threats of barbarians that came out of the South.

The South, a region called Mannistan, was separated from Coristan by the Eninac River. At the time, it contained three main clans: the Eninac, the Draeb, and the Meriam. The Eninac inhabited the Dahgo Woods region and the Meriam and Draeb split the Draeb Mountains. The forests were separated from the hills by the Barbarian Plains and it was there that a multitude of “lesser” clans dwelled. Prior to the Plague, these lesser clans rarely held significant power in Mannistan and earned the title of barbarians for their seemingly constant attempts to upset the authority of the Draeb, Eninac, and Meriam and their warrior-style patriarchy that conflicted with the trend of atriarchy in Mannistan. Thanks to the Plague, one of these clans succeeded in overthrowing the “greater” clans and quickly came to dominate Southern Sondor. This clan was the Yelkao.

By 995, the Yelkao were led by a woman named Einna Yelkao and their Clan had control of Mannistan, Coristan, and Cagistan – her authority stopped only at the Kou River where the Cage and Kou Clans had teamed up to oppose her. But in the early 980s, she was hardly more than a slave raised among the barbarian leaders to become a concubine in adulthood. Orphaned by the pillaging of Yelkao bandits, she was kidnapped as a child. Childhood for young female orphans amongst the barbarians wasn't so bad. They were taught to fight and invited to join in the raids. However, there was no secret as to what their fate would be once they turned thirteen. There were ten warlords and probably a hundred or so women exchanged between them like commodities. Einna would turn 13 in 993 and she could not imagine such a fate.

In the summer of 992, Einna attempted suicide. One of the warlords stopped her – this was a fatal mistake. As he consoled her, promising that she would be his favorite concubine, she realized how selfish her escape plan had been. She had nearly abandoned her sisters to endure a fate she considered worse than death. So she killed the man that saved her then fled into the wilderness.

The bandits would've come for her had they been able to successfully track her. She killed every warrior that managed to come across her trail. It wasn't just her skill as a marksman. While hiding out in the Draeb Mountains she ran up against the mythical Kamaroq. The very beast that guarded Bluff's legendary Gustbow. Slaying the giant hornet, she won the ancient bow. Armed with an unlimited amount of ammunition and the aim of a goddess, she was able to fend off her pursuers with seeming ease. Giving up on revenge, they placed a bounty on her head and continued their campaign to conquer Sondor. Having consolidated Mannistan, they now crossed the Eninac River and began to rampage through Coristan. Meanwhile, Einna, who had been known as a prodigy with the bow, followed the war parties of the Yelkao and carefully assassinated each and every last warlord. By the time only a few were left, Yelkao came to the concubines and the women led a revolt. They slaughtered the last two barbarian despots then addressed the warriors of the Yelkao tribe.

The newly 13-year-old Einna Yelkao captured the hearts of the barbarians. She was one of them but, unlike their previous leaders, she was not just a brave warrior but also a person of integrity, someone with a sense of justice and with a determination to carry said justice out. Rallying behind her, the Yelkao conquered most of Sondor in the midst of the chaos instilled by the Plague. While empires around the world struggled to maintain their authority, Einna was the only leader able to consolidate her power and expand.

As the Yelkao Barbarians expanded, the Plague's pace slackened. After sending half of the souls in the Southern Hemisphere's off to Solaris, from 995 to 1000 the scourge killed only a fourth of what it had in its first five years. You once had to be especially lucky to dodge the disease, now you had to be especially unlucky to contract it.

Iahrtro was now a man, going by the name Iahrtro Cage, and one of the most able Kou-Cage warriors, if not the ablest. Because of this, when one of his adopted mothers, Ecaep Kou, was dying of the Plague, she included him in the holy ritual that made it possible for her to hand over the Mystak Blade. When many of the Kou elders criticized such a decision, she reminded them of the risk of passing off the blade to another Kou – if one were to die with the blade, no one would ever be able to wield it again. Iahrtro seemed the most likely candidate to be able to avoid the deadly grasp of the disease that was now being called the Crow's Plague. After all, he'd been surrounded by it since he was young and never once contracted it. And so he took the sword at the turn of the century and Ecaep died shortly after the ceremony was completed.

After Ecaep died, Zenobia fell ill so Iahrtro took leadership of the troops. They had come to love and trust him on the battlefield and their loyalty proved fruitful. After a series of defeats, the Kou-Cage forces were backed against the Kou River when Iahrtro took over. He turned the tide. With each new attempt to push them back, Iahrtro's soldiers held their ground and repelled

Einna's barbarians. This was not the result of Iahtro's skill as a commander alone, part of his success was due to tragedies within Einna's organization.

Einna, and many of her military and civilian leaders, contracted the Plague. While she sought to continue leading her people until her dying breath, her advisors begged her to think otherwise. They knew that without Einna, their young empire would collapse upon itself and Iahtro would unravel all their warrior empress had accomplished. They even suggested a solution – the Doom Warriors. They were desperate. One of her advisors proposed that she travel to Iceload, seek out the infamous Flow Morain, and obtain his secret to immortality – even if this meant she would return to Sondor as an immolated skeleton. Einna resisted the plan until the advisor, who'd been one of her fellow orphan-sisters, made it her deathbed request.

She traveled to Fort Dunvar on the Middakle Peninsula of Iceload and found Flow Morain. According to Einna, he initially refused to help until she bested him in combat – beating him back with the magical arrows of the Gustbow. After nearly succumbing to her arrows, he challenged her to a duel in Total Darkness. She claims to have bested him again, though most folks believe otherwise. Whatever happened in the dimension of the dead, Einna Yelkao emerged as a banshee. Many point to the fact that she left Fort Dunvar arguably-alive as proof that she truly had triumphed over Flow. Only one thing is for sure, she definitely gained his respect otherwise he would have killed her dead rather than baptizing her in the unholy flames of ghosthood.

Einna Yelkao returned to Sondor as a banshee and she quickly converted the sickly among her loyal followers. Though the Yelkao Barbarians had endured nothing but defeats since Einna's departure, their fortune shifted only for a short time upon her return. Within a month, they'd pushed Iahtro and the Kou-Cage forces back against the Kou River but – soon after that – the ranks of the Yelkao began to fight amongst themselves. As their flesh began to rot, so too did their humanity – or so it seemed – as old friends attacked one another, ghostly inferiors rebelled against their superiors. Once again, Iahtro was able to push Einna south, preaching the evils of Einna's cure with each victory.

The barbarians weren't the only one with a cure, in Batloe – where the Magic War continued to be waged – Razel Oturan's multi-racial committee of scientists and magicians in Space City had developed a complex cure by the year 1001. They discovered that the Plague was not a biological disease, but a magical curse. After years of experimentation, they'd devised a spell that could stop the curse. Unfortunately, the spell took an entire book of text, a day to cast, and a well-rested magician with impressive stamina. The first wizard to cast the spell successfully was Uthemarc Shelba – the orphaned moleman that had deserted the Fire Nations in the early days of the Magic War – only two others had tried but both had died. While the team continued to make the cure more efficient, Uthemarc could only cure a victim every other day (requiring a day of rest and meditation in-between).

Razel Oturan sent invitations to world leaders, describing their discovery and offering foreign citizens spots in the lottery that decided who got to be Uthemarc's next patient. However, not every nation was invited. Iahtro had not made the mailing list. As the Yelkao Barbarians

imploded, Iahtro continued to bombard them and expelled all those that resisted his authority. Even Einna had been purged, being defeated by Iahtro in the light of day and under Total Darkness (leading Iahtro to claim that he was a greater swordsman than Flow Morain – a statement that would eventually spark a rivalry that would last for centuries). Einna and those still loyal to her fled to Razel Oturan. Razel had welcomed them, believing her scientists and magicians might learn from Einna’s condition. By the time a cure had been developed, Razel and Einna had become friends thus Iahtro – the big bully of Sondor – was not someone that Razel had a high opinion of.

Iahtro’s ally, Hou Row, fell ill with the Plague shortly before the end of 1000. When Razel’s invitation was extended to Hou, he immediately sent word back asking to be cured. Razel, a woman of principle, apologized but asserted that there would be no favoritism, he could throw his name in the hat but he would have no advantage over anyone one else afflicted. Hou then asked if he alone could apply for the lottery, competing equally with Batloens but excluding his fellow Tadloens. Again, Razel denied him. Once his pleas became known to the public, many Tadloens were outraged. There were those that defended Hou, as their king, his survival was of major significance to the rest of Tadloe – but there were also those that saw this as a gross misuse of his power. Many of the offended were descendants of the Fou Tribe, the largest ethnic group in Tadloe. Their leaders joined the Sentry invaders and claimed to be a part of a revolution, a revolution to oust the royal Row family and replace them with an elected monarch.

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“The Sentry invaders?”

Lo nodded, “Did I forget to mention that?”

Joe shrugged, “Guess so.”

“In 995, it was, the Sentry invaded Tadloe. I told you how Hou’s mother had been defending people in Iceload from the Sentry and Ipativians, right?”

“Yea, the...” Joe scratched his scruffy chin for a moment, “The War of the Centuries?”

“Close enough,” Lo said, “The Sentry and Ipativians had started conquering their neighbors to keep their war against each other afloat. Ipativy went South then West. Sentry went South then East.”

“And the Fou thought the Sentry would let them rule Tadloe if they took over?” Joe scoffed.

Lo shrugged, “I doubt the Sentry would mind so long as the Fou gave them what they wanted.”

“Fair enough.”

“And,” she added, “Razel Oturan liked the Sentry, so when earth elves from Tadloe joined up with them, Razel put their names in the pool for the cure.”

“Ahhhh, that makes more sense.”

“She called it the Cure Confederation.”

“Called what?”

“Well, by the middle of 1001, almost every nation vying for the cure was at war and had half-hazard been made allies: the Icespear, the Sentry, the Fou, the Yelkao, even Razel Oturan herself.”

“It’s like a world war of civil wars!”

“Folks thought civilization was going down.” Lo agreed, “If the Plague didn’t finish them off, their own bickering would.”

“So when’s the Queen show up?” Joe asked.

“At the start of the new year, 1002, but before we get there I’ve got to take you back to Icelore in 995...”

“Jesus...” Joe lamented.

Lo ignored his grumbling and continued.

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In early Icelore, there was caste system of sorts. Most of the population lived as peasants, these poor nellafs were called hellbrutes – in part because they were Thoran Christians, the sect of Christianity that believed in hell (among other backwards things). Long after the castes crumbled, the hellbrutes remained as an ethnic group of sorts and they adopted the surname Hellbrute as a, “Farak you!” to the descendants of the more prestigious casts. Centuries later, a family of these Hellbrutes had come to garner considerable influence in Icelore after years of hard work and clever decisions as merchants. By the 900s, the tension between Hellbrutes and the Icelores and Darkblades was almost nonexistent – that is, until a petty conflict spiraled out of control.

Supposedly, Gjallarhorn Darkblade stole, killed, and cooked a wooly chicken he snatched from Helene Hellbrute. When she ran into him at a bar, she confronted him. He denied her accusations and swung on her. Rather than swinging back, Helene pulled out a knife and stabbed him repeatedly until he died (172 times total). Then she fled for the mountains. Gjallarhorn was Ivy Darkblade’s husband and when she heard about this she went and found Helene and dragged her into court – or tried to. Helene’s family came to her rescue. They thought they could overpower her, but they could not. She may have been the daughter or a wealthy politician but she was also the youngest of ten siblings. Ivy had grown up fighting. Bare handed she fought off the dozen or so that had come to Helene’s aid – accidentally killing a few, including Helene, in the process.

Content that justice had been served, Ivy went home. Even the Hellbrute’s seemed done with the conflict. But across the Great Straight of Heimdallure, the fighting had attracted Ipativy’s attention. A general in the Ipativian army had been in love with Helene and, in response to her death, when Ipativy sought to decide where to expand next, he voted ardently for Icelore. After all, the Hellbrutes were Thoran Christians like the Ipativians, whereas the Darkblades and Icelore were Mystakle Christians like the Sentry. Seeing their options divided between Icelore

and the Vanian Mountains, they were also partially persuaded by the limited feasibility of invading and conquering the GraiLords as compared to the Icelore. However, in Ipativian lore, they invaded Icelore to liberate the Hellbrute's from the oppressive classism of the Icelore and Darkblades.

The Icelore fought off the Ipativian invaders and Hellbrute traitors for five years before fleeing across the straight to seek asylum in the Vanian Mountains. Before they became refugees, however, a refugee washed up on their mountainous island. His name was Yak Habba and he was a goblin – a race that had left the South over a century ago – and he claimed to know the cause of the Plague. It was, in fact, because of a bird, but not a real one. Just as Flow Morain was known for turning into a wolf and Creaton Live would come to be known for turning into a fox, there was a woman banshee from the Northern Hemisphere that would take the form of a crow and it was she that was spreading the Plague – not as a disease, but as a curse, a curse fueled by the death of its victims. Though it seemed all Southern Solarins had noticed the sudden appearance of ravens – a creature previously thought to be extinct – and noted the way citings corresponded with catching the sickness, none had seemed to realize that no two ravens were ever seen at the same time. This was interesting information, but the nellafs of Icelore had little use for it at the time.

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“You said Raven.” Joe interrupted.

Lo nodded.

“Don't you mean crow?”

“Nah,” Lo explained, “those crow sightings were really raven sightings.”

“Then why'd you say they were crows?”

“Because crows are trash birds and everyone hates the Queen of Darkness.” Lo stated, “So even though we all know she was turning into a raven, we continue to call her a crow and her plague the Crow's Plague.”

“Isn't that kind of petty?” Joe laughed.

“Yea,” Lo shared Joe's smirk.

“I wonder why they don't call Creaton a rat...” Joe pondered aloud.

“That's a good question...” Lo thought for a moment then got back on topic, “I'm getting tired, I'll get us to a good stopping point and finish the story later, alright?”

“Sure.”

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Once the Icelore arrived in the Vanian Mountains, Ivy Darkblade introduced Yak Habba to King Theseus Icespear and the minotaur revealed his own refugee: a fishfolk named Tidalus Gill. He'd fled from the Aquarian Ocean south, through the Dragon Gulf, around Iceload's

Azunu peninsula, and up the Frosted Coast before braving the surface. He'd traveled so far for safety because he feared that the minotaurs were the only ones that could keep him safe.

A woman calling herself the Queen of Light, though his people spitefully called her the Queen of Darkness, came to Aquaria in the form of a crow and conquered his nation without an army. She said they could either bow to her and be cured or remain sovereign and die of the Plague. Just like elsewhere in Solaris, the rate of infections had died down considerably in Aquaria but after her arrival, it shot up. Nearly half of Aquaria woke up with a cough and approximately three quarters went out into the streets and pressed their heads to the ocean floor when the Queen flew through their cities and towns that afternoon.

Among those that submitted, the sick were taken away to be "treated". The healthy were told they had been admitted to the Catechism. This was a test, a test of the purity of their souls, and it required them to be absolutely obedient to the demands of the Queen. The first of which was the demand that they surrender all of their weapons for civilizations in the midst of the Catechism were devoid of violence. Their cities would be policed by individuals she brought with her, individuals who were much farther along in the process of the Catechism. She called them the Knights of-

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"Knights of the Light!" Joe exclaimed.

Lo stared blankly back.

Joe explained, "I've seen them."

"Lies!" She laughed, "Farakin godi tiad, that is!"

"Really!"

"Where? On Earth?"

"No, here! Uh... Tadloe, in Tadloe, they were chasing us."

Her eyes narrowed and her brow flatlined, "Get to the punch line already..."

"Seriously! You ever heard of the Key Library? The myth or whatever?"

"Um...no?"

"It's a legendary library full of keys, keys that you can use to travel between dimensions." Joe explained.

"Sounds made up."

"Well it's not. That's how I got here – and that's where I ran into the Knights of the Light."

"Huh." Lo thought for a moment, "Maybe that's where the Queen came from."

This idea struck a chord in Joe's mind. *I wonder if she's still wandering around the Library, looking for the right key to come back...*

"Do they know where she went?" Joe asked.

Lo shook her head, "No, not really...do you want me to spoil it or keep telling the story?"

"You can keep going."

The fishfolk that didn't submit were hunted – hunted by the Knights of the Light and also by the Plague. They fled Aquaria, through the Dragon Gulf, and around the Frosted Coast knowing that the safest place to run when chased by a powerful banshee was to the minotaurs. Only one survived. Tidalus Gill was an apt mage (an elemental, something rather new at the time), though the rest of his family and followers were eventually overtaken by the Knights of the Light, he could not be bested. As for the Plague, well, he was a Gill – a member of a bloodline that was so terribly cursed that their poor souls had no more room to spare for further accessories.

Yak Habba confirmed that the Queen of Darkness had conquered the Northern Hemisphere in much the same manner and that, in the North, all of the beings that survived the Crow's Plague were now trapped in the oppressive phases of the Catechism, policed by the Knights of the Light. Ivy Darkblade, Theseus Icespear, Yak Habba, and Tidalus Gill wanted to help the fishfolk, to liberate the North, and to keep the Queen from doing the same to the rest of the planet but, for the most part, their hands were tied. The Ipativians were preparing to attack the GraiLord. Rather than facing the Knights of the Light in war, Theseus and Ivy came to the conclusion that it would be best if they could simply devise a cure so that the Queen would no longer be able to so easily coerce submission.

They sent Yak Habba and Tidalus Gill to Razel Oturan, to become a part of the interracial team mentioned before. Less than a year later, Razel's team had succeeded and the cure lottery began. The Cure Confederation offered the people of the Southern Hemisphere, demoralized by the Plague and the civil wars, a tiny ray of hope – but only for about a year. The Queen left the seafloor early in 1002 and came straight to Batloe.

At this time, a Knome, named Zipper, had just won the cure-lottery. For the first time, the Queen used her army like an army. They stormed Space City – their goal to kill Uthemarc. Using her own banshee vision to spot the wizard where he sat – having just finished curing the Knome in a room near the top of a star pillar – she aimed a blade at the mage and cast Total Darkness. At the last second, almost by chance though now we know it to have been out of pure, unadulterated heroicism, Zipper the Knome hopped in the way.

A moment later, the Queen and Zipper emerged from the darkness, still sparring in the tower top. Suddenly aware of their peril, Yak Habba and Tidalus rushed Uthemarc out of the tower as Zipper kept the Queen occupied. With the help of Razel Oturan's forces in Space City, commanded by Einna Yelkao, they escaped Batloe and flew immediately to the Blue Ridges. There, Theseus, Ivy, Einna, Yak, Tidalus, and Uthemarc sought to make their stand, protect the cure, and repel the Queen of Darkness, but the Queen was in no hurry to confront them. When Zipper the Knome found them in Iceload, he told them this. The Queen sought to conquer the rest of the Southern Hemisphere and save the GraiLord for last. Unlike Flow Morain, who failed to destroy the GraiLord defenses and whose forces crumbled from in-fighting beneath him, the Queen's army was resolute and unerringly devoted to her.

Her soldiers had been bound by a magical pact to remain loyal – a pact they eagerly accepted as only those who passed her test, the Catechism, were permitted to live underneath her rule. Yak Habba had fled the examination as it slowly chewed up and spat out those that survived her Plague in the Northern Hemisphere. Her goal wasn't merely world domination nor was it to simply add to the ranks of the Knights of the Light. Her goal was to bring civilization into its final stage: ghosthood. The final phase of the Catechism, Yak Habba claimed, was immolation. In a post-Catechism world, intelligent life would be undead and in this world of banshees, the Queen believed, it would be a utopia. A world without war. A day deprived of death.

There was something tempting about such a vision but also something deeply unsettling, something that made the whole idea seem unstable. However it would have turned out, after the Queen of Darkness stormed Space City, Zipper, Tidalus Gill, Theseus Icespear, Yak Habba, Ivy Darkblade, and Uthemarc Shelba decided they'd rather die than be immortal. They plus Einna Yelkao – who agreed in theory but was questionably immortal already – decided to stop the Queen of Darkness and guard the cure at all costs.

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“You know...it's kind of funny.” Joe interrupted, “If she won, everyone would win. Folks that wanted to live forever could live forever and folks who wanted to die like mortals would be dead.”

“That's a weird way to put it.” Lo stated, not sharing Joe's humor, “Do you not see how her plan was a horrible idea?”

“I mean,” he shrugged, “the whole Doom Warrior thing. Everyone killing each other off...and you wouldn't be able to make babies.”

Lo went back to being silly, raising an eyebrow, “Why you so worried about *me* making babies?”

“That's not what-” Joe cut himself off and rolled his eyes, “I think it's *you* that's interested in making babies.”

“Psh.” She scoffed, “I'm taken, Sun Child.”

“That mean I get the bed to myself tonight?” Joe asked.

“In your dreams!” She crowed, “Now scoot over, let's get some sleep. I tell you how the Guardians beat the Queen tomorrow.”

Chapter Eighteen: Birth of the Fifth Knomish Blade

“Earthboy.”

The deep, cold voice of Shalis Skullsummon rattled Joe to his core as he shielded his eyes from the blinding light flooding in through the cell’s open door. She was but a silhouette standing in the doorway. Neither Joe nor Lo dared to move from where they lied beside each other.

“Tomorrow morning you will be taken from this cell.” Shalis continued, “You will be marched out of the dungeon, led through the castle, and taken into the courtyard to stand before the other Disciples.”

As Shalis spoke, she strode into the cell. Shadows of skeletons standing in the doorway painted the walls of the cell. Shalis strode over to the cot. Lo instinctively pushed back, wedging Joe between her and the wall. As Shalis leaned over them, Joe countered Lo’s defense. Getting up onto his knees, he straddled his cellmate and rose to meet the Sheik. Putting himself between them. The Witch clamped one hand on his shoulder. A cool numbness swept over his body, extending from where she touched him. He couldn't move, he couldn't think, his eyes rolled about uselessly in their sockets. Pulling him off the cot, over Lo, and onto his knees on the floor of the cell, Shalis let go of Joe and stepped back towards the doorway.

“You will kneel before me and I will have your wrists bound behind you. I will offer you salvation in the form of conversion. If you condemn the Trinity Nations, the Coalition of the Vokriit and the GraiLords, and to declare your devotion to my cause, the cause of the Disciples – the cause of the Queen, not only will you be spared but you will grow to by the strongest pyromancer this world has ever seen. Together we will melt the cold shoulders of the Blue Ridges and surge across the three legs of Iceload.”

Stepping forward, she cupped his chin as she had the day before. Her fingers were soft, but her grip was strong. It wasn't uncomfortable so long as he remained still. But the moment he flinched in one direction or the other, he realized the intense firmness of her hold on him.

“If you refuse,” as she continued, a rod of ivory began to form in the clenched fist of her free hand, expanding into a blade, “I will release your entrails upon the snow. Do not fear, I will not slay you then and there. We have a way of keeping you alive even with your intestines freezing over on the ground. You will have ample time to redeem yourself. There will be no more opportunities for salvation, not in life, but at least in death you will be able to die enlightened.”

She lifted the white sword to her face, sniffing the dull-side of the bone-made blade as she slid it beneath her nose. The weapon evaporated as she did so and the spectral tendrils of smoke it became were sucked up into her flaring nostrils. After a quivering sigh, she smiled at Joe.

“No one refuses redemption the second time.” Shalis smiled, “Some people just need longer than others. Don't worry, we'll give you plenty of time.”

Joe could only stare.

“See you tomorrow, Sun Child.”

Just as quick as she'd come in, she was suddenly gone. The door slammed shut behind her, throwing Joe and Lo back under the cloak of darkness lit only by his chest stone. Neither spoke for a while.

"I'm sorry..." Lo whispered eventually.

Joe fell off his knees to land on his butt with his back against the cot. He shrugged and forced himself to speak, "I was supposed to die two weeks ago, suppose I should be glad I made it this far...just wish I could see my family again."

"I know that feeling," Lo sighed, "I doubt I'll ever see my family again."

"When's the last time you saw them?"

"A few days after we came to Iceload, they were some of the first gmoats to get arrested...they're probably dead now but...but part of me still believes they're alive, that they've somehow made it back to Delia and are waiting for me there..."

Joe didn't speak. In their brief time together, he'd become accustomed to the way Lo spoke. Once she started going, she would continue on like a Knome if you let her. But her monologues gave him something to listen to and he needed that, anything to keep his mind off the decision he'd have to make tomorrow. And, honestly, anything to keep his mind off some of the decisions he'd made the last two weeks as well.

"But I know they're not, they're swimming inside the stars now," she murmured, "I just hope it's happy up there, hope they're not ashamed of me..."

"Is that where y'all say people go when they die?" Joe asked, "The stars?"

Lo nodded, "We believe – Delians do, that is. I'm not really that religious, but yea. Delians believe that when you die, your energy is pulled towards your sun until finally you become a part of the star and you live out another life, inside the star, until that star explodes. Then, slowly, your energy will be pulled away to the next star and the next star, until you've traveled all over the universe. You see, we, our bodies, aren't eternal. Just like stars aren't eternal. But energy cannot be destroyed and so our energy keeps going, forever and ever, just like the Abbim."

"The Abbim?"

"Earth, Mystakle Planet, the world beneath the star Delia, they are all the Abbim. The soil beneath your feet, that's what transports life through time and space. Every sun dies, Joe, but planets don't. They may smash and split, but they tumble on, clinging to star after star as one explodes after the other, launching them through space until another star reaches out and grabs them. As far as we know, all living things have shared the same Abbim and through Abbim we are connected as kin, as one united family of living things."

"So this planet is the same as my planet and your planet, just at different times?"

Lo nodded.

Joe had to look back at her to see her gesture before he reluctantly said, "I don't know about that."

"I know, it's more of a myth than anything else." Lo shrugged, "But at the same time...I like to think bits and pieces are true."

"Like the part about souls and the Abbim?"

"Mhm." She grinned, though Joe was still propped up against the cot in such a way that he couldn't see, he could feel the grin in her voice, "Next time you get the chance, scoop up some of the soil or pluck a leaf and look at it real close. Feel it. Rub it between your fingers. Let me know if you think it's alien, you'd be surprised what your instincts would suggest."

"Yea...next time..." Joe mumbled.

“You aren’t dead yet...”

“Might as well be...”

“...you’ve gotta choice...”

Joe pivoted from where he sat to face her, looking her in the eyes as he asked, “Are you serious?”

Lo shrugged.

“I could never!”

“You could always lie!”

“Can I?” Joe asked.

“Can’t you?”

“I mean...” Joe rubbed the stubble along his jaw, “could I really just claim to join her then betray her later?”

“No,” Lo admitted with a sigh, “she’d find a way to hold you to it.”

“How?”

“Magic...or by holding someone you care about hostage.”

“So I don’t have a choice.”

Lo hung her head, “Not really...”

Silence slipped between them as Joe considered his options. He frowned as he raked his mind, “You think I could fight her?”

Lo laughed, “Even if you can beat her one on one, you’ll be surrounded by soldiers and mancers and probably shackled from the moment you leave the cell. There’s a reason she didn’t bother to take your fire.”

Joe’s frown deepened. There was a third option. It wasn’t just submit or die. There was the potential to refuse and bring Shalis down with him. He could explode. Turning back to Lo, Joe asked.

“When it’s your turn...what will you do?”

She thought for a moment, then offered a wry smile. She didn’t have to say anything. They could read it in each other’s eyes – they’d come to similar conclusions. Nonetheless, she put it into words, “Even if there is no way, I’ll fight her, I’ll fight her til my soul slinks off to Solaris.”

Joe nodded, grinning with her despite their predicament.

“Donum.” He muttered.

Lo nodded, “Donum.”

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One corpse still held flame, sizzling in the corner. Three bodies surrounded it, their burnt rosy flesh striped by lacerations like the stripes of a tiger. Bits and pieces of mancers sprinkled the floor, a forearm here, a severed calf there, and atop a table was a nearly-fingerless hand with a handful of knuckles – the middle finger being the only phalange intact, pointing defiantly towards Castle Icelore somewhere high above. A deep purple paste – the goopy remains of more of Shalis’ unfortunate minions – held the pieces of people like chunks of fruit in Jell-O. The entire room was covered in this layer of death. Even the Knome, standing upon an anvil, had been unable to dodge the explosion of gore. His white beard, black hood, and kilted romper were coated in the melted meat and boiled blood of his victims.

He paid the carnage no mind as he held his new creation before him like a mother cradling her newborn child. Though hiltless, the sword could still be held by the cold metal tang. As for the blade, it was black, not as eerily black as the Suikii but rather ashen, verging on gray. Nor was it a slender, Fou style weapon, like the Suikii, but instead it was in the Otusacha style – long and heavy, possessing a brutish, rectangular blade with a triangular tip, it cut by the sheer force of its weight rather than by the fine sharpness of its edge.

“You’re beautiful,” Grandfather nearly swooned, “I won’t let them have you.”

He looked around the room to be sure none of the deceased were listening. Satisfied, he hopped down. The biological pudding splattered his bare thighs. He adjusted his skirt, holding his genitals to keep from slapping the surface of the gunk as he waded on tip toes to the wall. Raising the sword above his head he swung it at the wall. The blade bounced off and Grandfather spun to slash at the wall a second time. Once more he was knocked back. As he spun to land his third swing, the black blade had begun to glow a vibrant orange. When he hit the wall, the stone façade exploded. Dust clouded around Grandfather, emanating from the six-foot wide hole his magic sword had blasted through.

“And you shall be called the Aruikii,” Grandfather jumped through his hole and observed the hallway before him, “the Destroyer. Now, lead me home!”

“You aren’t going anywhere, Knome.”

Grandfather’s upper lip curled into a snarl as he turned to face his opponent. Hermes stood behind him in the hallway. The banshee’s skeletal head turned to glance in the hole the Knomish blade had carved out of the wall and, though a skull shows little emotion, Grandfather could tell Hermes was startled.

Now’s my chance!

Grandfather charged. As the Knome drew near, Hermes stepped back and drew his own sword to parry the attack. Grandfather swung again and their blades clamored together for a second time.

“I’ve grown stronger each day, little man.” Hermes growled, “You cannot defeat me.”

Rearing back, Grandfather struck the banshee’s blade for a third time – the Aruikii shining with the brilliance of an iron straight out of the furnace – and released a force that launched Hermes down the hall.

“I don’t have to.” Grandfather muttered.

Beaming from his success, the Knome spun on his heels and ran head first into Shalis Skullsummon’s foot.

Her toes tickled his soiled beard as feeling began to leave his body. He dropped the sword. The paralyzing freeze of the chilled marrow incantation enveloped him.

“Did you really think you could escape?” Shalis asked.

Grandfather responded through gritted teeth, “Can’t fault a Knome for trying.”

“I say we execute him with the Earthboy tomorrow.” Hermes said as he came up from behind them.

“No,” Shalis shook her head as she reached down to pick up the blade Grandfather had just created, “Grandfather is far too valuable. If he can make a fifth Knomish blade, he can make a sixth-”

“At the cost of two dozen mancercs?” Hermes nodded in the direction of Grandfather’s hole, “He can’t get away with murdering our people!”

“You aren’t the Sheik,” Shalis snapped.

“Yea,” Grandfather ground the words out, “ya godi badger.”

Hermes' grip tightened around his blade.

Shalis scoffed and removed her foot.

Grandfather fell to one knee, panting.

Then the world froze. There was, for a short moment, that horrendous shuddering sound. A wrenching of reality, like the pounding of a plane tearing through the sky towards the ground combined with the sound of the explosion when it finally smashed into the earth. Darkness came with it. Shalis was now nothing more than a frozen white silhouette.

Grandfather turned to Hermes, "Did you mean to target me, son?"

Hermes laughed, the sound scraped across Grandfather's ear drums, "Yes, Knome, but not to fight you. I've turned the lights out to take what is mine and leave this forsaken island."

"And so the great Hermes Retskcirt deserts once more..." Grandfather smirked.

Hermes stepped over the Knome and plucked the newborn Aruikii from the Witch's frozen fingers. For a moment he stood beside Shalis with the new sword in hand and Grandfather truly believed the banshee was about to restart time and kill Shalis before she could comprehend what had happened, but no. For some reason, be it mercy or a lack of self-confidence, he did not. The undead bearn turned from his superior and looked back down to the Knome.

"What's it called?" He asked.

"The Aruikii," Grandfather answered reluctantly, "the Destroyer."

"Beautiful..." Hermes rubbed his gloved hands over the blade then disappeared.

Time returned.

Shalis cursed.

"You're a genius, you know that?" Grandfather huffed out a laugh, muttering on, "Trusting Hermes..."

"Rotama taught me a thing or two – I can keep you alive without keeping you comfortable, Knome," Shalis hissed, boney needles protruding between her fingers as she clenched her fist, "I'm sure your howls will soothe my fury just as well as any other prisoner's."

Grandfather cleared his throat, bowed, then said with a charming grin, "You know I do take requests, just say the word and I'll make the blade of your dreams!"

Shalis spun away from the Knome and marched down the hall. A handful of boneguards materialized to escort Grandfather back to his cell.

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Catty sat with her eyes on the cell door. With her crow eye, she could see the souls lined up on either side of her, pacing about their cells, rocking back and forth in fetal positions, or lying prostrate seeking communion with their favorite higher power. While her roommate was away, she had nothing else to do but attempt to decipher the identity of the bright shadows around her. Many of these figures she found familiar, the dungeon was filled with old acquaintances, but one figure captivated her attention. Across the hall, sitting in the same position as she, was an energy she recognized as one she'd only just met. This was not the first time she'd noticed him but after he'd had a visitor that morning, she wondered how much longer they would be neighbors and couldn't help but to stare vigilantly at the being lest she miss witnessing some last minute, miraculous escape.

Her train of thought was interrupted as the door to her cell opened. Grandfather dragged himself inside, shuffling his feet as the boneguards ground their teeth with impatience. As soon as the Knome cleared the door it was shut behind him. Never before had Catty seen such a

perfect example of a frown than what she saw on Grandfather's face. It looked as if the bent crest of his pursed lips and deep V of his furled brow might meet in the middle, consuming his nose.

"You finished the sword?" Catty asked.

The Knome nodded.

"Now she's even stronger," the shadowmancer groaned, "splendid."

"Believe it or not," Grandfather plopped onto his romp across from the shadowmancer, "Hermes took the sword and ran."

Catherine raised an eyebrow. She was genuinely impressed. Though she had little respect for him on the battlefield, the banshee had a knack for coming out on top.

"One day, he might be something to deal with." Catty stated.

"Seems he is already. Look where we are." Grandfather noted.

"Yea well..." she shrugged, "Now that he's betrayed the Witch twice, the Doom Warriors and the Pact once, figure his days are numbered."

"You can only hope." Grandfather sighed, "Shalis seems determined to get a sword nonetheless. She wants me to make a sixth."

Again, Catty was surprised, "Even after your little trickery with the attendants?"

"She didn't seem to care." Grandfather raised his hands to the sky and shook his head, "She's lost her mind. You were right. She was already mad but this Sunasha thing has driven her irrational!"

"She's insecure," Catherine asserted, "just like any other romantic."

"You must be right, but..." Grandfather chuckled, "just never woulda taken her to be a romantic."

"The most violent people are the most prone to fall in love." Catty stated.

"I thought I was the wise one." He reached into his kilt, foraging blindly about his undergarments – or lack thereof – and retrieved two small, black marbles, saying, "She didn't even stop me from stealing these. She must've smelled them."

He tossed them to Catty. She reluctantly caught them, glaring at the balls in her palm for a moment, her nose crinkled, "I think the smell of your pocket might've masked the smell of their energy."

"I don't have pockets." Grandfather stated.

Catherine gagged.

Grandfather crossed his arms and shrugged, "Take it or leave it. And maybe – I don't know – thank me for once? Seeing as you'd be dead if it weren't for me."

She wasn't the thanking type. Holding the balls in a fist, she sapped the shadows from them. A wave of euphoria wafter over the shadowmancer, calming her. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Catherine tossed the empty crow eyes in the corner.

"No thanks?"

Catty shook her head.

"You're not very giving." Grandfather retorted.

Catty glared at the Knome for a moment. Knowing her silence tortured his restless spirit, she let the quiet build. She thoroughly enjoyed his agony for as long as she could bare then offered her own form of thanks.

"Across the hall, in the cell opposite ours, sits your pyromancer."

Grandfather was on his feet instantly, looking at the wall as if he might be able to spy through it.

"You're welcome." Catty whispered before rolling over to fall asleep.

- - -

Joe stood in the charred wooden staircase. The body beneath him smoked. The chalky carbon wafted into his face, making him sneeze.

“Bless you!”

Joe jumped. The body hadn’t moved, but the head had twisted around – like an owl’s – so that it stared up at him. The electric elf’s face was slick, his skin a melty puddy sliding around his skull as he shuddered. Joe’s foot slipped on the stair below him. His arms pinwheeled as he leaned back. Just as he was about to fall down the stairs, something behind him caught him. His savior spun him around and he saw that it was not one man but a cluster. They were a tangled mess of blue body parts, twisted, bent, and broken into a wad. Blood seeped out from their black, shark-like eyes. An agonizing hum seemed to rise up from their quivering gills.

Joe staggered up the stairs, away from the talking corpse and moaning clump of fishfolk.

“What’s wrong, Sun Child?”

The top of the stairs was blocked off as well. There stood Johnny, raising his severed hand to wave mockingly as he squirmed where he stood. Beside him was the rippled, bacon-like flesh of the fishfolk who’s stare had been forever scarred into his memory. Another figure came to stand behind them. At first, Joe thought it was a younger Theseus. The figure wore the old minotaur’s seal, but after a moment Joe knew who it was. It was the Guardian’s son, Acamus. Acamus looked down the stairs at Joe. His dark eyes, once wild with worry but now fiery with rage, glared hard.

“You’ve brought pain into this world.” Acamus snarled.

Joe fell to his knees.

The fishfolk strode forward. He cupped Joe’s chin and forced him to look into his eyes.

“Don’t be afraid,” the fishfolk raised his free hand which now held a sword, “its only justice.”

“Joe!” Johnny yelped.

“Joe!” Acamus cried.

“Joooooe!” The mutilated bodies behind him sang.

“WAKE UP!”

Joe was laying on his back, his head cradled in Lo’s lap, his entire body convulsing. Lo’s eyes were as wide as the fishfolk’s had been in his dream.

“You’ve got some demons in you Joe,” Lo said bluntly, “maybe we should stay awake tonight.”

Joe sat up and brushed his hair out of his face.

“Dreaming about Shalis?”

Joe shook his head. Though his body seemed to be listening and responding to Lo, his mind was still hooked on the train of thoughts he’d been forced to explore in his dream. *I’ve done some terrible things.* He admitted. *I’m no better than the people I’ve been fighting.* His stomach twisted and for an instant he thought he might throw up.

Then again, there was nothing to throw up.

He got up from the cot and began to pace around what little space they had. *I’m a murderer.* He pressed himself against the corner, letting his head rest in the nook.

I’m a murderer.

“Joe.” Lo said but Joe didn’t hear until she repeated herself louder, “Joe!”

He whirled around, eyes as wild as Acamus' had been back onboard the *Monoceros*, looking at Lo as if he'd never seen her before.

She raised her hands and lowered them slowly, in sync with her words, "Breathe, Joe, breathe..."

With his back against the wall, he slid down to sit in the corner. Lo didn't say anything else, she just watched him quietly. After a minute or so, Joe spoke.

"Maybe it's okay that I'm going to die."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe I *should* die."

"Farak that!" Lo rolled her eyes before calming her voice and asking gently, "Why?"

"I've hurt a lot of people since I got here." Joe muttered, then he cleared his voice and added, "I've killed people."

"Who hasn't?" Lo laughed then coughed, choking on her chuckles when she saw that her comment did not help, "Joe."

"Yea?"

"Do you honestly think you're worse than the people who run this castle?"

"Does it matter if I'm worse?" Joe asked.

Lo resisted the urge to roll her eyes again. They stared at each other for a moment as Lo strategized how to approach the point. Finally, she asked, "Remember when I said some animals have more energy than people?"

Joe nodded.

"We all kill animals, don't we?"

"But we don't leave them to rot." Joe retorted.

"Right, we do it for a reason." Lo agreed, "Did you kill these people without a reason?" Joe didn't respond, he was looking at his feet. Lo continued, "You didn't hurt anyone without a good reason, Joe."

"Does it ma-"

"Yes!" Lo was on her hooves now, "Joe. Nothing is that straight forward!" She knelt before him and took his hands into her own, "Have you not saved people?"

Joe could tell she wanted him to look up, but he couldn't.

"You came here – or at least, you stayed here – to help people, to help this world, didn't you?" Lo pressed, "That matters, Joe. Intentions matter."

Joe could feel tears coming into his eyes but he couldn't wipe them away because Lo held his hands. Suddenly, he felt embarrassed for her to see him cry. Then he felt embarrassed for worrying about such a thing. The tears rolled down his cheeks and fell onto Lo's hands.

"I've done bad things too, Joe." Lo said, "Who hasn't? It's why we do what we do that matters."

Finally Joe looked up, but only so he could challenge her, "And the result, how it all winds up, how it ends. That doesn't matter at all?"

"It does," Lo nodded, "but it isn't over yet, is it? You are in control of how it ends, Joe. You get to decide."

Joe nodded. Lo released his hands and sat cross legged before him.

"This is war, Joe." Lo said, "No one in this thing is clean. *No one*. Not even the good guys." She scoffed, "If there are any."

They sat for a while in silence. Lo was right about one thing for sure – he did not want to go back to sleep. He didn't know whether she was right about the rest. His mind was too

exhausted to try and come to a conclusion. But he hoped that she was. He hoped that one day he would be able to look back – even if he were looking back from heaven...or hell for that matter – at his thirteen days beneath Solaris and be able to justify his decisions. Above all, he hoped he had the courage to finish it right. That was something else he knew Lo was right about. There was one last test for him to take and his response had the potential to redefine everything he'd done.

Joe couldn't tell how long they had been sitting there before Lo finally spoke up again.

“Want me to finish the story of the Queen of Darkness?” Lo asked.

Joe smiled, “Think it'll get us to sunrise?”

“It just might.” Lo smiled back.

Lo's Tale 3: The Catechism

When the King of Tadloe, Hou Row, showed symptoms of the Crow's Plague, he sent his children to Sondor with their mother and an enchanted contract. Hou and Iahtro had kept in contact since the earth elf first saved him from the quick justice of Ecaep's blade. Iahtro considered Hou as something in between father and uncle. In this light, Hou's dying wish seems almost justifiable for even without the formality of the contract, Iahtro would've adopted Hou's kids as his own without question. However, the extremity of the covenant – the curse was from Mirkweed and (ask a Gill) Mirkweed curses are no joke – has left historians to wonder if the bond between the two kings might have dissolved in Hou's final days as he couldn't help but to blame Iahtro for the Plague.

Nonetheless, Iahtro bowed to Hou. By that enchanted paper, on which he signed with a bloody pin, Iahtro swore to succumb to his greatest fears if ever he failed to preserve Hou's family tree. It wasn't necessarily the wellbeing of his kids that Hou cared about – he'd hardly participated in the parenting – but rather the mortality of his legacy that haunted the Tadloen king's death bed nightmares.

Iahtro thought little of the blood oath. His mind was devoted to the elimination of the Yelkao Barbarians. By the time Hou fell ill, Iahtro's campaign was a major success yet still nowhere near complete. In the mountains that skirted Sondor's southeastern shores there were numerous pockets of resistance to Iahtro's rule, the most troublesome of which was led by Jamael Cormac.

History has painted Jamael as a humble leader, a unifier, and a martyr but, in reality, he was probably more of a hustler and a coward. As an orphan of the Plague and an inheritor of great wealth in Corimount, he was able to hijack the anti-Iahtro sentiments of the mountain peoples and combine that with the military wisdom of the scattered leaders of Einna's movement. As a result, he kept the resistance alive and became wealthier and wealthier.

He recruited infamous members of the Yelkao Barbarians, many of them banshees, and enticed them to join his crusade by ceding them authority over his own troops. His soldiers obeyed these new commanders at the behest of Jamael not because of their devotion towards the man but because he'd rented out plots from his massive estate to his follower's families. Paying rent was cheaper than the taxes charged in the countryside's ruled by Iahtro and sending one family member off to serve in Jamael's armies was preferable to being drafted into the invading army to serve the agenda of the Kou and Cage Clans.

When the Plague hit, markets withered. Those that dodged the curse often died due to destitution, only those with land were able to drop specialized labor and adopt village-esque, self-sustaining lifestyles. As Jamael's family members died, so too did much of their workforce, which provided him the opportunity to lease chunks out to fellow survivors. Though any old hillbilly could claim abandoned land and lease it out as the supposed owner, Jamael's noble heritage as a high-born Cormac made his organization far more trustworthy and the more

families that signed with Jamael, the more trustworthy he became. In comparison, the name Yelkao had suddenly lost all legitimacy in Einna's absence.

Without their warrior queen, the Barbarians had stooped to infighting rather than standing united against Iahtro. When Jamael offered Yelkao leaders armies to lead that were not loyal to the Yelkao, but rather Jamael, he was able to employ rival leaders – leaders that had been at each other's throats only months before – to fight alongside each other in the same campaigns. If they attempted to turn on each other, they could but their soldiers wouldn't follow. While Einna had united by way of charisma and military skill, Jamael united his forces through sheer practicality.

The Yelkao Barbarians were reincarnated into the Mountaineer Resistance headed by Jamael who'd yet to visit a battlefield but had no problem fabricating property documents of the bloody acres after the fact. This infuriated Iahtro – who typically led the charge in his campaigns – and rendered him desperate for any solution that might rid him of the pesky Southerners.

That solution came from – you guessed it! – the Queen of Darkness. Though she didn't offer it outright. First she consolidated her control over Batloe, Iceload, and Tadloe – pulling the same number she had in Aquaria and doing so successfully (even in the GraiLord's Vanian Mountains!). Then she began to seduce Iahtro (this was a platonic seduction, of course, sense the Queen was a banshee [also, just as an odd sidenote – she couldn't speak verbally, granted through magic she found ways...but still]). He reached out to her first – hoping that she might spare Sondor from the same ultimatum she awarded the rest of the Southern Hemisphere – and almost immediately he became enthralled. His communications with her – difficult as it was at first due to her inability to speak – offered him solace from the seemingly never-ending task of smothering the Mountaineers who's tactics had devolved into outright terrorism. Most of their time together was spent in Total Darkness. There they could escape their responsibilities without consequence. There she could speak without the exertion of extra magic. Legends claim the two spent years together, traveling a black and frozen planet with nothing more than each other's company. Not only did she convince him to become a shadowmancer – like she herself was – but she convinced him to become a ghost. The man that had abhorred ghosthood – banshees especially, after Einna adopted the cursed state of immortality as her cure – became a banshee himself. The Queen of Darkness baptized him in the Well herself. Some think the two actually felt a true connection, others posit that their relationship was nothing more than an elaborate scheme of the Queen for, in the end, she betrayed him.

But first she gave him the key to victory. By the year 1003, she had nearly all the lands she sought outside of Sondor and the Catechism was in its early stages. She'd stopped the Plague and subjected the world to her laws: no weapons, no drugs (including coffee, tobacco, and even most sweets), no meat, no nationalism (no flags, no anthems), no possessions, no families-

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“People went along with all that?!”

Lo nodded, “It was either that or die.”

“So what, you eat a cookie and they kill you?” Joe scoffed.

“Not yet.”

“Not yet?!”

“The rules were straight forward and explicit. If you were accused of an offense, the Knights of the Light would pick you up, decide if you were guilty or not, then sentence you.”

“To what, jail?” Joe asked.

She shook her head, “Torture.”

“Jesus!”

“Or execution.”

“Isn’t that extreme?!”

Lo shrugged, “It served her purpose though, right? The whole point of the Catechism was to weed out folks that would give her trouble – that wouldn’t fit in her utopia.”

“Damn.”

“Donum.” Lo agreed.

“And the no possessions, no families?”

“That was a work in progress,” Lo admitted, “see, in a banshee-utopia, there would be no possessions or families, right? So she wanted to get folks started. Marriages weren’t legal. And you’d better not get caught pregnant, that was a major offense.”

“What about folks already married?”

“The Queen didn’t go in a split couples up, though she probably would’ve if the Catechism got far enough along. It was more like, ‘no *more* families’.” Lo explained, “Same for possessions, folks were supposed to share things. If someone stole something from you, you’d get in more trouble for reporting it to the Knights than a thief would get if they actually got caught stealing.”

“Dude,” Joe shook his head, “existence must’ve been horrible.”

“For many, it was, but for others, it wasn’t so bad. For one thing, no more Plague.”

“True.”

“And another thing, a lot of poor people now could complain to the Knights, saying they needed this or that and the Knights would just swipe it from wealthier folks and hand it over. Some people really weren’t opposed to that first stage of Catechism.”

“Interesting...”

They were quiet for a moment then Joe got back on track, “So why’d she help Iahtro? Why didn’t she just kill him?”

“Maybe she really loved him,” Lo shrugged, “or maybe he really was naturally immune to the Plague.”

“She couldn’t kill him herself? I mean, without the Plague?” Joe asked.

“Iahtro was – and still is – one of the greatest warriors of all time. He hosts duels with champions every couple hundred years or so just to kill off whoever claims to be the best at the time and prove he’s still the boss.” Lo shook her head with a chuckle, then added, “And at the

time, he had the Mystak Blade, too. But for whatever reason, she didn't hit him with the Plague and once she convinced him to go banshee, he no longer could be Plagued."

"Hmm..."

"Another theory is that she kept Iahtro on her side in hopes of using him to kill the Guardians."

"How?"

"You'll see..."

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With her vast territory, she offered to support Iahtro's empire so that he could lower the taxes on his people. Suddenly, his taxes became more affordable than the rent that Jamael's loyal peasants paid. No longer did joining the invaders seem like such a bad idea. Families began to desert and lend support to Iahtro's plight. Within a month, the Mountaineer Resistance had dissolved. After another month, Jamael was dead and no one claiming Cormac royalty remained above the Eninac River. There were still pockets of resistance but these pockets were so small and weak their resistance consisted mostly of hiding rather than rebelling.

Though they were friends and though the Queen helped Iahtro iron out the kinks in his empire, she did not stop the slow spread of the Plague in Sondor. Iahtro knew she could, but he did not know exactly how responsible she was for the Plague either. Due to his ignorance, he considered the vulnerability of his nation in part his fault. His hubris kept him from bowing and ceding his empire over to the Catechism. Thus, when Hou's family got sick, he was not outraged but actually somewhat ashamed. His own desire to keep Sondor sovereign had now put the family of his good friend in harm's way. When he came to the Queen seeking aid, he wasn't indignant. He was desperate. He disliked the idea of the Catechism immensely – after all, he'd seen what had happened to Einna's banshee army firsthand – but he was responsible for the lives of his people and in the face of a slow, but sure death, ghosthood seemed somewhat better.

He pleaded for her to submit the Hou kids and all of Sondor to her Catechism and, in doing so, he stepped down from his throne. She agreed, accepting the crown, but demanded one more thing of him. She wanted him to lure the infamous Zipper out of hiding so that they could, together, slay him.

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"Wait," Joe interjected, "how does Iahtro know Zipper, I thought he was just some random Knome?"

"Have you ever met a Knome?" Lo asked with a smirk.

"Good point." Joe admitted.

“The Queen of Darkness is probably the only person beneath Solaris that wouldn’t be able to get a Knome to come out of their little hole – but that’s beside the point, Zipper wasn’t just some random Knome.”

“Huh?”

“He held off the Queen of Darkness for Solaris’ sake!”

“Okay, okay,” Joe nodded, despite his original question still being unanswered, “so how’d Iahtro know him?”

“Remember that fisherman that saved Iahtro’s life when he tried to leave Panta but got caught in a storm?”

“What are the chances?” Joe muttered.

“Huh?”

“What are the chances?”

“Knomes, man.”

“Are there Knomes in Delia?”

Lo shook her head twice before stopping and tilting her chin like a dog suddenly spotting a treat, saying, “Aside from the Dragon Slayer and Grandfather-”

“The Dragon Slayer, like the one that helped Saint?”

“Uh huh.”

Now it was Joe who was tilting his head, “He was a Knome?”

“What did I just say?” Lo rolled her eyes, “Anyways...”

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Iahtro contacted Zipper via mailmole – a service common to Knomes in the Under but only popularized on the surface after Zipper’s rise to fame – claiming that he sought to betray the Queen of Darkness, but that he needed Zipper’s help. When Zipper arrived on the shores below the mountains that, at this time, rose north of the Kou Jungle, he found the opposite to be true. The Queen of Darkness needed Iahtro’s help to defeat Zipper and, even Zipper admitted, that they would’ve easily slain him had Iahtro not been conflicted.

After receiving Iahtro’s message, Zipper sent back his own so that Iahtro would know that he was on his way. His message celebrated his old friend’s sudden mental clarity and referenced the oppressive, coercive nature of the Catechism and, in doing so, he asserted how she was the sole cause of the Plague. No one knows if Zipper knew it was a trap, but he definitely elaborated in his correspondence in such a way that many historians postulate he was trying to make the ex-king have second thoughts (though, that could’ve just been a symptom of a Knome’s natural tendency to elaborate). He provided specific descriptions about the Plague and the cure Uthemarc had created. When noting how Tidalus had aided in the effort, he referenced an old friend of the fishfolk, a woman that happened to be the very curse maker that had created the cursed contract Hou had made Iahtro sign. Zipper included enough details to destabilize Iahtro’s determination to doubt that the Queen, someone who he’d come to love and trust, was

manipulating him. Deep down, Iahtro knew the truth he'd been avoiding, but still he had to hear it from the horse's mouth.

When the Queen attacked Zipper, rather than helping, Iahtro got in the way. In a similar manner, when Zipper bested the Queen, Iahtro never failed to repel him. While he kept the two from killing each other, he interrogated them. Between clanging metal, Zipper laid out the Queen's plans while the Queen refused to honor such claims with refutation. In the end, she fled – seemingly confirming Zipper's accusations.

Iahtro was hurt. Whether or not the Queen had betrayed him with deception, he had now most certainly betrayed her. If she was telling the truth, then he just severed one of the greatest relationships he'd ever known. There in the mountains of northern Sondor, Zipper consoled Iahtro. He pleaded with the King to join him and the others, to give up on the idea of forcing her to concede and to go ahead and recognize the most likely truth, for the Guardians could desperately use Iahtro and his people's help to defeat her. Of course, Iahtro refused. Even if he committed to the conspiracy Zipper proposed, he could not expect his people to take on the Queen. For if she were as evil as Zipper claimed, she might pause the Catechism and bring the Plague back to the Grand Plains with a vengeance. Still, he had the sinking sensation that Zipper was right and he agreed to offer the Knome something: the Mystak Blade. They hastily concocted the bloody ritual and Iahtro Cage transferred the ownership over to Zipper the Knome.

If the blade had not switched hands, then it would've been bound to Iahtro forever, for only a few days later – before Zipper had left his friend and made the journey back to the Blue Ridges – the Queen and some of her strongest allies, including Donum, returned to the mountains to assault the two. This seemed odd to Iahtro and Zipper. Even though they were outnumbered, together they could easily withstand almost any foes. Still today, Iahtro and Zipper are considered to have been (and be) in the top ten greatest warriors beneath the Sun, Solaris, and Delia combined. But there was a method to the Queen's madness and this method, this plan, was quickly revealed.

As they fought, she explained that the Row Children completed their Catechism. No, they would not be slain, but yes, they would be baptized and immolated and that alone was enough to break the contract Iahtro had signed in blood. Immortal but infertile. Hou Row's lineage ended that evening.

The once bright, starry sky fell dark. Clouds churned overhead and wind whipped through the peaks. Rain poured down from the heavens so thick so that no one with mortal eyes could see. Lightning struck one after the other, rapid fire, now even the banshees were blinded. Thunder shook the ground as if there was an earthquake. The storm grew so thick and powerful that the mountains themselves began to crumble, melting into the ocean. Those present were swallowed in the thrashing waves. The Queen managed to escape but many of her allies drowned in the chaos (unfortunately, Donum survived). Dead or alive, Zipper vanished.

At first it seemed Iahtro had disappeared too but the world quickly realized the whereabouts of the missing king. He had not abandoned Sondor, on the contrary, he had returned with another worldly rage for, as the storm consumed the bluffs, the Queen had continued to

rant. She revealed to Iahtro in an undeniable manner that she indeed was behind the Plague, she even claimed – though some still question it – that she had never loved him, never cared for him, was merely trying to manipulate him, to string him up as a puppet so as not to lose the greatest sword arm the universe had ever known. As the curse took hold, shredding and stripping his flesh, modifying the molecules of his matter then melting and merging them together into something new, his fury pounded down like the fist of a god, plunging from the heavens, obliterating what got in its way. He carved up the mountainsides that once walled the northern edge, creating the jagged, jungle shore now known as the Crowned Coast. The curse inscribed to the blood oath he'd signed would've merely ensured his death had he not been a ghost. Instead, Iahtro's flesh had been obliterated and his cold, frozen heart now sought asylum not in a cage of bone but in the eye of a hurricane. Never again would he set foot on solid ground.

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“Hold on,” Joe said, his eyebrows scrunched, “you're telling me that a piece of paper turned Iahtro into a hurricane?”

“An enchanted contract, yea.”

“Was Hou some kind of archmage?!” Joe exclaimed.

“Oh no, he didn't enchant the contract,” Lo said, shaking her head, “he got it from the fishfolk – I'm pretty sure I told you that.”

“Hadn't the Queen of Darkness conquered them?”

“Yea, but most of those above ground didn't know this – even if Hou did, he probably would've sided with her against the Cure Confederacy if he'd been given the chance.” Lo shrugged, “Anyways, I think the curse was actually made by the Queen.”

“Figures...”

“And, according to legend, she used a lot of the energy of the folks that died from the Plague to power it. See, when she began to dial back the Plague, taking the energy rather than letting it spread to infect another victim, she had a ton left over. She could use it for things like curses or to pay off her loyal subjects.” Lo explained, “I figure it took a good couple souls-worth of energy to enchant a contract like that.”

“Did she know it was for Iahtro when Hou got it?”

“Who knows? But I bet she did.”

“I'm having a hard time believing she really loved him.”

“Most people do.”

- - -

The entire world was now under the Queen's control, though, according to her, there were pockets of freedom. She claimed that temples, Delian, Islamic, and Christian, were permitted to exist as safe havens outside of the Catechism.

No one knows why she had this policy. Some historians speculate that this was a practical move: the extremely religious would never forsake their own religion and persecuting them for their devotion would hinder her message – her the truth, the “light” her spirit army were Knights of, was one of peace, utopia. Remember, she enforced the narrative that the Plague was not her creation but that the Catechism was her cure. If folks wanted to die bowing to gods other than her, preferring the Plague over the Catechism, then so be it.

Others claim it as a way to discourage resistance. By supposedly allowing temples independence, those who chose to oppose her rule would be more likely to seek refuge in churches and mosques rather than in basements and backrooms. And, ironically, Delianism, Christianity and Islam all advocated for similar policies as her Catechism (all three were socialist in nature, they also all promoted asceticism). Cults became more theologically fundamental, able to do so and still be a less-strict alternative to mainstream society. Aside from those already extremely devout, the only sorts of people to seek out these religious conclaves were the militantly opposed to the Queen and those wanted by the Knights of the Light for often minor infractions – like young couples that forgot to take the necessary sexual precautions. This led temples to tend towards the chaotic as fundamentalists clashed with revolutionaries and both clashed with the delinquents. Seeing the chaos in the old religions, it helped those bogged down by the new laws cope with their compliance. At least they had order.

Aside from the temples, there was one city that the Queen of Darkness permitted sovereignty: Zviecoff. This was because there were too many faithful Muslims and Christians to squeeze into the Argolian Temple. But her agenda wound up infringing with the liberty of the pious people of the metropolis anyway.

She wanted to move the Stone of Krynor to an island in the center of the Northern Hemisphere (an island that would later become the capital of the Trinity Nations). The journey would take the giant chunk of void-dust from the Vanian Mountains to Zviecoff where it would be put on a ship to travel up the Etihw River, through Gulf of Zannon and the Hiyan Gulf, out the Strait of Ice and Earth, and into the body of water that would only later come to be called God’s Ocean. It would have been far less trouble to take the rock west, to the Frosted Coast but such a route would require more time on the open seas – more time in which Iahtro could spin by and obliterate the transporters. While the Queen’s plan still gave a window for Iahtro to interfere, traveling North through the Aquarian Ocean would be protected. Iahtro could not squeeze between Iceload and Tadloe into the Aquarian Ocean without endangering the civilization beneath the surface.

The entirety of the Southern Hemisphere was disgusted with the Queen’s plan to move the Stone. The mountain and the rock itself held a special sort of spiritual importance for Solarins, even for the most secular individuals. Many were worried that moving the Stone could have severe implications. The very unpredictability of the rock combined with its unmeasurable power suggested such tampering could be colossally fatal. With tensions high and anything possible, the Guardians – who’d been living in hiding, hopping from one religious temple to the

next, curing folks as they went – knew this might be their opportunity to strike. They watched closely.

- - -

“Joe,” Lo said, standing up, “I’m not gonna lie, I’m getting pretty tired.”

“Can you finish the story, you think?” Joe asked.

“Of course, of course...” Lo nodded as she stretched out on the cot, “Don’t let me fall asleep, I don’t want to abandon you.”

Joe smiled though his brow frowned, “I’ll be fine.”

“Alright, so...”

- - -

The Knights spent weeks carving a tunnel into the mountainside and preparing a rode from Krynor to Zviecoff so that their route would be the fastest route possible. A magical claw, meant to levitate the massive Stone between its cage like bars, was built in hopes that its enchanted cradle might keep the void-dust from acting out. Nothing happened immediately, but on the way out of the mountain the contraption struck a rock wall, rattling the Stone.

According to Einna Yelkao, who was utilizing her ghostly vision to watch the endeavor from outside the mountain where she reported the progress of the Stone to her allies, “The Knights made no mistake, the Stone did it – like a stubborn dog being dragged by its master, the Stone thrashed.”

The mountain moaned and the Knights rushed forward as the earthen façade that had been struck came to life. A squad of rocky, people-like shapes fell out of the tunnel wall and set about chasing after them. Reinforcements from the Knights of the Light began to pour into the mountains as their comrades were slaughtered one after the other. Every other minute the Stone of Krynor would shake, strike the earth, and more golems would rise from the snow, thirsty for blood (or in this case fire, as nearly all of the Knights of the Light were spirits). As the golems roared, more creatures came to their aid. Even the foliage seemed to turn against the caravan – dumping ice from their high reaching branches, outright splitting in half to topple over on top of unsuspecting spirits. Reinforcements continued to replace the Knights of the Light that fell and the Stone’s progress did not stop, but they left a canyon in their wake, littered with the empty armor of their extinguished comrades.

When word of the chaos in the Blue Ridges reached the people of Zviecoff, already uncomfortable with the temporarily occupying Knights of the Light, the seeds of rebellion the Guardians had been sewing for months finally took root. Groups of the different denominations in the city gathered as the Guardians traveled between them, giving them updates on the whereabouts of the Stone reported by Einna and received by mailmole. The plan was simple: wait until the Stone was placed safely in its cradle in Zvie Castle then attack the Knights of the

Light. They believed that the Queen might not even challenge them after the damage the Stone had been causing her forces but, if she did, they believed the Stone – or God, rather, acting through the Stone, as they believed he was – would protect them.

In Christian lore – and Islamic, for that matter – the Stone of Krynor symbolized a covenant between God and civilization, a promise of free will, a promise threatened by the Queen’s attempt to rewrite the rights of Solarins and to essentially become a goddess herself. The religious of Zviecoff believed that this separation of the Stone from its home was her final offense against the all-powerful.

The Guardians unashamedly encouraged such a belief. Though some did so sincerely (Theseus was an authentic Muslim) others, like Uthemarc, saw the uprising as a legitimate opportunity to overthrow the Queen. He theorized that if he could understand the Stone, he could use its strength to project his cure across the globe, inoculating the world, and destroying the Catechism’s ultimate appeal.

The Queen of Darkness was not oblivious. She knew what the people of Zviecoff were planning and was glad. Not only would she be able to eliminate the rest of the Guardians but she could show the cultish conclaves around the world that there was no God or gods in the heavens – that the closest thing they had to a god was beneath Solaris, walking amongst them as their Queen. Just as the Guardians planned their revolt for the moment the Stone came to its temporary resting place in Zvie Castle, so too did the Queen plan her arrival into the city.

The Guardians were not prepared for this.

The Stone of Krynor arrived and so too did the battle between nature and the Queen’s minions. Golems poured into the city alongside waves of wild animals – all drawn like magnets towards the stone as it was transported to the Castle. The citizens of Zviecoff hid behind closed doors, their breathes hushed as they waited for Einna’s signal. As the Stone was dropped into its throne near the top of Zvie Castle, Einna entered the city and ushered the rebels into action with a clap of banshee thunder. As Christians, Muslims, Delians, revolutionaries, and miscreants joined the ranks of the monsters in the assault on the Knights of the Light, the Guardians rushed Uthemarc towards the Stone of Krynor. Little did they know the Queen was waiting for them.

The Queen was in no hurry. In part, her hesitation was to let them revel in their victory so that their sudden change of fate with her arrival would be all the more soul crushing. But there was also a bit of her that wanted to see if they would be able to understand the Stone. If any one of the Guardians might be worth keeping alive so that she could manipulate the greatest chunk of void-dust known to Solaris. From the Blue Ridges, she watched intently with her banshee eyes.

Only Yak Habba was initially capable of comprehending the strange power though even he was unable to promise that he would be able to influence it. No sooner did he reveal this than did the Queen sound the second banshee’s thunder of the day. Though she trapped Yak in Total Darkness, she did not kill him nor take him away. Instead, she sought to instill him with mental anguish as she explained her new plan. She would spare him and slay his friends. He would be forced to translate the way of the Stone of Krynor to her and to manipulate it to her bidding.

Yak feigned despair, but he knew they had won. Though he wasn't confident he would be able to use the Stone to their advantage, he saw that the Stone had already decided to deliver their victory. It was as if the rock had told him itself. It had one last rattle in it. One last magic spurting thrash. And in this thrash, the Stone would bring Zipper back.

He had not died. According to the Knome, he had been busy elsewhere. After Iahtro was cursed, the Queen dispatched a large chunk of the Knights of the Light to ravage the Knomish world of the Under. Entire nations of Knomes thrived beneath the crust of Mystakle Planet and the Queen sought to keep Zipper occupied defending his people so that he could not interfere with her plans above ground. However long Zipper spent fending off the Knights of the Light in the Under he couldn't recall, it could've been centuries for the Stone of Krynor could teleport him from anywhere and anywhen to any time and any place. The war was a losing one – though the Knome's could've continued to resist the Knights, they would've eventually been eradicated by the Plague – but Zipper would not abandon his people. In the end, the Stone stole him away. Fortunately so. Otherwise, he would not have vanquished the Queen and his people would have undoubtedly died.

Ready to defeat her last opponents, the Queen ended her duel with Yak Habba and turned to face the rest of the Guardians only to see Zipper materialize before her. The old Knome raised the Mystak Blade to attack, but the Queen knew better. Without hesitating another second, she leapt towards the Stone of Krynor and whacked it with her sword.

The Queen of Darkness was gone.

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Lo yawned, long and loud.

"You going to sleep?" Joe asked.

"No...I can stay up with you," she said though her eyes were closed, "...just lay down over here, just pinch me if I start to nod off."

It was fine. He got up and slipped onto the cot beside her. She cuddled up against him. He'd thought that he wanted her to stay up with him. That her voice – anyone's voice – would somehow console him for what was coming in only a few hours, but now he felt otherwise. Now he craved silence. He needed to think. Alone. But her warmth was nice.

His entire body was sore with anxiety. His organs throbbed – not just from the stress of mental anguish but also from the absolute lack of nutrition. They'd only been supplied with water. His muscles twitched. Even in the silence that filled their cell, he could hardly keep a thought in his head before it flitted off. In a strange way, he almost wanted time to speed up. Just to get it over with. He closed his eyes.

Never woulda guessed, he thought to himself, my final hours and all I want in the world is to sleep through them.

Chapter Nineteen: Rise of the Sun Child

Although he couldn't tell, Solaris was preparing for the climb up over the Vanian Mountains, warming up the courage to shed its light on the island of Icelore. Only a couple of hours separated him from his appointment in the courtyard. Condensation coated the walls of their enclosure, mirroring Joe's own state: melting in a cold sweat. Seconds crawled painfully by. Yet, his mind was empty. He lie there in the complete absence of thought.

Lo was curled up on the cot, smiling in her sleep. Her subtle grin was incorporated in the facade upon which waves of light danced, displacing shadows. Joe watched lazily. Unaware even that he was watching until a sharp pang seeped out of the stone in his chest to prick his rib cage. With a silent yelp he sat up. His flames were going haywire. Normally his fire tumbled over and over, like clothes in a washer machine, but now his fire spiraled, weaving in and out of loops it made as it frantically raced around the perimeter of the stone.

My fire's more anxious than I am!

Another but brief flash of pain and suddenly his flame burst from his chest, hitting the wall opposite him and bouncing down to hit the floor then flying up to smack the ceiling before coming to a stop, trembling before the cot in a humanoid shape.

"Agony?"

But no, this shape was not tall and broad like the fiery figure Joe'd met the night of his induction. No, this creature stood hunched over, shaking as her body took a solid, fleshy shape. Before that, though, Joe caught a glimpse of what he initially believed to be a bright sapphire-colored jewel – but quickly realized that it was in actuality an ice-encased intestine, a frozen heart to be exact, for as he recognized the state of the being now standing firm before him, he knew it to be a banshee.

Draped only in fire which poured from her chest stone, Joe couldn't tell where the true fire ended and the ephemeral banshee flame began. Even her hair, which seemed to be dancing with the flames, blended with the inferno due to its collage of shades from yellows to reds. She was a race he'd yet to see – though notably elven due to her dagger-like ears. If it wasn't for Lo's lore, he may have mistaken her for some sort of ethnic mix – having the slanted eyes of a South Sondoran human but the pale skin of an electric elf – but he knew who and what she was. She was a fire elf, she was from Delia, and she was named Sunasha Flamecall.

"I cannot speak long." Her voice was a shrill whisper, as if she were also afraid of people listening in, "Are you prepared for what we must do?"

Joe was only able to nod before she continued.

"You will be a hero, Joe. Her death will save many lives. As for the Prophecy – or the Foretelling if you prefer – it is nothing but Knomish lies, Joe. The Samurai will return, there is no need to resurrect them, I've seen one with my own eyes. Fetch Eninac resides, imprisoned by the Pact, in the volcano known as Graand Galla. I tell you this to relieve any guilt you may have for failing to do as you've been told you must, I tell you this to fill you with pride that though you may not be the Sun Child and though the Samurai may not come back tomorrow, you will bring unmeasurable good to the people of this planet with the sacrifice you will make today."

Then, again without allowing time for Joe to respond, the flames swelled around her and she crumbled to the ground where the fire, shuddering as if it were an arduous task, tightened into a ball. Once recompacted the ball shot off – smashing into the corner across from the cot, ricocheting across the cell, then flying back to Joe and pounding him in the chest.

Joe stared at the stone in his chest. It was already back to spinning angrily. He looked at Lo. She seemed not to have been disturbed. For a moment, he thought about waking her but he eventually chose not to. His eyes turned back to his chest stone where the Tsar of Pyromancy thrashed.

He was ready.

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As Solaris rose over the Blue Ridges, no one in Icelore could look east. The ice-capped tower heads of Castle Icelore glowed like light houses, becoming accidental beacons to anyone sailing the Frosted Coast. Within one of these frozen minarets, the two most powerful people in the Order of Mancers were getting dressed for a day of ceremonial executions.

The two were as similar as they were different. A bone bender and a shadow slinger. A dress and a suit of armor. An earth elf and a water elf. But both equally ferocious. Impeccably capable in war and peace. Few foes escaped elimination be they the enemy in battle or in politics. The two abided by a code of savagery that had come to manifest a sort of primitive sense of order in the Order. The strong did as they pleased and the weak were only protected so long as they gave the strong reason to do so. Many wondered why it was that Shalis and Adora had yet to turn on each other – having already turned on almost all of their former peers. Most assumed they were lovers, but they shared a different bond. Somehow, through all the bloodshed and anarchy, the two had fostered a sense of mutual loyalty. In part it spawned from the fact that neither knew whether or not the other could kill them, but it had grown into a partnership that few beneath Solaris were lucky enough to experience. It was sisterhood that bound them.

Shalis Skullsummon said, “Solaris is smiling awfully big for it to be the day we kill one of its kin.”

Adora Shadowstorm smirked, “Today Solaris swallows the Sun.”

“Tell me,” Shalis paused to pass judgement on her gown then continued, “do you think he will give in?”

“Absolutely.”

“Really?”

Adora shrugged, causing her armor to clank, “If he is from Earth like they say he is. They say he has only been on this planet for what? Two weeks?” She shook her head, “He wouldn’t even know what he’d be dying for. Maybe you’ll have to tear his guts out first, but he’ll submit in the end. I’m sure.”

“But those Knomes, you know he’s hung with them.” Shalis spat, “They’re highly influential.”

“What Knomes?” Adora scoffed, “If he can be manipulated by Knomes then he was never a threat to begin with. If he can be manipulated by Knomes, he’ll be kissing your feet like he’s John Pigeon.”

“If that’s the case,” Shalis chuckled, “I might cut him open nonetheless.”

“That’s my vote.” Adora stated, “Who knows. Maybe from his corpse the Queen will rise. The Stone’s weird like that.”

“Wouldn’t that be beautiful?” Shalis sighed, “We slay the Trinity Nation’s newfound hope and the Queen returns...shall we, my love?”

Adora shook her shoulders, letting her armor rattle, then twisted her head to pop her neck – a ritual that answered Shalis’ question.

“How do I look?” Shalis asked.

“Like the devil herself.” Then Adora asked, “And I?”

“You’re a force to reckon with, my love.”

“Let’s kill a messiah.” Adora grinned.

“Aye,” Shalis concurred, “in the name of the Queen.”

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As Solaris climbed higher, the morning fog stooped lower as if driven back by the frozen tower tops of Castle Icelore. While the spires glowed like infant stars, the rest of the stronghold’s exterior was shrouded in the shadows of the mountains that skirted the steep edge of the island. The fortress itself sat well above the crashing waves below and, with the fog being forced to retreat further and further down as Solaris demanded her place in the sky, it almost appeared as if Castle Icelore floated on the clouds.

In the midst of the fog that dressed the base of the great keep, the *Monoceros* waited. The murk had stretched across the Great Straight of Heimdallure in the darker hours of morning but just as it descended upon the waves it also fled west as the morning rolled on. The *Monoceros* had sailed through the clouds and anchored in the midst of the fog, east of the Castle. There they waited for the minotaurs.

Ekaf, below deck, watched the mapworks vigilantly. He’d been watching before dawn when the school of tiny wooden dragons, looking like a cloud of blood as they glowed red upon the map, left Mount Krynor flying north across the mapwork towards Icelore.

Cedar Row, the earth elven Vokriit Commander, stood at the front of the ship beside the one-armed Shaprone Ipativy. Their feet rested impatiently on thick, splintery ropes that had been fed over the sides of the vessel to leash the tenders below. Half of the soldiers they’d brought with them waited on the tenders, packed so tightly there was no room for them to sit. Then again, the soldiers were so anxious and fidgety, few would have chosen to sit to begin with. They stood, rocking back and forth as their dinghies bobbed in the rough, cold waters, blind as bats in the fog, waiting for word from their leaders above.

The only soldiers not dead silent – Shaprone was strict when it came to pre-battle conduct – were those unfortunate enough to get stuck standing downwind from Nogard. They couldn’t help but cough as plumes of smoke poured from the chidra’s nostrils.

“Aye lad,” Bold spoke up, “moind given that uh rest?”

Zalfron concurred, “Yea, yer gettin the whole armay hah.”

“You shoulda said somedin before I started, Civ.” Nogard shrugged and showed his comrades the only half-combusted bowl of gogo, “I’m not drowing dis out.”

“You should go into battle in your right mind.” Zach stated.

“Right mind?” Nogard chuckled. He nudged Machuba, “He dinks I gotta right mind?”

“This is as right as his mind gets.” Machuba stated, accepting the pipe himself.

“Least I ain’t bumblin around like John Pigeon?” Nogard argued.

“True.” Bold admitted.

“You’ve got a problem.” Zach said.

“Yea, Civ,” Nogard laughed, “who doesn’t?”

A commotion behind them freed Nogard from further criticism. Ekaf had arrived. Having slid down the rope to the tender then shoved his way between the legs of the troops to get to where his comrades stood near the front. As he came to stand beside them, the tenders began to move forward. Propelled by enertomb-powered motors.

“These damn dinghies are too slow,” Ekaf lamented, “I told Shaprone they wouldn’t cut it, but no – ‘Expenses!’ he said...”

“Wae’ll get thar.” Bold patted his vertically challenged comrade.

Uncomforted, “But behind the minotaurs!”

“AYE!” Nogard yelled.

A breeze rushed by, carrying off a layer of fog and blowing the last bit of ground greens out of the bowl of the chidra’s pipe. As he grieved, the rest of the group reveled in the view – finally able to see the castle sitting up on a cliff of clouds.

Something was happening. The frozen towers, still shining, began to glow with a growing fierceness so much so that the observers were forced to squint, holding their hands to their faces and peering through their fingers. Then the glow was replaced by flame. Tongues of flame shot out in all directions, completely engulfing the castle so that it became nothing more than a shadow, like black coal, in the fire that surged around and through it. For a brief second, squinting was not enough. The men and women on the tenders and the *Monoceros* looked away as a thunderous blast rumbled the island and shot across the Great Straight. Bold screamed like a little girl as the tenders rocked. When they turned back, they saw the charred castle trembling. One of the three towers shuddered further, shifting then wrenching in half, casting its crumbling head down into the murk that shrouded the rigid shore of Icelore.

“Selu!” Zalfron shouted.

“What was dat?” Nogard demanded.

“That couldn’t have been the minotaurs, could it have?” Zach asked.

“Whatever it was, it works in our favor!” Ekaf declared.

Shaprone’s voice, though distant, could be heard by the tenders as he shouted in response to the sudden explosion, “The Sun Child beckons!”

A collective murmur of anxious chuckles spread throughout the troops packed into the little tenders. More explosions, though these were far smaller and much less of a surprise, sounded behind them as the *Monoceros*’ cannons opened fire, launching mortars over the dinghies to bombard the cave-like harbor and hillside below the castle. As their glorified row boats road up and down the waves of the now agitated sea, they listened to the destruction hidden in the fog.

Dragons began pouring out of the towers above the castle – like hornets from a nest – and the soldiers on the tenders braced themselves, but the dragons weren’t for them. No sooner did they leave the tower tops than were they slammed by other dragons, longer and fatter than those that had left the Castle – the minotaurs had arrived!

The cannon fire stopped and another faint cry of the Battle General reached the ears of those on board the tenders.

“Death to the Witch!”

The soldiers echoed his cheer.

“DEATH TO THE WITCH!”

“End to the War!”

“END TO THE WAR!”

The chanting on the *Monoceros* was now no longer intelligible but one of the officers onboard one of the dinghies took on the job.

“For the Blue Ridges!”

“FOR THE BLUE RIDGES!”

“For Ipativy!”

“FOR IPATIVY!”

Zalfron interjected, “For Sentrakle!”

“FOR SENTRAKLE!”

To which another soldier responded, “For Iceload!”

“FOR ICELOAD!”

“And the Sun Child!” Ekaf shouted.

“THE SUN CHILD!”

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Soaring between the peaks that pimpled Icelore, the minotaurs dove low into the mist that clung to the valleys in between. They flew blind, unable to decipher between the ivory of the fog and the white opal blanket of snow. Fortunately, reckunk dragons, the most common steed of the GraiLord, relied more on their auditory and olfactory senses than their sight – traits honed from years spent hunting in the blizzards of the Vanian Mountains. There were four furred warriors to a dragon and at least a hundred dragons in all. Most were miners, hunters, and farmers but there were also priests and teachers, bakers and tailors, smiths and engineers. The minotaurs soldiers from Zviecoff divided themselves up amongst the Taural militia. Not for protection, the villagers Acamus allowed to accompany them were experienced in combat whether with bandits or wild beasts, but once they breached the walls of Castle Icelore, there would be a mad dash for the dungeon and Acamus had made it known he wouldn't be sticking around to give orders. He planned to be the first to find his father. He flew a good hundred yards ahead of the rest and expected the trained soldiers to lead the militia warriors onwards in his absence.

As they drew closer, the fog began to shrink, sticking to the nooks and crannies. Emerging from the clouds, Acamus could recognize the terrain. He closed his eyes and prayed.

When he opened his eyes, Castle Icelore stood before him, wedged between two mountains. They had been spotted, tiny figures could be seen bouncing along the top of the walls, lighting the great torches that would alert the rest of the fortress but by this time it didn't matter. Acamus and his warriors had made it. As they reached the wall, flying single file behind their leader, they leaned back and led their dragons upwards at a ninety-degree angle from the ground. Solaris shone bright on the shimmering bellies of the GraiLord's sky dragons, but only for a second. Reaching his desired peak, Acamus had his beast level off to begin her dive and as he caught sight of the courtyard below, he squeezed his hoof into his beast's side to spur her onward.

He saw the mass gathered between the castle and its walls and recognized it as an execution. *Father!* was his first thought. His second thought was interrupted when a figure in the middle of the courtyard – the individual about to be executed – began to glow and then – BOOM! The castle was engulfed in flame. Acamus had never seen so much fire in his life. And he was diving into it! He pulled back on the reins and his steed spread her wings.

Jerked by the sudden slowing, Acamus was jarred but he held tight. He directed the dragon to pitch left, just barely dodging the worst of the exploding column of fire. Still, the

inferno surrounded them for a moment, scorching him, before evaporating. The force of the blast knocked his steed out cold, launching them into a barrel roll. They were going to crash into the castle. Hoisting his spear with one hand and holding tight to the reigns with the other, Acamus crouched as best he could on the tumbling beast. When he pounced, it was hardly more than a fall, but he managed to avoid the abrupt collision that his unconscious dragon endured. He grabbed his spear with both hands and thrust it into the stone edifice of the tower half a second before he would've crashed flat against it. His dragon smashed the tower just a few yards beneath him.

He muttered another prayer as he hung from the Vanian Spear. He craned his neck to look back at the courtyard but never got to finish his glimpse. He felt the foundation shift beneath him. With a horrible grinding groan, the tower began to lean towards the sea.

Acamus whispered, "Father—"

Then the tower collapsed and his voice was swept away.

- - -

Light flooded the cell and drove his headache like a dagger deeper into his brain. Yet, despite the pain, he was almost happy the time had finally come. He hadn't slept a wink. Despite the bulky silhouettes, the visitors were fleshless. Armored hands took hold of his arms and hoisted him to his feet. Lo rolled onto her back with a groan. She opened her eyes, trying to squint past the light to meet Joe's gaze but Joe was unable to meet hers. A third boneguard, having somehow maneuvered around to stand behind him, prodded Joe with the tip of a blade. His body marched forward before his mind could consent. He craned his neck to look back and say goodbye but in a second he was out of the cell and the herder behind him was shutting the door. Before it slammed shut, he heard Lo squeak something, the beginning of a word robbed from Joe by the impatient undead.

Joe felt cold. His mind was numb yet his skull was pounding. Thoughts flickered through his consciousness but he was unable to grab onto any except one reoccurring realization.

I'm going to die.

The walk through the dungeon took a century and yet it took no time at all. The halls were dark and quiet aside from the drip drop of condensation which coated the walls. None of the prisoners made a peep. It felt like a funeral procession – though the other inmates probably had no clue he was passing by. In silence they marched through five layered rings of cells then started up the spiral staircase that stood like a column in the center of the dungeon.

The stairs climbed up above the prisoner hold into an airy chamber. It was almost like a below-ground tower, a massive column of space carved out the earth. Spiraling one hundred feet up to the base of Castle Icelore, the stairs had no railings and the walls of the peculiar chamber stretched at least thirty feet away from the pillar the steps wrapped around. Joe was suddenly – albeit temporarily – appreciative of his undead guides because of their firm hold on his shoulders. As they climbed, Joe observed the far walls. He noticed undead minions stationed at tiny slits in the wall, each armed with either bow or crossbow, each with their empty eye sockets aimed in Joe's general direction.

Their short tour through Castle Icelore didn't impress Joe half as much as the subterranean staircase. Though it was just as quiet. The significance of the broken-record-realization had subsided and so had his headache.

I died the minute they locked me in that cell.

Instead, Joe felt buzzed. The whole situation seemed surreal. For a moment, he again began to wonder whether this alien world was real or a figment of his imagination. *No*, he assured himself, *this is real*. When they reached the courtyard and Joe saw the crowd that had gathered he nearly panicked. The calm he'd come to know in the face of his fate waivered but it didn't crumble. Instead, the euphoric, unrealness embraced his psyche and he drifted out in front of Castle Icelore with his boney escort like as though it were nothing more than a walk in the park.

He felt as though he were in a dream but, on the other hand, his mind was clear, as it sometimes can be in a particularly true dream.

Leaving the undead to guard the castle, almost every living member of the Order that had stayed in Icelore was present in the courtyard. Knights and mancens alike. There were hundreds, probably over a thousand. Make-shift bleachers filled the snow caked grounds, each fully stocked with Disciples. Even a good bit of undead had been gathered, not so much as to watch, but to add to the image of the insurmountable odds facing Joe. The skeletal slaves stomped their feet in unison, creating a beat, as their summoners sang with long drawn-out syllables in deep tones. The words were unintelligible but reminded Joe of some of the magical words he'd heard his companions use. Whatever it was, the chant sent shivers down his spine.

Halfway between the castle and the walls, they stopped. Joe was surrounded by the congregation still occupied in their ominous song. He focused on his breathing, slow and deep. The boneguard who had stood behind Joe, now strode out before him, revealing the blade he'd held before to be a stake crossed by a perpendicular bar. The undead shoved the stick in the ground then Joe was led over to stand in front of it, facing the castle.

His resolve suddenly trembled. The skeleton grabbed Joe by his shoulders and the two others kicked him behind his knees, dropping him to kneel before the stake. Tears began to well in his eyes and he clinched them shut. Breathing in and out, slowly, Joe fought back the urge to crumble. His legs and arms were tied to the post behind him. *Stay calm, stay calm, stay calm*. He began to pray but then the chanting stopped.

He opened his eyes.

Shalis stood in front of him with a crooked smile stretched across her lips. Joe shuddered and the tears finally broke the seal, rolling down his cheek.

"Behold, the Sun Child!" Shalis proclaimed to the audience, "Our savior foretold in the Delain Prophecy!"

The audience responded with an assortment of laughter and jeers.

"This is *he*? What do y'all think?" Not waiting for an answer, she turned to Joe, "For *years* we have been working to prepare the world for the return of the Queen and now here you are..." She whirled back around to face the crowd, "Looks like we've *still* got our work cut out for us."

Ignoring the whooping and hollering, she was back to Joe. She stooped, almost kneeling, so that her eyes were just above Joe's and her nose nearly tickled his brow. She whispered, but somehow – by some magical enchantment – her dark voice was projected throughout the courtyard like that ominous voice in the back of your head that whispers toxic anxieties.

"You are nothing. You have no home, you have no family, you don't belong here. You're lost...just as we once were." Then she spun back to the audience, voice raised, arms spread wide like a soaring dragon, "But are no more!"

The mangers of the Order quieted. Even the early morning breeze seemed to still. Fog slowly drifted through the courtyard, blurring the spectacle. As if the climate itself were intrigued. Shalis began pacing around Joe as she continued.

“We were taken from our homes, taken from our families, told we don’t belong because they wanted us gone. They demanded that we destroy ourselves. They begged us to disappear. They said we were a plague – that we were what was wrong with this world – that mancy was a disease. Why? For what?”

She stopped in front of Joe, standing sideways so that one shoulder pointed towards the Castle and the other towards the walls.

“Because we were strong. Stronger than they were and they were afraid of us. Just as they were afraid of the Queen. They were so busy protecting the weak that they started to persecute the strong. That Bastard in the Cathedral? He’s crippling this Abbim. He’s poisoning the beings beneath Solaris with lies of justice and right and wrong all the while he smears the legacy of the Catechism – the one thing that nearly brought justice to this world. Tell me, Joe,” She turned to fully face Joe, “what’s wrong with what we’re doing? What’s wrong with defending our way of life? What makes us so evil?”

“I don’t know if anyone is evil.” Joe responded, surprising himself with his own quickness. He looked up at the Witch, “But I do think you’re wrong.”

“Is that so?”

Joe nodded. His voice was gentle, even as he condemned her cause, he spoke as if it were a regular conversation, “Mancy is a disease – like an addiction-”

“And we’re wrong to be ill?!” Shalis spat back.

“No...”

Joe shook his head, frowning as he tried to find how to express what he meant. He wouldn’t have much time, though, because Shalis was moving on. She raised her palm to the sky and an ivory white hilt began to take shape in her grasp.

“Mancy is a choice – an option.” Shalis continued, “One everyone should have the opportunity to consider. Greatness. That’s what mancy offers. No one should keep us from greatness. We aren’t wrong, the world is!”

As the blade came to life, bubbling out of the hilt, she slid the dull edge beneath her nose and closed her eyes, inhaling the barren scent of bone. Then she looked back at Joe – who finally had a response.

“Even if the world is wrong, that doesn’t make you right.” Joe stated.

She brought her nose to Joe’s brow and the tip of her blade to his belly, then she whispered, “Then what makes us wrong?”

Joe bowed his head, letting his hair droop over his eyes. He watched the fire in his chest, swirling over and over, just above where the Witch’s white blade waited. He was ready.

“I have a friend,” Joe said, “named Zalfon. Your people killed his family.”

“His family killed our people.” Shalis stated.

“Machuba.” Joe continued, “Your people ruined his country.”

“It was already in ruins.” Shalis shrugged.

“Theseus Icespear-”

“He was no angel.” Shalis scoffed, “Make no mistake Sun Child, if we’re wrong then so are you.”

“Maybe so...” Joe admitted.

He couldn't help but think of the body of the elf in the stairwell at the Barren's Mullet. Of the burning fishfolk in the Submarine Canyon. *How many Sea Lords and how many mancens have died by my hands since then?* It all felt so wrong. And yet. At the same time, he felt sure that he was doing what was right.

Clenching his eyes shut, he conjured up a snap shut of Ekaf. The geriatric warrior, with his sneaky grin but warm eyes. Bonehead appeared to him. Though his skull had no flesh, there seemed almost to be a sad smile in the way his jaws clasped together. Grouchy Grandfather, bouncy Zalfron, for a moment Joe thought he could smell the gogo wafting up from Nogard's corncob pipe. He thought of Sam Budd, of Boldarian the Fifth and Zachias Shisharay – two brothers bound by time rather than blood, much like Nogard and Machuba. That young fishfolk, cursed to bear a pain Joe couldn't even fathom, charmed with a wisdom well beyond his own years. He thought of Aquaria, of Sidon and, despite the circumstances Joe even managed a chuckle as the next two slipped across his mind: Janwe and Yiangu. Then Acamus and his father Shalis interrupted his thoughts, "It is time for you to make your decision."

Finally, he thought of Lo. An alien like himself. He could hear her.

"No one in this thing is clean. No one."

"Well?" Shalis cut in, growing impatient, "What'll it be?"

He could envision her big brown eyes, boring hard into his own, her soft melodious voice reminding him, *"You are in control of how it ends."* He looked up into the face of the sheik.

He said nothing but she read his mind from the pale, white-lipped smirk that spread across his face. She hissed and plunged her weapon into Joe's stomach. There was no pain, instead, as the sword slid into his flesh Joe felt a wave of euphoria. His body fell limp and his head rocked back to rest on the cross he was strung to. A loud hum filled his ears, erasing all other noise as his other senses ceased to respond. The strange alien world he'd become accustomed to spun around him as the fire in his chest churned with the intensity of a tornado. He felt peaceful. He felt as though this was the first real rest he'd had in a long time. But it lasted only for a split second. Even in that split second, he knew he was not yet done. He knew that his final breath would soon slip out from between his lips and, before that, he had something he had to do. One last great effort. In prayer, he apologized to his friends then he straightened up as best he could and returned his gaze to the Witch then released every bit of fire he had inside him.



Map

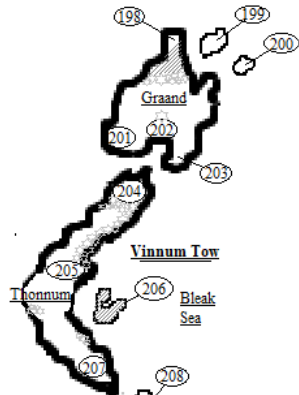
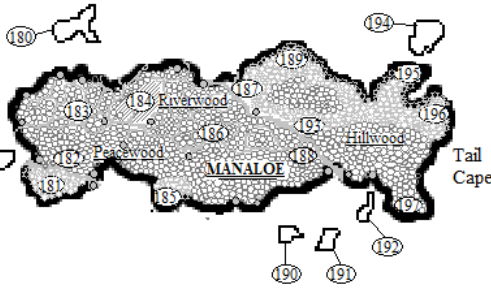
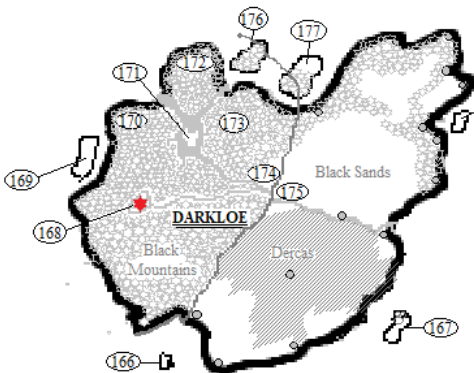
1. Coraljen
2. Aidaros
3. Men
4. Fort Gonchi
5. Kilko
6. Shwayjen
7. Gongchan
8. Jinurdojen
9. Baejen
10. Sanction
11. Submarine Canyon
12. Malpirendaw
13. Binchingjen (lost town in the Wobniar Woods)
14. Shanhubee (above water: the Coral Bridge)
15. Aquaros
16. Anura Island
17. Nevomnrock
18. Port Dunleh
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 | 107. Fort Crown | 134. Tenta and the East and West Ring River |
| 82. Yelkaovuhl on the Bar River (river that wraps around the Kishastand River Valley) | 108. Fort Blunder | 135. Sereibis and Sereibis River |
| 83. Ehcatsum | 109. Ragashi | 136. Drathernan |
| 84. Dogtown and Eninac River | 110. Mountain Zou and the Raga Mountains | 137. Jungle Port on the Jungle Canal |
| 85. Kat Mountain | 111. Dagar and the Peace River | 138. East Nevomnu on the Brown River |
| 86. Enivuhl | 112. Banai | 139. Jungloe |
| 87. Mountpond | 113. Green Town | 140. Hightop and Hightop Hills |
| 88. Porton | 114. Won, Ash Lake, and the Green River | 141. Panta and the Pillar of the Past |
| 89. Meriamuhl | 115. Bay Town | 142. Kakal |
| 90. Blugri | 116. Inton & the Swamps of Inton | 143. Bash, Rath, Paph (in order from West to East) |
| 91. Mountainside | 117. Ta-Nissassa | 144. Fox Island |
| 92. Mericor | 118. Kemplor & Saluman River | 145. Dragonrok |
| 93. South Eson and the Eson River | 119. Portville | 146. Babasachaloe |
| 94. North Eson | 120. Suinus | 147. Babaramoh |
| 95. Basher and Cage River | 121. Chartree Village | 148. Machine City |
| 96. Cormacton and the Polestand Mountains | 122. Soil | 149. Savannaramoh |
| 97. Coridahk | 123. Rah and the Rah River | 150. Dragonfork |
| 98. Odneuni | 124. Toxica | 151. North Fang |
| 99. Cage Town & Zion's Stronghold & Zion's Mountain & Swamps of Cormac | 125. Eastport & Northern and Southern Fou Lakes | 152. Tubakamoh |
| 100. Koul | 126. Westport & Fou River | 153. Factory Town |
| 101. Riverbush City and Riverbush and Kou River | 127. Fou Town | 154. Inwood and the Bay of Bamba |
| 102. North Cori | 128. Swampville and Escano Swamps | 155. Sodpaz |
| 103. Mountainvuhl | 129. Kraddonville Islands | 156. Mystwood and Mystwood City and the Mysty River |
| 104. Sandtown | 130. Oreh Island | 157. Blue Island |
| 105. Tween Rivers | 131. Harp and the South Ring River | 158. Industropolis |
| 106. Fort Cage | 132. Chick-Chaw and the Winged River | 159. South Fang and the Stoned Mountains |
| | 133. Kine | |

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| 160. Hawk Eye or the People's City and the People's River | 189. Woodland Ridge | 213. Drule |
| 161. Calleranta | 190. Weatherbee (Christian Isles) | 214. Doggenham, the Citadel, & Meriam River |
| 162. Hawkvale | 191. Greentree (Christian Isles) | 215. Eeron |
| 163. Tidtoe | 192. Christon (Christian Isles) | 216. Collah and Collar River |
| 164. West Fang | 193. Cliff Creek Village on The Christian's River | 217. Arden & the Arden Mountains (aka Scruffy Mountains) |
| 165. Gogo Grove | 194. Petara | 218. Yipper |
| 166. Hormah's Isle | 195. Johnstown | 219. Powtown |
| 167. Skirm | 196. Tail City | 220. Paugh |
| 168. Mount Ahsik and the River of Fire | 197. Fantum | 221. Woove and Wolf River and Tuft Woods |
| 169. Chentah | 198. Doorum, the Savior's Effigy, and the Glass Lake | 222. Marabel and Marble River |
| 170. Leege | 199. Tallum (and the Kahn Channel) | 223. Soto-Na |
| 171. Hormarah, The Acropoliskia, and the Hills of Dalvary | 200. Trader's Fortress | 224. Ahsikloe |
| 172. Canaan | 201. Vinn Town | 225. Dodcha |
| 173. Reege | 202. Graand City and Graand Galla on the Dabadi Bay south of the Graand Pyramids | 226. Dickums and Dickums River and Dickums Mountains |
| 174. Bila and the Chane's Wall | 203. Light Sands & the Giant's Temple | 227. Eman-Modnar |
| 175. Jaza and the Rage River | 204. Mormument, the Red Obelisk, and the Diamond Back Mountains | 228. Elohssa |
| 176. Wallend and Fort Doom | 205. Bullum | 229. Tael |
| 177. Niek and Chane's Bay | 206. Akaum & Kisha's Statue | 230. Tiptown |
| 178. Antariloe | 207. Dooran & the Anubian Shrine | 231. The Cathedral |
| 179. Barrotown | 208. Graize | |
| 180. Nezorf | 209. Lacka | |
| 181. Goon | 210. Harn | |
| 182. Blimp on the River of Life | 211. Dogtown and River Nase | |
| 183. Manaville | 212. Kuru | |
| 184. Swampwood | | |
| 185. Whitewood | | |
| 186. Phinn on the Phinn River | | |
| 187. Fork of Light | | |
| 188. Riverbend | | |

STORMING OCEAN

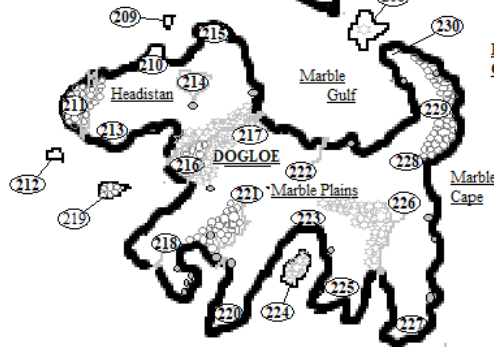
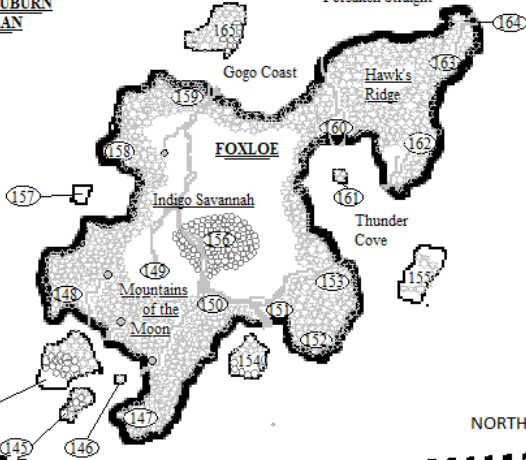
Selim = 
(6 hours by foot)
(roughly 18 miles)
Naeco = 
(12 hours by boat)
(6 hours by wing)



DRAUBURN OCEAN

LAHTRO'S OCEAN

DRAUBURN OCEAN



GOD'S ISLAND

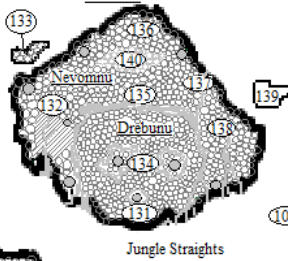
GOD'S OCEAN

NORTHERN HEMISPHERE

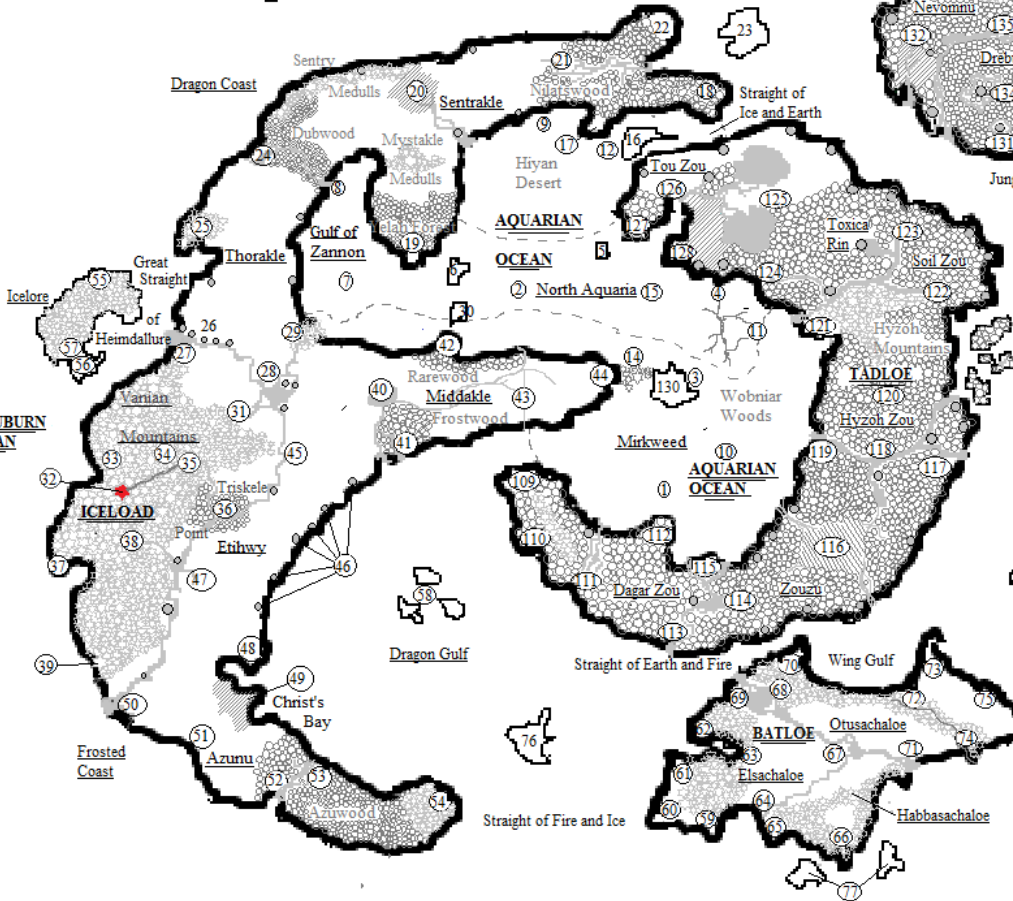
SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE



MUNKLOE



DRAUBURN OCEAN



DRAUBURN OCEAN



STORMING OCEAN