



FATEBOUND
Legend of the Samurai
SUMMONING
Written by Seth Pen

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Prologue

Shadows curled in around him like billowing smoke. The lantern's flame quivered behind its glass panes, beating back just enough darkness to provide the mole a sliver of light. The amber glow painted the bones gold but the mole didn't fall for the illusion. His eyes scanned until they spotted a twinkle amongst the tangled skeletons: a wedding band. Plunging into the crypt, he dove on the forgotten ring. The phalanges dissolved around it like ash – so too did the metacarpals, carpals, ulna, radius, and humerus beyond. The entire skeleton crumbled like dry autumn leaves as the mole tumbled deeper into the tomb. He opened his snout to yelp but his mouth was instantly filled with the disintegrating osseous material as he was buried by the very bones he'd unburied.

Scrambling out of the grave, the mole flopped over onto his back. He'd lost the ring but he'd kept the lantern. The flickering fire painted the ceiling of the chamber as his mind raced. The bones were old, but not that old. Though he'd only heard tale and never seen it himself, he knew what bones so brittle meant. *There is a necromancer in the Catacombs.* He jumped to his feet. *There is a necromancer in the Catacombs!*

Back pedaling out of the chamber with his eyes on the crypt, half expecting some sort of monster to rise from the silt of the skeletons, he stumbled out the hole he had carved and back into the corridor where he bumped against the opposite wall – or was it the opposite wall? The wall was soft and had give. As he bounced off it, he whirled around. When he plopped down on his butt he had his lantern held out before him to illuminate whatever it was he had struck. His heart had started to plummet before his eyes were able to identify what it was he saw-

“Princess!” Up on his feet once more, his heart jumped out of his belly and up into his throat, “Princess, we've got to go!” With his free hand, he reached for hers, warning, “There is a necromancer in the Catacombs stealing bone!”

The Princess stepped away from him, halfway into the darkness just outside of his dwindling flame. Her voice was cool and it froze him in place. She said, “Are you not a grave robber?”

He sputtered, “I...I...” he gulped before confessing, “I am, I admit.” The lantern swung in his grasp as he explained, “I wasn't always! I was a miner – on the moon! You know we've all fallen on hard times since-”

She raised a hand and shushed him, “No need to apologize, you and I are quite alike.”

“No, your majesty!” He protested, “I am nothing, your majesty! Worthless, really! Nothing like you, Princess!”

This time, she stepped towards him. His fire flickered as if she were a harsh wind. For a moment they were engulfed in the darkness but a glimmer of light returned as she spoke, “Down here, I am not your Princess.”

The lantern clattered to the floor. A quiet squeal emitted from somewhere deep within the mole's throat then he convulsed. His chest jerked up and his head rocked back, his arms

extended and so too did his legs as his feet lifted off the ground. The man's fur began to squirm like chunky river water shifting over a sheet of ice. The light went out and there was a terrible ripping sound then the only noise was a faint rattle.

The Princess said, "Down here, I am Truth."

- - -

Flashes of light exploded through the air and thunder rolled down from the heavens. Heavy droplets of rain pelted the mighty city-state known as God's Island. The Capitol of the Empire, the Cathedral, reached up into the heavens to impale the storm clouds like a blade. It was the tallest building beneath Solaris and on the very top, in the midst of the year of 1992's greatest storm, fearless, proud, and as old as the castle itself, sat an old man.

Thin silvery strands of hair whipped the elf's face as the wind tore around him. Fresh warm precipitation ran through the wrinkles of his temple, running around his scarred, pointed ears and over his thinning eyebrows. Rain soaked the leather patch that covered his left eye. He licked his lips and tasted the water. He listened to the pitter-patter on the Cathedral, the storms very pulse. He felt each individual droplet, soft and comforting like a pat on the back, as they soaked his humble robes. He watched the jagged bolts of energy fling themselves across the evening sky like frightened crickets.

God's wrath and science's miracle. he revealed.

The storm raged and he sat within it, calm like the eye of a hurricane. The old man, in his ragged garments, in his war scars, in his tranquil state of being, was the king of God's Island and the Emperor of the Trinity Nations. The half-elf's name was Saint.

Something was coming. He could feel it. Taste it on his lips, smell it in the air, and hear it in the storm. He just couldn't see it. He closed his one good eye.

The wind picked up, the rain skipped a beat, and a bolt of lightning struck the castle rooftop three feet in front of where he sat. He didn't flinch. Opening his eye, Saint stared at the spot where the lightning had struck. Twenty-four names were scribbled into the stone roof, separated into three groups. The old king stood and looked at the title that separated the first twelve names from the others.

Saint read it aloud, "The Mystakle Samurai."

PART ONE – THE BATTLE



Chapter One: The Thief and the Smith

The colors of the setting sun's shadow eventually faded into a black silhouette, as it had 364 times since that ferocious storm rocked the Cathedral and since the bloody slaughter of the Iceloadic Vokarburrock. As the stars sprawled out across the sky like snow flakes floating across the sea, the tension in the air remained contained between Solaris and Mystakle Planet. Quiet had returned after the abrupt revolution, but peace had not. The air remained taut as if lightning was about to strike. The world was wrapped in a strained silence, listening for the distant whispers of thunder.

The waves of the Aquarian Ocean were reluctant to rise but relieved to fall. Darker than the night tide and barely visible in the moonlight, a ship tip-toed over the waves. The crew dozed, ears vigilant as their minds dreamed. Magic quietly operated the black sails and magic adjusted the ropes. The boatswain, the one-man crew that worked throughout the night, stood beside his captain at the wheel.

The Captain was a stern man and, like the quiet determined pace of his ship, he trudged steadily through life. Black scales, rare for his race, covered his body. They were almost iridescent, twinkling like the constellations in the twilight. He wore a pair of sirwals that hung loosely from his hips, tethered by a thick leather belt which also held his sword. No shirt covered his chest, his well toned muscle was covered only by flesh and scale. His dome shaped face – like that of a reptile's, though without the toothy snout – gazed into the night as if he had asked the darkness a question and was growing impatient to find the answer. The chidra breathed in and the taste of the air alerted him of the intruder.

“You are not welcome upon my ship.” He stated, speaking to the creature behind them without turning to glare at it.

“Are you going to make me leave, Dresdan?” The intruder asked, its voice raspy like the wind.

“What do you want?” Captain Dresdan demanded.

“I want you to kill the King of Batloe. I want you to kill Duifeen Shelba.”

The boatswain shifted.

“Stay, Drakken.” The Captain's grip tightened on the steering wheel until the wood squeeled then he released it and stepped back, saying, “Take the wheel.”

Drakken, a thinly furred old moleman with a limp fez for a hat, did so with a nod.

Dresdan did not turn to the intruder, instead he strode past Drakken at the helm and clasped the banisters on the starboard side of the bridge. A thorny stem fell from his pocket as he walked away from the visitor.

“Tonight's as good as night as any to break the news.” Dresdan cleared his throat, “We aren't working with the Disciples of Darkness or the Pact anymore.”

The robed alien took a step forwards and grabbed the flowerless-stem from the floor boards. Its claws pinched the thorns until blood squirted from its thumb and index finger. Words whispered beneath its cowl began to freeze the symbolic plant. When it dropped the stem to the floor, it shattered like glass.

“I'd heard of your change of heart.” It snickered, “The great Captain Dresdan has pillaged his last port, sold his last slave, smuggled your last product...I heard you've begun begging the Emperor to legalize your beloved contraband,” it snorted with a smirk, “but I had to hear it from the tongue of the snake himself. Why?”

“Peace of mind,” Dresdan said plainly, “for my crew and myself.” Then a smirk slipped across his face to curve his lips, “We’ve spent too much time mulling around in the mud with swine.”

The intruder was silent. Only the sound of water lapping at the sides of the *Obsidian Sail* pierced the night sky. Finally, Dresdan broke the silence.

“Why do you need me to kill the King of Batloe?” He asked, “There’s a dozen other captains in your debt, not to mention the mancer warlords that serve you, and finally there’s yourself. I’ve seen you in combat. Why me?”

Another silence fell over them. Then it replied.

“Peace of mind.”

Dresdan chuckled.

“That’s it then.” It asked.

Dresdan nodded.

“Being with the Rosethorn now,” it began, “that makes us enemies.”

“It does.” Dresdan stated.

“Then pray we never meet again.”

In an instant, the intruder’s dark silhouette melted into a pale ooze. The substance collapsed to the floor of the deck and spread away from the Captain, pooling by portside gunwell where it seaped through the balustrades and dripped into the sea. Dresdan didn’t react. He stared into the horizon. Midnight was approaching, the day was almost over, and he knew in his heart, prayer or no, this wouldn’t be the last he would hear of this intruder. That was most definitely, not “it”.

“Dresdan?”

“Yes, Drakken?” the Captain turned to his comrade.

“If I’m not imposing, might I ask who that was?”

“They’re from the Dragon Islands.” Dresdan answered, “We fought together in the War of the Tiger.”

“Ah...” the boatswain muttered, “hence her necromancy.”

The Captain frowned, “Her?”

“Aye,” the mole shuddered, “what’s her name?”

“I knew them...” the chidra paused, then started over, “I knew her only as Truth.”

“Truth...” Drakken caught his tongue before giving away anymore of his opinions.

Dresdan looked back over the ocean.

“Truth is, Drakken,” Dresdan sighed, “I think we have to kill her.”

- - -

The earth elf slipped shoulder first through the crowd. His left hand was held low, flat and pointed forwards to split the scores of static shoppers as he weaseled between them. His right hand tickled his hip, like a cowboy clawing at the handle of a holstered revolver in the long drawn out seconds before the start of a duel. Though not a cowboy, he was in a duel and – like a cowboy – his feud was with the sheriff and the sheriff’s goons. Goons that would soon be upon him.

Finally his fingers found it: a penny pouch slapping the thighs of a tradesman, tethered to their belt by a loose knot. His right hand struck like a snake. He pinched the thread, yanked it, and pivoted. As he did, his left hand retrieved a caribeener from his own belt. He shoved the

sharp end of the clip through the sack and then latched it to the belt of another stranger. Continuing to rotate, he faced back the way he'd been and sped off just as his victim turned to accuse the unsuspecting fool he'd set up. As an argument developed, the pursuing policemen took the bait. The earth elf had won a brief reprieve, one he should've utilized to escape but instead he exploited the distraction by diving deeper into the markets of Yelah.

The salty sulfurous scent of the sea cut through the must of the multitudes. The waves whapping the wharfs drowned out the droning of the droves. Despite the chaos created by the crossword puzzle of piers and the crowds packed in upon them, the smell and song of the ocean – made of the same recipe and melody as that which had been for ages – brought the illusion of order to the bayside bazar, like a siren's call in the midst of a storm.

The docks dipped below and twisted around one another. Jetties used overpasses as awnings. Promenades were turned into rooftops over concave caverns carved into the short cliffside to make more room for piers. Shops crowded onramps, staggered on a first-come-first-serve basis though there were a few vendors that had spots reserved – spots pirates dared not seize and police needed not protect. These were reserved for the kin of the frozen land's great dynasties. Descendants of the ancestors that had logged the cedarwood to construct the mercantile labyrinth that made up Yelah's harbor. Even the seagulls skirted these stalls, especially the lot belonging to the Sentry. For though the Sentry's were smiths, forgers of the finest swords beneath Solaris, the current heir had a gun on her hip – and she never missed.

While the thief was smarter than a seagull, he didn't recognize the Sentry. He did, however, recognize their merchandise. The sabers shone in the sunlight like the opal glaciers atop the Medull Mountains to the north. One blade in particular drew his dark amber stare. His glare was so powerful it seemed like a blade itself. The smith could almost hear it strike the sword it bore down upon. When her golden eyes found his, he almost forgot about the weapon.

“Ah've shot strangers for softer stares-”

He flinched – he hadn't even realized that he'd made his way up to her booth – but he didn't blink. He couldn't look away. Despite the threat, there was also an offer in those eyes. Her hand moved from her holster to the hilt of the sword that had initially drawn him.

“-but this stael calls to you.”

She lifted the weapon, balancing the blade flat on her index finger.

“You a blademaster?” She continued, “Swordsman?”

He reached for the weapon. With a flick of her wrist she tossed the sword up and caught it with the same hand – the edge of the blade was hardly a centimeter from the tip of his fingertips.

“A mute?” She asked.

“Tou Fou.” The thief said.

“That a name or a noun?”

Smirking, she twisted her arm and spun the sword so that the hilt lay in her palm and the blade ran up her arm. It was sharp enough to shave with, but she was skilled enough to keep it from slicing off a slab of pale electric elven skin. She let the smirk slide into a warm smile, nodding for Tou to take the weapon.

“Tabuh Sentry.” She said, “And the sword's name is *Future*.”

Tou took the sword and weighed it in his hands, asking without looking up, “*Future*?”

“It was made to cut away the past and,” Tabuh elaborated, “carve out the future.”

There was a bit of a crowd gathering around the stall. The smith was well known in the city, but rarely known to hand off a sword. The Sentry booth was mostly maintained for tradition

as there was nothing in the harbor more expensive than a Sentry Sword and the only people in all of Iceload that could afford one were celebrities of some kind or another. This Tou Fou was not. As a matter of fact, among the capitalism-hardened hearts of the street folk gathered around the booth that morning, this Tou Fou looked a bit like a rogue. Someone you might should check your pockets after passing. He was an obvious foreigner – dark skinned earth elves were few and far between among those on the icy shores of Iceload – and dressed peculiarly. There wasn't so much as a stain or a wrinkle from his tunic to the rolled up cuffs of his slacks. There wasn't a single barb missing from the feather poking out of his dark green tudor cap. His leather boots were unmarred and unscuffed, but it was the boots that gave him away. They weren't the boots of a mysterious entrepreneur, they were bulky, belt-banded combat boots. Sure, they – like the rest of his attire – appeared to have been acquired mere hours prior, but they weren't worn for fashion. These were boots that could withstand the elements and outlast the years, these were boots that could run. And yet Tabuh Sentry had handed him a sword.

With all the attention, Tou had the space to shadow-spar a bit with the saber. Tabuh put her palms on the counter and leaned over the rest of her weapons with a crooked, squint-eyed grin. The young man's swordplay was novel. It was obvious he knew what he was doing, yet she had never seen someone use a sword in such a way. His swings and slashes were all a part of a single fluid dance despite the abruptness of his transitions – he moved like a wildcat closing in on a fox.

She cocked her head to the side, "Where did you train?"

Tou cut a figure eight in the air so fast that it shot a breeze that ruffled the drapes above Tabuh's head as he replied with a preoccupied shrug, "The woods."

There was a murmur of laughter from the crowd, a murmur that Tabuh silenced with a brief chuckle of her own.

"Ha!" Tabuh winked, "The woods? Well, fancy that, Mr. Woodsman, wae're lookin for a new swordsman for the Woodsmen – assumin you aren't the tahpe that could afford such a sword, wae maht could figure out a payment plan if you can make the taem...were do you plan to bae tomorrow?"

"Sorray, Miss Sentray."

Another murmur rushed through the crowd as a shadow moved to loom over Tou Fou. Despite the Sentry accent, the man was not elven. He was a giant – even for his race – standing over eight feet tall. His muscles were so profuse that he had to use two plates of armor where most would've had one. Tufts of fur stuck out from between his metal pads. Of all the bearns Tou had ever encountered, this one was certainly the most bear-like.

"Mr. Woodsman is to bae in Southbay bah waeks end."

A black tunic hung like a bib from around his neck, the symbol of a rose frozen in a shard of ice was blazed across the center. Similar bibs hung from his comrades, though these fit them far better. The Sheriff's three goons stuck to the edge of the crowd, their arms spread to legitimize the space that had already existed before. The giant bearn drew an Otusacha-style claymore – a sword made to be held with two hands. He brandished it in his left hand alone. The tip of the sword pointed at the back of Tou's head.

"If hae makes it that far." The Sheriff growled.

Tou turned back to lock eyes with Tabuh.

"You're under arrest for thaevaray."

Tabuh extended her palm out to Tou, nodding at her sword, "Mr. Woodsman."

“Ah’m sorry Miss,” the Sheriff smirked, “but ah believe that sword belongs to the Mystvokar.”

“Excuse me?!” Tabuh exclaimed.

The crowd took a collective step back, despite the three deputees having done nothing to influence such. Their eyes weren’t on the officers, they were on the wild golden eyes of the smith behind the counter. She took a deep breath and let her shoulders slump. Blinking her rage away, she put on a taut smile.

The bearn’s snout twisted a bit more, making the smile seem more like a snarl, “Evidence...Miss.”

“You must bae a few arrows short of a quiver.” Tabuh laughed, “What happened to Sheriff Andras?”

“Ah can take ya to Southbay with Mr. Woodsman if you’d lahk to sae him?”

The murmur that swept through the crowd this time was a grumble. The smith’s upper lip curled as her posture stiffened. When she spoke, her voice was colder than the water that rushed beneath them. Again the shoppers took a step back.

“Sheriff Andras was a good man.”

“Hae was a traitor.” The Sheriff snapped, “Are you a traitor, Miss S-”

BANG!

Even though Tou had been staring straight at her, he hadn’t seen her move. He saw a flash like lightning followed by immediate thunder. His eyes slammed shut and he staggered away from the smith’s booth, toppling backwards.

BANG!

When his butt hit the pavement, his eyes bounced back open. Smoke wafted from the barrel of the revolver, a gun as gold as the shooter’s eyes, as plumes of fire burst from the mouth of the weapon in the wake of the fat chunks of lead.

BANG!

The firearm hardly pitched in her grasp as she adjusted her aim. The cylinder turned, her finger squeezed, and the hammer struck. With the very same precision she used to pummel a new blade into existence, she drove a fourth bullet from the barrel.

BANG!

Tou could see the scene behind him in her wide open eyes – he saw the figure of the giant bearn tumbling forward. From the ground, Tou dove headfirst, rolling into the façade of the Sentry’s stall. He came up facing the crowd just in time to see the Sheriff slam shoulder first onto the cobblestone. His shoulder armor had been punctured right where two plates overlapped. His knees had been struck too. He couldn’t blame the uniform for those two. It was his bowlegged stance that allowed Tabuh to plant a slug just behind the bulb of steel that cupped his kneecaps.

The bearn reached for his sword but his arm stopped short as blood spurted from his shoulder wound. He writhed forward onto his stomach, smashing the brick with his fist. Foaming at the snout, he roared.

“GET THEM!”

“FOR THE MYSTVOKAR!” His deputies cried.

As the officers – an electric elf, nellaf, and a normal-sized bearn – charged from the edge of the crowd, Tou hopped up. He winced as he turned to Tabuh but saw that her gun was back in its holster. She appeared to have started organizing her booth.

“Kaep those thrae back whahl ah pack up.”

Tou kept staring at her.

Tabuh looked up, rolling her eyes, “Hare’s your audition!”

Tou whirled around, took a lunging step forward, and raised *Future* in an arching swing to collide with the blade of the first officer. With both their sword arms above their heads, Tou hit the elf with a karate chop to the throat. As the man staggered back, Tou pushed his blade off of his foe’s blade and bound towards the next opponent – the nellaf. This time it was the officer that parried his attack, but Tou drove his enemy’s sword to the pavement. Having seen Tou’s aggression, the nellaf tried to beat him to the punch – literally. The nellaf punched with her free hand but Tou leaned out of the way and grabbed the woman’s wrist. Then, Tou slid *Future* up her blade, slicing her forearm all the way up until his saber stopped at the lip of her shoulder plate. Before she could cry out in pain, he yanked her by the wrist he still held and pranced past her.

A yard from his boot was the Sheriff’s sword. The Sheriff had almost managed to shimmy to it. His face trembled with rage as his eyes met Tou’s.

“You farakin-”

Tou dropped *Future* and, with both hands, took the bearn’s sword. He began to pivot on his heels before even looking to see if his suspicions were correct: they were.

The third deputy had circumvented Tou, going straight for Tabuh – Tabuh who was still fixated on closing up shop. This third officer, a bearn, was almost to the booth when Tou picked up the Sheriff’s sword, which is why Tou had picked it up spinning. A three-sixty gave him enough momentum to lob the massive blade. It pinwheeled across the clearing – nearly clobbering the two deputees Tou had already bested – and slammed into the bearn, square across his back, cracking his spine through his chainmail. The bearn went down, his chin bouncing off the edge of the booth as he collapsed.

Tabuh looked up as she snapped shut the clamps of her trunk.

“Mr. Woodsman,” she gestured behind her where the top rungs of a ladder could be seen poking up above the edge of the pier, “shall wae?”

Tou nodded like a bug had landed on his nose.

With a heave, she tossed the sword case down. A loud THUMP was followed by muffled yelps from the shocked victims below who would soon get to confront the prankster that had startled them, for Tabuh hopped down to the dock underneath and landed on her sword crate. Her golden eyed glare was enough to cool the tempers of the locals on the lower dock, they’d already begun to mosey on by the time Tou landed beside her.

“Where now?” He asked.

She drew her pistol and pointed it above her despite turning to face Tou. Without even pulling the trigger, the cop that Tou had karate chopped in the throat hollered bloody murder and jumped from the ladder into the bay.

“The Den!” Tabuh exclaimed, “Get the othersahd!”

The two hopped off the trunk. Tabuh took the front handle and led the way, dragging the case a few inches before Tou could follow suit with the back handle (it took him a second to slide the saber between his belt and his britches without turning his pants into a pair of bottomless chaps). Yet, no sooner did Tou sheath *Future* and grab hold of the handle than did he see more black-tunic brutes rushing their way.

“Tabuh!” He yelped.

“Shut up!” She hissed over her shoulder.

His head cocked to the side and his right eyebrow pitched, “Huh?”

Her golden eyes bulged, dancing from the police – now passing them – to Tou and back. *They don't know!* Tou realized. As the police hustled past, hollering at some other poor fools, one of their rank stopped alongside them. Tabuh yanked the case and Tou scurried on along with her but as he did he watched the last officer out of the corner of his eye. There was a little red dragon on his shoulder, no larger than a lizard, with tiny heart-shaped wings. Its neck snaked around the jaw of the guard so that its nose neared the police officer's when it emitted a quick puff of smoke.

A shield dragon! Tou choked on his own spit as he saw the message coded in the scent of the little reptile's smoke translate to orders in the mind of its recipient. As his eyes turned back to Tabuh, he saw that she saw it too. *They know now!*

The guard turned to Tou, his lips parting to call out to his comrades, but his shout never left his throat as Tou dropped the sword case, grabbed the cop by his jersey, and tossed him over the side of the dock – or rather, he tried. The officer landed in the unfortunate grasps of two unwitting passerbies.

“Oof!” One grunted, grabbing the cop by the bicep.

“Hey!” The other yelped, catching hold of the guards flailing hand.

The deputy clung to them for dear life as momentum continued to drag him towards the edge of the dock. The two townfolks needed only a second to realize what he was but that was a second enough for him to call out.

“OY!” Then, cursing the state underneath their breathes, the two shoppers let the cop go and he tumbled backwards into the sea, hollering, “THE DIRT ELF!”

Tou looked down the dock as the other two policemen looked up.

BANG!

One of the guards flew backwards, a ribbon of blood pouring from her shoulder. Her comrade hesitated but after a second's glance at the gun toting smith and sword wielding thief, she decided to tend to her fallen partner instead.

“*COME ON!*” Tabuh roared.

Tou's head was yanked back around to Tabuh who was dragging the sword case by herself into the throng of people with little success, her gun already back in the holster. Nodding, Tou retrieved the handle and together they rushed up the pier.

A sweaty fog filled the Underdocks. The clamor overpowered the comforting sounds of the sea. Chains clinked as ships tugged and slackened. Engines bellowed as they cooled or ralleyed back to life. Gears rang as they wound up heavy steel cords that lifted elevators and lowered bridges. Sailors swore across splashing water-alleys as they fought for their dinghy's right away through cramped intersections that cut deeper and deeper underneath the harbor and into the shadows of Yelah's underworld.

“The Mystvokar has no power down here!” Tabuh explained, having to shout over all the commotion as they pushed further.

“Do you?” Tou asked.

Tabuh's grimace was not the answer Tou was looking for.

“Ah've got two shots left,” She said, turning from Tou to crane her neck so that she could see where they were going as they scuffled onwards, “That'll get us to the Den – donum!”

The gangway beneath them shifted as it was hoisted up into the air. The seamen on the modest rowboats on either side of the bridge cheered and applauded as passage had been finally granted while those on the rising scaffold snorted and stomped. Tabuh shoved a bit with her shoulders – her golden eyes bound to the stationary dock just beyond – but the folks weren't

budging. Instead, two chidras turned to snarl at her. Cursing foreigners under her breath, she turned back to Tou. He was nervously observing the people above them. There was an intermediate level slipped inbetween the Underdocks and the upper – stumpy shacks hid out in the crevace there, the fumes that seeped from the gaudy stalls stung the earth elf’s nostrils.

“Don’t braethe too hard, Mr. Woodsman, if you’ve never had snake smoke.”

The grumpy reptilians rolled their eyes at Tabuh’s slur as they got off the lift. The tweeny-docks had the air of an insect layer. Patrons literally crawled about the place, mostly due to the lowness of the ceiling but for many it was out of inebriated necessity. Bearn would’n’t make the cut in the tweeny-docks, but here Knomes thrived. Despite having nothing in his trousers other than what the good Lord had given him, Tou’s hips itched at the sight of the little old, cone-hatted men dipping in and out of view. Tabuh, on the other hand, likely had gold in her belt purse and, with both their hands occupied by the sword case, Tou trained his eyes on her waist.

Tabuh smirked, “Assume your watchin mah pockets?”

Tou’s dark chocolate skin hardly helped to hide his blush. Turning his eyes back to hers, he asked, “You got friends at ‘the Den’?”

“No.” She admitted, “But nor do ah have enemaes.”

With an abrupt jerk, the bridge began to descend. Tabuh sighed with relief. Tou gulped.

“What if they heard about the Sheriff?”

“Saelu to that!” Tabuh exclaimed, “They’d prolly bah us a baer!”

Tou wasn’t laughing, “If the cops’ll go after you, what makes you think pirates won’t?”

“Hae’s gotta point, lass.”

The hairs of their napes stood at attention as the owner of the deep, gravelly voice came into view. He was perpendicular to the lift, standing in a dinghy that was far too small for a bearn of his size. His head nearly scraped the roof of the Underdocks. His appearance sent a second wave of chills down Tou and Tabuh’s spines, for his face looked to be an identical clone of the very Sheriff they had just recently crippled.

They dropped the case as their hands shot to their weapons. The heavy trunk shook the bridge, thoroughly antagonizing their fellow passengers who’s opinions of the two only diminished further when they saw the two were pointing a sword and a gun at the nice bearn waiting in a rowboat before them.

He was shirtless, but that hardly appeared naked. The man’s fur was so thick and his chest so broad it seemed likely that there were few shirts beneath Solaris thicker than the behemoth’s natural coat. A gaudy belt road high up his belly though it was hardly visible beneath the assortment of weapons strapped at his waist. Despite his hipside arsenal, his hands were empty and folded into his armpits as if in an attempt to restrain himself. His lip was curled. Not to snarl, but rather to smile. The warmth he exuded made both Tou and Tabuh suspicious.

“Well that’s awfullay rude.” He said, “Were ya raised in the woods?”

“You know aech other?” Tabuh asked, not taking her gaze off the bearn.

“No.” Tou said, “You?”

“No.” Tabuh stated.

“Wae will soon enough.” The bearn promised.

The platform rattled as it stuck back in place along its initial dock. A wave slapped over, splashing the boots of the thief and the smith and splattering the trunk of swords between them. There were two dinghy’s behind the one dedicated to the giant bearn, bobbing in the wake like ducklings behind their mother. When the lift landed, the bearn raised his hands and his comrades

on the boats behind him hopped onto his dinghy and then onto the dock on either side of Tou and Tabuh. Their fellow lift passengers quickly departed.

“They take another step towards us, your dead.” Tabuh warned.

The bearn’s bushy brow raised and his grin widened, “That so, lass?”

A tiny red head wiggled out from the thick curls of fur along his bare shoulder. A slender stream of smoke trailed from the little dragon’s nostrils.

“A lil birthday told mae ya onlay got two shots left.”

“What do you want?” Tabuh demanded.

“The Captain would lahk to commission a blade.” The bearn explained.

“Tell him to get in lahn.” Tabuh snapped.

“Ah, but ma’am,” the bearn cocked his head to the side, “it is you that is gettina skip the lahne.”

Now it was the electric elf’s head that tilted at an angle.

“Smiths across Solaris are vahin for this opportunitay.” He continued, “This won’t bae just anay sword...”

Her golden eyes narrowed to be as sharp as her blades.

The bearn raised his left hand to calm his audience as his right fished into his pocket. He pulled out a slender black box and tossed it to Tabuh. She caught it in one hand without lowering her gun. Keeping her glare on the bearn, she held the box out to Tou. Tou reluctantly slid *Future* back between his belt and his pants then took the box and opened it.

Blue light lit up the Underdocks, spraying Tou’s face with sapphire. Inside the little box was a vial of radiant sand, pulsating and whispering unintelligible words as if tiny fairies were hovering by his ears singing ancient alien songs. Tou had no clue what he was looking at but when he turned to Tabuh he saw that he was alone in his ignorance.

“Void-dust!” She gasped.

“Huh?” Tou remarked, turning to the bearn for an explanation.

The bearn chuckled, bowing low before them, saying only, “Welcome, then, to the *Obsidian Sail*.”

- - -

Above the interwoven branches of docks that crisscrossed the bay like a canopy, a façade of arches separated the main streets from the marina. A row of narrower arches lined up above these and it was among these that the hustle and bustle of the harbor was finally eluded. Though open to the ocean air, the shady second floor was strolled by savor strapped soldiers. Nothing but the breeze passed them without permission, for it was only through them that one could access the floors above. No dragons would fit through the balistraria-like slit windows that split the upper walls with such frequency it was as if the architect had sought to see how many they could possibly fit. Then, atop the boxy upper chambers, was a vast dome which so overlapped its rectangular base that little turret towers had to descend to support the circumference.

These towers, which hung beneath the dome like Atlas beneath his globe, had once bore the banners of the brave citizens that had opposed their governor. Nearly three hundred years ago, a mutiny made Yelah independent of the greater Sentrakle region. It was a period of faltering factionalism and rising populism. After all, less than a decade after the Yelah Mutiny, the people of the city swore their allegiance to the Mystvokar, the First Mystvokar – the monarch that laid claim to not only Sentrakle but the entire continent upon which Sentrakle resided. Now,

three centuries later under the Second Mystvokar's continental-rule, the Magistrate of Yelah was faced with a similar dilemma.

Onotna Sentry was not only the Magistrate of Yelah, but also the Battle Admiral of the Imperial Navy. Onotna ruled a city that belonged to the Mystvokar, the Mystvokar being the King of the continent of Iceload, but Onotna commanded ships that served the Emperor of the Trinity Nations, a rival alliance of surrounding continents. He could smell the rot of factionalism, but was it regional or continental? And the incoming warm front of populism – was it national, did it stop at the throne of the Mystvokar? Or did it extend across the oceans to the many crowns beneath the Trinity Nations? These were the questions Onotna mulled over as he leaned out an arrow slit. Questions that were of little concern to the producers and profiteers in the port before him. For the people of Iceload, armies and authorities came and went, it was their appetites that stayed the same. Neither kings nor councils seemed to serve them supper. That reality was on the forefront of Onotna's visitor's mind that morning.

Commander Shaprone Ipativy was as fond of the Magistrate as he was of the task at hand: pacifying a petty squabble between the police and a powerful pedestrian. The only reason he was chosen for the job was, in fact, the only reason he was willing. Had it been for anyone else, he might've preferred outright desertion over such a dishonorable chore, but alas, it was not. It was Tabuh Sentry.

"She shot your new sheriff."

"Ah beg your pardon?!" The Magistrate whirled away from the window to face the Commander, his head spinning far faster than his bulky girth could manage, "Shae did no such thang!"

"Four times." The Commander added, "Then she ran off – and not only did she run off, she ran off with a suspected thief – the very thief that Sheriff Kakal was attempting to arrest when she shot him... *four times.*"

"Sir!" Onotna cried. His belly, as rotund as the great dome atop his palace, tremored with such gravity it rustled the contents of the chamber, "Mah daughter was kidnapped!"

Shaprone raised a blonde eyebrow, "Kidnapped?"

"Bah the *Obsidaian Sail*." Onotna nodded.

"By pirates?" His brow fell.

"Enemaes of the state, sir."

Battle Admiral Onotna's voice was suddenly gruff. His blue eyes distant as he gazed back out the arrow slit at the bay, as if he was remembering some traumatic battle. Rolling his eyes was all Shaprone could do to withhold a scoff. If the old man's plump stature didn't give it away, then his melodramatic antics made it clear: the Battle Admiral was not a soldier. His talents hid above his shoulders and, even there, he kept them well hidden from view.

Shaprone said, "Enemies of *your* state, not mine, *Magistrate.*"

"They sell illicit materials in your state, Commander." Onotna noted. He paced over to a paper laden desk and snatched up a skinny folder. He opened it, revealing neatly packed documents. There wasn't even a mar in the layer of dust upon the sloppy desk, it was obvious Onotna had brought the folder with him to meet Shaprone, yet still he picked through the pages as if double checking. Finally, his index finger shot into the air and he drew out a sheet of paper – it just so happened to be the sheet at the front of the folder: a mugshot and short bio of a brawny looking bearn. He said, "Jason "the Giant" Kakal – First Mate of Captain Dresden Otubak of the *Obsidaian Sail* – the bearn was saen laeving the harbor with mah daughter and your thaif. Tell mae again, what was the name of your bullet riddled sheriff?"

Taking the sheet, the Commander answered, “Justin Kakal.”

“Blood brothers.” The Admiral explained, “Coincidence?”

Shaprone closed his eyes, lest he roll them again, saying, “Magistrate Sentry-”

“It’s Magistrate Battle Admiral, Commander.”

Shaprone kept his eyes shut. He cleared his throat. Then he started over, “Magistrate Battle Admiral Sentry, Sheriff Kakal was shot by your daughter’s gun-”

“Whah would shae attack an officer of the law?”

“The same reason every other Sentry attacks our officers! We have at least a dozen assaults a day – in Yelah alone, not to mention the rest of Sentrakle! – and you know Tabuh, do you really think-”

“Do you raellay think telling Yelah that mah daughter shot a Sheriff is a good ahdaea, Commander? Let the papers run with that storay, Mr. Ipativy, and sae how that does.” He tossed the folder back onto the table and a plume of dust rose up behind him like a mushroom cloud. Spreading his hands out before him to frame the potential headline, he continued, “Princess of Sentrakle Shoots Sheriff Four Tahmes – think that’ll reduce vahlece against your Mystvokar’s state or encourage it?”

Shaprone shuffled his boots and grunted in concession.

“Tell them it was pahrates. Ah hate pahrates, you hate pahrates, wae all hate pahrates.” Onotna continued, “Common enemay. That’s how wae reduce this tension.”

A knock on the door offered Shaprone an escape from his surrender as outrage oncemore became an appropriate response. His hand shot to the hilt on his hip, but Onotna raised a calming hand.

“Behand that door lahs a favor from mae to you – a good faith donation to the solution of this fickle pickle wae’ve found ourselves in.”

Shaprone rustled his curled mustache with a discontented snort as the door swung open.

A full suit of armor strode first into the room, all that was visible of the individual within was a pair of silver eyes that glared through the slit in her helmet and the long silver strands of hair that wrapped her chestplate like a sash, carrying a strap where her bow could lie across her spine had it not been in her hand. The armor and hair alone would not have identified her, though it did narrow down the possibilities. Metallic eyes like hers could belong only to the translucent race of ghostlike beings known as spirits (though they were, unlike ghosts, very much alive). These people normally dressed in clothes as transparent as their flesh, but a certain warrior-sect of their kind adorned a fashion quite different. Disciples of the Woodland Ridge Monastery left their holy hills armored from head to toe, donning the family name “Shisharay”.

Yet Shaprone knew immediately who she was. It was the bow in her hand, an intricate compact bow, that identified her beyond race and ethnicity. The handle clamped in her gauntlet glowed blue, hued like a glacial lake beaming in the light of a mountain sun. The shine peaked through blossoming vines that twisted around the limbs, so decorated was the artifact that it could almost convince admirers it was a novelty and not a weapon – if not for that sapphiric energy. Beautiful yet threatening. Though there was no string, her right hand pinched the lotus-dressed tail of an arrow that sat above where her thumb curled around the handle.

“Lalmly Shisharay and,” Shaprone bowed his head, but made sure not to stoop too low so that he could keep his eyes on the door where he was sure her partner would soon appear, “Zaria Ein?”

“Commander.”

Zaria curtsied. She was in full formal uniform: polished high top boots, pressed blue slacks, and a dark navy blazer held taut over her torso by fat golden buttons. Her arms were hidden beneath a heavy maroon overcoat, though the right shoulder had slipped off to hang on her upperarm just low enough to reveal the golden three-leaf clover above the anchor insignia on her shoulder. Her hands were shrowded beneath the maroon overcoat, as were both the sword and firearm on her hip.

Despite her respectful salutation, Zaria's righthand man did not grant Shaprone such decency. The little yellow dog – stocky, due to the unfortunate cuteness of his breed, but fit – emitted a low growl as it plopped onto its fluffy white rear end, perching on the steel plated tip of the Strategy Admiral's boot.

Shaprone echoed the sentiment with a snarl, before turning to Battle Admiral Onotna, “Dogs are permitted in Mutiny Palace?”

“The little did-vallhund is an honored guest.”

Onotna stooped as far as his wideberth would allow so that he could tempt the dog over for pets. The dog didn't budge.

Zaria winced at the nickname, providing his true title, “*Cowboy* the Pirate Killer is, in fact, Lalmly and I's personal guard.”

“Is that so?” Shaprone grunted.

“Indeed, Commander.” Zaria smirked. She rolled her shoulders and cleared her throat to tear Onotna's attention back to her dark brown eyes. She said, “So, Magistrate Battle Admiral Sentry, I heard you've got some pirates that need killing?”

Chapter Two: The Obsidian Sail

Something rolled into him. He resisted the urge to open his eyes, complying instead with his desire to remain asleep – that is until a hot, damp stench fell across his face like a heavy blanket. Recoiling with a groan, he sat up and looked.

The smith, Tabuh Sentry, lay in bed beside him. Her long blonde hair was pooled around her like the tentacles of an octopus. Her soft, pink lips were parted and it was from between them that the pungent heat had wafted.

Holding his breath, Tou slipped out from under the sheets, taking the same amount of precautions as he had to steal the clothes he wore – and still wore – from the day before. He was nearly free when Tabuh’s mouth snapped shut and her nose roared to life with the ferocity of an angry mother bear. Tou tumbled off the side of the bed and landed a loud thud.

No sooner did Tou hit the floorboards than did Tabuh pounce out of bed like a tigress, pinning him by his shoulders with both hands as she snarled, “Where’s mah gun?”

If not for her vice grip, he would’ve shrugged. Instead, his eyebrows did the job for him. Her golden eyes shot down to his hip.

“And mah sword.” Looking up and around the room, she cursed, “Taiad... where are all mah swords – Where are wae?”

Getting of Tou, Tabuh stood up. Together, they took in their surroundings. Striped sheets peeked out from under the heavy plaid comforter they’d slept beneath. Polka dotted pillows were strewn about at the foot of the bed after having been expelled from the mattress when the rabid woman attacked him. The head board was made of tarnished bronze, gerrymandered to fit to the polished oak bed frame. Despite how comfortable it had been to sleep on, the bed itself was almost painful to look at and the rest of the room had been decorated quite the same: a red leather couch, a green little coffee table, two asymmetrical stools, and orange curtains that billowed around opened – but barred – windows.

When the two elves’ eyes saw the bars on the windows, their heads turned immediately for the door but as they moved towards it the door flew open and in marched the hulking bearn they’d met in Yelah.

“Morning.” He grinned before curtsing into a low bow, a bow he’d already been halfway towards as he stood a little over a foot taller than the ceiling. The oaf maintained his stoop as he gestured with his hands for attention to be directed towards the individual that now followed him into the cabin, “Introducing, Captain Dresdan Otubak.”

The man was dark as the sails of his ship, his scales black and yet simultaneously shimmering with iridescent rainbows in the low amber light of the enertomb lantern hanging from the ceiling. His eyes were purple, like the crooked witch-hat who’s brim rode like a crest above his gaze. His stare was tight and fixated on Tou.

Dresdan’s furred compatriot straightened up as much as he could and gave reason to the glare, “It appaers that you – Tou Fou – ain’t no stranger to the *Obsidian Sail*.”

Tabuh shoved past Tou and tore the captain’s indigo eyes off the earth elf.

“Good to haer y’all’re old friends,” she hissed, “but that saems to have nothing to do with mae – nor does it saem to have anythang to do with how wae got hare.” Her index finger jabbed at the windows, “Ah agraed to forge a sword, not to baeing drugged!”

“Not drugged, ma’am,” the bearn grinned, a twinkle in his beady eyes, “ensorcelled.”

“What in the crimson taid...”

But Tabuh let her own complaints dwindle as a third visitor entered the chamber. His hat’s point was flopped over like the Captain’s, but brim was folded in like a cuff. It was a scarlet phrygian cap, one often worn by the moon miners of Batloe, and like the moon miners he was Batloen – a moleman. His snout was shriveled so much so that some of his teeth poked out from under his gray lips, giving him a bit of a goofy grin. The hat and mussle aside, the old man’s large eyes reeked of wisdom. His brow was relaxed and his gaze was steady. One hand was behind his back, the other held a book open before him.

“I apologize, Dame Sentry, Sir Fou,” the moleman said, “but my orders were for your safety.”

“Indaed.” The bearn nodded, “Our swain encorcelled you two to provahde plausible denahabilitay! Well...at laest for you, ma’am.” His smirked turned to Tou, “It may bae that it is our crew and Captain that naeds denahabilitay from the lahks of you, boy.”

Tou began to pull a heavy breath in through his nose but before it could be expunged, the stoic Captain rolled his shoulders back and spoke.

“Far be it for pirates like us to scandalize a thief.” Dresden raised a scaley brow, “that is, if you are a thief? The gold you took and the blood you spilt, Sir Fou, were you borrowing or burglaring? The former can be repaid with labor, but the latter costs at least a limb.”

“Lahf dependin on the prahce.” The bearn interjected.

Tabuh elbowed Tou in the gut, demanding through gritted teeth, “What’d you stael from them?”

Tou shrugged and flinched simultaneously, “Didn’t know I had?”

“Nor did wae,” The bearn smiled, “but sae our magician hare can’t forget a face.”

The moleman nodded, his oaken eyes extinguished Tou’s doubt-fueled indignation. He’d stolen so much in his life, it wasn’t hard to imagine that somewhere along the way he’d nabbed something from one of the black-sailed buccaneers.

Dresden continued, “The Sentry’s saber was more than enough to suffice, but-”

“Hey!” Tabuh crowed, “That’s mah sword!”

Dresden’s eyes grew wide. His chest swelled and it seemed he grew a few inches, the conical cap of his hat scrounged up against the ceiling. His teeth ground against one another with a force that emitted an earsplitting. Tou and Tabuh cringed as the scaled man’s furry comrades stepped back and away from their Captain. Dresden’s nostrils flared and he turned his indigo eyes upon the interrupting smith.

Despite the goosebumps pimpling her forearms, Tabuh kept her tone cool and glowered back at the black scaled pirate, “Am ah your prisoner?”

“You may very well be.” Dresden growled.

The bearn cleared his throat and tiptoed back to his leader’s side, “Captain Dresden is an honorable man. The raespect hae grants you, hae daemands in raeturn.”

Both the chidra and the electric elf simmered, beams of light were almost visible connecting their eyes from across the room.

“The bars and locks are for your own safetay.” The bearn continued, “Sae, way may run a taht ship hare, but wae are pahrates. Manay a few of the crew is none too fond of the admahrable Admiral – your pa – and a few have a bone to pick with Mr. Pretty-Boy Pickpocket.” The bearn winked at Tou, “Wae may not tolerate aggression against our guests, however, wae’d rather praevent the crahme than punish the criminal. Despaht the skull and crossbones, there ain’t anay mancans on board so y’all’re no good to us dead.”

“So then we’re free to leave?” Tou asked.

“Was hae listening?” The bearn checked with the mole before responding to the earth elf, “The lass is, but you, boy, owe us labor or limb.”

Tou’s shoulders fell in submission.

Tabuh was still skeptical, “So then, where’s mah gun? Where’s mah sword? Where’s mah *swords*?”

“Safelay stowed away.” The bearn grinned, “Wae saw how you handled mah brother and figured-”

“Your brother?” Tabuh asked.

“The Sheriff.” He grinned.

“You’re a Kakal?”

He bowed, “Jason Kakal, estranged brother of the newly crippled crow-Sheriff of Yelah.”

“Your weapons will be available to you,” Dresdan said, taking control of the conversation one more, “as soon as we come to an understanding.”

“The magic sword.” Tabuh nodded.

“Can you do it?” Dresdan asked.

“Ah’m no magician.” Tabuh shrugged.

“You’re a Sentry.” Dresdan countered.

“That ah am.” Tabuh said.

“Our swain,” he gestured to the moleman, “Drakken, will guide you.”

“And payment?” Tabuh asked.

“Room and board until completion.” Dresdan said, “Your reward will be the ransom on my head.”

Tabuh cocked a golden eyebrow, “How’s that work?”

“The Captain’s retahrin.” Jason winked, “Hae naeds that sword to tah up a few loose ends.”

“Once I have the weapon, the ship is yours.” Dresdan said.

“*What?!*” Tou and Tabuh gasped.

“Your father claims we’ve kidnapped you, which makes that the gospel truth according to the Trinity Nations.” Dresdan explained, “If you turn this ship in to God’s Island, you’ll leave the Capitol the richest woman beneath Solaris.”

“And not just that,” Jason inserted, “you’ll win renown.” He raised his hands and spread them wide as he rolled out the title, “Tabuh the Pahrte Hunter, no longer just Tabuh, the Admiral’s kid.”

Tabuh rolled her eyes, “Without a crew? Or are you throwing your men under the bus?”

“There will be a crew.” Dresdan promised, “None of those currently onboard, but the brig will be stocked with buccaneers.”

“How?” Tabuh scoffed.

“The less you know, the better.” Dresdan assured them.

“Plausible denahabilitay.” Jason grinned.

“We’re on a tight schedule, we must start today.” Dresdan said. He strode forward and extended a hand towards Tabuh, “What do you say?”

Tabuh and Tou exchanged blinking looks.

“No offense,” Tabuh said, turning back to the Captain, “but ah’d say your crazy.”

“Fair enough.” Dresdan’s hand didn’t lower.

Tabuh tilted her head, as if dumping her skepticism out of her ear before turning her head back upright with a shrug, “A ton of gold and a chance to make a magic sword, you drahve a hard bargain, Captain.” She took his hand and shook, “Dael.”

Then all eyes turned to Tou. Dresdan stepped before him.

“I assume between life, limb, and labor you’d prefer labor.”

Tou nodded.

“If we were to hire you on as the personal guard of our guest blacksmith, do you think you’d be up for the job?”

Tou looked over at Tabuh and she said what he was thinking.

Chuckling, Tabuh said, “Ah appreciate the offer but ah don’t naed his protection.”

“Ah, but ma’am,” Jason jumped back in, “yer a fahn shot, but if ya’ve got more than seven foes, you naed someone watchin your back whahl ya raeload.”

Tabuh crossed her arms, “Fahting off a dozen men whahle trahin to forge a legendaray sword is not the dael ah thought ah was shakin on a moment ago.”

“Maybae wae should dahvulge just a little, Captain.” Jason suggested.

“Indeed.” Drakken, the boatswain, chimed in to concur.

“So be it.” Dresdan shrugged, “A battle is coming – the Battle – and in this skirmish my crew and I will disappear. We’ll leave behind our enemies, subdued and constrained, for you to turn in with the ship. I’ll spare you the details of this transaction, but I assure you we are collaborating with the appropriate parties necessary for this plot to prevail. However, as with all plots, there is always a possibility of failure in which case we would coordinate your escape and, in which case, you would be wise to have another ally by your side.”

Tabuh’s eyes narrowed, “It sounds lahk ah may bae riskin mah lahf to get the pay ah’ve been promised.”

“You are not wrong.” Dresdan admitted, “But generous as the pay is, you’re not interested in our ransom half as much as you’re interested in our renown. We’ll do as much as we can, but glory must still be earned.”

“Just the way you’d want it, raht, ma’am?” Jason added, “You’ve already got your dadday’s honor, your out hare trahin fahnd your own.”

She held her squinting sapphire glare for a moment more before it melted into a wink and a smirk. Looking over at Tou, she asked, “What do you think, Mr. Woodsman?”

Tou shrugged, “Can I keep the sword?”

“If ah can kaep the gold.” Tabuh offered.

Tou pursed his lips, glancing from the smith to the three pirates then back as he mulled it over. Finally, he stepped forward and took Dresdan’s hand.

“Deal.”

“Welcome aboard Sir Fou,” Dresdan released Tou’s hand and backed up to bow at the both of them, “Dame Sentry. If we pull this off right, then you two will go down in history as the elves that captured the *Obsidian Sail*.”

- - -

The sack hit the table top and flattened out like a pancake before bouncing back to a bulbous balloon then flopping over again to flatten. The nipple-headed nossle spun around like a dizzy chicken. The sack was going to roll right off the edge and slap down to the floor had a man not dove to catch it. This was no small feat, he was standing in the doorway and the table was a

good three yards into the room. He launched himself, his legs extending like a frog's, his body twisting in midair like a cat. Except, unlike a cat, he landed on his back, cradling the flask in his belly where it hit and thrust the air right out of him.

"One paida."

The voice of the speaker seemed not to realize the cost of their actions, considering the fact that she could have just sat the sack down gently. In fact, there was no reason for her to drop it in the first place, she'd been sitting before the table mere moments prior. That said, it was a coffee table and she likely didn't figure that diving to catch the bag would be considered necessary – in fact, she still didn't figure it had been. Still, refraining from judgement, she chose instead to speak with indifference. Something she did often.

Though one sapphiric eye did give away a sparkle of amusement at her visitor's behavior, the other was as dull as her tone. It was as black as a crow's eye – which, in fact, is what people call them – and full of an even darker substance within: shadows, the merky energy of the dead. She normally kept her head bandaged, hiding her crow eye, but she did not have to hide in her customer's company. Especially not considering the fact that the sack she was selling was full of enough illicit hallucinogens to put her away for life.

Replacing the gallon sized flask on the coffee table, the gentleman sat down in the miniature stool across from the woman shadowmancer. She – who had to stoop to even fit beneath the ceiling – followed suit.

"Peedi." He said.

She cocked her head to the side.

"Paida means something else entirely-"

"I said paida."

"Exactly – that means 'condom', you mean '*peedi*'."

"That's what ah'm saying-"

"Krystyna-"

Suddenly, a gaseous substance poured out from her crow eye. It curled around her head, wrapping around her neck like a snake, reaching her shoulders before the man had even finished her name. He very quickly choked himself on his tongue, correcting himself as his big brown eyes stared at the darkness slowly shrowding his host.

"Skar!"

She simmered. The shadows loosened, but still hung around her shoulders like the popped collar of her duster. Clearing his throat and sporting a weakened smile, he got back to the business at hand.

"This is just a guzzle?"

She scoffed, "Want mae to squaeze some out?"

"No, ma'am! Not at all!" He looked at his nails, digging under one with the other as if there was a bit of dirt stuck there though even his one-eyed counterpart could tell that his fingernails were immaculate. Still, the manicure was all he needed to regain his composure and manifest his infamous swagger that people knew and loved. Turning back to Skar, he grinned through his words, "I would love to stay and chat – I mean..." he played with the curled end of his mustache and winked at his host, "you know, I could thing of tons of-"

More shadows spilled out from her eye, so much so that they could no longer hang around her shoulders. They descended to the other side of the table, waiting around her fingertips which tapped on the table as she glared at her customer.

“*BUT* a gentleman never imposes...even when struck to the soul by the immaculate beauty of-”

Normally, this would've been enough to send Skar over the edge. Had her customer not been John Pigeon, she would've likely attacked right as he hit the earlier ellipsis, but she needed the young pirate to live. She had plans for him and his Sea Lords. Still, she interrupted because she saw something he did not.

Crow eyes don't only store energy, they see energy. Thus a shadowmancer like Skar could see through the walls of her humble shack and she saw two people approaching.

“Someone's coming.” She immediately tore open her robes – an act that totally distracted Johnny from the urgency – and snatched the white cloth she used as a head bandage to hide her cursed eye, “Go! Now!”

“In Knomeloe? Really?” Johnny didn't budge, instead, he shrugged, “Is it a Knome? We can take a godi-”

“Go! NOW!”

This time her command registered in the pirate's acid-washed brain and he shot up out of his stool – unfortunately so abruptly that he forgot that the ceiling hung low at a more Knome-appropriate height. WHAM!

Rubbing his head, Johnny began to lament, “Farakin-”

“GO!” Skar roared.

Snatching the guzzle of drugs with one hand and clutching the growing goose egg on his temple with the other, Johnny took off. Despite never having been in the house before, the exit was easy enough to find. It was a simple shotgun house, meaning there was only one way you could go. The reason such houses were called such was because the rooms were stacked one behind the other, like cars on a train, and if you opened all the doors you could – theoretically – fire a shotgun from the front door and shoot someone out the back. Now, this fact helped Johnny to get out fast *but* it also increased the risk of him not getting out in time. After all, it appeared that one of Skar's new visitors was carrying something that could very likely be a shotgun.

As the backdoor slammed behind Johnny's rear end, the front door was yanked open. The first intruder was a little yellow dog. The vallhund rushed in only to skid to a halt as it was met by Skar's icy, one-eyed stare. Next came his master's bodyguard, a massive suit of armor. Had there been actual flesh in the armor and not the gaseous essence that makes up a spirit's visible self then there was no way they would've been able to crumple themselves into the Knomish abode, even still it was impressive. Behind the bow-toting juggernaut, came another woman. Though she was shorter than both the armored soldier and the bean-pole of a drug dealer, she was still a tall woman and it was just as hard to fit in the Knome-sized doorway as it was to squeeze next to her bodyguard to sit across from the mini-table from Skar. The poor earth elf had to remove her sheath just to sit flat on the stool, laying it on the table in a questionable gesture that could've either been a peaceful offering or a threat.

Fortunately, Skar was not annoyed by the act. She was, however, annoyed by the unscheduled visit and for that she kept her lips pursed in a flatline and her blue eye – the only one still visible – squinting with silent rage.

Zaria immediately recognized her old friends expression. She responded with a wincing smile, “We should've warned-”

Lalmly, the bodyguarding bowman, took it upon herself to not only protect the Strategy Admiral's physical body but also her mental health and that included defending her in social

situations in which Zaria was being far to apologetic. She interrupted, "This is important. Things are moving fast."

"The Battle?" Skar asked.

The two women across from her nodded.

Skar's glare hadn't diminished, "John Pigeon just ran out the back door."

Now Lalmly sported a wincing smile, though hers was hidden by her helmet's visor. If the psychedelic pirate had seen Skar collaborating with the highest official in the Imperial Navy that still toted a gun, Skar's cover would've been blown harder than John Pigeon's brain on the drugs he'd just purchased.

Zaria resorted back to apology, "We should've warned you, I'm sorry, but you know how it is. We can't risk anything being intercepted and all our chess pieces are occupied with this or that and the other, we had no choice but to deliver this in person and as soon as possible."

Skar rolled her eyes but relaxed her eyelids.

"Dresdan kidnapped Tabuh Sentry." Zaria said.

"That's some godai taiad if ah ever heard it." Skar scoffed, "That woman could kill a banshee with a bullet."

"Willing or not, Tabuh's *on* the *Obsidian Sail* and her father – my boss – wants her *off*." Zaria continued, "I can only put it off for so long--"

"Whah?" Skar pressed.

"The Mystvokar's favorite errand boy," Lalmly interjected, "Commander Shaprone Ipativy."

Cowboy growled low, rumbling the table from underneath.

"He won't interfere for a while, even though he is in love with Tabuh, however, if it starts to look like we're farakin around--"

"The Mystvokar would love to one up the Empahr." Skar nodded.

"And get rid of zirra dealers while they're at it." Lalmly agreed.

"The *Obsidian Sail* may be full of some of the most formidable pirates beneath Solaris, but if you take a murder of trained Iceloadic dragons at a boat on the highseas..."

Skar nodded, "It'd burn up quicker than a vallhund covered in bacon graese."

Cowboy wimpered and slinked an inch back towards the door.

"So wae'll move up the Battle." Skar said, "Ah'll tell Dresdan."

"Thank you." Zaria bowed her head, "Rosethorn."

"Rosethorn." Skar and Lalmly concurred.

Then Skar added, "One last thing. Dresdan has a message for you."

Zaria and Lalmly's heads cocked to one side.

"The bone bender Truth contacted him about a waek ago." Skar said.

"Truth." Lalmly muttered, turning to Zaria, "The necromancer from the War of the Tiger that--"

"I know who she is." Zaria snapped, though she still felt the need to go on a prove it, "Truth's New Pact, a Disciple of Darkness, Anti-Antipa."

"That's just Pa..." Lalmly noted, "You can just say they're--"

Zaria turned back to Skar, "What'd Truth tell Dresdan?"

Skar waited as Lalmly finished her point, "-a fan of the Black Crown Pact."

Then Skar responded, "They didn't tell him anaythang. They asked him to kill the King of Batloe."

"Duifeen?" Lalmly was taken aback, "He's sick and dying already?"

“Not fast enough.” Skar said, adding, “And Batloe’s on the verge of a working class revolution.”

“The Pact’s trying to start it...” Zaria murmured.

Skar shrugged, “Or stop it?”

“Crimpsin tiad.” Zaria cursed, “Something’s coming together.”

“Ain’t it though.” Skar agreed.

“We should go to Batloe.” Lalmly stated, “Immediately.”

Zaria nodded. The two women moved to get up – or as up as they could considering the restraints of the Knomish architecture – but were paused as two pale hands shot out to catch theirs. Though one eye was hidden away behind white bandages, her right eye bore into theirs. Switching from Zaria’s amber eyes to Lalmly’s silver.

“Saelu to you, sisters.” She said.

“Selu to you, too, sister.” Zaria said.

“Selu to you, too.” Lalmly said.

Then she let them leave.

- - -

“Who are you?”

The air was hot with sun roasted tobacco smoke floating thick like a ribbon of fog wrapped around the deck trailing off with the ocean breeze only to be continually fed by the filter sucking lips of the crew. Aside from a few spits and snorts, the crew was quiet, shifting their weight between their feet or squatting to squint at the greenhorn pacing around their captain.

The first bead of sweat developed on Tou’s temple. His grip shifted on the emerald hilt of *Future*. His brow was furled in a scowl though his mind was not so certain. His thoughts flopped around like a fish inside his skull. *Is this a duel or an execution?* The two weren’t fighting with poles. The Captain had given Tou back the Sentry’s sword to “spar” with and the Captain himself held a massive Otusacha-style blade. The weapon was three times as wide as the one sided saber in Tou’s grasp. It’s gaudy scarlet hilt, shaped like a squared cross, required two hands. Extending the blade so that the tip pointed at Tou, Dresdan pivoted on his heels as Tou prowled around the circle made by the audience of smoggy pirates.

“You’re from the woods,” Dresdan stated, “but who are you?”

Tou grunted in affirmation to the first part but shrugged in response to the second.

“Who trained you?” Dresdan continued, “The trees?”

Tou lunged. His arm shot forward like a piston, putting the tip of *Future* well past where Dresdan’s head had been. The Captain hadn’t blocked, he’d merely leaned out of the way. Yanking the blade back, Tou swiped again for the chidra’s face and again he missed as the Captain leaned further back but then Dresdan stopped. Planting his feet, he rolled his torso forward and drew up his massive sword to bat back Tou’s third swing. Tou spun to swing again but this time he spun to his knees and swung low – aiming for the pirate’s baggy britches. Dresdan, having just lifted his blade to the sun, used the weight of the weapon to bring it down with a swiftness, stabbing it into the deck just in time to parry Tou’s swing.

Tou snarled up at Dresdan from his knees.

Dresdan smiled back, “Or were you trained by beasts?”

Tou shot up from the floor. Dresdan yanked his blade free with tremendous force, spinning his body to get the mighty weapon around and ready to attack once more. The move was so fast that he was ready to attack before Tou. The earth elf didn't slink back, however, he pushed his planned attack into a parry and stopped the blademaster's mighty blow. Holding his saber above him to keep Dresdan's from crashing down upon him, he crouched and twisted around, pulling both their weapons out from between them so that when he finished his turn and they were face to face again he found Dresdan open for attack with his free hand.

But Dresdan also found Tou open for attack. Before Tou could punch, Dresdan had kicked. No sooner did Tou's brown eyes meet Dresdan's indigo than did he receive a foot to the face. His feather-pinned green cap flew into the crowd as he tumbled.

The crowd crowed but Dresdan didn't claim his victory – not yet. He stood his ground and waited, continuing to interrogate his adversary, "You're a legend, you know? Do you know what they call you back home – in Westport?"

Tou got back up. He stabbed his saber in the ground and while the hand guard wiggled back and forth he undid the buttons of his tunic. In response to Dresdan, he said, "Westport ain't my home."

"That's right," Dresdan smiled, "because you're from the woods."

Tou threw his vest to the ground then went after the buttons of his blouse.

"Barrens live in those woods – in Tou Zou – don't they? Monstrous beasts..." He addressed the crowd to explain, "They dwarf buffalos and have jaws big enough to eat them too, with horns that would make a minotaur look like an antelope." He turned back to Tou, "You must've seen them growing up, yes?"

Tou unlatched his belt then latched it back a notch tighter. He grabbed his sword and asked, "What do they call me in Westport?"

"The Barren Boy." Dresdan smirked.

With a snarl, Tou attacked. Drawing his saber up from below as if to cut a sash of blood across Dresdan's bare chest but at the last moment he let go of the weapon and caught the hilt with his free hand. Holding it backwards, he stooped low and sliced at the Captain's shins. Dresdan jumped. His heels clearing the assault as he leaned into his own swing – a swing that would've taken his opponent's head clean off had he not had his sword oriented so that it was the flat of the blade that collided with the young man's melon.

Future went flying off into the crowd.

Tou hit the ground. His head reeling and his body seemingly spinning beneath it even as he lay completely still on the floor of the deck. There was a roar in his ears, like that of the barrens he used to know, popping like thunder and growing louder and louder until it finally stopped just a notch before it became unbearable.

"Get up!" Dresdan demanded.

"*Get down!*" A little girl demanded.

He couldn't see her, all he could see was darkness spliced with broad bursts of light. There were fireworks on the inside of his eyelids.

He lay flat against the deck. He knew that. But at the same time, he was somewhere else.

"Get up!"

"*Get down!*"

"*Zou...*" He whispered.

His voice traveled in his head like it was echoing in his skull. He wasn't speaking – at least, he wasn't speaking on the deck of the Obsidian Sail – he was remembering and, after one more great burst of light, suddenly he was seeing.

It looked like waves across an angry sea – the rolling shoulders of an army of barrens. Their backs were arched to fit the muscles that rippled around their biceps as their paws obliterated the cobblestone beneath them. Tou remembered thinking it looked like a flash flood suddenly storming down the city streets. It would leave a similar wake of destruction.

There was little Tou: stark naked and standing between the horns of his adopted mother, his chest puffed out and his eyes wide and reveling at the sight – his first sight – of the city. Then there was little Zou. She was a tad bit bigger than Tou, but you wouldn't have known that if you saw them in that moment. She was hiding beneath the gristly fur of their mother's spine and from beneath the mane she shrieked to her brother.

“GET DOWN!”

Little Tou refused, but soon the universe would bring him to heel. He saw it the second before it happened too. A line of armor on the rooftop and a row of bows knocked and drawn. His eyes met with the eyes of a soldier. Maybe the one that hit him, maybe not, but either way they both saw each other and in that instant they both wished they had used the seconds prior to stop what was now inevitable.

The town guards fired.

An arrow struck little Tou in the shoulder. The force yanked his hands from the horns. He teetered back onto one foot. For a moment, he hung there in the air with his feet slowly peeling off his mother's head and his back descending towards the street – towards a space that would soon be filled with a trampling beast that, regardless of its intent to hurt Tou or lack thereof, would not be able to stop.

Little Zou lunged from the shelter of her mother's hump. She grabbed hold of her brother with one hand and her mother's horn with the other, then yanked him back onto the barren's back and shoved him beneath their mother's mane. Shreiking again:

“GET DOWN!”

“Get up!”

Tou was back onboard the *Obsidian Sail*. Placing his palms on the deck, Tou pushed himself up. The sweat that poured from his temple was now mixed with blood. The blunt force of the blow had bust open his forehead. On his knees, he faced Dresdan again. The Captain held *Future* by the blade, offering the hilt back to Tou. Even as Tou reached for it, his world was still spinning around him. There was no way he could handle another back and forth just yet, he needed some time to regain his composure – at least a couple seconds. Luckily, whether Dresdan knew this or not, he gave Tou a break.

“You seem quite civilized for someone raised by monsters.” Dresdan said. His tone was cool but not sharp. Indifferent but not insulting. He asked, “Who taught you to be a person?”

“Zou,” He said, taking the sword, “my sister.”

“Tou and Zou?” Dresdan asked.

Tou nodded and it made his brain reel so he kept the nod singular.

“Tou and Zou from Tou Zou, Tadloe?” Dresdan asked.

Tou didn't nod this time, instead he concurred verbally, “Yup.”

There was snickering amongst the crew. A spike of rage pierced through the cloud obscuring Tou's concentration. He was up in an instant. His blade clamoring against Dresdan's. Though Dresdan continued to play, blocking and attacking, over and over, it was obvious the

Captain was now distracted. No longer was Dresden taking the windows Tou's wreckless style continued to open up. Dresden was taking other openings instead – Tou was finally opening up.

“Why'd you leave the woods?”

“Because I lost her.”

Tou beat back Dresden's sword with such force that the Captain lost one of his grips on the weapon. The chidra had to back pedal, leaning and ducking away from Tou's slashing saber. Though it was his curiosity that distracted him, it was now his curiosity that brought him back to the fight. Stopping his retreat, he stepped in.

With one hand he reached up and caught Tou's wrist mid-swing. Tou dropped his sword, trying to catch it in his other hand and counter Dresden but Dresden too had dropped his sword. Balling his sword hand into a fist, he caught Tou hard just below the ribs. Dresden released him and the earth elf staggered, clutching his gut and gasping for air as *Future* fell on the ground before the Captain.

“So you're looking for her.” Dresden commented as he retrieved his sword.

Tou, with his hands on his knees, kept his eyes on the Captain.

Picking up *Future*, Dresden held it by the blade and offered the hilt to Tou, asking, “Have you tried a mapwork?”

Without a word, Tou took the weapon, straightened back up, and rolled his shoulders.

Dresden raised a scaley brow, “Or are you referring to a different kind of loss.”

Tou charged and swung with every intention of slicing open the Captain's face, right between his taily mustache. He figured he'd miss, however, and so he used the momentum of the swing to bring the blade full-circle, back up over his head and down again. He did miss the first go, Dresden limbo-ed out of the way for that one, and he missed the second as Dresden pivoted his limbo. Tou was poised to go for a third but the cocky manner in which Dresden was playing, simply leaning out of the way instead of parrying with his blade, irked the earth elf – and he had already been previously irked.

He moved as if to take *Future* in a full rotation once more but then he pivoted the blade out away from him, stopped his arm, and flicked his wrist to whip the sharp edge of the blade back around, hurtling towards Dresden's blank glare. Finally, the Captain raised his sword. He deflect Tou's slice before bringing his blade face down on Tou's over-extended forearm.

Crying out in pain, Tou hopped back but he didn't drop his sword.

The placid expression of the Captain broke for a moment as a snicker escaped his lips.

Tou jumped forwards with a mock swing. Dresden leaned out of the way as he had before, exactly as the earth elf had hoped, and this allowed Tou to attack again with another quick hop-step forward and a real, full range swing. Dresden ducked right under the slicing saber, spinning as he did and releasing his sword to hold it in one hand instead of two. His spin and Tou's hop-step had put them rather close together. Too close. For as Dresden came out of his pivot, he sliced for Tou's feet. The elf was still leaning in from his last attack and his sword arm was still fully extended – there was no way he could block in time. All he could do to save his shins was jump straight up. It may have spared his legs, but it put his chin on full display – directly above Dresden, who had over extended with one arm but had his left hand free. The Captain's legs shot him up from his stooping posture and his left fist pumped up to catch Tou square in his chiseled jaw.

The crew burst into hoops and hollers but the Captain raised his bloody knuckles to silence them. No sooner did Tou land flat on his back than did he hop back up. Dresden could tell he would get up. He'd caught him good, but not good enough to send him under again.

They'd come to that point in the fight where he was beginning to see Tou's strategy before it was even implemented – possibly before even Tou knew what he was about to do. Years of fighting made it easy for the chidra to predict what an amateur would do. There were only so many ways an opponent could respond to his assaults without dying. And he could sense the heat in Tou's head. The frustration. Not just from their fight but from whatever demons his interrogation had unearthed. It was time to end the battle.

Dresdan still held his sword in one hand. He held the blade back, his grip upside down as if he was hiding the giant weapon behind him. Tou bound forward and swung *Future* over his shoulder with all his might, attempting to cleave the Captain from the collar bone to his heart – though of course this did not happen. Dresdan stepped in, pivoted, and swung so that his broadsword hit Tou's saber hardly even an inch above the handguard. The force of the block was so fierce that Tou's arm immediately gave. It fell out of the way and Dresdan's sword came crashing down on Tou oncemore. Again, the flat of his blade slammed into the side of Tou's head, knocking him immediately onto his ass.

Dresdan stood over him, his cross-hilted sword pointed so that the tip rested against the nape of Tou's neck. Somehow, Tou had stayed consciousness this time, although with the lights currently blinding him he wasn't sure how long he would retain it.

"We will train you." Dresdan stated, "By the time you leave the *Obsidian Sail*, no one will be able to knock you down. Not even I. You-"

"WHAT IN THE FARAKIN GODAI HELL IS THIS?!"

The crowd parted like as though they were the Red Sea and the speaker was Moses. Though the speaker was most definitely not Moses, the tone of her exclamation assured all those present that she was more than willing to bring the holy fury of god down upon them. Tabuh stormed across the deck, one hand pointing at Tou's nigh-paralyzed figure and the other clutching her beloved golden revolver. Behind her, trailed Drakken. His head was bowed in shame and he avoided eye contact with the Captain who most definitely had not given the order to return the firearm fully loaded.

"Well?" She hissed.

Dresdan pulled his glare away from the swain and softened his scaley expression, shrugging, "Training."

"TRAININ?!" Tabuh exploded once more – though she did holster her handgun which caused the entire congregation to quietly sigh with relief – before kneeling to help Tou get up.

"I'm fine." He grunted.

Tabuh cocked an eyebrow and backed off by an inch, saying, "Get up then."

Tou strained to rise but could hardly get his shoulders an inch up off the ground before falling back. Not only did his head feel like it weighed a thousand pounds, it felt as though it was spinning faster than Mystakle Planet rotated as it orbited Solaris. Abandoning the recovery effort, Tabuh turned from the concussed earth elf to the black-scaled chidra. Her face said it all but she said it nonetheless.

"How's hae to protect mae when hae can't aeven stand up, huh, Captain?"

"How is he indeed." Dresdan concurred, "He'll get there with time. We weren't finished-"

„

"The hell you weren't?!" Tabuh crowed.

"Tabuh." Tou said.

Tabuh looked down at him. Blood and sweat coated his face. His forehead would soon be bulging as if he were sprouting horns. Yet, squinting through the swelling and smiling through his busted lip, his voice was deep and calm.

“It’s okay.” He continued in a whisper so that only she could hear, “I need this.”

She stared at him for a moment with her golden eyes. He squinted hard to keep that view in his sight.

“Glory’s gotta be earned.” He murmured.

Tabuh sighed but nodded, “Can ah help ya up?”

Tou grunted in affirmation.

Gently cradling his shoulders, she hoisted him back up onto his feet. She slid his arm over her shoulders and they faced the Captain again together.

“Hae’s done for today though.” Tabuh stated.

Dresdan bowed his head. A wave of grumbles spread through the crowd of pirates as they shuffled off back to work. Dresdan stepped closer to the two elves so they could hear him over the clamor of the dispersing crew.

“Tomorrow. Jason will come for you.” The Captain said to Tou. He turned to Tabuh, “And Drakken for you. How did you like the accommodations?”

Tabuh scoffed, “Ah could make the sword with a lot less...” Then she cast the moleman, lingering out of the way but still quite within earshot, a smirk, “The question is if your guy can do the magic.”

“She isn’t wrong.” Drakken admitted, stepping hesitantly closer, “Only the greatest magicians have successfully been able to use void-”

“*Everyone* is capable of greatness, Sir Drakken.” Despite speaking to the boatswain, his eyes were on Tou, “To the helm.”

Drakken turned and marched off.

“If everayone can, then whah do so few?” Tabuh asked.

“Not everyone has a teacher.” Dresdan smiled.

“Mhm?” Tabuh rolled her eyes, “And not everayone survahves the taeching aither, huh?”

Tou and The Captain ignored her last comment, their eyes were locked – well, as well as they could be locked considering the lumps now bulging out over Tou’s eyes. Tou was looking for the catch. *Why does this man want to train me so badly? I stole from him and my punishment is training? A pirate, a drug dealer, a murderer, and yet...* There was no lie in the man’s indigo eyes, at least none that he could see.

“Come on, Tou,” Tabuh said. With him leaning on her for support, he really didn’t have much say in the matter, “let’s go get you claened up.”

They stooped to snatch up Tou’s clothes and then staggered off the deck. His body was pressed close to her side and as their hips bumped together, his thieving senses picked up on something peculiar. Tabuh had been dressed in a tight fitting get up when he met her on the docks of Yelah. A get up she still wore. Her arms were bare, showing off enough muscle to rival Tou’s own, and her top was strapped to her neck by thin bands and bound to her abdomen by a loose fitting corset (loose for a corset but likely still tight compared to the vest Tou had been wearing). Only a Sentry could get away with bare arms beneath the cold sun above Sentrakle, but now her outfit was far more suited to the warm ocean air than Tou’s button up, vest, and slacks. Which was the first clue that something was off – she now wore a shawl. Unless the garment had particularly caught her eyes, there was no practical reason for her to have thrown one over her shoulders. Unless, that is, she was hiding something beneath. Her money pouch was there,

jostling against him from its place on her belt, but he felt a second weight beneath it. There was something new in the pocket of her trousers. It shifted with the money pouch, but it didn't jingle and when Tou incidentally pressed against it, it seemed to smush.

The void-dust. Tou realized. His eyes shifted to hers. Hers were trained ahead, focused on getting back to their chamber without dropping the elf or his sweat-soaked clothes. Tou couldn't be sure. It could've been any number of things, but it felt like a sack of sand. *Whatever it is, she doesn't want anyone to know.*

"Since wae're roommates," Tabuh noted as they neared the door, "ah expect you to wash up. Don't know if folks that grew up in forests are used to practicing some personal hahjaene."

"My woods smelled a lot better than your Yelah." Tou shot back before asking, "Isn't it locked?"

"Can ya stand?" Tabuh asked.

Tou nodded and slid his arm off her shoulders. She handed him his sweaty rags and slipped her hand in her pocket – the opposite pocket of the one Tou's eyes lingered over – to withdraw a key.

"That swain is a push over." Tabuh winked at Tou as she opened the door, "Maht come in handay."

The bathroom was no master bath but it was far better than one would expect on a smuggler's ship. There was a toilet of sorts, fitted with enertomb enchantments (which both elves hoped meant it could flush out to sea, but seeing the incense and matches on the counter beside the pot did not give them much hope). Along with the magical privy, there was a sink and faucet with a mirror above it and a rack of clothes to the side – but no shower.

Their eyes met in the mirror.

"Take turns?" Tou asked.

Tabuh shrugged, "Grab the stools."

Tou walked like he was heading to his grave. His sweat had just begun to slow since the duel but now the floodgates reopened. He picked up the stools and slowly made his way back to the bathroom door. With his eyes on the floor, he sat the stool down by her feet – now bare – and set his own just outside the doorway. He kept his eyes trained on the floor boards. That is, until a thick leather belt whipped out and slapped him on the inside of his upper thigh.

Flinching, he looked up and froze. Her lips were twisted in a crooked smile. One slender brow was raised higher than the other. Her golden eyes squinted over her cheeks, pushed up by that mischevious grin. The eyebrow bounced and, as if she had cast some sort of spell, his eyes fell to her figure.

She wasn't naked, but she didn't need to be to turn Tou's blood hot. Her corset had almost hidden her figure. Her hips were swung to one side and her shoulder was stooped as if she were about to nudge him with her elbow and let him in on some inside joke. Her torso was so taut it seemed as if her abdominal muscles were flexing to hold her body tighter than the corset she had taken off. Her hips and thighs were thick. Her posture forced one leg to bulge with sleek, round muscle while her other leg was relaxed and soft.

He wanted to feel her. Any bit of her. Even just her fingertips or the golden hair that cascaded down to tickle the small of her back. He wanted nothing more than to run his hand along the curve that ran from her ribs, just below her breasts, down to her waist and then pull her body against his – but he wouldn't dare.

He gulped and brought his gaze back to her face.

Yet her eyes didn't meet his. She was taking in her own spectacle. Tou still had on his pants, but his shirt and vest lay in a pile on the floor. There was no fat visible from his belt to his chest. His abs, like hers, seemed almost to be straining – though now, as he stared at Tabuh in shock, they may have been – but his chest bulged with muscles that would feel like a pillow beneath her cheek. Two pyramids of brawn attached his shoulders to his neck, one side half shrowded beneath his dread lochs that ran down his chest and hung off his pecks like war medals. His veins showed up like long ridges of mountain scapes down his biceps and forearms. She imagined running her fingers along them, as if she were tracing a route on a map, and then grabbing his wrists and wrapping herself in his arms, pulling him around her like a blanket.

She caught her breath. Then met his gaze.

“It's fahn, Mr. Woodsman,” she smiled, “you can stare if ah can.”

Tou took an instinctive step back and toppled over the stool he'd placed there.

Tabuh burst out laughing and turned around to sit on her stool.

“Wae maht should do this back to back,” despite her joy at his fall, he could tell from her tone that she wasn't just laughing at him, “otherwahs...” she cleared her throat, “well...get your pants off and ah'll hand you a rag.”

Having recovered, Tou did as he was told then sat down on his stool. Back to back, Tou couldn't see her but Tabuh could watch the back of his head in the mirror. They scrubbed at themselves in silence for a while. Both trapped in their own heads. Tabuh escaped first, breaking the spell.

“After all this, wae still could use a blademaster on the Woodsmen.”

“The sports team?”

“Mhm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm?”

Tabuh looked over her shoulder and nudged Tou. He looked back at her.

“Your rag.” She said, offering a new one, “Trade?”

Tou nodded and handed his over. It was half red with blood and brown with sweat. Tabuh fought past her gag reflexes and, for a moment, it seemed that the act of bathing side by side might actually save them from the potential problems that their mutual attraction might manifest, but then Tabuh began to rinse the cloth out in the sink and as the filth slid down the drain so too did her discomfort as her eyes rose back to the mirror and rested on the earth elf's shoulders.

She hadn't just happened upon the duel when she burst out onto the deck, she'd gotten to see nearly the entire fight. More importantly, she'd gotten to hear what he had told the Captain.

“What was Zou lahk?”

She saw him stiffen in the mirror, as if he was holding his breath. His hand, scrubbing his arm, stopped. Then his shoulders fell back, he sighed, and continued to wash.

“Strong.”

Tabuh looked away. *I should stop.* But she almost immediately looked back. *We're stuck together! I've been a loner for so long and now I'm stuck with this man – the one man in the world that isn't an incessant flow of vomiting back story – and I'm just going to let politeness maintain a wedge between us? Farak that!* Setting her brow and giving herself a nod of confidence, she pressed deeper.

“Were you raellay raised bah barrens?”

“Yes.”

She took that gentle prod and replaced it with a ten foot pole, “Did you know your parents?”

Immediate hesitation. A longer spell than before. He turned his head, craning his neck so that his right eye could observe her face in the mirror. Her eyes were wide, her lips slightly parted. *What is she doing*, he wondered, yet, despite his confusion there was one thing he felt was true. Just as he felt that Dresdan was sincere, he felt Tabuh was too but it had been so long since anyone had cared that he couldn’t help but be skeptical. He turned around and continued to wash himself, but decided to answer.

“No.”

“Did Zou?”

“She said she did.” Tou shrugged, “She knew common tongue.”

“Shae was older?”

“Mhm,” Tou nodded, “by a couple years.”

“Did shae ever tell you what happened to em?”

Tou chuckled, “A hundred times.”

He tried to stop the chuckle, stooping over and grabbing his stomach as if he could clutch the giggles and smother them away, but he couldn’t. He wasn’t amused, that wasn’t why he was laughing. He’d never told a soul this before. His brain was freaking out, flipping all the switches in his emotional control room on and off in a futile attempt to find the right one. And there was a right one, but Tou refused it. Still, he continued down a path that skirted dangerously close unlocking it.

“She’d always lie. Everytime I’d ask she’d tell me a different thing. Each new lie more epic than the last – except the first. That was the only lie she’d repeat. Near the end that lie disappeared, but for a while there she had stuck with it...”

His brain had found the right switch. Like a kid standing before a fire alarm, smelling smoke but still too scared to flip it, he froze. Tabuh had frozen too. She could sense the strain, but she couldn’t help herself. She’d broken into the vault. She knew she probably shouldn’t but she also knew she couldn’t stop.

“What was it?”

“She said our parents were going to Iceload for a little while.” He was upright and rigid. Only his mouth moved, “That they told her to stay and look after me.”

He turned to watch her with his right eye again.

“She didn’t want to look after me, she loved hunting and we lived in a little cabin in the country, surrounded by woods – woods full of critters.”

With a shrug he turned away again.

“So she bundled me up and left me so that she could go catch dinner – least that’s what she said she was doing.”

He chuckled again but it was a dry laugh. It was as fake as it was involuntary.

“I was a trouble maker of a baby – least that’s what she would always say. I wouldn’t sit still. Without her there to hold me down, I broke out of my cradle and went looking for her. Only, when I did, I knocked over a candle.”

Tabuh’s eyes bore into the back of Tou’s head. She placed her rag in the sink and twisted so that she could place a hand on his shoulder – but she paused. Her hand hovering just over his arm. *Maybe I shouldn’t...* Then he trembled. Her hand instinctively fell to clasp him. The trembling stopped. He leaned into her grasp.

“She found me crawling outside. The house up in flames behind me.”

His head leaned over so that his cheek rubbed against her hand. Gently and slowly. She squeezed his shoulder.

“We went back for years. I remember leaving notes in bottles. My oldest memories were there...by the time of my first, my oldest memory, the ruins were littered with the bottles. All exactly as we left them. As if the trees above had refused to let the wind and the rain budge them. Not even an inch. I started to doubt that there had ever even been a house there. Not long after that, she started refusing to go back. And I was too young, I didn’t know the way. We were living with the barrens by then and I was a happy kid despite it all. I thought the world was a wonderful wooded place...”

Sitting back upright, he placed his hand over hers, then gently peeled it off him.

“Do you believe that one’s the true one?” Tabuh asked.

Tou thought for a moment, then said, “I think most of it is true...but...over time...I’ve started to doubt parts of it.” He paused again. The lump in his throat was choking him, but it passed after a moment or two and Tabuh gave him time. He continued, “I don’t think our parents went to Iceload.”

“You think...” but Tabuh realized what Tou thought and she didn’t want to say it.

He said it, “I don’t think they’d gone anywhere.”

Now it was Tabuh that had a lump in her throat and tears budding in her eyes.

“I don’t think they left the cabin.”

Silence fell over them. This was not the awkward silence that falls between strangers, but the shared silence that envelopes partners. A loud thundering silence that signifies just as much meaning as any spoken words might. It was Tou that broke the spell this time.

“We should get some sleep.”

Tabuh nodded, shaking her head to clear her mind before asking, “All claen?”

“Mhm.”

They stood up. Together they crowded the sink. They rinsed out the rags, wrenched them out, then draped them from one of the bars on the washcloth rack. Tou took the stools as Tabuh made her way to the bed. Without a word, she got into bed. Slid over to the far side and lay thinking. Tou turned down the lamps in silence. As the light disappeared, so too did any noise from the earth elf. Tabuh half thought he’d snuck out the door. She didn’t look over until she heard a thump on the floor beside the bed.

“Tou?”

“Mhm?”

“What are you doing?”

There was a pause and then a question, “Going to sleep?”

“On the floor?” she shot back immediately.

“Uh...”

“You got baet the godai taiad up today!” Tabuh cried, lurching to an upright position, “You ain’t slaepin on the floor!”

After another pause, two brown eyes peaked over the side of the bed, “You sure?”

“Heh,” she scoffed. She lifted her pillow to reveal the golden gun beneath, “Ah ain’t worraed. Ah slaep with mah finger on the trigger.”

Now Tou was hesitating for an altogether separate reason, “I’m not sure that’s very safe-” She rolled her eyes, “Naither is sharin a bed with a stranger.”

Tou stood up but didn’t get in bed. He asked, “Are we still strangers?”

Tabuh smiled. She moved to put the gun on the windowsill beside the bed and left it there, “You know ah’m a quick draw anyways.”

“True.”

She laid back down, rolling over to give Tou privacy as he got in. He did so delicately, just as he had tried to do when he had gotten out of the bed in the morning, as if any sudden noise or shake might startle the marksman and lead to either his death or his expulsion and – considering the wracking pain still spinning in his brain – sleeping on the wood floor would’ve been hardly more preferable than a quick bullet to the temple. But he made it in unharmed.

They lay there in complete silence for a while. Both listening to the other’s breath, trying to read into each shortened inhale and each drawn out exhale. Tabuh shifted. She wiggled backwards, closer to the middle of the bed. She thought it was a bold move but she did not expect that Tou would make almost the exact opposite move at the exact same moment – wiggling forwards. That made both their bold moves quite bolder as suddenly they were pressed right up next to each other, spooning.

There was dead quiet.

A gentle hand ran down Tabuh’s side, starting just below her breasts and stopping right above her hips. Tou’s hand would’ve went away then, but before it could escape a separate hand caught it by the fingers. Adjusting her grasp, Tabuh pulled Tou’s arm over her like a blanket. She pulled him close and he held her tight.

The quiet returned but it was far from cold and dead. It was warm and new. And shortly thereafter they fell asleep.

Chapter Three: The Princess and the Guard



The waters were rough. Waves rolled up to narrow peaks then crashed, slinging the dinghy into the middle of the next wave. Bursting through the surging sea, the vessel's hull clapped against the next ridge and shot up to smash through another. The sailor was drenched and his stomach was churning. Despite his discomfort, he held his usual posture. Leaning into the storm with his arms crossed and hands tucked into the pits of his arms. His furred snout was twisted in a discontented snarl and his bushy brow was furled as he glared through the rain to scrutinize the individual on the dock ahead of him.

"Farak..." He recognized the figure, despite her near nondescript appearance. Black robe, blue eye, blonde hair: your typical electric elf standing in the rain. The defining feature was the banadage that cut diagonally across her face and covered her left eye, "...it's Skar."

The bearn's eyes bored hard into her single visible eye, attempting to discern her motives, for he did not think she was supposed to be there but he knew that she was only ever where she was for a purpose. His fingers twitched beneath his armpits as his mind thought of which weapon to reach for first – his belt was loaded. A mighty sword was slung over his back, two sabers hung from his hip, an entire set of daggers – including a machete – crowded those hilts not to mention a revolver, a folded up crossbow, a mace, a whip, an ax, and a chain. As his dingy approached the pier and he quelled the motor, he chose to keep his philanges off his arsenal. His trust was in part due to the fact that he knew Skar could likely best him regardless of which weapon he reached for, but also due to the fact that he had never done wrong by Skar. Nor had any Obsidian. He believed that if Skar had come to interrupt this deal then she had done so in his – and his Captain and crew's – best interest.

"Skar."

He jumped onto the dock. The dinghy slammed against it. The waves smacking it from behind wedged it so that it pushed beneath the pier at such an angle that it began to take on water. Soon, it would be submerged but the spark in Skar's eye caused Jason to lose all concern for his little raft.

"It's a set up, Jason." She said.

The bearn cocked his head.

"Walk and talk?" She asked.

Jason nodded. The wood sagged beneath his lumbering weight but the sound of squealing planks was deafened by the thunder booming overhead. No one else was in the harbor – not that it was a particularly large one to begin with. They were on the shores of Kilko, a tiny city-state island that was a peculiar mix of tax dodging wealthy and authority avoiding exiles. The only folks with enough money to own a boat on the island did not do so out of necessity – they weren't fishermen or shippers – and so while the docks were packed with spectacular crafts, the boats were abandoned to weather the storm alone. All but one, that is, although it most definitely did not belong to the authority evading exiles on board.

"Dresdan has somethan for ya." Jason stated.

"Hm," Skar held out a hand.

"Ain't got it on mae!" Jason scoffed.

Skar rolled her eye.

Jason copied the gesture, "How was ah supposed to know ya were gonna bae hare, huh?" She shrugged.

"Whah are ya hare?"

"There's a hit out on Dresdan." Skar explained as they neared the yacht.

“Hae’s a pahrate.” Jason shrugged, “When is there not?”

“A rael one.” Skar snapped, “The Empahr.”

The gangplank stretched out to the loungey deck of the stern. Wicker chairs and couches were draped in raincovers that stretched taught, hiding their form, and yet despite that two fishfolk sat uncomfortably ontop. Their slender blue bodies were naked down to their britches – like Jason – and their feet were bare, swinging beneath them as they resisted the urge to fidget on the trampoline like seating arrangement they’d chosen.

Thase hooligans better hope they got some more intimidating fellas inside, Jason chuckled to himself as they strode past the two blue doormen without so much as a nod. Once out of earshot – or rather, tympanumshot – Jason turned to ask Skar.

“Sae Lords?”

“No. Racist ass...” Skar shook her head, “Ya sae two farakin fishfolk and imagine it’s gotta bae the Sae Lords-”

“Well, that ain’t the onlay-”

“It’s that godai Sentray!” Skar barked.

Her holler just cleared the stairs they were heading up. Their heads were level with the maindeck now – well, Jason’s was and Skar’s scalp was about there – the cabin doors were sprawled open about five yards from the top of the stairs. In the space in between was a diverse collection of five pairs of boots. Jason and Skar stopped midstair and craned their heads to scrutinize the faces of the folks that would very likely soon be their foes.

In the middle was a bearn woman, who not only wore a shirt – unlike Jason – but wore a thick chestplate of bulging armor. There technically wasn’t a weapon on her, but her hands were submerged in massive gauntlets of shingled metal with raised ridges along the knuckles. Her fists, balled at her sides, looked like maces.

On either side of the bearn, was an elf. The earth elf looked like he’d taken a wrong turn and wound up on the yacht instead of in some overpriced, yuppy coffee shop. His gimmick was the L shaped staff held half behind his back. Wedged in the knook of the L was a pale gray stone – the same sort of stone that powered the appliances in Tou and Tabuh’s bathroom. It was an elgroon, a solar powered weapon controlled by the weilder’s imagination. The electric elf, on the otherside of the elemental hipster, had a Sentry-style sword sheathed on each hip. The pale elf was more armed than her darker skinned comrade, with leather from head to toe. Scanning her posture and glare, both Jason and Skar identified her as the main threat.

Especially cause, next to her, was a yellow robed individual. Though Skar wore robes and was a warrior, this woman’s robes seemed to be cut of a different cloth. It wasn’t just the fantastical coloration or the clover patterns that covered it, but the way she wore it. While the bearn and elves seemed to lean forward, this chidran woman leaned back. Her head was tilted ever so slightly as if she was revelling in the rain, letting it splatter across her bright red scales and drop to turn her robe a shade of orange.

Jason and Skar exchanged a confused side-eyed glance after analyzing her. *Healer?* They both thought. Medics weren’t common members of bounty hunter squads. In fact, medics weren’t commonly seen outside of formal settings, but they shrugged it off, knowing all would soon be revealed.

They looked to the fifth and final member. His eyes looked to be the size of dinner plates what with the way his glasses magnified them. Cradled against his chest was a book which must’ve weighed more than the little human himself. He had robes like the chidra, but his were

brown and bland. He was either cold or frightened, either way he was shivering so bad that his teeth chattered with such ferocity he couldn't keep his mouth closed.

Now Jason and Skar exchanged a full glance. Both seeing they had the same thought in each other's eyes. *This band of hooligans is a joke.*

"Come on up." The armored bearn commanded, "Let's get out of this rain."

Jason and Skar followed orders. The healer and the book boy stepped aside as the bearn lead them into the cabin. The swordswoman and the elementalist followed on either side of Jason and Skar. As they entered the chamber, the healer and book boy closed the doors. The geek stood there to one side of the doorway while the chidra took a seat in a club chair, crossed her leg over the other, and leaned back to watch with a gleam in her violet eyes.

The room was full of club chairs, they lined the walls, blocking off the shelves that were full of books and scrolls. At the other end of the cabin was another set of double doors. A semicircle of curved couches surrounded a glass coffee table in the center of the room – it was on the otherside of that table that the bearn with the metal boxing gloves stopped and turned.

"So?" She asked.

Jason turned to Skar, speaking in a whisper that was polite but definitely not inaudible to anyone else, "Just the Empahr or the Mystvokar too?"

"Both." Skar responded, not even bothering to lower her voice.

"Farak are y'all talking about." The bearn barked.

Still, they ignored her as Jason asked, "Ya thank one of em hahred thase guys?"

"No way," Skar scoffed, "look lahk entrepreneurs to mae."

Jason gagged, then turned back to the bearn woman and growled, "Farakin bountay hunters."

"HEY." The woman slammed a hand down on the coffee table. It immediately shattered. She stepped through the debris to stand a mere yard from Jason. There she snarled, "Where is it?"

Jason winked at her then placed his index finger and middle finger like a peace sign against his neck in the international-Solarin gesture of, "Fuck you." Her eyes grew wide and her snarl turned into a roar, but then Skar stepped in.

The bandage around her head had fallen, revealing that next to her sparkling blue eye was a dull black marble. From this marble, her crow eye, a ribbon of blackness extended, like shadows stretching across the floor except these shadows cut through the air and they shot like a striking snake down the throat of the gaping bearn. Her hands immediately went to cut off the stream but before they could get there, Skar had hopped out of her cloak and wrapped her legs over the shoulders of the armored behemoth – all the while driving her dark, searing energy down her opponent's throat. With the force of her leap and her weight – as a physically fit 5'11 warrior – she easily knocked the bearn off balance. She didn't get off either, boring down on her so that her weight plus the weight of her victim's chest plate toppled the victim over. The bearn landed on the skeleton of the coffee table, Skar still riding on her breast.

As Skar tackled the bearn, the other bearn in the room, Jason, turned to face their foe's comrades. He heard the sound of swords leaving sheaths as he turned and so he knew he had to turn and draw. In that split second, he scrolled through his options. There was a swordswoman, an elementalist, a mage, and a mystery healer. *Forget the haeler. The mage can wait. The swordswoman* – he drew his machete with his left hand – *and the elementalist* – and took his revolver in his right.

When he completed his pivot, he looked first at the elemental. The man stood as if he was holding a lightning rod – and in a way he was: the elgroon’s gem was glowing a bright yellow and sparks were already starting to burgeon when-

BANG!

Jason shot the enertomb right as it was about to unleash a whip crack of lightning. The stone exploded like a grenade of electricity. Tiny darts of lightning shot out in all directions – striking both Jason and the swordswoman swinging for Jason’s throat, but more importantly – striking the elemental. He caught an entire half of the electric explosion. It lifted him up off his feet, his body writhing as the energy coursed through him, and threw him against the double doors.

The electrocution hurt, but also likely saved Jason, as it caused the swordswoman to freeze and gave him time to turn from the elemental and raise his machete to block her first assault. Still, she wielded two sabers, and as his blade hit her first, her second came cutting in for his gut. He raised the revolver, his finger rocking back the hammer as he did, then fired.

BANG!

The bullet bounced off the sword and shot through the ceiling. It threw her left arm back, but her right arm still held her first blade against Jason. As Jason’s mind went to firing another shot, she twisted her hold and stepped out of the way of the bearn’s firearm. This drew the dumb pirate to follow her with his gun – even as she slid her saber, no longer angling the blade at Jason’s body, but rather at his right bicep which swung into position as he tried to get off another shot. Rather than another BANG! there was a roar as the elf’s blade pierced his upper arm and slid on through.

By then, the elf’s left arm had recovered. She had the second-saber poised high and coming down fast to cleave Jason’s bear-like face in two. At the last second, a block of shadows smashed into her chest and threw her across the cabin. Jason roared again as the blade was torn free from his arm, but Skar’s voice cut through his agonizing bellows.

“THE MAGE!”

Jason cursed.

His right arm hanging limp from his shoulder, the revolver fell to the floor. Jason turned to see the mage nigh done with his spell. The book was wide open in his arms, the letters scrawled therein were on fire, as if they were a trail of gun powder. Jason reached for the gun but his right arm remained uncooperative. With little time and no better idea, he drew back the machete and flung it at the wizard. The poor bookworm’s eyes were on the scripture, the flames dancing in the thick lenses of his glasses. He didn’t even see it coming. The machete struck his sternum, broke through, and pushed further. He looked up from the book as he dropped it, gasping for breath. The human turned to the healer – who hadn’t moved from where she sat in the corner – , reached out for her, but then fell onto his back to convulse.

Jason and the healer’s eyes met but they were quickly pulled away as Skar screamed at him again.

“THE SWORDSWOMAN!”

Jason whirled around. Skar had not yet killed the bearn. Skar’s shadows were still coursing through the open maw of her foe, seeping down into her victim’s intestines to slow cook her, but that was the problem. It was a slow death. The pain did hamper the bearn’s fighting abilities, but as a giant tank of armored muscle, the woman was still able to give Skar quite the struggle. Meanwhile, the shadow-blasted swordswoman was back up and running into the mix.

This time, Jason had a moment to retrieve his gun with his good arm. This was good. After all, he was left handed. He flung himself onto the ground, snatched the firearm, and rolled over to face the swordswoman.

BANG!

She swatted the bullet out of the air with a sword like it was a fly.

BANG!

Again, she deflect it. This time, the bullet shot right back at Jason. It hit him in the shoulder, right above the blood-gushing wound in his arm. Jason didn't have time to revel in awe at his opponent's skills. In fact, if his brain wanted to do anything it wanted to lament his stupidity in picking the gun. It seemed that seeing Tabuh make a cripple of his brother had gotten him stoked on the idea of trying to prove his own marksmanship. Unfortunately – unlike on Earth – guns are a lot harder to beat swords with on Solaris, especially when you aren't half the quickdraw that you used to be and your opponent is actually proficient in their own form of combat. Despite not having the time to bask, Jason wound up wasting valuable moments bruding in frustration at his failure and by the time he got ahold of himself, the swordswoman was coming down on him with two blades.

“Farak.”

“JASON!”

Her arms stopped. Shadows had curled around the swordswoman's shoulders and they tightened around her arms. She was leaning over Jason, her arms extended, both blades a split second away from slicing open his stomach.

BANG!

He put one right through her temple then rolled out of the way as the shadows withdrew and she fell. The swordswoman hit the ground as Jason hopped to his feet. Skar had saved his ass but in doing so she had let her guard down on the still struggling bearn she had tackled. As Jason got to his feet, he was already taking aim. The bearn had finally yanked Skar off her, she had one girthy arm wrapped around Skar's neck, the other attempting to get a grip on her jaw so that she could snap shadowmancer's neck like a twig. Skar was no twig either, but compared to this bearn...Skar's struggling would not save her for long.

Turns out, Jason thought as he pulled back the hammer, *it was the raht choice after all.* then fired.

BANG!

The bullet brushed so close to Skar's face that it took a tiny strip of skin before it left her cheek, entered the bearn woman's chin, broke into her skull and ricocheted off the inner walls until her brain had been whipped into a spaghetti sauce.

BANG! BANG!

It wasn't Jason's gun this time. Jason jerked around so fast he nearly fell over. His gun rose with him and he found himself aiming at the open double doors just in time to see the top of the elementalists' head as he dashed down the stairs. The doors continued to bang against the wall in his wake.

“That's good.”

Skar, rubbing her neck, came to stand beside him, “Whah? Ya broke his elgroon.”

“Yea,” Jason nodded but holstered his gun, “but ah'm out.”

The mage was still seizing up on the floor by the doors, but before Jason could go get his machete, both he and Skar found their gaze pulled over to the chidran healer that still sat calm and collected in the corner.

“Yer a haeler.” Skar asked.

The chidra nodded.

“Then yer gonna hael mah friend hare.” Skar stated.

“In exchange for what, Civ?” the healer asked.

“In exchange for-”

Skar cut herself off as she took a stomping step towards the corner, shadows already unfurling out around her crow eye, but before she could take another step, the chidra moved her foot to lift the fabric that was draped from the seat to the floor. This revealed a metal box beneath. Though Jason could see it, Skar could see it for all it was. She saw the energy trailing from the box up to a little device that had been hidden in the woman’s lap. Lifting this device, both Jason and Skar saw there was a little red button atop the cylinder.

“A bomb.” Jason murmured.

“Some haeler.” Skar grumbled.

“We all die or we all live,” the healer smirked, “dat is, if you give me da zirra.”

“You weren’t hare for the bounty?” Skar asked.

The chidra snorted, “I wouldn’t have minded it, but I would’ve just spent it on zirra. Was in jail – for zirra – when da bounty passed drough.”

“Where?” Skar snapped.

“Swampville.”

Skar shrugged.

“Tadloe,” the healer continued, “da bounty hunters were mostly a buncha amateurs.” She gestured to the dead, “As you can see, Civ. Dey were scared so da guards offered dem me and offered me a cut.”

“Ah, justice.” Skar rolled her eyes.

“I was just gonna eat up all dere food anyways.” She laughed, “Dey don’t got any space for any more crackheads in Swampville.”

“A crackhead doctor.” Jason remarked, “Who woulda guessed?”

“Who’s bomb is that, then?” Skar asked.

The woman beamed, “I made it, Civ.”

“Godai taiad.” Jason spat.

Folding her arms, she shrugged off his doubt, “You’d be surprised what you can learn on da floor of dem Foxloe factories. Dose Civilist activists don’t play, Civ.”

Jason gave her a nod as she did have a point.

“Well it’s not mah zirra and it’s not mah arm.” Skar turned to Jason with a shrug, “Guess it’s all up to you. Ah’m gettin thase shadows in the maentahme.”

“Whatdya say, Civ?”

Jason turned back to Skar, “That bomb – it look big enough t-”

“Oh yeah.” Skar said, without looking away from her work.

“And you didn’t thank to warn mae?!” Jason crowed.

“How the hell?!” Skar looked up, her eyes wide and her lips twitching, “What? Ah thought it was an engine or some-”

“*UNDER A CHAIR?!?*”

“*SORRAY AH DIDN’T THANK A HAELER’D BAE SITTIN ON A BOMB?!?*”

“Crimpsin taiad.” Jason sighed, turning back to the healer.

“You’re from da *Obsidian Sail*,” the chidra stated, smirking as she got specific, “Jason da Giant?” Then she nodded at Skar, “But who is she?”

“A friend.” Jason grunted, “Who are you?”

“Peshkova Fang.”

Jason was a bit stunned by the honesty. Skar even looked up from her shadow sucking.

“I’m not too worried about any Obsidian Civs turning lil ol’ me in for a bounty.”

Peshkova laughed, “If you give me da zirra, den I heal your arm, and we all make it out of here and go our separate ways but you still got beef wid me? Not much I can do. I gotta record in da Cagirent, Iceload, da Empire.” She shrugged, “Even da Black Crown Pact don’t like me. So I let it all hang out. I’d shake your hand if I didn’t have to hold dis trigger, but I got no secrets on me, Civ, trust.”

Jason’s jaws had half opened to respond when a clamor at the sprawling double doors demanded his attention. The two scrawny fishfolk were there on the landing. Having likely just got done talking to the desheveled elemental, they’d romped up the stairs and found everyone else dead (well, dying: the magician was still gurgling blood on his back) aside from Peshkova. Their big black eyes took one look at Jason, then Skar – who’s hands were dancing over the swordswoman, pulling the black, liquid like shadows from her lifeless body, and they didn’t even check to see what had happened with the chidra before they turned around and sprinted right back down the stairs.

Skar went back to foraging for energy and Peshkova turned back to Jason. Jason, on the other hand, had just been hit with a bit of wooziness. He staggered a tad to the side before stopping but even once he got his feet under him, his head continued to spin.

“I dink it’s time you hand over da zirra, Civ.” Peshkova suggested.

“Mhm.” Jason grunted.

Looking up, Skar couldn’t help but agree. The bearn’s right arm was drenched with blood. It was dripping off his fingertips like they were stalagmites in a cave. Turning to the chidra, who was still sitting on the bomb, Skar told her, “Zirra’s in his pants leg.”

Jason took a step, another grunt, and then a, “Harumph?” before he collapsed face first onto the floor.

- - -

“Even the most powerful mage in the world,” Zaria said as she screwed the long, cylindrical Valentine Barrel onto her beloved Black Gun, “has a blind side.”

“I spot two.” Lalmly said.

Cowboy, with his head resting on his paws, cradled between the slots in the parapet, let out a quiet chirp but the two women ignored the vallhund’s remark.

“Where?” Zaria asked.

The spirit clomped over to the earth elf to show her. Lalmly’s armor lay in a pile behind them, the clomping came from her boots. Standing on the roof of a townhouse that clung to the edge of a cliff, a fully armored spirit would’ve reflected Solaris’ light like a beacon, blinding both the friends and foes they supervised far below them. Considering the narrowness of the bridge upon which the masses marched, a temporary lack of sight could’ve sent citizens of Batloe tumbling over the edge towards the desert gully far below in the basin of the Rift.

The Rift had become a symbol of the separation between the rich and the poor, the Old Town (Vare) and the New Town (Tlow-Vare). The indifference of time and the discrimination of power slowly segregated the communities and the poor were pushed out to Tlow-Vare while the rich stayed behind, turning the geographic phenomenon into a metaphor for the gap between the

socioeconomic class. The bridge between, upon which the marchers now paraded, was not a bridge in the symbolic sense however. Despite its physical characteristics, the bridge was a wall – a gate for which only the wealthy possessed the keys to, keys which their workers were finally demanding.

Though the working class was not alone, amongst them was an untraditional comrade: the youngest daughter of the king, Princess Daffeega Shelba. She marched just rows behind the leaders of the march, doing her best to blend in even though it was her very significance that made the demonstration possible. Such civil disruption would not be tolerated by the Royal Guard, but Daffeega threw a stick in their spokes – and even if the ruling class resorted to darker means, the King’s daughters were the greatest magicians in the world. They would not be easily subdued. Plus, this youngest daughter had friends in high places.

Lalmly pointed to an elevated veranda. A mosaic dome crowned a rectangle of hypostyle column-walls in the square beyond the end of the bridge in Old Town, Vare. Zaria noted a lump in one of the shadows that slid between the pillars. The asymmetrical silhouette was a fully visible person to Lalmly’s silver stare and with her help Zaria was able to lock on.

“I…” Zaria murmured, raising the Black Gun so she could put the sight on the assassin, “…got him.”

Lalmly nodded, “I’ll get the other.”

Cowboy barked.

“Hush!” Zaria snapped, focusing on the gunman across the Rift. She said to Lalmly, “Tell me when.”

Stomping around the rowdy pup, Lalmly took her place in the rut between the ridges of the bulwark. Her silver eyes squinted. The sandstone courtyard that extended beyond the bridge was a giant sun dial. A forty foot statue of the Guardian of Batloe, Uthemarc Shelba, acted as the hands of the clock. Just beyond the giant moleman’s head was a glorious temple, the Registrar of the Royal Sacred University. Raindrop shaped domes were globbed ontop of nearly every rooftop connected to the structure. Sky piercing obelisks impaled every corner of the many tiered mountainous structure. An abundance of balconies and towers spiraled out from the building, offering many a vantage point from which to observe the Rift Bridge and it was upon one of these that stood the unwitting target of Lalmly’s unborn arrow.

Her fingers tickled an invisible string that stretched from one end of her bow to the other. Flowering vines twisted around the blue shaft, as if camouflaging the weapon though the disguise was not very effective for as Lalmly drew back the magical string the bow began to shine like young star.

“Now!”

The spirit released the invisible string and an arrow, dressed in lotus petals, materialized out of thin air only to disappear a moment later as it zoomed through the air. Lalmly had barely finished her single syllable command before the BANG! of Zaria’s rifle blurted out its own bullet. And before either of their projectiles met their mark, Cowboy cried out once more.

“BORK!”

“Farakin hell, Cowboy, wh-”

Zaria stopped short when her amber eyes fell on the golden pooch. He wasn’t looking at her. His head was wedged between the castle-like wall of the rooftop, his brow furled and his floppy ears perked as his big ole eyes glared with a rare ferocity at the bridge. Just as the Admiral realized that her right hand man was not simply being needy, but rather doing his job, so too did Lalmly. Both women turned to the dog and then looked to each other with wide eyes.

Neither need speak. Their eyes whipped back to the overpass and quickly spotted what the hound had been hollering about all this time: a third assassin. Zaria pulled back the hammer, Lalmly curled her fingers around her invisible string, but neither could get a bead on the scrawny figure quickly slipping through the crowd towards the People's Princess.

"You can't fire." Lalmly warned.

"We've got to!" Zaria snapped through clenched teeth.

"You'll hit-"

"She'll be-"

Cowboy turned away from the ledge and hid his eyes beneath his paws.

A commotion rippled through the marchers. Both women's hearts sank as shrieks echoed across the Rift, but then came a second cry. Raucous applause.

Lalmly lowered her bow, Zaria her gun. Princess Daffeega Shelba had turned, no longer facing Vare, but rather New Town. In one hand, she held a staff while her other hand slowly rose into the air. As it rose, so too did a figure from the procession. His body was wrapped in an indigo haze. It swirled around him, slowly constricting his writhing body as he was lifted higher. In one hand was a dark black dagger but it evaporated as the purple smog swallowed his clenched fist.

"So much for a blind side." Zaria murmured.

As the crowd went wild once more, Daffeega Shelba turned so that she gazed far over the Tlow-Vare side of the bridge from whence they'd come. Her eyes seemed almost to drift over to the two ladies that had sought to protect her from the Rift-side rooftop, though they knew there was no way a moleman's eyes could've seen them from so far away – Zaria hardly could as an elf! Then again, she was the world's greatest magician. And just as they began to believe that she was in fact looking at them, she convinced them with a smirk and a wink.

"Did she just wink at us?" Zaria gasped.

"I think it's time we join the march." Lalmly replied.

By the time the Admiral, her dog, and her right hand woman had made it across the bridge and into the Old Town, the actual march was over though the marchers hadn't quite dispersed. Most of Vare was none too fond of the idea of letting the working class hang out on their side of the Rift, that is, aside from those that employed the working class who commuted into Vare every morning. The bars and cafes were thrilled to have customers that knew how to treat service workers back under their roofs and there are few better customers than folks amped up after fighting for economic justice. The only Tlow-Varens that missed the march were on the clock racking up the tips.

Neither Zaria nor Lalmly knew exactly where to go, but they knew the People's Princess would find them. Even if Daffeega wasn't a woman of magic, word would quickly reach her molish ears that an officer of the Imperial Navy – the highest ranking officer to still work the metaphorical frontlines – and a Shisharay – not only a member of the most infamous order of archers underneath Solaris, but the owner of the legendary Gustbow – were wandering through the venues of Vare. Thus, the two strode into the first establishment that permitted pups: the Sexy Jackal Saloon.

The place was one of the first to ditch the ritzy Old Town clientel in exchange for the parched protestors. In fact, it had so embraced the rowdy nature of the revolutionaries that it had converted the bar top into a dance floor upon which servers could earn extra tips and customers could sweat off the last round before refreshing themselves with the next. It was packed full of moles and chidras, even a few Knomes snaked in and out around the grinding hips and stumbling

feet of the belligerents. The bar tenders were mostly human – as per usual – but the Saloon had it's fair share of natives employed.

Zaria ordered a frozen uthemarcarita from the bar between the pivoting ankles of an amped up anarchist while Lalmly watched for door. By the time the earth elf had started on her second drink, Lalmly perked up.

“She’s here.”

Daffeega entered the inn with an impromptu entourage of phrygian wearing common folk. They acted as though they were guards – though none had done a thing to protect her on the bridge. In reality they were something closer to paparazzi. She didn’t enable it but she didn’t discourage it either, after all, as the People’s Princess she couldn’t quite expect to be left alone. If there was any doubt in this matter, it could be cast aside by the sight of the silly red cap she wore to match her comrades.

Standing less than five feet, her stature still seemed commanding. Though her legs were crippled by an ancient family curse, she stood upright and did not stagger. Stabbing her staff into the sud stained floor boards, she marched forward, hiding her limp behind a slow swaggering pace. Patrons bowed as they parted to let her pass. Zaria and Lalmly bowed their heads as she approached but Cowboy threw formality to the wind and ran to greet her, hopping and yowling in circles around her.

Within a yard of the two ladies at the bar, Daffeega knelt to console the hyped up hound then faced the Admiral and her Shisharay. The moleman’s eyes were purple and small, yet they weren’t beady. They twinkled like sun-struck gems. Her snout was long, whiskers sprouting from either side like a faint mustache, giving her sharp-toothed grin a comedic warmth rather than a threatening chill.

“Does the Emperor now order extrajudicial executions?” She asked.

Zaria gulped.

Lalmly would’ve been sweating had she had the glands to do so. She hurriedly issued their excuse, “They would’ve killed you!”

“Would they? How do you think I’ve come this far,” She gestured to the crowd around the bar, “roaming amongst the people?” The princess twitched her nose, “I’ve got a nose like a necromancer.”

“Like the man you captured?” Lalmly asked, “He was a mancer?”

Cowboy flopped onto his back, positioning his furry white belly towards the magician. Daffeega complied and belly scratches commenced. Still, she kept her eyes on the Imperials above her.

“Shadowmancer.” Daffeega nodded.

“Is this a usual occurrence?” Zaria asked.

“Not usual.” Daffeega said before admitting, “But not unusual.”

“Because you’re a princess,” Zaria pressed, “or because you’re an activist?”

“The latter, typically,” Daffeega answered, “though I must say I am quite surprised to see a mancer siding with the bourgeoisie.”

“We’ve got reason to believe he wasn’t.” Lalmly stated, before adding, “Princess.”

Daffeega smirked, “Well, let’s ask him, shall we?”

Zaria and Lalmly jumped up from their bar stools.

The moleman princess’ smile turned into a snicker as she reached within her robe and pulled out a tiny little furred humanoid. The two women fell back onto their stools as they stared at the monkey dangling from Daffeega’s hand. Even Cowboy rolled back over onto his belly in

order to sniff at the tiny little primate. One of the unconscious animal's eyes was rolled back white, the other was black as a crow's. Daffeega held him by his ankles in one hand and gripped her staff in the other as she rose to stand.

"You..." Zaria stammered, "you turned him into a monkey?"

"That's highly illegal!" Lalmly exclaimed.

"Without consent." Daffeega countered.

Lalmly didn't budge, "With consent, it is still illegal."

"My dad is still king." Daffeega shrugged, "I figure he'd prefer being a monkey over being dead."

"Dead?" Zaria asked.

"The punishment for assassinating a member of the royal family is a swift shortcut to the great beyond. Though," she glowered hard at Zaria, "we typically have a trial before shipping them off."

"They were assassins!" Zaria crowed.

"Oh yes, that's right, they were secret killers!" Daffeega raised an inquisitive brow, "Now remind me, what again were you two doing on that rooftop? Sunbathing?"

Frowning, the Admiral passed the baton to Lalmly.

The spirit was still ogling the little monkey, her silver eyes wide as dollar coins, "Can he understand us?"

"He can..." Daffeega smacked her staff on the wooden floor. It looked like a typical walking stick made out of whittled wood except for the purple gems that budded out like knots all up and down the shaft. It was almost as if there was a core of glossy, lavender stone within that sought to burst from its oaken prison but was constrained by whatever magic charmed the powerful weapon. Once she struck the floor, she began to whisper words in the Sacred Tongue and the grape colored jewels came to light with life. A mere split second later, the monkey's eyelids flickered and rolled back into place as she broke off the spell and returned to common tongue to say, "...now."

The monkey gave one violent thrash before it realized where it was. It recognized Zaria and Lalmly with its biological eye and then realized their immense power with its sacrificed eye. The little chimp-cousin gulped.

"Who sent you?" Zaria demanded.

"Who who? Ha ha!"

Zaria and Lalmly turned to Daffeega.

"You asked if he could understand you, not if you could understand him!" The magician protested, "The former is going to take a rather complicated spell and I'm a bit winded from the whole transformation incantation."

Both women sighed.

Daffeega raised her staff in her own defense, "You still have yes or no questions!"

They turned back to the ape-kin.

"Did Truth send you?" Zaria asked.

The monkey gulped. Its good eye looked back at Daffeega.

Daffeega smiled warmly at the little critter, saying, "Don't worry. They can't hurt you, little friend, you have no one to fear but the blade of the executioner."

The monkey's eyes grew wide.

"However, the date of your introduction to said blade can be delayed depending on your willingness to cooperate." Daffeega cooed.

Turning back to Zaria, the monkey nodded.

Zaria looked back to Daffeega, "Truth is after your family."

"The necromancer?" Daffeega asked, "She's after my family?"

"You father." Lalmly said.

"My father?!" Daffeega exclaimed.

Zaria nodded, "Do you trust his guards?"

"Yes, but..." Daffeega paused. She looked down at the floor for a moment, giving Zaria and Lalmly time to exchange anxious glances. The monkey, still dangling from her grasp, turned from the princess to the Admiral and Shisharay then back again before Daffeega finally figured out how to word what she wanted to say, "My father is...sick, why would..." She shook her head and shrugged.

Zaria mirrored the princess, "You tell us."

"Why would they seek to kill me, my sister is the heir?" Daffeega asked, "Are they after Suicine, too?"

"Ask the monkey?" Zaria said.

The monkey threw up his hands – or rather, threw down as he was dangling from his ankles – to declare his ignorance.

"Would Truth and the Disciples of Darkness want to stop the movement?" Lalmly asked.

"I can't see how that would benefit them." Daffeega frowned, "Nor can I see how eliminating Shelban rule would."

"Can you take us to Duifeen?" Zaria asked, "He may have a clue."

"Of course." Daffeega nodded.

Zaria and Lalmly got up, but Daffeega stopped them. With her monkey-holding hand, she gestured towards Zaria's unfinished uthemarcarita.

"Are you going to finish that?"

Zaria chuckled, "All yours, your highness."

Daffeega's rod, the Staff of Uthemarc, shown with a brilliant lavender hugh as it lifted the glass up off the bar, levitated it directly above the moleman's snout, and then poured the sour liquid into her open maw. Licking her lips, she set the glass back and sent a handful of golden coins on a purple cloud to create a nest around it. As the bar tenders applauded, the three women left. The monkey still dangling from Daffeega's hands as Cowboy followed, hopping and skipping to nip at the ex-assassin's newfound tail.

- - -

Light poured into the hall, shaped into trapezoids by the row of rectangular windows that let it in. It splattered onto the marble stairs and bounced up to shoot out the wall of windows on the eastern side. On either side of the V made by the beams of light, more stairs crawled up against the wall, underneath the grand glass panes, traveling up to the next floor where a broad chamber of cross-bottomed columns rose to lift concave domes.

The creatures of Batloe sprawled across the arched ceilings. Giant ground dragons with their barbed hides of full-grown-men-sized spikes soared over brave battledillos barreling their soldiers into war against an off screen foe. Not all the beasts were militant. There were murals of landscapes with scrawny legged cloudwalkers perched on cliffsides, their beedy eyes squinting over their beaks at the colors of the sunset. Fat four legged snakes bathed on flat black rocks beneath Solaris' unrelenting gaze. Flannel camels marched like mirages on the horizon while

bushards circled overhead in search of dead foliage. The artwork was beautiful, but often left unappreciated – especially now. The chamber was closed. The king was bedridden. Leaving his private guard to stroll the grand stairwell in lonely silence.

Yet, it wasn't quite silent. Not this evening. The guard heard voices echoing up from one of the lower levels. Despite being covered in armor from head to toe, he was able to creep down the stairs without making a single sound. His defenses were so well fitted and his body perfectly used to the hall in which he marched that there wasn't a single jingle or jangle as he approached the jabbering intruders. The closer he got, the more he could tell.

Foreigners. He noted. *Dree of dem.* What was strange though was that one sounded like a child and another sounded like...well...he couldn't place his finger on it, but the tone had a certain inanimate ring to it. The third he knew for sure. The third voice was most definitely a Knome. And if there is one kind of person, one race upon Mystakle Planet, one sort of being beneath Solaris, that a security guard hopes not to encounter while on the clock, then it would most definitely be a Knome.

The guard drew his sword slow. He was so smooth that the blade didn't make a single noise as it slid from his sheath. As he listened, he leaned over the banister and took his first look at the three trespassers as they rounded the bend and began their way up the stairs that ran parallel to those he had been coming down.

"-the chidra has now killed the last moleman." The alien voice stated.

"Which one is that?" Asked the Knome.

"The moleman? The rapist." The child responded.

"Thank the universe!" The Knome crowed, "So only the three chidras left."

"Indeed." The odd one said.

The strange speaker seemed to nod, though the guard couldn't be sure. After all, the speaker appeared to be nothing more than a head. In the absence of a body it was hard to know if the noggin actually nodded or if the little boy that carried him simply bobbed the head back and forth. The guard would've been alarmed – well, more alarmed – at the fact that a child was seemingly cradling a talking head, but the head did not appear to be alive. Rather than skin like the intruders or scales like the guard, the head was made of metal. Its eyes were as big as an owl's, bulging and glowing yellow like charged up enertombs. Owl like too was its jaw, what would've been any other being's soft upper lip instead came to a triangular point almost like a flattened beak. Having grown up on the floor of a factory, the guard knew a machine when he saw one. Still, what was this robotic head doing in the hands of a child? *And what are all dree doing in my castle?!*

The kid continued to speak, "The murderer, the thief, and the anarchist."

The Knome hopped up an extra step before turning to say, "Fingers crossed for the thief!"

"The thief?!" The boy stopped in his tracks, "That's just cause you're a Knome!"

"What?!" The Knome gasped, "That's Knomophobic!"

The human child seemed quite unconcerned at the accusation, continuing to criticize his similarly sized friend, "Why not the anarchist?!"

"She's not some an *anarchist*," the Knome folded his arms, "she's a crimpsin tiad *arsonist*!"

Above them, the guard rolled his eyes. He raised his blade and slammed the hilt down on the banister. Both the Knome and the boy jumped. The boy was startled so bad he dropped the electric head.

"Tiad!" He yelped.

“Language!” The Knome snapped.

Both little people scurried after the falling machine as it bounced down the stairs.

The guard’s eyes narrowed. With one hand on the railing, he hopped right over and landed with a heavy thud on the stairs above the petite invaders. They’d just stopped the electric head when they heard his heavy boots smash the marble steps behind them.

“FREEZE.” He commanded, “Turn around, slow.”

The two did as they were told, the robotic skull cradled once more in the boy’s arms.

“What’re you doing here?”

The child had turned white as the stone that staired the hall but the Knome suddenly became indignant. His little hands went right to his hip, his chest puffed out, and his nose crinkled with rage.

“What? Knomes aren’t allowed-”

“No one’s allowed-”

“Then why are you here?” The Knome snapped.

The guard tilted his head to one side but suppressed his rage. While there would surely be no consequences, he always made an effort to be a good Civilist and Civilists strove to reduce their implicit biases. He knew he wasn’t perfect and often struggled with Knomophobia. It could very well be that his fuse had been shortened by the race of this little law breaker. Instead of resorting to force, he took a deep breath and responded calmly.

Pointing to the bat engraved over his heart, he introduced himself, “Sharp Otubak. Da King’s private guard. Dis hall is off limits, Civ, even to da Royal Guard and deir Arcane Sentinels and deir Magi, less you got permission to be here. You got permission?”

The Knome blushed. He turned to the boy, “Do we?”

The kid shook his head, “Sorry.”

“What is dis?” Sharp asked, marching the rest of the way down to them, “Who are y’all?”

The old man swept off his cap and bowed, “Unlucky the Knome!”

“Kenchi Kou!” The boy chirped.

“Kenchi *Kou*?” Sharp’s jaw dropped.

“Mhm!” The boy nodded, raising the robot head and saying, “This is Atlas.”

Again the head rolled forward in the child’s grasp as if to nod, “The one and only.”

“Only what, Civ?” Sharp asked, continuing down the stairs towards them.

“The only globework.” Kenchi said.

“Like a mapwork?”

“Mhm!”

“The child is traveling the world to collect data. Every last inch. Not just geography. Even this very hall is being documented as we speak.” The Knome explained.

“Oh, Civ,” Nogard sheathed his sword as he came to a stop before them, “dat can’t be.”

“It is!” Kenchi proclaimed.

“Well it better stop being, lil Civ.” Sharp warned, “We can’t let just anyone mapwork out da royal chambers, specially not a Sondoran.”

“Would you say...” Kenchi looked to the Knome with wide eyes before turning back, “that it might be...illegal?”

Sharp knelt before the boy and offered a sympathetic frown, “Dat be exactly what I’m sayin, lil Civ.”

“That’s great!”

“Huh?”

“Yea, uh...big Civ? Yea! That’s great! My big bro – Tenchi Kou – you see, he loves y’all’s Pyramid games – the gladiator ones, ya know! – but only criminals can play, cause they’re a bit life and death and all – so we could have him do the rest of the mapping *and* get him in the Pyramid games all in one – no hard feelings!”

Sharp looked from the child to the Knome only to see the exact same excited, open-mouth grin. Staying down on one knee, he slid off his helmet and ran a gauntlet through his head tails. Even without his menacing metal uniform and his nigh six-and-a-half foot stature, Sharp was quite an imposing figure. His scales were black as night, something likely only he and the infamous Captain of the *Obsidian Sail* shared in common. His chin was decorated with dozens of gently squirming tails that reached up and across his lip like a Medusa-esque goatee, these he stroked for a moment before he finally said something.

“You’re really Tenchi Kou’s kid brudder?”

“Mhm!”

“Kid brudder of da weilder of da Mystak Blade?”

“Yup!”

“You’re second to da heir of da Kou Clan.”

The boy looked to the Knome then back to the armored chidra and nodded.

“What in da godi gop are ya doing here widdouta bodyguard, lil Civ?!” Sharp exclaimed, gesturing to the one and only Atlas, “Dat ding shoot lasers or someding?!”

Kenchi snickered, winking at the concerned swordsman, “Not yet.” Then he pointed to Unlucky, “I got Unlucky for protection.”

Sharp looked from the boy to the Knome. The little man wore a floppy conical hat, slippers, and a one piece tunic. There was a dagger with a pretty golden handle pinched between his hip and his belt, but that was it. *A Knome with a knife named Unlucky...da brudder of da most wanted man in all of Sondor is wandering around Batloe willy nilly wid nuddin more to protect him dan a Knome wid a knife named Unlucky...dis has to be a trick.* Sharp put his helmet back on and stood up.

“Mr. Kou, Mr. Unlucky, Atlas-”

“The one and only.” Atlas chimed.

“-if you don’t want to spend da night in da dungeon, I’ve got to ask you to leave.” Sharp offered a sympathetic smile, “Now, if you give me any trouble, den I gotta get you an escort out. I gotta get you an escort out, den you’ll spend da night in da dungeon. Prolly a few fore we get some ambassadors down here to straighten dings out. I don’t want to do dat. Solaris knows your brudder would likely have a dragon if I did. So I dink it’s best for bode me and y’all if y’all just sneak back out whatever way y’all snuck in.”

Unlucky and Kenchi conferred with each other’s expressions as they contemplated sprinting around the armored warrior standing twice their height, but before they could, their third member spoke up.

“Excuse me, Mr. Otubak,” Atlas interjected, “there seem to be three other individuals sneaking in the way we just snuck in. Headed this way. I can’t say I recognize them but judging from their nature – as they’ve just passed through a physical structure – it would appear they are spirits.”

“Spirits?” Sharp asked.

“In Batloe?” Kenchi asked.

“That’s why there were bows in the vents!” Unlucky exclaimed.

“Bows?!” Sharp gasped, “*In the vents?!*”

“We passed bows on the way in – bows and quivers.” Kenchi explained, turning to Unlucky, “Think they’re here for us or...” He turned back to Sharp, “Who are you guarding up there?”

“Da King!” Sharp exclaimed, “Get back!” He hopped over the two child-sized intruders, still addressing the animatronic skull, “How close?”

“Close.” Atlas stated, “Entering the Hall of Pillars.”

“Farak.”

Sharp drew his sword and began a brisk march down the rest of the stairs. Without turning his head, he whistled to the only other organism that was *supposed* to be in the chamber. The critter came to life with a squeak, swooping down from somewhere far up above and landing with a near silent plop on the chidra’s shoulder pad.

“Intruders in da Hall of Pillars.” Sharp reported, “Spirits wid bows.”

The bat nodded, gave another squeak, then took off.

“A mailbat!” Kenchi whispered, nudging Unlucky with an elbow.

“Knome,” Sharp growled through gritted teeth, “you and da child take cover behind a column.”

“You hear that Kenchi, you and Atlas-”

“The one and only.” The anamatron interjected.

“-take cover behind a column, Mr. Otubak and I will handle-”

“*Knome!*”

Sharp whipped around, his jaw unclenching this time to permit his roar, then he stopped. The Knome now held a claymore. It had the same intricate golden handle as the butter knife Sharp had spotted in his belt prior, only now it was about a dozen times the size. It was actually quite amazing that the weight of the weapon didn’t topple the little man over onto his face. Before he could ask, the robotic head in the boy’s arms spoke up.

“They stopped up ahead.” Atlas said, “I would assume they are taking aim.”

“FARAK!”

There was no more time to fret about protecting the mini-intruders. It was time for Sharp to do his job. Whirling back towards the hall that sprawled out before them, Sharp dashed for a column. The hall extended to an intersection of four other columned halls. The grand pillars, spanning at least as wide as three Sharp-shoulder-spans each, marched in pairs to this confluence where they met their piers to form a circle.

Slamming into one of these columns, Sharp turned to call over to his unfortunate allies. Unlucky and Kenchi had made it to the pillar parallel to Sharp’s but Atlas was nowhere to be seen. Kenchi’s wide brown eyes answered the question before Sharp could ask it. The sound of the poor bodyless bot bouncing on down the hall confirmed his suspicion. Peeking around the edge of the gaudy cylinder he hid behind, Sharp cried out to the machine.

“Where are dey?!”

“Thirty yards-”

The poor anamatron’s words were drowned out as three arrows crashed into his chrome dome.

“Atlas!” Kenchi shrieked.

A muffled, “The one and only.” echoed after Kenchi’s yelp as the poor creation’s roll stopped him face down. His echo was followed by the echo of little barefeet as the tiny human child took off after his beloved toy.

The Knome and the chidra cursed in unison as they peeled their backs off the safety of their shelters and rushed after the kid. Though both men could not yet spot the ephemeral assassins, they could hear the twang of the second volley being released. Their war-trained eyes honed in on the zooming projectiles.

“GET DOWN!” Unlucky and Sharp ordered simultaneously.

They paired their command with action. Sharp lobbed his blade and it pinwheeled across the chamber. It passed the boy and, as it did so, it slapped an arrow right out of thin air. Then, Kenchi dove – this was not exactly what Sharp had meant when he had commanded the lad to get down, this was in fact so-much-not that it ruined the chidra’s plan. Now the little boy was sliding belly first directly in his path. It forced him to jump over the human and hurdle the Knome that was rushing beneath him. Unlucky, with his tiny little legs and seemingly ancient knees, somehow got ahead of the sliding child and was able – with one swing of his now gargantuan blade – to cut the second shot out of the sky as he came to a skidding halt in front of Kenchi Kou and his globework.

There was still a third projectile. Fortunately, Kenchi’s dive hadn’t interfered enough to stop the expert warrior from doing his job: Sharp landed across from the boy and the Knome as his sword struck the column before him. It hit just right so as to pinwheel back the way it came – right into Sharp’s hands. He caught his the hilt and swung, spanking the third arrow in the rear just enough to change it’s course and assure the safety of his new friends.

Now both Unlucky and Sharp spotted the spirits.

The marksmen were unclothed – as was necessary for them to walk through walls – but they did have bows – that some traitor must’ve planted in the vents. Purple fires flared within the confines of their translucent torsos, the life force of their kind, and without anything physical to protect the flames it wouldn’t take much more than a malevolent touch to extinguish them – but they still stood twenty yards away and their bows were already locked and loaded for a third onslaught.

“LEFT!” Sharp directed.

Again, he and the Knome moved in unison. This time, even Kenchi came along, however, it was not of his own free will. Sharp snatched the boy up by the back of his shirt and dragged him – and his robot – with one hand while Sharp toted his weapon with the other. As the third volley whistled by the napes of their necks and they pressed their backs back against the cool safety of the round stone cylinder, Atlas updated them.

“Two are staying back, one is flanking.”

Sheathing his sword, Sharp took off his helmet and set it by his feet – doing so in a very stiff way so as to ensure his body didn’t poke out from around the column. He then immediately went to unstrapping his gauntlets.

“Are you surrendering?” Kenchi yelled in an urgent whisper.

Sharp rolled his eyes, explaining, “Dey’re unarmored.”

Unlucky caught on, “Even a rock can kill an unarmored spirit.”

“Why don’t *you* have a bow?” Kenchi asked.

Laying his gloves by his feet, he began to undo his boots, responding with a shrug and, “Don’t need one, lil Civ. I’m da greatest guard benead Solaris.” Slipping out of his shoes he smirked at the little boy, ruffling his greasy black lochs, “Why ya dink dey only need one guard to defend da King?”

Unlucky nudged Kenchi, whispering, “King Duifeen’s been struggling to make ends meet ever since he ended the Moon Mining Contracts.”

“Moon Mining Contracts?” Kenchi asked.

“Hush,” Nogard snapped, “pay attention, Civs.”

The chidra slapped a chestplate into the Knome’s chest. Unlucky caught it with an, “OOMPF.”

“We’re bout to roll out and drow-”

Little Kenchi gasped, “Selu-”

“Not you.” Sharp barked, jabbing a finger into the human’s sternum, “Stay put, lil Civ, okay?”

Pouting, Kenchi slumped to his butt, “Okay...”

The robot in his lap let out a short puff of steam that could’ve only been interpreted as a sigh of relief.

“Knome?” Sharp asked.

Unlucky nodded.

“On one. Dre-”

The Knome leapt out into the middle of the chamber, hollering bloody murder while his arm swung clockwise like a windmill. He lobbed the guard’s chestplate at the two spirits that had held their ground near the start of the hall. Cursing, Sharp followed. As the chidra threw, the Knome spun around and ran back for more ammunition. As Unlucky returned for his second pitch and Sharp rushed for his, the spirits took a step forward. They easily sniped the lumbering projectiles out of the sky, pinning the armored plates to the pillars of the hall as if they were memos on a bulletin board. Still, Sharp had a lot of armor and it made for a lot of ammo, so the chidra and Knome continued to dash back and forth, throwing overhand and underhand, trying to dupe their far too accurate foes. Kenchi watched. Peeking around the pillar, the young Sondoran saw the flaw in his comrades’ plan before it came to be.

The spirits aren’t even trying to get a shot in – they’re distracting us! His head whipped around so fast that his brain had to stop spinning before he could see: the other spirit, the one Atlas had warned about, would soon be parallel to them. *Farak.*

Kenchi stood up quietly, so as not to worry his companions, and hoisted Atlas up over his shoulder.

He whispered, “Atlas-”

“The one and only.” Atlas whispered back.

“-I’m sorry!”

Kenchi chucked the animatronic noggin. This was a fantastic move. After all, the spirit didn’t see it coming. He rounded the column with a full view shot of the three and was ready to release his arrow right as the machine hurtled towards him. The problem was, Kenchi was a kid, the machine was heavy, and it didn’t hurtle far. It arched a good three to four feet from the boy then hit the floor. Though, one of the elements that made this move fantastic, was the fact that Kenchi had programmed Atlas to react to pain. The robot didn’t *feel* pain, but it did react. So as it hit the hard marble, it hollered.

“OW!”

The spirit, coming from the wooded mountains of Manaloe (as most spirits do) was not used to machines, especially not talking machines. So though Atlas would’ve bounced a bit more and then rolled to a stop a yard before the assassin, the spirit saw a speaking orb and figured it to be more of a threat than it really was. Rather than putting an arrow between Kenchi’s furled brow or in the back of the chidra’s head or through the droopy cone shaped hat the Knome wore, the spirit turned his weapon on the bouncing ball of metal and fired. The bolt struck Atlas

between the eyes and flicked up and back the way it came – spinning straight through the indigo flames of the very fool that had fired it.

The one and only Atlas watched the teal-colored translucent shape of a person evaporate before its robotic eyes as the bow fell to the ground to stop automaton's roll. The spirit was gone, but two remained. And these two had seen their comrade fade out of existence – taking their laid back strategy with him. Suddenly, their bows stopped aiming for the flying metal. Both stepped simultaneously away, dodging the next round of armor plates as they took aim at the flesh of their foes.

No sooner did a curse simultaneously slip off the tongues of the Knome and the chidra than did those arrows cut loose. The two dove for the pillar behind which the human child hid. Their reaction was fast enough to save their lives but not quick enough to spare their hide. Both men were struck in the shoulder. The pain hit twice as they landed behind cover, jostling their arm and shifting the bolts deeper into their muscle. They christened their fall with another curse, then looked to each other.

“Outa dings to drow, Civ.” Nogard admitted.

“On the contrary,” Unlucky protested, hopping to his feet, “throw me.”

“Dat's a godi-”

Sharp was cut off as two arrows whizzed by his foot. The very tip of his big toe was sticking out from behind the pillar. The soft cotton of his sock was torn by the arrows zooming by. His eyes whipped from his foot back to the Knome and he finished his sentence.

“-good idea, Civ!”

The black scaled chidra, now clad only in the soft padding of his underarmor, hopped to his feet beside the Knome.

“You throw me, then charge.” Unlucky stated.

Sharp nodded, “Try and keep one alive.”

“Can you even throw with that arrow in your arm?” Kenchi asked.

Sharp winked, “Ambidextrous, lil Civ.”

“You can breathe underwater?!” Kenchi exclaimed.

“No, son,” Unlucky rolled his eyes at the boy, “it means he's left handed.”

Sharp rolled his eyes at them both.

Two more arrows zipped by. These clipped the side of the column, taking chunks of stone with them. The display of force made both the tall man and the little man wince at the thought of what the arrows in their shoulders had done to their bones. With a gulp, Sharp turned to Unlucky and offered his left arm. The Knome didn't hesitate. Up he hopped. Soon as his little green kilt graced the black scales of Sharp's forearm, the guard spun out in to the open. Using the momentum from his spin, he flung the old man down the hall.

As he flew, he drew his dagger. The magic weapon grew in his grasp until the edge of its blade scraped the floor, stuck fast, then pole vaulted him over the two arrows the spirits had just sent his way. As they knocked their next round, Unlucky landed between them. Finally, the itty-bitty blademaker had the rangers up close. With a quick whip of his now gargantuan sword, he cut through their bows before they could fire again.

Both spirits hopped back, holding only the arrow they'd been about to launch as a last ditch weapon. Though they were typically gaseous – able to slip through solid objects – they'd coated their weapons in copra oil. This oil was typically used on their own cloudy bodies, however, slicking their weapons with it produced a similar effect: it allowed their ghostly forms to grip solid objects. Where ever a spirit touched copra oil, their body suddenly seemed solid.

Therefore their hands, now smeared with the substance, could be restrained – but Unlucky had to disarm them first.

He spun around, keeping the spirits' stabs at bay.

The stabs never stabbed. Instead, both spirits turned and ran.

“Farak!” Unlucky cursed.

“Da quivers!” Sharp hollered.

The chidra had charged after throwing the Knome, but still had some distance to cover. When he saw the two spirits, bowless, decide to bolt, he immediately threw his sword. The blade spun like a circular saw from his grasp, flying flat like a frisbee right over the lumpy green hat of the Knome. It continued on – directly in line with one of the ghastly assassins.

The tip of the blade missed the quiver on the man's back but the sword continued spinning so that the hilt slid through his immaterial shoulderblade, snagged the shoulder strap like a shepherd's staff hooks a lamb, and yanked the man right out of his run. Unfortunately, the sword was big and bulky and so too were the purple flames that bounced in the spirit's chest – the flames that, if touched by a violent object would be immediately smothered – and as he was thrown off course, those flames lapped at the edges of that hilt and POOF! He was gone.

In the meantime, Unlucky had shortened his sword back into a knife. His beady eyes squinted at the final assassin. He took one stride forward, like a pitcher on the mound, then threw. Unlike Sharp's weapon, Unlucky's was tiny. The blade missed the quiver but slipped through the blue gas and struck the strap that slid across the spirit woman's chest. It tore her off her feet as the quiver was nailed to a column.

As she struggled against the quiver, Unlucky, Sharp, and Kenchi rushed over. They got there just as she slipped out. She would've slipped right through the floor were it not for the oil on her skin. She whirled around to find herself surrounded by the three, her only weapons pinned to the pillar ten feet above her head.

The three froze upon arrival, forgetting even to demand her surrender, as they stared perplexed at her eyes. Spirits were known for their silver, coin-like, eyes. This woman, however, had an indigo gaze – as if they were covered in a purple film – and neither Unlucky nor Kenchi had ever seen nor heard of a spirit having such. Sharp was a bit less bewildered but equally surprised. He immediately recognized it for what it was.

“Da color of the da Sacred Tongue.” He moved towards her, crouching, “Dey're under a spell!”

“Who's?” Kenchi asked.

“Lord, forgive me!” Even as the cry left the woman's lips, she'd already begun to fade. Her fire had ceased to flicker as soon as she'd gotten untangled from her quiver. There on the ground, her color faded to a gray and then to nothing. Her fire fizzled to naught. And those purple eyes blinked out of existence leaving behind only the echo of a half uttered whisper, “Father Shisharay...”

“What the?!” Kenchi yelled.

“Civ killed herself.” Sharp sighed, “Spirits can do dat. Pure will power.” He turned to the Knome, “Dough I don't dink dat was her own will, yea?”

“No, it wouldn't seem so.” Unlucky nodded, “Those eyes. That spell, they call it corruption – she wouldn't have had much control over her actions at all.”

“No easy spell, eider.” Sharp nodded, “Take one of da greatest magicians in da world to corrupt dree Shisharay at a time.”

“They were Shisharay!” Kenchi exclaimed.

“Her last words would surely suggest so.” Unlucky shrugged.

Sharp concurred, “And dey sure shot like it.”

“Company!” The call came from a robotic voice down the hall, “Allies – it seems?”

The three turned from the empty space where the last assassin had been. Their eyes were drawn to a shadow that was expanding across one of the great panes of glass along the hall. The window shimmered like the surface of a lake, rippling as if a stone had been cast into it, and then something burst through. A long boat like object with a roaring cannon mounted on the end. Fire frothed from cannon’s mouth. The flames simmered down, coughing and spurting as they did, and the vessel sunk slowly to the floor of the chamber.

On board were three – five if you included the hound and the monkey tied up on his back. They hopped off before the ship even touched the ground. The lead figure staggered when she did, catching herself with her staff before collapsing. The other two, an earth elf in military dress blues and, her partner, a figure so well armored that she offered no other immediately discernable features, rushed to aid their stooping leader only for her to wave them away and straighten up. Magic flowed from the gem on her staff, glowing as gorgeous a lavender as the eyes of the foes that had now disappeared. The mystical aura wrapped around her legs like constricting boas. Smacking the blunt bottom of her staff on the marble once more, she marched forward.

Sharp immediately dropped to one knee, slapping both the Knome and the boy on the back of their heads with such force that they fell into formation alongside him. As they bowed, they heard marching thundering down the halls in the opposite direction. All three couldn’t help but scoff at the timely arrival of backup. With their chuckles out of the way, they began to blush – at least the two with pale skin did – as they anticipated the impending declaration of royal appreciation.

“Where are they?” Daffeega demanded.

The smiles on their lips stiffened as they tentively looked up from their bows.

She gestured to the weapons scattered about the room.

Sharp gulped then began, “Dey’re d-”

“Crimpsin tiad!” Daffeega howled, whirling around as if she couldn’t bare to look at them any longer only to find herself staring at Zaria and Lalmly – an equally guilty pair – behind her. Turning her snout to the arched ceilings, she cried, “Why can’t you people show some restraint?!”

“They were spirits!” Unlucky cried.

Daffeega’s normally beady eyes suddenly looked quite big and wide when she whipped back around to eye the Knome – but the Knome did have a point and the princess realized that a split second into her glare, murmuring, “Spirits?”

Tearing her eyes from the discarded archer paraphernalia, the armored woman, Lalmly, took up the gauntlet Daffeega had discarded, offering the three kneelers a hard, wide silver-eyed stare. This because there was a question on her gaseous tongue that she couldn’t bare to ask. A question her comrade asked for her.

Zaria strode up to the plate, “Shisharay?”

Sharp began to nod but stopped to add a disclaimer, “We dink so.”

“One cried out to ‘Father Shisharay’.” Kenchi explained.

“Impossible.” Lalmly whispered.

“Company.” Zaria noted.

The doors sprawled open at the far end of the Hall of Pillars and an armored entourage began to march in: The Royal Guard. Unlucky and Kenchi winced at the sound of their approaching footsteps, as one would expect trespassers to wince, however Sharp and Daffeega cringed as well and one would not expect the bodyguard and daughter of the King to have such a reaction to the Royal Guard – that is, of course, if you didn't know the Royal Guard. Daffeega pushed her problems with them out of her head, though, for the guard she did trust was before her and bleeding.

“Are y'all okay?” Daffeega asked.

“Fine.” Sharp shrugged, while Unlucky simultaneously lamented, “I think I may die, ma'am.”

Daffeega's opinion lay somewhere in between the two wounded men, “We need to get you two to some healers. We've got-”

“Dat can wait, Civ.” Sharp said, “I want you to know...I dink it was an inside job.”

Sharp glanced over his shoulder. The Royals had come in large numbers. They came to a stop ten yards back, in formation, and waited for Daffeega to address them. Their wizard captain – known as an Arcane Sentinel – avoided her eye contact, instead he scowled the Hall as if he might find another hidden opponent. Sharp would've rolled his eyes had he not been concerned with the possibility that any one of the dozen behind him might be the under cover agent responsible. Turning back to the princess, the Admiral, and her protector, Sharp elaborated, “Da spirits were corrupted.”

“Purple eyes!” Kenchi chimed.

“And deir weapons were stashed in da vents.” Sharp continued, “Would dink maybe a chidra, tired of mole rule, but dey'd have to be an insider...”

“Why can't a chidra be an insider?” Zaria demanded, “You're an insider.”

Sharp laughed before abruptly cutting himself off.

Daffeega filled in, “He's Foxloen. Hence the 'Civ's.”

“Da Batloen chidras like me about as much as dey like a mole, Civ.” Sharp sighed.

“Godi racism...” Lalmly and Zaria swore in unison.

“Ain't it.” The Knome concurred with a sigh.

Zaria pressed forward, “No Batloen chidras work in the Cloches?”

“None that could hide the amount of magical talent required to corrupt three Shisharays.” Daffeega said, “But some that might could hide their ties to Truth – ties to mancy.”

“Mancy?” Sharp, Unlucky, and Kenchi burped simultaneously.

Daffeega changed the subject, reclaiming her trademark glare, “What is this, Sharp? Who are these people?”

“Kenchi Kou-”

“KOU?!” Both Zaria and Lalmly crowed.

“Mhm!” Kenchi beamed.

“You've got no guard!” Lalmly exclaimed.

“Dat's what I said.” Sharp muttered.

“Unlucky's my guard!” Kenchi said.

Unlucky took a bow.

“A KNOME?!” Zaria and Lalmly crowed.

“Uh oh.” Sharp sighed.

“RACIST!” Unlucky exclaimed.

Lalmly's shoulders fell, “My apologies...”

Zaria turned to Sharp, her hand just a knotch above limp – just enough to gesture at the little boy, “He’s really-”

Sharp was already nodding.

Daffeega was not pleased. Her staff stood erect on its own as she let go of it so that she could place her hands on her hips as she turned to scowl at the guard as if he were her grandson, “Sharp...honey...What are you doing hanging out with Knomes and child-separatists on the clock? I can’t-”

“BORK!”

The People’s Princess’ lecture was paused as all those present turned to look at Cowboy. The little yellow dog had not followed the three women to approach the three kneeling, instead, he’d gone straight to the metal orb with the glowing yellow eyes. And there he was. His butt in the air, tail wagging ferociously, with his chest pressed to the floor so that his snout could lay flat on the ground, allowing his big brown eyes to take in the globe shaped robot in its entirety. The monkey – who had not so long ago been an assassin – was straddling the stumpy yellow dog, eyeing the mechanical ball with equal intrigue.

“Farak is that?” Daffeega demanded.

“Atlas!” Kenchi exclaimed.

“The one-”

“BORK! BORK! BORK!”

“-and only!”

“BORK! BORK! BORK!”

“Farak?!” Daffeega yelped.

“A globework!” Kenchi proclaimed further.

“Like a mapwork?” Zaria asked.

“Mhm!”

“He snuck in here,” Sharp jumped back in, “da same way da spirits did – aside from da slipping drough walls tiad – wid dis Knome and dat robot so dat dey could map da Cloches-”

“You let them map the palace?!” Daffeega crowed.

“No, Civ!” Sharp cried, “I was telling dem to leave! Dat’s when da spirits showed up.”

Once again, Daffeega found herself a tad bit embarrassed.

“You’re the only guard protecting my father, aren’t you?”

Sharp pumped his chest up, “Hey, Civ, I’m all ya need! Best guard benead Solar-”

“Donum...” Daffeega cursed.

Zaria nudged Lalmly, explaining, “Without the Moon Mining Contracts, Duifeen’s been cutting come-”

“Zaria!” Daffeega hissed.

The Admiral stopped mid syllable.

“Da King is safe.” Sharp shrugged, “All is well, Civ.”

“No, Sharp.” Daffeega sighed, “All is not well. There will be more.”

The black scaled chidra gave another, undaunted shrug, “I can handle-”

“You can handle taking out Mr. Kou and...”

“Unlucky!”

“...Mr. Unlucky. I’ve got to go speak to my father.” One hand went back to her staff while the other went to her brow as if checking for a fever, “And my sister and the Magi and god knows who else.” She shook her head, continuing to ramble on, “We’re going to have to have mancer testing, donum...Sharp, keep your eyes out for any suspicious behavior.”

“Ofcourse, Princess!” Sharp nodded vigorously, “Now um...”

“We’ll send a bat for you after you get that arm looked at and you get rid of these goofballs. I’d like to speak further but considering how the day may turn...” she sighed, and began turning around towards the stairs, mumbling under her breath, “...the godi Magi...”

“Princess!” Sharp blurted.

Daffeega stopped.

He glanced nervously at the Knome and then the boy, not turning his head but just looking out of the corner of his eyes, then asked, “By ‘get rid of’ ... ‘taking out’ ... you don’t mean...”

“NO I DON’T WANT YOU TO KILL THEM! You think I want you to kill the godi kid brother of the weilder of the Mystak Blade?”

Her holler seemed to scoot Sharp back an inch with nothing more than pure cringe, “So den...out da back door or do I have to process dem and...”

“You think I want you to arrest the crimpsin tiad, godi kid brother of the weilder of the Mystak Blade?! Tenchi is close friends of the Emperor! He owns an army! Sharp?!”

Sharp nodded though the nod lasted longer than any in the chamber felt was necessary. As it continued, his indigo eyes slowly fell over onto Zaria – the Strategy Admiral of the Imperial Navy – and then they snapped quickly back to Daffeega, saying in something near a whisper, “But protocol would be-”

“Zaria’s a farakin ‘Rose Stem’ or whatever Antipa-thing!” Daffeega lamented, “Honey, it’s fine.” She turned to Zaria, “Admiral, can we let the Kou boy slide?”

Zaria shrugged. Daffeega turned back to Sharp.

“Take Mr. Kou and Mr. Unlucky out of the Cloches, find the best healers in Vare and tell them to bill the princess. Then tell these two goons not to step within a godi selim of this place without written permission from me, my sister, or the King...” Her eyes were drawn to the stoic, yet somehow impatient Royal Guards, still waiting behind them and she added, “Or I suppose the Magi.”

“What about the Emperor?” Kenchi piped up.

Daffeega’s shoulders grew rigid and her lips couldn’t help but curl up her snout as she added through clenched teeth, “Or the Emperor.”

“Cool.” Kenchi smiled.

He and the Knome exchanged a behind the back high five.

“BORK!”

Cowboy the Vallhund and the Monkey Assassin had arrived. Cowboy had been hard at work rolling the asymmetrical sphere down the chamber. One nudge sent it one way only for its beak like upper lip to alter its course and launch it in a different direction. Holding onto his ears and stroking his head, the monkey did his best to motivate his mighty steed. Cowboy wasn’t one to give up and, with the monkey’s support, he got the globe where it needed to go.

“Zaria, Lalmly,” Daffeega nodded, finally completing her journey towards the stairs, “come with me to see my father.”

The two agreed with a nod though hung back a second.

Zaria said, “Nice meeting you, Sharp...”

“Otubak.” He shrugged, “Generic name, Civ, I was a factory orphan, could just as easily be a Fang.”

“You look like an Otubak I know.” Zaria stated.

Sharp’s scaled brow raised.

Zaria nodded. Her face remained stern, but the edges of her lips did curve in a smile. Before turning to follow Daffeega she said, “Good work today, Sir Otubak. We could use warriors like you in the Navy.”

Sharp scoffed, “Probably pay better too.”

Lalmly gave Sharp a nod, but said nothing. Sharp was the one that held her back.

“I’m sorry, Civ.” He said, “We tried not to kill dem.”

“She’s Shisharay?” Kenchi whispered to Unlucky.

“Looks like it.” Unlucky nodded.

“You did your job, sir guard.” Lalmly bowed, “You did it well. I hear Shisharay arrows hurt quite a bit.”

“You heard right, Civ.” Sharp offered a genuine half smile.

“You ought to get healed when the Knome does.” Lalmly warned, “The longer you wait, the harder to heal.”

“Danks, Civ.” Sharp bowed.

The spirit turned and marched after Cowboy and the Admiral as they trailed the princess up the steps. Finally, Sharp, Kenchi, and Unlucky got up off their knees. They probably could have before but as it had been quite the intense confrontation they’d tacitly decided to exchange the health of their kneecaps for the mercy their posture might afford them. As Sharp went about gathering his armor, Kenchi and Unlucky pestered the guards still in formation in the hall behind them. Whether they had gathered whatever information the Arcane Sentinel in charge was acting like he was gathering or it was in fact pure annoyance that ushered the other guards out of the Hall of Pillars, the wizard and his silent soldiers had left by the time Sharp was back in his armor – right shoulder plate excluded.

“Shall we, Civs?” Sharp asked.

They headed out of the Cloches, the backway. Unlucky rambled on and on about something Sharp wasn’t listening too, while Kenchi wondered through the depths of his mind. Normally his imagination was running wild while touring strange and new places, but on this day his thoughts weren’t on the miraculous architecture around them. He was thinking about the conversation he’d just heard between the Princess and the Guard.

Finally, he decided to ask aloud, “What’s Antipa?”

“Anti-Pact.” Unlucky explained, “Specifically, Anti New Pact.”

“Dat’s da New Black Crown Pact, lil Civ.” Sharp elaborated, “Da guys dat want Creaton Live and da Queen of Darkness to come back from da Void to overdraw ad empire of da Trinity Nations. Want everyone to be mancercs or undead or some odder tiad.”

“Anarchists.” Unlucky nodded, “And not the good kind.”

“Yea, Civ.” Sharp agreed, “Da Antipa are da good kind.”

“How are they anarchists if they work for the Empire?” Kenchi asked.

“Wid, Civ. Not for.” Sharp corrected.

“Indeed.” Unlucky chimed.

“But that earth elf lady was in the Imperial Navy?” Kenchi pressed.

Unlucky and Sharp paused, both looking at the child then back at each other before turning their gaze back on the kid.

“Dat’s pretty good, Civ.” Sharp admitted, “How old are you?”

“Five.”

Sharp laughed, “Ha! Dat’s a lie.”

“Nuh uh!” Kenchi whined.

Unlucky got them back on track, “Zaria was Antipa before she was hired by the Trinity Nations.”

They began walking once more.

“Isn’t that a bit of a problem? For the Empire to hire an anarchist – even if it’s a good anarchist?” Kenchi asked.

“It is,” Unlucky admitted, “*but* right now people are more worried about the Pact than they are about the Anti-Pact.”

“Is that fair though?”

“Sometimes what’s fair isn’t what’s right.” Sharp patted Kenchi on the shoulder.

“Is it legal?”

Unlucky patted Kenchi on the other shoulder, whispering, “Maybe don’t press Sharp on what’s legal or not until we’re out of his jurisdiction, huh, Kenchi?”

“Ahhh...”

Kenchi drifted off into his thoughts once more. He wasn’t from Batloe, he was from Sondor. Unlike Batloe, Sondor wasn’t in the Trinity Nations – it wasn’t in the Empire – and yet his big brother, Tenchi (“the weilder of the Mystak Blade”), seemed to be best friends with the Emperor. Kenchi had even met the Emperor on multiple occasions in his short five years beneath Solaris. Juxtaposing that relationship – the Kous with the Emperor – with their relationship to their own king, the King of Sondor, who actively sought to kill Kenchi, his brother, and anyone else that claimed the Kou name – this intrigued Kenchi. *The law in my land would have me dead.* He thought. *The law in this land would have me arrested...but people like my brother and Sharp don’t worry about the law. They worry about what’s right. What’s a law anyways?*

(As a five year old, he honestly wasn’t sure.)

“I think I’m Antipa now.” Kenchi stated.

Sharp and Unlucky smiled, patting him on opposite shoulders once again.

Chapter Four: A Drop of Blood

Shimmering galaxies of coral spawn danced between the neon branches of the submarine forest known as the Wobniar Woods. While the graveyard canopy of rainbow polyps hid the night sky from the sea floor, the luminescent glitter of the sparkling gametes twirling with the twilight tide produced a sight spectacular enough to make the heavens envious. These mass spawning events once inspired vast festivals where mermen celebrated the health of the great reef that filled half the Aquarian Ocean – but now only the creatures of the coral were left to enjoy the glories of the Wobniar Wood. The Second Aquarian War on Mancy had led the Aquarian monarch to ban travel between the rainbow branches, for within the forbidden forest hid the terrorists known as the Soldiers of Shelmick.

Despite the alleged danger, rich and powerful Aquarians could not afford to sacrifice any inconvenience. Their vacation plans could not be impeded by wartime law. Thus the most elite of the Aquarian fishfolk still made the pilgrimage. This disturbed the creatures that had proliferated in the absence of people. The beasts watched from the shadows as seasteeds – which had once been their comrades and now were little more than domesticated robots – blundered by, churning up sand and crushing coral, painted in the glitter of splattered spawn.

This was an invasion of the wilderness and the intruders were not ignorant to this fact. They came for the view but also for the hunt. Their disruption was strategic, provocation used as bait. They sought to anger the wild and tame it with the cold, hard shackles of death.

One caravan road ahead of the others. This brazen expedition shot through the very heart of the submarine jungle like a flare, boldly carving its own path. Eight seasteeds trampled up the bulbous bloom of a live-reef. Their fins beat upward, pushing their hooves down so that they stabbed the soft flesh of the poor polyp as they climbed. The reef popped and hissed as each hole was punctured. Hot glowing crimson poured out in stacks as entire generations were obliterated with each step. Then came the wheels of the heavy wagons, two of them, cutting rivets in the rounded side of the coral colony and leaving streams of emerald luminescent like contrails in the sky.

There were four seasteeds, each being ridden, per carriage. The equestrians on the first two were heavily armored. Round shields hung like capes from their shoulder blades, a scimitar and a harpoon gun – with white glowing enertombs – were holstered on their right hips. Behind these guards, came hunters. Hardly as armored but far more armed. Not only did they have the sword and gun, they had an assortment of daggers and a collection of razor toothed frisbees (affectionately called fishcuses by Aquarians). These fishfolk had two other tools too that weren't weapons: a conch shell and goggles. The shell would not only allow them to contact other hunters – but also contact home. In the underwater world of Aquaria, large sonar-speaking porpoises known as callphins had been trained to transport information when it reached them at a certain sound frequency, essentially acting as a radio network for the entire sea floor civilization. The goggles, on the other hand, were far less environmentally-collaborative. They were a creation of Space City: high tech, enertomb powered glasses that allowed the hunters to see energy as if they had the eyes of a shadowmancer. This typically gave hunters an insane advantage over the wild animals of the Wobniar Wood, but on this particular night, amidst the down pour of coral spawn, turning on their goggle gadgets would've likely rendered them blind.

The crew on the seasteeds mirrored the crew in the carriages except for that one of the guards rode atop each covered wagon – this guard having a conch shell like the hunters – and one rode inside. There was also one more exception: in one of the carriages rode the Prince of Aquaria. He was the reason for the armored guards and over-equipped hunters, in fact, he was the reason for the incredibly inconsiderate route they were taking, and – finally – he was the reason that his caravan was being watched by something more than a beast.

The hunter was being hunted.

Though he was a fishfolk, the average Aquarian would assume him a merman. He stood stark naked aside from the weapons on his belt and the gauntlets on his hands. His chest was a pale cerulean, his back a deep indigo. He wasn't born with this complexion, as mermen are, this coloration came from time in the wilderness – a submarine tan, if you will – and it worked to camouflage him like the sharks he swam amongst.

He stood atop a umbrella coral that plumed out from a tall stalk like the head of a mushroom. The base of this polyp's trunk was in line with the route the caravan was currently running. Opening a large pouch on his belt, he removed four saw-edged fishcuses.

"Barro," he whispered, "this is for Cas."

Then he dove. He pumped his legs with such force that he descended as if in freefall and as he did he threw two disks. Now, he didn't know which carriage the Prince was in. Thus, to delay being discovered for as long as possible, he picked the rear buggy first.

One disk hit the rooftop-guard on the top of his helmet. It rattled the metal but ultimately bounced away, floating into the abyss. The guard whirled around just as the second disk struck him – in the shoulder – it too bounced off after doing no more than possibly bruising the flesh beneath the armor. However, as the guard turned – gun drawn and he craned his head upwards – a gap in his armor was revealed – a thin space between his collar and his neck – and the assassin still had two more disks.

But the guard had a gun. As the assassin reared back with his third fishcus, the guard swung his pre-charged weapon up to aim. The weapon shot silent in the submarine environment, as silent as the disk the assassin threw. Rather than going for the kill, he'd gone defensive. His disk struck the harpoon hurtling towards him, just enough to allow him to twist out of the trajectory.

The assassin was almost to the carriage. The guard had a split second decision to make: reload the harpoon gun or sound off the alarm. Due to the rapturous romping of the seasteeds and clammoring of the carriages, no one had heard the razor blades bounce off his helmet or clatter against his chest. No one would likely even hear him if he hollered – especially not with the muzzle of his metal visor – and so he could either try and reload his gun and kill this naked assailant first or give his life and assure the demise of this likely terrorist. This decision was made before the split second had even started – he had a pregnant wife at home, it may have been treasonous, but he'd be damned if he'd die for his country and leave his beloved-

The fourth discus hit him in the throat. The blade went so deep that it cut halfway through his spine. The soldier had only just gotten his second harpoon in the chamber, his mind's eye still thinking about his now widowed wife. It was she he saw as the death-endorphins kicked in and her rotund belly he saw as he toppled backward. He would've fallen off the carriage had the assassin not arrived to catch him. The sight of the man's face actually ripped him out of his happy little death-high.

A metal scar stretched down the assassin's chest like a thin sash.

"Gill..." the guard would've gasped had he been able, "Paud Gill!"

Paud, the assassin, took his armored fist and punched the fishcus through, severing the soon-to-be father's head and laying his body down on the roof of the carriage. From his limp fingers, Paud retrieved the gun and finished loading the harpoon. He then moved to the edge of the carriage. On either side, the walls had three slits cutting across the buggy parallel to the ground. Now these weren't slits that he could fit through, but something that he could definitely shoot through, as they were designed for those inside to be able to shoot out. If the Prince was in this carriage, he could finish his job with the pull of a trigger.

Holding onto the decorative cornice that created a ridge around the border of the wagon's cover, Paud leaned over and aimed the harpoon gun through the first slit he could reach with his free hand. His dark, shark-like eyes swept over the passengers. There was one armored like the guard he'd just killed, two armored like the hunters with the goggles, and that was it. No prince.

As if he had never been there, he pulled himself back onto the roof and held his gills shut – listening. A moment passed. There seemed to be no commotion. Paud let out a deep breath.

Then they hit a bump.

If the assassin was a species with eyelids, his eyes would've grown wide. Instead, they merely stared as the head of the dead guard bounced up off the roof of the carriage, down once more, and then right off the front of the wagon. There, on the front of the buggy, was a little trough of a seat where a guard could sit if they so chose. Behind this trough, there were more slits so that the passengers could look through and shoot if they so desired. While, they did not so desire to shoot, they were looking through and when the head landed on the bench with a thump, all three men in the buggy saw it.

“Barro.” Paud cursed.

Two conch shells sounded off from inside the carriage and, at the same moment, Paud shot the harpoon gun. The harpoon hit the guard on the front left seasteed in the back of the head, splitting his helmet like pumpkin and splattering the contents of his skull across the inside of his visor. This happened just as his comrade, riding alongside him, turned at the sound of his companion's horns. He turned, as did the two hunters riding behind him. Though one hunter didn't finish his turn for, as a less armored individual, he became the target of Paud's last fishcus. Yanking it from its place beside the headless soldier, he flung it at the pivoting hunter and got him right where the bridge of his nose would've been had he not been a flat-faced fishfolk.

Two down, two more to go – not to mention the three inside the buggy.

And now there were two harpoon guns aimed right at him.

Paud got back and ducked. On all fours, he got as close as he could to the cover of the wagon, as if he might try and scramble off the back. He could hear dead silence in the buggy below him and that quiet encouraged him not to. There were likely three harpoons locked and loaded hoping he would. Instead, he chose to surprise them. He grabbed the headless body of the guard, took a gargantuan gulp of air through his gills, and then shot to his feet and off the front

Two harpoons almost immediately struck the body he held before him. The impact of such hits were enough to slightly throw him off balance, pivoting his body as his foot reached the front lip of the carriage. He gave in to the momentum, spinning with it, then flung the body when he came back around. The hunter leaned far in his saddle under the weight of the corpse of his comrade he was now entangled by. The guard on the seasteed before the hunter reloaded. Paud landed on the seasteed across from the hunter – where the other hunter, with the split face, was still strapped to his beast, bouncing to the side like a banner waving in the wind. Not only was he still strapped in, but the harpoon gun in his holster was still ready to fire.

As the guard reloaded his harpoon, Paud grabbed the dead hunter. Looping one arm around him, he turned back towards the carriage and pulled the corpse up against his back like a knapsack. In the same motion, he drew the harpoon gun from the holster and aimed it back at the carriage. When he fired, so too did the guard on the seasteed behind him, but his foe only hit the dead hunter on his back. Paud, on the other hand, drove a harpoon through the slit in the front of the buggy and bashed in the head of the armored guard there. The guard fell back, arms sprawled out, and knocked the hunters in the carriage back with him.

Four left.

Paud didn't have time to revel in his victory. The very-much-still-alive hunter on the seasteed parallel to him had finally gotten the headless corpse off him, reloaded his harpoon, and was taking aim. If Paud adjusted the dead hunter on his back, then he'd open himself to a third shot from the last remaining guard – but if he didn't, the hunter beside him would surely shoot him. Then again, he didn't have much of a choice.

He pivoted, pulling his meat shield between him and the hunter, then pointing his empty harpoon at the guard on the front steed. To his amazement, the guard flinched.

Paud cocked his head in confusion.

Then a shadow descended over him. So close was this great vessel that the current nearly knocked him off the horse. He dropped the corpse-meat shield he'd been holding onto and the gun he'd stolen from it then clung onto the seasteed as the dark mass thrust past him like a giant missile – and like a giant missile it hit the guard on the front seasteed like a bomb. Sand and neon coral filled the area like an explosion of fireworks. The other seasteeds shrieked and took off in separate directions, causing them to tumble and tangle in their reigns. Then the carriage hit the crater left in the wake of the now-gone-guard and tipped over. It didn't stop tipping either. The coral they'd been climbing was a giant globe shape. Once off its wheels, the buggy continued to flip down the rotund side of the giant living reef, taking its passengers and tied up beasts of burden with it.

As the seasteed Paud clung to began to be dragged down the slope, he shook his fist. Three blades shot from his armored knuckles and he reached back to slice through the reigns that bound it to the wagon. Those cut, he moved on to the bellyband, but he had to be more careful so as not to split open the side of the animal. Even as he tried to focus, they were being pulled over the side of the reef. With wild eyes, his sapphiric horse utilized both fins and hooves and fought against gravity but the wagon would surely win this fight. Still, Paud didn't let the intensity of the situation disrupt him, with surgical precision he got his claws between the band and the beast and snapped it free. Immediately, they bound forward, charging up the slope to freedom.

Atop the bulbous reef, Paud retracted his claws and went about stroking the seasteeds finny-mane as it pranced about panting and gasping, its big wild eyes stared down at the glittery destruction of the still plunging carriage and crew. While it watched its comrades descend, Paud kept his eyes up. Scowering the neon heavens for the return of what for him and his new horse had been a bit of a *Deus ex Machina* – for though it seemed to be a “Deus” now, it could very easily become a “Diabolus”, and he did not want to share the same fate as the late guardsman. Though he was a Gill, the only beings such beasts new to fear, Paud wasn't in favor of testing the legend – at least not until the opportune moment.

The great ghostlike behemoth appeared to have departed. Paud felt its presence was surely still near, but he would have to tolerate the risk. He had a job to finish. And that job was rushing away at a high speed.

“Tingshe.” Paud commanded.

He slid off the amphibious horse and directed it to wait in a crevice between a large umbrella polyp and a vast disk shaped coral. Petting its snout one last time, he left the beast and ran after the fallen carriage. His “Claws” and empty harpoon gun would not be enough to stop the second carriage. Scavenging the wreckage would give the prince ample time to get away, but not enough time to escape the Wobniar Wood, and Paud had a feeling they would have to make camp. For the great vessel of a beast that had saved his life would not be satisfied with one man and their steed. It would hunger for more. And as the King of the Ocean, this monster would not lower itself to pick through the debris of the wrecked wagon – it would seek the fresh, warm blood of the part of the caravan that had gotten away. There would be a stand off. And if Paud put himself in the right place at the right time, he could use the monster to his advantage once more.

The conch had been sounded – two in fact – and the callphins would’ve gotten the message back to the capital within hours, but the prince was deep in the Wood. There were many other caravans in the region, out for the same hunts, and they normally would’ve come together to the defense of the royal – but not this time. After all, the prince wasn’t the king. Even if he were, the tide had turned against the current monarch. Prince though he was, he was not considered the heir to the throne. No, that honor went to the General. Not because the people preferred him, but because the people feared him – and for good reason.

General Lacitar Te-Naryt, who had become commander of not just the military but also the police, killed all those that opposed him. Whether they be a peasant or a prince, the General knew no bounds, and in the midst of this particular cold, Spring twilight, had set his sights on the prince. As the night drew to an end and the silence of the sea floor became deafening, the prince began to realize that.

The prince and his party had fortified a small cave formed in the coral. Their carriage had been backed in, the hunters’ daggers mounted to the façade to discourage the great beast from chomping through the wood. They left out the seasteeds – offerings to the true King of the Ocean – and hoped that help might come if they held out long enough. Two guards lay beneath the wagon, their harpoons loaded and charged, while two more lay atop it, their backs protected by the lip of the coral cave. Four hunters and the prince hid inside the carriage, the heads of their harpoons poking out separate slits.

Seconds passed like hours, but passed nonetheless. The light of Solaris began to pierce through cracks in the rainbow rocks of the coral canopy. The glittery spawns were settling, covering the ocean floor like mica along a riverbed. And then, just when shadows once more became possible, a great long lumbering shadow began to crisscross the narrow clearing before them. The seasteeds paced anxiously. Their eyes wide and their gaze upturned.

If fishfolk could sweat, their trigger fingers would’ve been oozing.

With a terrible shriek, the darkness rushed in. Coral and sand lifted up from the ground like as though an asteroid had struck. It hung in the air like a wall, blocking from view anything beyond the clearing before the coral cave that the carriage jutted out of. All that was between them and this wall of debris were the two last seasteeds – the others had been taken away.

“How much can they eat?” A guard whispered in horror.

“Entire regiments.” A hunter replied.

“And that’s just one.” Another hunter said, his goggled eyes staring up through the roof of the carriage, “I see three.”

And then he saw no more. No sooner did the last vowel sound leave his sharp-toothed jaws than was he grasped in the sharp-toothed jaws of a behemoth. Ignoring the blade-barbed

façade of the carriage, the great beast had shot down from the surface of the sea and smashed into them with jaws wide open. One hundred rows of teeth obliterated the front of the buggy and shredded two hunters with it as the massive creature's face slammed into the ocean floor.

The others – four guards, two hunters, and the Prince – fired their harpoons and they didn't miss. How could they. The entire mouth of the cave had been blockaded by the vast underbelly of the enormous fish. Blood streamed from its flesh – trickling as it might from a deep splinter in your toe – as the monster pulled its face up from the impression it had made on the ocean floor. The fishfolk that survived scurried as far back as they could, but the monster was done for now. It rose up and swam out of the way, leaving them looking out the gaping orifice it had left behind.

The sand and crumbs of coral had settled from where the first monster had swallowed up two of their amphibious horses. The other two steeds pulled at their reins, howling to the heavens for deliverance, but the fishfolk could hardly hear over the pounding of their own heartbeats. The morning light finally colored the massive, shadow monsters that had been hunting them: sharks the size of sailboats. Apart from their size, the three fins that rose from their spine, staggered side by side, were their defining feature. These were sumarii - the true Kings of the Ocean.

“We have to run.” A guard stated.

“You can't run.” A hunter argued, “We have to hide, right here. They may be satisfied.”

“Then why are they still here?” The guard retorted.

“Fine, run, then!” The hunter clapped back, “See what happens!”

“Silence!” The prince commanded, “No one is running. Reload your guns.”

The hunters, holed up beside the Prince in the back of what remained of the wagon, abided. The two guards underneath the carriage did as they were told. The two guards above, however, took one look at each other and then bolted. Sliding down the sides of the buggy, they made for the seasteeds.

Cursing, the prince strode forward and took aim.

FWOOSH!

His harpoon stuck fast in the back of one of the guards.

The other made it to one of the seasteeds and then-

FWOOSH!

A sumarii swooped by and gobbled all four up.

The prince retreated back into the confines of what remained of their shelter.

“We've been set up.” He stated.

“By the wilderness?” A hunter scoffed.

If the Prince's gun had been loaded, he likely would've offed the disrespectful peon, but instead he settled with providing a grumbling explanation and reloading his weapon in the hopes of a second offense, “How long ago did we signal for help? Where are the other caravans?”

“Help will come.” A guard assured him from underneath the buggy, “We must endure.”

“The sumarii aren't alone.” A hunter warned, his goggles down and his gaze trained through the roof of the carriage, “The assassin survived.”

“Well he better hurry.” Another guard underneath the wagon said, “Look.”

A sumarii was swooping down in the distance making a B-line for the cave. It rushed down between the great rainbow branches of the polyyps like a bullet sliding into the chamber.

“If we split up-”

“IF WE SPLIT UP I’LL BE MURDERED!” The prince shrieked, “Now aim your harpoons unless you want to get one in the back!”

As his hunters and guards did as they were told, the prince opened the back door of the carriage. It could only open half a foot before hitting the rugged back wall of the coral reef, but it was enough for the slender young man to slip out. Closing the door behind him, he cowered. His harpoon was loaded but there was no room to ready it and so he held it to his chest like a toddler cradles a stuffed animal and there, he waited.

Whispers of, “Barro,” this and, “Barro” that began to go off among the survivors like popcorn in a microwave. This was it. They had just enough time to make peace with themselves and their diety and then CRASH!

The sumarii slammed into the carriage. Its jaws spread so wide that when it crunched down it took half the mouth of the shallow cave and a good two feet of the sand beneath with it. The hunters in the carriage and the guards on the ground were chopped and diced in an instant by the rows and rows of blade sized teeth. Their armor, their weapons, and their flesh were all swallowed up with the sand, the coral, and the wood. The entire cave was left more like a small indentation in a cliffside of broad polyp, against which trembled the prince.

And as the sumarii pulled away, someone took its place. He came from above, jumping from the roof of what was once the coral cave. Landing before the prince, he snarled. The prince took one look at the diagonal scar across his torso and cursed.

“You godi eel.”

The Prince aimed the harpoon and fired. The spear stuck fast in the armored grasp of the assassin. He’d caught it out of thin water. The assassin’s snarl closed.

“You’re working for the General now are you?” The Prince growled.

Paud took slow strides, closing their distance. The Prince threw down his gun and squared his shoulders, puffing out his chest as he glowered at his impending death.

“You want him to replace the King, not I? Ha!” The Prince cackled, “You’re fighting for a sword to replace a dagger! As King I could hold my father and the General accountable for what they’ve done – I am the only one who can! I am your only hope for justice!”

“I’m not here for justice.”

He grabbed the prince by his leather armor, ripping him out of his best attempt at an intimidating stance.

“I’m here to get paid.”

Paud swept the royal’s feet out from under him and threw him down on his ass. The prince sat there, looking up at Paud with a mixture of fear and outrage. Behind Paud, the sumarii swam by. The great beasts inched closer as Paud inched closer to the prince. The assassin’s blood was hot. It was cursed blood – a magical substance similar to something like molten steel. It would melt through any normal being’s flesh in an instant, it would even eat through the thick skin of a sumarii if they were foolish enough to bite down upon him. Some had tried, but they hadn’t gotten far. Underwater, his blood would quickly harden once outside of his cursed veins. Protecting him from being crunched by those rows of teeth and searing any creature foolish enough to attempt to. The heat that emanated from his flesh, warned the wiser predators to keep their distance. The flashy scar across his abdomen was a shiny warning to older sumarii, as some were centuries old, reminding them exactly who he was. A Gill. One of the few descendants left of Thompthou Gill, the first fishfolk to ever slay a sumarii.

The prince gestured with a nod at the sharks lurking behind the assassin.

“You going to feed me to them, huh?”

“Not yet.” Paud said, “I need you.”

For a moment, the prince’s voice carried a note of hope. He asked, “Alive?”

“No.”

Paud shook his right arm and three long blades slid out of the knuckles of his gauntlet.

“Just your head.”

- - -

Taking out another shimmering white nugget, Jason flattened it to the tabletop with the slender blade of a dagger. Turning the blade, he carved at the pancaked powder, shaving off crumbs of twinkling pale specks that he could then scrape over to join two long lines that sprawled out before him and his new comrade, Peshkova Fang the Incendiary Healer. After licking the dust off the knife, Jason turned to the chidra and winked.

“You gotta god?” He asked.

“Ha!” Peshkova scoffed, “I’m a Civilist, Civ. We don’t believe in dem dings.”

Jason shrugged, “Well ah do and this is mah zirra.”

Her reptilian eyes rolled, “I dough dis was my pay for savin your life?”

“Ah onlay pay Christians.” Jason growled.

Peshkova threw her hands to the heavens, proclaiming, “Lawd Jesus, my savior!” then she slammed her head down on the table, clamped one finger tightly over her left nostril, and snorted up the line Jason had straightened out in front of her.

Jason glowered at her for a moment, but then lightened up, said a swift prayer, and took his line.

Behind the two at the table and the mound of zirra that rose between them, Dresdan and Skar watched with muted amusement. They shook their heads.

“He isn’t even Christian.” Dresdan stated.

“Zirra.” Skar noted.

“Indeed.”

Dresdan moved back to his desk and sat in the large, leather chair behind it. The back of the chair rose high like a throne, though the base was wheeled as if it belonged in an office. This fit, as the room was half office, half throne room. Long windows striped the sides of the wide chamber, the room stretched the entire width of the *Obsidian Sail*. These windows were mostly hidden behind brief L-shaped mazes of bookshelves – half stocked with reading material and half with drugs: bottles of booze, gallons of gogo, ziplocked satchels of zirra, and totes of tobacco. A cross of space cut through the middle of the room so that the Captain’s desk was in view of the door and the side windows allowed light to cross the hall that intersected this middle passage. Jason and Peshkova were down oneside of the middle passage, Skar and Dresdan had walked out of view to leave the bearn and chidra to their vices while they discussed actual business. Skar sat in a chair before the bureau. She leaned back and plopped her boots on the counter. Before her heels hit the surface, Dresdan’s hand whipped out from his robe, snatched two coasters, and slung them across the desk to catch her feet and protect his precious cherry wood.

“Considering your pompous disposition,” Dresdan said, straining to not annoyance leak out in his tone, “I assume you come bearing fruit.”

“Ah saved your boy’s lahf.” Skar stated, “Fruity enough for ya?”

Dresdan’s head tilted, his long purple hat slid as if he tipped it.

Skar knew the look. She took her feet off his desk and got to the point, “You kidnappin a Sentray is raellay farakin up the plan, Captain.”

“She came of her own accord.” Dresdan stated.

“That truth don’t raellay matter though now does it?” Skar countered.

“She’s making me a sword.” Dresdan said, “So I can kill Truth.”

“You saeraious?” Skar almost started to laugh but she stopped when she realized he wasn’t kidding. Instead, she said, “What about the Battle?”

“She’ll be there.”

“Truth’s going to bae at the Battle?!” Skar rocked back with shock, then as the captain’s words really sank in, she rocked back even further. She would’ve toppled out of her chair had she not jumped to her feet, “*She?* You know who Truth is?”

“I’ve got a guess.”

“Who?”

“Don’t want to bias your investigation. However...” Dresdan reached down and opened one of the larger drawers in his desk. He withdrew a mason jar. It was nearly empty, aside from what looked like crumpled up bush clippings, the crumbs of some dried dead plant material. Sitting it on the desk top between them, he leaned back and explained, “I’ve got her blood.”

Skar’s one visible eye grew wide.

“Whether or not she’ll be at the Battle, we’ll be able to know beforehand.” Dresdan leaned back, tilting his head towards the ceiling and taking a long breath through his nostrils, “I’m quite sure she will be. I feel it.”

“Ah...” Skar rolled her eyes, “well, faelins asahde, ah came to tell you that the Admiral wants us to move the Battle up.”

Dresdan sat back up right, frowning.

Skar shrugged, raising her hands up with open palms, “Not mah fault you kidnapped her boss’ daughter.”

Dresdan glowered.

“It’s a matter of tahm baefore the Mystvokar daecahdes to rescue her – if you got the entahr Ahceloadic navay trailing you – Saelu forbid, the dalvaray too – our lil plot will bae a whole godai lot harder to pull off now won’t it?”

“How soon?” Dresdan asked.

“This waek?” Skar replied.

“Farakin...” Dresdan cursed, looking away to think before ultimately conceding, “It can be done.”

Skar leaned forward, “Are you sure?”

Dresdan bowed his head in a solemn nod.

“Rosethorn.” Skar sighed.

“Rosethorn.” Dresdan concurred, then he asked, “You’ll have to tell the others.”

“Ah know.” Skar said.

“And I want you to take the blood to Zaria. If I fail to stop Truth, then the rest of the Rosethorn must take up the challenge.” Dresdan stated.

Skar cocked her head to the side, “What’s your baef with this bonebender?”

“She’s playing with dangerous magic-”

“Oh yeah?” Skar laughed, “Who woulda guessed? A mancer playing with dark magic-”

“Not dark magic. I don’t discriminate against kinds of magic, Skar, you of all people should know that.” Dresdan snapped before cooling into an explanation, “Dangerous

experiments. Teleportation. Portals. Travel to other worlds. Worlds where enemies of this planet may be waiting.”

“This some Void taiad your on about?” Though her lips were twisted in a smirk, her voice admitted to her actual concern, “You think shae wants to bring back Craeton?”

“Or worse.” Dresdan whispered.

“The Quaen of Darkness.” Skar murmured.

“Look at the rise of the Mystvokar, Talloome, in Iceload and the Cagirent, Zion, in Sondor... Truth’s plot to kill the sick King of Batloe will likely lead to some other bad actor with a crown. Not to mention, we’ve got the New Pact’s Disciples running around the Trinity Nations causing mayhem while the Empire’s Kings and Queens further dismantle their defenses – If the Queen came back tomorrow...”

“Ah’ll take the blood to the Admiral.” Skar promised.

“Thank you, Skar.” Dresdan offered a wary smile.

Skar gave a tired grin back, “Anay clue where shae maht bae?”

The door to the office opened. From the far end of the cross-hall, an old moleman strode in. Though his shoulders were hunched and his robes a bit dingy, he moved with the sort of sure footed steps that only an honest man can conjure. The red cap on his head was as bright as his amber-brown eyes, driving home the point that though you might be able to toss him in a tumble, the old crone would not falter in a war of words – his mind was in tip top shape. This was in part thanks to all his reading. Reading was required of magicians of the book, but Drakken also read for recreation – keeping track of all the major events going on beneath Solaris – and as he marched down the hall of bookshelves, past the oblivious zirra snorting hooligans, and up to the desk of the Captain, he held before him the front page of the *Mystakle Times*.

“Terrible news, Captain.” The swain warned, “Father Shisharay is dead.”

Both Dresdan and Skar were speechless.

“The Woodland Ridge Monastery,” Drakken continued, “burned to the ground.”

The Woodland Ridge Monastery was essentially a convent of killers. Spirits took an oath to train under the atriarch. Becoming a Shisharay upon graduation, they then were cast out of the Monastery to chase their warrior calling. Though strict Christians, the Shisharay believed in the Samurai Principle: that violence is never justified, no matter how necessary, and thus in order to protect the innocent – and save them from necessary violence – the Shisharay took it upon themselves to devote their lives to fight for the righteous. Shisharay bore the sinful burden of violence to stop the violence of other sinners so that the peaceful masses could remain at peace.

The only Shisharay in the Monastery was the atriarch, in this case Father Shisharay. The atriarch was a lifetime position, the Father had served for centuries. As a spirit, age was not a life threatening factor. Aside from murder, only a major heart break could extinguish the purple fire life force within the chest of a spirit and it was highly unlikely that Father Shisharay, as the leader of this highly disciplined group, was not of stable mind. Then again, it seemed just as unlikely that this great warrior could’ve been bested.

Drakken finished, “And three Shisharay tried to kill the King of Batloe yesterday.”

Drakken laid the newspaper on the desk between the two but rather than looking at the print, the two looked at each other.

“Truth.” They spoke in unison.

“The life celebration begins tomorrow.” Drakken finished.

“Now ah know where to fahnd Zaria and Lalmlay.” Skar noted.

“Manaloe is on the otherside of Mystakle Planet.” Dresdan stated, “You should leave now.”

Skar took the jar of the bloody rose crumbs and got up.

Dresdan rose and bowed to his comrade, “Selu to you.”

“Saelu to you.” Skar bowed back, turning to bow to the swain too, “And to you, Drakken.”

With powder covered noses and wide, dialated eyes, Jason and Peshkova peaked around the bookshelves, asking simultaneously, “What happened?”

“Pesh, you coming with mae or stayin with the pahrates?” Skar asked, her stride not skipping a beat as she headed for the door.

“Shae godai hell ain’t stayin!” Jason yelled.

Peshkova hissed at Jason then turned to Dresdan, “Can I take da zirra?”

“It was your pay.” Dresdan nodded.

“Wait for me, Civ!” Peshkova hollered after Skar as the elf strolled out the door. The chidra rushed back over to the table, scraping the white powder into the jar they had dumped it out of, “Don’t leave me wid dese crimpsin tiad pirates!”

Jason took it upon himself to escort the bombastic doctor out.

Meanwhile, Dresdan sat back down in his chair and Drakken took the seat Skar had left behind.

“The Battle will be this week.”

“This week?” Drakken gasped.

Dresdan nodded, “Can the sword be ready?”

The moleman gulped, “I’m sorry, Captain, but I can’t promise-”

Reaching across the table, Dresdan clasped the old man’s hand and said, “I know you’ll do your best.”

“What about the Fou boy?” Drakken asked.

Dresdan smiled, admitting, “I can’t promise that either.”

- - -

Ash continued to scatter as wind whistled by, scraping at what remained of the Monastery. Empty doorways, stubborn arches, and lone standing fragments of wall rose from the black debris like abstract tombstones in an unorganized graveyard but there were no bodies buried beneath. The only soul lost in the wreckage had evaporated off the face of Mystakle Planet. Father Shisharay’s flame had gone out, his gaseous spirit torn to shreads as it drifted up and away, through the atmosphere ascending towards Solaris. Tears rained upwards, chasing after his essence, as they floated from the eyes of the spirits gathered below the hill.

The Monastery sat at the top of the Woodland Ridge which was a narrow blade of a peak. Great pines lined the edges of the ramped cliff. Without their roots, the Ridge would’ve long since eroded away, and it was in an effort to protect the woods from the flames that the Shisharay had failed to protect their beloved temple. This sacrifice would’ve made the Father proud, for their gospel was very clear that life came before property. The dead, dry wood that built the Monastery had been allowed to burn as the sisters and brothers of the Shisharay defended the living, green trees that held their mountain together. The Monastery was but a building, their home was their family. Sure the church had provided shelter, but the trees provided the oxygen that fueled their flames.

Indigo fire raged in a pit, the same shade of purple as the fires in the chests of the naked spirits that danced around it. As it spat sparks to the heavens, the spirits tears rose alongside them, extinguishing the little embers with quiet hisses as they collided. The bonfire was in the courtyard that sprawled out in the brief, flat valley that separated the Monastery from the village. A tile path created a dancefloor around the flames. The ceramic stones were decorated with immaculate designs of flowers and vines, mirroring the gardens that walled the patio. The fire, the courtyard, and the garden were what was known to spirits as a lifepyre. As their race left behind no bodies to bury, their kind held life celebrations by fire light instead and it was at these funerals that they made new life as well.

The spirits didn't just dance around the magical flames, they danced through them. Having discarded their translucent garments and washed themselves of the oils that gave their flesh a sense of solidity, they strode into the fire and splashed through one another. Lovers found each other in the heat of the indigo inferno and when their chest flames wrapped around another, if their love was pure, sometimes a new chest flame would be born. They'd emerge from the pit with a new little spirit in tow. The congregation would celebrate and all those present would promise to take responsibility for the child, but the lovers that made the little spirit would still primarily take on the role of parenting – except for when it came to naming. That was a communal affair. The child's first name came from that of the lost soul or souls that inspired the pyre. The rest of the child's names – often numbering in the dozens – come from the rest of those present at the celebration for not only were they responsible for the child, but the child would be responsible for them.

Lalmly was born of a lifepyre, though she did not go by her first name as there were twelve others born alongside her. She picked Lalmly from one of her fifty-two names when she graduated from the Monastery. And as a graduate, she was not to dance in the pyre any longer. She could not commit to raising a child, she'd already committed her life to defending Solaris.

“Did you know Lalmly?” Zaria asked.

They stood on the hill above the pyre, on the edge of the Monastery's remains. Well, Zaria stood. Lalmly was in her lifepyre uniform – her birthday suit – and so she appeared to levitate just a few inches above the ground.

“No.” Lalmly replied, “She disappeared years before I began to remember. Many spirits get lost and simply fade away.”

“Did she ever get one of these?” Zaria asked.

“No.” Lalmly sighed, “After all, she may be still alive, living somewhere alone.”

Cowboy plopped his head down between his front paws, sulking with a faint whimper.

“Sad.” Zaria murmured as she knelt to pet the hound.

Lalmly nodded, “One can only hope she prefers solitude.”

“Why'd you pick her name?” Zaria asked.

“You don't remember?”

Zaria shrugged.

“So it wouldn't die.” Lalmly answered.

“That's sweet.” Zaria stated.

“And...” Lalmly admitted with an embarrassed mutter, “I thought it was pretty.”

Zaria chuckled and stood back up despite Cowboy's protestations. His whining would've likely continued to get louder had he not been distracted when he noticed people approaching from behind. There were plenty of people coming and going. The slope between the ruins and the pyre had been designated as a place for non-participants to pay their respects and witness the

Father's life celebration. However, one of these new comers Cowboy sensed was different than all those gathered there. She had a particular scent – a smell that no mortal possessed and one that few mortals can sense, few non-canine mortals that is.

Cowboy whirled around, his lips already curling as a low growl emitted from his barred teeth, but then he stopped. His lips dropped, his jaw opened, and his tongue rolled out so he could offer a goofy, panting grin. Both Zaria and Lalmly turned to see what was the matter.

While those guests around them recoiled away from the new arrivals, Zaria and Lalmly strode up to meet them. There was good reason for folks unfamiliar with the pair to be concerned. After all, one was engulfed in spectral flames. It wasn't just the scarlet fire, either, after all the being beneath the fire had no more flesh than Lalmly. She did have bones, but if anything that made her appear more threatening. Her skeleton was wrapped in tight leather armor, blood stained and worn white at the creases, and an assortment of ranged weapons were strapped to her shoulders and hips. Though terrifying, this undead warrior had once helped to save Solaris. Had she been recognizable, the others on the slope might not have been so alarmed. That said, her comrade didn't have much of a comforting appearance either.

He was a giant – which wasn't abnormal for his species, as he was a bearn, but what was abnormal for his species was that he was covered in blood. He was dressed in a similar leather garb as his comrade but his was nearly torn to shreds. The blood that stained it was fresh and still oozing out as he hobbled forward, leaning heavily on a walking stick that looked like he'd just recently snapped off from a nearby tree. One eye was clamped shut by a bulging bruise and the other was drooping slightly as it appeared he was struggling to maintain consciousness.

Zaria and Lalmly skipped right past the, "Good to see you!"s when they noticed the state of their undead friend's guest. Attempting as hushed a tone as they could considering their shock, they confronted the two.

"What the godi hell?" Zaria whispered with as sharp a voice as she could as she rushed over to offer her body as support for the struggling bearn, "Who is this?"

"My assistant." The skeletal woman shrugged, "We were on our way to Munkloe-"

"For a healer?" Lalmly asked as she hurriedly pulled her invisiworm silk garments back on so that she might have enough physicality that she could help Zaria in supporting the dying bearn, "He can't wait til Munkloe!"

"He's tough, he'll be fine-"

Zaria maneuvered beneath the weight of the man so that she could set her eyes on the one eye that he still had open, "Are you okay, sir?"

All that came out was a grunt and a nod.

"Crimpsin tiad, Einna!" Zaria's tone was becoming less and less hushed.

"We've got to get him into town." Lalmly stated, "He needs a healer, now."

"Now?" The skeleton – who was apparently Einna – asked, "He's a tough lad. He can pull through til the end of the ceremony."

The bearn offered another grunt and a nod.

"Einna!" Zaria crowed.

Now the congregation on the slope was less concerned by the two new comer's presence and more alarmed by the noise being made by the original two. Strangers began to stare daggers. Lalmly, now dressed but still oiling her long silver hair, addressed Einna with a whisper.

"Einna. These ceremonies go for hours."

"Well it must be halfway over by now-"

"Einna." Lalmly tried again, "Your friend may not make it thirty minutes."

Though Lalmly couldn't tell, due to Einna's lack of eyes, the skeleton was mentally rolling her eyes, "He's a tough lad, he-"

"We're taking him to town." Zaria stated, "We've got a zoomer behind the church. You can stay and watch if you want but we're taking him into town."

Einna said nothing. Her flames surging displayed her annoyance sufficiently. Neither Lalmly nor Zaria cared. Together, they helped the bearn hobble through the wreckage that was the Monastery. They would've gone around but neither woman felt they had a moment to spare. Cowboy followed them, shaking his head at Einna as they passed.

"No respect for ceremony." The skeleton grumbled before ultimately turning to follow the women escorting her assistant, "Sacriligious Antipas..."

As they marched through the debris, Lalmly and Zaria were able to speak louder to Einna behind them.

"Who is this assistant of yours?" Zaria demanded.

"Sniper." Einna explained.

Now it was the mortals that rolled their eyes. Einna was a lot of things, one of which was the boss of a group of assassins known as the Golden Dagger. Despite Einna's disdain for the new generation of vigilante heroes that had come to be known as Antipa, the Golden Dagger was – for all practical purposes – an Antipan group. As the boss, she picked the jobs and she rarely picked a job that conflicted with the interests of the Empire. Her assassins were kept anonymous, referred to only by the nicknames she assigned them, even though many of the members of the Golden Dagger quickly became infamous. The fact that she referred to this assistant as "Sniper" meant that he was not merely some secretary she had hired to help her with her taxes, but rather a new member of her team of swords-for-hire.

"And who'd y'all just get finished killing?" Zaria asked.

"Some genocidal governor in the Cagirent." Einna shrugged, "Sniper got a bit faraked up, so I was on my way to get him top knotch healing in Munkloe when we heard the news-"

"ON YOUR WAY?!" Zaria crowed, "Manaloe is right next door to Sondor – you flew halfway across the globe to-"

"Ah, ah, ah!" Einna interjected, "I am a banshee, Admiral. I don't have to fly. I travel through the timeless realm of Total Darkness."

"Yes, but can't you only teleport once a day?" Lalmly asked.

"That is true." Einna admitted.

"And Munkloe is a day's flight from here." Lalmly continued.

"That is also true." Einna conceded.

"So what was your plan?" Lalmly finished.

Einna said nothing for a moment before finally saying, "He is a tough lad."

"You've lost it." Zaria growled.

"Long ago." Einna agreed.

Lalmly cleared her throat – or rather, she made a noise as if she was clearing her throat. As a spirit, she had no throat to clear – to interrupt the two before they devolved into inflammatory banter, "It may be wise to take a less threatening form, Mrs. Yelkao."

"They've already seen me." The banshee countered but after her retort was met with silence, she conceded to the spirit's wishes. With a whirl like that of the crackling fire well behind them, the skeletal archer turned into a red-feathered bird of prey. She was as large as an eagle, but her body was less aerodynamic. Her head was crowned with a crest of up curled feathers and similar furred decorative feathers criss-crossed her body, wings, and tail. Her beak

was hooked and sharp, ready to stab and snap her prey, and if her beak missed then her gnarled talons could surely finish the job. While less threatening than a immolated skeletal warrior, the foxbird form Einna had taken would still draw eyes and instill fear in those that passed by. When the bird's beak opened, the voice of the woman came out, "This better?"

"Better." Lalmly and Zaria sighed together.

They trudged through the rest of the monastery in silence. The quiet was broken only by the engine of their zoomer once they climbed aboard and the gurgly coughs of the bearn bleeding all over the backseats as they took off.

Leaving the top of the ridge, they circled back towards the village that climbed up the slope beneath the Monastery and the lifepyre. The little hamlet was protected by the Shisharay, thus they too were commemorating the loss of the church and the Father. Candles sat on windowsills, reefs hung from the doors, and the spirits of the town went about their chores in dark, black garbs. They parked the vessel at a dead end that overlooked the Storming Ocean. The distant horizon was lit by flashes of lightning. A gargantuan storm swirled far out at sea. The group recognized it as the Iahtro Storm – the hurricane that perpetually traveled the water ways of Solaris, controlled by a man as old as Einna, another immortal cursed to take on a ghastly form, another witness that had come to show their respect to the lost Father Shisharay.

"He better keep his distance." The foxbird growled at the storm.

Zaria and Lalmly helped Sniper out of the zoomer, rolling their eyes at the old banshee as they did.

She continued, "I'll shoot him out of the godi sky."

"Save that fight for later, Einna." Zaria said, turning to Lalmly as they began to help Sniper down the street, "Are there even healers in the Ridge?"

Lalmly nodded, "There is one. We Shisharay often need a place to heal our clients. Sometimes, Munkloe isn't a fan of those who we protect."

"Lead the way." Zaria said.

Cowboy had been trotting alongside them but suddenly he began to skip in circles around them, barking at the sky. Einna pulled her gaze from the hurricane on the horizon and rushed over to the slow moving three. Her great wings nearly bowled them over when she swooped down. Landing, she beckoned for them to turn around. Craning their necks, Zaria and Lalmly did so. Even Sniper, delirious as he was, turned his head to glance.

Behind them, a dragon was soaring down to land.

"Mancers." Einna warned.

"We know her." Lalmly and Zaria chimed.

Cowboy growled.

The dragon was a curlhead – as large a beast as the zoomer they'd flown in with a wingspan of twice that. Their name came from the crest that rose from their forehead and curled back against their neck, creating a spiral of flesh almost like that of a tightly rolled ram's horn. This particular beast was a purplish-blue, blending with the dark clouds of the storm far behind it. One of its riders was garbed in black, her entire body covered in robes except for her pale face which was rapped with a bandage across one of her sapphiric eyes. Her short blonde hair was frozen behind her from the cold of the night sky and the speed with which they had traveled. This was the individual Lalmly and Zaria recognized, her partner, however, was new. The second rider wore robes as well but hers were a bright shade of yellow with a floral pattern of green clover shapes. Like their steed, she was of a scaled race, though her scales were as red as the foxbird that scrutinized her.

Skar bowed her head as she left her beast, saying, "Rosethorn."

"Rosethorn." Zaria and Lalmly echoed.

The foxbird rolled its eyes, cursing under her breath, "Godi Antipas..."

"Ah've got somethin for..." Skar's words trailed off as she realized the condition of the bearn the two women were lifting, "Crimpsin taiad!" She turned to the chidra, "Pesh!"

Skar slapped her beast on its shoulder, "Violet, hunt!" She ordered. As the beast took off, she turned to rush over to the wounded bearn. Peshkova was already there, checking out the bearn's wounds. Arriving, Skar's single blue eye switched back and forth between Zaria and Lalmly.

"Newest member of the Golden Dagger." Zaria grumbled, side-eyeing the foxbird.

Skar turned to the banshee, "That makes you-"

"I'm not but a bird." Einna snapped, shooting a glare back at Zaria.

Lalmly was watching Peshkova as she poked and prodded the lacerations that striped the bearn. Lalmly asked, "Are you a healer?"

Peshkova looked up with a sly grin, "For a price, Civ."

Lalmly's brow furled. Had she not been supporting the weight of the bearn, she might've reached for her bow. Zaria also gave the chidra a snarl, but – unlike Lalmly – she had a one handed weapon. As her glare hardened, her free hand fell to the gun on her hip.

"I wouldn't do dat if I were you, Civ." Peshkova warned, her smile not breaking.

"I believe she's wrapped in explosives." The foxbird noted.

Peshkova looked from the foxbird then back to Skar, "Dat bird...it ain't a banshee is-"

"It is." Skar nodded, "Einna Yelkao. Guardian of Sondor."

"Seeelu..." Peshkova murmured.

"Revel later. We're busy." Zaria snapped, her hand still on her gun, "Skar. Your friend going to help us or are we going to find out what kind of bomb she's got under those robes."

"Shae'll help." Skar assured her.

"I will?" Peshkova asked.

"Ah'll pay." Skar said.

"Wid what?" Peshkova pressed.

Skar took a deep breath and Peshkova decided to give her new friend a bit of faith.

Turning back to the bearn toting women, Peshkova nodded, saying, "I'll help."

"Lalmly," Skar asked, "is there a mapwork round hare?"

"Yes, but-"

"Could wae do the haeling there?" Skar asked.

"I suppose, but-"

Skar pulled out the jar of rose stem crumbs. Both Lalmly, Zaria, and Cowboy cocked their heads to the side.

"Truth's blood." Skar explained.

Lalmly turned back to the street before them, "Follow me."

As they traveled into the Woodland Ridge, Skar explained the situation. How she had gone to save Jason "the Giant" Kakal – Captain Dresdan's righthand man – from a set up drug deal and met Peshkova Fang. Having witnessed Peshkova heal Jason, she could vouch for the healer's ability to fix up a bearn. Jason took them to the *Obsidian Sail* where they'd told Dresdan what Zaria and Lalmly had told Skar: that the Trinity Nations had a bounty out for Dresdan's head and that the Battle would have to be sooner rather than later. Dresdan had then given Skar the jar with the plant refuse that, supposedly, had Truth's blood on it and had asked her to take it

to Zaria. Having heard of Father Shisharay's death, Skar knew exactly where to find them. They flew immediately for Woodland Ridge, Manaloe and saw Zaria's zoomer right as they arrived.

Then Zaria and Lalmly explained how they'd gone to Batloe. How three Shisharay had tried to assassinate Duifeen only to be stopped by the King's personal guardsman. This guard, Sharp Otubak, had claimed that the Shisharay spirits had been corrupted and had been helped by an insider of the palace. Zaria and Lalmly were on their way to Manaloe before they'd even heard that the Father had died and the Monastery had been burnt down – but that only furthered their suspicion that Truth was behind it as it certainly would've taken someone quite powerful to put an end to the millenarian atriarch of the Shisharay. Then they ran into Einna Yelkao at the life celebration. The old undead had decided to put off healing her new "assistant" in order to pay her respects to the Father, only for Lalmly and Zaria to protest out of fear that this "Sniper" would likely die within the hour if they didn't get him help. They were on their way to find the town healer when Skar and Peshkova arrived.

"If this Truth is hiring assassins, then why hasn't she come to me?" Einna, the foxbird, asked.

"You're Antipa." Zaria answered.

"Am not!" The bird protested.

"You're friends with the Emperor." Lalmly stated.

"Acquaintances at best!" The bird squawked.

"Weren't you a Guardian?" Skar asked.

The bird puffed out her chest, "They don't know that."

"How do you know, Civ?" Peshkova chuckled, "You don't know who Trude is!"

Zaria agreed with the chidra's logic, "If we know who runs the Golden Dagger, then there is a chance they know."

Einna didn't like that, but she settled to, "Hmph" rather than argue.

A kind, albeit shocked, spirit met them at the door to the mapwork building. He wasn't too fond of letting a blood-seeping bearn lumber into his office but as the bearn was being carried by the Strategy Admiral of the Imperial Navy and one of the most respected daughters of the Shisharay, he ultimately consented. Hospitality then took over what initial resistance he had felt. He brought over two large chests that they could put together before the mapwork for the bearn to lay back on as Peshkova got to work. He even offered to send for food and drink for as a spirit, he had none on his person, but he knew of an inn that catered to more fleshy folks down the street that could cater. Lalmly turned the offer down before anyone could accept, feeling guilty enough already, and assured him that they would call if they needed assistance and so the man left them in the mapwork room to do their business.

The mapwork took up an entire wall. It was made of whittled wood, carved to depict Mystakle Planet. The mountains were choppy ridges, the forests rounded bumps, and the rivers and oceans were sleek, rippling indentions cut deeper into the map than the land masses that rose around them. A jerry rigged mechanical arm extended from the ceiling before the map-mural, holding a small glass cylinder in its robotic hand. The hand's fingertips were tiny glowing orbs that gently cradled the tube, electricity could be seen bouncing through the little marbles like angry bees trapped in tiny spheres. Zaria went up to the cylinder and dropped a pinch of the rose crumbs in. Humming, the orbs began to light up. The little bouncing bolts of electricity began to expand until their yellow sheen filled the small balls.

"Ah don't understand whah Truth won't just kill the King themself?" Skar asked.

"Maybe they tried." Lalmly suggested, "The King's personal guard is quite proficient."

“Hae’s a swordsman against a bone bender.” Skar scoffed.

“Don’t doubt da power of da blade, Civ.” Peshkova spoke up.

Zaria and Lalmly whirled around to glower at the healer. She quickly turned away, returning her focus to the limp body before her. Once the spells started flowing off her lips and her hands began glowing again, the two women turned back to Skar.

“It is odd.” Zaria admitted.

“Maybe Truth can’t stomach the task.” Einna suggested.

“Ha!” Zaria crooned, “Did you hear how they fought in the War of the Tiger?”

“You said they were an insider.” Einna continued, “A powerful mage too.”

Zaria and Lalmly’s gaze narrowed.

“You think Truth is one of the King’s daughters?” Skar asked.

The foxbird shrugged, then gestured with her beak at the map.

There, at the bottom of the map, on the two-winged continent of Batloe, cradled between the Rift Mountains and Fire Lake, was a red smudge. The smudge sat just north of Tlow-Vare. The scarlet hue was pulsating not just on Vare, but on the Cloches palace itself.

“That doesn’t mean Truth is necessarily one of Duifeen’s daughters.” Zaria stated, “That just means Truth is in the Cloches.”

“True.” Einna admitted, “But how can a necromancer waltz around the Batloen palace without one of the sisters knowing they’re a mancer? One – or both – must be in on it.”

“What do they stand to gain?” Skar asked, “The eldest…”

“Suicine.” Zaria inserted.

“Suicine will inherit the throne when her father dahs anyway.” Skar said, “And the youngest-”

“Daffeega.” Lalmly inserted.

“Won’t baecome Quaen if her father dahs bah the blade today or disaese tomorrow.” Skar concluded.

“You forget the Trinity Nations’ Declaration of Democracy.” Einna suggested.

“Why does that matter?” Lalmly asked, “Whether he dies by ‘the blade’ or by disease, his replacement must be elected.”

“What do you think the Trinity Nations will do if they don’t?” Einna countered.

“Nothing.” Lalmly confessed.

“If King Duifeen is slain,” Zaria hypothesized, “then they could claim it is some kind of national emergency. That an election must wait.”

“If that happens,” Skar repeated her question from before, “which sister stands to gain?”

“Suicine.” Zaria said as Einna simultaneously said, “Daffeega.”

All eyes turned to the foxbird.

Ruffling her feathers, she explained, “If there is no election, Suicine is the next queen. The people don’t like her – not like they like Daffeega, Daffeega could likely win an election! But if Suicine gets the crown, that would add fuel to the fire of the protests.”

“So Daffeega wants to have her father murdered to ensure this working class protest turns into a revolution?” Zaria scoffed at the idea.

The foxbird didn’t back down, “What would Suicine gain, then?”

Again Zaria chuckled, “She’d be queen!”

“And you think Suicine wants that?” Einna pressed further.

“Maybe you’re wrong.” Zaria shrugged, “If there is no election, then it will stop the revolution. They claim it is a national emergency and crack down on the protests.”

“And you think Suicine wants to stop the revolution?” Einna asked.
 Zaria shrugged again.
 Lalmly came to her aid, “She certainly isn’t as in favor of the protests as Daffeega.”
 “Unless it’s a ruse.” Einna argued, “What’re the protests for?”
 “The poor.” Skar answered.
 With a wave of her wing, Einna beckoned for more.
 “Uh...” Skar scratched her head, “Voting...healthcare...schooling-”
 “Exactly!” Einna crowed, “Both sisters could lose their power if Batloe becomes a democracy and, if the protestors succeed, the rich – which includes both sisters – will lose their monopoly on magic. Both sisters lose unless Batloe remains a dictatorship that serves the rich.”
 “They’d have to leave the Trinity Nations!” Zaria exclaimed.
 “You think they’d abandon the Empire?” Lalmly echoed Zaria’s disbelief.
 “If one of them is a necromancer-”
 “Or aeven if they’re jus workin with one.” Skar interjected.
 “-then they likely wanted out before their father got sick and before the protests began.”
 Einna concluded, “I’m not saying it is Daffeega – but it surely is just as likely to be her as it is to be her sister.”
 “Or both.” Skar nodded.
 “Or both.” Einna concurred.
 Zaria and Lalmly looked at each other. Both beset with frowns. Zaria finally looked away and approached the vial to retrieve the crums of the rose stem. Lalmly turned to the foxbird and the electric elf.
 “We still don’t *know* it is one of the daughters.”
 “True,” the bird almost seemed to be smirking, “but in your heart – or your fire, rather – what do you think?”
 Again Lalmly frowned.
 Skar decided this was as good a time as any to bring up one of the things the Captain of *the Obsidian Sail* had told her that she had left out of her previous synopsis, “Dresdan thanks Truth is a woman.”
 Lalmly and Zaria’s brows raised.
 “And that Truth will show up at the Battle.” Skar continued, “If Duifaen hangs in til then – and if that amazin boday guard you were talkin about holds his ground – there maybae a rael quick answer to our mystery.”
 “In a week.” Zaria grumbled.
 “Just have da sisters tested.” Peshkova suggested.
 Again, Zaria and Lalmly turned to stare daggers at the healer but by the time their eyes fell on the chidra she was back at her magic work as if she had never said a thing to begin with. Her hands were glowing a brilliant gold. Sniper the bearn’s body was trembling gently as his lacerations were sealed – his fur and skin and muscle retethered with fresh flesh. The giant man had even begun to snore. The Admiral and her right hand woman turned back to Skar and Einna.
 “No use in testing if they’re both – or even either or – in on it.” Zaria grumbled further.
 “They have to run it by the Magi since the King is incapacitated.” Lalmly added, “And if a sister is in on it, surely the Magi may be as well.”
 “Wouldn’t aeven bae able to trust the results.” Skar agreed.
 “So you wait.” Einna stated.
 “If onlay there were more daetailed mapworks.” Skar sighed.

Cowboy yipped and Zaria and Lalmly turned. He yipped again and their eyes grew wide. They turned to one another and exclaimed in unison, “The Globework!”

Now it was Skar and Einna that exchanged glances, “Huh?”

“The Kou boy!” Zaria exclaimed.

“Kenchi Kou!” Lalmly filled in.

“He’s making a portable mapwork!” Zaria explained.

“We caught him mapping the halls of the Cloches!” Lalmly elaborated.

“Godai Taiad!” Skar crossed her arms.

“We didn’t see it in action...” Zaria confessed, “but it spoke!”

“It spoke?” The foxbird’s head was twisted at such a doubtful angle it was nearly upside down, “The mapwork?”

“Globework.” Zaria corrected, “Atlas.”

“The one and only.” Lalmly snickered.

“Where is it?” Skar asked.

Zaria turned to Einna, “You know the Kous, you can take us to them!”

“Ha!” Einna crowed, “They’re in hiding!”

Zaria rolled her eyes, “You’re the Sondoran Guardian. You can find the godi weilder of the Mystak Blade and his little brother.”

“He has an entire army.” Lalmly concurred, “He can’t be hidden all that well.”

Einna let out a noise as similar to a sigh as a bird can make, “I can find them, but not before your little Battle.”

“We’ll be busy preparing anyways.” Zaria said, “Einna, I need your word. You’ll find the Kou boy and bring us the Globework.”

The bird thought for a bit, glanced back at Sniper, then turned back to the Admiral, “Deal. If nothing else, out of curiosity.”

Both women let out a deep breath of relief and slumped back into the chairs that had gone unused the entire time. Skar followed suit in an opposing chair. They spent the rest of the time they’d paid to rent the mapwork room going over the plans for the Battle. Neither of the three were too worried about the foxbird listening in. After all, as much as she acted as if she were unaffiliated with the Empire, she had been on of the Guardians. She’d fought against the Queen of Darkness herself. She may disagree with the Emperor and the Trinity Nations but no more than Zaria and Lalmly and Skar did themselves.

The six (plus Cowboy) eventually got a room in the nearby inn (the one that offered food for physical beings). They were even able to park their zoomer out back and house their dragon in the stable. Peshkova was still working on Sniper by midnight, but the other women were happily warming themselves by the fire and sipping on the stockpile of beverages left over from previous patrons of flesh (except for Einna and Lalmly, of course). They would split up in the morning. Zaria and Lalmly and Skar heading off in different directions to prepare for the Battle. Peshkova would leave as well, but not with Skar. Einna had taken her under her wing. As an undead, she had little use for a healer, however, as the figurehead of a gang of assassins that often wound up looking like Sniper had – she had plenty of use for one (*and* plenty of gold with which she could buy plenty of zirra to pay off said healer). Peshkova wasn’t just in it for the drugs. She was intrigued by the tale of the Kou boy – the child inventor – and as a bomb manufacturer, she had a feeling that this small child could teach her a few tricks or two that might come in handy.

It was fortunate that Einna Yelkao found a new recruit to join the Golden Dagger, after all, that same day – though she did not yet know – she lost one of her greatest.

- - -

The room was dark when she entered, but she could hear his quivering breathes. The brief, sharp inhales were a feeble attempt to hide his presence, but they only served to draw more attention to him. It was the darkness that tricked him into hoping that she wasn't there for him, that he was simply sharing the room with her objective, but that was not the case. He was right where he was supposed to be and his fears were very valid.

When the door closed, no lights came on. He could hear her move close. Had his hands not been bound to his feet, he might have scurried away but as it were he was too afraid to wiggle out of her path. He was too afraid to move at all.

“I can smell your fear, little mouse.”

Sweat dripped from his nose. His tongue rolled out his mouth as he gave in to the need to pant. His eyes were wide but he could see nothing in the darkness.

“Why are you so frightened,” she continued, “do you know who I am?”

Something cold and dry wrapped around his snout. The grip was tight and knobby, the bumps bruising his nose and pinching his lips as it clamped his mouth shut forcing his teeth to cut into his tongue. More, similar, appendages rose from the floorboards and wrapped around his body, digging into his back and pulling his arms apart despite his hands being tethered to his ankles. All that escaped him were muffled groans, but she hadn't expected an answer anyways.

The lights came on with a lions roar. He was initially blinded, but after a second his eyes swept the room. Shelves lined the chamber, stocked with torn scrolls and books with worn out seams. Glass cylinders and vials fizzled in between the literature, some bubbling over while others' contents crept up like gue. Opaque stones, some glowing and some dull, sat among the shelves, each carved with runes the poor observer could not interpret. He knew the symbols were of the Sacred Tongue, which he hadn't had the privilege of learning. That lack of privilege was actually why he was there on the floor in this magician's library. He had been fighting in the streets for such a privilege, not only for himself but for all, when he was arrested. He considered himself a revolutionary, but those that governed his state saw him differently. And those that have the power have the final say. He was not a revolutionary. He was a traitor. And he found himself, laying on his belly, staring straight up into the eyes of-

“The next Queen of Batloe.”

His eyes were yanked from the woman as excruciating pain wracked his body. His bindings were not inanimate, nor were they artificial, they were bone and they were very much so alive. If their grip had been tight before, then this was something other than tight. His skin began to peel apart and give way to the skeletal claws. They cut through his muscles like butter and scraped against his own bone like fingernails on a chalkboard. He couldn't even cry out for relief as the undead hand around his maw had a grip so tight it had begun to displace his teeth.

“You wanted to die for our country?” She hissed, stooping over him and placing one furry, clawed hand atop his head. She shook him, trying to demand his gaze but the pain was too much. His eyes rolled around in his sockets as if they'd been cut loose from his brain. This only further enraged her and her grasp tightened. A white gas began to rise from his flesh, rushing over to the woman as if blown by a wind, and as it left he endured a pain that made the previous

agony look like nothing. He writhed about in silence and she smiled, saying, “Now you die for the Queen.”

Truth released him and he crumpled to the ground completely still. The boney appendages that had bound him evaporated into a ephemeral liquid that floated back to their master in goopy droplets like moths to a light. She absorbed the ivory energy through her flesh and her head rocked back as the high hit her in the nose and then surged through her body. After a shiver she collected herself. Spitting out a few words in the Sacred Tongue, a mirror jumped off the wall and rushed over to hover before her.

The mirror did not reflect her, instead it showed her a ship – or at least, half of a ship. It sat at the bottom of the sea. Only the shape of the structure made it possible to identify it as a vessel for every inch of the boat was coated in a layer of mossy coral that curled over the edges, tucking in the tanker like as though it were a blanket – a rainbow quilt of pulsating life. Long ago it had transported dead fish across the ocean surface, now it gave live fish a place to reproduce and raise their young on the ocean floor.

With the front end of the barge long since wrenched off, discarded elsewhere in the great Wobniar Wood, the broad front to this makeshift abode gaped open like a gargantuan carport. Beneath the roof, was a workshop. An assortment of tool cluttered tabletops and turning turbines created a maze to the entrance of the severed sunken ship. Though it was on the sea floor, it was beneath an Aquarian Dome. The atmosphere was damp, but the salt water that flowed into the Dome became a mystical gaseous substance that allowed both land lubbers and sea dwellers to breathe and move about almost as if on land. The fires in the furnace were blue, but the mechanic at the table could still strike hot metal against an anvil as if he were back in Foxloe.

The man was bulky. His arms rippled with muscles but his pecks her hidden beneath fat. The sweat that beaded along his scaly forehead immediately evaporated to join the enchanted sea water that swirled around him like a heavy, yet transparent mist. Beside him, was a long torpedo shaped machine. Though not quite the gargantuan size, it shared the three fins of a sumarii. It also bore the enertomb-powered engine of a zoomer, yet it wasn't elevated above the aft-end of the boat like a canon, instead it was positioned in the rear of the tubular vessel like the rocket engine of a spaceship. The chidra wiped his brow, an unnecessary act underwater, and turned to welcome the homeowner.

“Shayu Shua.” The engineer winked.

The homeowner was a fishfolk. His eyes were as black as a sharks. So even though he rolled them at his comrade, his comrade couldn't tell. Shua was an Aquarian curse word – like “bastard”, “Shayu Shua” being something like, “Shark Bastard” – however, in this case it was his codename. As a member of the Golden Dagger, Paud was supposed to keep his identity discreet. That said, as a barechested assassin with a long sash of a metallic scar across his chest, it was quite obvious that the naked fishfolk was a Gill and – at this time – there were only four Gills still alive.

“Baba.” Paud bowed. Straightening back up, his black eyes appraised the machine. He asked, “How long?”

“Not long.” Gear promised.

“Less than a week?” Paud pressed.

“Easy, Civ.” Gear winked again.

Paud patted the man on the shoulder then turned towards the front door but Gear reached out and grabbed his shoulder.

“You got company.” He said in a hushed tone.

The fishfolk nodded and Gear let him go. His company started speaking before he'd even stepped inside his home.

"Nihow, Sheenshong Gill."

He recognized the voice. She had the distinct accent of a southern Aquarian, which made her a merman. Though the two races were essentially the same, there were some physical differences. His flesh had been tanned by time exposed to the sea-filtered light of Solaris, while she had been born with a deep indigo back and soft teal front. Their eyes would've been the same, black as a shark's, but her right eye was something different: an enchanted stone. She was a shadowmancer. Not just any shadowmancer either, she was the greatest shadow slinger to leave the sea floor in centuries. If there was any doubt, the fact that she was captain of the greatest fleet of pirates on Mystakle Planet was proof. Under her leadership, she and her goons had cut the competition in half and created a tight cartel, a fourway monopoly on sea-farring crime in the Southern Hemisphere. The Obsidians got zirra, the Reds got tobacco, the Goldies got laundering, and she and her Sea Lords got all the rest – including anything and everything that had to do with the notorious Disciples of Darkness, the shadowmancers and necromancers of the New Pact.

Paud emitted a low gurgling growl, "Captain Shih."

It was who he had thought it would be, but who he thought it would be was not supposed to be there. Not only was she not supposed to be there but she had used his real name. Then, to add insult to injury, when he walked through the doorway to face her, she tossed him a bag of coins.

"You know how this works." Paud tossed the bag back to the pirate, "This goes to the Bird."

"This isn't for killing the Prince – all that gold went to covering your dear, sick sister's tab." Ching smiled, "This is an advance payment for your next mission."

He turned his back on the merman. The wall by the door was lined with weaponry. Taking his backpack off and setting it before the impressive display, he went about putting up his murderous tools. First back on the wall went the Claws, his blade-equipped gauntlets, having been cleaned and polished since they took off the head of the king's son. With them out of the way, he could reach said head. Pulling it from his sack, he turned back to the Captain.

He threw her the wrapped head of the Prince, saying, "I only take missions from the Bird. Take it up with her."

Ching caught the head and set it on the table beside her, her smile not wavering. She jostled the bag of change in her hand.

"Do you know which faction sees over your sisters care?"

The cursed blood in his veins began to heat up. His shoulders squared, his jaw set.

"It isn't the Empire or their secret lovers in Antipa." Ching continued, her amicable expression slowly changing as her upper lip peeled back from her gums, showing off her fangs, "She isn't kept alive by the regimes of Iceload or Sondor. Who is it that keeps her alive? Which magicians is it that you turned to?"

Shadows began to seep from her right eye, swirling around her body and sizzling as it cut through the wet atmosphere of the submarine world. She could see the assassin itching to return to his bag of blades, his knuckles clenching out of reflex as if he still wore his armored gloves. For a moment, she almost hoped that he had forgotten his place. That he had forgotten who she truly was and what she was capable of. But then she pushed her pride aside and drove home the deal.

“You came to us out of necessity, Shayu Shua.” Ching said, her voice shifting to a softer tone, “Your sister has been cared for, but she is at the same time held hostage. This job offer will not only pay handsomely, but it will offer you and your kin a way out.”

“What do you mean?” Paud growled.

“Sereibis.” Ching said, “The School of Modern Healing – the best healers in the world – where the doctors are protected by civil law. Where debt collectors charge interest, rather than demand blood.”

Paud shook his head, “How is that possible?”

Ching ignored his question, “You won’t have to work for the Bird. You won’t have to work for me. You won’t have to go by Shayu Shua any longer.”

Paud took a step towards her. She immediately strengthened her shadows, coating herself so thick that she appeared like nothing more than a silhouette.

Again, Paud asked, snarling this time, “How?”

“Because you’ll be working for me.”

Paud whirled around. The voice came from his left. There on the left side of the room, between two bookshelves and above a door, was a wide round mirror. It normally reflected light from a sunroof that caught the rays that made it down through holes in the great reef, but it had grown dark. So dark that it cast an unnatural shadow upon both the sea people now staring up at it. In that black screen, however, Paud could see a hand. Furry gnarled fingers clamped around a rusty scarlet stone, the head to a staff that extended out of view.

“And who are you?” Paud demanded.

“Truth.” The mirror replied.

“I know of you.” Paud snapped, “How can you promise Cassandra will be allowed into Munkloe?”

The figure in the mirror leaned forward. A black hood became differentiable from the darkness. Paud could make out the faint outline of a snout beneath the cowl.

“If you do this for me,” she said, “then I will have power over the throne of Batloe.”

Paud turned back to Ching Shih. Her shadows were still out and ready. His weapons were against the wall and still tucked in his bag. There was even the possibility that the necromancer in the mirror could attack him for all he knew. Gear Baba would come to his aid, but he could not be quick enough. The poor chidra would likely lose his life too. Then, whether or not he could overpower Ching and Truth, it would all be for naught. His sister, in a black market hospital hidden somewhere in the Disciples of Darkness’ Dragon Islands, would surely pay the price for his trouble making.

He had no choice.

“I have one last job to complete before the end of the week.” Paud stated, “Then I’m yours.”

“Wonderful.” Truth snickered.

“What is it you want me to do?” Paud asked.

Pale, white teeth became visible from beneath the hood. Sharp and grinning.

“I want you to give me the Batloen throne.” Truth said.

“By killing the one who sits on it now?” Paud asked.

The faceless necromancer nodded.

Paud’s gills flared as he let out a sigh.

He turned to Ching and held out his hand. She tossed him the coin purse. He turned back to the mirror, but the darkness was gone and the faint Solarin light once more poured in. Much

like the mirror, when he turned back to the merman she too was gone. His front door ajar. Outside his house, he heard Gear wail on the metal anvil once more – a noise that he hadn't heard since he entered his home.

With the metal still ringing, Gear hollered, "Tight spot you got dere, Civ."

"Nothing new." Paud muttered.

"Dat guardsman, for da King of Batloe," Gear said, "he ain't no joke."

Paud rolled his shoulders then went back to unpacking his equipment.

"Suppose dat suites you dough, Civ." Gear snickered, "Never had a sense of humor anyway."

Despite his predicament and contrary to the chidra's claim, as Paud knelt by his bag, he couldn't help but smirk a bit, though he never would've admitted that to the engineer.

Chapter Five: Calm Before the Storm

Solaris glared in his eyes. He'd have no more vision if he kept his eyes open and so he clamped them shut. He didn't need to see. Though it was only his fifth day aboard the *Obsidian Sail*, the incessant training had thrown him up and down, left and right, all over the ship so much so that he felt as if he'd been there for ages. His bare feet knew exactly which plank upon which he stood, the little rivets and splinters beneath the pads of his toes acted like some form of brail to his sun-blinded mind. And just as well as he had come to know the ship, had he come to know the foe before him.

Jason "the Giant" Kakal. He couldn't see the smirk on the bear's snout but he could feel it in his voice as he slid playful threats into his educational sermons.

"Tahm to test yer resilaence, Mr. Woodsman."

Tou gulped. His right hand shot up almost as if on its own accord. He'd been hit in the face so many times in the last five days that the universe had decided to start giving him some form of premonitions. Sure enough, his hand caught a wooden pole that would've clunked him in the head a moment later.

"Pain." Jason continued, "Mahnd ovuh matter, Fou."

Scoffing, Tou adjusted his grip. *Pain?* There wasn't a fiber of muscle in his body that hadn't been torn. His hands were covered in blisters and displaced caluses. Cramps wracked his gut as his metabolism burned up everything his belly had to offer. The only agony Tou lacked was dehydration as the boatswain, Drakken, refused to let the crew go without fresh clean water even if the Captain felt that all other forms of strain made the body stronger. That said, all other forms of agony had very much so become a regular part of Tou Fou's life. With a proud grin, Mr. Woodsman thought to himself: *I'm not afraid of pain.*

"Pain's but a faelin. It's rael – farakin rael – but you get to choose how you interpret it."

What Tou was afraid of was the impending length of the anecdote that was swirling around in Jason's brain, sure to soon slowly slip out of his slobbery snout. A shadow fell over Tou and he heard the Giant's weight creak the floorboards before him. With the man's silhouette eclipsing Solaris, Tou was able to open his eyes and looked up at the furry warrior. While Tou had one, Jason held two poles – and his were knobby. This whipped the scoff off Tou's lips and he swallowed it down with an audible gulp. All that separated him from the incoming onslaught was whatever tale Jason was about to tell. Maybe he could stomach the story.

"When ah was uh tot," Jason began, "went to sae mah uncle in Bash. Hae was a great zirra farmer, aeven greater zirra snorter, and in the end that's what got him on the wrong sahd of the grass. Had been for a whahl too. Found him rottin in a pahl of powder."

"Wait – *Rotting?*"

Jason nodded, "Hae was half goo when wae got there. Ahs had both rolled out of his head and a whole flock of maggots had made an entahr godai civilahzation outa his maw."

Tou gagged so hard he fell to one knee.

Those among the crew that had been clustered around them, eager to watch the next stage in Tou's torturous training, quickly shuffled off. Whether they knew the story or not, they had no intention of hearing anymore. Tou wasn't sure where Jason was going, but he was more than ready for him to get there, get done, and get on with the pain.

“Whole ahland smelled worse than a lah. So bad they couldn’t aeven fahnd the tahm to dig a hole. Town Master made us take him up the hill in a wael barrow and toss him off the cliff into the sae. Whole way up, ocean braeze was just blowin his funk raht down mah snout. Ah tell you, that stank was so strong-”

He poked Tou in the gut with one of his sticks, producing a, “Hmph?” from the earth elf. “You ever smelled death?” Jason asked.

Tou’s lip curled as he nodded.

“Mm.” Jason grunted, “Well ah swear that stank was so strong ah could taste it.”

Tou’s stomach clenched, fortunately (or unfortunately) he had nothing left in his gut to heave.

“Saelu to us was that mah Pa was helpin. Hae set us straight. Said, ‘It’s jus a smell. It’s rael, but the part of ya that thank it’s bad? That’s just a faelin.’” Jason put both his poles in one hand so he could lift Tou with his free hand. Once the earth elf was back on his feet, Jason tapped his noggin gently with a pole, explaining, “Yer brain’s the one that says it stanks. Same way it says yer woman smells lahk flowers whahl the rest of us thank shae smells like the godai Underdocks of Yelah. Ya follow? Nothin stanks anaymore than it smells good – everaythang just smells. Some thangs smell more or some thangs smell less, but what it smells lahk is just a faelin. And you can change those. Will power. Mahnd ovuh matter.”

Jason rolled his shoulders back and puffed out his chest, grinning down at Tou with a posture that was a tacit query for feedback.

Tou bit the bait, “You can’t change your feel-”

WACK! Jason came down hard on Tou’s scalp with one of his staffs and, as Tou recoiled, Jason brought down the other. WACK!

“FARA-” Tou couldn’t even finish his curse before-

WACK! WACK!

Tou was on the floorboards. Stars exploding on the inside of his eyelids.

“Maybae you couldn’t in the past,” Jason growled, “but raht now you better fahnd out how! Get up!”

Fearing the next onslaught, Tou had already been in the process of rising to his feet before he had been commanded to do so.

“Ah’ll strahk ya with mah left arm and you’ll take it,” Jason explained, raising his dominant hand. Lowering his left, he raised his right, “then you’ll block mah raht.”

Through gritted teeth, Tou grumbled, “And if I block both?”

“Farak around and fahnd out.” Jason snarled back.

Tou responded with a submissive curse under his breath then braced himself. Jason didn’t give him much time. With his gargantuan stature and wingspan, Jason’s left caught Tou so far back on his thigh that it was nearly his backside. The blow swept his leg right out from under him. Even as he fell, Tou tried to reach up and stop the next assault but the pain soaring through his body, surging up from his laterals like an upside down lightning bolt, not only blinded him but simultaneously froze his joints and slackened his muscles. His raised staff bent with hardly any resistance and Jason’s staff smashed down on his shoulder, nailing him to the deck.

Once his head stopped ringing after cracking against the floorboards, the very next sound he heard was the bearn’s cackle.

“Not hard enough?” Jason barked, “Ah can hit harder!”

“Bet.” Tou growled.

Suddenly, all that pain from prior days of training seemed to have dissipated. In fact, even the agony of Jason's anecdote seemed quite tantalizing compared to his current state on the floor. Nonetheless, Tou took a deep breath. Holding it, he forced his limbs to lift him to his feet. Once halfway there, he put his wooden sparring sword beneath him and used it as a crutch to get the rest of the way up.

Then Jason kicked the pole right out from under him.

"If God wanted ya to have a third leg, hae woulda blessed ya at birth!"

Tou groaned.

"Get up on yer own strength fore ah hit ya again."

This time, Tou got up faster. As if he was already learning the lesson of the day, he embraced the suffering and powered through. But he wasn't even fully upright before Jason struck at him again. However, the elf was still prepared.

One knotted staff swung low for his shin. Tou braced himself for impact but otherwise ignored this attack, instead forcing his eyes to look away and note the angle of the bear's right hand as it swung the second rod. Before the first landed, Tou raised to parry the second. That way, as the initial blow bounced off his shin and his vision went white as his brain seared with pain, all he had to do was keep swinging and hold fast to his weapon. With a pop, he beat back his foe's second blow.

Glaring until his sight returned, Tou gave Jason a triumphant nod.

"Thought you could hit harder?" He said.

Jason smiled, "Gettin there Mr. Woodsman. Wae'll bae at this til Solaris reaches its paek."

Tou's shoulders fell.

"Now, this tahn around: take a hit, block, then take anothe hit, and block again." Jason commanded, "Got it?"

"Donum." Tou muttered.

At least there was an end in sight. With every WACK!, Tou trained his eyes on the sky and prayed that Solaris might rise just a little bit quicker. In the meantime, his muscles were mashed down to the bone and his dark, ebony skin became almost iridescently dark as blood pooled in bruises beneath. Each time the bear's stick caught his head, memories flashed across the membrane of his mind: *Charred ruins of the home he never knew, littered with unread messages tucked in untouched bottles. His sister, Zou, shoving him down beneath the mane of their beast-mother as he writhed in pain and clutched the bolt in his shoulder.* He beat away these painful thoughts. The discomfort of his past encouraged him to charge head first into the torture awaiting him at present, but even Tou's resilient will had a limit and finally he caught a bonk on the head that he could not rise from.

Down he went. Down upon the deck. But also down into that dark place that haunted him in nightmares, a heart wrenching memory and yet one that he cherished. The last time he saw Zou.

Zou was trembling. Tears were streaming down her cheeks, washing the dirt from her brown skin. These tears flew from her lips with the spit sprayed by her shrieks. Her fists were clenched by her hips, her shoulders heaving with each shout. Each time she cried out, he cried back. Shaking the same as her. Neither listening to what the other was saying as both knew there would be no minds changed that night.

Dark beasts loomed around them. They watched with black eyes, their snouts turned down to the earth, their lips creased by frowns. Their mound like backs looked burdensome

between their shoulder blades as they watched their adopted children fight. This was not a fight like their kind knew, there was no barred fangs and no bloodshed, only heartbreak. Their mother flinched with each insult flung. Though she couldn't completely comprehend, she knew her heart would soon be wrenched in two.

Zou demanded they leave. It was finally time to go to the city – to stay. She wanted to rejoin civilization – she was no longer a child of the woods and she wanted to be a woman of the world. Not only that, but the woods were dying. The elves of the city were encroaching. The tree line was receding. Their herd had tried to raid the city, to discourage the people, but it had only hastened the urban spread. If they went to the city, Zou argued, then maybe they could convince the elves to stop and save their beast-family's way of life.

Tou was terrified. He was younger. He didn't remember the before time. All he knew of civilization was the wound in his shoulder and the fear he had felt as he had almost fallen to his death. The woods were safe, in Tou's mind, the woods were familiar. The city? It was like the charred remains of his blood-families home. All it harbored for him was pain. They had no choice, Tou argued, they had to stand their ground deep in the Tadloen forests and defend their adopted family.

The barrens watched in silence. They didn't want their elven children to leave, but they knew Zou was right. Eventually, beast-mother got up and separated them. One of the younger barrens escorted Zou to the edge of the herd, away from Tou, while beast-mother had Tou lie down to sleep beside her. Tou and Zou normally slept together, curled up against their monstrous matriarch's muscled hide, but they needed space that night.

Tou watched her walk away. Her shoulders still trembling with both rage and fear. Her dark hair bouncing behind her until she dissolved into the shadows.

A tiny bit of his consciousness, looking back on this memory as he lay on the deck of the *Obsidian Sail*, reached out to her – called out to her in this blunt-force-induced day dream. He couldn't have known as a child, but as an adult he knew that he would never see her again. At midnight, the hunters of the city would come for the herd and, in that commotion, he would flee with his beast-mother and she would not be there when the herd returned.

He extended his hand and opened his mouth to say-
WACK!

Jason's pole swatted Tou's knuckles and his hand flopped back to smack himself in the face. He was back. Fully conscious. Staring up at the noon-time Solaris until it was eclipsed by Jason's bulbous head.

Tou sat up, asking, "How long was I out?"

"Too long." Jason growled.

"That's enough for today."

Both the bearn and the elf turned to bow to the approaching Captain. Dressed as dapper as ever – his head was topped with a droopy witch hat, his chest completely bare so that his black scales glistened in the sunlight, and his baggy britches were blown tight against his waist by the ocean breeze – he walked with the air of a king with both hands behind his back. As he approached, Jason reached down to help Tou to his feet (allowing him to use his staff as a crutch this time around).

"The Battle will soon be upon us." Dresdan stated.

"Soon?" Tou looked from the Captain to the first mate, "How soon is soon?"

Jason scratched the back of his head with a guilty shrug, "Trainin's trainin, Fou. Just cause the big day is coming up doesn't maen ah can start slackin on whippin you into shape."

“You don’t think you’ll be ready?” Dresdan asked.

Tou’s head jerked back around to the chidra, “No sir. I’ll be ready.”

“Good.” Dresdan rolled his shoulders and scanned the crew now gathering back around them as he continued, “In three days, comrades, we will slay a god.”

If the folks on deck hadn’t been paying attention before, they were now.

“The Sea Lords.” Dresdan explained, “Their entire fleet. Whether you believe they will be meeting God or Barro or neither, they’ll meet the sea floor before Solaris sets three days from now.”

Sealed lips suppressed the gasps of disbelief while the eyes of the crew gave away their obvious alarm. The Sea Lords were the most powerful pirates on the sea and had been for years. There was not an illicit business that did not involve their greedy palms and even fewer conspiracies that weren’t made possible by the dark web of mischief their Captain weaved. Captain Ching Shih had haunted the oceans as much as the Iahtro Storm itself and the idea of stopping her seemed tantamount to challenging a hurricane to a fistfight.

Although, if anyone could tussle with a typhoon, it’d be Dresdan Otubak.

“We will not be alone. The allies that will be fighting alongside us are as revered as the Emperor himself and as feared as anyone who’s ever worn the Black Crown.” Dresdan raised his indigo eyes to the sky, daring Solaris herself as he concluded, “We will destroy the Sea Lords, then disband the *Obsidian Sail*. It will end the Pirate Wars and we will retire, redeemed, as legends.”

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With one hand grasping the tongs, she reached up and cranked the lever down. The furnace roared as a great metal arm descended from within to squash the plates of amber steel beneath. Cracks split as the separate plates combined, cutting through the stack like yellow glowing lightning bolts. Flakes and chips crumbled off like the sweat that was pouring from her temple. Then Tabuh relented, raising the lever and the arm with it. She adjusted the plates with the tongs. The plates had been welded together to form a firm stack of cards, but they had not yet become one malleable block, and so again she pulled down the bar, which dropped the great cylinder arm, and mashed the steel together harder. Over and over she did this, flipping the material to subject another side to the crushing machine, adjusting how deep it sat in the furnace to put different sections of the cube under the heavy arm of the compressor. There was a gentle firmness to her technique, a patient strength that had been partly inherited, but mostly learned.

Her golden eyes were protected from the heat and light in the belly of the forge behind the magical panes of her smithing goggles, but they burned nonetheless as she resisted the urge to blink in an effort to remain absolutely focused with the task at hand. So possessed was she by the process, she didn’t hear Drakken enter the room behind her. In her defense the chamber was loud enough as it was. Though magical exhaust ports had been installed and the floor, walls, and ceiling had been extensively fireproofed so as to make it possible to have a furnace on a mostly wooden vessel, nothing had been done to protect the ears of those in the forge.

Drakken didn’t interrupt her. He waited for her to get to a stopping place, sitting at the work station behind the oven, content to watch in silence. Before him, on the desk, was a skinny black box. That’s what Tabuh noticed first when she turned around. A pang of guilt struck her in the chest but she brushed it off. Lifting her goggles, she approached the table but did not sit down.

“Mr. Drakken.” She stated.

“Dame Sentry.” The moleman bowed his head.

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the furnace, choking on the soon-to-be sword. Once it became obvious that Tabuh wasn’t going to break it, Drakken leaned back and pressed her.

“Do you know why Dresdan wants this sword?”

Tabuh rolled her eyes, “For ‘the Battle’?”

“Yes.” Drakken nodded, “More specifically, to kill the necromancer that may be at the Battle – have you ever heard of Truth?”

“Were they one of the mancercs that aided the Empahr in the War of the Tahger?”

Again Drakken nodded, “Truth hired us to aid the Empire as well.”

“Fahn choice that war was – all to pick which tahrant got to rule the mancercs.” Tabuh scoffed, “Traded a tahger for a witch – and made a whole hell of a lot of pahrates rich in the process.” She shook her head until her frustration with the foolish skirmish diminished enough for her to return to the conversation, “So Dresdan wants a magic sword to kill some poor fool for Truth?”

“To kill Truth herself.” Drakken stated.

Tabuh’s head cocked to the side.

“We deal in drugs, beneath these Obsidian sails, not in souls.” The moleman explained, taking off his little read cap as he sat up straight, “Truth and the Disciples of Darkness are up to no good-”

“With a name lahk that, who would’ve guessed?” Tabuh remarked.

“-and Dresdan feels personally responsible-”

“As hae lahklay should.” Tabuh interjected.

Now it was the moleman who’s head cocked to the side.

“Was Dresdan in charge of orchestrating the War of the Tiger for the Emperor?” He asked, “If anything, Onotna Sentry was more responsible for the war than any pirate, Pacter, or Antipan associated with the conflict?” Despite the attacks laden in his language, the boatswain still managed to avoid coming off as confrontational. He was sincere. His chest puffed out with concern, not bravado, and his brow furled by the intensity of his honesty. He continued, “This is as much a chance for Dresdan to absolve his crew as it is for you to absolve your family.”

Tabuh wanted to be mad, but she also wanted that chance. She was not a big fan of piracy – she had seen the price of the drugs the Obsidian’s peddled to her people – but she was also not a fan of the current state of politics. She had witnessed as much evil caused by corruption and incompetance in office as she had by criminals in the shadows. The plagues that terrorized Sentrakle had been ignored while foolish foreign campaigns – like the War of the Tiger – seemed only to enable and empower the very groups responsible for the trouble back home. In the end, the swain’s words calmed her.

She had begun to wonder why she was still there. Why she hadn’t taken the void-dust and ran. Was this it? Her hesitation was fate, not failure. *Antipan pahrates*, she chuckled to herself, *Mystakle Planet sure is full of surpahses*. Pushing her pride aside, she smiled at the moleman and answered his questions with another.

“Are you ready?”

“Ma’am?”

She gestured back towards the furnace, “The blade is ready for the Sacred Tongue.”

The confusion on the swain’s face confused the elf aswell.

“But...” He stammered, reaching for the black box on the table before him and opening it, “I came here to convince you-”

Tabuh blushed. Reaching into one of the pockets on her tool belt, she retrieved an empty pouch, “Ah had a change of heart.”

“Why?” Drakken asked.

“Thank Mr. Woodsman.” Tabuh shrugged, “Or God if you baelaave in one.”

Embarrassed, she turned from the moleman and strode back to the oven. Removing the smashed steel with the tongues, she held the glowing rod out before her for him to see. Sapphiric sparkles glistened amongst the orange shine of nearly molten metal. The blade and void-dust had been merged, now it only needed activation from a magician and then the weapon could be beaten and sharpened into its final form.

“Ah’m glad ah stayed.” Tabuh admitted, daring to face the swain once more, “Too long ah’ve ran from purpose. Been so busy runnin from purposes other folks wanted for mae, ah never stopped to make mah own.” She looked at the steaming blade, “Ah wanna sae where this takes mae.” No longer embarrassed, she was back to her smirking self. She grinned over at Drakken, “So again, ah’m askin. You ready?”

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The ship throbbed like a blood pumping organ. Tou felt as if he resided in the belly of the great beast that was the *Obsidian Sail* – or maybe in a lonely vein or artery, just close enough to the heart to hear and feel the vibrations but not near enough to see the action. His room was an inclosed organic vessel within the greater body – the windows covered, the door closed, the lights dim – he was a tumor that wasn’t supposed to be there, that didn’t share the DNA that the others on board shared. If this wasn’t obvious, then it was made so by his presence below deck while the celebration sprawled out beneath the stars above.

Wrenching out the rag, he hung it over the faucet and limped back to the bed where he collapsed with an, “Oof.” *It isn’t like I could dance anyways*, he admitted to himself, *even if my legs still worked. Plus* – considering the fact that the party above was partially to celebrate the crew’s coming retirement but mostly to encourage the consumption of the drugs that would not be able to be sold before the Battle – *I don’t need any zirra, I need sleep.*

Yet, just as his eyes began to close, the door was flung open.

Tou shot upright as if he thought Jason was storming in with his knobby pole.

“Shall wae dance?”

Tabuh flitted across the room, tugging at the seam of her britches as if they were a ball gown. Tou smirked at first but as she continued to dance he realized the suggestion wasn’t joke. A curve took hold of the edge of his lips and his brow arched up. His face was contorted with concern – a concern that escalated even further when her golden eyes met his and she winked. Gesturing to the thumping bass above, she continued to sing.

“On a braht cloud of music, shall wae flah?”

His expression did not shift, but Tabuh’s did. She rolled her eyes so hard that her head rolled with them. Prancing back across their room, she paused by the bed to poke the barren.

With hands on her hips, she prodded, “What’s your problem?”

Tou pulled himself up off the bed and hobbled over to the bathroom. In the doorway, he examined his naked torso and the beautiful splotches of blacks and blues that polka dotted his flesh, providing just a hint of the absolute mush that had been made out of his muscles. He

looked over his shoulder and, meeting her gaze, he saw that she understood his point. Acting as if he could strip his tone of any emotion, he stated as monotonely as he could manage, “You’re in a mood.”

“Ah am.” She spun over to him, “A good one.” She playfully slapped him on the shoulder, “Enjoy it whahl it lasts.”

Again, with as dead a tone as he could muster, he said, “You finished the sword?”

“Indaed.” She twirled away from the doorway, skipping about once more, “Now dance with mae.”

Tou didn’t move. He watched her waltz in the mirror and his expression began to soften. Though he thought he guarded his thoughts, his big brown eyes following her reflection gave him away. As Tabuh spun around, she caught glimpses of him watching and it didn’t take her long for her to read him like a book. She froze.

“You can’t dance, can you?”

“My forest didn’t have a dance hall.” Tou said.

Tabuh frowned, but even as she did she grooved with the tunes above them. Rocking with the beat as she thought and as she thought she noticed that Tou too had begun to move with the rhythm. *It isn’t that he can’t*, she decided, *just that he hasn’t*.

“You know how to hunt, raht, Mr. Woodsman?” She asked, “How to stalk prey?”

Tou nodded.

She winked at him again, “Then stalk mae.”

He flinched at the thought and she chuckled.

“Move when ah move. Follow mae. Lahk wae’re in a duel.” Tabuh explained, beginning to bounce a bit on the balls of her feet with the regular thunder rumbling the ceiling and floorboards, “You can faht, you can dance.”

Still, Tou remained glued to the bathroom mirror.

Tabuh flung her hands up, “Tou!”

He whirled around, “What!”

“Don’t bae a coward!” She snapped, “Get up ya godai-”

Tou started to march towards her so abruptly that Tabuh instinctively back pedalled.

“Where’s the limp?”

“Teach me to dance.”

She smirked as she altered her pace so that her strides matched his. The smile that crept across her lips quickly spread from her to him. The beat was quickening above. There was wrapping on some sort of shrill drum, a fast slapping that had Tabuh taking swift half steps back and forth almost as if she was faking him out, like a sparring partner attempting to trip up their foe or make them flinch. Fortunately, Tou was a fighter and his brain recognized the slight shifts in the angle of her hips and the twists in her steps intuitively. Just as he could anticipate a wooden pole swinging for his shin, he could anticipate where she was going and his body responded accordingly. He was clumsy – of course, as he wasn’t used to the style of the sort of movements – but he caught on fast and Tabuh was thrilled.

“Okay, Mr. Woodsman!” She exclaimed.

His dark skin failed to hide his blush.

They paused as the tempo changed again. The focus was taken off percussion, now a twangy string instrument took control. Tou’s eyes got wide but Tabuh jumped back into the role of the teacher.

“Take mah hands.” She snatched his, not giving him much of an option, then asked, “You can count, raht. Those woods-baests taught you numbers?”

Tou rolled his eyes but they barely had time to stop rolling before Tabuh started moving.

“One, two, thrae,” she said, “and one, two, thrae...”

“One, two, three,” he murmured, “and one, two, three...”

Hand in hand, they waltzed around the bed chamber, twisting and swaying. As they did, Tou’s furred brow slowly slipped back upon his temple and Tabuh noticed. She stopped so abruptly he nearly tripped over his own feet.

“What’s wrong?”

He gave her his eyes, “This isn’t dancing-dancing.”

She frowned, “What do ya maen?”

He opened his mouth but his tongue flopped limp and he looked away.

“Come on-”

Releasing her left hand, he grabbed her waist, pulled her close, and then met her gaze again.

“Oh,” She gasped, blushing like he had before, only the red in her cheeks stood out on her pale skin so much so that she almost seemed to glow, “well...”

“Right?” Tou asked.

“Oh yes.” She smiled.

They were frozen there, pressed close to one another, and her blush was very quickly spreading back to Tou’s cheeks. After a moment, he cleared his throat.

“Well?”

“Oh yes!” Tabuh flinched, “Follow mae!”

Tabuh didn’t count this time, she watched his face as he whispered the numbers under his breath. The poor boy was focusing harder than he had when he was being pummeled by Jason earlier that day. Each step he took possessed as much effort as each hammer blow she struck to the blade she had only just finished forging, but each step he took made him more confident as well – more willing to trust his intuition and give in to the flow of the muffled melody. As he got more and more comfortable, his mind began to wander. Not away from Tabuh, but closer. He had revealed so much to his roommate over the past week but had gotten so little time to investigate her. Once he was sure enough of his groove to trust that he wouldn’t step on her toes – or his own – he met her eyes.

“How’d a smith learn to dance?”

Tabuh took his hand back in her own as she reminded him, “Ah’m a Sentray first and foremost.”

She curtsied with a smirk and in doing so she lifted Tou’s left hand high then pulled his right hand so that he was turned around with his back to her. She whispered in his ear, as if joking, even though the dread in her voice could not be cloaked.

“Mah blood defahnes mae baebefore mah brain has anythang to say.”

Twirling him back around, Tou faced her once more. Undaunted, he pressed further.

“What does dancing have to do with nobility?”

Tabuh shrugged, admitting, “Nothin. Nothing but tradition.”

“So dances weren’t-” Tou attempted to mimic Tabuh’s maneuver. He took her left hand up and yanked her right but got stuck on his own angles halfway through. She gracefully slipped from his grasp, spun around and slid her hands down his wrists to let go and take hold of his waist. Tou croaked out the end of his question, “-fun?”

Tabuh smiled, “They were, but there was always a scaeme undernaeth it all.”

“Like what?”

Suddenly, Tabuh yanked Tou so close he hopped out of his planned step and slammed into her – nearly knocking her down had she not planned for such disruption. Instead, the move ended with her back bent nearly parallel to the floor and Tou trembling over her as he strained not to collapse upon her.

“There was a man.” She whispered.

“A man?” Tou gulped.

Straightening back up, she twirled Tou again as she explained, “A boy.”

“A boy?” Tou grunted.

“When ah was a girl.”

“Ah.” Tou came out of his twirl and gave twirling her another shot. This time, partially thanks to Tabuh’s congeniality, he was successful, “Did you lahk him?”

“Ah did, but ah didn’t lahk that ah had to.” Tabuh answered. She took his victory and decided to increase the difficulty. The tempo above was changing anyways. She quickened her pace and dragged him stumbling around after her, criss-crossing her feet as she circled the room and elaborated, “Mah father isn’t a bad man and naither was the boy – hae had no more choice in it than ah – but after ah made it clae ah had no intention of baeing some kahnda traetay...let’s just say ah wasn’t invahnted to manay more dances after that.”

“I see.” Tou noted, struggling to listen and keep up, “Treaty?”

“Twaen the Sentravay and the Ipativay.” Tabuh explained, “But then Redemption Day happened anyway.”

He tripped over his feet but caught himself without taking his hands off her’s, “Huh?”

“The rahs of the Mystvokar.” She rolled her eyes – not at him, but at: “Talloome Asslore’s bloody revolution.”

“Ah.”

He sighed. Not due to her explanation but due to the fact that he had finally mastered her grape-vine and then, of course, she switched it up again as the music slowed once more. And allthwhile, he still had to listen.

“Mhm. After that, all of Sentrakle got turned insahd out. The paeple turned on the nobilitay, considering us traitors for wanting to budday up with the new regeaime, whahl they sahmultaneouslay defended us as wae were the onlay ones able to kaepp the new regeaime at bay. Ah’d just had enough of it. Enough baeing a Sentravay, enough baeing Assloadic, and enough baeing a prop for a buncha old men’s plots and schames.”

Tou was better at the slower style. Taking short steps, he was able to focus more on her words.

“What did you want?”

“To do something for mae.”

She was looking away. Not at anything in particular but that was because she wasn’t really looking. Nor was she really hearing either. She was listening to Tou, but no longer to the music. Tou noticed this, as the beat above no longer seemed to be slow enough to match their gait. His eyes scanned her face. It was somber, though her brow was stern. It was as if she was pondering the question he had asked even before he had asked it, so he asked another.

“Like what?”

“Anaythang.” She added with a chuckle, “Anaythang *but* a politician.”

“A smith?”

“Or a shooter.”

“As a soldier?”

Turning back to look at Tou, she said, “Ah said, ‘for mae’, ya gop. Not for some kang or quae.” Her ears caught back on to the music above and they moved a little quicker. Not by much, they still danced slow enough to remain close to one another. They could feel one another’s breath, only a thin sheet of air separated them. She continued, “Ah plan to dance to mah own baet. Ah don’t know exactlay what that will maen...but ah lahk where thangs are going.”

“Here?” Tou was barely able to withhold his surprise.

“Yes, Tou,” She smiled, “ah’m happy. Ah lahk baeing haer...haer with you.”

Tou grinned, “I do too.”

They stopped dancing. It seemed as if the music above had stopped. The ship ceased to rock as if the ocean itself had calmed and flattened out like a pane of glass. Around them, the room fell dark, but the dim light that shrowded them brightened to make the two glow as their bodies pressed together. His deep dark eyes were locked on her big bright eyes.

He asked, “Can I k-”

She kissed him.

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For a monolith of a man, he limped into the room with a slouch that made him appear half as tall. His shoulders were slumped like a child caught lying. His eyes dragged on the floor as he made his way to the chair and plopped down before the Commander.

“Sheriff?”

He certainly no longer looked the part. Melting in his gaudy frame like as though he was meant to be a Knome and not a bearn. But the Commander’s kind word kindled a bit of the old flame that had burned within him when he had held the title of Sheriff. Swallowing his misery, he raised his gaze and faced the man for just long enough to make eye contact before he bowed his head.

“Commander Ipativay.”

“That limp,” Shaprone wrapped his fingers on the desk, pulling the bearns eyes back to his own, “you haven’t healed?”

“Commander...” Justin hesitated, “the haelers in Yelah aren’t lahk the haelers in the capital.”

Where his fingers had once wrapped, his hand slammed palm down. He hit his desk with such force that his chair shifted back a couple inches. Unlike the bearn, Shaprone still had plenty of fire in his soul. For a minute, the electric elf bit his tongue – forced to look away from the pitiful shell of the once proud, law enforcer before him.

“We’ll get you fixed.” He murmured before speaking up and asking, “How can you properly serve your city, staggering around like that?”

Again, Justin hesitated. Finally, he cleared his throat and said in as quite a tone as the behemoth could manage, he said, “They raeplaced mae.”

Shaprone shot out of his chair.

“Who? Magistrate Onotna? Without the Mystvokar’s permission?!”

That flame Shaprone had initially tickled within Justin was now being fanned by the Commander’s outrage, for this was an outrage Justin shared but had been suppressing for days.

Now, Commander Shaprone Ipativy – a noble and able, up-and-coming star of the new Mystvokar government – was sitting across from him and sympathizing with his situation. He put faith in the fuming elf before him and sat up straighter in his chair.

“They said ah was in no state to serve!”

“Cause they botched your haeling!”

All Justin could do was nod.

Cursing, Shaprone sat back down in his chair.

“We’ll get you healed.” Shaprone promised, his eyes as blue as a pilot light, “I promise you that.” He shook his head and looked away for a moment. Then, he asked, “Tell me about your brother.”

If Justin wasn’t upright before, he surely was now. There was no way he would let the Commander doubt his loyalty to the Mystvokar – especially not because of his blood ties to that bastard Jason Kakal, “Hae’s no brother of mahn, Commander. Hae’s a traitor.”

Shaprone pressed deeper, “A drug dealer?”

“Worse than that, sir.” Justin warned, “Godai Antaipa.”

“Antipa?” Shaprone asked.

“Farakin Rosethorn.” Justin confirmed.

“Rosethorn...” Shaprone whispered, cocking his head to the side, “They work with the Trinity Nations, correct, the Imperial Navy and all?”

“With?” Justin scoffed, “For.”

“For?” Shaprone leaned back, taking the front legs of his chair off the floor as he gestured for the ex-Sheriff to continue, “For who exactly?”

“The Imperial Navy.” Justin shrugged, “Maybae not for the Admiral – the Magistrate Onotna Sentray – but for those that work for him? Sure! They been doin the Empahr’s bidin since the War of the Tahger if not baefore that!”

Now it was Shaprone who was a bit nervous. He knew the answer before he even posed the question but nonetheless he posed it: “What about the Strategy Admiral – Zaria Ein.”

“Absolutelay!” Justin crowed.

Again, Shaprone slammed his hand down on the desk. This time with such force that the desk hopped up off the floor an inch and poor Justin flinched in his chair. Shaprone nodded to himself in shame, “You know they sent Zaria after Tabuh.”

“Ah’d heard.” Justin stated.

“You think they’re in cahoots?” Shaprone asked.

Justin answered truthfully, “Ah do.”

Shaprone cursed again.

Justin went out on a limb, “Those Sentray...”

Shaprone looked up, raising an eyebrow.

Justin gulped but continued, “They think they can do whatever they want. Not any more, Commander, not under the Mystvokar. There is law and order in this countray now, justice, and it don’t matter what kahnd of blood you got in your veins.”

For a moment, Shaprone said nothing. Justin was beginning to worry he’d gone too far, but something about the Commander’s stare told him otherwise. Slowly, the young man smiled. Finally, he peeled his black and blue bruised hand from the top of his desk and extended it to Justin. Justin would’ve been sweating had he not been a bearn, but he took the hand.

“How would you like to serve in the Army of the Mystvokar?”

“Ah would, sir!” Justin exclaimed.

“Well then, Justin, welcome aboard.”

Shaprone released the man’s thick furred hand and stood to salute him with his hand across his heart. Justin shot up out of his chair and did the same.

“You’re going to help me hunt down the *Obsidian Sail*.” Shaprone smiled, “We are going to bring every single last one of them to justice. Whether their name is Jason Kakal or Tabuh Sentry.” The Commander growled this last sentence as if the villains were standing before him, “There is law and order in this country now.”

Chapter Six: The Deicide

The wind whistled by, curling around Dresdan's cape and tugging it back towards the *Obsidian Sail*. He stood on a plank that extended out over the gentle sea, stretched between his ship and that of his adversary's. There was a plank parallel to his own where she stood, but he looked beyond her for a moment. His eyes traveled south, his gaze skiing up the waves and jumping from one frothing crest to the next until he couldn't discern between the distant ridges. Not far beyond that point, the ocean was swept up in a gargantuan gust where the sea itself became a part of the great column of weather that churned on the horizon, connecting the sea to the sky. The hurricane seemed almost to bend, as if bowing its head in recognition of the Captain's eye, but the motion was so faint that no one would know whether or not it was real or all in their head. Dresdan smiled before turning away – though he did not yet face his opponent.

Instead he looked north, as if intent on taking in the view so that he might never forget this specific moment. While a storm waged to the south, the peaceful island of Oreh waited to the north. The high bluffs of its eastern edge were colorful, each story of stone painted by nature to depict a separate millenia. The green, clifftop grasses were hidden by the ships of the Sea Lords flags. It was just before her shores where they created their circular perimeter. Dresdan stood at the nexus of this ring of vessels. Standing in opposition of his foe, though she couldn't have been sure of the nature of his posture against her. It was now near time that she found out.

He turned to face the Queen of the Pirates.

Ching Shih was not smiling. Her eyes would've been narrowed if they'd had lids to narrow them, instead her gaze was made stern by the muscles flexing in her temple. Her tongue split her snarl to lick her shark-like eyes. The breeze nipped at her sarong, pulling at each of the three leaves so that they flapped like they once had before she'd tied them to her hip – they were the flags of the Muddy, the Tri-Race Rogues, and the Davivo and she wore them like a warrior wears scalps on their belt. There were only four major flags left to collect and she had arranged to obtain one of those four that day.

The flag was as black as the sails it belonged to, folded nicely into a triangle, displayed in the hands of Jason the Giant. The fact that the gargantuan bearn – loaded to the gills with weapons – didn't split the plank was amazing. Dresdan had to repress a flinch everytime Jason shifted his weight. Despite being on a separate plank, parallel to the two Obsidians, John Pigeon couldn't stop himself from cringing. Johnny, like Jason, stood out amongst his crew but not because of his size. While the *Obsidian Sail* was a diverse lot, the Sea Lords consisted almost completely of blue-skinned mermen and fishfolk. Johnny was a sun-dried human from the great plains of Sondor. Unlike Jason, however, Johnny appeared to carry no weapons. All he held was his gaudy belt buckle made of an opaque stone that depicted a snarling barren's head.

While the calm breeze yanked at both Dresdan and Ching, Jason and Johnny stood in opposition to it. They leaned towards the Sea Lord ship that the *Obsidian Sail* was tethered to: the *Hong Chi* – Aquarian for the “Maroon Flag”. Though the flag was a deep shade of red, it certainly wasn't the only thing. The entire vessel was a mosaic of bloody reds and deep-sea blues. These were the Sea Lord's signature colors and they painted the many vessels that surrounded the two bound ships. The entire Sea Lord armada circled the meeting, promising the Obsidians no escape if they were to go about any funny business. Granted, the Obsidians didn't have a shot in the dark to make it to the circumference if they reneged. Two crews worth of Sea

Lords leaned over the banisters of the *Hong Chi*, chomping at the bit for a chance to scrap with the legendary one-ship fleet that was the *Obsidian Sail*. They hung from the rigging of the sails and masts, straddled the banisters, and peaked out the portholes beneath. The Obsidians mirrored their intimidation. The ship sat uneven in the sea as the entire crew crowded the starboard side – amongst them, Tou, Tabuh, and Drakken.

Drakken, in his own tacit way, tilted his snout towards two characters across the gap and drew both elves' gaze with his. One of the individuals was a well dressed nellaf. Black, curling stripes wrapped around his flesh though most of his skin was hidden beneath the layers of what was at least twice the pieces of a three piece suit. The man looked almost like a turtle with how scrawny he was from the collar up and how thick he was layered in garments beneath – appearing weaponless as well, both Tou and Tabuh instantly assumed he was hiding something of value in the many coats and vests he layered upon himself. Aside from his peculiar garb, he was of no more note to the couple. However, the figure beside him they instantly recognized.

They had never seen her before, but for some reason they instantly knew who it was. Even if they had seen her, it wasn't like she was visually distinct. She dressed as if she were the Grim Reaper and revealed a similar level of flesh. She was but a hooded black cloak. Her face was hidden in the shadow of the cowl. Even the shape of her body was hidden by slumped shoulders that made the robe fall around her without a crease. Still, both Tou and Tabuh instantly figured who she was: Truth.

The two elves exchanged glances out of the sides of their eyes, gulping simultaneously. Then their attention was pulled to the captains facing off on the planks.

“Captain Otubak.” Ching smirked.

“Captain Shih.” Dresdan stated.

“I see you've got a new sword.”

Ching's crow eye, that cursed magic marble that sits in one of the eye sockets of every shadowmancer, was fixated on the blade behind his robe. Dresdan slipped his hand to the sheath and drew out the saber. The merman's leer then left the Captain and his weapon to target Tabuh.

“The work of a Sentry.” She remarked.

“I'm trading the ship, not the smith.” Dresdan said. His voice was so plain and still, so forcedly unemotional, there seemed to be a hint of a threat within it. Especially when he turned his gaze upon the nellaf watching from *Hong Chi* and noted, “It seems we both harbor Iceloadic nobility.”

The overdressed nellaf took a step back from the parapet. His comrade in dark robes seemed to loom forward in response.

Ching enjoyed the banter. Gesturing to the cowering man, she introduced him – an act which caused him to tremble further – saying, “Sorelac Icelore – young brother of the Mystvokar and twin brother of the Master of Oreh Island – unfortunately, though he'd make a fantastic swain, he is not a Sea Lord. Merely passing through, a plus-one of our esteemed, mutual acquaintance. A fellow veteran of the War of the Tiger.”

Ching turned to smile at Truth.

Truth spoke from beneath her cowl, “That sword. It isn't just steel and magic.” She inhaled long and loudly, almost as if she were snoring. Just when Tou and Tabuh began to wonder whether she might've fallen asleep, she shifted. Her body turned from those on the planks to Drakken standing behind the railing of the parallel ship, “Void-dust?”

Drakken said nothing, he gave a single nod.

Truth's shoulders seemed almost to shudder though it was hard to tell from beneath her elusive cloak, "What powers has this blade been ensorcelled with?"

Before Drakken could answer, Dresdan raised his free hand towards the necromancer. There was a silent wave of awe in response to the act. Both crews were taken aback for both crews knew of Truth. Though she was no Sea Lord, she was no joke in her own right. The Obsidian's silencing gesture was blatantly disrespectful. Flippant, almost, as well. The chidra didn't even grant her a glance, he kept his eyes on Ching Shih. Lowering his hand and ignoring the tension, he spoke again with his cold, bland tone.

"Captain Shih." He tipped his hat in the direction of the storm which engulfed the horizon, "While we have the calm, we should complete the transaction and go our separate ways."

Again, Shih licked her eyes. Then, for a moment, she turned to appraise the Iahtro Storm. It's clouds were already so sprawled out across the sky they would soon block the face of Solaris. She could feel the vibrations of distant rumbling thunder, like the sound of a distant battle, and smell the damp scent of the impending downpour. It tasted like waterlogged oak on her tongue. Yet she could sense something else in the air and, finally, as she stared at the storm, she saw it with her crow eye.

Glowing silhouettes, like constellations in the shadowy distance, descending from the cover of Iahtro's precipitous canopy. Once they broke free of the wall of clouds, she could make them out with her living eye. It was a delirium. An advancing armada of fire-breathing dinosaurs. Before the Sea Lord Captain could turn on Dresdan, however, the sound of conch shell horns called her attention.

The northern most Sea Lord ship in the fleet's circumference was pitched like a breaching whale. Before the sight could sink in, Ching's attention was drawn to the vessels on either side of the capsizing ship. They were leaning drastically, like a drunk slipping off a barstool, and the crew was scurrying about like the ants of a disturbed pile. The icing on the cake loomed just beyond the three distressed ships, peaking out from the edges of the island bluffs of Oreh: an Imperial ship, it's clover emblazoned flag flapping gallantly as the galley galloped across the waves towards them. Who knew how many more lingered behind?

The Sea Lords were surrounded on the horizontal plane and trapped in half of their vertical options thanks to the approaching dragons, but there was still the other half – the submarine half. Ching didn't even blink (granted, she couldn't have if she wanted to), she spun on her heels, turning her back to those that had betrayed her, and dove from the plank, between the two great ships, into the Aquarian Ocean.

The second her feet left the bridge, both crews exploded. Weapons were drawn immediately. Fingers found triggers, tongues tickled spells, and swords slit ropes as the two sides prepared to board and battle. There was hardly half an instant before there would be no going back, but somehow both ships' first mates stepped into that moment and their comrades froze. It seemed even the wind had ceased. The tide itself had fallen limp, letting the waves sink to a still so that neither the *Obsidian Sail* nor the *Hong Chi* shifted in the sea.

Johnny stood where his captain had and Jason where his. Johnny had one hand raised to his crew, the other gripping his belt buckle which was now beginning to glow a scarlet hue. Jason also had a hand out to his mates while he held an even more unconventional weapon in his other: a chain. In that brief moment of hesitant preparation, Jason had whipped the chain down below his waste. It slapped the plank and wrapped around it twice. The end Jason held hung loose with slack. Johnny didn't much focus on the chain nor did he bother to ponder the Giant's

plan, instead, his eyes darted between Jason and Dresdan – for the two hadn't just switched places. Dresdan had actually moved to stand closer to the *Hong Chi*, not the *Obsidian Sail*.

“What's the deal?” Johnny demanded.

“Wae ain't hare for you.” Jason growled.

“They're here for me.” Truth hissed.

Truth had stepped off the *Hong Chi* and onto the plank. Though her face was hidden in her hood, her glare seemed to radiate out from the darkness with a fury that was nearly visible. It was dissolving the tension that had frozen both parties of pirates. Muscles began to thaw, lungs were beginning to inhale, if one side didn't spark it their would be a mutually spontaneous ignition, but as Truth took another step along the plank Dresdan surged forwards in a flurry of motion.

With a twirl, the black scaled swordsman flung the newly enchanted saber at the necromancer. The blade pinwheeled towards her – or where she had been – for just as the hilt left Dresdan's hand, Truth's robes dissolved into a pale, gray fluid. The liquid didn't melt into the sea, it remained standing like a pillar of goo as it split itself in the center to let the mystical weapon spin through.

And before the blade hit the deck of the *Hong Chi*, both sides erupted.

The Battle had begun.

- - -

Her silver eyes squinted as her armored fingers, ever so gently, pulled back the invisible string of her magic bow. Her target was so far away that no normal archer could expect to shoot true. In fact, even an archer of Lalmly's caliber couldn't hope to hit their mark. Without the Elemental Weapon in her possession, the feat would've been impossible. With the Gustbow, however, the world's greatest archer became Solaris' greatest sniper. Unfortunately, even the mightiest markswoman in the world could fall victim to the pitiful distraction of a puppy's yip.

“Bork!”

Stripping her eyes from the distant deck of the *Hong Chi*, Lalmly glanced over at Cowboy. He sat on a barrel beside her, leaning dangerously over the side of the galley as it careened across the sea towards the nexus of the skirmish, but despite the wind resistance, his ears were up in attention mode.

“Bork!”

Following the vallhund's doughy brown eyes, Lalmly caught on quick. Cowboy wasn't just Lalmly's body guard, after all, he was in charge of defending the Strategy Admiral as well. Zaria Ein wasn't on the navy ship with Lalmly, Zaria was riding a magic-powered zoomer across the sea at a speed that made their own vessel look as though it were treading water. Zaria wasn't alone, she had the most-valued-freshmen-member of the Rosethorn there with her: the tall, electric elven shadowmancer known as Skar. The two were some of the most formidable fighters one could find on Mystakle Planet. In fact, the only place you might be able to find a fair fight against them would be on board one of the two ships the ladies were zooming towards – there, and in the sea beneath them. For as Lalmly had seen, Ching Shih had abandoned ship.

She didn't flee?! Had Lalmly been of a fleshed race, her blood would've turned cold. Her silver eyes honed in on the sea between her comrades and the Battle. There was a darkness beneath the surface and it was rushing towards the women. Looking back to the deuling ships, Lalmly saw a more Sea Lords abandoning the *Chi* to follow their captain. *I knew she wouldn't*

run without drawing blood. Lowering her bow, she gave Cowboy a quick scratch behind the ear to console him.

“Thank you, Cowboy.” She cooed, “Don’t worry now.” She took aim again, raising the Gustbow and screwing her eyes down to a tight sliver, “Zaria and Skar can handle it and, if not, we’ve got their back.”

- - -

Just as the stone in John Pigeon’s belt shone, same as the giant rock on Zaria Ein’s zoomer engine glowed, another brilliant prism had been hard at work beneath the surface of the Aquarian Ocean. It had been propelling a vessel over the Aquarian Domes of Mirkweed. Shooting like a spaceship through the night sky, the Zoomarii stalked its prey in much the same manner that it’s organic inspiration did: like a shark. The machine had circled the Sea Lord fleet a dozen times, as if herding a school of fish, before it had gone in for the bite. The pilot, Paud Gill, remained tucked behind the hydrodynamic watershield that maned the nape of the robotic sumarii’s neck – he was not the bite. The jaws weren’t either. The bite was the passenger.

The passenger, Theseus Icespear, held tight to the three fins of the mechanical beast and when they soared close to the bilges of the buccaneers’ boats, he jumped from the vessel like a harpooner plunges. His harpoon was a mystical spear – crafted by the same smith that crafted Lalmly’s Gustbow and endowed with an equivalent amount of power. Theseus tossed the spear ahead of him like a javelin. The spear cut through the current with ease, striking his target dead on. Once the keel was struck, Theseus arrived. He straddled his weapon and grasped it with both hands. At his mind’s command, ice began to spread from where his spearhead was imbedded in the boat. Not only did it creep along the bottom of the ship, it froze the water around it and created a bulb that was stretching out towards the wielder himself. Once it got too close to his own furry-hide, Theseus wrenched the polearm free. The spell broke and the ice shattered. As he kicked off and the Zoomarii shot up to catch him, the ocean punched through the hole he had made in the hull.

Before Captain Dresden addressed Captain Ching on the planks stretched between their two ships, Theseus and Paud had made it almost halfway around the circle of the Sea Lord fleet that surrounded the two flagships. Neither saboteur knew exactly when the Battle would start. It all depended on what the Sea Lords saw first: a ship capsizing or a dragon rider dipping below the cover of the edges of the Iahtro Storm. And so, when they’d gotten about halfway around, they broke the circle and cut in for the center.

This was not a part of the plan. Well...it was not a part of the Rosethorn’s plan, but see: the Rosethorn didn’t control Paud Gill. The Bird controlled Paud Gill. Zaria hadn’t met with the Bird to hire Paud nor had Dresden – Theseus had been the one to meet with the Bird and solicit the services of the Golden Dagger. He’d arranged for Paud and his Zoomarii to be ready for the Battle. He knew his agenda didn’t fit in with that of his Antipa friends, not completely at least. The Rosethorn wanted to destroy the entire fleet and capture the *Hong Chi* but, as fate would have it, the *Hong Chi* was the only ship Theseus was determined to destroy.

Maybe the old minotaur could have convinced them, but he had decided not to take that chance. As a King, he knew it was better to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission. Thus, halfway through their sabotage of the Sea Lord fleet, Paud turned the Zoomarii on the *Hong Chi* and they shot off like a torpedo.

Both the minotaur and the fishfolk kept their heads on a swivel, switching between scrutinizing the center of the circle and the northern most point of the circumference where they had initiated their assault. Though they couldn't tell when the first of the GraiLord dalvary would be spotted in the sky, they might could see when the first Sea Lord vessel would give Ching Shih their tell. Whether it was luck or wisdom, they'd nearly made it to the focus when the first ship pitched.

A moment later, a figure – shrowded in shadows – plunged into the water between the two vessels. Theseus couldn't speak, his snout was stoppered by his oxygen device, but Paud Gill had gills, he could.

“CHING.” He shouted over his shoulder.

Ching saw them. She paused to glare but her ire almost immediately disappeared as an explosion of darkness surrounded her like ink hiding a squid. The tar colored plume then tightened, twisting into the thick body of a serpentine dragon. After one last snarl at Paud and Theseus, Ching shot off, soaring north.

“Zaria.” Paud murmured.

The Gill slowed their approach for a moment, but continued when a large, furred hand grasped his shoulder. Behind him, Theseus removed his mouth piece to speak but his underwater musings only came out in garbled syllables. They were nearly there anyways. More Aquarians fled the ship, hitting the water and zipping off after their leader or plunging further to hide in the Wobniar Woods below. None seemed remotely interested in interfering with Theseus or Paud and Theseus seemed equally as concerned.

Despite his clients inability to communicate, Paud understood them minotaur and did as he was told – though he couldn't help but think a little lesser of the old hero. *Such a desire for revenge and on an inanimate object no less.* Paud understood revenge. There were many throats he longed to slit. But to seek vengeance on an object? He simply did not have the luxury of such arbitrary retributions. *I'll do my job, he told himself, then I'll kill Ching.*

As he put the breaks on the Zoomarii, slowing them to a virtual halt under the hull of the *Hong Chi*, something new smashed its way below the surface from between the two ships. This mass was far greater than that of the average Sea Lord – fishfolk and mermen tended to have small frames – and the way it thrashed, hiding itself in a flurry of bubbles and flurry, it became immediately obvious that it was not from the sea floor.

Again, Theseus belched a unintelligible command. Turning to him, Paud got the message. The minotaur took one last breath then offered Paud his oxygen devise and gestured to the north. Paud shook his head, “Keep it for him.”

Theseus nodded then leapt from the back of the mechanical shark, diving upwards to the flailing individual.

Paud turned the Zoomerii and cranked the machine up to full speed.

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“You're gonna love this.”

Skar had taken off the bandage that she kept wrapped around her head to hide her crow eye. There was no need to hide it from her comrade nor from the foe that was rushing towards them for this enemy suffered from the same curse. The two shared more in common than their types of mancy, both practiced similar forms of shadow manipulation. They were shape shifters.

Skar's appearance was a spell, a manifestation made of blood and shadows. The opponent that was shooting through the sea towards them was also not in their original form.

"Is that a shamoo?" Zaria asked.

Zaria was behind the wheel of the zoomer. Though her eyes couldn't pierce the surface of the water like Skar's crow eye, she could still see the giant snake like shape surging towards them. The creature soared with such force that the waves split in two in its wake, even as its barbed spine was a dozen meters below the surface.

"Not just any shamoo." Skar warned.

"Farak." Zaria muttered, "Ching."

The Strategy Admiral wasted no more time lamenting. Stepping back from the helm, She snatched the infamous Black Gun from its holster and the Valentine Barrel that was sheathed beside it on her hip. As she began to screw it on, Skar took her place at the wheel. She immediately turned the zoomer but before they could complete the curve and start zipping back towards the navy ship, Zaria snatched the wheel.

"Zaria!" Skar yelled.

"Skar!" Zaria snapped, spinning the wheel back.

The vessel swerved sharply. The waves and wakes smashed together in a twisted heap behind them as the zoomer shot back towards the approaching sea beast and the naval battle beyond.

"Shae's got back up!" Skar warned over the clamor of their commotion.

Zaria looked Skar up and down, "As do I."

"Wae're doing this?" Skar pressed.

"Yes ma'am." Zaria declared, "Now take the wheel."

With a shrug, Skar conceded. They switched places again and Zaria raised her gun to eye level. The shamoo was massive, likely fifty feet from head to tail, at least five times as long as the zoomer. A horned triceratops-like crest adorned the serpentine head of the monster. It was this crest that Zaria took aim at as she pulled back the hammer with her thumb – right in the flat space between the three horns. Even before she pulled the trigger, she knew the shot was too good to be true but nonetheless she went ahead.

BANG!

The bullet flew true. It struck the beast dead in the middle of its scaly crest, but rather than piercing the flesh the flesh exploded like the burst of ink that had created it. Unlike ink, however, the darkness continued to surge forwards. It dissolved into separate squiggily shapes and took similar forms as it had before, only smaller. Now, instead of one giant shamoo swimming at them, there was an entire school of little ones. And they were mere yards away.

"Better?" Skar asked.

Zaria didn't put up her gun, but she did draw her sword, "We'll see."

"Ah gotta ahdaea." Skar warned, "Hold on."

Zaria did not hold on. Her hands were full. All she could do was brace herself and watch as the shapeshifting pirate queen breeched the surface as two dozen, sharp-toothed, draconic sea snakes. They arched through the air like a volley of arrows but as their flights crested and they began to curve down upon their prey the ship beneath them twisted.

Skar slammed the throttle as far as she could forward and turned the wheel all the way to the left. The zoomer pivoted, turning so abruptly that it rolled over onto its side. The tilt was so extreme that both women were standing nearly parallel to the waves they road across. The only thing that kept them from being launched off the ship was that Skar kept the ship moving. Not

forwards – towards the Battle – nor backwards – towards the naval fleet – but in a circle and after she completed one orbit she kept going. Instead of diving onto the zoomer, the shamoos dove back into the whirlpool that Skar was making with the ships wake and – as they did – Zaria fired.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Three reptiles exploded in a poof of shadows, then the rest hit the water. Spinning the wheel back the way it was (nearly knocking Zaria into the sea after shamoos). Zaria tried to focus on the shadow beneath the water but with the way the waves were being whipped up by the now figure-eighting zoomer, she totally lost sight. Fortunately, Zaria was just as bamboozled as their opponent by Skar's motoring, for when Ching Shih resurfaced she shot out of the surf directly in front of the zoomer.

She was back in the shape of the giant three horned shamoo. Had her thick scaly neck been made of flesh, the zoomer would've struck her and flipped like the arm of a mouse trap. Even if she had just incorporated blood into the transformation, the form would've been solid enough to toss the zoomer head-over-keel. Instead, the zoomer burst through the sea dragon shape as if it had been ensorcelled out of paper. In place of blood and guts, an explosion of spent shadowy energy filled the space where the sea serpent had been and, as the vessel shot through, Ching Shih fell from the evaporating heart of the former beast.

The merman landed on the deck between the two woman. When the bow of the zoomer punched the Sea Lord, it popped her out of her reptilian shape with a tad of momentum – momentum she harnessed to hit the ground running. There wasn't much space to run on the speed-boat-sized vessel, especially not wedged between her two opponents. Her run was actually more of a spin. Twirling, her weapon materialized: a long handled halberd with a wide, one sided blade like an ax. The whirl was meant to end with the blade in Skar's face, but the pirate had landed between Skar *and* Zaria. While Zaria wasn't in a position to block the assault on Skar with her sword, the Admiral was in a position to run the Queen of the Pirates through. However, going for the kill would likely condemn Zaria's comrade to a similar fate. Instead, Zaria aimed the Black Gun with the long Valentine Barrel at the shadow-spear and popped it like she had the shadow-made shamoo babies.

Though her weapon had been dissolved, the merman finished her spin. She turned her back on Skar and faced Zaria.

Zaria had already gotten the hammer pulled back and the cylinder had rolled over to ready another bullet.

BANG!

Poof! It wasn't the real Ching! She burst into wasted shadows and disappeared as if she had never been there. The real Ching had been in the shamoo that Skar had driven head first through, but she had not returned to her normal merman shape as it had seemed. In that split second she, hidden in the darkness of her own broken spell, had created two things with shadows. One being a clone of herself and the other being another disguise. Just as she had taken a serpentine form beneath the surface, she took one above. Slithering under the radar, she'd crept up on Skar. Skar had been mostly distracted by the faux-Ching before her while still straining to continue piloting the zoomer. However, that was only mostly. Skar did realize Ching's trick before Zaria did. She noticed in time to save her own life as well, but not in time to stop Ching completely.

When Zaria fired and popped the fake Ching, Skar let go of the wheel and whirled around to face the real Ching. The snake had crept up behind her and retook her true merman form,

rising from the floor with a shadow halberd in her hands. Skar could've tried to block. She was a shadowmancer like Ching and could've manifested a sword or shield with which to parry, but she would've had little time to block. That combined with the speed at which they were already zooming meant that even if she had deflected Ching's attack, the impact would've likely launched her off the vessel regardless. Thus, Skar made the executive decision to save her shadows and submit to the inevitable with only one modification: she yanked the throttle back up, killing the engine, before she jumped over the side of the zoomer leaving Zaria to face Ching Shih alone.

"Suicide." The Merman snickered, "My Lords will tear your piss elf to shreds."

"Ha!" Zaria scoffed, "She'll slay your eels and be back in time to see me slit your pretty throat."

"Which one?"

Ching split herself into four identical clones.

BANG!

Three identical clones. The Chings snickered despite the fate of their dopple ganger. They spoke in unison.

"Out of bullets?"

Zaria rolled her eyes, "Out of shadows?"

The Admiral pulled back the hammer and fired once more but the long Valentine Barrel was just barely knocked aside by a spear thrown by one of Ching's twins. The bullet nicked the side of the vehicle before disappearing into the sea. The Chings were right, Zaria was now empty. She had more ammo in her coat but no time to reload, still the steal of the barrel was long and strong enough to be useful. Plus, she assumed the Chings – cocky as they were – were still concerned that there was another slug waiting in the cylinder of the Black Gun. Raising the makeshift rifle over her shoulder as if it were a police baton, the Admiral pointed her one-sided Otusacha-style claymore at her foe and set her feet.

The third Ching stayed back, reforging their halberd out of shadows, but the other two charged. On her left, the merman brought their long-handled ax down as if aiming to cut off the Admiral's decorative epaulette. Zaria blocked with the rifle, smacking the shadow-blade aside and using the rebounding momentum to then bounce the barrel off the weapon and rap the head of her opponent. As she did this, she swung her sword at the ax-blade of the opposite foe who was aiming at her hips. Hitting this foe's shadow-polearm up, Zaria ducked down and let her feet slide out from under her as she continued push the Ching's halberd away from her torso. Then, from the floor of the zoomer, she aimed the Valentine Barrel at the Sea Lord Captain.

Despite the gun being empty, the merman flinched away.

Meanwhile, the other merman had recovered from the conk on their head. They stabbed for the gut of the downed Admiral.

FWAP!

The halberd fell from their hand. A flower dressed arrow protruded from their temple. It stayed there for a moment, then it fell to the floor as the body of the blood clone dissolved into thin air.

I love you Lalmlly. Zaria didn't revel in her distant savior's excellence for long. In fact, even as she thanked the heavens for her friend, she'd already begun to capitalize on the flinching Ching before her. Zaria dropped the Black Gun and used that hand to help her hop back up and press her foe with her gaudy, one-sided Spiegel Sword. Zaria'd hardly even begun her first slash, however, before she noticed the third Ching coming in on her left. Now it was Zaria that was

flinching away, ducking out of her assault and diving blindly backwards. Had she done so a moment later, her face would've been split in two. It was still nearly so. Ching's halberd caught her temple above her left eye and continued to carve all the way down to her right cheek, scating across her eye. Zaria screamed in shock. The pain hadn't even come yet, just the sensation of metal scraping her skull and warm blood immediately spilling out across her face. She tumbled backwards, over the console of the vehicle and onto the floorboards behind.

FWAP!

The Ching that had scarred her face dissolved.

The final Ching saw the lotus-decorated arrow fall where the fake-Ching's body would've collapsed. The pirate looked north at the naval fleet approaching from around the bend of Oreh Island – she may have even spotted Lalmlly with her crow eye, a glowing silhouette on with a bow on the bow. Either way, the Queen of the Pirates knew she had made a mistake. She should have run when she had the chance. Who knew, maybe she still had the chance? She knew she certainly couldn't spend another moment standing on the deck of that zoomer lest she become the next victim of the Gustbow. Spinning on a dime, Ching Shih dove overboard.

Overboard, an entirely separate war had been waging. When Skar had jumped off the zoomer, she knew that more Sea Lords were coming their way. Skar also assumed these to be mancers of some kind, or at least magicians, as the *Hong Chi* was quite a ways away and far too far for any normal being – even an Aquarian – to have managed to swim half as fast as their captain. With this fact understood, Skar expected a squad of Sea Lords in some similar form as that which their captain had taken but Skar, like their captain, was also a shadowmancer. Not only that, she specialized in shape shifting aswell. Plunging into the sea, Skar immediately manifested a fake form around her. Splitting her palms with the dark magic of shadowmancy, she mixed blood with her shadows and gave herself a new physical form. It wouldn't trick her foes for long, but it would be enough to get a head start on a fight in a setting where she was a fish out of water.

They saw her morphing from far away, but the two shadowmancers saw her only as a distant glow and the three necromancers smelled her only as a powerful being – her power being along the same potency as Ching's own – plus, she had taken a shape Ching often took, that of a giant three horned shamoo. Skar would have the advantage of the first strike, but after that...she didn't have the same supply of shadows as Ching to pull from. She was Rosethorn, Antipa, a vigilante with a conscious. This meant she was always low on shadows, after all, it was difficult to ethically acquire the energy of the dead. She couldn't afford to make a mistake. Mixing blood with her shadow shaping, she'd committed to this new form. This was a long term transformation. If she didn't achieve victory in it, then she would likely die in it.

The necromancers were faster than their comrades. The three shot through the water on bone-made wedges. The vehicles were like rockets with windshields (or, in this case, watershields) like the crest of a shamoo. The Sea Lords tucked in behind the crests as they zoomed along. Skar didn't want to face the necromancers first, she wanted the shadowmancers. They came too, but slower. Two of the shadowmancers countered her shamoo form by taking on the shapes of giant, three finned sumariis. Staring at the two faux-sumariis, Skar noticed a third figure straggling behind them. This individual also mimicked a sumarii, but it wasn't a disguise. It wasn't organic but it wasn't a shadow either. It was being driven much like the necromancer's bone-rockets, with the pilot tucked behind a shield of sorts, but the vessel was most certainly not bone.

What in the...

Though the necromancers were closing in, Skar was still fixated on this sixth figure and their fake shark. Somehow, they were familiar to her but she was sure she had never seen something like them. Their body glowed like a crow eye – as if it contained energy that burned within every part of their body – yet they did not appear to be a mancer. Then, the pilot of the faux-fish reared up just enough to be visible above the crest of the machine. Though still far off, he was close enough for Skar to be able to make out a defining feature with her one living eye.

He was an Aquarian. Either a merman or a fishfolk. What defined him, however, was the metallic scar that sliced from his shoulder blades to his hips.

Shayu Shua! Skar didn't know if he was there for her or for the Sea Lords but one thing was sure, if he was there for her then there was no way she would win against five mancers plus a legendary assassin. This might've frozen other fighters in their tracks, but this actually acted to ease Skar's mind. *Ah'll dah bah his hand*, she would've shrugged had she not been in the form of a shoulderless sea serpent, *or wae'll turn the Ocean red with thase ael's blood*.

Finally, for it felt like far too much time had passed despite her analysis taking only a mere moment, she initiated. The first of the necromancers had arrived, he was the point on the V formation in which they jetted. With a suddenness like a viper, Skar snapped on the foe. Snatching him off his osseous rocket as her fangs severed his body in two. She didn't stop, the other two were fast approaching. Ducking her head and twisting her tail of a body, she pivoted so that she could get her horns underneath and buck the Sea Lord on her right. As he spiralled away, his compatriot cut in and dove off his ship. Skar saw and squirmed in an effort to dodge the merman but he caught ahold, grabbing her by the ridges that protruded from her spine.

No sooner did he touch her than did she begin to lose control. A fierce weakness came over her. It was a sensation similar to that which one has when they stand too fast, a dizzy deliriousness, but paired with a numbness in her muscles. She knew exactly what it was. A common albeit effective necromancer technique called "chilled marrow". It was quite a wordy spell but one that could be prepared well before the touch. Once cast, the touch of the necromancer causes one to lose control of their body, allowing the necromancer to finish their assault and deliver a murdering strike.

That said, the victim maintains control of their mind a while longer. Even though Skar could not open her mouth to utter magic, she was a shadowmancer. Her magic was powered by the shadows in her eye and her imagination which, though slowing, was still capable of lashing out. Shadows poured from her reptilian eye like a snake. It curled around her body and grabbed the necromancer's wrist as he prepared to dig his bone-made dagger into her scaley hide.

Before either could make their next move, however, the third necromancer returned. He shot by, peppering Skar with a barrage of bone-made darts. They splintered her softer underbelly and she flinched, weakening her grasp on the necromancer that had mounted her from behind and allowing him enough leeway to overpower her shadows and drive his dagger into her spine. She didn't feel it. Not because he had severed a vertebrae – he hadn't – but because of his own spell. The chilled marrow – still seeping from her back to engulf the rest of her body – had already numbed her dorsal finlets. It hadn't yet gotten to her belly, where the bone barbs had spurred her, but she'd already flinched through that pain. Thus, as he drove the dagger into her back, she gave one last surge of shadow energy – strengthening the black tether she had on his arm and then tearing him off her. The force was so much that it yanked the poor merman's arm out of socket as it threw him into the depths. As he tumbled through the water, warmth returned to her flesh, and she surged forward to chomp down on the dart-throwing necromancer that had just zipped back around.

Without the numbness, the pain of her wounds began to grow – most notably the dagger still protruding from her back – but Skar fought through it and turned to look for the necromancer she'd just discarded. He wasn't looking at her. Nor was he surging towards her. With one arm dangling beside him, he scooped with the other and swam as fast as he could towards the sea floor. If reptiles sigh, that's what Skar did with a short burst of bubbles before looking back towards the Battle to check the progress of the approaching shadowmancer Sea Lords and the ill-famed assassin.

The shadowmancers were nowhere to be seen however the assassin, on his mechanical shark, was nigh there. The fact that he seemed to have done away with the other Sea Lords boded well for Skar, but still, she couldn't be sure. *Hae could bae hare for all of us.* As she scrutinized what she would come to learn was the Zoomarii, the pilot she had identified as *Shayu Shua* reared up. He raised one of his infamous gauntlets and pointed right at her.

Skar wiggled into a more intimidating sea-serpent posture.

Wait...is hae pointing at mae?

He wasn't. He was pointing right above her!

Whipping around, Skar saw why. Ching was plunging towards her. It was like looking in a mirror. The Sea Lord Captain was back in her shamoo form. The only difference in the two's appearances was the blood oozing from Skar's back and belly. Even if Skar was as skilled at fighting in the form of the great sea serpent as Ching, she would've had a great disadvantage what with her wounds. But Skar didn't have to face off alone. She merely had to last long enough for the Zoomarii to arrive – she just had to survive this initial attack. And she knew exactly how to do it.

She hardly had any shadows left, but so too did her foe. She could see how much dimmer the sea serpent's eye were as she plunged towards her. *Wae've got her surrounded. Ah just gotta slow her down and stay alahve.* Skar's shamoo disguise was not made of shadows alone, thanks to the blood the magical illusion was more powerful than your typical shadow-made apparition. It could take a hit. It could bleed. And very rarely anything more than a death-dealing blow was capable of jarring a shadowmancer out of such a manifestation – that is, aside from their own will. See, Skar had torn her flesh out of its previous appearance in order to take on that of the three horned shamoo. While her previous appearance had been herself, it hadn't been the same as the flesh she had been born into. Returning to that original form was possibly just as painful as the dagger sticking out of her back. But, Skar was a survivor because in situations such as these, she did what she had to do.

As Ching surged forward, her snake like body cutting through the water like a spear, her fangs wide and ready to clamp down on the throat of her foe, Skar returned to her birth form: a man. Fortunately, sex and gender matter little in battle. What mattered was that she was no longer a giant sea serpent but instead an average sized electric elf and as such, Ching totally missed her throat. Instead, she shot on past Skar, missing her completely and leaving her back – nearly forty feet of tail – open and unguarded to the elf.

Ripping the knife the Sea Lord had left in her spine from her back, Skar drove it into Captain and let it carve as far as it could before the shamoo had passed.

An ear splitting scream filled the sea and Ching whipped around in her draconic form ready to tear Skar to shreds, but when she did she saw the approaching shark. The Zoomarii and the assassin upon it. Like Skar, Ching recognized the Shayu Shua. Unlike Skar, Ching – with their last encounter still fresh on her mind – was sure that he was not there to aid her.

Rather than falling prey to the murderous fishfolk, she chose not to seek revenge on the shadowmancer treading water above her. Instead, she shot straight up towards the surface. She couldn't outpace the assassin's machine – not underwater at least – but she could fly away, if she could hijack the Admiral's.

The Admiral had recovered from her tumble over the console of the zoomer. Though blood was pouring down her face, her right eye was still unobscured. The moment Ching had jumped off the zoomer, Zaria had set about reloading the Black Gun. She hadn't gotten far – only one bullet in fact – when Ching Shih broke the surface of the Aquarian Sea. The creature towered over the zoomer as Ching prepared to pop back into her merman form and land back on board. Zaria raised her weapon, her one good eye met Shih's one living eye for a split second before their stare was interrupted by the not-so-hollow tube of the Valentine Barrel.

BANG!

- - -

A massive curling flame plumed out of John Pigeon's barren-shaped belt buckle, punching forwards like the blunt end of a battering ram, aiming to knock his foe – Jason the Giant – from where he stood on the opposing plank and, though the assault missed, Johnny got what he wanted. Jason jumped off the plank before the fire could force him. Holding the chain in his right hand, Jason dove backwards off the board. Clinging to the steel links, he swung under the bridge he'd abandoned and slung himself up behind the buccannier with the magic belt. Though he was as agile as a Knome – his twisting dive being of Olympic level – he still weighed as much as a bear just about to begin hibernation. The plank his chain was anchored to sagged even more than it had when his feet had been on it, so much so that it began to splinter. Johnny noticed this. As the human's flame dissipated in the ocean breeze, his belt's amber glow darkened into a dull, earthy brown. Sand and dirt began to cluster in the air before Johnny. The particles whizzed out of nooks and crannies across both decks as his belt summoned more and more, faster and faster. As Jason the Giant tarzanned beneath him, Johnny finished his boulder. For a moment it levitated over the bending plank Jason's chain was tethered to.

Johnny smirked, muttering, "Say hi to a sumarii."

Then the stone slammed down. The plank burst in two with as loud a snap as the guttural roar that followed. After Jason jumped had off the plank, no one else had gotten on. Pirates on both sides knew better than to test the board bearing the bearn's burden and figured they'd have a better chance crossing over to each other's ships via the loose rigging ropes dangling around the sails. Dresdan had made it off the bridge before Jason had taken his plunge, for the Captain knew he only had so much time.

The sword Tabuh had forged, after Truth evaded his throw, had clattered to the floor of the *Hong Chi*. While the rest of the Sea Lords on the deck were busy scrambling to get across to the deck of the *Obsidian Sail* or struggling against Obsidians that had already made it over, three were waiting for Dresdan. One held the traditional merman trident while his twin held an equally traditional blade, similar to that of a kopis but far more rigid than the smooth curved kopis type blade you might find in Ancient Greece. The third, the apparent leader of this little squad, was abnormal. For one, she was a woman and female Sea Lords were about as common as human ones. The other novel element was her weapon: she held Tabuh's magical saber.

"Farak." Dresdan cursed.

He wasn't unarmed. He still had his infamous, cross-hilted two-hander. Rushing across the deck, he drew his blade, raised it over his head, and brought it down on the golden trifurcated weapon of the first Sea Lord. His strength was such that the poor merman's raised trident was knocked down until the pole's base had the floorboards for support, so low that the edge of Dresden's weapon dug into his enemy's gills. As the Aquarian dropped to one knee, Dresden spun in for the next. The woman blocked his blade with an upward swing – as Dresden had hoped. He released his hilt with one hand and grabbed her wrist just as she instinctively spun away. This left her entire forearm open, ready to be chopped clean off, but Dresden knew her third mate would run him through before he could, so instead he merely yanked her off her feet and let her go as he turned to push his blade through the gut of the third merman.

The Sea Lord took the stab with his arm raised, his angular scimitar posed ready to cut down on Dresden. Instead, it tumbled out of his limp hand. Dresden released his own sword, allowing the blade to fall with the dying swordsman as Dresden caught the man's falling kopis, twirled, and threw it at the woman who had stolen the magic sword. Just as the weapon caught her in the ribs, knocking her to the ground, Dresden himself was caught.

He didn't feel it at first. Not until he turned his eyes to the trident-wielding merman rushing towards him. For when he tried to move out of the way, he couldn't budge. His feet were not only stuck as if they were frozen, but they were freezing as well. In no time at all, the chill swept over his body – halting even his chest from lifting to breathe – so that all he could feel was that icy numbness, as if he had been standing out in a blizzard.

Chilled marrow! Even without being able to look down and see, he knew what was there. Truth in her nequified state - the same state of white goop she had transformed herself into to originally dodge the magic saber. She had slithered across the deck and wrapped around his ankles. She had beaten him to the punch, but it wasn't over yet.

When Jason's plank snapped, Johnny's boulder didn't fall with it. The cluster of rock and dirt was still collecting mass, sweeping the decks of the *Obsidian Sail* and the *Hong Chi* beneath the feet of the battling combatants. As it grew, Johnny stretched it out, creating an entirely new bridge between the ships. No sooner did one side touch the other than did both crews hop on. A line of Sea Lords charged across while, on the otherside, a lone Tou Fou stepped onto the narrow land bridge. He strode forward and twisted sideways to dodge the first fishfolk's trident as they jabbed at him. Rather than cutting their blue flesh open, Tou raised his sword and rapped the man on his head with the butt of the hilt. As he fell from the bridge, the next came – slicing downward with a scimitar. Tou brought his sword up, catching his foe with his arms over his head, leaned into his pary, and brought a knee up into the Aquarian's groin. As the pirate buckled backwards, Tou brought his saber down to slit his throat and toss him off the bridge.

“Tou! Your left!”

Tou looked left with but a moment to spare. A giant ice sickle was shooting like a spear for his gut. Without another thought he jumped backwards, but his foot slipped on the trident of his first aggressor and he fell flat onto his butt. His attention was still drawn to the left. Not because there was another projectile, but because Johnny's belt was still glowing. Not white as it had when he'd shot the ice, but brown as it had when he'd built the bridge. John Pigeon had one hand on the buckle and the other waving to Tou as he snickered.

“Bye-bye, dirt elf!”

He could feel the rocks shifting beneath him. Looking back towards the *Obsidian Sail*, Tou watched the earthen bridge begin to disintegrate. Then, again, he heard Tabuh cry out.

“TOU! GET DOWN!”

Get down?! Tou silently balked, And fall into the sea?

Turning to look back down the bridge towards the *Hong Chi*, he saw the mermen rushing to get back on their ship. He also saw two merman already on the *Hong Chi* with crossbows aimed right at him. Scrambling, Tou spun around and made a wild scurrying dash for the deck of the *Obsidian Sail*. No sooner had he started back than did his eyes fall upon an especially wide-eyed Drakken staring back from behind the parapet. The old mage shook his head as his tongue and lips flew. A book was open in Drakken's hands, the letters on the pages lit as if they'd been inked with diesel fuel. An indigo beam of light floated like a ribbon through the sky, extending from Drakken's book towards Tou.

Crimpsin tiad, Tou cursed. The bridge was dissolving far too fast. He was not going to make it back. He had to put his faith in the old boatswain. Skidding to a halt, he turned to face the crossbowmen.

BANG! BANG!

Tabuh was above Tou, though way back on the ship. The only reason she hadn't been firing sooner was because she'd immediately set about scaling some of the netting that went from the side of the ship and cut diagonally up towards the tops of one of the masts. When she saw Dresdan make a mad dash onto the *Hong Chi*, she immediately sought a vantage point from which she could get a shot off and back up the Captain. Especially as she saw the worm like white fluid oozing its way after the *Obsidian*. Her attention had been drawn away when she noticed the white glow of Johnny's belt and the horrible cone of ice he had constructed in an attempt to impale her friend. Shortly after that, she saw the crossbowmen.

She couldn't just shoot them. There was no way of knowing for sure she'd get off her shots before they got off theirs and, if she didn't, Tou would be thrown into the sea with a bolt in his chest.

"God, give mae aim like Ainna."

She fired the two shots Tou had heard go off.

BANG! BANG!

Even the bowmen were surprised. Their lives had been spared. It was only seeing Tou unharmed that alerted them to the reality. Yet, Tabuh hadn't missed. She'd shot both their bolts out of the sky after they'd fired. They were so struck by awe, they wasted a valuable moment to gaze up at the woman hanging from the rigging.

BANG!

One fell to the ground. The other reached for another bolt but was too late.

BANG!

Now she could turn her attention back to the Captain. After all, Tou had not only been spared from the fate of the crossbows, he'd been saved from the dissolving bridge. Drakken's spell had finally been finished. The purple radiation solidified into a more opaque trail, like that of a liquid, as it wrapped around Tou and hoisted him above the disappearing peninsula of rock.

Tou was so shocked he nearly dropped *Future*. Fortunately he gathered himself and did so in time to see that Drakken was not pulling him back to safety but rather setting him in immediate danger as Drakken set Tou down right in front of Johnny.

The Sea Lord, first mate's nostrils flared as he took a step back, gripped his belt buckle with both hands, and released a blast of electricity. It shot across the plank like a lightning bolt, but missed Tou. Drakken had known better than to set the elf down and cut him loose. Seeing the glow of Johnny's enertomb, Tou had instinctively gone to jump. It wouldn't have done much to get him out of the path of danger had he not had the help of moleman. With the swain's help Tou

shot into the sky and Johnny's javelin of violent electricity shot on to strike some other unluckier Obsidian while Tou landed on the otherside of the Sea Lord.

"He your babysitter?" Johnny snapped.

"Magic against magic." Tou shrugged, "Seems fair to me."

Twisting his head to crack his neck, Johnny took the bait – or well, he attempted to act as though he did. His belt shone with that warm red brightness it had when the Battle first began. A slender thread of flame came to life in Johnny's right hand. It stretched out like a sword, though its edges still pulsated and waved like fire. An elementalist could make a burning blade and fight with such as if it were any other sword, but Johnny hadn't done just that. Though it looked like fire on the outside, the inside was molten lava. It had sapped much of the energy from his belt and he'd likely have to recharge if the fight went on too long, but he was willing to bet that his magma filled weapon could melt Tou's flimsy saber if he could just hold a parry for a couple of seconds.

"*This* is fair." Johnny lied with a smirk. He gesturing to Drakken with a backwards nod, "Call him off."

Tou glanced over, nodding to the swain and raising his hand to reassure him.

"Alrighty then." The human smirked, "En garde!"

Surging forwards, their two blades collided. Tou expected a parry, but he trusted Tabuh's blade and its spectacularly sharp edge to cut right through Johnny's ridiculous weapon. Thus, he aimed for his finisher from the start. Not for his opponent's flesh, but rather for his weapon – his real weapon: the belt.

Future cut through the fire sword as if it were butter. The magma within splashed as the top half of the sword disappated. It even splattered across Tou's sword for a moment before being flung off onto the plank at their feet. The only sign it had ever touched *Future* was in the red glow left behind, the more significant impact of the trickery was how the droplets immediately caught flame on the wooden bridge. Johnny had failed, but Tou hadn't. Though the pirate had twisted out of harms way, Tou still managed to catch Johnny's side just enough to slice through the leather strap around his waist.

Both men hopped backwards as the fire flared with the ocean breeze.

"That sword?!" Johnny yelped.

"Sentry-made." Tou grinned.

Johnny had no more time to revel, for not only was the fire growing between them but his belt had just slipped right off. Weighed by the heavy enertomb-buckle, it plummeted for the sea. Stuck between the flames and the enemy ship, Johnny had no choice but to dive after it. Meanwhile, Tou had no choice but to run for the *Hong Chi* before the bridge he stood upon was burnt in two.

After Tabuh blasted the bowmen and saw that Drakken had Tou safely wrapped in a magical, translucent band, she'd scurried a bit higher up in the netted rigging. She searched the deck of the *Hong Chi* for the Obsidian Captain. No sooner did her aurelian eyes fall upon his black scales than did she witness the merman – the one he had knicked on the shoulder before Truth had paralyzed him – rush Dresdan with their trident low.

"Crimpsin taiad." Tabuh murmured.

She only had three shots left in the cylinder and she couldn't help but notice that the nellaf Truth had brought with her – Sorelac Icelore – had a book out looking incredibly similar to the one that Drakken held. What's more was that the words on the pages were burning, all except for the last sentence – the flames quivered with impatience. But there was no time to speculate

nor time to conserve, for if she didn't do something then at least one of the merman's three golden prongs would soon puncture her Captain's heart.

BANG!

The Sea Lord went down as Tabuh turned her golden gun on the white fluid seeping up Dresdan's waist.

BANG!

The nequified Truth thrashed, peeling off Dresdan and lashing out in a dozen directions like an enraged squid, but one long tentacle of osseus energy remained wrapped tightly around Dresdan's ankle.

"Donum." Tabuh cursed and, as she did, she fired.

BANG!

The bullet struck the goop and the pale white sludge was blown off Captain's legs. Truth splattered across the deck before him, freezing fleeing Sea Lords in their tracks. No sooner did cursed substance leave his scales than did Dresdan lunge and dive for the enchanted sword

As he went for the weapon, Tabuh reloaded and scanned the deck of the *Hong Chi* for her swordsman. Despite the chaos of the battle before her, she immediately spotted Tou. More specifically, she spotted his adversary: a giant spider. *That can't bae...*

It wasn't. In fact, when Tou first met this foe, the last descriptor he would've used was "giant". Bounding onto the deck of the Sea Lord ship as the burning plank finally split in two and crashed into the sea behind him, Tou nearly tripped over the little fellow. Fortunately, a firm fist landed square against Tou's jaw and sent him tumbling out of the way. He hit the deck and bounced back up on his feet, whirling around to face his attacker.

The man was no taller than a dwarf. While fishfolk tended to be shorter than elves, this fishfolk was at least a foot shorter than the average Sea Lord. Although Tou wasn't sure this person was a fishfolk. A cape was draped over their shoulders so Tou couldn't make out if there were gills jutting out above his collar bones. They were dressed from head to toe in black leather armor, a cowl even covered the back of their head so that only their face was revealed. They had face of an Aquarian, but as a boy who had barely seen the world outside of the Tadloen woods, Tou wasn't sure if black eyes and sharp teeth were a uniquely Aquarian trait. Come to think of it, Tou had never *seen* a dwarf. Nearly all dwarves were restricted to Vinnum Tow, the fascist desert state that incarcerated them, so for all Tou knew dwarves could've been as blue-skinned as the fishfolk and mermen of Aquaria.

"Are you a dwarf?" Tou blurted.

Cracking the knuckles that had just bruised Tou's chin, the little boxer smirked, "Are you saying I hit like a dwarven boxer?"

So not a dwarf. Tou concluded. Then it struck him: there was another miniature race of man that hailed from the Northern Hemisphere! Not only had he never seen the dwarves of Vinnum Tow, he'd never met a goblin from Darkloe and he knew goblins were supposed to be green. *Blue, green? Close enough!* Driving his index finger into the air, Tou exclaimed, "You're a goblin!"

"*WHAT?!*" The man crowed. He took a tiny step towards Tou then stopped himself. He licked his left eye and lowered his gaze. With a twisted grin, he said, "I am Smra-"

Tou's head was still cocked to the side, "Is that what you are or is that your name?"

"-of the Arms!" Smra continued as if uninterrupted. As he did, dark appendages protruded from his back, just above his hip bones. Made of silky black shadows, their sheen made them distinct from Smra's leather vest. As they grew, Tou began to realize what they were

(though Smra's title helped). They were arms! Two arms nearly as long as Smra stood tall. They stretched down to the deck of the *Hong Chi* and lifted the man off the floor boards, hoisting him until he hovered at eye level with Tou. Smra concluded, "the Fist of the Disciples, the Shadow Slugger of Rein-"

Not only was Tou's head still tilted, he tilted it further as Smra's body modification only served to perplex him more. He asked, "Why make arms if you're using them as legs?"

Four more appendages sprouted from the back of the shadowmancer, curling over his shoulders like the arms of a tower crane. As they balled their black fingers into fists, Smra held out his real hands. A tiny sliver of blackness materialized in his right, he gripped it tight and slit his left palm. Blood spurted up from the wound, then was sucked out of the air to be absorbed by Smra's six extra arms. The transformation complete, Smra finally answered the elf's question, "Legs aren't as handy."

If Smra had eyelids, then he would've winked. Instead, he attacked. His lower limbs launched him forwards while his upper arms cocked back like bolts in a crossbow. Tou fell back on his left foot then bounced forward onto his right, slicing diagonally upwards with *Future*. Smra easily batted the sword out of the way with one prosthetic forearm against the flat of the blade. With his second upper-most arm, Smra delivered a punch to the same part of the chin he'd hit Tou earlier. As Tou back pedalled from the blow, Smra's two middle appendages slapped together at the wrists then hit Tou hard in the chest with open palms. His feet slipped out from under him as he fell onto his back but before his spine could hit the hardwood, Smra's bottom-most arms (the two that could've just as well been legs) planted themselves on his gut and slammed him to the floor.

"Dresden'll just hire anyone these days, huh?" Smra remarked.

BANG!

A bullet would've smashed through the little man's normal sized skull had he not reacted with the speed of a cat. Diving off Tou and away from the bullet, Smra's head was spared but one of his left arms was not. The slug slipped in the shadowy forearm then popped out before plunging back into the artificial bicep. Any other shadowmancer manifestation would've exploded in the cloud of smoggy darkness, but the blood mixed in with the shadows kept the appendage alive – albeit severely less useful.

As Smra's eyes left Tou and shot over the golden eyed sharp shooter, hanging out high up in the rigging of the *Obsidian Sail*, Tou jumped back to his feet. This jerked Smra's attention back, though the fishfolk was still too late to completely stifle Tou's attack. *Future* cut in from Tou's right, Smra's left for the throat. With one left arm crippled, the shadowmancer wasn't able to get the middle-left to bat away the blade as he had before – at least not the flat of the blade. Instead, Smra sacrificed the appendage to save his neck. Tou's sword slipped right through the blood-shadow at the elbow, then Tou caught a right hook to the head that sent him tumbling off his feet once more.

"The missing Sentry Princess," Smra's lips peeled back into a sharp toothed smile as he manifested a shadowy dagger in his biological left hand, "and a dirt elf with a Sentry sword?"

Tou was back on his feet and running. Smra let him come. The shadowmancer cut open his right hand and again the blood leapt into the air like a thin mist before zooming to repair his wounded left arms. Smra was back at six when Tou arrived, swinging his saber. Smra went to parry the blade as he had before, but Tou faked him out. Pulling back his attack, he spun to try and flank the fishfolk. His spin nearly ended with another facefull of fist had it not been for-

BANG!

-Tabuh. The fist was obliterated into a black and bloody goop, leaving only a stump of a forearm surging towards Tou's nose. The force of the shot nudged the punch just enough off its course for Tou to slip under it, continue spinning, then extend his right arm to slice at the leathery armor of his foe. Then he caught another two palmed punch but instead of in the chest like last time, he was hit in the back. He managed to roll rather than fall flat on his face, but the blow still knocked the air out of him.

BANG!

Smra caught this one with two hands like one might squash a fly. He spoke to Tou even as his eyes turned back to the gunner.

"Is she protecting your blade," Smra mused, "or you?"

Tou was back on his feet, watching *Obsidian Sail* with Smra. Tabuh had four more shots in the revolver, but no more time to cover Tou's ass. A giant mountain of a man, decked out in armor from head to toe, had begun to rustle with the netted shrouds Tabuh had climbed up in.

"Tabuh!" Tou exclaimed.

"Aaah!" Smra whipped back around to face Tou, chuckling, "Lovers!"

Raising *Future* over his head, Tou charged. Smra stood his ground and waited. When Tou swung down, Smra turned sideways. Tou turned his blade but before he could cut in at the fishfolk, he caught two shadow-made fists to the face – one after the other from the two upper left arms. POW! POW! Then, rocking back onto his right arms, Smra added an uppercut with his lower-most appendage. The hit lifted Tou off his feet. Smra launched himself off his right hands and into an airborne twirl that ended with all three right fists slamming the earth elf to the deck of the *Hong Chi*.

Tou didn't hop back up from this one but as soon as he was able to breathe, while stars were still exploding in his eyes, he managed to roll over onto all fours.

"You weren't made for this, kid." Smra laughed, "Certainly not made to be dragging a pretty lady like her into danger like this."

Tou thought he could hear gunshots going off on the other ship but still couldn't see much farther than the devil before him, and even then it was a blur. All he could smell was rusty metal, he could taste it too. Spitting out a fat wad of blood, Tou forced himself up to one knee. Each movement sent sudden jolts of pain. For a minute, the little shadowmancer's blur turned into Jason the Giant. The massive bearns wisdom echoed in his brain, "*Mahnd ovuh matter.*" Even the memory of sounds hurt his pounding head. Still, somehow, he stood up.

Smra had stopped smiling. He was legitimately impressed with the elf. Not with his combat abilities, but his determination was remarkable. Despite being an Aquarian, Smra was not a Sea Lord. He didn't care that they'd been betrayed and that the entire fleet appeared to be at serious risk of annihilation. He was simply there as a witness for the Disciples of Darkness and the Sheik, Shalis Skullsummon. *With the right training*, Smra thought, *the Sheik could use a kid like this*. But for now, he simply said, "You're going to get her killed."

That was the first thing Tou was able to understand since he'd been slammed on the floorboards for the third time. Each breath felt like a redhot rake was scraping his ribs, but he was forced to pant to get enough air in his half-collapsed lungs. His arms and legs were fine, but he wasn't sure how much more his head or chest could take. One eye was already nearly swollen shut and his left eye was half closed by the ferocity of his glare.

"Let me save you the heartbreak, kid." Smra offered. While not a Sea Lord and not concerned with killing Obsidians, he was a Disciple. This meant he did hate the Empire of the Trinity Nations – especially their naval officers. Slaughtering the daughter of the highest official

under the Emperor sounded a lot more fun than killing some poor earth elf in over their head. He turned away from Tou, hollering over his shoulder as he made his way to the edge of the deck, “Forget the pale elf, sell the sword, and settle down with a barmaid.”

Tou bound forward but Smra was gone. Two arms pulled the miniature monster up onto the taffrail then launched him over the gap between the two ships. Tou rushed after him but stopped short at the railing. Tabuh didn’t see the shadowmancer coming, she was still finishing off the massive menace in armor.

Solaris’ glare hit the heaping tower of chrome and bounced up to stab Tabuh’s golden eyes. Whirling away from the *Hong Chi*, she pivoted in her makeshift harness of ropes and riggings and clenched the trigger of her revolver.

BANG! Tink.

The slug hit the metallic thug and bounced off without forcing her foe to so much as budge. Standing seven feet tall, Tabuh had to assume this was no fishfolk and her opponent held an Aquarian trident like a Sea Lord – a trident that made his peers’ weapons like like dining forks. Jabbing the three-pronged javelin into the ratlines, Tabuh scurried to untangle herself and clamber higher up.

As she monkeyed, she hollered down, “Are you a faraking Sae Lord or another one of Jason’s brothers? Can’t bae a fishfolk undernaeth all that armor!”

A deep, thunderous, “HA!” escaped the silver shelled soldier. They reached up to unclasp their chin strap then jerked their head so that the visor of their helmet snapped back to reveal the blue skinned, black eyed face of an Aquarian. Glowering up at Tabuh, the giant licked his eyes, “My father was Barro himself.”

“Then what was your mother?” Tabuh retorted, “A whale?”

The titan roared in response, snapping his visor back down over his face before Tabuh could twist around and get off a shot. Raking his trident across the lower riggings of the shroud, the oaf cut it free. The ropes jumped from the side of the ship, spinning Tabuh as she swung like pendulum over the deck of the *Obsidian Sail*. *Saelu to you, whalefolk*, Tabuh mused to herself as she squirmed free of the knotting cords in preparation for the swing backtowards her foe, *this could have been a whole lot harder*.

Rearing back with his trident, the whalefolk was ready to skewer the sharp shooter as the shroud brought her back his way. He stood flat as a wall as he waited. With all his armor, he didn’t need to be clever. This wasn’t his first rodeo, he knew his defenses were impenetrable. There was no weakness beneath his shiny shields, not unless he himself removed a piece or unclasped an element – such as a chin strap, for instance. The realization dawned on him just as Tabuh jumped down from ther swinging shroud.

The whalefolk stabbed for the elf, but he hadn’t expected her to jump towards him. She soared right past the shaft of the trident, feet first. Kicking off his helmet, she ricocheted towards the deck, rolling over to watch her foe as she fell.

BANG!

The shot hit the brim of his visor and the metal mask snapped back.

BANG!

The second shot struck where the visor had been, clocking the whalefolk right between his black eyes. Tabuh hit the deck hard. The floorboards knocked the air right out of her as her opponent took their last breath. The behemoth staggered back, towards the taffrail, then crumpled backwards and tumbled into the sea. Tabuh was fortunate he fell that way, too, for it

was at that moment that a certain eight armed nuisance careened over the banisters of the *Obsidian Sail*, arching like a missile as they shot towards the downed electric elf.

BANG!

Tabuh nearly shot Smra out of the sky, but he managed to snatch the tail end of the shroud she'd discarded as it flicked up to finish one end of its penduluming. Tabuh jumped to her feet as Smra landed on his.

"Lucky shot." Smra remarked. His real right hand went to the steaming wound in his side, "Miss Sentry."

"Ah never miss." Tabuh snapped back. Her hand also went to her side – to the pouch where she kept her ammo.

"Easy for you to say, Princess," Smra smirked, his crow eye seemingly twinkling as he ogled Tabuh's firearm, "you've never shot at someone who ain't afraid of your dad!"

Tabuh bolted. She dove beneath the stabbing trident of a Sea Lord stabbing for an Obsidian, then popped up from her lunge to skip past the slicing scimitar of another Aquarian. All the while, her fingers fumbled for another bullet. Her weaseling through the boat-top-battlefield didn't do much to throw the spider-like shadowmancer off her tail. In fact, it only served to make it easier on him. Bounding back up into the rigging ropes of the sails, Smra flung himself over the pirates between them, over Tabuh herself, then twisted back around and down to plant two feet right into Tabuh's gut. The elf tumbled across the deck, skidding to a stop where she had started when the bantam boxer first arrived.

Smra paused to wince, clutching the gunshot wound Tabuh had left him with initially, then he forced his lips into a sharp toothed grin and launched himself back into the shrouds above. Tabuh didn't see the flinch nor the pounce but she figured the latter would be coming. While the wind had been knocked out of her, she managed to hold on to bullet and the gun said slug was destined for. She flopped onto her back, slapped the cartridge into the cylinder, and squinted as she pointed the gun into the webs of ratlines above.

The eight-armed shadowmancer was swooping down on her like an eagle - right where Tabuh had hoped he'd be. She'd already started squeezing the trigger before her eyes landed on her opponent. The firearm's hammer was already punching forward for the primer of the little silver bullet she'd loaded when her view of her target became obscured by a blur of green. *What?* There was no time to adjust her aim or stop the shot.

BANG!

Tou had come rocketing over the side of the *Obsidian Sail* like a cannon ball, having tarzanned off the *Hong Chi* to crash into Smra in midair, saving Tabuh from the fishfolk's many fists. At least, that was his intention. Instead, Tou had saved the fishfolk from Tabuh's deadly aim. One might argue he single handedly ended the Sentry's shooting streak, though she hadn't really missed. While her bullet would've hit Smra between the eyes, she still hit flesh.

The bullet seared through Tou's side, scraping his hip bone as it tore a hole straight through his body. Then, a moment after that impact, both Tou and Smra crashed to the deck of the *Obsidian Sail*, landing on their nigh identical waist wounds.

"TOU!" Tabuh exclaimed, her voice was shrill as her blood went cold for a second. That second passed quick, however, as she saw she hadn't killed the earth elf. Her blood immediately heated up and this time her voice was guttural like the roar of a lioness, "*TOU!*"

Tou hopped up to a hobbled fighting stance. He was hunched over like an old man, putting as much weight as he could on his right leg as even just touching his left boot to the floorboards of the deck sent shockwaves of pain out in all directions from his hip. Smra was in

better shape. With his long octopus-like appendages, he simply lifted himself off the ground so that his legs could dangle freely.

“That count as a miss, Miss Sentry?” Smra snickered.

“You faraking crow!” Tabuh shrieked.

Tou felt similarly, but with his swollen eyes he had only limited vision and had decided to keep his eyes on the shadowmancer. This meant that he didn’t see that his partner had popped another bullet in the chamber. Meaning, that when he turned to slice at Smra’s throat, he’d just started the motion when Tabuh fired.

BANG! Tink.

The sword Tabuh had forged, *Future*, blocked the bullet Tabuh fired as Smra turned to tempt Tou’s blade, placing Tou between the shadowmancer and the shooter as a shield. While Tou was trembling from his wounds, Tabuh was trembling from her wounded ego. Her right eye twitched and her fingers fluttered as they slipped into her ammo pouch. Smra was shuddering – partially from the pain, as his fractured hip was beginning to get to him – primarily due to his effort to repress a gurgled fishfolk guffaw. Brutalizing the suicidally determined earth elf and humiliating the stuck up electric elf had been some of the most fun he’d had in years. That said, time was running out.

Murders of dragons were descending from the clouds of the Iahtro Storm to the south and a fleet of Trinity Nation ships were rounding Oreh Island to the north. The Sea Lord leadership had taken to the sea and the Disciples he had accompanied appeared to be making an exit of their own. He could play the two elves off each other all day long, but once Captain Dresdan, Firstmate Jason, and Swain Drakken had their hands free then the situation between the two ships would be quite different – not to mention whoever was amongst the incoming reinforcements. *Should I kill them or save them for later?* Smra was considering this when a particularly strong pang of pain shot up from his hip. Tou had managed to smack the flat of his blade against Smra’s shin after Smra deflected a slice with one of his prosthetic arms. The bruising caught the shadowmancer so much off guard that he nearly missed a bullet hurtling towards his head-

BANG!

He snatched it from the sky, shadows sizzling around his fingers, then flicked it at Tou. It pegged him in the forehead, splitting open one of the bruises Smra had given Tou earlier. Smra then danced back towards the banistered side of the ship, letting the earth elf stumble towards him as he addressed the electric elf. With a nod towards the hurricane in the south, he hollered, “Rain check, Princess,” Then he nodded north towards the flotilla, “say, ‘Hi’ to your daddy for me!”

With that, Smra whirled away from Tou. His many arms melted back into shadows, forming a sort of cape behind him that – BANG! – absorbed Tabuh’s next shot. Smra surged up over the taffrails and dove into the sliver of sea between the two ships, leaving both Tou and Tabuh staring dumbly towards the *Hong Chi*. Tou’s frustration with himself and Tabuh’s frustration with Tou would have to wait, for the sight on the Sea Lord ship immediately commanded their attention.

A massive flash of sapphiric energy engulfed the tangled ships with a sudden, deafening ring.

Mere minutes before this, just as Smra was introducing himself to Tou and the whalefolk was making a bee line for Tabuh, Captain Dresdan reclaimed the void-dust saber and began bashing through the skeletal foes suddenly rising from the deck of the *Hong Chi*. Hand and feet

bones shattered into little chunks, spines split into vertebrae, and ribs scattered in all directions like shrapnel. As skeletons and Sea Lords flinched beneath the spray of boneshot, Dresdan rushed onward. The enchanted blade broke what spells it touched, it had only to tap Truth's minions to disassemble their undead frames. But despite the magical weapon and his masterful bladework, trudging through the crew of Sea Lord minions was like wading through a swamp – and Truth wasn't waiting idly behind her wall of ghouls and thugs.

Half-solid, half-liquid, Truth's form was only now beginning to coalesce and rise from the deck. The offwhite slime appeared to be growing a thin film of fur as it returned to the texture of her black robes. A twisted and gnarled arm of sludge and sleeve jutted out from the growing column and a barrage of darts spewed from appendage.

Dresdan sliced as he ran but his arms were about as effective as windshield wipers without the windshield. The slender splinters peppered him, stabbing him all over, some only stopping as they hit bone, but Dresdan persevered. He could hear the murmurings of a spell spilling out of the solidifying necromancer. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the nellaf wizard standing off to the side in the shadow of the nearest mast, flames thrashing on the pages of his open tome. He was running out of time.

A second appendage jutted out from the squirming pillar of osseous matter, launching another volley of projectiles though this round was bigger. Rather than darts, large razor-bladed discs flew towards Dresdan. While the needles had punctured his bones, these freakish frisbees would cut his bones in two. Fortunately, Dresdan had cover. Beneath the black sails, watching from the railings, Drakken cast quick magic to blow the zooming blades away before they could split the scales of his master. The swain could also hear the necromancer's incantations, worse too he could hear the over-dressed nellaf-mage's casting too. While Dresdan presumed they were running out of time, Drakken knew there were – if they had not already.

Dresdan was within a stride of Truth, but Truth was within a sentence of finishing her spell. Her body finally solidified as she uttered the final word but at that exact moment – or perhaps a split moment before – Dresdan loomed over her. As that last syllable left Truth's snout, Dresdan plunged his sword into her flesh.

There was a sudden and drastic silence. The saber – at least, the bit of it not driven deep into the necromancer's flesh – glowed with a blue as brilliant as the heart of a scorching flame. Truth glowed with a similar mystical flare, though her shade was that peculiar indigo – the color of the Sacred Tongue. Just as her body had turned white when she nequified, her body now turned violet. Without the sword in her abdomen, that violet would've grown brighter and brighter and then she would've snapped out of that space and time and disappeared off the deck of the *Hong Chi* – but the sword was there. Had Dresdan driven it through sooner, before the last syllable had left her tongue, then there would have been no hesitation and there would have been no spell – but he hadn't. Instead, the universe froze. The blade and the spell locked in a split second stalemate.

Until the tie breaker arrived.

The multi-robed, scrawny mage off to the side, the nellaf of noble blood with the words burning on his spell book, finished his spell the instant after Dresdan stabbed Truth. He had been casting the very same spell as she – casting it for himself, but seeing the course of events before him he had changed the target from his own hide to that of his ally's, that of the necromancer's. And so, after that brief moment of universe-halting conundrum, the Sacred Tongue rolled out of his mouth and the sudden and drastic silence was obliterated with an ear splitting screech.

Both sides of the Battle cringed. Wincing through the noise, most fell to their knees. Not Dresdan. Covered as he was with the barbs of his foe, bleeding and in terrible pain, he stood like a statue with a face as blank as one at complete peace, sound asleep. He was not at peace, however, he was filled with such an extreme frustration that his body simply didn't know how to react. It had malfunctioned much like the universe had a second prior. For before Captain Dresdan was no longer Truth, but instead the broken shards of his enchanted sword. Truth was nowhere to be seen.

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With a sound like the whip crack of lightning, a thick column of water burst through the floor, pummeling the ceiling and then crashing down in all directions to rush down the corridor like a river set loose from a dam. Within that torrential pillar, thrust up by the ocean, shot two gargantuan men. They smacked the ceiling and were yanked with the river down the hall.

Scrambling against time and the tide, Theseus Icespear spread his arms. With one palm flat on the wall to his left and his knuckles pressed hard against the wall on his right, he stopped himself and got his hooves underneath him. Rearing up like ram preparing to charge, he stabbed his ox-like horns into the ceiling. The minotaur was so tall, he couldn't even get close to standing upright but that made it easier for him to stop the current from gripping him. In his hands, he held the Vanian Spear. Taking the weapon, he drove it into the water still punching in through the hole in the hull, harpooning the inverted waterfall he had created. Just as he had created it, he cealed it: ice spread from the spearhead. It grew out like a sphere, spreading in all directions. His eyes bounced back and forth between the growing ice and the rising water level. His hooves were sliding, splintering the floorboards beneath him. His horns left deep divets in the ceiling. Soon the water would be above his kilt and then even he might not have the strength to resist it.

“Come on, you kor!”

The globe of ice at the end of his spear had become so vast it would've been incredibly hard to hold if it was being bobbed by the flow of ocean water lustfully pouring in, eager to drag the *Hong Chi* down to the bottom of the sea. But the ocean would have to wait, Theseus had work to do. With gritted teeth and a muffled roar, Theseus slammed the sphere of ice down, plugging the hole, and holding the spell just a moment longer so that the ice would lock itself in place as it crept along the inside and outside of the ship. With that complete, he delicately twisted his spear and pulled it free carefully – one slight tap from the mystical weapon and the entire frozen plug would shatter.

“Obsidian!” He hollered this before even turning to look. When he did, he cursed, “Back eels!”

The Obsidian was hardly visible. Once his limp body had gotten itself wedged – his head stuck in a doorway and his feet in another – the rapids rushing through the corridor had pushed him to the floor where he lay stretched across the hall. The river of sea water tugged at his fur and weapons as it surged onwards, seeking to fill every nook and cranny of the bilge. Already it had bashed open the door at the end of the hall – revealing the “eels” Theseus spoke of.

Sea Lords had arrived. They'd waded into the passageway, staggering against the current as they fought their way towards the source of the leak. Even though all five were Aquarians (endowed with the gift of Barro and capable of gliding through water like landlubbers across land), the force of the water against them dampened their genetic advantage. They'd only just made it through the doorway when Theseus initially barked at them.

“Back!” Theseus roared again.

Digging his horns out of the roof, Theseus began down the hall with an awkward stoop. With shoulders like a barren and a chest like two barrels of whiskey, his hunched-over march filled the passageway with wall to wall muscle. The Sea Lords didn’t budge but they also didn’t get back. The hall was long enough they had time to confer before having to decide between fight or flight. Hopping back out the door they’d come through, they lingered off to the side, plotting in the Aquarian Dialect. Theseus glowered but his ire would have to wait.

“Wake up, Obsidian!”

He’d made it to the sunken bearn. Grabbing him by his over-loaded weapons-belt, he lifted the shirtless pirate from the half-full hallway. He stabbed the Vanian Spear into the floor and used his right hand to slap the bearn once with his palm and then again with the back.

“Come, my friend!”

No avail. Theseus sighed. The “eels” had reemerged at the end of the hall.

“Godi eels, get out of here!” Theseus roared.

“We’re not eels!” One shouted, waving their sword, “Crimpsin tiad cow!”

“Cow?!” Theseus howled.

Turning back to the Obsidian, he slugged him hard in the gut. Finally, the bearn gasped back to life. Water burst from his mouth and nose like it had from the giant leak Theseus had burst in the hull. The bearn’s eyes met Theseus’ and he attempted to offer salutations but all that came out was another gasp. At least there was no water this time.

“You’re Jason the Giant?” Theseus asked.

Jason nodded.

“Nice to meet you, my friend.” Theseus shifted his head but couldn’t quite lower it any further to nod. The bilge of a Sea Lord vessel wasn’t accessible to man of Jason’s stature and Theseus had half-a-foot on the bearn. They hardly fit next to each other in the hall. Theseus had to wiggle and squirm to take his place between the bearn and the approaching fishfolk. He said, “I can handle the eels, my friend. Get your breath back.”

With that, Theseus turned and lobbed his spear. It shot through the passage and harpooned the first fishfolk with such force that he was thrown back against the second. The two pirates beside them rushed to their aid. The first fellow was an obvious lost cause, but one of the Sea Lords tried to pull the spear out of him nonetheless. The other helped the second fellow back up. Meanwhile, the fifth passed the four, figuring now was the time to charge the giant minotaur as the furred-intruder had just discarded his weapon. The merman lost some of his opportunistic vigor when he saw the vigor in his opponents eye, rushing through the water with the current on his side. The merman paused to lick his eyes then sheathed his sword and drew three saw-toothed disks from his belt.

“Fishcuses?” Theseus smirked, not halting his pace. He beckoned on the attacked with a curling index finger, “Bring it, my friend.”

The merman threw all three, one after the other, so that if they failed to stop the giant the would still have time to draw his sword. Theseus caught the first. The blade cut into his palm, but his hand was roughly three times the size of the weapon and the cut likely the softest battle wound the millenarian warrior had ever acquired. He deflected the second with the first then let the third thwack his bare chest. Blood began to seep out to stain the grey fur around the wound, but aside from that Theseus seemed not to notice. His entire snout was twisted in a snarl. As the merman raised his sword, Theseus flung the discus he’d caught back. The merman swiped at it and missed. It struck him in the chest and, unlike the minotaur, the merman felt it. It would’ve

thrown him to the ground if the ground wasn't covered by two and a half feet of water. Still he flopped back, losing hold of his sword the pirate flung it into the air. Before the blade could bash the ceiling, Theseus caught snatched the weapon and plunged it through the belly of the fallen foe that had dropped it.

The fishfolk that had been knocked back by the first victim was now back up, trident in hand. His comrade, a merman, bore a sword and shield and a sharp toothed snarl. Together they stepped up to take their turn. No sooner did the trident wielder step forward than were they thrown backwards off their feet with half a fishcus protruding from between their big black eyes. Undaunted, his merman partner attacked.

Having just used the razorblade that was stuck in his breast, Theseus looked essentially weaponless. Dressed in the traditional war garb of his people, which was coincidentally the formal wear, casual wear, and anything in-between-wear of his people, it appeared to one unfamiliar with GraiLord culture that all the minotaur had to defend himself aside from his skirt or his horns was the massive metal plate that protected his lower belly and groin – but that was not the case. Beneath his flannel tartan, all sorts of knives and daggers were strapped to his thigh. If the merman had known, they likely would've fled. Unfortunately, even not knowing, they should've fled. Because though Theseus was armed, he didn't want to risk losing any of his beloved sharp objects to the dark rushing water and, to be honest, he didn't need to.

The merman stabbed upward, aiming to pierce Theseus' abdomen above his decorative belt clasp but Theseus swatted the flat of the blade away with his knuckles. The Sea Lord's heart sank but he didn't give up quite yet, he still had his shield. Ducking down, he hid behind it as Theseus brought down his fist like a hammer. Forced to squat under the weight of the GraiLord's blow, the merman made the best of it: he had a clear shot at the minotaur's leg. With one swing he cut a deep gash into the side of Theseus' calf.

With a roar, Theseus grabbed hold of the Sea Lord's shield and threw it against the wall. It was strapped to the Aquarian's arm so he went with it. Yanked from the water, the merman slammed flat against the wall of the bilge. Before he could fall to the water below, Theseus pinned him by his throat. The Sea Lord raised his sword but Theseus grabbed his wrist.

"Well done, little eel." Theseus admitted.

The merman's lips curled into a snarl. Theseus looked back down the passageway. Jason was holding a gun.

"No, my friend!" Theseus exclaimed, "Let this one live."

"Saeraiouslay?" Jason yelped.

"Keep the gun on him though." The minotaur turned back to the merman, "No funny business or we're having sushi."

The merman broke his glare to lick his eyes. When his captor's expression hadn't changed, the pirate gave a gentle nod.

Theseus threw him back towards Jason then turned to face the last Sea Lord. As he did, the fishfolk finally finished prying the Vanian Spear from the still-dying body of his comrade. Triumphant, the Sea Lord turned to Theseus with the widest, sharkiest smile the minotaur had ever seen.

"Don't be a fool, eel." Theseus warned.

"Eel!" The fishfolk exclaimed, "You cow!"

Rushing forward, he stabbed with the mystical weapon. Theseus didn't even try to dodge it. He did, however, catch it before the spear blade could reach his snout. The fishfolk immediately yanked, attempting to first wrestle it from the minotaur's grasp. When that failed,

he pushed hard and tried to stab the minotaur. Theseus's grip held firm. Seeing that neither was going to work, the Sea Lord decided it was time to run. Letting go of the spear-

He couldn't let go. Looking down at his hands, he saw the ice was now creeping up his wrists. His big black eyes turned back to Theseus just in time to see Theseus take the spear in both hands and wrench it free. His forearms exploded into shards of frozen flesh. Blood began pouring from his stumped arms as he screamed to both barro and all the other gods he didn't believe in.

"Allah." Theseus suggested, then he spun the spear around and put the handleless Aquarian out of his misery.

Down the passageway, Jason stated, "Brutal."

Theseus shrugged, "Ready, my friend?"

Jason kept the revolver on the surviving Sea Lord, having him wade backwards down the hall to Theseus.

Theseus spoke to the merman once more, "That ice there won't hold forever. Soon this ship will sink. But that's no issue for you, little eel, now is it?"

The merman winced at the slur but restrained himself from protesting. Instead, he bowed his head, "Thank you, Guardian."

Theseus attempted to bow back but again the cramped quarters prevented him. He continued, "If you value this new life you've been granted, my friend, then you will not return to the Sea Lords." He tapped the ceiling with his spear, warning, "This cartel is cursed." Then he tapped the floorboards beneath the sloshing pool, "Seek out the Soldiers of Shelmick."

Jason traded places with the merman and motioned for the man to head down the hallway towards the hole Theseus had burst in the bilge. Once far enough away, Jason turned to Theseus and shook his head. Theseus smirked back then turned to lead Jason down the rest of the corridor. They didn't encounter many other Sea Lords on their way up – those they did turned tail pretty fast. Nor could they hear much from above. The leak was still making quite the racket – breaking into new rooms, slapping in to fill up untouched airpockets, tossing furniture around as the current changed with the new water level – and so they had no way of knowing what to expect until they got closer to the stairs that would take them above deck. In the stairwell, they began to make out the topside clamor. It was still rowdy, but not rowdy enough for battle. The battle had been won. And by the distinct absence of much of a crew below deck, the two furred titans had a good feeling about the outcome.

Solaris still stood strong and tall but Iahtro's gray chimney clouds continued to push north, dragging the massive column of wind and rain, wrapped in pulsing veins of lightning. The ocean breeze had been replaced with a whipping gusts that were becoming slowly stronger. It seemed the Battle – short and sweet – had ended right on time. The Sea Lord fleet was in disarray. Half the ships had toppled over, thanks to Theseus' spear, and the other half had been lit on fire, thanks to Theseus' dragon riders. There was supposed to be one ship remaining, the *Hong Chi*, but Theseus had sabotaged that plan. The old man felt no shame in the slight betrayal. His people were the reason the Battle was even possible to begin with. That said, the plan had depended heavily on Theseus and his people. The members of Rosethorn knew an alliance with the minotaurs of the Blue Ridges was risky. The GraiLord had long since learned not to count on the promises of foreigners. King Theseus Icespear had stopped making promises a long time ago.

Though Theseus hadn't spared the *Hong Chi* as his Rosethorn friends had hoped he would, he did allow one ship to survive: the *Monoceros*. It was currently surging northwest

towards the western side of Oreh Island. This was a risky move, considering the fact that the Imperial Navy was sailing around the eastern side of Oreh, but likely a good gamble. After all, no one yet knew that Theseus had thrown the Vanian Spear into the spokes of the plan's wheel.

Dresdan had just noticed the *Monoceros* sneaking away in the distance. Then, Theseus and Jason emerged from below deck.

“Captain!”

The water-logged Giant bound forward, shaking the entire ship as he rushed to his bone-barbed Captain's side.

A sigh of relief temporarily cooled Dresdan's growing rage, “I was worried you sank to the Wobniar Woods.”

Jason beamed, puffing out his chest and pointing to the equally soggy minotaur behind him, “The Asspaer saved mae!”

“Is that why you're here?” Dresdan seemed to grown an inch in stature as his concern left Jason and turned to suspicion when his indigo eyes hit Theseus. His witch-like hat rocked back as his bare shoulders rolled. The blood leaking out the crags in his scales seemed only to highlight the intensity of his slow rising frustration, “What did you do?”

“What I came to do, my friend.” Theseus did not smirk, his smile was sad. Staggering forward from the stairwell, the Obsidians stopped what they were doing. Even the fishfolk and mermen they were accosting, transferring over a plank (the third to have stretched between the two vessels) to tie up and stow away in the brig, stopped resisting to pay the legend his due attention. He stopped just close enough to Dresdan to make the Captain look up to him (which wasn't very close, considering – horns excluded – that he stood over two feet higher). Theseus continued, “I was offered revenge on the *Hong Chi*.”

Tou, Tabuh, and Drakken had joined Dresdan on the *Hong Chi* shortly after the Battle was won. Drakken had hurried to take the spell book from Sorelac Icelore – the mage that had made Truth's escape possible – then had Tabuh keep him subdued. Tabuh had done this by tying the man's hands behind his back, laying him flat on the salty, blood-soaked deck, and keeping her heel between the magician's over-dressed shoulder blades. Her ears still rang from the shots she herself had fired, so she couldn't hear Sorelac complaining beneath her. Nor could she hear him stop complaining as he decided to conserve what breath he had left. Tou joined as fast as he could but wasn't been much help, considering the fact that his hip was shattered and his face was swollen up like a dog that had stuck its snout in a yellow jacket hole. However, his hearing was still in good order, thus he heard loud and clear when Tabuh turned to him and asked with a bit too audible disdain, “Hae wants revenge on a boat?”

Whether Theseus heard this or not, he did elaborate, “Shalis Skullsummon slayed my brother on this very floor.” He stomped his hoof. “This ship will be buried with the coral within the hour.”

Dresdan held his breath to avoid a sigh, he looked past the minotaur to avoid rolling his eyes, and barked out orders to avoid snapping at the GraiLord, “Obsidians! Change of plans! Fill the brig, then leave the rest of the Lords on their ship. We're staying on the *Sail*.” Expecting hesitation as his crew would likely rather sit and be enthralled with the fact that a Gaurdian stood amongst them, Dresdan added, “Any slacker gets a pain training, courtesy of Jason the Giant!”

Tou perked up at the threat and his torso swerved before his feet could even start propelling him back to the ship.

“Nope.” Tabuh snapped, slapping his chest with a hand to keep the elf from budging. She dug her heels into Sorelac's back as if smearing her point into his spinal column would help her

drive home her point. She kept her golden eyes on the Captain, growling, “Wae’re staying raht hare til wae fahnd out what the hell is going on. Ah made a damn sword expectin-”

Dresdan whirled on her, “And I expected it to work.”

“Donum.” Jason gasped, his eyes ogled the shards of the saber between them, “It didn’t work.”

“Not mah fault!” Tabuh shrieked. Her hand left Tou’s chest to point down at the nellaf as if her index finger held the same threat as the barrel of her golden gun, “The godai Asslore zapped her out to god knows where!”

Ignoring the excuse, Dresdan turned back to Theseus. He couldn’t force a cool tone, but he managed to withhold any sharpness, “Why did your dalvary spare the *Monoceros*.”

“Icespears do not renege, my friend.” Theseus stated, “The *Monoceros* was given to the Sea Lords to pay off my brother’s debt to the Disciples of Darkness, to resolve the feud between them and my brother Clymene.”

“Ya trusted the Pact?” Jason scoffed.

A light sparked in Theseus’ eye and Jason took an immediate step back.

“I trusted that they knew the consequences of betraying my trust.” Theseus gestured to the destruction in the distance around them. Then, with a nod, he directed their attention to an incoming dragon and said, “Now I must make sure that they understand what has taken place here today.”

The dragon was massive and as it swooped low, it was the closest Tou had ever been to such a beast. He’d seen sky dragons before, soaring above the clouds like airships, so far away they were hardly more than specks against the sun. Up close, sky dragons – or reckunk dragons, as minotaurs often called them – were massive. Five stories from head to tail, with wingspans of twice that. This particular steed had baby-blue scales, a mix between the receding sapphire skies and the crystal waters of the Aquarian. The beast swept by in a flash. Tucking its wings, it dove down to pass by close to the ship. Upon its spined back was an intricate leather saddle with two seats – one ridden by an armored minotaur, standing in his stirrups but leaning low over the horn, the other one empty.

Theseus marched slow then bound from the deck of the ship. Even with his wounded leg, he cleared the taffrail by more than a couple feet. When he hit the saddle, the dragon dropped another couple yards – enough to fall out of view for those on the deck. The crew still on board the *Hong* rushed to the side just as the dragon veered right, spread its wings, and shot up back towards the heavens – chasing after the *Monoceros*.

“What a dick.” Jason grunted.

“He serves his people.” Dresdan sighed, “The Empire has betrayed them as many times as the Pact.”

“Two wrongs don’t make a raht.” Tabuh reminded the two, “Now, how you gone make raht the promise you made us?”

Whether or not Dresdan was about to answer, the electric elf would never know. The perfect excuse for ignoring her interrogation arrived in quite a dramatic fashion. Those by the railings were so distracted, still watching Theseus soar away, that they didn’t expect a zoomer to zoom up before them. It must’ve took a near ninety degree angle turn to scale the side of the ship, for when it popped up it’s hull was all that was visible. Stopping abruptly just above the deck, the Space City vessel leveled out and lowered itself – like a car parallel parking – to rest parallel with the *Hong Chi*.

If the sudden arrival of the vehicle wasn't surprising enough, then the cargo surely captivated the attention of those there to witness. First off, Zaria Ein was still bleeding. She'd washed her wound in the sea then wrapped it with the bandage that was normally wrapped around Skar's head – the bandage that was normally white but now as dark a maroon as the red and blue checkered flags of the sinking Sea Lord fleet. Her dress blues actually looked quite Sea-Lordy for much of the blood had stained her coat before she'd been able to clean off. The Strategy Admiral's presence alone would've garnered the attention of a band of buccaneers but her bloody condition commanded it.

While she drew eyes due to her status, Skar drew eyes by her strangeness. Skar was quite recognizable to Obsidians. As an infamous new Rosethorn, she was well known among Antipan pirates. It was odd that her bandage-bandana was not covering her shadowmancer eye, but Dresdan's goons already knew of her crow eye. What they didn't know, was why her body appeared so different. None could quite pinpoint what exactly had changed about her appearance, but she certainly did not look like the Skar they knew. It was almost as if a stranger was in costume eerily attempting to portray her.

The third intriguing passenger was a merman-tanned fishfolk. Now, this was not necessarily odd. After all, they were on the Aquarian Ocean so Aquarians were common. Plus, it was unlikely that a normal fishfolk would be an ally, as the ethnostate of Aquaria was anything but friendly to the Empire of the Trinity Nations. Mermen were most commonly against the Aquarian state and that opposition typically manifested in them joining either the Pact or the Antipact, so a fishfolk tanned like a merman would fit right in around an Obsidian. What was rare about this fellow was his blood and his audience knew this by the metal scar that he wore like a sash across his chest.

The entire deck seemed to murmur his nickname simultaneously, "The Shayu Shua." Paud, the Shayu Shua, did his best to repress a cringe.

"Captain." Zaria nodded.

"Admiral." Dresdan nodded.

"Was that Theseus?" Zaria asked.

"Indeed." Dresdan stated.

Zaria turned to watch the sky dragon continue to fly away. She hissed beneath her breath.

"Hae hah jacked the plan?" Skar asked.

"Yup." Jason said before an exaggerated sigh.

Turning back, Zaria asked, "You're not surrendering the *Obsidian Sail*, then?"

"Afraid not, Admiral." Dresdan answered.

"Godi..." She murmured, "The *Hong*"ll have to do."

"It's sankin." Jason warned, "Asspaer sunk it."

"Farakin..." she whirled around to stare out towards her approaching fleet, stopping her tongue as if she had to save her swears for later.

"Did Truth show?" Skar asked.

"Came," Jason laughed in the way only a good sport can after a terrible loss, "and went."

He pointed to the shards of the saber on the deck beside him.

All eyes went to Tabuh and Tou.

Tabuh was furious, "What in the godai taiad does this maen for us, then?!"

Zaria turned to Skar and Skar turned to Paud. Paud wasn't even paying attention. With his black fishfolk eyes, he could look wherever he wanted and no one would know the better. He was actually scrutinizing the rigging work of the sails of the *Hong Chi*, nigh oblivious to the

conversation being had, but as the attention turned back to him, he simultaneously finish his observations and figured it was time to head out.

He glanced around. Unaware or unconcerned with why everyone was staring at him, he simply bowed, turned and marched back to the side of the ship, the he dove down into the sea.

“Who was that?” Tou whispered to Tabuh.

Fortunately, Tabuh couldn't hear him what with the wind and her still somewhat crippled ears. She was preoccupied anyways. Giving up on the Admiral providing an answer, she turned back to the Captain, “Dresdan. What the hell are wae doing now?”

Dresdan gave her an honest shrug, “We are going after Truth.”

A low growl emitted from Tabuh, “Ah thought wae got to turn in the ship? Thus claiming the bounty. You just told the Admiral you're taking the ship. So ah raepaet: what the hell are wae,” she pointed to herself and Tou, “doing now?”

“Excuse me, Dame Sentry.” Drakken stepped in. His presence did much to calm Tabuh's burgeoning rage and his interjection reminded everyone that there was a less egotistical mind available to save the day, “The old offer may still be available to you and Sir Fou.” With a wincing smile on his snout, he requested of Tabuh, “Please lighten up on the wizard's spine – just for a moment.”

Tabuh stepped off the nellaf. The nellaf gasped as if he had been holding his breath.

“Sir Icelore,” Drakken began, “you will surely be found guilty of aiding and abetting a now-enemy of the Empire.” Drakken looked over at Zaria.

Zaria looked over to Dresdan.

Dresdan nodded.

Zaria turned back to make eye contact with Sorelac.

“Yup.” She said.

“Unless,” Drakken said, still looking at Zaria, “you cooperate.”

Again, Zaria confirmed, “Sure.”

“And cooperation,” Drakken turned back to look down at Sorelac, “sounds like you telling us where you sent the necromancer.”

The nellaf gulped.

“Tell them we tortured you if you have to.” Drakken suggested.

“Wae can make it aesaer and do the torturing too, if ya lahk.” Jason offered.

The nellaf gulped again.

“Now would be a good time to answer.” Dresdan said.

“Munkloe.” Sorelac whispered.

“That's a whole godai continent!” Jason cursed.

“Sereibis.” Sorelac specified.

“The biggest farakin citay?” Skar scoffed.

Groaning, Sorelac confessed, “The *Marrialdo*.”

“What's that?” Tabuh demanded, “A ship?”

“A hellbrute ship that might as well have diplomatic immunity in Munkloe. King Ruse sent a letterlemur to us just before the Battle asking for help, but,” Zaria paused, turning from Tabuh to wink at Dresdan, “no servant of the Empire can touch it.”

“So what now?” Tabuh asked.

“Leave with Zaria,” Dresdan offered, “or continue on with us to Munkloe.”

“And wae'll get to turn in the ship then?” Tabuh asked.

“Yes.” Dresdan promised.

Tabuh groaned. She turned to Tou.

Tou didn't have to think long, he only had one question, "Hellbrutes are the ones that enslave all the dwarves?"

Dresdan nodded.

Then one more, "So if we go to Munkloe, then we get to fight a bunch of slavers?"

Dresdan nodded.

And finally, the only question he should've asked to begin with, "And y'all can get me a healer before the next fight?"

"You look lahk ya naed one baefore the next naht, boy!" Jason crowed.

Dresdan chuckled but nodded nonetheless.

Tou turned to Tabuh, "Want to go to Munkloe?"

Tabuh shook her head but gave in, "Wae're going to Munkloe."

- - -

The wind was still calm on the high bluffs of Oreh Island that overlooked the Battle. The Iahtro Storm had a ways to go and the *Obsidian Sail* was only just pulling away from the *Hong Chi*. Two men stood there on that cliffside park, sticking out from the rest of the civilians for their stoic nature which had first set them apart. When they arrived, they were the only ones on the grassy knoll without smiles on their faces. All others present were picnicking or sight seeing or something similarly recreational but all that stopped when the ships of the Sea Lord fleet to the south began to sink.

It wasn't at all odd to see pirates from that vantage. The folks of Oreh pirate-peered like other sea-side city-folk whale-watched. Especially with the prevalence of Sea Lords in the Aquarian Ocean, citizens of the island kingdom would've enjoyed the sight of the entire fleet but would not have thought much of it. However, the sight of the greatest pirates in the Southern Hemisphere sinking and burning – now that was a spectacle.

The crowds on the cliffs became ecstatic, oohing and awing as they squinted to see the Battle taking place. This made the two quiet men sharing a telescope on the edge of the bluff stand out like sore thumbs. Not that their lack of excitement was anything illegal, it just made them easily identifiable as certified party poopers which, incidentally, gave them the privacy they desired.

As the conflict wrapped up, the two began to whisper.

"That's Talloome's brother." Shaprone stated.

"The Master?" Justin asked.

"No, the Master's twin brother, Sorelac." Shaprone corrected.

"The magician." Justin realized, "Whah is hae workin with the Sae Lords?"

"The Mystvokar's kin aren't as immune to immorality as he is." Shaprone reminded Justin, "That said, they are still his kin and that one, Sorelac Icelore, is now a hostage of these Antipan pirates that Tabuh Sentry has herself in bed with."

"They have a mancer too." Justin said, "Thought that was illaegal in the Empahr."

"It is but this is the Rosethorn we are..." Shaprone's words trailed off.

He had seen the mancer that was riding with Zaria on the zoomer from the start but had ceased to pay her much attention. Only, while she stood on the deck of the *Hong Chi*, he suddenly realized that she looked familiar. The problem was, she looked like someone who he had heard of – seen mugshots of – that was not a she, but rather a he.

“Skarbek?” He murmured.

“Prahvate Skarbek?” Justin asked, “*The Prahvate Skarbek?*”

Shaprone lowered the telescope from his eye.

“Private Skarbek is a wanted man.” Shaprone stated, “A mass murderer.”

“A terrorist!” Justin concurred.

“The Empire will have no choice but to hand him over.” Shaprone continued, “Defending a villain such as that...”

“An act of war, one maht say.” Justin suggested.

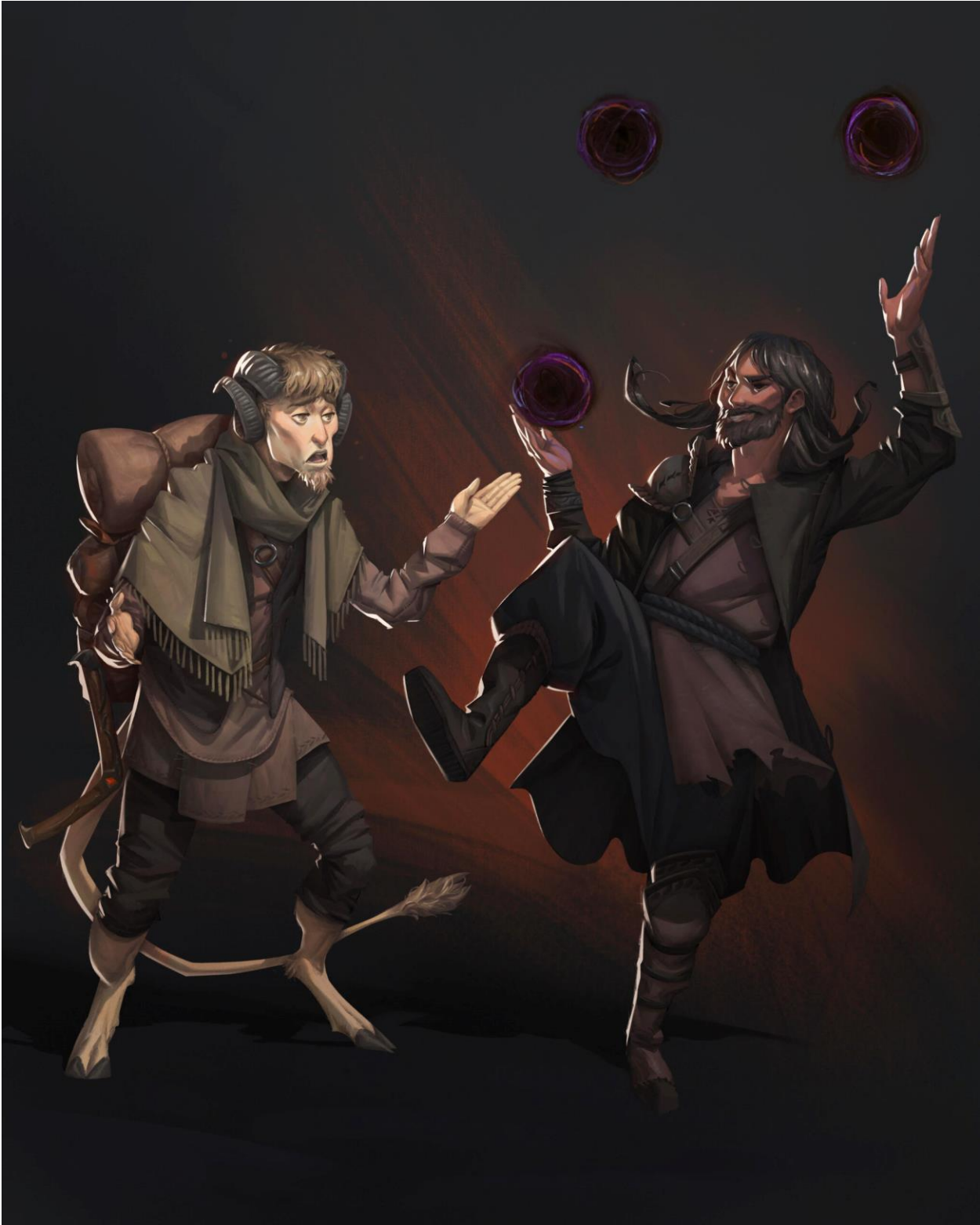
“One might.” Shaprone agreed, “One might, indeed.”

The Commander twisted his spyglass and an opaque ring that split the two collapsible cylinders lit up. The device began to hum as he put it back to his eye. Focusing it on Skar, he twisted the enertomb band oncemore. With the sound of a snap, the light flashed then dimmed back to its prior state and continued to whirl. He slid the spyglass into the holster on his belt and turned to his comrade with a smirk.

“What now?” Justin asked, “Wae tell Onotna?”

“Oh no,” Shaprone shook his head, “they’re harboring a terrorist and they’ve kidnapped the Mystvokar’s brother.” He patted the telescope, “This goes straight to top.”

PART TWO – DOG CATCHING



Chapter Seven: The Herder and the Stray

Solaris grinned upon the Marble Plains of Dogloe, sending soft winds whistling through the weeds that stood and stooped like waves crashing across the sea. Between the reeds, herds of hounds bounced and dived like dolphins romping in the tide. The songs of the prairie birds were drowned out by the yips and barks of the wild dogs, singing their happy hyena hymns while the herder watched from the hill.

His crooked staff, bent at a right angle so that it was shaped like an L, rested on his criss-crossed legs as he sat. The gem in the nook shone like the sun, slurping the solar energy from Solaris and storing it for later use. The staff was an elgroom, his mother's, but he was not an elemental. For him, it was nothing more than a shepherd's crook. Still, he liked the warmth the stone captured and the glow reminded him of his mother.

A cloud crept over Solaris and Ben looked up. Sunlight still touched the plain, bursting through a hole in the clouds to stab the planet with a single ray of light. There were four horses in the sunbeam and there were people riding upon them – riding towards him and his flock.

“Yak Habba help me.” Ben murmured. He jumped to his feet and hollered, “Pups!”

Ears flopped up and tails went sharp. Though his hounds had gone rigid, he himself was struggling to keep from trembling. Still, he planted his hooves in the dirt and kept his voice firm. He pointed his short, L-shaped staff in the direction of the cave. Honestly, the body language and tone was enough, but nevertheless he gave his command verbal reinforcement.

“Home!”

Their ears went back and their tails fell as they jerked their heads at his direction, as if jump starting their charge. They rushed for the cavern. His own tail was fidgeting behind him like a large mouth bass on the end of a fishing line, as if it sought to snap off his spine and slither off to safety with the rest of the herd, but Ben had to hold his ground until his flock was all accounted for. He counted them by name as they zoomed by and, in between identifying his own, he squinted at the approaching marauders.

Be strong, Ben, the gmoat told himself, you're a Fasthoof and you're prepared. Stick to the plan!

As the last mutt moseyed into the cave, Ben turned his back on the raiders and followed his furred comrades. There was a dark, dry chamber near the rear of the cave. It was bit of a maze to get to, but he and his herd had the maze memorized. They flowed like water rushing down a ravine and stopped when they made it to the bunker. There, he'd fashioned a wooden gate with fallen limbs and hemp rope. The younger pups were whimpering and their high-pitched lamentations weighed heavy on his soul but then his gaze found the deep dark brown eyes of those older dogs that knew and trusted him. They immediately set about to calming their younger kin, coaxing them out of the way so that Ben could fit the fence in place.

He whirled around. *How long do I have?* His hand snuck up to matt down the hair around the crooked horns that shot up out of his head. He was less mulling over the plan than he was spiraling through the same thoughts over and over. Finally, he flinched out of it. His entire body seized from his hooves to his horns, one hand even flopped up to smack him in the jaw – snapping him out of his trance. *No time to dwell!* Ben dashed off.

Blood tingling in his veins, his hooves click clacked as he bound back through the labyrinth. He didn't return to the plain however, instead he climbed up onto a ledge he'd carved out above the entrance. A bamboo pole stretched from one side of the cave ceiling to the other,

just beneath Ben's hooves. A thick hemp-cord was wound around the pole and at the other end it was tied to a bucket of heavy stones. It was a simple trap. The bamboo axel had four poles shooting out of it, perpendicular to the axel, each armed with hand-carved spear heads. When the bucket was dropped, the hemp would unwind, spinning the axel and swinging the four spears down on who ever happened to be walking through the entrance of the cave.

This was not the nervous young gmoat's first rodeo.

Two spears lay by his side. They were hastily made, bamboo poles carved at both ends so that they could easily be used to pierce flesh. Ben mentally made note of where the spears were in case he needed to grab one in a hurry.

At the sound of a horse whinnying, he strapped his elgroon into his backpack and grabbed the buckets with both hands. There were four men in all and he knew that even with the best luck his trap wouldn't down all four, still, the more he could get the better. All he could see of the ground below him was the small hole where he could drop the bucket, and so he waited.

The thugs hesitated at the front of the cave for a moment before one stepped forward. Ben watched him walk past the hole but kept waiting. The man walked out of range of the trap and now stood completely visible to Ben, standing about where Ben had when he climbed up to his secretive ledge. Silently, the intruder turned back to his comrades and beckoned them forwards.

Ben stood as slowly as he could, holding the bucket between his legs and over the hole as he prayed to the Guardian Yak that the first thief wouldn't see him in the darkness. He waited until he saw what looked to be a head moving beneath him and then let go.

WHAM!

The bucket slammed into the man's head and he crumpled to the floor.

"What the--"

The trap spun into action, spears spinning down from the roof.

WHAPOW! WHAPOW!

Two more thieves gasped as the blades slid easily between their ribs. Ben didn't have the luxury of bathing in his success, there was still one man standing. Grabbing a spear, the gmoat leapt off his vantage point and tackled the baffled bandit. As they fell, their limbs in a tangled heap, the man's head hit a rock, bounced up, and smacked Ben in the forehead. Stars exploded into Ben's vision. His body went limp for a split second, his arm flopping like a noodle and his fingers unfurling to release his spear. The rogue was less stunned than the herder and got the next move off first. Grabbing him by the throat, the thief slugged Ben across the jaw. The hit was hard enough to knock Ben off the intruder. His head was still spinning, pain ricocheting off the insides of his skull, but Ben caught himself before he hit the rough floor of the cave. Gritting his teeth, he struggled to his feet. His mind thinking only of getting up and getting the spear. But again he was too slow. He took a kick to the gut that toppled him over onto his back. Chuckling, the intruder loomed over him.

"Farakin mutt." The raider spat, stomping on the fallen dog herder with a chuckle.

Ben rolled away in pain and the thief grabbed the spear. As the gmoat got onto all fours, the bandit drew back the spear. Ben could see his offender's silhouette. He doubted he could take much more pummelling, but he knew for a fact that he couldn't take being skewered like kebab. His flickering monkey-tail suddenly whipped taught, like his hounds' had, and his goat-ears snapped back.

This is it!

The intruder thrust the spear, Ben hit the floor. He didn't just fall flat – that still would've gotten him stuck – instead he lowered himself, as if preparing for a pushup, and then pushed off the ground to barrel-roll fast into the man's shins. The unsuspecting villain was toppled, his legs swept out from under him. The intruder tumbled forwards. As he fell, so too did the spear, but it didn't fall far. It stuck fast in the crags of the cave floor, jutting up beneath the falling felon. Had he had a harder belly, it would've stopped his fall like a kick stand. Instead, it slid through his abdomen, split apart a pair of vertebrae, and burst out his back as he slumped to the rocky crags.

The once-chuckling thief was now whimpering away his last breathes, sounding an awful lot like the puppers of Ben's flock that he'd come to pilfer. Ben, on the other hand, shouted a few unintelligible syllables triumphantly as he bound to his feet, only to remember that the creep had not come alone.

"You farakin mutt!"

Ben spun around. One of the bandits stood before him, a hand clamped to her bleeding ribs, the other holding a crooked dagger. The dog herder took a step back as the thief staggered forward.

"You crimpsin tiad..." the woman gasped as if he'd just slugged her and knocked the air out of her, but it wasn't him, it was her wound. An extra spurt of blood sprayed out between her fingers as she staggered on. She was hardly a threat in that state, but Ben was so shell-shocked that – in that moment – they might've been on equal playing fields, "...you godi--"

PAP! PAP! PAP!

The woman keeled over. She would've fallen onto Ben if the gmoat hadn't leapt out of the way. Instead she fell onto the spear protruding from her comrade's back. Adding another piece of meat to the brochette. Three arrows jutted out of her back, but Ben didn't look to inspect them. His eyes were towards the mouth of the maze.

"Looks like you were in the dog house there for a second."

Four figures stood, eclipsing the light from the entrance. Ben's eyes had adjusted enough that he could make out some of the characteristics of these individuals. Specifically, that of the fourth who stood before the other three. Each detail he discerned – from the patch enclosing his right eye to the marble crown that framed his temple – rattled Ben's nerves, shaking his consciousness nearly as much as the head-butt he'd received mere moments before. His heart was fluttering like the wings of a butterfly as he attempted to name his savior.

He stammered, "K-k-k--"

"Catch." The man strode forward, extending a hand to the gmoat, "Catch Eninac."

"King," Ben croaked, "Catch Eninac!"

The king nodded once, then shrugged, saying, "Call me Catch."

Ben didn't take the hand, instead he fell to one knee.

"No need for that." Catch chuckled, turning his shake request into a helping hand as he hoisted the herder back onto his hooves. Ben was trembling. Catch smiled, his white teeth seeming to glow in the shadows of the cave, "I must confess. I didn't come to save you. A fortunate coincidence."

Again, Ben felt the need to bow, but Catch's firm-yet-gentle grasp would not allow it.

"I'm here to thank you."

Ben's head cocked to the side, one ear up and one ear down, "Huh?"

The King gestured to the darkness beyond the herder, "For protecting my kin!"

"Huh?"

"He means us."

This was a new voice. It wasn't the king's, nor one of the three silhouettes that still stood motionless behind the nobleman. This voice came from behind Ben and, not only that, it came from below him. The poor gmoat was in such a state of confusion that his nerves simply didn't allow him to turn and face the speaker. Instead, the speaker stepped out from behind him and joined the king before the gmoat.

The speaker was a dog – one of the elders of the herd.

Ben instantly forgot the last couple of minutes – the fight *and* the royal's arrival – as his herding instincts kicked in, “You're supposed to...” but as the words spilled out of his mouth his mind caught back up with the situation, “Wait, *HUH?!?*”

“This,” said the King of Dogloe, releasing Ben's shoulders so that he could stoop to stroke the pooch at his side, “is my father.”

Ben looked from the King to the ragged dog at his feet. He had finally lost the ability to “huh” at this point. His tongue sputtered.

“Not sure how well you know your history,” Catch began, “but I'm sure you've heard that I am not in fact a full human, but actually mostly dog.”

“I thought that was a...” Ben realized he wasn't sure what he had thought that was. If that was a myth, or simply something people said, that definitely wouldn't have been a thing said to exalt the nobleman and his family. If anything, that rumor was an insult. Ben suddenly felt embarrassed for even having heard of such a thing.

“As you can see, it is very true.” Catch smiled, “I'm only partially human.”

“He's only forty-nine percent!”

Another new voice came from behind the gmoat. This speaker joined the king and his father. Once again, it was a member of Ben's pack, a pooch he had cared for since he first took over the herd.

“This is my mother.” The king explained, “You've been guarding the royal family and you've been doing such a good job, we figured it was time to give you a promotion.”

“From dog herder to dog catcher!” The father dog interjected.

“We're sending you out after a stray.” The mother dog added.

The king nodded, filling in the final detail, “We need you to capture my brother.”

Ben opened his mouth, as if he had reloaded his huh-gun but apparently the munition was a blank. All that came out was a wavering exhalation and then a, “Hmph” as he slumped off his hooves and collapsed forwards onto the monarch and his furry parents.

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Ben woke up with little more than a thought. Consciousness came like a slap to the face. His body shot up into a right angle as he gaped, almost as if repulsed, at the structure upon which he lay.

“A bed!”

His eyes swept the room. Leading to another horrified realization.

“A ROOM!”

He nearly tumbled off the meager cot that, to him, represented the lap of luxury. The poor – poor in more ways than one, mind you – dog herder hadn't found himself within the four-walled confines of a room in at least a year if not a couple (unless, of course, prairie caves counted). And this was a room to behold. It was obviously some sort of nursing chamber, hence the cot, but the setting was anything but hospital-chic. The walls were marble. The floor and

ceiling was marble. There was a chandelier overhead – *a chandelier*. Oggling the hanging candelabrum, Ben’s brain finally switched back access to his short term memory.

“The king!” He gasped.

Sliding his legs off the bed, his hooves hit the black-speckled marble and he approached the broad façade of glass panes that windowed the exterior wall. More shocking than had been his presence within a building was the fact that he appeared to be three stories up. The last time he’d been this high had been when he’d been forced to climb a savanna tree to recover a fetching ball. Fortunately, he was all out of gasps by this point. Besides, the courtyard he looked down upon was familiar. His mother had brought him here as a young child.

The Marble Courtyard. He began matting down the hair around his horns. *I’m in Doggenham. I’m in Doggenham!*

Swatting himself on the top of the head, he twirled around to face the door. No sooner had he spun than was the door pushed open. Not by a person, but rather by a dog. A familiar dog. It was the rugged black furred fluffer that had revealed himself to be the father of the king.

“Hello Mr. Fasthoof.”

All out of shock, Ben instead fell prey to skepticism.

“Mr. Eninac,” he bowed, then his brown eyes squinted and his hands slipped up to rest on his hips, “How come I’ve never even heard you bark – let alone yip – and yet here you are, speaking common tongue?”

The dog couldn’t quite shrug, what with a lack of bipedal-oriented shoulder blades, so instead he stretched. Exhibiting the old fashioned downward dog as he answered, “I dunno, not much to say on the plains.”

“Can everyone else hear you?” Ben asked, “Or is it just me?”

The pooch glanced around the room then turned back to the gmoat, “No one else is here?”

“I mean, I bumped my head, right?” Ben explained, “So maybe this is some kind of hallucination?”

“This would be quite an extensive hallucination, Ben. Have you ever actually hallucinated before?” The dog pressed.

“No. Well...I don’t think so?” His fingers instinctively returned to the tufts of hair crowning his horns, “Have you?”

“I’m a dog!” The dog yipped, “Half of what I see is hallucination! Now come on!” He turned, his tail fanning as he trotted back towards the door, “I’m to take you to my son.”

“The king?”

“No, the other one.” He scoffed.

“Aren’t I supposed to be hunting him down?”

“Ah, see!” The woofers looked back to wink, “It’s all coming back!”

“Wait!” Ben exclaimed, “My herd?”

“They’re fine!” The dog assured him, pausing in the doorway to roll his eyes, “You think the half-dog king would leave a herd of dogs unattended?”

“Fair.” Ben admitted and, with his tail twitching like the lightning bolts of thoughts zipping through the synaps of his brain, he followed the dog out of the room, “So strange...I just always assumed it was a rumor.”

“We like to keep it that way.” The dog nodded, “No one knows their history these days so it’s best not to spread any truths. Most people can’t handle nuance, they’ve long since lost the critical thinking capacity they had as animals.”

Despite the dig at civilization, Ben couldn't argue otherwise. He wasn't quite privy on the exact manner in which a man became a dog (or vice versa) and, being still a bit too concussed to curb his tongue, he asked, "So how exactly did your family become part...uh...whichever part came second?"

The dog paused, looking over his shoulder, "Are you suggesting some sort of interspecies?"

"No! Of course not!" Ben exclaimed, but then, as the dog turned back around and started leading him through the halls once more, Ben couldn't help but note aloud, "Although...isn't your son married to a human now?"

"He's always been a little kinky, but hey," the dog didn't skip a beat, "it was people that elected him. Not dogs."

Ben smirked and quieted down. He hadn't been in the palace since he was little kid. The Citadel, it was called. Now he was back and, not only that, he was being herded around by a former member of his herd. *What a bizarre turn of events.*

"Our great ancestor was cursed – or charmed, rather – long ago. The Emperor's father, in fact, Etamladip Eninac, although he was cursed after he and his lover conceived of his son."

"So the Emperor isn't half dog?" Ben asked.

"Well..." the dog replied, "that depends on your opinion of the Ipativy."

Having no opinion whatsoever of the Ipativy, nor hardly any clue as to who or what they were, Ben snickered at the jab and secretly prayed that this response would not offend. Then both men were distracted by a soft yip down the hall. The scraggly yellow dog, that had revealed herself to be the king's mother, was waiting at the top of a stairwell. When they approached she came trotting over. Their tails beat back and forth like windshield wipers at max speed until they paused to sniff at each other's noses – drawing so close they nearly kissed, nostrils flaring. Then she turned her attention to her former herder.

"Hello, Ben!" The mother exclaimed, popping up a bit off the ground so Ben didn't have to stoop to pat her head, "Excited for your mission?"

Ben gulped, "Not sure."

The two dogs began to march downstairs, shooting their herder glances over their shoulders as they continued to chat. Ever so often they passed a guard or a diplomat. None seemed to bat an eye. It may have been a myth that the royal family were canines but it surely wasn't to those with access to the Citadel.

"I'm still not sure why me." Ben stated, "I know my mom was friends with the king and all, but still...why'd you all have to live all the way out on the plains with the other dogs? It doesn't seem like your much of a secret here – you chose the prairies over the palace?"

"Of course!" The father crowed, "What real dog wants to live inside?!"

"Plus," the mother added, "you're a celebrity in the canine community."

"Huh?" Ben yelped.

"You've got rave reviews – 100% five stars. No dogs hurt, hardly any fights!"

The father chimed in, "A fantastic treat to kibble ratio, one that won't have any woofers gaining too much weight but still gives a dog a taste of the finer things in life."

The mother continued, "-no runaways – aside from us, of course!"

"You guys ranaway?!" Ben exclaimed.

"Only for government business!" The mother promised him.

"Don't feel bad." The father assured him, "We had decoys, it was super covert, the whole nine yards – point is, you should be proud. They don't make dog herders like you anymore, son."

At the base of the stairs, the hall was far more populated. It wasn't packed, but it was fuller. Many of those they passed did cast the two pooches an odd glance – especially after hearing common tongue escape their snouts – but folks were busy. Rushing to and fro on this task or the other, attempting to tie up any and all loose ends before the last minutes of business hours shriveled up. Ben had to twist and skip to keep up with his shorter and stouter guides who cut easily through the crowd, until finally they strode out into the immaculate Marble Courtyard. Taking a breath of fresh air, Ben sighed.

“When our last herder croaked – and thank the universe for that – we ultimately decided you would be next.” The mother explained, “The fact that you were raised by Mercuada Fasthoof only made things better.”

“Barely...” Ben remarked.

“Barely?” The father asked.

Ben shook his head, even though his guides weren't looking back to see. They were cutting diagonally across the courtyard to a round chamber that sat in the corner. Its door was open and guarded by a halberd-holding soldier who bowed gently to them as they entered. A short set of stairs took them to a long, damp alley with seemingly nothing aside from the light of the exit at the end. Ben was attempting to concoct his answer but as his hand slipped up to tuck the hair in around his horns, his tongue flopped uselessly like the tail flickering behind him.

The mother answered for him, “His mother was killed when he was just thirteen.”

“Oh yea...” The father muttered, his tail curling down behind him as he continued to move forwards. After a moment, he pepped up, trying to pep Ben up with him, “She was a hero, Ben.”

Ben sighed, “So I hear...”

The dogs could hear his feelings in his tone. They could seemingly smell it in the air. As they trotted on up and out of the tunnel, they glanced at one another to make sure they weren't mistaken. *No more talk of dead mothers*, that was the message they tacitly sent to one another, they weren't the dogs for the job. Now, dead grandmothers, on the other hand?

“Your grandmother was killed too, did you know that?” the father asked, adding, “Assassinated, actually.”

Ben was shocked. Not at the pooch's audacity – he didn't even know his grandmother, so he wasn't offended, he was just surprised to find that his grandmother – who his mother had never mentioned – had been someone worth “assassinating”.

“Huh?” He croaked.

“Your grandmother was once Emperor.” The mother explained, “The only other Emperor we've ever had in the Empire of the Trinity Nations.”

“Seriously?” Ben yelped.

“Figure your mother didn't want it getting to your head.” The father suggested.

“Heterice Fasthoof.” The mother proceeded, “She covered for Saint while he was trapped in the Iahtro Storm – centuries ago – she was a great woman.”

They'd finally reached the light at the end of the tunnel. Up another brief flight of stairs, Ben found that they'd brought him to a stable. Stalls of horses, smelling an awful lot like the caves Ben had spent his teen years sleeping in, lined the hall. They marched passed the furry steeds and went up to the second floor where the more scaley variety awaited them. These stalls were far larger, each fitted with a grand balcony so that the winged beasts within could depart for the skies rather than having to fit down the narrow alley that potential passengers strode down. The king stood by one of the pins, talking to a dragon rider. He was a tall man. His dark brown

lochs looked a touch cleaner and far neater than those of his furry parents. An eye patch slid across his face, covering his right, and a crown cut across his forehead. His garb seemed half ceremonial – adorned in the baby blue of the national colors – and half for battle, though the lack of marks on his plates hinted that his attire was definitely pre-conflict. As they approached, the two dogs ran up to their son, taking their pats, then settling down by his feet. King Catch Eninac thanked the dragon rider but waited to speak to Ben until the man had walked out of ear shot. The king was just about to say something when Ben began to kneel.

“No need for that, Ben, a friend of my folks is a friend of mine.”

Ben froze mid squat.

“I figure you’ve got a lot of questions.” Catch began.

“We’ve told him about his grandmother.” The father warned.

“And that he’s quite the herder.” The mother added.

“He is indeed.” Catch nodded, “Dog herding is a humble occupation, but honorable-”

“Ha!” The scoff burst forth from Ben’s mouth with such abruptness that it shocked even himself.

“Humble, huh?” The father dog snickered.

But this was what the King had hoped for, “You’re a Fasthoof.” He smiled, “Like your mother and like your mother’s mother – like all Dogloen mothers – you’ve got the herders’ gene. But you’ve payed your dues on the plains. You’ve won the admiration of the beasts.”

Both his parents snorted at the phrasing but did not interrupt further.

“Now it is time that you win the admiration of the people.” Catch concluded, “Time to take your place alongside the legacy of your mother and grandmother.”

Ben’s mind was reeling, but still there was enough clearness in his consciousness for him to piece together all the information he’d been bombarded with since the King had first come to his cave. The last thing he had heard before he’d passed out: *“From dog herder to dog catcher. We’re sending you out after a stray. We need you to capture my brother.”*

“What’s this have to do with your brother?” Ben asked, “Where is he?”

“Munkloe.”

“Munkloe?” Ben asked.

Catch nodded.

“I don’t know anything about Munkloe!” Ben exclaimed, “I’ve never left the continent!”

“Ah, but they know of you.” Catch raised a calming hand to the gmoat, “They know of your Grandmother and they know of your Mother *and* you know dogs.”

“So?” Ben crowed.

“They need dogs.” Catch answered.

“Huh?” Ben laughed, “Who *needs* dogs?”

“Hey!” Both canine parents exclaimed.

Ben cringed out an apology, “Sorry, I meant-”

Catch interrupted, “Mancer hounds.”

“They want mancer hounds?” Ben asked.

“No, but they need them.” Catch answered.

Again, Ben was perplexed.

Catch raised his hands, once again pleading for Ben to hush and trust, as he elaborated, “At a banquet the other night, my brother, Fetch Eninac, wooed King Signan Ruse’s only heir, Princess Lenga Ruse.”

“And?” Ben asked.

“My brother is a fugitive.” Catch pointed to his eye patch, “You see, as a dog-”

“Part dog.” His father inserted.

“Mostly dog.” His mother corrected.

Catch continued, “I wasn’t able to take this form until my brother became a shadowmancer. My brother then turned my sister and myself into shadowmancers so that we could join him. We were able to exist under the radar for a little while...then the Tornados of 91.”

“Our son saved a hundred lives before the funnel cloud even left the ground!” The father dog proclaimed.

“Together, our family recovered near a thousand total after the storm was over.” The mother dog added.

“That’s how I got elected King of Dogloe.” Catch nodded, “Only problem was, I had a crow’s eye.”

“But you were a hero!” Ben exclaimed.

“Still, mancy is illegal. However, you are right. The Emperor, Saint, knew I shouldn’t be shipped off to live on the Dragon Islands, under the Order of Mancy, and that I deserved to serve my people – and the Empire – as King of Dogloe. Thus, he offered me and my siblings an out. Yak Habba – the Guardian himself – replaced my eye with an enchanted enertomb that not only allowed me to remove my crow eye without shriveling up and dying but also permitted me to retain this humanoid form.”

“Fetch and Shakira didn’t take the deal.” The mother dog said sadly.

“Those are the other two to Catch’s litter.” The father dog said as he nuzzled his partner, “They were forced to go to the Dragon Islands.”

The mother continued “Though both did escape, they’re now criminals by law.”

“Then how’d he meet Lenga?” Ben asked.

Catch shrugged, “He’s sneaky and we,” he gestured to himself and his folks, “well, we missed him.”

“And now he’s gone back with Lenga?”

“Indeed.” Catch sighed, “King Signan of Munkloe believes that Fetch brought with him an entire band of nefarious mancers. While we highly doubt this is the case, we don’t want to ruin relations between us and our ally. Therefore, we want you to fly to Munkloe as a Dogloen diplomat and offer them a team of top-notch mancer hounds so they can scower Sereibis and sleep tight knowing the city is clear of mancers of any kind.”

“But the city isn’t clear?” Ben thought aloud, “Cause your brother is there, right?”

“He is.” Catch nodded, “But he will be gone before the hounds arrive.”

“How’s that?”

“You’ll bring him back with you.”

“How?!”

“He’ll recognize you. He spent time in your herd, visiting our folks, and so he will know he can trust you *and* he’ll know I sent you.” Catch said, “He’ll come with you.”

“But...” Ben was stumped.

“Are you afraid of flying?”

“I am!”

“How afraid?”

Ben stood, eyes emphasizing his words as he spoke, “Deathly!”

“There’ll be a reward, all I’m asking is that you try.”

Ben was content as a dogherder, he did love his job, *but* his life – and the life of his herd – would drastically improve with a bit more gold in his back pocket. He could upgrade from caves to marble rooms with beds and chandeliers. He could toss his traps and hire guards to protect himself and his hounds. Chefs could plot out their meals and butchers provide their meats. Maybe with a bit of extra help, he could afford to stretch out and explore a bit of the world beyond the plains. Maybe he could serve more than just his herd, maybe he could become something like his mother – *or grandmother! Was she really the Emperor?* He noticed his fingers were tangling around in the hair around his horns and he stopped with a sheepish smile at those waiting on his response. *That's a lot more gold than a simple reward, Ben.* He told himself, but then the other voice chimed in. The side of Ben that took over when the raiders showed up on the horizon argued, *A king is asking you to pull off a secret diplomatic mission. That's worth more than a simple reward!* Ben cleared his throat then lowered his head, as if worried not only his idea but his head might get smacked down, “Excuse my frankness, but it'd have to be a pretty hefty reward to-”

“Deal!” The king strode forward, reached around, and clasped Ben so hard on the back that he lost all the air in his lungs. Catch continued, “After this, Ben, you'll never have to look after dogs again!”

- - -

Thin-ringed chainmail jingled down the hallway, splattering sweat with each barefooted stomp. No swords hung on their hips, that would've reduced their weight, but instead their backs were strapped by massive, kite-shaped shields that weighed more than any sword and sheath a normal soldier might carry. Their fur was even heavier than their weapons and armor, sopping wet with perspiration. The entire structure around them shuddered with each extra stride until finally they stopped. None of them spoke, their jaws hung loose like fish gasping for water. They exchanged defeated glances as their leader placed his hands on the double doors' handles. There were deep breathes all around and as they exhaled they took a meditative moment to appreciate the beauty around them. Moonlight twinkled through the branches of the trees, bouncing off the damp jungle leaves and shining through the windows of the great tree-house palace known as the Tabernacle. The sound of the wind reminded the bearns of the ocean as the breeze shifted the building like an anchored vessel swaying with the tide.

Their breathes expelled, the Captain opened the doors and strode in. Cackling flames, bouncing from their mounted torches, mocked them. The shadows of the fires dancing on the walls only added to the humiliation. There was no comforting jungle breeze in this chamber, the windows were shut, shuttered, and covered by drapes. More of their kind – armored guardsmen – stood by these plugged orifices, but they were not comrades for their blank expressions poorly masked the sneers hiding beneath. The leader of the approaching guards took a knee before the king. The Captain's compatriots quickly followed suit.

“Your majesty,” The Captain's gaze hit the floor, “he is not in the palace.”

The king was not on his throne. He stood midway through the hall, staring into the swirling fires of one of the torches that lined the walkway which split the chamber. In the auburn light, his blue skin looked almost purple. His long white hair, glossy and reflective, seemed almost like a mirror in a lighthouse – glowing – much like his eyes. In the same way that a shadowmancer's crow eye appears totally black, his eyes appeared totally white. Cataracts had

long since consumed them. Turning away from the fire, his eyes dimmed, and he turned to face his daughter – she sat in his throne.

She stooped forward, but not too far. She couldn't lean too far for there was a guest in her lap. A ragged looking dog. His fur was as curly and knotted as the fur of the guardsmen that had just spent the day sprinting about the Capitol. She stroked the sleeping pooch affectionately, but the dog-petting-induced endorphins were not enough to calm her. Shifting in the royal seat, she said nothing. She allowed her posture and regulated breathing to express her concern.

“Have you searched *every* room, Captain?” the king asked. He still looked away from them, but his blind eyes no longer lay on his daughter. They looked down like the gazes of the guards kneeling behind him, “Every last one?”

“Yes, Lord Ruse,” the Captain replied, resisting the urge to glance over at the throne room guards glaring at him, “every room but this one.”

The throne room guards shifted in their boots but their king shot one a dirty look and the rest froze as if he'd cast a spell. King Signan Ruse slipped off his crown and played with it in his hands, shaking his head.

“A diplomat from Dogloe is arriving tomorrow.” He sighed, “Offering us mancer hounds – offering us the tools to hunt down the criminal they had the audacity to harbor in the first place.”

The dog yawned in the Princess' lap and the lead-guard of the search team looked up for the first time since he took a knee. As the hound's jaw stretched and his tongue curled, the pooch's right eye opened and stayed open as he laid his head back down in Lenga Ruse's lap. Meanwhile, the Captain's eyes narrowed to a glare.

The king continued, “They're sending a Fasthoof – a descendant of Heterice and the son of her daughter Merциada – yet he is neither a politician nor an elementalist.”

This oddity stole the Captains' attention away from the mutt. He turned back to his King to ask, “Sir, then, what is he?”

“A dog herder.” The king scoffed, not at the Captain of the Guard, but at himself. His inflection translated that clearly, but rather than laugh alongside him, both the Captain's men and the guards of the royal chamber squirmed. King Ruse muttered on, “They're sending a dog herder.”

“They're up to something.” The Captain said.

“Yes.” The King concurred, “Keep an eye on this ‘Benjamin Fasthoof’. If Fetch Eninac hasn't left Munkloe, he will make a point to visit the –” he couldn't help but add another scoff before concluding, “– the diplomat. If we let him escape, then no foreigner will respect our laws ever again. We must do everything we can to resist replacing our shields with swords.”

“Yes,” The bearn rose to leave and as he did, his eyes drifted from his King to the Princess and her mysterious lapdog. Maintaining his leer on the animal, he finished the salute to his king and left, “Lord Ruse.”

Ben scrambled off the scaly back of his salamandery steed. When his hooves hit the soft sod of the jungle floor, he tumbled forwards. Catching himself with his hands, he was only able to complete about three fourths of a push up before the nausea overwhelmed him. He reared like a dragon about to spit fire and vomited a glorious emerald stream, fertilizing the fungi that dressed the roots of the rainforest.

Wiping his mouth, he straightened up onto his knees and saw that the contents of his belly was now flowing between a pair of war-torn leather boots.

“I suppose you enjoyed the ride.”

The man in the galoshes took a step back as Ben expressed his appreciation for aviation once more. *Never again.* The dog herder meant that for both the ride and the retching. Steeling himself, Ben wiped his mouth and clenched his teeth then forced a tight lipped smile as he cranked his head at enough of an angle to greet his receiver. His face was paler than that of a Doom Warrior and his voice was as faint as a ghost’s – the poor gmoat was essentially mouthing, “It was great.”

The stranger laughed and stuck his hand out, “The name’s,” the man withdrew his hand an inch as he paused. His eyes fell to the puddle and then returned to the herder, “Puke, Puke Green.”

Had Ben been anything other than a dog herder, he wouldn’t have bought the coincidence for a second, but, alas, Ben was Ben. The poor prairie boy had met more people in the last twenty-four hours than he had in years, the pang of suspicion in the back of his mind was drowned out by the flood of social anxiety. For all he knew, everyone made up names on the spot these days. Was that not what he did for his herd? He was far more embarrassed than he was apprehensive. Ben spat out another wad of green puke, swallowed and immediately regretted it, then forced himself to stand and reach out with his clean hand. The man switched hands and they shook.

“Benjamin Fasthoof.”

Ben stared at the stranger for a moment. The gentleman was human – not a common race among the water elves and bearns of Munkloe – and so Ben assumed he was Dogloen. *A contact*, he thought as he met the man’s brown eyes as best as he could, *a rather scraggly one.* Puke had an oily mop of curly black hair that sat lopsided on his head, covering up his left eye. His apparel matched his hair. Loose and not altogether fresh. The man was also rather dark skinned for a Dogloen. Then again, what did Ben know? *Maybe city folk get more sunlight...even as he thought it, he knew it was silly.* His bolder side broke through, reasserting his true initial thought: *This man is Sondoran.* Before meek-Ben juttled back in, *Sondor is an unfriendly place, lotta humans seek solace in the Empire. No wonder he’s a servant of the most humane state outside of Sondor!* Just as he had mentally wiggled his way out of any caution towards the odd individual, good ol Puke yanked him right back into those treacherous thoughts.

“Long time no see-” Puke suddenly coughed so violently that it seemed he might live up to the name, but he recovered almost as abruptly and continued with a grin, “I’ll show you through Sereibis.”

This oddity did not escape Ben, but before he could comment he was interrupted by the dragon rider.

“That it then?”

The pilot’s tone said what his words hadn’t. Ben jumped to scrounging around in his pockets for coins, giving Puke a desperate glance only for the human to shrug with such exaggeration that Ben felt sure the man had some change on him. In the end, the herder found a few in a pouch on his backpack. Not enough to please the rider but enough to satiate him.

“Thanks for the ride!” Ben yelped.

Both the man and the beast snorted, but they turned around and left it alone.

Looking back to Puke, Ben asked, “Have we met?”

“Doubt it.” Puke arched his only visible brow, “Have you ever been to Munkloe?”

“No.”

“I’ve never been anywhere but Munkloe,” the man replied as he turned and began to walk across the jungle clearing, “Born and raised right up there,” he pointed at the tree tops, “I’d suppose you’d say I’m a jungleman. That’s what my friends say. ‘Ol Green’s got more jungle in him than the water elves and bearns combined.’ And after all these years, I suppose they’re right.”

Ben followed the strange man, slowly becoming more curious than nauseous, “You’ve got to be one of the only humans out here.”

“Or close to it.” Puke nodded, “Watch out for dragon tiad.”

“Huh?” Ben mumbled as the two strode past a giant mound of what looked almost like a termite hill, it stood waist high. The nausea returned.

Ben took in his surroundings to distract himself. Dragons stood all around while even more circled over head. Strips of clearings had been carved out of the jungle, the upturned dirt of ruffled greens displayed the heavy usage of the Sereibis airfields. Ben momentarily puzzled over how the landings had been made as he’d heard the Munkloens – specifically those in the treetop cities like Sereibis – didn’t kill, not even plants. They were a society of scavengers in a sense, folks more willing to fast than to take another organism’s life. This was why Munkloens in particular, distrusted mancercs more than any other nation within the Empire of the Trinity Nations. Mancercs couldn’t fast. Their thirst for the energy of the dead is one that must be regularly quenched. His pondering was paused as he nearly walked directly into a pile of dung – Puke saved him with a quick yank out of the way.

“Saved your life.” He grinned, “Ya owe me.”

“Thanks...” Ben grinned back sheepishly, then as they continued on he asked, “How’d they make these landing strips?”

“Patience.” Puke explained, gesturing to the vast trunks around them he elaborated, “They wait for the big boys to pass away and transport the little guys off, replanting them elsewhere. I suppose they had to transport a few of the big guys too to be honest, after all, these giant fellas live centuries – after all, they’ve held Sereibis up since the Queen of Darkness days. Did you know that Theseus Icespear, the Guardian, founded this city?”

“Really?” Ben asked, “The minotaur?”

“Mhm.” Puke nodded, “It was a fortress where they could protect vaccine production against the Queen’s disciples as they tried to rebuild the world after the Crow’s Plague.” He snickered, “Funny how now you’ve got anti-vaxxers calling the Enchantment Vaccination Proclamation tyranny when once folks fought a war and died to make the vaccine possible in the first place.” Shaking his head, he concluded, “Republics crumble when the citizens forget their own history.”

Just as his nausea had distracted him from his suspicion, now his respect for his guide’s knowledge had taken primary focus, “Are you a tour guide – how do you know so much?”

“I’m a local!” Puke cried as if offended, though his grin then returned as he admitted, “I date the Headmaster of the Munkloe School of Modern Healing.”

“Woh.” Ben gasped, “She must be-”

“The world’s greatest healer?” Puke interjected with a modest shrug, “I’d suppose you could say so.”

Puke gestured to the structure before them and had Ben come to a complete stop. The trunk was massive, girthy enough to fit a large building inside and tall enough to compete with a mountain – as it had to be. The tree and its frondescent comrades held the entire city of Sereibis.

A spiral of flat spines twisted up the trunk, overlapping one another and extending far enough out that half a dozen people could stand side by side upon them without someone having to stray too close to the edge. Still, there were no railings and, though the tree was old and the spines worn by many a climber's boot, Ben couldn't help but wonder how often they gave way to the weight of those ascending them.

"I know you're not a fan of flying, ha!" Puke clasped Ben on the back, "But how do you do with heights on your own two hooves?"

Ben gulped.

Puke grinned, "Don't worry. The cardio will distract you."

The human wasn't wrong. What conversation there was to have was quickly cast aside as they huff and puffed their way up the wide spiraling stairs to the elevated city far above. Ever so often a spike would extend out and meet the branch of another tree. These intersections became more and more common and more and more busy the higher they climbed. Luminescent enertombs lit the shady passages within the brambly canopy as water elves and bearsn hustled here and there. Creatures rushed in and around the people too. Letterlemurs swung from vines overhead, spreading news from one tree to the next. Sunbees buzzed from lantern to lantern, pollinating the enertombs with solar energy to keep the streetlights lit. Cockatunes flitted about, broadcasting the latest poptunes to the ears of the busy cityfolk in hopes of being tipped a nut or a chunk of bread. Ben had neither seen creatures of the like, he'd only ever heard of them in the bedtime stories his mother had told him.

He could see her: *Merciada sat on the edge of the bed, smiling down at him while his vision blurred in and out of focus as his imagination brought her words to life.*

"Stop looking at me, Benji, look around!" She'd say, smiling.

Ben chuckled to himself. There was a warmth to the sadness of the memory. Taking his mother's order to heart, he kept his head on a swivel as they rose into the treetops. Puke directed them across one of the offshooting bridges and, from there, they began to navigate the spiderweb of branch-made overpasses that connected the trees. Rope bridges attached parallel branches, sometimes even being stairways themselves, bound together and hung from above. As they wandered this elaborate maze, they never once breached the real surface. They passed a few shops, hugging the sides of tree trunks, and homes formed out of knots and hollows in tree sides, but that was about it. Though busy enough, they still weren't on the mainstreets. There were no looming structures – no palaces, no government buildings, only their shadows. *Are we taking a short cut*, Ben wondered, *or are we hiding?*

Just as he was about to ask, Puke asked a question, "So Ben, I suppose you're an elemental, right?"

"Huh?" Ben's hand shot idly to tuck in the hair around his horn, "Oh no, I'm a dog herder."

"Dog herder!" Puke barked, whirling around, "Catch sent a dog herder?"

"Well," Ben winced, "to be honest, I thought the same thing-"

"But the staff on your backpack – that's an elgroon, right?"

"Right, but it's my mother's-"

"She never taught you?" Puke flung his hands in the air, "She just gave you the elgroon?" He turned to the wide expanse before them and gestured as if to an audience, "Just gave her dog herding son a magical weapon and never taught him to use it?!" Turning back to Ben with his hands on his hips, Puke demanded, "What was she waiting for?"

Ben took a step back. His hoof hitting the plank of the rope bridge with a loud thunk. They were in the middle of one of the longer bridges Ben had seen, thus though his guide's tone offended him, Ben took a deep breath before responding. He did not want to start an argument with this excitable stranger three hundred feet from the jungle floor.

"She died." Ben stated.

Puke's face went as pale as Ben's had been when they first met. Taking another deep breath, he slid one strap off his back and pulled the elgroon from its place on his pack. Putting his pack back on, he held the staff between them in both hands.

"I know how it works, I just never..."

He wanted to look down at his hooves but doing that would've meant he'd be looking down at the distant ground below him and, having avoided that since they began their climb, he knew better than to start looking down now. He kept his eyes up on Puke – or past Puke. He noticed something over the human's shoulder. A crowd was heading their way. Fortunately the bridge was wide enough for people to pass, in fact the group marched double-file. Their approach corresponded with a gentle vibrating of the rope railings and bobbing of the wooden slats. Unable to see the end of the procession, he took the trembling to mean that the line was long, like some sort of parade.

"I'm sorry, Ben." Puke said, clasping him on the shoulder, "I shouldn't have gotten so riled up. It's just that...do you think you could try?"

Ben stopped squinting over Puke's shoulder and cocked his head at the human, "Huh?"

"Try." Puke repeated.

"Try what?" Ben shrugged with the magical weapon, "Try this?"

The vibrating and bobbing of the bridge was escalating.

"Yea, try it!" Puke shrugged back, "You know how it works!"

"Yea but," Ben scoffed, "what do you want me to try and do with it?"

The vibrating and bobbing had become rumbling and bouncing. As Puke hastily glanced over his shoulder, Ben became sure that the approaching bridge-jostlers were approaching precisely because of them. Glancing over his own shoulder, Ben saw a similar procession, only this group was closer – close enough for him to make out a bit of what they were wearing: armor.

Guards! As Ben ripped one hand from his elgroon to clench the rippling railing, all the suspicion that had initially invaded his mind when he first met Puke on the jungle floor returned. And with that suspicion also came the nausea. *Yak Habba help me.*

He knew what was up before the guards painted it in black and white.

"Benjamin Fasthoof," the column behind him hollered, followed by a holler from the column behind Puke, "Fetch Eninac," and then together the two groups commanded, "**DO NOT MOVE!**"

Ignoring the approach of the law, Fetch picked back up where he had left off, "I want you to catch us."

"No." Ben's eyes were wide and bulging, "Puke – I mean Fetch – Fetch, no! I've never-"
"**PUT THE STAFF DOWN, SIR!**"

The bridge temporarily calmed as both lines of guards skidded to a halt. They gave the pair a good ten yards of distance on either side. Fetch, a known shadowmancer, scared the pacifist brigade and Ben, an unknown visitor, was holding a powerful weapon. If the pair wouldn't surrender peacefully, the guards definitely wanted to wait until the bridge stopped shaking. While the gmoat seemed willing to submit soon as he gained his balance, the human was obviously still unconvinced.

Fetch leaned in to whisper, “You know how to, Ben, it’s in your blood!”

“Fetch,” Ben hissed back, “I’m adopted!”

Fetch shrugged it off, “What is blood anyways? The woman raised you! You’ve got her soul in your brain-”

“What’s that even mean?!”

“-it’s fate!” Fetch proclaimed, “You are an elementalist!”

“*PUT THE STAFF DOWN – LAST WARNING!*”

“Sorry, Fetch.”

Ben stooped so as to place the staff flat on the wide bridge slat beneath his hooves.

“Me too.”

Fetch wrapped his arms around Ben and leapt off the bridge. Whether it was the heave of Fetch’s embrace or the sight of the ground, the dropping of his throat down into his stomach or the bright light of Solaris in the afternoon – piercing like a blade through the city above and the canopy it sat nestled within to strike Ben in the face as they tumbled head over heel and hooves towards the jungle floor – Ben passed out. His consciousness darted out of present time but got stuck in the memories of his past before it could escape.

He was no longer in Munkloe plummeting to the leaf laden forest floor nor was he anymore the grown man that he had become, he was Little Benji.

“Morning, Benji.”

Ben’s eyelids flew open, flinging sleep from his eyes. Mercuada Fasthoof stood in the bedroom doorway. Dust twinkled in the morning light between them, like stars in the night sky. She was the shining galaxies beyond them. When his eyes met her crooked grin – as crooked as her posture – he tore off his blanket and dove for her hooves. Despite her stoop, she stood as firm as a tree. As he pressed his cheek to the rough denim of her leggings, she matted the fur around his growing horns.

“Happy birthday!”

“You came back!” Little Benji squealed.

“Ofcourse!” Mercuada exclaimed.

He flopped onto his back, sprawled out like a star fish, beaming so wide that his cheeks forced his eyes shut. With a sigh of joy, he confessed, “I thought you wouldn’t make it back in time.”

“It isn’t everyday that my boy turns thirteen,” Mercuada knelt before him, “you think I’d miss this?”

Had Ben not been exuberant, he might’ve mentioned that she’d missed his last five, but not only did that seem irrelevant at the moment – he could hardly think of anything other than the present and, more specifically, the presence of his mother. His tail flopped beneath him like a cat’s tail just before a pounce. When it whipped around and slapped his face, it seemingly jogged his memory. His mind switched from present to future: birthday meant gifts! He sat up at an abrupt right angle.

Mercuada’s smile had been swapped for a more serious stare.

“There is something serious I need to talk to you about.”

A chill rushed through Ben from his hooves to his horns. His tail fell limp. His head slowly nodded and his eyes kept getting wider.

“Thirteen is the age most mothers give their boys swords, but most mothers don’t have sons as special as you, Benji.”

Ben gasped.

“No, no! No – you get something better!” she pulled an L shaped staff out from behind her back, “Do you know what this is?”

Ben nodded, slackjawed.

“This has saved my life countless times. It has saved the lives of many, many others too – and it will save the lives of many, many more in your hands.”

“My hands?” Little Benji murmured.

Merciada tapped his temple with her index finger, “And your mind.”

She handed him the elgroom and he took it in both hands.

“It runs on sunlight and imagination. And though I get plenty of sunlight these days, I’m getting old, Benji, and my imagination isn’t what it used to be – but yours? Your imagination is as strong as Solaris and as wide as the sky, my elgroom is now yours.”

Ben came back to the present. Hardly a second had passed. His vision was a blur of the jungle floor and the afternoon sky. Blue and green, blue and green was all he could see as they continued to tumble down, down, down. The guardsmen yelled after them but the wind, whipping past their ears, blotted out all sound from above. Ben’s arms flailed and his stomach clenched.

Thank the Guardians I’ve got nothing else to spew. Ben thought before one thought replaced that and refused to share any mental space with any other possible musings: *WE’RE GOING TO DIE.*

“CLOSE YOUR EYES AND FOCUS, DON’T LET GO OF THAT STAFF!” Fetch roared, clinging to Ben’s backpack as they plummeted, “YOU ARE AN ELEMENTALIST!”

“I’m not an ele-”

“WE’RE GOING TO DIE!”

“Farak.”

The fugitive was right. They were going to die. So whether or not Ben was an elemental, he was about to be nothing if he didn’t try. Ben closed his eyes. *Here it goes.* He visualized the tree trunks and branches, the dense clumps of brush below, and the bridge sprinkled with guards above. *I can control the elements.* He wasn’t falling. Not anymore. With his eyes closed, he imagined himself standing in mid air, hovering, with Fetch still clinging to his lumpy backpack.

The wind stopped.

“*We have a gift, you and I,*” words of his mother rang in his ears, “*Imagination.*”

The bases of the great kapok trees shuddered, their trunks seemed to twist and moan, and then their roots ripped free from the earth and shot up from the jungle floor like the the fingers of a giant reaching out of sinking sand. They wrapped around Fetch and Ben, completely encasing the two then slowly lowering them into the tangles of underbrush as other, smaller tubers held back the briars and thorns.

“*And in this world, imagination is a weapon – a powerful weapon.*”

“That’s amazing.” Fetch murmured.

Ben opened his eyes. They stood on the soft jungle dirt. Thick tangled walls of weeds surrounded them, walling them into the clearing, climbing up over them to block out the sun. Ben glanced at the L shaped staff in his hand, the stone at the arch glowed emerald green.

“I did it?” Ben whispered.

Fetch clapped the gmoat on the shoulder.

“I knew you’d do it! You should’ve seen it! The tree-tentacles just reached up and snatched us out of the air,” Fetch jumped around the clearing, reaching up into the air as if he was the tree, “and the look on those guards’ faces? *Faaantastic!*”

Ben fell to his knees.

“I’m an elementalist.”

“A godi good one too!”

The stone began to dim and the green faded back into the plain grey.

“You know it takes training for most people to learn magic? I mean years of training. You totally just went with it and, dude, it was great. I mean, crimp sin tiad, we would’ve died.” Fetch paused then shook his head and started prancing around once more, “We would have died!”

“Really?” Ben’s voice was suddenly gruff.

Fetch kept skipping, blissfully unaware, “Yea!”

Ben growled, “You didn’t have a back up plan?”

“You were my back up and front down plan, brother!” Fetch proclaimed.

Ben rolled off his knees, onto his back, and closed his eyes. He discarded his frustration and exchanged it for despair, “You’re insane.”

“And you’re my hero,” Fetch’s smile suddenly stopped, as did his dancing – not because of Ben’s assertion, but rather because something else had caught his attention, “Did you hear that?”

“What?” Ben groaned, still lying on the fungi carpeted floor, staring at the ceiling of branches above.

“A jingling noise.”

Ben turned his head and listened. He could hear the wind comb the canopy, the clashing melodies of birds, and the voice of guards overhead echoing their way from tree trunk to tree trunk, but no jingling.

“What does it sound like?” Ben asked.

“Jingling.”

Ben rolled his eyes and asked again through clenched teeth, “Jingling what?”

“Chainmail,” Fetch hadn’t stopped staring off into the jungle, just as he had pranced like a happy young deer, he now stood frozen like a deer in headlights, “Guards. I think they’re still chasing us.”

“They’re down here already?!” Ben gasped.

“Hush!”

The two were quiet for a while, holding their breathes.

“Wait a second!” Ben snapped, hopping to his hooves, “Chasing us? They should be chasing *you*, not *us*.”

“*Hush!*” Fetch held up a hand and continued to stare into the brush.

Ben would not hush, he moaned on, “Listen! I didn’t do anything! You pulled me off that bridge!”

“You helped me escape.” Fetch whispered, “*Now huuush!*”

“No! Fetch!” Ben’s eyes were as wide as his veins as his heart shot adrenaline-infected blood coursing through his body, “Do you really think they’re after me too?”

“I’d suppose so.”

“You’d suppose? This is serious! Guardians help me if I’m a wanted man!” Ben began to rub at the hair sticking up around his horns, his tail flicked up and down behind him, “Why did I

leave Dogloe. Why didn't we leave Munkloe?!" Ben yanked his hand from his scalp and clasped Fetch's shoulder, demanding an answer, "Why didn't we leave back on the airstrip when you met me – you know I'm here to take you home?!"

"I've got business left to do here." Fetch finally faced him, his expression surprisingly stoic.

"The princess?" Ben asked.

Fetch nodded.

Ben rolled his eyes, "You couldn't just write her a letter?"

"From where?" Fetch snapped, "The Dragon Islands? I'd rather die than go back there."

"Well I'd rather not die!" Ben retorted.

"Then stick with me!" Fetch shot back, "Now come on, we need to keep moving."

Fetch turned to make a run for it but stopped when he got the feeling that his new found friend wasn't going to follow him. Glancing over his shoulder, he sighed. Ben had his elgroom back on his backpack, his arms crossed, and his hooves planted firmly in the sod.

"What if I turn myself in?" Ben asked.

Fetch shrugged, "You'll go to prison."

"But Catch sent me!" Ben exclaimed.

Fetch nodded, "Yea, he sent you to do something illegal." He shrugged, "Turn yourself in and turn my brother in too, if you want. Maybe you'll get to be cell mates together and he can apologize to you then. But I'm running with or without you. Now, if you come with me, then we'll both have a better chance out there and therefore a better chance of getting out of here."

Ben grumbled under his breath but stopped when his ears caught the faint sound of jingling chainmail.

"If we ever get out of this, I'm turning you in." Ben growled.

"Yea, sure." Fetch scoffed, "Now come on, watch your tail."

This time Ben followed and together the pair trapsed off into the jungle.

- - -

"Your majesty, you were right."

The Captain was once again kneeling at the foot of the king, except this time before his throne. The princess was not there, nor were the other barefoot guards of his team. Only the royal guards, posted by the shuttered windows, joined them in the throneroom. Aside from the cackling torches and the muffled sounds of wind whistling through the tree tops outside, the room was silent as the Captain paused before finishing his confession.

"Eninac showed up at the landing field when Fasthoof arrived. We followed them and trapped them on a bridge – then they jumped."

The king leaned forward in his chair and covered his blind eyes with his hand, dragging his fingers down his face as if he were wiping it clean.

"Did Eninac use dark magic to stop their fall?"

"No, Lord Ruse, it was Fasthoof. He is an elementalist." The Captain explained, shaking his head, "I can't believe the Dogloen's would pull such a stunt. We knew they were up to something sending the dog herder, but conspiring against our authority so blatantly... donum..."

Signan Ruse whispered to himself, "It seems our allies have no respect for us."

The Captain winced at his King's despair. Gathering himself, he looked up from his bowed position and met his master's blind eyes in an effort to summon courage back into his voice, "Your majesty, we have guards on the ground. They will be captured."

"No." The King commanded.

Again, the bearn flinched.

"No." Signan reached out and held the guardsman's shoulder, "No, Captain. Withdraw."

"Your majesty?" He stammered, "We will capture them – my guards know the jungle, they can handle the creatures of the night, we must do our job. We cannot let—"

"Captain." Signan's voice was low and firm, his grasp on the bearn's shoulder now tighter, "All life is sacred. I will not have our people risk their lives nor those of the beasts that hunt under the moons. Send out letterlemurs, withdraw them."

The Captain bowed, "Yes, Lord Ruse."

"These foreigners may not respect our laws, but we must not let them take our laws from us." Signan continued, releasing the Captain to gaze off into the distance. He was as much talking to himself as he was to the guardsman, "No Munkloen has yet been hurt because of this shadowmancer. Our people's safety is our main priority – all of our people's. Your life is as precious as my own daughter's, Captain, and as is the lives of your guards."

The Captain bowed lower, his blood hot with humility, had his face not been furred his blush would've lit up the room.

"Withdraw the guards and watch the ramps to the city." The King said, "If they survive the night, then they'll be desperate to escape the jungle. There is nowhere to run in Sereibis. Nowhere but up."

"Yes, Lord Ruse."

- - -

Even though Solaris had just begun to set, darkness had consumed the jungle. The dense cloud of foliage robbed the sodden floor of daylight, time beneath the branches bent between evening and twilight. Even on a clear night sky with beaming full moon, only slender spears of silver light cut through the canopy to shine upon the underbrush. Outside of the pale pillars, it was nothing but shadows, like diving beneath the surface of a mirky lake. Had it not been for Fetch then the two would've been solely dependant on scent and sound to blunder blindly onwards – but Fetch could see.

His left eye had been sacrificed when he'd been converted into a shadowmancer. It no longer saw color, but rather energy. While one eye saw beams of moonlight, his other saw the brilliant glow coursing through the vast shafts of the kapok trees. The soft turf beneath them was a carpet of shimmering crystals – each fungi and fern radiating with whatever modest energy they possessed. With his right eye closed, he felt as though they were wading through the milkyway as they pushed past bushes and briars, leading Ben onwards.

"Should we stop?" Ben asked.

Fetch stopped. They stood in a ray of moonlight. Fetch opened his right eye and blinked as he readjusted to the brightness. Cocking his head to the side, he asked, *Why?*

Ben nodded back towards the way they had come, "Won't we have to go back?" Then he gestured to the direction they were headed, "Won't we get lost?"

“But the guards...” Fetch’s words trailed off as his ears commandeered his attention. They wiggled in his sockets, eager to perk up like they would had he been in his natural canine form. He said, “They’re gone.”

Again, Ben was fortunate that he had Fetch for there was no way his gmoat-ears could’ve picked up the sound of jingling chainmail in the commotion that was the Munkloen night. There was a vibrant cacophony of noise. Hungry creatures hooping and hollering, shrubs shaking and sticks snapping, all wrapped in the constant rattling snare of insects that crescendoed in waves like a downpour in a gale. It was beautiful but also terrifying for Ben, because he couldn’t make out one sound from the next. Whether it came from here or there, above him or behind him. And he knew that those making the noises – much like Fetch with his bestial ears – could distinguish. Though he wasn’t a jungleman, as a plainsman he knew nature and he knew that the critters of the jungle knew exactly where he was and, whether or not he was the apex predator in the situation, he had yet to prove that to the wild. It was only a matter of time before that wild decided to find out.

“So we should stop?” Ben asked.

Fetch shrugged, “I suppose we might as well. Try and get some sleep.”

An eerie silver spotlight shone upon a twisted quilt of roots that rain and rodents had stripped naked of dirt, creating a tight cubby beneath. Neither Fetch nor Ben being particularly large adults, both men saw it as enough space to slip into. The roots looked thick enough to protect them from anything that might seek to gobble them up in the night. Ben took off his backpack and they squirmed beneath the tangle of tubers, rolling onto their backs to stare through the roots like prisoners through the bars of their cell.

“You can hear like a dog?” Ben asked, “Even in this form?”

“Mhm, smell too.” Fetch nodded, though Ben couldn’t see. There wasn’t much room to sit up and look at one another. Fetch continued, “It’s all an illusion.”

“But you tackled me off the bridge?”

“Well, it isn’t *all* an illusion.” Fetch frowned, “It’s shadows mixed with blood, so it is a bit physical.”

“Huh.” Ben murmured, “So if you get stabbed, do you turn back into a dog?”

“Depends on where I get stabbed.” Fetch answered, “And how hard.”

“Have you been stabbed before?” Ben asked.

“Of course!” Fetch crowed, chuckling a bit, “I was sent to the Dragon Islands!”

“Oh, right...”

“You?” Fetch asked.

Ben thought for a minute, then responded, “By teeth.”

“What?”

“I’ve been stabbed by teeth-”

“By teeth?” Fetch interrupted, “You mean you’ve been bitten.”

“Yea.” Ben said.

“That’s not being stabbed.” Fetch stated.

“Well...” Ben argued, “it is kind of worse, right?”

“How is it worse?!” Fetch scoffed.

“It’s like being stabbed a whole bunch at once!” Ben protested.

“A whole bunch of baby stabs!” Fetch crowed.

“Who said they were baby stabs?” Ben demanded, “Teeth can be as big as any blade!”

“How big were they then, huh? The blade I was stabbed by was at least th...” Fetch went immediately silent, then whimpered, “Farak.”

All thought of debate flew out the window as Ben – even with the ears of a gmoat – could hear the trouble in Fetch’s tone. He didn’t ask. He froze. So much so that he even held his breath as he waited for Fetch to elaborate.

“These teeth,” Fetch whispered, “may be bigger than the blade that stabbed me.”

Ben gulped.

“A ridgeback – no.” Fetch gulped, “Three.”

As if the human-shaped dog had cast a spell, Ben could now hear the creatures crushing through the brush. He felt as though he could even feel the turf trembling beneath them.

“Ben.” Fetch said, “Get out your elgroom.”

He opened his mouth as if to say what he was thinking: *I don’t know if I-* but even his mind cut himself off before he could finish the thought. Whether or not he could, he had to. He’d encountered ridgebacks on the plains of Dogloe. The beasts’ humped spines peaked at a height twice that of the average man’s and their burly shoulders and gaudy necks gave them the strength to crush stone walls with one swing of their tusked snouts. *The Guardians only know what they could do to these roots.* Ben thought. Then he went about retrieving his elgroom from his pack.

“If you can kill one, then I can take its shadows while you distract the others.” Fetch said. While Ben was wiggling around trying to retrieve the staff, Fetch was scurrying around collecting stones that sat in the bottom of their trough. As he did, he explained, “Turn these stones into a dagger or something – I’d suppose we’ve got about enough time for just that – then it’s go time. Here.”

It was nearly as difficult a task to get his staff off his pack as it was to reach down to grab the rocks Fetch had gathered, but he pulled it off. Laying them in the dirt alongside him in a line, Ben rolled back to lie flat and clutch his elgroom to his chest. Closing his eyes, he brought his surroundings back to life in his mind: the rough knobby roots twisting overhead, the soft black soil beneath, the weeds that shot up from the ground to weave the underbrush and the tubers together, and finally the pebbles in the line beside him.

They’re soft as dough. Little clumps of dough, he told himself, *when pressed together, they easily take shape and...* as the words in his mind trailed off, images took their place and manifested as the shape of his thoughts. With his eyes closed, he watched the stones melt together, stretch, and flatten out, then he opened his eyes.

A sharp, short rod of rock sat in the place of the stones.

Ben had no time to celebrate his success. The insects had stopped chirping. The breeze shifted and a putrid must swept over them, one that made Ben’s nostrils flare and his eyes water. Without speaking, Ben slid the weapon down to where Fetch lay. Fetch took the spade-like blade and squeezed Ben’s hand, offering him the appreciation that he couldn’t provide verbally, then went about slowly escaping their root-made bunker. No sooner had he slipped his head and shoulders out from inbetween two fat arms of tubers than did a heaping shadow lumber into the small, half lit clearing.

It was only a few yards away and, though it was small for its kind, it was still taller than Ben even as it stood on all fours. The beast shuffled slowly towards the tree, dragging its face on the ground and plowing the earth with its tusks. Bits of sod and plants were flung up by its snorting and grunting. It had moved into the beam of moonlight that shown down on them. The silver glow splattered off the spikes that lined its steeply arched spine. The spikes were the size of Ben’s forearm. The monster stopped there in the ray of light, looking away from them. Ben

and Fetch didn't dare move. They could hear the other two beasts still rummaging through the foliage beyond the little clearing. The creature seemed almost to be holding its breath, just like them, but then another breeze swept through.

The jungle rustled.

The ridgeback turned and stared at Fetch. Fetch was hardly half way out of the ditch, he'd frozen just after getting his arms out. He was propped up on his elbows, clutching the dagger Ben had made, and staring into the beady eyes of the beast hardly two yards away. The hog-like snout huffed, nostrils flaring, as it turned its head to the side.

If Fetch can smell like a dog, Ben wondered, does he smell like a dog?

Fetch scooted forward but then stopped. Half his body was now free, but his hips were caught by the odd bends of the roots he was squeezing out between. Keeping his hand clamped around his dagger, he dug his knuckles into the dirt and pushed while he clawed at the ground with his free hand. Meanwhile, the boar was done hesitating – it stepped forward.

“BEN!”

Ben clamped his eyes shut, clutching his L-shaped staff. The gem began to glow green. Fetch continued to squirm but to no avail. The ridgeback took another stride. The monster now loomed over the faux-human. Its jaw hung loose, globs of slobber glistened in the moonlight as they oozed between its gargantuan fangs like magma from the crags of a volcano. It reared back, throwing its crescent shaped tusks towards the canopy, but as it did the roots around the base of the tree splayed open and flung earth and moss through the air – peppering the ridgeback as it launched Fetch to freedom.

Fetch didn't go far. He rolled forward and came to an abrupt stop on his knees – right up under the beast's neck as its head prepared to come sweeping down. No sooner did his knees dig into the dirt than did his arm jut up and thrust the stone dagger into the grizzly neck of the animal. Then down came the head. The left tusk struck Fetch like a golf club, scooping him up off the ground and throwing him into the bushes.

As Fetch landed, Ben got up. Though his blood still ran cold with adrenaline and fear, he was calm. It was similar, in a way, to what had happened back on the bridge. He was absolutely terrified and yet, at the same time, he was calm. Even as the ridgeback's beedy eyes fell on him. It paced around the clearing, doing a lap but never taking its eyes off the gmoat.

“Ben, run!”

Ben could vaguely hear Fetch croak from the periphery as he scrambled to get up, but he could clearly hear his mother's voice – still and sharp.

“You can't outrun a wolf.”

He closed his eyes. He could still see the ridgeback snarling before him – the stripes of blood and black that criss-crossed its fur, the spiraling fangs sopping wet with stinking saliva, and the make-shift dagger wedged between the fiend's jowl and shoulder.

“You can't outrun them, so what do you do?”

The ridgeback charged.

“Ben!”

He didn't hear Fetch. He didn't even really hear the hooves of the beast as it ran towards him, but he wasn't oblivious to his environment. On the contrary, he could *feel* nature coursing around him. He could sense the wind shifting through the branches, the ants crawling through the soil, and the worms tunneling far beneath. He may not have heard the beast, but he felt the vibrations of its pounding hooves reverberating through his body as if it were charging down his spine.

“What do you do, Benji?”

“You fight.”

Ben rose his elgroom, his brown eyes seeming to glow like the stone in the nook of his staff, and a bolder shot up from the ground just as the ridgeback ran over it. It slammed the dagger, like a hammer striking a nail, submerging the rock-blade deep into the flesh of the fiend, splitting two vertebrae of the monster’s spinal column as it passed through to rocket out the otherside of the ridgeback’s neck. The force of the blow was so much that it picked the beast’s heavy torso up off the ground. Momentum carried it forward as its muscles failed and it flopped on its side, sliding to a stop mere inches from Ben’s hooves.

“Selu, Ben!” Fetch exclaimed as he hobbled over, hunched over to not aggravate the wound in his belly, “You sure you’ve never done magic before?”

“Not that I know of-”

Fetch dove towards Ben, tackling him to the ground as the other two ridgebacks joined them in the clearing, bursting through the brush as if expecting to crash head first into foes of their own size. As the three thousand pound monsters skidded to a halt, the two young men hopped back up.

“You distract em then I’ll take care of em. Got it?” Fetch asked.

“Got it.” Ben grunted as he closed his eyes.

Fetch scurried over to the dead ridgeback as Ben stepped forward to stand between his companion and the two snarling beasts. The monsters eyed him, looking from him to their fallen comrade and then back again, huffing and snorting as they did, but Ben didn’t open his eyes. He kept his eyes clamped shut and his mind focused.

I am an elementalist. He filled his imagination with his surroundings, then opened his mind to let some of his memories seep in.

Merciada stood by the fireplace, the L-shaped staff hooked goofily around her neck. With a wink, the logs in the hearth roared to life.

One of the ridgebacks gave a brief roar, the other pounded the ground as it charged.

Well, Mom, let’s see what I can do.

Opening his eyes, Ben pointed the corner of the elgroom at the charging beasts. The orb, that had glowed an amber brown before, suddenly shone like a ruby in the sun. A radiant blast of crimson flame burst from the rod, splitting open the silver twilight and obsidian shadows of the glade. The fire engulfed the charging monsters, hitting them with enough blunt force that they lost two paces in their charge. One veered off, skipping frantically in circles as the fire burnt its way through its fur, rushing to roast the hardened hide beneath. The other, however, did not veer. It continued its charge despite the flames flickering around it.

Closing his eyes once more, Ben scoured his memory. Ice began to crystalize around his free hand as thoughts of summer snowmen came to mind.

Little Benji stared wide-eyed at his own reflection as he scated out across the lake, tip-hoofing, his eyes glued to the ice beneath him.

“Mom, it won’t hold!” He yelped.

“Benji!” She hollered, “As long as I keep it from melting, this ice is as strong as steel.”

When he opened his eyes, his free hand was fully engulfed in a blade of solid ice. Just beyond his upraised hand was the burning head of the third ridgeback, reared back and swinging down. Ben ducked and the flames whooshed past, singeing his already short brown hair. But though he had ducked, he hadn’t lowered his hand. His frozen blade sliced through the neck of the beast as it swung for the kill. Ben clenched his teeth as he struggled to hold his saber steady

but his imagination had forged a blade so sharp that few smiths could've matched it. It cut through the ridgeback's flesh like butter. A

The hog's head fell to the earth as the ice melted off Ben's knuckles.

Beyond the burning body of the headless ridgeback was its steaming comrade. While Ben had sparred with the third, the second had finally stopped romping about and had thrown itself onto the damp jungle floor, rolling until the flames extinguished. When Ben straightened up, shaking the blood and water from his hand, the last ridgeback turned to face him. Blistered and charred, the beast snarled as it tore at the ground with its hooves and snorted.

"I got this one."

Fetch stepped past Ben. He strode towards the monster with his hands up and palms out. He was painted in the scarlet light of the burning corpse before Ben. There was a swirling darkness taking shape in Fetch's hands. Though Ben saw it, his foe did not. Having stepped around the fallen fiends, Fetch was now wide open to a frontal assault from the final beast – or so it may have seemed. Scorched and furious, it charged. Fetch dug his feet in, leaning so far forward it seemed as if he had to be leaning against something, then he thrust his arms out as if he were pushing against an invisible wall. A façade of darkness rushed forward to meet the charging ridgeback and when they collided the poor creature was turned upside down. Its haunches lifted up over its shoulders and it flipped over to land on its back. The great spikes protruding from its spine stuck it in the ground like stakes. Its charred, slobbering jowl gaped and trembled just mere inches from where Fetch still stood.

"Shadowmancy." Ben murmured.

More darkness twisted and twirled around Fetch's hands, growing slender and long as they came to take the shape of a long sword in his grasp. Fetch strode around the beast's head and raised the shadow blade above its throat. Though the beast likely could not see Fetch from the angle at which it was nailed to the ground, it stopped struggling. Just as the night had become silent, so too did the creature. It took one last breath and then a deep sigh before closing its eyes. Fetch turned the blade so that the tip pointed down and drove it through the ridgeback's neck.

Ben flinched. It was as if the moment the threat had been eliminated, his brain suddenly opened back up for freer thinking. Thinking beyond live or die, thinking beyond the now – thinking about how the now might hinder their future. Thinking: *We just killed three creatures of Munkloe.*

Kneeling by the dead ridgeback, Fetch's hands were empty once more and his palms extended. His posture was like that of a cold camper holding their hands out to the bonfire – only this ridgeback was no longer aflame. That said, a flame like material did begin to leave its body. It shifted through the air like smoke but with a sort of fluidity that suggested it wasn't a gas. The material flowed out from the flesh of the beast and coiled around Fetch's hands, snaking up his arms to finally slip into his dark, black eye. The flesh left behind was leached of its color. In the burnt patches where the fur had been seared through, the rough ridgeback hide became translucent as the shadows left. Soon Ben would be able to see the faint outline of a skeleton within the dark jelly of flesh left behind.

We just killed three creatures of Munkloe and stole their shadows. Ben thought. He murmured outloud, "Now we're totally faraked."

Fetch trembled, reeling back from the beast and falling onto his butt with a sigh of relief. Then, after a brief pause, he turned to the last corpse he'd yet to scavenge. Flames were still flickering around its haunches.

"Fetch!" Ben exclaimed.

Blinking as if woken from a good dream, Fetch turned to Ben, dumbfounded. His expression was apparently contagious, cause suddenly Ben found himself without words. Fortunately, Fetch caught on.

“We already killed them, what’s wrong with taking the shadows?” Fetch asked, he gestured to the ridgeback he’d slain, “Don’t you think they’ll come in handy?”

“Come in handy?” Ben scoffed, “Come in handy in adding to our jail time – this is Munkloe.”

“Mhm,” Fetch nodded, then he pointed to the ridgeback he’d been about to suck the shadows from, “and who killed this one?”

Ben sputtered.

Fetch pointed to the ridgeback by the knotted roots of the ditch they’d hid in, asking, “And that one?”

“We had to!” Ben exclaimed.

“And I have to get more shadows!” Fetch exclaimed.

“Well...” Ben’s freehand’s fingers drifted up to his scalp, he pointed to the un-shadow-depleted corpse with his elgroon, “leave that one.”

Fetch rolled his one good eye, shaking his head, “Why?”

“The less desecration the better?” Ben shrugged.

“The less,” Fetch made airquotes for the next word, “ ‘desecration’ the less likely we’ll make it through the night.”

Ben sighed, but he knew the shadowmancer wasn’t wrong – not completely. After all, the night wasn’t even close to halfway over and they’d already almost died. There would be no recharging his elgroon until the sun rose and as an amateur elemental he had no clue how much ammunition the enertomb in the nook had left. *But* this entire situation was unnecessary. First off, Fetch didn’t have to go to Munkloe. Second, they could’ve left when Fetch met him at the airstrip. And third, well... Ben didn’t have a third yet. As he tried to concoct one, Fetch went ahead and started draining the third corpse.

Then he stopped. Not because he’d suddenly had a change of heart, but because something else had commandeered his attention: he heard something. No sooner did Fetch perk up than did Ben hear it too. The ground began to tremble.

“Fetch.” Ben murmured.

Fetch nodded, “More. These three must’ve been some sort of scouts.”

Ben rushed over to the root-tangled ditch beneath the tree trunk but Fetch caught ahold of him.

“They’ll smell us.” He stated.

Ben was exasperated, “Then what do we do? We can’t outrun a stampede!”

“No we can’t.” Fetch admitted.

The two fell silent.

A new sound triggered them. A snapping and thwapping from above. Both men looked up and then dove out of the way as a large branch slammed into the ground between them. The limb was nearly as thick around as they were. But the size wasn’t what intrigued them. It was the amount of leaves on the twiggy extrimities, though they only had moonlight and faint glimmers of flame still tickling the sides of the bonfired ridgeback, the leaves looked plump and green.

“Are those leaves alive?” Ben asked.

“They’ve got energy.” Fetch nodded. Looking up into the canopy far above, Fetch hollered, “Hey! Who’s up there?!”

“Fetch!” Ben yelled, grabbing his shoulder, “What if it’s an animal?”

“No.” Fetch shook his head, squinting into the darkness with his crow eye, “Unless it is a gorilla, I’m pretty sure it is a person.”

Ben gulped, “Person or gorilla – do they look friendly?”

Fetch looked down from the heavens to glare at Ben.

Ben shrugged, complaining, “I mean...do they?”

Fetch winced as he admitted, “They’re armed.”

“With?”

“Axes.”

Again, Ben gulped. Then he suggested, “Maybe they’re a lumberjack?”

“A lumberjack?” Fetch glowered, “In Munkloe?”

“Well we’ve got a shadowmancer in Munkloe.” Ben threw his hands up, flustered, “Why not?”

“Fair enough.” Fetch conceded.

They both turned their gaze back to the branch blotted sky. They could now hear the distant grunting and grumbling of the heard growing nearer. Time was surely running out.

“Help us!” Fetch cried.

“Please!” Ben added.

There was quiet for a moment, although, it was hard to tell whether it was actually quiet above or just quieter than the rising clamor coming from the jungle floor. The clamor that was rapidly rising. Fetch had just about had enough, opening his mouth to holler once more, when a rope fell from above and landed between the two men. It coiled on the ground like a snake while the rest, the neck and head of the serpent, remained hidden in the darkness of the tree tops.

Fetch and Ben exchanged anxious glances, then Fetch approached the lifeline. He gave it a tug. It held. The cordage was thick, as big around as Fetch’s arm, and rough like the sort of rope you might expect to find anchoring a seafaring vessel.

“I’ll go first.” Fetch stated.

Ben rushed to the roots to pull his backpack from the mess.

“Be ready to go for the elgroon,” Fetch said as Ben strapped the elemental staff back on his pack, “in case we fall.”

“Of course.” Ben nodded.

With no time to spare and no alternatives, they left it at that. Fetch took the rope in both hands, wrapped his knees around it, pinched it with his feet, and began to inch his way up like a caterpillar. Ben gave Fetch a good head start and then tightened the straps on his pack and grabbed onto the rope. For whatever reason, he was reminded of King Catch’s promise.

“After this, Ben, you’ll never have to look after dogs again.”

He chuckled a bit to himself. *The work of a dog herder never ends.*

Chapter Eight: The Bounty Hunter and the Freedom Fighter



She crawled one arm and leg at a time through the canopy, like a chameleon slow shifting from limb to limb. Sprawled out to spread her weight, she moved as slow as necessary to not cause a rustle. This was as much for her prey as for her predators, hearing did her a lot better than seeing in the dark nightshade of the kapok pavilion. Ever so often her leer caught a gap in the leaves, following a moonbeam, and she could make out the two men below. When the moonlight failed her, the flames from their charred victims did their part, but still they were so far down it was hard to really see them. Even their words only came in bits and pieces. For as she tried not to jostle the branches, her chainmail still jingled with every move she made. Her sweat soaked fur tried to muffle the rattling rings, poking through the freshly-torn holes of her undershirt to be painfully pulled by the shifting links of her armor. It was because of one particularly harsh pinch of a tuft of fur beneath her armpit that caused her to flinch and lean on a branch she had yet to test. No sooner did she put her weight on it than did she recoil. Ignoring the chainmail tugging her hair, she collapsed back on the boughs she already knew to be safe but that minor mistake had been enough.

With a thunder like crack, the branch she'd reached out to snapped. It tumbled through the canopy, ricocheting off its still-attached comrades as it plummeted to the jungle floor. The limb hit the ground hardly a yard from the men she spied upon. They dove out of the way then sprung back to their feet (or hooves), craning their necks to squint up at her.

“Hey! Who’s up there?!”

Can he see me? She knew the one that hollered was a shadowmancer, but she wasn't exactly the expert on mancy. She knew he could see energy, but from how far away? *Can he see me through all this foliage?* She stopped that train of thought, scoffing it away. *Even if they can, what can they do. They can't get up here, not without my help.*

The two were murmuring to one another in hushed tones that she couldn't make out. It didn't help that the boughs she held on to had begun to rumble. With one ear against the rugged bark, she could hear the approach of the ridgeback herd storming through the underbrush towards the clearing in which the two men stood staring up at her.

What a pity. She thought, *That shadowmancer could be useful.*

“Help us!” The shadowmancer cried.

His elementalist friend added a, “Please!” for good measure.

She shrugged, *I can always kill them if they're trouble.* then crept down the bough to where she'd left her boots and backpack. There was a confluence of branches that created a large pocket, like a sort of crow's nest in the canopy. She'd cleared the nook out to be her homebase for the night. There, amongst her belongings, was the massive coil of rope which she and her comrades had used to drag up their gaudy trunk. The cable was still wrapped around one of the larger limbs and securely knotted in a true sailor's fashion. Taking a few coils of the loose end, she continued to muse as she heaved it up and over the lip of the branch made basin, mulling over the potential risks of letting the strangers up to her spot. Finally, with another shrug and a smirk, she dropped the rope and stood out of the way as it slithered to the jungle floor. *They may die before I even have a say – I hope they know how to climb.*

While both men did know how to climb, they had never before climbed so high – especially with nothing else but a rope to hold onto. Fetch was quite sure that his muscles were about to pull free from his bones by the time he started passing the base branches of the giant jungle tree. Fortunately, these limbs were lifelines. The slender finger tips of the nearing boughs offered short reprieves from their perpendicular peregrination – but they still had a ways to go before any branch was bold enough to bear their full weight.

If the climb wasn't bad enough already, the stampede streaked by beneath them just as they neared the halfway mark. The entire jungle bounced to the beat of the ridgeback hooves. The kapok that held them quivered, causing their rope to pulsate like a sine wave. The only reprieve from the convulsions was even worse: ever so often, the tail end of the lifeline would get caught in the dumb-gaping jaws of the storming horde. The rope would be stretched taut before jerking free from the ridgeback's tusks and jumping up, like a snake rearing back to bite at something attacking its midsection.

Fetch clung and cried, but Ben took action. Clinging with his thighs, knees, calves, and ankles, he leaned into the bouncing and squirming rope with his chest so that he could use his arms and tail to pull up the thread beneath them. He didn't have to pull it up all the way, just enough to get the end off the ground and out of range of the herd. Once he got a couple loops stuck in the lower branches of the kapok that jutted out around him, they were safe – at least from one danger. The rope still danced, jostling them like marionettes. And they'd only just made it halfway.

Ben's arms felt like their bones were bending as he persevered. Once the lion's share of the job was done – at least as best as he could estimate – he risked taking a break. With legs spread like a jumping-jack, he balanced his hooves on two springy branches that generously decided to trade his weight back and forth. He craned his neck. All he could see was shadows – faint outlines of branches as the cord impaled the blackness between the sticky-silhouettes – and Fetch was not amongst them. A sinking coldness slipped into his heart, seeming to weigh him down even more than he already was. *How far behind am I?* He suddenly became aware of the hardness of the elgroom on his pack. *Should I magic my way up? No.* Who knew what threats waited in the canopy above, he needed to save it. *I can still climb a little further.*

"Ben!" Fetch's voice came down from the heavens like the words of an angel, "I see the end!"

I can do this! Ben determined. His calluses were all lopsided, slipping off the pads of his palm, blood trickled down the blisters that hid beneath them. His legs, from his thighs to his ankles, were rubbed raw even beneath his slacks. But the end was in sight and it was time to get it over with. He took a deep breath, prayed to the Guardians, then started back up oncemore.

Though Ben didn't respond verbally, Fetch got a response. Not from below but rather from above.

"Howdy."

The voice seemed feminine. Which shouldn't have surprised Fetch, he fancied himself a feminist, but he did not expect to find that a woman was scaling kapok trees with two battle axes at her side. Yet, to be honest, a woman with a battle ax was as rare as a Munkloen with a battle ax and so Fetch didn't know what to be more curious of first. He could only see her energy with his crow eye, but she wasn't far off. In deep dark shades of gray, he could see the rope wrapped and knotted around the gentle energy-glow of the branch above and it was upon that bough that she posed.

Time to discover our fate. Fetch gulped before responding, "Howdy – and thank you, ma'am!"

He inched his pinched knees up another half-foot but before he could reach up further with his hands, his potential savior stopped him.

"No further."

A tiny sliver of silver light glinted off a blade shaped like the shadow of a crescent moon. At its widest point, the edge, it could've cleaved Fetch's head in two – from chin to forehead –

and still had room to cut through a modestly sized fedora had the shadowmancer been the hat-wearing type. Although this was Fetch's first thought, his second was to understand the reason she was showing him her ax – it could more than easily cut the cord he hung from.

“No further – absolutely!” Fetch croaked. He glanced down, again unable to see with his living eye but making out Ben's slowly, upward inching glow with his crow eye. Then he looked back up to the woman, “I'm unarmed. No sword and no shadows-”

“Crimpsin tiad.” the woman snapped and Fetch choked on his words, “I've seen a shadow slinger out of shadows – they wouldn't have made it halfway up this rope – so now I know I've got a mancer and a liar asking for me to trust them.” She spat, the glob of which descended dangerously close to Fetch's face, “I ought to chop you down right now.”

“I'm sorry ma'am! No more lying from me!” He exclaimed, “I swear! Now, what do you need me to do before I can get off this rope?”

“A guarantee.”

“I guarantee.”

“What do you guarantee?”

“Uh...” Fetch snickered, adjusting his hands and his legs to get a better grip as his blood kept loosening his hold, “Not to try and kill you?”

“Crimpsin tiad.”

Fetch cursed himself under his breath. The bright side of the hold up was that he could no longer feel his hands, but that was also the dark side. After all, how long could he hang from a rope with numb hands before those numb hands stopped hanging on. But what the hell was he supposed to say? *She let us get this close – is she going to make us force our way up? No*, he thought, *I just have to find the right thing to say.*

“You saved my life – our lives – trust us, we won't hurt someone who we owe our lives to – who would? Can you trust in good will?”

“No.”

Fetch groaned, “Fair enough. Want us to climb back down?”

The ax slipped out of the moonlight for a moment. Whether that was a good sign or not, Fetch didn't know. But Ben had arrived beneath him.

“What's goin on?” Ben lamented, “Why aren't you moving? Aren't we about there?”

“Well, see-”

“Here.”

Fetch's head whipped back to look above him so fast that his skull nearly hopped off his spine. A hand extended into the silver beam above, a dark, sweaty, furred hand. It took every human instinct within the dog-man to keep from leaping off the rope and onto the hand. Somehow, he resisted for but a moment.

“You're not off the hook just yet,” their savior warned, reaching farther down so that Fetch could grab a hold, “we'll discuss further up here.”

Fetch took her hand and was yanked up off the rope and slung against the cold smooth wood of a queen-sized tree branch. It was so broad he couldn't even latch on for dear life, as was his first instinct, but instead he lay flat and spread like a star fish. He was still and safe and with something solid beneath him. A breeze ruffled his hair like a master petting their pooch after a good long hunt. He sighed deeply.

Ben was similarly hoisted, set down in the pocket between the branches where the woman had stashed her belongings. He was as exhausted as he was over enthusiastic to thank their hero. It was both weakness and humility that brought the gmoat to his knees.

“Thank you so much! We wouldn’t have lasted another second!” Ben rambled, “Thank you so, so, so-”

“Don’t thank me yet.”

Rolling over, Fetch slid down his branch into the little tree top cubby. It was only a little larger than a bathtub, just big enough for the two boys to squeeze in alongside each other and face the ax-wielding woman together.

“I need a good reason to trust you two, otherwise I’m going to have to chop you both up and toss your chunks down to the feed the ridgebacks.”

“Sure!” Fetch smirked. The shadowmancer rolled his shoulders then leaned back against the shaft of the tree behind him, “One, we’re too young to die.”

“A *good* reason.” She interjected.

“Two, you already let us up.”

“Not a reason.” She snarled.

“And three, it’s now two against one-”

“Fetch!” Ben yelped. He jumped up to stand between the two, his hands flailing out before him only for him to yank them back as the bearn woman hoisted her ax. He pleaded, “We won’t hurt you, we mean no harm-”

Fetch yanked the gmoat back, Ben would’ve fallen onto his butt had his tail not been there to support him. Fetch glared hard at the woman, continuing to make his third point, “We have magic, you’ve got an ax-”

The woman shifted her posture and it became apparent that she had an extra hanging from her belt.

“Two axes...” Fetch hesitated, but caught his courage back after an audible gulp. His chest reinflated and his lips caught the curve of his cocky smirk oncemore, “By the time you kill one of us, the other will have killed you.”

“Nope.” Ben stated.

Fetch pivoted so he could side eye the dog herder he’d thought had been his ally. Ben stood with his arms crossed.

“He’s on his own.” Ben glowered at the humanoid mutt, then looked past him to the bearn, “I’m not gonna threaten the woman that just saved our lives.”

The woman stared at the two for a moment long enough to make both young men question their position. Finally, she budged. Having stood on the lip above the little branch-made crater, she stepped into the leaf-ladden basin and joined them in the tight quarters.

“Though I’m still convinced I could kill you both,” she said to Fetch, “I’d die nonetheless.” She nodded to the dark shadows of the rest of the canopy above them, “One person can’t survive alone in this jungle at night. With the three of us, we can exchange watches – still, you’re welcome.”

“Thanks.” Ben sighed.

“Yea, thanks.” Fetch grunted before scowling back at the gmoat, “And thanks a lot to you, Ben.”

“Fetch,” Ben hissed back, “counting this, the ridgebacks, and the bridge, you’ve almost got me killed three times now *in just one day*.”

“Was it me or was it bad luck or-” Fetch gave Ben a smirk and a wink, “Was it fate?”

“Fate? Wait a second!” Ben slapped a hand to his ear as if a bug had just flown into it and whispered a secret, “I just got a message – a message from fate! It seems I’m destined to kill you!” He gasped, shaking his head, “I suppose we might as well get it over with, huh?”

Fetch's grin didn't diminish, he turned back to the furred woman, "So what's your deal?"
"Huh?" the bearn asked.

He gestured at her get up, "You're wearing chainmail, you've got axes, you're hiding in a tree, and you're all alone. What's the story?"

"I'm a bounty hunter – though on this gig I'm more of an ax-for-hire." She answered, "Out here looking for an escapee."

"An escapee? From where?" Ben asked.

"Prison." She explained.

Ben was surprised, "I didn't know they had a prison in Munkloe?"

"Not a prisoner of the Empire." She swung her ax down into the rim of the tree-pocket beside her and sat on the tree-branch lip, "We were transporting a prisoner from Sondor to Iceload."

"Sondor to Iceload?" Fetch cocked his head to the side in a truly doglike fashion, "Munkloe's less than a day from Sondor. You could've stopped in Iceload in as much time as y'all took sailing all the way down the Sereibis River."

"Didn't I say, 'escapee'?" She snapped.

Fetch threw up his hands, "Fair enough!"

She shrugged, "Besides, I don't sail the ship. Like I said, I'm a bounty hunter. I'm just along for the gold."

"Must be paying you pretty well to get you to come out here alone." Fetch noted.

She unclasped the harness that crisscrossed her abdomen, the one that had been carrying her double-sided ax, then pulled her second – single-sided – ax from the ring on her belt. In the rare threads of moonlight that lit their nest, they could tell it wasn't black like its sibling, but scarlet. Her company wondered whether or not that was in fact its color or if it simply had not been cleaned since the last time it had been used. Laying the ax down on her other side, she sighed, "They didn't."

"Pay well?" Fetch asked.

"Send me alone. Though," She admitted, "they don't pay well either. They sent me with two of their crew but they didn't last long."

"Oh." Fetch gulped.

After brief silence, Ben quietly offered his condolences, "Sorry, we didn't-"

"Nah." She spat over her shoulder then looked back at them, "They were bigger bastards than they were idiots. And they *were* idiots. Godi gops thought I'd hold them back on account of my," she batted her eyes and curtsied with her skirt of chainmail, "femininity. Turns out, it doesn't matter what you've got between your legs when it comes to climbing a tree."

"I'd suppose if a monkey can do it, anyone can." Fetch agreed – or so he thought.

Now it was the woman that cocked her head to the side, "What's that?"

"Oh no," Fetch yelped, "I didn't mean..." He looked to Ben for help but the gmoat was far too exhausted with coming to his rescue by this point, leaving Fetch to tumble some sort of excuse for his comment, "Listen, I'm not sexist, my mother's a woman!"

The woman took a deep breath.

"Besdies, I'm not speciest either. I'm not even fully a person – I'm part dog!"

Finally, he was offered a lifeline as the ax woman smirked, "That make your mother a bitch?"

Fetch caught his breath as he fought the urge to take offense.

Ben decided to diffuse the tension, "He really is part dog."

“A dog that’s a shadowmancer.” Her eyes narrowed, then widened, “You’re that prodigal prince from Dogloe!”

“I suppose the dog’s out of the box.” Fetch nodded. He extended a hand to the woman, “Fetch Eninac.”

Blood was still dripping from his palms but she didn’t seem to mind, shaking it regardless. She then took her sweat and blood soaked hand and extended it to Ben. Unlike her, Ben wasn’t a big fan of mixing his blood with Fetch’s blood and this stranger’s sweat but he also didn’t want to insult their new comrade so he winced and shook away.

“Benjamin Fasthoof.” Ben grimaced.

“Marvell of the Ax.” Marvell said in return, then she gestured to her crimson ax, “This is Pride,” and then the double bladed, obsidian ax, “and Joy.”

“Marvell of the Ax!” Fetch exclaimed, “You’re a Warcourter!”

“Was.” Marvell sighed, “No sports in wartime.”

“Wartime?” Ben asked.

Marvell began to laugh but stopped as she saw the gmoat’s cheeks turn as red as Pride.

“The Pirate Wars.” She was perplexed, “Who are you, Fasthoof?”

“Just a dog herder.” Ben stated.

“Wait. A dog herder and a runaway dog.” She began to giggle again, pointing at Fetch as best she could while bouncing from laughter, “Wait! Did Dogloe send a dog herder to catch you?!”

Ben patted the hair around his horns as he nodded.

Fetch took a deep breath and decided to mention, “Can you actually keep the part about me and my family being dogs quiet. My brother, *the King*, likes to keep it a myth.”

Marvell respectfully curbed her snickering, though she couldn’t cut out her goofy grin, “I think you’ve got bigger problems than being a dog.” She pointed to her own left eye and then to his, “They’ve got your face posted all over Sereibis – your bounty’s bigger than the one I was after!”

Fetch and Ben were quiet for a moment. Marvell revelled in their pale-faced anxiety.

“Don’t worry.” She assured them, “Our ship is going to Iceload, remember? The Mystvokar, yea? Where mancy is decriminalized? The crew would never let me turn you in – especially knowing the types of farakin crows I’m working for, they’d probably sell me to the Mystvokar before they’d sell you to the Empire.”

Again, Fetch and Ben were quiet, but this time for an entirely different reason. Their heads slowly turned until they were looking at each other. Their expressions seemed to be a mirror of each other’s. Yanking their faces back around to stare wide eyed at the bounty hunter, they exclaimed in unison, “CAN WE COME!”

“To Iceload?” Marvell asked.

“Yes!” Ben exclaimed, “We’ve got to get Fetch out of Munkloe, if we could sneak onto your boat, he’d be safe in Iceload!”

“I have a few loose ends to tie up here,” Fetch admitted, “but I can be quick if you’re down to help us!”

Marvell twisted her lips into a frown, itching the fur of her chin for a moment, “I’ll help you, if y’all help me, deal?”

The two didn’t even have to confer, they simultaneously agreed, “Deal!”

“Then it’s settled.” She hopped up, snatching her black ax (“Joy” as she donned it). Both men flinched, but she didn’t notice. She was peering up above them, saying, “I’ll take the first watch. Get some sleep.”

The fellas didn’t fight back. They were exhausted from the climb and Ben was extra tired as he had gotten very little sleep on his flight from Dogloe to Munkloe. She’d hardly climbed ten yards before she could hear them snoring beneath her. Marvell didn’t have to go much further before she found her spot. It was marked with blood and guts – a strategy she had learned as a child on hunting hikes with her father.

“Beasts can smell weakness...” she whispered to herself.

After her comrades’ demise, she could hear the predators of the night closing in. Rather than waiting for them, she’d sought them out. Catching a horned panther alone, she was able to subdue it one on one. Then, she carved out its organs and draped them across the branches above her nest as if she were decorating a gory Christmas tree. She severed the feline’s tail and dipped it into the carcass, using it to paint a broad line in the boughs above where she had decided to spend the night. The more extreme the spectacle, the less likely any other creatures would test her. Still, it would have been only a matter of time had she fallen asleep.

Insects weren’t afraid. A trail of bulbous ants, as red as the ax she had left behind, marched in a twirling ribbon up the limb she clung to. Each of their round body segments were as fat as her finger tips. She put her thumb against one that had strayed from the line, pressing it against the smooth wooden bark of the kapok tree. It squirmed. Its legs wiggled in all directions, its pinchers gnashed, and its stinger slid in and out of its posterior. A tiny bead of crimson poison clung to the end of the needle.

She pushed her father’s lessons from her head, but those old memories were merely replaced by the more recent memories of her crew. She could see Angine and Garfield snickering at her. “*Ladysitting*”, they’d called their assignment. And it didn’t take long for their snickers to turn into growls. Their mockery to threats. She would’ve rathered the company of the horned panthers. *They should have sent me alone.* She wound up that way nonetheless. *How is it they can’t trust a woman but the nellafs were too scared to brave the jungle without a Munkloen?*

Her father’s voice came crashing back, overriding her thought processes with those knotted memories she wished she could forget. She squinted into the darkness, lest she close her eyes and see his face. Still, she heard his words, “*Beasts can smell weakness and women – ain’t no difference in the wild.*”

Marvell pressed down harder on the insect’s thorax, her eyes fell to watch it struggle. Another ant crawled over to watch. Their antennas twitched, clasping one another’s, then it ran away. It abandoned its comrade and hopped back into line.

“It’s okay little ant.” Marvell cooed, “You don’t need anyone but yourself.”

Her father had wanted nothing but a son. When her mother couldn’t provide that, her mother left. She didn’t hate Marvell, not completely. She only hated the part of Marvell that was her father. Marvell hated her mother for that, though she hardly knew the woman enough to hate her. In the end, she more so despised the fact that her departure only seemed to prove Marvell’s father right.

Women are weak. She scoffed. For a moment, she let up on the ant. Its belly spared from bursting, the bug seemingly sighed. Its legs went limp and it lay flat and still for a moment. *Women are weak?* Yet every suiter her father brought home left with a broken nose and it wasn’t Daddy that had the bruised knuckles. She grinned, thinking of the sweat, tears, and blood she’d drained from the men she’d pumpeled on the battlefields of Warcourt stadiums. The boys

began to resent her. As did her father – had he not resented her all along. *If women are weak, Marvell twisted her lips as if she'd just bitten into something sour, then no one is strong, finally the curve of a smile took hold of her lips, because no one is stronger than me.*

She plucked the ant up from the tree and it began to squirm once more. The line of ants behind it finally stopped as more left rank and wandered over to look anxiously at their comrade, suspended in the air by some giant, superior being.

Daddy is dead. She thought, banishing his voice from her head. *So too are Angine and Garfield.* Her eyes fell down to the shadowy shapes of the sleeping men below. *And now I have new friends, new "lady-sitters".* She lifted the ant up to her eye level. For a bit, it froze there pinched between her thumb and index finger. It was as if they were staring at one another and it was tacitly pleading for its life. *Why would these men be any different than any others?*

In one swift motion, she tossed the ant up, let it fall into her palm, and then balled her hand into a fist – doing everything but clamping down and squashing out its life. The ants that broke line clicked and squeaked, but they waited no longer. Climbing over one another, they began to construct a bridge, reaching out to the ant trapped in Marvell's hand.

It's too late, the Marrialdos aren't going to Iceload. When they learn we're going to Vinnum Tow – when they learn what my prisoner is – they'll turn on me. Even as she frowned, her fist began to open up. The ant didn't dare move. Even the arm of ants extending from the tree trunk hesitated, unsure of what this furred giant was planning. *Would they be wrong?*

Holding her hand flat, she waited until the ant gave in to hope. It inched forwards a few steps, then it dashed off her finger tips and dove into the loving grasp of its comrades. But no sooner did the insects begin to chirp with joy than did Marvell swat at the arm with the back of her hand. The column of ants broke and scattered like sparks emitted from an explosion, raining down from the tree tops to land on separate leaves and twigs. Somehow, the original ant managed to stay on the trunk she clung to. It stood there, alone, the line severed and its saviors displaced, staring defiantly back at Marvell. Then, it shook its head and scurried off.

With a sigh, Marvell sat back against an opposing branch. Shutting out her thoughts, she scanned the heavens above for threats – occasionally glancing below to be sure that those who claimed to be her new teammates hadn't woken up and changed their minds.

- - -

The Captain led the way, fighting the urge to march at his usual brisk pace so that his officers could keep up. His entourage of barefoot bears was just a tiny bit more diverse that night and it was that diversity that was slowing their stride. His two most trusted men and women hoisted a foreigner up by his shoulders – or at least attempted to. Bears are rarely less than seven feet tall and this presented a problem for the guards trying to assist their out-of-state visitor for not only was he not a bear, but he was a dwarf. Ironically, though he stood just less than four and a half feet tall, this little asylum seeker made up for his lack of verticality in horizontal leaps and bounds of brawn. The man was as strong as an ox and as heavy as one too. If you asked the two guards trying to help him down the hall, they'd have testified he was at least as heavy as they were combined (chainmail and shields included). The old dwarf was seemingly skipping through the Tabernacle as the bears hobbled. The guards dipped under the burden until the dwarf sagged low enough to kick off the floor boards – allowing the guards to rise back upright only for gravity to regain control and drag them back down.

If the palace hadn't shuddered under their march before, it certainly did on the night of May 29th, and the dwarf was well aware of it.

"Aye, laddae, lassae, ya can set mae down, oi swar!"

His aids couldn't have responded if they wanted to. They were gritting their teeth so hard they were coming seriously close to needing medical attention before they could ever open their maws again. The Captain answered for them.

"It isn't a problem, sir." He pivoted to walk backwards before the dwarf, pointing to the blood-soaked bandage wrapped around the dwarf's head, "We can't in good faith have you walking. If you pass out again and hit your head, the Princess would never forgive us."

"The Princess!"

The dwarf nearly hopped out of the guard's arms – which could've been fatal had he bound forward and tackled the Captain – but somehow, no doubt due to their impeccable training, the guards held strong, granted they might've chipped a gritted-tooth or two in the process.

"Shae's hare, Captain?!" The refugee exclaimed, "In Saeroibus?!"

The Captain nodded, "On her way as we speak."

"Lard..." the old man murmured. He calmed down, to both the grin and chagrin of his carriers. Going limp meant no more helpful kicks off the ground. Instead, his guards had to stoop at an awkward angle as his old callused toes dragged along the polished wooden floors. He continued to talk of the Princess, "Haven't saen har in somethan loike six yars...shae's grown now, aye?"

"Yes sir, well..." The Captain hesitated, "according to science, yes. According to her father-"

"Aye, they nevar grow up in ar oyes, do they?" The dwarf smiled, "Shae gotta job?"

"She's Headmaster."

"Saelu?!" He exclaimed, "Marraed?"

"No."

"Boyfriend?"

"Well..." Again, the Captain was a bit stumped.

"Oh Lard," the dwarf chuckled, "shae got an oye far the bad lads, aye?"

"Uh..." The Captain cleared his throat and said in as bland a tone as he could manage, "I do not wish to tread on your right's of expression as a sovereign being beneath Solaris, brother dwarf, but I might advise you not to bring up the gentleman caller to her father."

"A *rael* bad lad, aye?" The dwarf muttered, setting his jaw and nodding to the Captain even as he made up his mind aloud, "Oi got some questions far the lil lassae now..."

When they made it to the double doors, the Captain and another guard strode forward to hold them open so that those hoisting their guest could enter first. The boot wearing throne room guards flinched at the sight of the dwarf before jerking back to stand still and upright. Even the flames seemed to gasp, flickering as the doors sprawled open. The guards finally let the dwarf down, though they hurried behind him and paid close attention just incase he might fall again as he strode down the emerald carpet towards his old friend, the King.

"Signan!" He shouted.

"Boldarian!"

King Signan Ruse bound out of his chair and rushed forward. The ancient elf slid into the ancient dwarf on his knees, embracing him before he remembered his royal manners. After the hug, he stood and stepped back. He ran the back of his fingers from Bold's brow to his chin (this

would've been odd, but remember: King Ruse was blind and he and the dwarf went waaay back). His hand didn't go far, he nearly immediately felt the cloth covering of his head wound,

The water elf gasped, "Your head!"

Not only was Bold's head bandaged, his hands were wrapped so thick that they would've appeared to be stuck into mittens had blood not been slowly dyeing the gauze a deep scarlet. Yet, before the dwarf could offer any explanation, he was bombarded by yet another tight embrace. No sooner did the King back up than did the Princess come dashing into the room. She held her robes up at her waist so that they fluttered about her calves as she sprinted down the carpet. Her hair flowed behind her, sweat droplets twinkling in the torch light like amethyst beads amongst her indigo locks. She skidded to a halt and slammed into the refugee, her hair spilled forward to cover him like a cool blanket as she clasped him from behind. The poor dwarf would've spilled forward had his two carriers not dove to his side, supporting his chest.

"Papa Bold!" She exclaimed.

Bold seemed to melt in her grasp, "Lil Lenga..."

Releasing him and stepping around to stand by her father, she explained, "He fell climbing a kapok-"

"Uhctually..." Bold scratched his bare scalp, just above his bandage-bandana, "Oi fell befar, runnin from the slavars."

"Slavers." King Ruse frowned. He looked up from the dwarf to the bearns behind them, "The *Marrialdo*?"

The Captain let the double doors close and strode up to stand beside Bold. He didn't have to nod to answer his King, it was more of a rhetorical question. Everyone in the room knew it had to be the *Marrialdo*. The ship wasn't loyal to the Trinity Nations and it happily worked with all the Empire's enemies. It was not welcome in the river harbor of Sereibis, but then again, what was the pacifist King to do? His hands were tied and double knotted.

"*Marraialduh*?" Bold asked, turning from the Captain to the King, "Sondoran lot, humans roight?" He turned back to the Captain, "Oi know the nonvoilence thang, lad, but poirates in yar Capitol? Cun't ya coll Tadloe ar Dogloe ar-"

"It isn't just us." The Captain sighed, "No matter how much Lord Ruse, no matter how much even the Emperor despises them, touching the *Marrialdo* would be an act of war that our allies are not willing to make."

"The *Marrialdo* serves the Cagirent of Sondor, the Mystvokar of Iceload, and the Sovereigns of Vinnum Tow." The King elaborated, "If we challenge them and they draw arms and their blood is spilt-"

"Thar'd bae somethin loike a Void War on ar hands." Bold cursed, "Tow."

"We will keep you safe from them, Boldarian." The King swore, "And the *Marrialdo* will not leave this continent."

Bold's jaw almost dropped but he held his resolve. Looking into the old elf's eyes, he saw a glimmer that had not been there six years ago. There was something swirling in his milky, white gaze and it made the dwarf a bit uneasy. He wasn't alone. The Captain had struggled to hold back a, "Huh?" at the King's comment. *Won't leave this continent*, the Captain wondered, *how could we even get away with that – nonviolence aside?* Unlike the bearn and the dwarf, the water elf beside her father had no problem expressing her concerned confusion.

"Father..." she murmured, "what do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said, my love." He assured her, gently clasping her shoulder, "Now, please, look after Mr. Drahkcor's wounds."

“Ah, come on now, moy Lard!” Bold smiled sheepishly, “Don’t mehk the lass barn the midnight enartomb! Give mae a bed and some bread and oi’ll fix moysel up in the marnin!”

“I promised to keep you safe, Boldarian.” King Ruse grinned back, “Don’t make me break my word.”

Bold rolled his eyes but consented, turning his smirk on the Princess whom’s hand he took. His warmth helped her stomach settle as she decided to ignore the implications of her father’s promises. *What can I do anyways?* She told herself, *I’m a healer, that’s what I can do. And Papa Bold needs healing.* Gently taking the dwarf’s large paw – swollen from his wounds and enlarged by the wrappings so much so that she really was only pinching the tip of his index finger – they turned towards the double doors. Immediately, the guards jumped around them.

“Captain!”

Everyone froze.

“Captain, stay behind.” The King then gestured to the Captain’s men, especially those that had been paralyzed mid-move to lift the dwarf, “Return to the city, continue with your nightly surveillance. I won’t hold the Captain long.”

The two stooping for Boldarian straightened up like flowers turning to the sun. Their lips couldn’t help but smile as their chests heaved such heavy sighs of relief that Bold couldn’t help but take it a bit personal. Quickly turning from the glower on the dwarf’s face, the two joined the double-file line of their barefoot comrades and marched from the throne room before Signan could change his mind.

The Captain possessed a similar scowl as his men and women strode towards freedom with a bit too much abruptness, he addressed the King, “My Lord-”

The old elf raised a hand to silence him, “Two of my royal guards will escort my daughter and our esteemed guest.” His blind eyes didn’t turn to watch them, but his voice glared for him, “If I hear that his feet so much as scrape the floor before his back hits the bed, then two of the Captain’s men will have the privilege of retiring to the position of royal guard. Understood?”

Gulping, “Yes, my Lord”’s escaped the guards as they exchanged anxious glances of tacit debate over who the two victims would be. The Captain turned to stare and the decision was made. Two stepped forward and made their way over to Bold. When Lenga saw them begin to struggle, she decided to stroll on ahead of them – lest she watch awkwardly as they grunted and groaned and gritted their teeth.

“Goodnight Father!” She yelped before whirling around and striding slowly down the emerald carpet, “Come on, gentlemen, I’ll lead the way.”

“The rest of you will wait outside the throne room, leaving the Captain and I to speak in private. Understood?”

With more relieved, “Yes, my Lord”’s this time, the royal guards followed the dwarf and the Headmaster out and happily shut the doors behind them. Only the King and the Captain remained. As the air cleared, the two looked at one another. Even though Signan Ruse was as blind as a bat, the Captain couldn’t help but feel seen.

Sighing, the King offered a brief smile then turned and ambled back towards his throne. The chair was a living thing, a shrub gently molded by magic. The twiggy brambles criss-crossed to make the back and seat like spiderweb wicker, the thicker branches – polished by time – curved around to trim these. Twisted all around it, like ribbons of royal cloth, were soft-stemmed vines with luminescent, raindrop-petalled flowers – these organic ornaments illuminated the King as he slumped down into his chair.

“I didn’t want to say while my daughter was here, but a member of her cohort is tending to the *Marrialdo*.” He said, “The spirit, Setarca Petara.”

“Medical treatment as a ploy to disguise their true intentions for docking here.” The Captain suggested.

The King shrugged, “That is what I need you to confirm.”

“Yes, your majesty.” The Captain bowed his head and dropped to one knee but before he could bounce back upright, ready to go, his majesty continued.

He scoffed. Not at the bearn, to be honest the King wasn’t even sure what he was laughing at. It was the very fact that it was untangeable that made him chuckle in the first place. As the Captain cocked his head to the side like a puzzled pooch, the King tried to explain, “All these mysteries intersecting at once.”

“Ah...” the guardsman muttered, “Eninac and Fasthoof...”

“I assumed the *Marrialdo* was here for them – that they planned to traipse through the jungle and sneak out through the harbor – but then Boldarian showed up.”

“A convenient coincidence for the shadowmancer.” The Captain noted.

“But maybe a coincidence nonetheless...” the water elf had been twirling his long white hair as he mused, but now he suddenly stopped. Sitting upright in his seat, his brow furled and again his cloudy eyes seemed to be boring into the Captain’s very soul as he spoke, “There will be another coincidence. Not tomorrow, but the next day, in the harbor, and after it the *Marrialdo* will be no more.”

The Captain gulped.

“The commotion will be immense.” The King continued, “If Fetch Eninac is not captured by then, he will surely escape in the chaos.”

“My Lord,” he bowed once more, “I will do my best.”

“I know you will, Captain, thank you.” The King bowed back before concluding their meeting with his orders, “Pry Dr. Setarca Petara first thing in the morning, before she goes to the pirates, then use the rest of the day to catch that blasted dog. Understood?”

“Yes, Lord Ruse.”

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“Uh narsaray?”

The room was lit with an organic chandelier that, like the King’s throne, was decorated with glowing flower blossoms. They slowly turned as if on a timed dial, each stem moving like the hand of a clock, spraying different shapes of neon light on the walls as they intersected with one another’s rays. Toys lined the walls, from miniature trebuchets to massive stuffed dragons smiling despite being draped in a layer of dust, all oriented towards what lay beneath the fortulaca flower lights: a crib.

“Ah expected to bae behbaed but this is next level!”

In her defense, the crib was large enough for the dwarf. This was the royal crib. It was circular and had a diameter long enough that she could’ve laid flat even as a grown elven woman, thus there was plenty of space for a dwarf. She could’ve brought him to any other guest room, but this room had the added benefit of being next to hers *and* the crib had the nicest mattress in the palace.

“You should try lying down before you complain.” Lenga giggled, then she turned to the guards that had carried him in and went about ushering them away.

“Shouldn’t oi claen up farst?” Bold asked, hesitating at the edge of his new enclosure.

“No need.” Lenga said, closing the door and returning to her old friend’s side, “If magic can heal wounds, Papa Bold, we can do away with stains.”

“Fehr enough.”

With a heave of a breath, the dwarf pulled himself up and onto the baby-bed then rolled over onto his back to exhale with a winded sigh.

“Sehftay.” He murmured.

Lenga knelt by the edge of the cot and slipped off her satchel. Inside, she retrieved a leather binder that was nigh as thick as the mattress before her. It took her quite the heave to lift it up on to the bed but she managed to pull it off before the dwarf noticed and could offer to help. With a sigh like the dwarf’s, she plopped the tome down beside him.

As she moseyed through the pages, she said, “So tell me what happened? Your son wrote me...he thought you didn’t get out?”

“Tow.” Bold took another deep inhale and exhale, “Oi haven’t wrote a soul, yar the farst ones to know oi eschepped. Got godai separehted in the Undar.” He sat up so abruptly that Lenga nearly tore out the page she was fingering as she flopped back onto her butt with a yelp. Bold exclaimed, “Is the Fifth hare?!”

“Lay back down!” Lenga demanded before shifting her tone back into something a little more bedside-mannery, “Your son is safe, but he isn’t here. In the revolt, the Vinn got his blood, but y’all’s friends-”

“The Knome?” Bold asked, defiantly laying upright.

Lenga gently grasped his shoulders and forced him back horizontal, “Yes, that Knome and the other Antipa folks, they got them somewhere safe – somewhere mapworks can’t track, a bar somewhere, I believe. He and Zachias both.”

“Saelu...” Bold murmured, finally flat oncemore.

If it was possible, her gentle tone grew even gentler as she continued, “That’s the good news.”

“Tow.” Bold cursed.

Lenga bit her lip, then went ahead and broke it, “The Vinn are killing ten dwarves a day. Saying they’ll continue until they’ve murdered ten for every dwarf that was involved in the Revolt. And they’re likely calling any dwarf in the vicinity of the Revolt complicit.”

The old dwarf’s lips parted as if to curse again but there was no word in his lexicon that could accurately describe his damnation for the situation.

“The Empire is furious, the Emperor especially, but the Councils’ anger is as performative as ever.” Lenga continued, “They’ll buy a little less ore until the Vinn stop the slaughter, but they won’t go to war.”

“Ten dwarves doie a deh boy thar bloody hellbrute hands in paece toimes.” Bold growled, “Carse twentay a deh doesn’t mehk the godai royals blink twice.”

Lenga slumped away from her book and the side of the bed. Her hands folded over her knees where tears began to fall on them.

She whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“Yar the last who should bae sorray, Lil Lenga.” Bold said firmly, “Whot you’ve done far mae and moy son. Yar a haelar and a taechar, a fraedom foightar in yar own weh, doing yar part. Lard, you’ve sartainlay sehved mar dwarven loives than oi now – oi’m runnin a crimpsin taiad deficit.”

The Princess smeared her tears across her cheek and sniffled as she straightened back up and smiled at the old man sprawled out before her. He was staring up at the flower-chandelier, his face contorted with a scowl.

“It’ll bae sometoime far oi can convince moysself it’s warth troyin again.” He stated, then he turned his head and smiled at the healer, “Let’s farget about this part of the world far now – do the Empahr a fehvar and talk about arselves far a change. How are ya, lass?”

Lenga smirked, half at Bold’s snide remark and half at herself for the reality of how she actually was, “Well...I’m in a bit of an odd situation.”

“The Captain told mae.” Bold winked, “Boy trouble?”

She would’ve recoiled at the thought of the guards gossiping about her to such a father figure had the deep darkness of their prior subject not still hung around her heart like a fog, still though, mention of the “boy” made her blue cheeks turn a warm indigo.

“What’d he say?” She asked.

“Nothin ofcarse, hae no sooner mentioned you had a boyfriend than hae plaeded far mae to nevar spaek of it agehn.” Bold chuckled.

Lenga observed Bold’s expression for a moment before trusting that he wasn’t lying, but then she went ahead and told him the truth anyways, “I met a boy from Dogloe...the King’s brother.”

“Who is the King thar now?” Bold asked.

“Catch...” She hesitated again, “...Eninac.”

“Eninac?” Bold muttered, “Human?”

“Yes...but see, that isn’t the problem.”

“Well, oi should hope it isn’t.”

“See...he’s a shadowmancer.”

“Oh lard, Lenga?” Bold jerked upright again, “Yar dehting a mansar?”

“I didn’t know!” Lenga admitted.

“Ehn’t they partay obvious?!” Bold crowed, “With the oye and oll?”

“He had it covered!” Lenga yelped.

“Loike a poirate?!“ Bold guffawed.

“Like anyone who covers their eye! I didn’t realize! The Emperor has an eye patch!” Lenga lamented, “Calm down!”

“Sarry, lass, sarry,” Bold let his posture slack a bit, remaining upright but sitting far less aggressively. He took a deep breathe and let it out slow, asking, “So now whot, lass, whot happened?”

“Apparently, he came here.” Lenga said.

“Apparrentlay?”

“He didn’t get to say, ‘Hi’ or try and explain who he was to me and why he had come – hence the “apparently”. Someone found out there was a shadowmancer in Sereibis and told Daddy and he totally freaked out.”

“Lard...”

“You know how Daddy feels about shadowmancers.”

“How everayone faels, raellay.” Bold said before quickly correcting, “Except you.”

“And now King Catch has sent an undercover dog herder to sneak Fetch out of the country.”

“Catch and Fetch?” Bold snickered, “Yar boyfriend is nehmed ‘Fetch’?”

Lenga shrugged, saying through cheeks that were now nearly scarlet, “I kind of thought it was cute.”

Bold rolled his eyes, moving past it to dig into the next weird part of her story, “Dogloe sent a dog hardar?”

“Undercover.” Lenga nodded, “Acting as though he was here to offer us mancer hounds. His name was Benjamin Fasthoof.”

“Weht.” Bold held up a hand. It was still oozing with blood from his climb. The two had gotten so distracted catching up that they’d totally neglected getting the healing started. Seeing his hand, Lenga was reminded, but hearing the name “Fasthoof” and the occupation “dog herder” had made Bold even more distracted than before. Very slowly, as if he were speaking to someone new to Common Tongue, Bold asked, “Is thot the son of Merciada Fasthoof?”

Lenga nodded as slowly as Bold had spoken.

“Saelu...” he murmured, looking down at his lap as his brain fully registered the news.

“Papa Bold?”

“Lil Lenga!” His head whipped back around to face her. With wide, amber eyes and a ridiculous smile stretched across his lips, Boldarian Drahkcor the Fourth exclaimed, “Ya’ve got to introduce mae!”

Chapter Nine: The Day After the Deicide

There was an odd indentation in the ground. It was shaped like a spade as if a trowel had been smashed into the ground, not by the edge of its blade but rather by the flat. The back of this hole was nearly three inches deep where as the front was incredibly shallow. Both Ben and Fetch scratched their heads as they stared at it. It was certainly unlike any footprint they'd ever seen.

"Did they have some sort of strange prosthetic?" Ben asked.

Fetch snickered, "You couldn't catch a cripple?"

"He wasn't a cripple." Marvell snapped, "Although, he may be now."

She raised her finger to point at the dented shaft of a tree. It was a young kapok, nowhere near the size of those that bore the city of Sereibis, and it wasn't going to get any older. The poor plant had been toppled over. A tangle of branches further up the trunk kept the timber from falling completely flush to the forest floor, instead it hung suspended about four feet off the ground – just above the mysterious divet in the dirt. There, smack dab in the middle of the trunk, directly over the funky footprint, was a dent that looked like it had been left by a cannon ball.

Marvell pointed to a fern that sat near the footprint and the boys now noticed droplets of dried blood speckling the fronds. She explained, "He hit his head and fell flat on his back. When he got back up, he was bleeding." She shrugged, "From his nose or his forehead, I don't know, but it wasn't enough to stop-him, stop-him. I followed the blood as much as I could, but in a jungle," She shook her head, "every godi bush has spots that look like they could be blood. We spent all day trying to track him down, but you – you're a shadowmancer, you can see blood with your crow eye."

"Right, right..." Fetch murmured as he ran his fingertips over the indentation in the fallen tree trunk, "I just can't get over the size of this crater!"

"And how he hit his head..." Ben concurred, he asked, "Is he a Knome?"

"That's a foot too high for a Knome." Fetch interjected.

Marvell concurred with the shadowmancer, "Close though – he's a dwarf."

"A dwarf?" Both boys chimed.

"What?" Marvell growled, her hand tickled the head of the red ax that hung from her belt, "You boys gotta problem with that?"

Yup. Neither said it though. Ben gulped and looked to Fetch. The human-dog hybrid smirked and slapped the gmoat on the back with enough gusto to knock the breath out of him had his backpack not been in the way, saying, "Just never seen a dwarf before."

Marvell took her hand away from Pride and crossed her arms tight over her breast, this new stance seemed just as imposing as the first, but she offered them a way to reduce the tension with a shrug, "Then today's your lucky day."

"Not luck, fate! We'll catch your dwarf and be out of this jungle in no time!" Fetch grinned, keeping his eyes on Marvell as he nudged Ben beside him, "Mind if I speak to Ben privately for a second, before we get started? See, I have a few errands to run before I leave the country – but you need me for my," he pointed at his cursed eye, "shadowmancy – so I have to have Ben run those errands while I help you, but Ben doesn't know those errands and they're a bit personal," Fetch blushed, holding a hand up to his jaw as if he were whispering a secret, "relationship drama," then continued with a broad smile that was either full of anxiety or full of shit, "so I'd like to keep them between him and I – *and* I have to ask him if he's okay with that –

and then we'll come back and make sure you're okay with that – you know, with him sneaking back into the city and all while we hunt down your dwarf – because I don't want to run my secrets by you if Ben winds up saying," he threw his hands up in the air, making a nasally voice that did not sound anything like Ben, " 'No, you mangy mutt, I won't help!' in which case, I have to abandon said errands but at least my secrets lie only with one separate – albeit racist – soul," he gestured to Ben, then to Marvell, "and not two. Yea?"

Marvell's arms unfolded. One hand retrieved Pride, the crimson cleaver on her belt, and the other reached back to snap Joy, the double bladed obsidian ax, off the harness on her back. Smiling with one half of her face, she gave the two a nod of approval and took a step back.

"We'll just be two yards over there."

Fetch twirled around, ducked under the fallen tree, and strolled swiftly a dozen yards from the bounty hunter. Ben was so caught off guard by the immediacy that his head jerked from Marvell to Fetch then back to Marvell.

"Sorry, be right back!" He assured her, then he ducked under the tree and hurried over to join his half-hound human.

They began to skirt around a vast kapok, but Marvell hollered out to them, "Where I can see you!"

With a couple curses under their breath, they looked back between the brush to give Marvell an acknowledging glance then stayed on her side of the tree. Standing close together, with their heads half turned in case she could read their lips, they discussed in hushed tones.

"We can't help her." Fetch stated.

"The dwarf's a slave?" Ben asked.

"Has to be. Ever heard of a rock dwarf in Sondor?" Fetch would've crowed if he didn't have to whisper.

Ben agreed, "And why would they be taking him to Iceload?"

Fetch nodded, "They're totally here to take him back to Vinnum Tow."

Marvell grunted loudly. Fetch's head whipped over to smile at her so fast that he nearly sprained his neck. Giving her a friendly wave, he said, "Just give us a minute!"

He turned back to Ben, "We've got to think."

Ben already was, but unfortunately for Fetch, the brains of their new duo was not thinking of a solution to their problem. He was thinking about his mother – more specifically, a letter, one he got over half a decade ago. When he blinked he could see the moment: *His fingers trembled as if it wasn't Summer on the plains, as if beads of sweat weren't budding off his brow and falling down past his hand to stain the leather pouch as he reached in and pinched a pale envelope from within. He hesitated for a moment. The postdog that wore the satchel was so still. Its head wasn't turned, but one of its big brown eyes rested on Ben. As Ben removed the letter, the dogs tail slowly curled to tuck underneath his belly.*

It wasn't his mother's words. The last words he ever had from her came from his thirteenth birthday, weeks prior, but instead it was the words of a stranger. Had those words written anything else, he might've been thrilled by the fact that he'd gotten a personal message, handwritten, from the Emperor himself – but it didn't matter that the author was the Emperor. On that hill, surrounded by his herd, standing above the postdog, the author was nothing more than a stranger telling him that his mother was dead and that he should be proud.

She died in Vinnum Tow fighting alongside the dwarves.

But there was no space in his heart for pride on that day. Instead, he fell to his knees and embraced the postdog. As he turned his head to the heavens, weeping, so too did his herd. They drowned out his wailing with their howls, mourning with their herder, and sharing his pain.

Blinking, he turned back to Fetch, wondering, *Was Fetch there that day? Does Fetch know?* But this wasn't the time for Ben to ask, Fetch's brain was racing a mile a minute – which cost it about all the effectiveness it had to spare – and Marvell's patience was running thin.

“Not only can we not help her – you know, cause farak slavery,” Fetch continued, “but I literally *can't* help her.”

“Huh?”

“My crow eye sees energy, not blood.” Fetch rolled his eyes in Marvell's direction, “Maybe if it was fresh blood, but dried blood has as much energy in it as a dead body!” Snapping his eyes back to Ben, he concluded, “We've got to run.”

“Run?” Ben whisper-shouted, “What if she chases us?”

“With all that armor and those axes?” Fetch shook his head, “The ridgebacks cleared the brush for us, if we run full speed then she could never keep up!”

“And if she throws one of those axes at us?” Ben pressed.

Fetch shrugged, “Duck.”

“What if we just tell her the truth.” Ben offered.

“That we won't help her?” Fetch scoffed.

“Yea, we won't. The deal was she gets us out of the Empire if we help her but now that we won't the deal is off.” Ben continued, “We just go our separate ways.”

“The deal *was* she let us into her tree-nest then we help her.” Fetch corrected.

“Was it?” Ben checked, “I thought it was she let us up, then we help her fend off the night beasts?”

“*Whatever the deal was,*” Fetch hissed, “Now the deal is we should run. If we run, we get a head start. If we're honest, and she decides to kill us, then what? You ready to kill her?”

Ben looked over at Marvell. She seemingly hadn't budged since his last glance, but this time she cocked her head to the side. He couldn't see her boots behind the brush, but he could assume she was tapping one foot and counting the seconds. *We're going to have to decide soon. She is working for the evil slavers of Vinnum Tow but...am I ready to kill her? She did save our lives last night.* Without noticing it, his hand had snaked up to tuck in the hair around his horns.

Fetch swatted his elbow, “Well?”

Ben sighed, “We run.”

Fetch nodded, “Ready?”

Ben nodded, “Count down.”

“Okay, on three,” Fetch whispered, “One.”

“Alright, y'all,” Marvell called, “Time's up!”

She started marching their way. She may have been heavier but she was also taller and her steps meant a lot more than did the boys'. In one gait, she'd made it to the toppled tree. Both boys' eyes grew wide as they saw her stoop to get beneath it.

“TWO, THREE!” Fetch yelled.

They took off in separate directions, each attempting to rush around the great façade of the kapok they stood before so that when the bounty hunter got around the fallen trunk they'd have another trunk between them. Unfortunately, Marvell was no fool. Not only was she a warrior, but she was an athlete. As an ex-Warcourter, she was more than used to making snap decisions when a plan went south. Before the second syllable left Fetch's tongue, she'd switched

from stooping to sliding – like a baseball player coasting into homeplate – and no sooner did she come back into view of the two men than did she lob Pride and Joy at them.

The axes pinwheeled through the air. The black ax struck the tree, it missed Fetch's neck by a hair – literally slicing off a chunk of his greasy locks – but the red ax didn't miss. Ben's hooves were just a bit slower than Fetch's feet. The scarlet blade sliced into his side and pinned him to the broad kapok tree. Having made it to the otherside, Fetch looked back as he skirted around the roots. Though the trunk of the tree had a glow, it wasn't as strong a glow as a person's, and Fetch's crow eye picked up Ben's shape barely a yard from where they'd taken off. Ben's silhouette was still.

Fetch skidded to a halt.

“Don't pull it out!” He roared from the otherside of the trunk.

Marvell had already made it to Ben's side.

“Don't come back around!” She shouted back.

Fetch could hear Ben's strained voice. A string of curses flowed from the herder as he attempted to grasp his current situation, “Tiad, tiad, tiad...” His hands shook, his finger tips gently tickling the handle of the ax protruding from his stomach. Marvell's gloved hand gently slid over his.

“Don't move.” She warned, “You'll kill yourself.”

Ben gave one slow, trembling nod.

Fetch was pressed up against the otherside of the tree. Staring through the steady glow of the tree at the pulsating seem splitting Ben's light nearly in two. The shadowmancer called out, “How bad is it?”

“Bad as it can be.” Marvell's grasp was somehow gentle wrapped around Ben's and her dark eyes met Ben's with sympathy, but then all heart left as she jerked her snout in Fetch's direction and snarled, “So don't farak with me.”

“So much for *Fasthoof*...” Fetch muttered to himself before raising his voice again, “If you let him die, then you're going to have to kill me too.”

“Wish I'd hit you instead anyways.” Marvell yelled.

“You let me help him, then I'll help you,” Fetch said, “and neither of us have to die.”

“He doesn't need a mancer, he needs a healer.” Marvell stated, seemingly disagreeing before she added, “The dwarf I'm looking for is a healer.”

A dwarf that's a healer? Fetch rolled his eyes, *The Hellbrutes of Vinnum Tow educating their slaves nowadays?* Still, if she let him leave, he did know a healer. In fact, contacting said healer had been his plan from the get go. And once he left, he could return with backup, get Ben fixed up, and make the bounty hunter pay. But before all that, he needed to get to Ben first. Despite what the bearn thought, Ben could use a mancer. Cleaved nearly in half, the gmoat would be out of blood by the time Fetch made it to the Tabernacle. He reached back across the arborous divide, “We got a deal?”

A deal? Marvell scoffed. She yanked the ax that had missed the shadowmancer from the tree and glowered at the mark it left as if it were the man who had dodged it. *I can smell your lies a naeco away – you're a survivor with a proclivity for drastic solutions, Mr. Shadowmancer...granted*, her brain couldn't ignore the fact that, *he and I may have that in common*. And that wasn't the only thing they shared, they were still both bound to one another. If they didn't trust each other, then they'd both lose. Through clenched teeth, she conceded, “Deal, come around slow.”

Ben was breathing in faint, weezing whimpers as he did his best not to shift. He was on the tips of his hooves, like a man in a noose trying not to slip off the stool. Despite being in shock, he wasn't one of the lucky ones, his brain was far too clear and he felt every bit of the agony. There was a heavy, constant tugging pain from the wound then there was another type that came in waves and washed over his entire body as if he'd been electrocuted. Neither helped him balance on his hooves and his tail was too busy holding the hilt of the ax to keep it from sliding out of him. When Fetch came around, seeing him for the first time with his real eye, Fetch nearly fainted.

After the initial gag, he made eye contact with Marvell. With the slightest of nods, she signalled he could approach the gmoat. Steeling himself, he met Ben's gaze.

"Am I-"

"You'll be fine." Fetch promised, "I can stop the bleeding and get a healer before..." He cleared his throat and forged a dagger of shadows in his hand, explaining, "I'm going to cut the clothes around the wound."

He worked as fast as he could but that wasn't very fast, he had to spend a lot of his focus keeping from shaking himself. Ben was losing his resolve, his trembling was getting worse. So much so that Marvell actually slapped the ax in her hand back into the harness on her back and stepped in to help by holding steady the ax sticking out of Ben. Once Fetch was able to see the wound, he let the dagger dissolve and cursed.

"We have to pull it out." Marvell guessed.

Fetch nodded, "Not sure why I thought there was a chance we could leave it."

"I'm going to need Pride to defend our camp tonight anyways." Marvell said plainly, "Specially sense I doubt he'll be climbing another kapok anytime soon."

"Alright, just give me a second to think." Fetch said.

Tears were streaming down the gmoat's cheeks. His eyes were wide and glued to Fetch who himself could hardly find it in him to face Ben again. He kept his head down, watching blood seep out the wound. It was about level with his belly button and it very nearly had made it as far over. *Is it all the way through?* Fetch cringed at the thought. *If it is, there's no way...* He wiped the thought from his head, *I can do this!* He got his mind to hunker down and think strictly about what he had to do, like a dog on the trail of a smell, nothing else mattered.

"His stomach... maybe some intestines..." Fetch murmured, having collected himself.

"Forget those, leave those for the healer." Marvell shattered his resolve, shaking her head, "Stop the bleeding, if Pride got one of the big blood vessels..."

"Like veins and arteries?" Fetch asked.

Fetch's query wound up breaking Marvell's false confidence, "Something like that?"

Fetch groaned.

"Fetch." Ben whispered.

Fetch forced himself to look Ben in the face, expecting to hear the young man's last will and testament, but there was a twinkle of hope in that fear stricken stare. Though his jaw quivered, it was set. Clenched and stubborn. Every breath he took sent tremors of pain shooting up and down his body, but he kept breathing.

"Do it." Ben demanded.

With a frown as curved upwards as his brow was furled down, Fetch nodded.

"You got the ax?" Fetch asked.

Ben mouthed the word, "Yes."

"Marvell, hold him so he doesn't fall." Fetch commanded.

Marvell stepped to stand over Fetch. She was nearly two feet taller than Fetch and Ben, this allowed her to lean over the mancer and pin Ben to the tree by his shoulders. Ben winced but keep his torso relatively still, screaming through his grinding teeth. As he lamented the pain of the adjustment against the trunk, Fetch took that as his cue. Without allowing another moment of hesitation to slip in between him and what he had to do, he grabbed Pride and yanked it from his friend's body. Blood spurted for a split second and in that short time Fetch threw the ax to the side then – before that split second could turn over into a full second – he slid his right hand into the wound, pushing the organs back in that so very nearly spilled out.

This time, Ben's roar escaped his grinding jaws. There was no fighting from writhing this time, even with the giant bearn holding him tightly, his entire body convulsed as his cry made every living creature in the vicinity shudder.

Not only did the gmoat have to endure the pain of being stabbed once more, and this time by a far blunter object than the scarlet ax, but Fetch's hand was engulfed in flesh searing shadows. Fetch flexed his dark energy, making sure not to expand the aura too far but instead to intensify it at the edges, rapidly cauterizing everything he touched. Slowly, he removed his hand, continuing to burn Ben's belly as his hand left so that he did not leave an open, blistered wound but a sealed, slab of scar tissue.

When his hand finally left Ben's side, Fetch fell to his knees. Ben had passed out, still pressed to the tree by Marvell's strong grasp. She slowly lowered him to a sitting position, his limp-noodle legs sprawled out in a V so that Fetch could still kneel before him. Huffing and puffing, Fetch reached forward. With a hand, now clean of shadows, he felt for his comrade's pulse. It was there, thumping away...but for how long?

"Donum." Fetch lamented.

"Donum." Marvell agreed.

"His life energy is way less than it was before." Fetch moved his fingers from Ben's neck to his forehead. Again, black energy seaped out from his hand, although this time it wasn't steaming. It slipped from his fingertips through Ben's temple. Fetch held the spell for a minute then doubled over, wincing as if his body were cramping. When he straightened back up, he was out of breath.

"Think he'll hang in there?" Marvell asked.

"I've got no clue." Fetch shrugged, "But I suppose it could've gone worse."

They were quiet for a moment, then Marvell said in a tone lighter than she had used since they'd met, "People can survive incredible things."

Fetch turned to her with a scowl that was far more in character for the bounty hunter, "I should kill you right now – I should tear your body limb for limb – I should-"

Marvell picked up Pride, Ben's blood still thick on the blade. She scoffed, "You barely have enough energy to go after the dwarf."

"No point in saving shadows to fight you if Ben dies in the process." Fetch growled.

"Exactly." Marvell looked at an imaginary watch on her wrist, "And I think you best get moving."

Fetch's hatred for Marvell was suddenly overcome by a new emotion, something similar to humility, as the enraged hostage remembered that he and his comrade were only still alive because the very tall threat with two axes thought that one of them could be of service. Fortunately, this realization struck with another wave of shadow-withdrawal and so he was doubled over when his frown went from anger to oopsie.

He had no way of getting the dwarf, but he did know how to get a healer. Remaining in his fetal position, he watched Marvell out of the corner of his eye. *She doesn't have to know. Won't weigh on my conscious. Who gives a godi tiad about a slave hunter? Not me – especially not after she tried to kill my friend.* A smirk slid across his lips, but that smirk died as the bounty hunter repeated herself.

“Seriously,” Marvell said, “not only is Ben’s clock ticking, but I’m not so sure how well I can defend a wounded gmoat on the floor of the jungle by myself for an entire night. You think you can find that dwarf before Solaris sets?”

Fetch straightened back up, took a deep breath, and got one foot underneath him. With his serious face back on, he turned to Marvell, demanding, “How do I know you won’t abandon him and make yourself another nest up there?”

“Cause without that dwarf, I’m dead.” Marvell snapped, “And I’ll be damned before I let the *Marrialdo* get the satisfaction.” She gestured to the wilderness around them, “Rather give myself up to Mother Nature.” She pointed Pride at Fetch, “You’re lucky I haven’t given up already. I’m the one with no reason to trust you.” She nodded at the comatose dog herder, “I just feel bad for the kid.”

“You and me both.” Fetch sighed. He got his other foot beneath him and stood up, saying, “Make a fire once Solaris goes down.”

“Sure.” Marvell said, “It’ll help keep the beasts at bay.”

“Not too big though – I may have guards after me – but the smell of smoke will help me find you.” Fetch explained.

Marvell gave a fake half laugh, “You really half dog?”

“The better half.” Fetch nodded and then, with a deep breath in and a long sigh out, he turned back to the jungle and dashed off.

“Selu to you.” Marvell muttered as she watched him go, then her gaze fell back to Ben, “and to you...”

Then, capitalizing on the time she had before Ben woke up, she began to stroll the perimeter, spiralling slowly further out from their little clearing as she gathered stones and fallen limbs. Not just for the fire she would eventually need, but for the defenses that would be even more important if Fetch didn’t make it back until twilight. As a Warcourter, she was more than capable of building a fort and she needed to hurry because when Ben woke up he would need all of her attention for physical and emotional support. Marvell knew that despair could kill a soul twice as fast as the wound itself while hope could trick them into persevering – regardless of whether or not the situation deserved any hope at all.

- - -

The opossum snored, each exhale shifting the first couple loose leaf pages on the stack that she dangled over. She slept upside down with her tail wrapped around a beam supporting a shelf that carried even more stacks of pages. On either side of the hanging marsupial were more sheets, towers of them all stacked half-hazardly so that if one was removed then the others would surely collapse. This was the opossum’s greatest fear and, though she was sound asleep, her species had a keen sixth sense for what they feared most.

Her jaw dropped with a hiss as her beady eyes opened. A spectral hand protruded from the wall behind her. It dipped its fingers in a plump jar of goo and then went about flipping through the pages under the opossum’s nose. She snipped at it – a gesture more than a threat –

and the hand responded with similarly symbolic aggression, faux-swatting at the critter's snout. With another defiant hiss, the opossum uncurled her tail and plopped down on the stack. The hand went limp then slipped back through the wall, leaving a layer of goo on the wood where it passed through. A moment later, a full-bodied ghost stepped through – twisting to avoid the gunk on the wall, and striding on past the stack and the opossum. It came to stand in the middle of the room, wading through the papers as if they were water. The body was biologically feminine, as evident by her stark nudity. Fortunately for the chaste opossum, the woman's transparency provided some modesty. She wasn't a ghost, but rather a spirit. A living breathing race of folk on Mystakle Planet, with a jovial purple flame dancing about within her breast.

With a hand on her gaseous hip, the woman rolled her silver eyes at the beast, "Laza."

Laza hissed.

"Laza, I'm running late."

Another hiss.

Another eye roll. This time, when her eyes came to a stop, she closed them and raised one hand letting her fingers slowly rise with them until they pointed at the pissy opossum, then she murmured, "Neme ah Sari, meered luhr arrasha tim ronim taerg kakal."

The pages rustled as a tight ribbon of wind manifested around Laza, lifting her up and onto a separate stack. Though it was hard to notice due to the beediness of them, Laza's eyes grew wide then she fell limp. By the time she was put down, rigormortis had already set in. This was not the first time Laza had appeared to have died from Doc's magic, Doc was so used to it that it didn't even warrant an eye roll. Doc waded back through the stacks of paper to the stack that Laza had been protecting. She dipped her fingers into the jar of goop once more and hurriedly went about looking through the pages on the top of the stack. She hadn't been at it for a minute when there came a knock at the door.

"Farakin..." Doc groaned.

She wiped her hand on the wall then stepped to the side and passed through it. The main room was simple enough: coffee table, L shaped couch, and, ofcourse, just as many stacks of paper as had been in the room she just left. Doc scooped an invisworm silk robe off the sofa – it was just translucent enough that when combined with her translucent nudity, she wouldn't run the risk of making a flesh-and-blooded person blush – slid it on, wrapped it around her, and then stuck her head through the door.

The Captain jumped back, reaching for the shield on his back before stopping himself. Clearing his throat and forcing a smile, he gave Doc a formal bow and asked as he straightened back up, "Setarca Petara, I'm with the Munkloe Guard, may I come in?"

"My friends call me Doc, Captain." Setarca smiled, but she still didn't budge.

His bare feet shifted, creaking the floorboards of her stoop, but he kept his eyes on her's, "Sorry, Doc..." he corrected himself, "We can speak out here if you prefer?"

"What if I prefer not to speak, Captain?" Setarca's head cocked to the side, her hair cascaded down well beneath where her toes would've been. The tips of it tickled the deck, slipping through the wood like smoke. She asked, "What can the Munkloe Guard do?"

"Setar-"

"Doc."

"Doc." The Captain sighed, "You aren't in trouble."

"I know I'm not." She said, "I've done nothing wrong."

"We don't intend to force you to do anything."

"Ofcourse," she scoffed, "I don't see how you could."

“I would just like to ask you a few questions.”

The Captain raised his hands, palms up, pleading. Her silver eyes leered at him but he didn't cower from their gaze. Instead, he watched them in an attempt to discern whether she was being playful or hateful. His estimations were in vain. The Captain was unfamiliar with spirits, Setarca – or Doc, rather – was the only spirit he knew by name and that was about all he knew about her. That and that she could heal and that she had been seen coming and going from the *Marrialdo*. Doc, on the other hand, knew quite a bit about bearns and she knew just about as much about the Captain. One of those factoids about the guardsman was that – at least so folks claimed – he was a good person. *Then again*, she thought, *everyone in this universe-forsaken jungle claims to be a good person.*

Ultimately, she gave in, saying, “Fine. What questions?”

“What is your business with the *Marrialdo*?” The Captain blurted his question so fast that it seemed almost as if he feared Doc would soon change her mind. Even he was a bit embarrassed by it but luckily his fur hid the fact that blood was rushing to fill his cheeks.

Doc snickered, “What do you think?”

“Did they come here to seek your services?” The Captain continued.

“Why does that matter?” Doc asked.

The Captain shifted his weight as he considered what information he could offer. Hoping that his offering might be reciprocated, he decided to divulge a bit, “The criminal we're after, is he associated with the *Marrialdo*?”

“I don't know,” Doc shrugged, though the Captain couldn't see her shoulders behind the closed door, “he's a shadowmancer, right?”

The Captain nodded.

“Then he could be.”

Now it was the Captain who was cocking his head to the side, “Why's that?”

“What's in it for me?” Doc asked, “I snitch on them, I could be in a lot of trouble. Unlike the lovely Munkloe Guard, Sondoran pirates don't mind violence.”

He hesitated, so Doc helped him make his decision. She slipped back into her home, leaving the Captain alone on her doorstep, and waited. She didn't have to wait long before he hollered from the otherside with his offer.

“As it is my duty to protect all the citizens of Munkloe, I must warn you that there is a storm coming.” He stated, speaking plainly as if he were making an announcement over an intercom, “It won't be safe to be on that ship tomorrow evening.”

Doc's head peaked back through the door. She winked at the stern faced bearn then said, “I don't know if your shadowmancer has ties to the *Marrialdo*, but I wouldn't be surprised. After all, I'm healing a necromancer.”

The bearn's eyes grew wide, asking the question before his words could, “A Disciple?”

“Truth.” With a mischievous smirk, Doc disappeared back behind her front door, shouting over her shoulder, “Now get out of here, I'm late for work!”

“Thank you, Set-” he choked on his tongue, hastily correcting himself, “thanks, Doc!”

“Don't mention it!” Then, as she slid off her robe and returned to her search, she whispered to herself with an anxious giggle, “Seriously, for my own good, don't mention it.”

It took her another hour to find all the pages she wanted. Setarca Petara was arguably the best healer beneath Solaris – in the very least she was tied with Headmaster Lenga Ruse – but she had nearly flunked out of Munkloe School of Modern Healing due to her regular tardiness. Whether or not she was the best healer, she was absolutely the most unorganized. It didn't help

that this particular gig was one of the most difficult she'd ever endeavored: reversing the curse of a void-dust enchanted wound. She'd managed to remove the shards of the shattered sword from the necromancer's body the day before, but now she had to remove the curse. Most healers wouldn't have even tried – removing a curse, especially one caused by such a powerful blade, would not be easy – but if magic could create something, then magic could destroy it.

Solaris had reached its peak high above the canopy by the time the spirit set foot on the floorboards of the *Marrialdo*. She'd dawned opaque clothes – much to the relief of the conservative Laza the Opossum – in a hopeless attempt to reduce the jeers of the crew as she made her way below deck – the Sondorans and Vinn, far from home and waiting for their contraband to be returned to them, had been allowed to indulge in other forms of contraband, making them even bigger scum than they had been before. The fact that Doc was a spirit and had no warm flesh to cuddle made no difference to the inebriated pirates, a pretty face was a pretty face. She smirked their advances off easily enough. For they didn't realize that the necromancer she was healing, Truth, was a woman and Doc had a feeling that, once healed, Truth might decide to make a few examples of the men on the *Marrialdo*.

Honestly, thinking of a few pages she had back home and the lexicon of pain inducing vocabulary she had tucked away in her head, *I might teach them a few lessons if she'll let me.*

Truth was being kept in the Captain's office and, as you can guess, the Captain was none too fond of this. However, Truth was either Queen or second-in-command for the Disciples of Darkness – sharing authority with Shalis Skullsummon – and just as the *Marrialdo* served Iceload, Sondor, and Vinnum Tow, they also served the New Pact. If the Captain were to anger the shadowmancers and necromancers by not catering to one of the highest ranking members of their cursed cult, then he would surely lose favor with his other friends and there likely wouldn't be another soul on the planet that would care to come to his defense.

Even if they did, they'd be far too slow – he had missed his chance. That morning – as Doc was being questioned by the Captain of the Munkloe Guard, a guard had arrived on the *Marrialdo* to look after the wounded necromancer and she hadn't left the witch's side since. The guard stood in the corner of the office. She was short but her height was hardly noticeable because one could hardly do more than glance in her direction before they'd be forced to flinch and look away. Her deep chocolate colored eye stared with an energy that could be felt like cold fingers creeping up your spine, the Captain himself privately thanked the universe that her hair was thick enough to cover her right eye for he couldn't imagine the discomfort of meeting her full glare.

Captain Smidt Cormac had a similar effect on people. The sight of him did instill discomfort but it wasn't out of any sort of fear. He wasn't tall or short, fat or skinny, but rather a lumpy fellow. His gut hung out but his chest recessed, his calves engulfed his ankles but his thighs were little more than skin and bones, his neck was as skinny as his wrists and yet his head was the size of a watermelon – there was a good chance it weighed as much too. The supposed leader of the intolerable group of pirates apparently couldn't afford to clean himself and his hair was so laden with grease that it dripped, even when he wasn't sweating (though this was rare, as he sweated incessantly). The man appeared constantly drenched and for this reason it wasn't must that he reaked of but mildew. To top it all off, he couldn't help but constantly click and smack his tongue and lips – as if savoring the last bit of flavor from a long since devoured meal. The man was so repulsive that it almost had to be intentional and yet, he'd captained the *Marrialdo* for years.

When Doc arrived, she made sure to advert her gaze, only giving the man a nod before getting right to work laying out her pages on the coffee table next to the bed of cushions they'd made for Truth on the floor.

"Our savior returns..." Smidt grumbled. He sat with his back parallel to the floor, his chair leaned back as far as possible so that his clown-shoe-length boots could rest on his desk, "Any sign of our slave?"

"Wasn't looking." Doc said coolly.

"How long until I can cast?"

Though Truth had asked the Doc, her beedy eyes were on the Captain. Much the same as it was with the other two, Doc didn't mind not having eye contact with the necromancer. Few – if any – had ever seen Truth without her hood aside from those now in the room. There were three ways Doc saw out of her current situation. First, she could fail and pray Cormac and the guard let her escape. Second, she could succeed and Truth would get up and turn her into – well, spirits don't have bones, so Truth would likely just kill her. Or third, she could succeed and Truth would keep her around. She could make as much gold as Lenga – she could become the Lenga of the world outside the Empire, that meant *more* gold than Lenga. And that was why she was there.

With her pages spread out, Doc walked around to Truth's opposite side, sat down, and looked her over – careful not to pass her eyes over anything but the gash in her gut. The wound was doing well – magic, curse part aside – so the witch's life had been spared, but still it glowed like a sapphire lightningbolt. The energy within it pulsed. The fur around it bristled with each wave of azure shine.

"At least a day." Doc admitted, "I've never excised a curse, but if the scripture I gathered today succeeds, then you'll be free in a little over twenty-four hours."

"If not?" Truth growled.

Doc forced a good hearted smile, "Then it'll be back to the lab again."

"I don't know how long you think I have." Truth snapped. She sat upright. Despite the pain it must've caused her, she didn't flinch. Her lips curled, revealing sharp yellow teeth as she snarled, "You were due here this morning."

If Doc wasn't a spirit, she might've gulped. Instead, the violet flames beating in her breast did a little flip. On the outside, her anxiety was perfectly cloaked. As someone habitually late – experienced in the art of nearly flunking and creating excuses – she was more than capable of keeping it together, especially because not only did she have an excuse this time around but she had something to offer as compensation. After a metaphorical deep breath, she raised her silver eyes to meet Truth's tiny black leers.

"The Munkloe Guard knows you're here."

The slouching Captain perked up so fast that he found himself standing on his desk.

Truth, on the other hand, didn't budge an inch. As her guard left the corner and made her way to stand in front of the office door, Truth clenched her jaw and waited for the elaboration.

"They have mancer hounds," Doc lied, "it wasn't me, I assure you."

"Godi tiad, that is!" The Captain crowed.

"Quiet, Smidt!" Truth spat, then before she could even stop herself, words of the Sacred Tongue began to fly off her tongue. She'd hardly finished the second syllable before the gash in her belly lit up like a lantern in the dark. The entire office went black except for the zig-zag wound. This time, Truth flinched. She flopped back to lie horizontal, her body seizing up as the curse punished her for her lack of self control.

Before she could regain control of her muscles, Doc quickly continued, “The shadowmancer brother of King Catch Eninac is here in Sereibis. The king sent mancer hounds as an apology to help them hunt the kid down. Unfortunately, they didn’t find the boy, they found y’all. I don’t know that they know *you* specifically, Truth, are here, but they know there are mancers on board.”

Still gritting her teeth, she couldn’t yet speak. Captain Smidt could.

“They’re crimson tiad pacifists,” he shrugged, having regained his composure, he plopped back down in his seat, “the hell they gonna do?”

The guard spoke up from the corner, saying only one word and an abbreviation at that, “Antipa.”

Doc nodded, “I was warned. They told me...” she paused, turning back to meet Truth’s eyes as the witch’s tremors finally ended, “not tomorrow, but the next day. They told me to make sure not to be on board the *Marrialdo*.”

“I better have my godi slave back by then.” Smidt muttered.

Truth twisted a bit in her bed of pillows and closed her eyes. After a deep sigh, she said simply, “Then you better hurry.”

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Lemonade light stretched like a tree branch into the room. The window was angled so that the leaf-filtered beam struck the crystal ornament that descended from the ceiling. It had been carved by magic into the shape of a monkey, dangling by its tail and contorted in such a goofy position that it raked the room with lasers of sunshine as it spun slowly around. It was a step up from the baby’s glowing bouquet in the chamber next door and it always made the Princess smile – well, almost always.

It was afternoon and there was still no word. Not from him, not even from the Guard.

He’s fine, she told herself, *he’s escaped the jungle before*.

She’d spent the better part of the night healing and catching up with Papa Bold. Once she finally laid down to sleep, Solaris rose mere moments later. She was more than okay with this. She planned to sleep until Solaris sat back down or, hopefully, until a lemur came swinging in through her open window with some kind of news on the whereabouts of the fugitive. Yet, as noon passed by, she couldn’t keep her eyelids shut any longer. She’d called for a lemur, sent them off, and received them again. The poor primeape delivered the bad news that there was no news. No one knew if Fetch and Ben had survived the night.

After the lemur left, she couldn’t go back to sleep. She lay in bed, plucking the hairs of the missing dog from her comforter. *Missing boyfriend, missing dog*. Lenga shook her head. *Maybe Patches is out there looking after him*.

“Patches?!”

A mass of swirling blackness bound through the open window, hitting the floor and tumbling across the room like an asteroid smashing into the surface of the planet. The furball hit the wall, bounced back, and rolled to its feet – or should I say, “Paws?” The poor pooch was panting profusely, his tongue lolling so far out his maw that it looked like it might fall out of his throat. His fur – already curly and matted – was covered in dust, leaves, and twigs but he hadn’t regained his composure enough yet to shake himself clean. It was most certainly the dog she had adopted, the dog she had named Patches. She had named him this because his left eye never opened. When she had tried to see about healing the poor pupper’s oggler, the dog had recoiled

from her and, in as peaceful a manner as a dog could manage, he had made it clear that, “Thanks, but no thanks.” This is all to say, what shocked her equally as much as the sudden return of the scruffy canine was the fact that his left eye was open wide.

And dark as midnight.

Now it was Lenga’s eyes that were wide open. She had to clasp her hands over her mouth to keep from shouting. Finally, after a couple moments of hyperventilation, she was able to curb her expression down to an exasperated whisper, “*Fetch?*”

The dog had begun to grow, its limbs stretching as its tail shrunk. The fur melted into cloth, discarding the jungle junk that had covered him and replacing the debris with a tight leather tunic and even tighter britches. A long robe formed around his shoulders, unfurling down to his boots and stretching up to covered his head in the shadows of a cowl. As he straightened up to full height, human fingers slipped out of his sleeves. His dusty, callused hands reached up to toss off his hood and reveal the mischievous smirk that had won her attention time and time again.

“Hey baby.” He winked.

Leaping from the bed, she tackled him to the floor. Knocking the breath out of him as she peppered him with kisses. He was still catching his breath when her smooches began to slow and she began to realize.

“Wait a second...” placing both hands on his chest, which did not help him recover from her assault, “were you Patches the entire time?”

Without any oxygen in his lungs, all he could do was mouth the word, “Yes.”

As fast as she had flung herself onto him, she flung herself off.

Gasping for breath, Fetch rolled over onto all fours.

“What the farak?!” She exclaimed before clasping a hand over her mouth, her eyes darting over to the wall that separated her room from the nursery where Papa Bold slept. Again, she reiterated, “Fetch, what the hell?”

“I thought,” he was still panting, “you knew?!”

“If I knew,” she whisper-shouted, “then why would I have called you farakin ‘Patches’?!”

“Not sure why you called me Patches even considering that you didn’t know.” Fetch muttered.

Trembling to avoid real-shouting, Lenga clenched her teeth and spoke through them, “Because. You. Had. One. Eye.”

“So that’d make me ‘Patch’.” Fetch flopped over to sit on his butt and look up at her, “Not ‘Patches’.”

“Fetch.” Lenga snapped.

“Lenga.” Fetch shrugged.

“Explain.” She demanded.

“You know how your dad wants me dead now?” Fetch started.

“Not dead.” Lenga rolled her eyes, “Shadowmancy is illegal. He wants to ship you back to the Dragon Islands.”

“Which is a death sentence.” Fetch nodded as if she had agreed and hurried on before she could protest, “I was working on a plan to reveal myself in such a way that would win his approval so we could be together and, in the meantime, I still wanted to be with you.”

Lenga hesitated. On the surface, this appeared to be a decent answer. Then again, on the surface, Fetch appeared to be a human. When in reality, he was a no good, dirty, two-faced, lying

dog. She needed a little more information before she could buy into the romanticism in his excuse. She asked, "What was your plan?"

"Well..." Fetch cleared his throat, scratched the back of his head, and averted his gaze, "I was going to buy you flowers."

Lenga's face went slack.

"What?" Fetch asked, "Like a bouquet?"

Again, with a locked jaw, she hissed, "*We don't do bouquets in Munkloe, Fetch.*"

"Well...what about potted flowers?"

Lenga sat down on the bed with a sigh, "Either way, I see neither, Fetch."

"Listen, I'm sorry," Fetch finally apologized, "I didn't think it through."

"In your defense," Lenga admitted, "there is nothing you could've done." She looked him in his eyes. One was sweet, warm and brown. The other empty, cold and black. His crooked grin was contagious. As her lips twisted into a smile, she confessed something more, "I do love you, Fetch Eninac."

Fetch got up to his feet with a groan. Not a groan in response to Lenga, but rather to his creaking muscles. He had to stretch a bit before he could hobble over to the Princess. When he did, he clasped her face in his hands and got down on his knees to kiss her.

"I love you too, Lenga Ruse." Pulling back from her, he said, "But I can't ask you to come with me."

"I know. But before you go, if you have time..."

She slipped out from under him, scooting further back onto the bed. Fetch paused for a moment. His good eye glanced out the window, gauging the sunlight. *You don't have time.* His brain said. Unfortunately, blood was quickly rushing away from his brain and in a matter of moments that truth was an after thought. Suddenly, there was nothing more important than crawling up onto that bed with the woman he loved.

- - -

The steady flow of blood had diminished to a thin trickle, coursing through riverbeds of coagulated liquid, gluing his hands to the gooey fur of the hound. The adhesive was unnecessary, Ben wasn't going anywhere. His eyes were trained on those of the dog. It lay on its side at his knees, one chestnut eye staring at the bumpy cavern walls. Ever so often, its eyelids would flutter then droop and Ben would raise his voice.

He'd already been prattling on, incessantly, but when his rant began to fail he had to change gears and remind the pooch, "Stay awake, eyes open, no sleeping!"

A faint whisper escaped the dog's lips. It caused a ripple effect amongst the rest of the pack, gathered around them. The knot in Ben's throat grew – and it was already nearly big enough to choke him – but he kept his voice strong and he did not let his gentle pressure relent.

"You're going to survive." Ben promised, "But you've got to stay awake." He turned to the dog beside him – a shaggy, old feller – saying with a sureness that hid the question in his eyes, "Help is almost here."

The wooly woofers nodded and Ben turned back to the hurt hound.

"The healer will arrive, we'll seal you up, but until then you have to stay awake." Ben continued but the poor guy's eyes began to flutter again, "Wake up – we're saving the plains tiger for you, no one gets a taste until you take the first bite – stay awake."

Suddenly, the dog's head reared up and looked at him. Ben felt a moment of panic, but it left as quick as it came.

This isn't real.

"Ben," the dog said, "you've got to wake up. Stay awake."

He sat up straight. The motion was so abrupt that his head began to spin but he didn't even notice the dizziness as the sharp pain in his gut broke the dam of numbness as extreme agony flooded over him, slamming him back to the ground as all his muscles clenched in a foolhardy attempt to power through.

Marvell, kneeling over him, gently clasped his shoulders.

"Let it hurt. Try and loosen up."

Her words only infuriated him but then again that enervation was quickly overpowered by the excruciating pain. His eyes were clamped shut but light was beginning to fill his vision. He could feel his mind skipping as it tried and failed to "let it hurt". Memories kept sliding across his consciousness, as if his brain was flipping through the channels, but he resisted the urge to dive into any. Somewhere deep inside, he knew Marvell was right. He had to stay present. He had to stay conscious. He couldn't trust his unconscious to fight for his life. It took a few minutes but eventually he regained control. Whether the pain had subsided or he had just gotten used to it, he was finally able to "loosen up". He took a long slow breath and let it out just as gently.

"How long has it been?" He asked.

"Hours." Marvell said, "Figure it is late afternoon."

Opening his eyes, he took in his surroundings. Though he was in the same place where he had been before, not at all far from the tree he'd been nailed to, it looked totally different. Marvell had been hard at work. There was something like a roof over his head. A collection of branches had been stabbed into the ground, their offshooting boughs split and split and split again, reaching up and curving over to be twisted and caught in the twiggy ends of their neighbors. It was all folded over into a dome and lightly covered with leaves. Large leaves leaned against the broader limbs that she'd stabbed into the ground, creating a very thin barrier between them and the jungle.

"It may rain this evening." Marvell explained, "Not only do I have to keep you dry," she nodded towards a pile of sticks that Ben could barely make out from where he lay, flat on his back, "I've got to start a fire later." She sat down beside him, idly observing her handiwork, "Fetch is getting a healer."

"You let him go?" Ben asked.

Marvell nodded.

Ben didn't have to say anymore. For a moment, he regretted the implication in his remark, worrying that Marvell might have thought the same thing. Fortunately, she had already dealt with that thought.

"I'll stay as long as I can." She said, looking back at Ben with a wry smile, "But I'm no fool. I'll be gone before Fetch gets back."

"Where will you go?" Ben asked.

She shrugged, "Not back to the *Marri*, that's for sure."

"Sorry." Ben sighed.

Marvell laughed. The short, burst of a laugh surprised Ben so much he flinched. That didn't help his situation. The flinch escalated. He writhed. His body wanted to curl up into a fetal

position – and it tried – but curling only made things worse. All he could do was flatten out and bear it. Marvell shook her head.

“Yea, Ben, I’m pretty sure that I’m the one that should be apologizing.”

The poor gmoat could hardly hear her half-assed confession. His hands balled into fists, pounding the ground at his side. His hooves dug in with their heels, carving divets in the soft soil. Beneath him, his tail squirmed like a severed worm, the tuft on the end jerked off to the side as if trying to escape the tepee.

“Granted,” she continued, “y’all shouldn’t have ran. We had a deal.”

For the first time since he woke up, emotions began to overpower his agony. Weilding that rage within, he calmed his body and slowly pivoted his head so he could glower at the bearn as he ground his teeth.

She raised her hands in self defense, “I saved your lives last night.”

Again, slowly, he turned his head back to stare out the gaps in their leaf-made ceiling. Marvell took that as acceptance and went about doing whatever task she’d been engaged with before she’d checked on him. It took Ben about as much time as it had to calm his nerves as it did to calm his fury, but finally, he was calm. He existed in a state of absolute discomfort, but he had found the resolve to tolerate it...at least for now.

“I don’t want to die with hate in my heart.” He stated, “I accept your apology.”

“You’re not going to die.” Marvell had returned. She held a water sack in her hand. Her face was contorted with a stern assuredness, furled brow, flared nostrils, and eyes with a spark of fire behind them, “You’re going to drink this.”

A third sensation suddenly captivated Ben: thirst. He hadn’t had anything to drink since they left their treetop campsite and his body had lost quite a bit of liquid since then. She gently put the nossle to his lips, keeping the sack beneath it so she didn’t douse him in the water. Ready, he nodded then she lifted the bladder and let water slowly pour into his mouth. It hit his throat like a crisp beer after a long week, like a downpour on a drought plagued desert, and it provided a brief period of relief that momentarily saved him from everything that was wrong with his current situation. Then, before his thirst was even fully quenched, the pain and anger came right back.

So much for dying without hate in my heart. Ben silently lamented. *Suppose I do have to stay alive.* Despite the very real grudge, planted about as deep in his heart as Marvell’s ax had been in his belly, Ben didn’t want to hate her. After all, if she weren’t there, then he’d probably have fallen prey to the many beasts that were no doubt looming nearby, slobbering for a chance to feast on the helpless herder. *Why is she still here?* As Marvell finished the sack herself, Ben asked, “Are you really leaving before Fetch returns?”

Marvell chuckled, “Do you really think Fetch won’t come back with a means to kill me?”

“Not denying that.” Ben assured her, “But...then...why are you still here?”

Acting as though she had to put the bladder up somewhere, though it very clearly just hung on her belt, Marvell moved out of Ben’s eyesight. This would seem an unwise line of questioning, if Ben wasn’t sure that Marvell had already thought it through. She had to have a reason. And while it would be convenient for her to just be congenial person, someone that couldn’t bare to abandon a stranger in their time of need, she had also just attempted to cleave him in two so he had a feeling that wasn’t the case.

“Fetch may not be back for hours for all we know. If you leave after the sun sets, wandering through the jungle alone and unprepared for the night...”

Marvell was quiet for a moment. A long moment. A moment long enough that Ben got a little nervous that she might've not actually thought this through but now that he'd prompted her she'd slipped out of the lean-to and bounced. He thought he could hear her lips moving. As if she was opening her mouth to speak then changing her mind, closing her mouth again, and thinking. When she finally answered, she answered with a question.

"Why did y'all run?"

Now it was Ben who fell quiet. What was he supposed to say? "*We don't support slavery.*" Then again, that was Ben's truth. Fetch's truth may have been more along the lines of, "*Shadowmancers can't track dried blood.*" Either way, it didn't really matter because, fortunately, Ben's pause was inconspicuous. Considering the fact that his abdomen had been recently saudered back together, speechlessness was not abnormal.

"I'm tracking a dwarf." She continued, "Considering the fact that 99.99% of dwarves are enslaved in Vinnum Tow, y'all figured I was tracking an escaped slave. Neither of y'all were down for that so – whatever the cost – y'all bolted, yea?"

"Yea." Ben stated.

"Well, that's why I'm still here." Marvell answered. She scooted back into view, frowning down at him with her eyes while she smiled awkwardly with her bear-like snout, "Listen, Ben. I'm a bounty hunter, not some faraking libertarian. I'm not in it for profits. I'm not trying to get rich. I'm just trying to keep a roof over my head." Looking up at the leafy ceiling above them, she chuckled a bit. She seemed to be as uncomfortable divulging this information as Ben was with the internal bleeding that was slowly killing him. She continued, "What good is a roof when you can't sleep at night? And I can stomach a lot of violence – I've got no problem taking a check to chop crimpsin tiad rapists and killers in half, that's the tiad that gives me good dreams! – but when it comes to hurting good people..."

Ben tried to inject a good-hearted laugh but it hurt too much before he even got started so it came out as more of a croak, "Thanks."

"Wasn't talking about you." Marvell snapped, "That dwarf, he isn't just any dwarf. He's faraking *Boldarian the Fourth*. Do you know who that is?" Marvell asked.

His jab had cost him a brief spike in pain. He couldn't respond with a "yes" or "no" if he tried. Fortunately, Marvell took his silent writhing to be a negative which would've been his answer anyways.

"He's the dwarves' best bet of ever being free, that's who." Marvell explained, "And trust me, they aren't paying me enough to set an entire race's fight for freedom back another hundred years." She shook her head, "The two goons they sent me with got themselves killed and then I run into you guys." She laughed at herself, "And I'm just now realizing that you guys may give me a chance to get out of this."

Ben clamped his eyes shut and swallowed his spit, pushing the pain down for just long enough to respond, "Wish you'd realized that before you chopped me in half."

"Same." Marvell acknowledged, "Donum luck, huh?"

For a moment, Ben's vision began to bleach. *Stay awake*, he told himself, *stay awake*. He focused on Marvell's voice for distraction, forcing his eyes back open. Marvell's head was directly over his, staring down at him intently.

"We're going to get you healed and then we're going to sneak onto the *Marrialdo* and get you guys out of Munkloe."

Ben frowned. He was still in too much pain to comment but his expression was enough to tell Marvell what he was thinking. She herself knew her plan sounded a little lofty.

“There are dwarves on board.” Marvell elaborated, “At least a dozen. That’s our backup. They’ve got them chained up to enertombs, manually charging those things. They’re our escape plan. If you crack one of those open,” she raised her eyebrows, enunciating so as to not have to yell to emphasize, “Boom!”

Ben’s frown lessened. The plan still seemed lofty, but somewhat possible. The problem now became trusting the bounty hunter and the bounty hunter had a similar problem. She had more than enough reason to believe that when Fetch returned, he’d return to kill her. However, her offer: an escape from Munkloe combined with the fact that this plan entailed liberating more dwarven souls – something that might redeem her for having agreed to hunt down one-such-a-soul in the first place – might be enough to curb the shadowmancer’s rage. It was as lofty a gamble as was the plan itself, but she didn’t see many other bets she could make. She’d rather bet on the boys’ forgiveness than on the mercy of the jungle – Solaris would soon be setting.

She got to her feet.

“Whether or not y’all’re down,” Marvell sighed, “I’ve got to keep you alive until Fetch gets back. Can I leave you for fifteen,” she slapped the shriveled water sack on her belt, “I need to fill up before dark.”

Ben nodded. Stooping, Marvell lumbered over to slip out between the broad leaf flaps but stopped halfway out when she heard Ben try and speak.

“You okay?”

He nodded again, his jaw jutting out as he forced the words, “You keep me safe until he gets back...I’ll trust you.”

Marvell grinned, “And what about your dog?”

Despite his pain, Ben managed to reciprocate the smile, “Just tell him it was meant to be.”

She giggled at that, “Fate, right?” Then she left for the creek, commenting to herself as she walked away, “Hope that boy isn’t faraking around up there.”

- - -

Solaris had not yet set, but the curtain of the canopy had already begun to close over her. The rolling hills of foliage had become a black amorphous blob split only by that last blade of sunlight that thrust forth from where the Solaris smashed into the horizon. The sun was the hilt of the sword that stabbed the evening jungle, above which cascading colors of auburn and crimson gathered beneath encroaching storm clouds.

King Signan Ruse reached out, raising his hand to eye level and curling his fingers around the descending sun as if he might lift the sword of light and wield it like a real blade. Then he watched as Solaris continued to slip down below the treeline. Though the sunset had not turned into a sword, he did have a sword in his left hand. No one had ever seen the King with a sword. Few had ever seen any Munkloen with a sword – those who had, reported such and the swordsman was deported to God’s Island to be rehabilitated. There were no sword rights in the state, not since Signan became King, and yet there he was, basking in the bashful light of the setting sun on his balcony, breaking his own ban.

“Your maj-” there was a choke, a cough, and then a voice-cracking yelp, “*Your majesty?!?*”

Signan didn’t turn around. He didn’t want the Captain to see the smirk on his face.

“I got your lemur.” The King said.

The Captain dragged his eyes away from the sword. Thoughts were racing through his mind at a million miles a second. *Why does he have a sword? Is he going to kill himself? Why does he have a sword? Is he going to kill me? Why does he have a sword?!* The Captain thought he knew the King well, but never before had he seen the silver-haired oldman brandish a weapon. He nervously looked over his shoulder, back to the King's chamber, to make sure that no guards had come through behind him.

"A shadowmancer is romping through our jungles and the Disciples of the New Black Crown Pact are partying in our harbor." He shook his head, "The Empire mocks our nonviolence and refuses to protect us, allowing those outside the Empire have their way with us." He turned to face the Captain, "Pacifism was good while it lasted, but I'm afraid if we suffer it any longer then we will pay in blood."

If the sword hadn't been enough to dry the poor Captain's throat and shrivel his tongue, then the King's words came at him to finish the job. From his position, on one knee, he simply stared up at the white eyes of his Lord and waited. His Lord seemed still to be thinking. Staring down at him but blind, so truly looking past him and musing. Meanwhile, the evening chorus began to rise behind them. Howler monkeys chanted, night owls hooted, and the white noise of chirping insects began to fill the air like the band at a pep rally intensifying an announcer's pause until finally:

"What is your name?"

The question nearly bowled the Captain over. None, in the Munkloe Guard, had names. Once you donned the chainmail, you left your name at home. Even if you knew the comrade next to you – If you grew up together since gradeschool – you did not share one another's names. When you got home at night and went out for fruit beer, you did not talk about your jobs. You worked for the Tabernacle and there was nothing to talk about that. If the Guard had names, then they'd have personalities. If they had personalities, then they'd have relationships. If they had relationships, then they would have relationships with their King and their King might then have mercy on them when they stepped outside the law – when they utilized violence to do their jobs – and that would go against the mandate set in place on King Signan's first day, over one hundred years ago. Munkloe was militantly nonviolent and laws were meticulously followed. The more power you wielded, the more precisely you were expected to follow said laws. And yet now, here before him, was a King that he should arrest, a criminal – a criminal with a sword.

"What's your name, Captain?" The King demanded.

"My Lord, if I tell you my name, I must resign." The Captain responded.

"If your name could save Munkloen lives, then would resign?" The King asked.

The Captain didn't hesitate, "Absolutely."

Signan Ruse took the sword in his hand and held it by its blade in his hands, extending it to the Captain so that he could examine it as if it were a piece of jewelry and the King a jeweler. It was an impressive blade. It appeared old. The metal was blotchy and speckled with darkness, though it didn't appear to have been harmed in its aging. It was oiled and undented or chipped. The hilt was like that of a saber's, with a hand guard, though much larger for the blade was long and wide enough at the end that it looked like it might require two hands to hold. As the blade widened at the end, it suddenly stopped at the tip. There were four divets, two small parallel indentions and then the other two just above them that narrowed the point of the sword into a spearhead like tip.

“This is the sword of Ben Dreb.” King Signan Ruse explained, “He was one of the leaders of the Rationals in the Munkloen Civil War, he defended our jungles from the Bishopry. You know of the Battle of Drathernan?”

The Captain took a deep breath. He could tell where this was going and he wasn't sure whether or not he approved, but he was a loyal servant of the state and so he entertained the King. He answered, “The Rationals and the Mystakle Christians were cornered by the extremist Thorans and Delians in Drathernan – the extremists being puppets of the invaders from Iceload – and they knew they were bound to lose. The leaders of the movement made a deal with the invaders, surrendering themselves so that their people – both their soldiers and their civilians – would be spared and the war would be over.”

Signan nodded, “The Bishopry took their leaders and slaughtered them. Then what happened to their people?”

Bowing his head, the Captain said, “They were slaughtered too.”

“You know, before Ben Dreb surrendered, he broke this sword.” Signan said, noting the tip of the blade, “Condemning violence, endorsing peace – praying that his sacrifice might make life better for those he left behind. Ben Dreb survived his execution, he escaped, and reclaimed this weapon. He sharpened the broken edges and reclaimed the sword. Do you know what people said he thought about pacifism before he died?”

This the Captain did not know. The legend told of Ben surviving, but he had not heard of Ben's sword, he'd only heard of Ben's song. The myth of his ballad, written about the Battle of Drathernan, was the story of modern Munkloe – in fact, it was their national anthem. But it said nothing of the man's personal opinions. Although, to be honest, the Captain could hardly remember the words.

“Peace in the face of conflict is violence.” The King turned the blade so that the hilt stopped a mere inch from the Captain's chest, “Captain, there is a conflict. The people of Munkloe must be protected. What will you do?”

The Captain turned his head up to acknowledge the King as he took the sword.

“My name is Thomas Hobbes.”

“A storm is coming tomorrow, Thomas, are you ready?”

“Yes, Lord Ruse.”

- - -

He woke up with a start, but no sooner did he sit up and look around than did he realize he had no clue what it was that had woken him in the first place. He squinted as he scanned the stuffed animals and miniature war machines that surrounded his crib, as if some witch or wizard might've disguised themselves as a children's toy in an attempt to sneak up on him. There was one critter in particular that rubbed him the wrong way. It had the rainbow beak of a toucan but with a hook on the end like an eagle. Broadchested like a rooster, it had webbed feet like a duck.

“Oi gotchya ya farakin-” Bold bound out of bed, tackling the preposterous parrot and tearing its head from its body. Foam and fluff went everywhere. Now, as Bold looked around, he looked not to be sure that there were no threats but to be sure there were no witnesses, muttering, “Thot was embarrassin...”

Then he heard it again. *The noise!* He jumped back to his feet. There was no need to scan the room this time, he knew exactly where it was coming from. The room next door – Lenga's room. Despite being a nigh half ton of bone and muscle, he was still as quick and quiet as a

mouse as he dashed over to the wall that separated their two chambers. He pressed his head against the wall and held his breath.

The noise hadn't stopped since he it had started back up. *Uh scaem!* The lamentations continued, muffled but growing in sequential bursts to be lower and lower as if whatever woe they were in response to was becoming more and more immediately important. *Lil Lenga's in danjar!*

Boldarian hopped back from the wall, then charged it. Like the ridgebacks stampeding the jungle floor, obliterating anything in their path, Bold lowered his shoulder and barreled through the wall. Wood splinters exploded with his entrance as he skidded to a halt on his heels.

There was the intruder, smothering the poor, innocent Princess-
Weht, whot?

The intruder wasn't smothering the Princess. In fact, the Princess had been on top of the intruder. When Bold burst through like a crime-fighting Koolaid man, the two separated as fast as two positive poles of a magnet. Lenga tumbled over onto her back, on the side of the bed furthest from the dwarf, taking the blankets with her to wrap herself up like a burrito. The "intruder" on the other hand, lurched to their feet and charged towards Boldarian. The befuddled dwarf was still struggling to comprehend the scene he had just barged into as the strange figure descended upon him. Striding forward, delivered a stone-shattering uppercut directly into the person's face.

"FETCH!"

Fetch flopped back onto the bed. Lenga dare not unravel, but she inch-wormed over to her unconscious lover.

"Oh lard," Bold bowed his head, pinching the bridge of his nose as he realized, "ya parvarts! Oi'm roight next dar, lassie! Couldn'ta kept it down at laest?"

Snaking an arm out of her cocoon to grab a pillow that she then used to cover Fetch's still quite upright fifth-appendage, Lenga muttered, "I tried..."

Turning his back on the couple, Bold gagged so hard he fell to one knee. Clenching his stomach to keep from wrenching, he straighted back up but made sure to keep facing the hole through which he'd come and not the two on the bed.

"Guess ya got uh good one, then, huh?"

"What's left of him." Lenga said, cooing into his ears, "Wake up, Fetch."

Fetch's brow furled and he returned to reality with an explosive moan. Vision still eluded him and his brain felt as though it was still in the process of being pummeled, but Fetch had endured enough hangovers to be capable of powering through even the worst of all headaches.

Keeping his eyes clenched shut, he groaned, "What the hell was that?"

"That was Papa Bold." Lenga smiled down at him, "I'm glad you both get to meet before we leave."

"LEAVE?!" Bold and Fetch explained.

As the shadowmancer jerked upright – much to the chagrin of his head – Boldarian whirled around, both men equally alarmed.

Bold took a step forward, demanding, "Whar are ya tehkin her, son?"

Fetch would've flinched at the sight of his assailant drawing nearer but he'd turned to Lenga to demand an answer for himself, "You're leaving with me?"

Lenga averted her gaze towards the crystal chandelier, her jaw jutting out as she answered both men, "I decided to leave with Fetch."

Maintaining his glare on the shadowmancer, Bold grunted, "Oi'm coming with ya."

“Hold on,” Fetch finally turned from Lenga to meet Bold’s leer, “you’re a dwarf.”

“And yar uh shadowslingar.” Bold growled.

“They’re looking for you!” Fetch exclaimed. His excitement momentarily led him to forget about the resounding excrutiation still pounding against the inside of his skull – it almost nearly led him to forget about the pillow covering his groin as he bound out of bed with a moment of eureka, “I’m looking for you!”

His joy was quickly dashed as that realization led to a wave of memories that he had conveniently pushed aside when he’d slid into bed beside Lenga. His face went pale and he staggered back to sit on the side of the bed, “Donum.”

“Whot is it, lad?”

“What, Fetch?”

“Ben.” Fetch stated, looking from Bold to Lenga, “We’ve got to go, fast.”

Maintaining the bundle of blankets around her, Lenga wiggled until she could sit up next to him, “What’s wrong?”

“He’s hurt. *Bad.*” Fetch explained, his eyes once again meeting Bold’s, “A bounty hunter saved us from a ridgeback stampede, but then demanded we help her hunt you down. When we refused...”

“Tow.” Bold frowned, looking down at his feet, “Lil Benjai...”

“She sent me to get you and a healer, saying she’d let me get Ben fixed up if I brought you back, but I wasn’t going to get you. I was going to come here, say bye to Lenga, find a healer at the school, then go back with enough shadows to kill-”

“Fetch!” Lenga gasped.

“She tried to kill Ben!” Fetch exclaimed, bowing his head as he admitted, “May have killed him by now.” He looked back up to Bold, “If you both come with me, then we can overpower her and save Ben.”

“The jungle is too danjarous at noight!” Bold said.

Fetch agreed, “Yea and for that reason, I’d rather her stay, but I suppose she’s going to come with us whether we like it or not.”

Lenga nodded.

Bold frowned, “Lil Lenga, you trust this lad?”

“I do, Papa Bold.” She promised.

The old dwarf grunted, “A bountay huntar, huh?”

“A bearn woman with two axes – an ex-Warcourter.” Fetch said, “She won’t die easy.”

“We aren’t going to kill her.” Lenga stated, jabbing Fetch in the ribs as she turned from him to the dwarf, “We’re going to ‘overpower’ her, save Ben, and send her back to wherever she came from.”

Fetch and Bold’s eyes were locked. They didn’t nod, neither so much as budged, but they stared into each other’s eyes for long enough to be sure of what the other was thinking. It was something along the lines of: *We’ll do what we have to do so that she, the bounty hunter, doesn’t stop us from doing what we have to do.* They glanced over at Lenga and then back to one another, again, tacitly vowing together, *No matter what, nothing will happen to Lenga.*

“Y’all naed to get dressed.” Bold stated, finally looking away. He went ahead and began marching back towards the nursery, “Oi’ll gathar moy thangs.”

“Do you feel up to climbing?” Lenga called after him.

Bold nodded, “Oi’m foine. It’s yar boy you should bae worried about.”

Fetch laughed but was caught off as he cringed. Clutching his head as he winced, he smiled back at Lenga, "I'll be fine. We don't have much of a choice."

He wasn't wrong. As if nightfall over the rainforest wasn't bad enough, thunder was rumbling in the distance. A storm was surely coming. The jungle floor was destined to be a dark, dark place. If they didn't hit the jungle floor soon, then Fetch's plan – to follow the smell of smoke – might wash away with the downpour. Would the weather hold off until morning? Fetch wasn't even sure if they'd be able to find Marvell and Ben before morning.

The lovers got dressed and Bold returned from the hole in the wall. Most of the rooms in the Tabernacle had massive coils of thick, climbing rope as fire precautions. Even the nursery had a set of two in a chest. Beneath most of the windows were cleats, mounted below the sill like you might find them mounted on a pier for boats to tie off to. They fastened one rope to Lenga's window, then another one to Bold's. The couple claimed they wanted two ropes so that they could descend faster, but in reality they were simply afraid that the half-ton mass of dwarven muscle might be a little heavy for them to all three to share one rope. Fetch and Bold led the way, Lenga climbing down after Fetch.

As the three moons that circled Mystakle Planet peeked over the unfurling clouds, attempting to spot the three between the branches of the Munkloen canopy, the trio prayed separate prayers to the heavens. Fetch prayed that Ben would hang in there until they arrived. Lenga prayed that there would be no more violence that night. And Bold prayed that the two star-crossed lovers weren't further entangling themselves but rather untying the knots that complicated their affair.

One such knot was only getting tighter. The Captain – or soon to be, ex-Captain, Thomas Hobbes – had been pacing the more private halls of the Tabernacle. Ben Dreb's sword, hidden in a sleek rectangular case, bounced against his side as he wandered the corridors. He needed to get back to work, hunting down the shadowmancer, but all he could think about was his conversation with the King and what his majesty had asked him to do tomorrow.

A gap in the overcast skies let a single ray of moonlight cut through the canopy, slip through a window, and strike a door just before him. As if the silver light were a solid beam, Hobbes came to a stop. As the clouds shifted, the light did too. It slid down the door. Wind whistled by from within the room and a tiny, black hair was blown out from under the gap between the door and floor. For whatever reason, the hair struck him as curious. Distracting him, for the first time in hours, from his bruding. The Captain knelt and picked up the hair, holding it up to his eyes and inspecting it.

"Fur?" He whispered, sniffing it, "Dog fur?"

He turned to look at the room. It was the Princess' room.

"She must've found Patches..."

He jumped back to his feet and pounded on the door, "Princess! Headmaster! This is the Captain of the Munkloe Guard, may I come in?"

There was no response. Thomas cursed. He stepped away from the door, leaned back, and delivered a barefoot kick justed beside the door knob. The door flew open and he rushed in.

The room was empty. The window was open. He rushed to the window and peered over. A rope was tethered to the cleat. Cursing again, he made a quick scan of the room – the scan stopped abruptly at the sight of the giant gaping hole in the wall. The nursery was empty too. Another curse. Returning to the bedroom, he went to the bed and there he found what he was afraid he would find. Not just one of them, but dozens if not hundreds. The entire bed was covered in fur.

Hobbes had found his distraction. As thunder boomed in the distance, he rushed to find a letterlemur. His troops had been kept from the jungle floor the previous night, but this was their last night to catch the shadowmancer and now it seemed clear. The mancer was in cahoots with the slavers, not only was their asylum seeking freedom fighter in danger but so too was their Princess. Though the Captain had been unsure of his stance before, he now had no question. As he ran through the palace, his grip tightened on the sword case at his side.

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The fire did not help keep the beasts at bay. It burned in the center of the tent Marvell had fashioned, the column of smoke being sucked up the orifice at the top of the tepee like it was an inhaling nostril. She'd pulled back some of the larger leaf flaps that operated as canvas walls around them so that she could keep her eyes on the shadows that lingered just beyond the light of their campfire. There were the normal noises in the darkness – the calls of nocturnal creatures – but in betweenst them she could hear sounds that raised suspicion. They were typically hidden beneath the howling of primeapes and the humming of insects, but ever so often the transgressors would slip up and she could hear them clearly. A snapping twig, a crunching leaf, a gentle pur between compatriots.

“Panthers.” She stated.

Ben perked up, “Panthers?”

Turning to her patient, she nodded. She didn't say what the sight of him made her think: *Panthers should be the least of your worries.* He didn't look good. He was shivering, despite being coated in a layer of thick sweat. His face, which had once been nicely tanned by Solaris' glare on the Marble Plains, was as white as the three moons far above. *Then again,* she realized, *you stopped looking good hours ago and yet here you are, still kicking.*

“Hang in there, Ben,” Marvell scurried over to the edge of the lean-to before pausing, “Are you religious?”

“Not really.” Ben whispered.

“Trust in the Guardians?” Marvell asked.

“I pray to them like I do, but,” Ben attempted a scoff but it came out as more of a wheeze, “not really.”

Marvell nodded in agreement, “Well, just wish Selu to me, then, cause if I don't come back...”

Ben groaned. The pain was honestly easier than it had been since she had first cleaved him halfway in half, now it was more of a nausea and a brutal numbness in his gut that seemed somehow responsible for the pounding bolder of throbbing in his skull. Despite the respite from agony, the discomfort was as extreme as ever.

“Donum.” Marvell grunted, “Selu to you, too.”

Crawling out from the tent and dragging her axes with her, her hazel glare spotted a pair of glowing eyes, twinkling like stars, from the shadows. Then they were gone. Her guests were no longer attempting to be discreet and she wasn't sure whether that was a good sign or not.

The battleground was set and she had homefield advantage. She'd fashioned a hasty wall of pikes around the perimeter of the clearing. The spears were little more than branches snapped in half, a full grown horned panther would burst through them as if they were nothing more than twigs, but they weren't there to impale the pouncing felines. They were there to funnel them. The cats would avoid her walls and attack through the opening she had made.

With Pride and Joy in her hands, she waited for them.

“Here kitty, kitty, kit-”

It came from the darkness as if it were the darkness itself. Its fur was such a perfect shade of black that it was nearly darker than the shadows, only its wide yellow eyes gave it away in time for Marvell to prepare. The beast’s paws were outstretched, claws the size of the curved edges of her axes, its ears back, and its lips curled to reveal the fangs that made its claws look like daggers compared to the swords that lined its maw. Even bigger than the teeth were the massive, obsidian horns that curved out from the feline’s furled brow.

Marvell felt the roar in her chest, but she didn’t step back. She stepped forward. Pride came first. She pivoted so that her left shoulder faced the pouncing lion. As she moved she raised the ax, bringing it over her head and down directly into the face of the monster – its entire mouth fit around the blade and, as the poor beast was unable to stop mid leap, Pride cleaved its mouth in two and drove it head first into the ground. If Pride hadn’t been enough, then Joy would’ve been. Marvell released the red ax and spun around to bring Joy’s black blade down on the cougar’s head – striking between the horns and splitting the skull like it were a pumpkin. A defiant spray of blood struck the bearn, but the cat was done.

Lifting Joy, the blade still firmly wedged in the head of the panther, she was able to pull Pride free from the monster’s mouth. Then, yanking Joy out and receiving another spurt of crimson war paint, she twirled around and hopped back towards the tent.

“Who’s next?”

The jungle was quiet. The night sounds that had become like white noise had been replaced with a deafening silence. Marvell took another backwards step towards the tent as her head jerked from side to side, squinting into the black.

She shivered. A breeze hadn’t passed through, but the temperature had dropped. She cursed under her breath. New lights appeared beyond the treeline. They weren’t massive and yellow like the cats’, but they did glow. They glowed red. They weren’t circular either, they were diamond shaped. Dancing about but not in pairs of two – *Are they even eyes?* They looked like energized enertombs ready to spout fire magic like the gem on the elgroon strapped to Ben’s backpack.

Speaking of Ben, he’d gotten up. When he spoke behind her, Marvell nearly had a heart attack. She whirled halfway around, ready to chop him again, before managing to stop herself as her brain registered who it was. Still, the speed at which she turned was demonstrated when the blood still dripping off her axes splattered Ben in the face.

“Hisses.” Ben croaked, “Don’t move.”

“Ben,” Marvell whispered, “lay back down.”

He shook his head as he staggered forward. The poor gmoat would’ve tumbled to the ground had Marvell not hopped closer so that he could catch her arm and lean on her.

“I know hisses.” Ben continued, his head bobbling on his spine like a baby struggling to bear their brain’s dead weight, “You gotta look em.”

“What are you talking about?”

Marvell turned back to check the progress of the hovering diamonds. There were more of them. They danced just outside of the light like fireflies, seeming to blink as they passed behind tree trunks and shrubbery. A wisp extended out into the light. It was gray, like smoke, but it wasn’t smokey. It reminded Marvell of a spirit, translucent and gaseous, but also maintaining a shape like a solid and as it journeyed further into the light. It was a hand! Gnarled and curled like

the talons of a giant bird of prey and disconnected from the body that followed it into the clearing.

“Farak me.” Marvell gasped.

“No.” Ben’s voice – despite his near-death deliriousness – was solid as a rock. There was a deepness that Marvell did not expect from the gmoat. He released her arm and stepped towards her makeshift-wall, standing between Marvell and the ghastly apparition. He was unable to stand straight, but even in his crooked posture he did not seem afraid, “Don’t show them fear.”

Marvell gulped but then choked as she tried to stop herself midway. The creature was now fully out in the open. The scarlet luminosity was not in fact the eyes – or well, it didn’t appear to be because it was not located where one would expect the eyes to be but rather smack-dab in the center of the ghoul’s head. There were no eyes, just empty ghostly, grayness. Descending down from the slope of its brow was a long toothy snout, like that of a dragon or crocodile. The fiend was slowly hovering towards them, others of its kind now leaving the darkness followed suit, and Marvell repressed another gasp as a wave of chills made her fur stand on end. The things were little more than heads, floating reptilian ghost-heads with disconnected claws clenching and unclenching with anticipation.

“They are drawn to my family.” Ben murmured.

“Some kind of curse?” Marvell asked.

“I was adopted.” Ben grunted.

“Then lucky you.” Marvell muttered.

Staggering a bit further, he grabbed hold of the edge of the pike-line that Marvell had made to defend their little campsite. One of the hisses was now right before him, less than a yard, levitating up to eye level, but it didn’t stop. It continued to rise and pass through him, keeping only the jewel implanted in its noggin above so that it drifted between his horns over the tufts of his short, sloppy hair.

“They protect us.”

Marvell held her ground but her eyes shifted quickly from the disembodied alligator to the back of the gmoat’s head – a gmoat that she had nearly killed and that may still yet die who was now telling her to just let the thing float around her. *“They protect us.” Am I included in that? Her eyes fell to Ben’s blood stained hip. Or am I something they need to protect you from?* Then again, if they sought to kill her, there wasn’t much a chance she’d survive if she fought them back. They had scared off the panthers. In fact, upon their arrival, the entire jungle seemed to hold its breath. Now dozens of the creatures were floating towards her, like a fog sweeping across the rain forest floor. *He needs me, she told herself, he wouldn’t sell me out to these fiends.*

She rolled her shoulders and kept her eyes open. Bobbing in the air, they converged around her. One of their ruby crystals brushed her cheek. It was hot and sharp, slicing through her fur like a razor, before pulling away. She couldn’t even make out their shapes as so many were passing through her and one another, but the longer it went on the less disturbed she became.

“Are they...magic?” She asked Ben.

He had turned around, still using the spear to support his weight. He shrugged as much as he could, explaining, “My mother used to say that they were animals that’ve been lost to the Well of Youth.”

Leaning forward, he started to stagger back towards her and the tent. As if taking his movement as a cue, the creatures began to depart. They drifted away from Marvell without

looking back. Their ghastly snouts all pointed towards the darkness. After they'd cleared the pike-fence, Marvell strode forward to help Ben hobble back into the tent.

"I thought you weren't religious." She stated, "You believe in the Well of Youth?"

Ben tried to shrug again but his body could hardly manage to walk let alone emote.

"We'll be safe now." He said as she helped him lay back down by the fire, "Selu, yea?"

Marvell smiled. She turned to watch the red lights dance on the periphery. Nodding she giggled a bit to herself, "Farakin selu indeed."

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"One thing I hate about turning into a human after being a dog," Fetch paused, shaking as well as a human could before giving up to pout, "I get all these loose dog hairs all over me."

While his wiggle had been unsuccessful compared to the sort of shakes he could pull off on all fours, the motion had still expunged a cloud of shedded fur. One that elicited a sneeze and a glare from the dwarf beside him.

"That's what that was," Lenga wrinkled her nose as she plucked a hair off her tongue and flicked it to add to the hairs slowly raining down to the jungle floor.

Bold gagged at the thought of his Lil Lenga and her less-than reputable lover but quickly switched gears back to the matter at hand, giving the shadowmancer a gentle nudge in the back.

"No toime to lollaigog, laddae, kaep on."

Craining his neck and tilting his chin towards the canopy, Fetch's nostrils flared.

"You really can smell like a dog?" Lenga murmured, enthralled.

"Smell loike a dog to mae." Bold muttered.

Ignoring the dwarf, Fetch smirked at the Princess. He rolled his shoulders and stretched his neck until it popped, "Even amongst dogs, I've gotta hell of a nose--"

"Dogs con haer too, con't they?" Bold interjected, pointing above them, "Haer that?"

Now, as Fetch turned his head to the heavens, so too did Lenga. Holding their breathes, they listened. Shouting. That was the first thing they heard, but then they focused further and heard the faint sounds of folks clamoring across the rope bridges accompanied by the jingle of chainmail.

"They're onto us." Lenga gulped.

"Aye." Bold nodded.

"It isn't them we need to worry about." Fetch warned, he pointed back the way they came, "There's Guards down here too."

"On the jungle floor?!" Lenga exclaimed.

Fetch nodded.

"My father would never..." Lenga's words faded as her frown grew.

"Aithar way, kids, wae've got ta move." Bold stated.

"Aye." Fetch concurred, reflexively lathering on a thick faux-dwarven accent. The sudden realization that he mimed his new, hard-fisted friend spurred him on to the task at hand. Rushing forwards before he could catch another punch, he beckoned his companions to follow, "This way!"

The rainforest was dark, very little moonlight made it through the unfurling clouds and even less found its way through the vast web of leaves and limbs that held Sereibis above. Still, there was light. Fireflies flickered on and off as they frolicked between the phosphorescent fungi that furred the fat foremasts of the kapoks. Itty-bitty brooks bent around the broad boughs,

hooking left and right like jagged lightning bolts, reflecting the blinking bugs and the bright bracket polypores. The neon lights splattered as the gang romped through and, as the fireflies dove for cover in their wake, they left behind them a trail of darkness.

But it was all bright to Fetch. With his crow eye opened wide, it was like running through the Milky Way. Entire galaxies of lifeforms surrounded them, carpeting the floor, twinkling in the air, and spiraling up the gargantuan tree trunks. Yet, despite his heightened senses, he was the first to nearly fall prey to the beasts of the night. It was Lenga – stumbling half blind behind him – that sensed something was wrong. Fetch may have had an advantage with sight, smell, and hearing, but Lenga was a native, she had a feel for the forest.

To an alien, the way the fireflies bounced about seemed random but to an indigenous soul there was a chaotic synchronicity to it. The constant scraping of the cicadas rose and fell like the sea crashing upon a beach and, like a beach, someone from the inland might not understand why some waves hit the shore bigger than others, but someone from the coast – while they may not be able to explain it – they could sense what the next tide would bring. The wind whistled as it coursed between the kapoks and ruffled the underbrush, whispering warnings in Lenga’s pointed, elven ears.

She stopped abruptly. Bold would’ve ran her over had she not turned sideways to let him pass. He began to skid to a halt but before he could Lenga tackled him to the ground. They’d hardly hit the damp jungle floor before she jerked her head up to watch her lover with wide purple eyes.

“FETCH!”

As Fetch spun around, his crow eye spun even faster. Fortunately, Fetch wasn’t the brightest light in the sky and so his cursed eye was able to see around the glow of his brain and spot the brilliant mass rocketing towards him. He jerked his own legs out from under him and flopped onto his back to let the yet-unidentified-threat soar over him.

“GET UP!”

His upside down dive had launched him between the last two trees before a clearing. Clearings weren’t common in Munkloe rain forests, in fact, they were nigh nonexistent. This one, on the other hand, existed merely because it had been the rally point of a ridgeback stampede the night before and though it still smelled of the filthy bovines, Fetch instantly caught a separate scent. A feline one. He hopped back up.

The cat hit the ground and twisted around then froze. It leered at him, shifting its weight from shoulder to shoulder as its tail whipped spastically behind it. The creature was the size of the curlhead dragon Ben had flown in on and it had upturned barren like horns sprouting out from between its back turned ears. The panther’s eyes were as big around as Fetch’s hands and, while the rest of the body melted into the twilight darkness, its eyes glowed like a harvest moon.

With his crow eye, Fetch could see the predator’s comrades lurking on the edges of the prairie, strategizing with one another through their body language. It felt almost as if its dancing tail was a conductor’s baton, organizing the accompaniment. Unfortunately for the cat, Fetch was more than familiar with the language of felines.

“Fetch.”

This time, it was a whisper. Lenga and Bold had crept up alongside him.

“Don’t kill it.”

Fetch clenched his teeth for a second before loosening them enough to speak, “Lenga, I’ve hardly any shadows left-”

“Don’t kill it.” Lenga repeated.

“Lad,” Bold jumped in, “how manay wae got round us?”

“Five.” Fetch stated.

“Lard.” Bold lamented.

“Six including this-”

Just as Lenga had a feel for the jungle, Fetch had a feel for beasts. There was a subconscious part of his brain that registered every little mannerism from the flicking of the tail to the twitching of the ears to the shift of weight from one shoulder to another. When the jaguar’s hair began to rise along its spine, so to did the hair running down the nape of Fetch’s neck. Just as two dogs can go from sniffing each other to simultaneously attacking in an instant, Fetch’s canine brain kicked in without hesitation.

“GET BACK!”

Bold may not have been a beast but he was a battleworn veteran. He was bounding back towards the treeline with Lenga thrown over his shoulder before the cougar had gotten off the ground. Bold’s eyes were on the kapok trunks, Lenga’s were on Fetch and Fetch wasn’t following them. He was running towards the pouncing predator. The feline’s maw was open wide, ready to catch Fetch’s face and crack open his skull like a walnut, but then Fetch slid to the ground. It seemed more like the cat’s jaw was dropped in a gasp now rather than a chomp. With one leg out, like a soccer player stealing the ball, Fetch slipped beneath the monster and then pushed himself back to his feet with the other leg he had folded behind him. Jumping back to bipedal, he twirled around and managed to just barely grasp the back end of the horned panther’s tail. With what shadows he had left, he surrounded his arms with the gooey black energy and used that – with his momentum – to give him the strength to yank the beast back.

He wasn’t able to flop it back over his head in some kind of tail-based suplex, but he was able to stop its leap – a leap he feared might make Lenga the new target of its lunge. When Fetch hit the soft earth of the clearing, he fell to his knees. His shadows dissipated from his arms and sudden wooziness swept over him. The cat, on the other hand, was furious. It was ready to whirl around and chomp its original target in two. Only, it never got the chance.

When Lenga saw Fetch running towards the critter, she’d cried out. Bold realized what was up, slid her off his shoulder, and spun around to charge back in. This was just as the cougar and Fetch slammed back down to the ground, Fetch first. He saw the shadowmancer hit the land and fall immediately to his knees. *The lad’s outa shadows!* Then the jag. Absolutely enraged. It had forgotten all about going for Bold and Lenga and was ready to turn back onto Fetch. It was so blinded by that rage that it didn’t see the broad-shouldered Bold bounding back towards it with one already-bruised fist cocked back and ready to-

POW!

His punch lifted the panther up off the ground and when it came back down, it didn’t get back up.

“Tehk the shadows, lad!” Bold ordered before turning back to face Lenga.

Her violet cheeks had paled to a pink. As excuses began to pour out of Bold’s mouth like beer from a tap, Fetch did as the dwarf had commanded. Holding out his hands, he called to the murky energy within the crumpled cat. It rose from the corpse like steam, then floated over to wrap around him like a shawl before slipping into his crow eye. Animals didn’t offer half as much energy as beings, but beasts didn’t require half as much energy to live either and, despite his disguises, Fetch was more hound than human. While he drained their fallen foe’s energy, he also listened. The jingling of chainmail in the distance was now louder than it had ever been

before and, not only that, Fetch could now see the glowing shapes of guardsmen rushing through the woods towards them.

Donum. He hopped back onto his feet and was about to take a quick sweeping glance around the clearing to see where the other panthers were when his eyes got trapped in the blood curdling glare of the Princess. Her leer struck him like a blade of ice even from where she stood, a dozen yards away.

“No more dead cats.” She stated.

Donum. Fetch looked to Bold.

Bold shrugged, “Shae’s stubborn as uh rock dwarf, lad.”

As Fetch turned back to Lenga, he saw that all the sternness had been wiped clean off her face. Instead of a furled brow, she had wide eyes once more. Before she could cry out, Fetch already figured what was up.

“FETCH!”

He dove forward – towards them – but that was the wrong move as he dove right into the swinging paw of a swiping feline. It caught him in the gut, the claws scraping across his belly before sending him on his way, head over heels, skipping off the ground like a flat stone slung across the surface of a smooth lake. He finally came to an abrupt stop under the paw of a separate panther. It reflexively reared its giant head back, roaring victoriously to the moon. This provided a crucial moment for its prey to concoct some manner with which to prevail.

No more dead cats? Fetch grumbled to himself. *Does she prefer dead dogs?*

As its roar finished, the beast brought its head back down to finish Fetch but Fetch was gone. With an embarrassed, high-pitched, “Mrow?” the jaguar lowered its head further, looking underneath its belly, just in time to see a scraggly black dog rushing out from between its legs. Fetch had planned to keep running, but beyond the haunches he saw yet another panther prowling. The only thing worse than a one-on-one with one of these giant cats would be a two-on-one – he’d rather be swallowed whole than torn in two – and so he decided to keep that beast at bay by keeping his current combatant combative. Rather than zooming out from under the horned panther, he jumped up and chomped down.

As a medium sized dog, Fetch had some gnarly chompers. However, to a giant, dragon-sized wild cat, his chompers weren’t very impressive. He’d have to pick a particularly weak spot to sink his teeth into to do any real damage to the feline. Fortunately, two particularly weak spots dangled right above him. It seemed that this “it” was biologically male.

The cat howled and its back legs kicked off the ground, flipping it over so it could get at the hound hanging from its testicles. Fetch let go and dashed up the belly of the beast, dodging the swiping paws as shadows poured from his crow eye. The cat had missed with its paws, but Fetch didn’t expect it would miss a second time. Rather than attacking again in such close quarters, Fetch needed to get some space to come up with another assault plan – plus he wanted to check on Bold and Lenga – so the dark energy that had spilled from his eye did not lash out and attack the cat but rather coated his body so that when the cougar thrashed, flipping off its back and turning around so as to pounce on the confused canine as it tumbled off its belly, the canine turned into three and confused the cat.

Poof! The panther hadn’t missed, it crushed one of the Fetch-clones beneath its paws, but as a shadow-made clone it was little more than a 3D art-work that evaporated into thin air when smashed. The other two pooches rushed onwards, back towards the treeline from whence they’d come, squinting to catch a glimpse of their friends.

He nearly tumbled tail over ears as he came to an immediate stop. The second-clone poofed away without even being hit, leaving the real Fetch completely exposed, but he wasn't worried – not about the jaguar, anyways. Their little dog and cat fight was over.

Above where he had been standing moments before being blindsighted by the paw of a panther, near the corpse of the fist-finished feline that first attacked them, two cats hung limp, suspended in the air. They rotated slowly, like shawarmas on vertical spits. The similarities didn't end there. The creatures were being slowly shaved away at, their fur being scraped off in long spiraling strips. Rivets were cut through the naked flesh beneath, clumps of muscle torn out and discarded to the growing pile of gore below. Fetch could hardly make out the culprits with his biological eye, but his crow eye could see them plain as day.

“Hisses.” He whispered,

His fur stood up along his spine but other than that, Fetch didn't move a molecule. The hisses weren't done disassembling the two felines, but some had started to leave, hovering back down to the clearing and drifting like an oncoming fog towards Fetch. Their reptilian jaws opened and closed slowly as they bobbed above the ground. Their talon like hands, floating near their bodies but seemingly detached, curled and unfurled. The diamond shaped ruby-colored gems in their temples shone with fierce brilliance, giving their gray gaseous material a bloody hue.

Don't move. Don't move. Don't-

With a roar like rolling thunder, the ball-bitten jaguar surged past him. It dove head first into the phantom phalanx, ready to thrash around and avenge its mutilated kin only to be instantly overwhelmed. The slow moving hisses suddenly snapped into action, their bodies immediately donning the crimson color of their jewels – no longer was it a mere hue, the color became so intense that the diamonds in their temples were no longer discernable from the rest of the eldritch shapes – as they lifted their feral foe into the air. Their claws slashed and scraped, peeling off flesh like a bar tender peels the rinds of a lime. Their jewels slipped in and out of the cat like sewing needles, leaving steaming bullet-hole-like orifices. Instead of thrashing, the panther writhed. Its roar had become distorted and choppy and eventually gargly as blood began to spurt out from between its gnashing fangs. Then it went silent, leaving the only sound in the night the hawk-like screeches of the macabre monsters.

Fetch still hadn't moved – except for to breathe. He fixated on his breathing. Though his eyes were open he tried to ignore what he was seeing, even as a batch of the demons tired of this third victim and returned back to the surface of the planet to seek out a fourth – drifting ever so slowly towards him. He refused to think of anything else even as subconscious fears darted about his brain like a hornet trapped under a glass – fears not only about himself, but his two missing comrades, lest he reveal any sort of weakness to the monsters approaching him. He didn't know which story about hisses he believed – whether they were demons from the Well of Youth or aliens from one of the three moons – but he put his faith in the single fact that both stories corroborated: *Hisses will kill you for fury or fear, only the brave do they revere.* Fetch mentally recited, *Now breathe.*

Their diamonds scraped his flesh, burning and splitting his fur where they touched him, but they continued on. He didn't move until he felt the rush of wind as they left. Turning he saw the panther, the one that had been lingering beyond the one he'd tried to neuter, rushing off into the jungle. The three mutilated carcasses thwumped to the ground as the hisses joined those that had just tested him in chasing the last cat.

“Wait...” Fetch murmured, *There is one more!* He turned back to look across the clearing, back the way they had initially came. *And the guards!*

It appeared that half the hisses had stayed. Not for Fetch, nor for anymore jaguars, but for the beings beyond the boughs of the kapok trees. Turning their ghastly backs on Fetch, they floated past the treeline where Fetch could see the glows of Lenga, Bold, and the Munkloe Guard.

Before the hisses had arrived, after Fetch had been swatted across the field, Bold stepped up to the plate to face the feline in the shadowmancer’s place. Running towards the wild cat as its head turned to watch the humanoid-shaped hound soar, Bold leapt into the air and grabbed hold of its right horn. Though the dwarf was strong enough to likely yank the keratin-spike from the feline skull, throw it to the ground, and mash it into a jello puddy, he instead let his weight do the damage. Smashing the cat’s chin into the soft sod and then grabbing ahold of the crooked ox like horn with another hand, Bold dug his feet into the earth and pivoted with a torque that would’ve given the gears of Foxloe’s greatest factory a severe case of imposter syndrome. The panther would’ve moved to swat Bold as it had Fetch but its body followed its heads and its limbs were yanked helplessly along with the rest of it.

“LENGA,” Bold roared as he swung the beast, “RUN TO THE GUARD!”

Whether Lenga wanted to abandon Bold or not, she had little choice as she stood directly in the path which Bold had just begun to sling the cat. This wasn’t just to motivate the Headmaster, this was actually because Bold had seen that the cat which slapped Fetch halfway across the prairie had also been tailed by another eager killer kitty. This jaguar was rushing in on its comrade’s right flank, had Bold not slung its peer in the way then it would’ve pounced on the Princess and showed her exactly how violent nature could be. Fortunately for her, Bold had slung its peer in the way. The two slammed together and tumbled towards the treeline in a jumbled mess. Bold rushed after them, knowing he couldn’t give them a second lest one get away to go after the Princess but his efforts were in vain, for even though the Headmaster took his advice and dashed off into the darkness of the kapok labrynth from whence they came, the sixth prowling panther slinked off into the shadows after her.

Her instincts were firing off in all sorts of directions. She had the keen sense that she was being pursued by one of the beasts but she was also rushing towards a ragtag group of Munkloe Guards that exuded a vibe – even from a distance – which made her uneasy. And there was something else too, rolling in like the storm clouds above. Their natural audience had long since departed – the songs of the cicadas and owls had ceased, the howler monkeys had called it a night, and not only had the lightning bugs turned off for the evening but even the luminescent fungi had seemed to dim as if hoping to go unnoticed. Something was wrong, of that Lenga was sure, and she was caught in the middle of it.

“Princess Lenga!”

They appeared to be as shocked to see her as she was to see them. Although, it wasn’t necessarily the fact that they were they that shocked her but rather the fact that they weren’t *just* they. A dozen of them, mostly bearsns but a few water elves, were in classic Munkloe Guard garb, barefoot and chainmailed, but that’s where the normalcy ended. They weren’t just armed, they were armed to the teeth. It was as if they’d suddenly been given access to the armory and went on a shopping spree. And, judging from the Captain’s sword, Lenga was quite sure that was exactly what had happened. He held the Sword of Ben Dreb.

“Captain.” She murmured.

Between them was a brief gully, padded with mosses and feathered with ferns. On either side of the ditch were great knots of kapok roots. Lenga had frozen in one of these tangles when she saw the guards and they'd stopped at the edge of the shallow ravine across from her, gathered around their own kapok. When they saw her, they expected to see the shadowmancer next. Their hands had immediately gone to their weapons – most of them crossbows – but when Lenga appeared not to be followed they froze up. Unfamiliar with their bloody tools and also temporarily stunned by their own shame at having joined the Captain in betraying their nonviolent vows. This was unfortunate, because crossbows can take a moment to load and, though the dog wasn't chasing Lenga, a cat was.

"Lenga!" The Captain exclaimed.

No sooner did he holler than did it pounce. It had slinked around the kapok tree and spotted the Princess. There was no time for Hobbes to hop over the gully – his leap would not beat the giant panther's – but there was time to do something. Before her name left his tongue, he had his ancient sword cocked back and just as the jaguar jumped he threw the broken blade.

His weapon struck the cat in the side of the head, pinning its ear to its skull and slamming it against the hard jungle tree. The gargantuan melon of the beast bounced off the tree while its rear end still carried it forward with the momentum from its leap. Its tail end tumbled over its head and led the way, flopping over Lenga to smack against the side of the ravine and slide down to the bottom – dead.

"Captain!" Lenga shrieked.

Sliding down the side of the ditch, Thomas Hobbes went to receive the gift her father had given him, saying, "I'm no longer the Captain." He placed a bare, furry foot on the cat's head and tore the sword free then faced her, "I'm here as a friend, Lenga. Your father asks that you return home."

Lenga slid down to join the bearn in the bottom of the gully. As he took his foot off the face of the feline, she knelt down to cradle the beast's massive maw. The guards on the ridge shifted their feet. Hobbes gulped.

Stabbing his sword into the ground, he squatted down beside her, saying, "Lenga, tonight is not the night and tomorrow is not the day."

"Capt..." her words petered off.

"Thomas." He said.

"Thomas." She looked up at him, "You're not taking me home tonight."

With a deep sigh, he bowed his head. After a moment, he whispered, "Promise me, you will not go to the harbor tomorrow."

Lenga frowned, "Why?"

Hobbes looked up, his deep brown eyes meeting her big purple ones, "Promise me."

"I can't." She stated.

Their conversation would've continued. He might've eventually cracked and warned her of the impending conflict that would take place at the river port. Instead, something caught his eyes. A wispy whiteness. It was on the peripheral of his vision and it jerked his attention away from the Princess out of instinct. His initial thought was smoke. But then, when he turned, his heart sank down into his gut as he recognized the devils that were approaching them.

"Nobody move!" He commanded, before freezing himself.

Hisses were floating around the kapok Lenga had stood in front of moments before. They poured down into the gully, surrounding Lenga and Thomas. Most continued up the otherside towards the ex-Captain's anxious followers but one came to a stop between the bearn and the

water elf. Their gazes met once more through the haze of the gaseous creature's flesh. There was a constrained emotion in both of their eyes, knowing fullwell they could not express any sort of fear but ultimately revealing their apprehension in the glossy films that coated their eyeballs and shut out their expression. Both native-born citizens of the capitol city had been well educated, they knew the peril they were in, but what they didn't know was who the hisses were there on behalf of. This question would very quickly be answered.

The scarlet diamond in the center of the reptilian ghost's head was now at eye level with Hobbes. The hiss had completely turned its back on the Headmaster, in fact, no more hisses remained on her side of the gully. A slow fizzling series of clicks seemed to emit from the creature as the jewel slowly inched closer to the bearn – drawing so close that it kept its head turned down so that its incessantly gnawing jaws didn't touch the forsaken Captain – this sent a clear message.

Matching the measured pace of his aggressor, Hobbes leaned back and then rose from his kneeling position. The shining crimson stone bobbed, clicks resounded from the spectre as it rose with him, then it raised one of its disembodied hands. The hand was twitching ferociously, like a fiend desperately attempting not to reach for their vice, but it managed to uncurl its claws for long enough to motion for Hobbes to turn away from the King's daughter and face his vigilante crew.

Now he knew why the hand of the hiss was trembling. The furred faces amongst his team were poofed, every little hair standing on edge, and the blue faces were as pale a blue as the sky on a sunny day. They quaked like the hisses and it was a quaking that wasn't slowing but rather increasing.

No. Hobbes could say nothing. He couldn't even dare emote. He knew each and every man and woman gathered there, they were more than competent. He trusted them to be the first Munkloens in centuries to engage in some semblance of a battle in less than twenty-four hours. Retrieving the Princess was to be a chore in comparison. Sure they might've had to face off against the beasts of the night, but who amongst them hadn't snuck out on some elicited hunting trip with their friends while growing up in the treetop cities. They were ready for that. He picked them because he believed they were even ready for the battle waiting for them in the harbor – but hisses? All it took was a flinch and then-

One of the guards, a young man with a scimitar, flinched.

The hisses surged. Their subdued rattle became a screech – like banshee thunder, wrenching metal, or blade scraping slate – as their smokey shade became a bloody fire. In an instant, they amalgamated where the bearn had been standing. It was like watching an inverted explosion. Instead of expanding out, they condensed, their diamonds all penetrating the poor soul at once so that no one square inch of his body was connected to another. Blood, flesh, and bone spurted out in all directions, minced down into itty bitty mushy chunks. He never even got to raise his weapon, but his comrades did.

Instinctually, the rest of the guards drew arms against the hisses and though they realized their mistakes as their friend's remains splattered them, it was already too late. Done with the first flincher, the mob of monsters spread out amongst the others, like shrapnel escaping the confines of a grenade, hoisting them into the air as they whittled them down to unrecognizable carcasses. Weapons and chainmail rained down with the blood, their shrieks mixed with the unholy chorus of the screeching hisses, and all this before the unwavering eyes of the helpless Thomas Hobbes, staring up from the gully.

One of the hisses descended from the atrocities to linger before the ex-Captain, testing him once more. The sword of Ben Dreb was stuck in the mud just before him, but he didn't let his eyes shift to it. His eyes swelled with tears, obscuring his vision as he refused to let them spill over and wet the fur of his cheeks. He moved only to breathe.

The hiss was impressed. It ceased testing him. Instead, it flew around him, ingraining his details in its mind. The other hisses, as they finished with his followers, dropped the lifeless shells of what once were members of the Munkloe Guard and joined their sibling in twirling around the lone survivor. Blood still dripped from their diamonds. As they twirled around him, creating a gastly tornado, blood sprayed him like a light drizzle. The hisses were marking him, adopting him under their dark wing of protection whether he wanted it or not.

His stoicism wasn't all due to his urge to survive, much of it was due to a new found sense of guilt. A growing throbbing pain in his heart, like a tumor, that had first started when he took the sword and would now haunt him forever more. Violence was not the way, the fate of his fellows was all the proof he needed to be sure of that, but now it was his way, his baptism in their blood had sealed his fate. As he stood there, enduring the presence of the ghastly demons, he wished he had stepped out with the others for he now felt like an alien in his own home.

While Hobbes had watched the massacre, Lenga had been forced to watch as well. Even though the hisses had left her, she still knew not if she could move. Plus, she couldn't look away. As a healer and a Munkloen, pain and death were her enemies. She felt as though nature was her ally – she its defender – and yet now here it was, brandishing the most extreme of examples of pain and death to defend her. She felt sick, but she dare not gag. She stayed as still as Hobbes, remaining where she had been before, kneeling by the head of the dead panther, as the blood of the Munkloe guard vigilanties began to drain into the gulch.

Just as her resolve began to waiver, a calloused hand gently grasped her shoulder.

“Lil Lenga,” Bold whispered, “they let ya pass, get up. Wae must go.”

She rose, holding her breath so tightly that even her heart was afraid to beat. Bold took her hand and they climbed back up the side of the ravine, around the kapoks, and out into the clearing. There she finally doubled over. Leaning on her knees, she heaved up the last royal meal she'd enjoy for a long time. Her tears spilled out too, washing away the cold sweat. Fetch ran over, still in his canine form though now he had the shadows of four panthers in him. His crow eye spotted the dimlit corpses of the once bright shining guard members, but he quickly averted his gaze to ignore the temptation of their shadows. He turned his good eye up to meet Bold's. The dwarf's lips were pursed in a concerned line.

“Wasn't ar fault, lad.” He stated.

Fetch bowed his head. Though he was a dog, he was only a little more than half – and such a thing was only possible thanks to an old family charm. Part of the magic allowed him to speak common as if he had the vocal cords of a being – one of many elements of the charm that led some to claim it was more of a curse than a charm, but that's neither here nor there. This was not the night for jokes about the novelty of his existence. Circumnavigating the puddle of refuse Lenga was still adding to, he knuzzled the pit of her knee. He responded to Bold with a simple, sad, “I suppose.”

“No one soul is impartant enough to chehnge the good Lard's feht far ya.” Bold asserted, speaking to both the dog and the elf, “Fehr bit uh hubris to thank yars is. Trust mae, Oi been thar.”

He then slapped Lenga in the small of her back and clapped Fetch on his hard-headed noggin, ushering them on across the clearing, “Come on now, let’s not let another soul slip off ta Solaris cause of whot wae’ve saen har tonoight, aye?”

“Ben.” Fetch nodded.

Lenga spat in a futile attempt to remove the taste of bile from her mouth, but she nodded to the others. It was time to go. She ran a hand down Fetch’s spine then straightened up and started across the field. Fetch followed her closely, his crow eye scanning the jungle but no more beasts would come for them that night. The creatures of the rain forest around Sereibis would remain quiet, only the rumbling of the storm clouds spreading above them broke the contemplative twilight. Bold followed the two with furled brow. They trudged onwards without words.

By the time mortal eyes could spot the flicker of fire in the distance, a slight drizzle had begun. Their bruding quiet was now replaced with an equally muted anxiousness, one that increased their pace. Before they knew it, they were sprinting around the kapoks, hopping over ravines where creeks were slowly coming to life, slapping branches and bushes aside as they rushed towards the campfire. Fetch, on four legs, got there twice as fast. He bound into the little clearing and skidded to a halt before Marvell’s makeshift tepee.

“Ben!” He barked.

Marvell rolled out of the tent, yanking an ax from the floor behind her and wielding it before her to keep the hound at bay. No sooner had she than did she lower it.

“Fetch?” She yelped.

Undaunted, Fetch slipped by her and sat himself down by Ben’s side. He lowered his head over the gmoat’s parted lips. His breath smelled of must and blood, but he was breathing. With a deep sigh, Fetch lifted his head and turned to address Marvell.

“He’s alive.”

“For now.” Marvell said. She hadn’t crawled back into the tent, she was looking through the woods, squinting into the darkness from whence Fetch had come, “Where’s the healer?”

He got off his butt and glared at her back at the edge of the entrance, growling, “They’re coming.”

Now Marvell peaked into the tent, her voice gruff, “You got a problem?”

Fetch shrugged as good as a dog can, saying nothing but keeping his lips curled back from his fangs. A fury began to well up inside her and, as if Mother Nature was trying to cool her down, the light drizzle turned into a steady rain. The fire hissed between the two furry foes but before their scowls could spark into violence, the healers arrived.

No sooner did Lenga and Bold enter the clearing, than did Bold put himself between the Headmaster and the axwoman. Marvell was surrounded. She traded glances between the dog and the dwarf before ultimately deciding to give the far more infamous fellow her full attention.

“Whar is the Fasthoof, lad?” He demanded.

“Just inside.” Marvell stated.

Bold took a stomp-like step towards her, “Outa the weh.”

“No.” Marvell snapped.

Lenga wanted to scream. From what they’d heard, Benjamin didn’t have much time left if he had time at all. She was already half drenched and it seemed the rain would only be getting stronger – there was no guarantee the bearn’s little lean-to would withstand the storm and almost no chance that her fire would survive the rain now pouring in the chimney-like exhaust-hole she’d left open at the top of the structure. Healing a half dead man while exposed to a torrential

down pour would be like trying to empty a lake with a bucket. But instead of she and Bold being able to rush to the gmoat's side, the dwarf and bearn were bantering over whether or not they were going to kill each other. The Princess had had enough violence for the day. Stomping with a fierceness that made Bold's little move look quite soft, Lenga strode between the freedom fighter and the bounty hunter.

"Kill each other in the rain if you like." She was almost hissing, "I'm going to heal Benjamin."

Marvell grumbled something under her breath but she got out of the way (reaching back to grab her other ax out from under the tent beforehand, however). Bold slid his backpack off his shoulders and handed it to Lenga, stubbornly avoiding her glare. As she stooped to enter the tent, Fetch sought to slip out, but he stopped when something grabbed his tail. Lenga was by Ben's side in an instant, gently helping him bear the weight of his head as he strained to get his eyes on his canine comrade. Fetch froze mid step, turning to watch Ben.

"Trust her."

Then Ben went limp again. Lenga lowered his head back down to the soft earth. She and Fetch exchanged glances, then he walked out into the rain and she got her healing book out of the bag to get started.

"Shae sehs wae should trust her, lad." Bold said as Fetch left the tent.

Fetch bowed his head, "Yea, well, so does Ben."

"Whot?" Bold grunted.

Marvell shrugged, "I kept him safe, didn't I?"

"After you nearly killed him!" Fetch barked.

"Me?!" Marvell crowed, "Where was he before all this – huh? Relaxing on the plains of Dogloe, babysitting your kind, safe as could be!"

"First off, dog herding is not an easy job." Fetch said before raising his voice, "Second off--"

Bold cut him off, his deep voice resonating like the not-so-distant thunder, "You wark far slavars. Godai hellbrutes! Aeven if ya hadn't troied to kill the Fasthoof lad, oi'd still kill ya."

"You try and kill me," Marvell rolled her shoulders, turning her axes outwards so that the flats of their blades were on full display, "and there'll be thirteen dead dwarves and only one of them will be cause of me."

Bold frowned but said nothing.

Fetch took the bait, "What're you talking about?"

"The *Marrialdo* was payed in slaves to catch our friend here." Marvell explained, "Those slaves are being worked to the bone to charge enertombs that the bastard Captain then sells." She turned back to Bold, "How long can a dwarf work day and night before they croak?"

"Longar than you'd thank, lassae." Bold retorted.

"And how long are you willing to let them endure?" Marvell pressed.

"Wae don't naed yar help." Bold snarled.

"Again," Marvell said, "you don't have a choice."

Fetch's mouth opened but then he realized he didn't know what to say. An embarrassing whimper escaped his jaw before he could clamp it shut. He looked up to Bold, the dwarf still glowered at the bearn.

Bold cracked his knuckles, saying, "Whot happens when wae follow you to thot boat and you turn on us thar?" He looked down at Fetch, "Wae'd rathar foight one bastard hare than fiftay-one thar!"

“What happens when you try and storm the ship yourselves?” Marvell shot back, “You think the Munkloe Guard is going to go with you?”

“Not after tonight...” Fetch murmured.

“You can’t just storm the ship – not the two of you. Even the three of us is a bit of a risk, but we can do it, because I know the ship and I know the crew.”

“How do ya plan to snaek a dwarf and a dog onbard then, huh?” Bold asked.

She nodded to Fetch, “I’m sure he picked up some shadows on his journey.”

“Not enough.” Fetch said before looking back the way they’d came and admitting, “Though I know where I could get some more...”

“There ya have it.” Marvell shrugged, “He’ll disguise us with shadows, we’ll go straight to your comrades – that’s a dozen extra able bodied fighters – then we’ll blow that boat to smithereens with their own enertombs.”

Fetch scoffed, “There’s no way this plan’ll-”

Marvell scoffed right back, gesturing to the tent behind them, “As if you haven’t tried crazier schemes?”

“Can ya map out the ship?” Bold asked.

“Ofcourse.” Marvell nodded.

“And the crew, you con list them.” Bold asked.

“I can describe them. The headcount. Their threat levels.” She assured him, “No mancers, no magicians, but they do have some talented swordsmen and marksmen – the turnover rate’s so high, most of them look like they can’t even take a punch. So yeah, I can give you the run down.”

“You really think this is a good idea.” Fetch asked Bold.

“Lil Benji sehd to trust har.” Bold looked away from them both, staring up into the rain, “You didn’t know his mothar...shae was somethin else.” He smiled and looked back down at the wet dog beside him, “And shae was nevar wrong about paeple,” he turned back to Marvell, “nar a plan.”

Marvell cocked her head to the side, “So we good?”

“Far now.” Bold nodded, “Ya start actin funnay, wae con alwehs kill ya tomarrow.”

Marvell slammed an ax down into the mud so that she had a free hand to extend to Bold.

“Marvell of the Ax.” She said.

“Boldarian-”

“Oh, I know.” She smiled.

“Well, if ya knew Oi was comin,” Bold broke his hard exterior to offer the axwoman a good hearted smirk, “not shar whoy ya couldn’ta built a biggar tent.”

Chapter Ten: Meanwhile, in Batloe

A twilight mist of darkness passed through the chamber as if it were seeping through the windows of the Cloches. The shadows retreated from Sharp Otubak's scowl, as if the clouds above had lost their resolve at the sight of the guard's menacing glare. At least, this was what the guard thought as his violet eyes darted across the Hall of Pillars, vanquishing the darkness and making room for the moonlight to take its place. He smirked triumphantly as marble floors glowed silver once more.

Then he frowned. Bowing his head, he plopped down to sit on the platform, halfway up the stairway. His imagination could only entertain him for so long before the dreadful news of the night rushed back to the forefront of his mind. He almost wished for an intruder. And after a moment, that almost-wish was leaning a little too close towards actual-wish – just close enough that it came true.

The double doors at the end of the Hall of Pillars crept open. They parted so slowly that, though the motion immediately caught Sharp's eyes, he couldn't initially be sure whether or not they were opening or if his eyes were playing tricks on him. Only once a dark figure slid through the partially cracked doors did the chidra stop pinching himself.

He shot to his feet. The person was decked out in black from head to toe, only their eyes peaked out of a slither in the cloth that wrapped them but it was too dark and the figure too far away for Sharp to discern anything from that. The figure was short – Sharp was sure he had at least a foot on the person, not including the inches his boots and helmet added – but not quite scrawny. The tight, mummy like wrappings that covered the visitor revealed a muscular outline that may not have been able to lift the guardsman but, if well trained, could potentially put up a decent fight. Then there were the individual's gloves – or gauntlets, rather, as they were quite gaudy and glinted in the moonlight like metal. The clothes, gloves, and the body type screamed, "Assassin!" but the nonchalance of their entry and their current stride threw Sharp for a loop.

Dey just waltzed in drough da front doors. Sharp frowned, marching down the steps. *Crimpsin tiad Royal Guard just letting anybody in now?* The chamber was long, but the acoustics effective, Sharp didn't have to raise his voice to speak to this mysterious person even though over fifty yards still separated them.

"Halt." He commanded.

There wasn't so much as a flinch from the other. Their stroll continued undaunted.

Sharp drew his sword, "Come any furdur and I'll consider you a dreat."

To Sharp's surprise, the intruder stopped. The guard couldn't help but give away his surprise as he came to a stop at the bottom of the stairs. He cleared his throat, saying, "Dis hall is off limits. In fact," he gestured to the doors through which the person had come, "dat hall was off limits too. I don't dink dere's a hall in da Cloches dat isn't off limits, Civ, especially tonight. What're you doing here?"

While the figure's body was stationary, his head was slowly rotating this way then that. He was observing the chamber. It didn't appear, at least to Sharp, that the intruder was listening to a word he was saying. Sharp's curiosity was once again squelched by his suspicion as his eyes narrowed to leer at the stranger.

"How'd you get in here?" Sharp pressed.

"Your comrades were asleep." The man stated.

“Farakin Royal Guard...” Sharp muttered.

Then the man gave a nod back the way he came, “And I snuck through the vents.”

Sharp slapped the face of his helmet with the palm of his gauntlet, the ensuing clang drowned out his flurry of curses. As the echoes quieted, he explained, “Dose were supposed to be fixed.”

“I think you’ve been set up.” The man stated.

“Eider idiots or evil.” Sharp agreed.

“I’m going to kill you now.” The man warned.

Sharp raised his weapon and smirked, “Selu to you den, Civ!”

The assassin took off, going from 0 to 100 in an instant and yet still managing to reach back and yank two disks from a bag on his belt. With one in each hand, he flung them at the guard. The projectiles spun through the air like circular saws, first curving out towards the columns then cutting back in towards Sharp. His eyes darted from one disk to the other as he concocted a split second plan then, with a smirk, the chidra twisted away from the murderous frisbees, swinging his sword as he completed his three-sixty turn, and came back to face the assassin with the flat of his blade thrust out like a baseball player’s swing. The two disks collided in the air, clattering together in the very spot Sharp had twirled away from, then fell towards the marble floors however one didn’t make it. With impeccable timing, Sharp’s swing collided with one of the falling sawblades and sent it soaring back towards the still sprinting assassin.

Unable to stop his momentum, the black garbed intruder chose instead to use it to his advantage. As his own weapon came careening back at him, he dove over it with a flip as graceful as Sharp’s twirl – one-upping the guard in grace, actually, for as he flew over the discus he snatched it out of thin air so that when his feet hit the ground once more he flung it right back at Sharp.

The two were mere yards away now. Too close for Sharp to effectively dodge the returning projectile, especially as he was distracted. Immediately after batting back the disk, he’d dropped his hilt with one hand and swept the other disk off the floor. When the assassin landed his flip and threw his saw-toothed saucer, Sharp threw the other.

With his throwing hand, Sharp swatted the discuss spinning towards him out of the way. It split the metal along the side of his gauntlet, tearing the black scales underneath and starting a trickle of blood running down his wrist before it zoomed off to clatter against a column. But Sharp had drawn blood too. The assassin was only able to block with his armored glove, smacking the discuss Sharp had lobbed away from his body with the back of his hand. It hopped off his knuckles and skimmed his forearm before flying up towards the ceiling and out of the way. Blood escaped the cloth that covered the assassin. Little embers lit up on the torn garments, burning the fringes of the tear for a second before turning into shiny silver beads. A few drops fell to the marble floor, sizzling there defiantly for a moment before hardening into metal flakes.

Sharp saw this and it immediately sent his mind racing, but he was now up close and personal with his foe, this was not the time to ask questions. The assassin’s gloves now had blades extending from them, three protruding from a chamber attached onto the back of both closed fists, and one of those gauntlets was rocketing up towards Sharp’s head.

Swinging his blade up, he batted the first punch away. Then he brought his sword down hard, expecting an immediate second punch. His instincts were spot on and his blade came crashing down on an uppercut.

The clang was followed by a screech as the assassin’s claws scraped the floor. His swing would’ve crushed any normal armored hand, but instead his blade struck against his foe’s gloves

as if he had merely parried a sword. Still, it nearly yanked his enemy's arm out of socket, which gave Sharp time to take the lead on the next bout of attacks.

Instead, he took the time to ask. His indigo eyes stared so hard he felt they might pop out of his skull and slip between the slit in his helmet's visor as he scrutinized the black eyes of his opponent and the flat blue nose that separated them. *Saw-toothed discuses, short stature, black eyes, blue skin, burning blood!*

"You're a Gill!" Sharp exclaimed, "Paud Gill – da Shayu Shua!"

"Now I really have to kill you." Paud growled.

Sharp's sword was still wedged between the claws of Paud's left gauntlet, while the blades of Paud's right were stabbed into the marble floor, propping both men up like the third leg of a tripod. After the chidra's revelation, the fishfolk retracted his claws and both warriors toppled over. Sharp's sword slipped off the armored knuckles and bounced off the floor. Paud slapped his right hand flat on the ground, lifting him off his feet so that his arm bore all of his weight as he swung to sweep Sharp's legs out from under him.

Sharp didn't fight it. He let himself fall backwards, even dropping his sword, but kept his eyes open for whatever Paud planned to do next. Continuing his sweep, Paud hopped back on his feet completing a full spin then came down on his foe with his left fist – where his Claws were still extended – aiming for the sight of Sharp's visor. Swordless, Sharp had two free hands and they came in handy. As his shoulderblades hit the floor, his hands shot up and caught Paud's stabbing glove before the blades could gouge out Sharp's eyes. Had he been a millisecond slower or a fraction weaker, he'd have been blinded. The tips of the claws poked through the slits in his helmet, faintly tickling the scales of his eyelids. All Paud could do was flick his wrist. The move barely scratched Sharp's brow, but it did flip up his visor and give Paud a good look at the face of his opponent before his opponent threw him off.

The two separately rolled to their feet. Paud with both his claws back out and Sharp with his sword back in his hands. There was a moment of hesitation. Paud's head was cocked to the side. Though he didn't recognize Sharp's face, he did recognize the black scales. He'd never seen a chidra with black scales – that was until yesterday, as the dust settled and smoke cleared between the *Obsidian Sail* and the *Hong Chi* – and now here he was staring into the face of another.

"You're kin of Dresdan." Paud stated, "But you've got a factory accent?"

"Ya, Civ," Sharp rolled his eyes, slapping his visor back down as he answered, "da Captain didn't exactly make many of my birthday parties."

"Do you know him?" Paud asked.

"I know as much about my fadder as I do about you." Sharp scoffed, but he could only fake his nonchalance for so long. Paud had struck a nerve. His good humor lapsed. He yelled as he charged, "Dat being, I'm gonna kill you bode!"

Sharp charged, swinging his broadsword brazenly. Paud dipped out of the way, slapping the blade to the side as he stepped in to deliver a three-pronged punch into his reptilian foe's belly, but the amphibian had underestimated his opponent. Brazen as the assault was, Sharp was still on guard. When Paud slipped underneath him, Sharp's blade was well out of reach to be used to block the assassin's daggered knuckles, but his elbows were right above the black-garbed blue-skinned shoulder blades. Sharp brought his armored bows down on Paud's spine and drove the man into the ground before Paud's Claws could scrape his chestplate.

The fishfolk hit the ground and the chidra staggered past. When Sharp turned around, Paud was already back on his feet and this time he was initiating the assault: rushing up close to

the guard with an uppercut. Sharp flinched back from the punch but Paud stepped into the gap and attacked again, this time slicing at his gut with a backhand. Sharp backedpedaled further but finally caught his bearings enough to respond. He swung low, like a golfer, going for the boxer's unprotected legs. Rather than back up himself, Paud chose to jump over the threat. Rocking back, he jumped off his feet and onto his hands as the tip of the blade passed by nearly skimming his gauntlets, then he pushed off and delivered a kick square into the guard's chest – launching him backwards into one of the guardy pillars.

Sharp bounced off the column and went right back at Paud. Paud, on the other hand, had turned and ran for the stairs. The fishfolk was quick but the chidra was quick too – quick and six foot five. Sharp reached the base of the stairs by the time Paud had made it halfway up. The stairway was bifurcated, so halfway up it split in two and doubled back as it continued on upwards towards the private royal chambers. This meant that while Sharp bound up, Paud was bounding up parallel to the swordsman. The Foxloen wasn't just hired for his skill with the blade, he had quite the haunches on him, and so, just before they lined up parallel to one another, Sharp leapt into the air, over the railing, and tackled the Aquarian as he neared the top of the stairs.

It's one thing to be tackled by a man a foot taller than you, but make that man heavier and add a full suit of armor and a tackle becomes a nigh lethal assault. Paud bounced off the wall and down a few stairs but he got back up more mad than hurt. Sharp was hardly even ready to respond while Paud was already back at it. Paud sprinted back up the stairs, the blades sprouting from his right fist as he thrust out a grand uppercut. Sharp clumsily blocked the attack, which Paud gracefully adjusted for. The guard's large sword came down to deflect his gauntlet, Paud twisted his gauntlet and caught the massive blade between two of his smaller ones, then, twisting his wrist further, he had Sharp's sword pinched. Of course, the chidra could yank his sword free, the tension between the Claws and his blade was no vice grip, but it was enough to stun and stall him as the fishfolk's left hook came for the guard.

Paud's aim was precise – so precise, in fact, that he retracted two claws so that only the middle remained. The slender dagger extending from his knuckles slid between the shingle-like lips of the armor protecting Sharp's leg and stabbed deep into his thigh. Had he not been underneath the guard on the stairs, the assassin might've been able to target a more significant place, but nonetheless, he'd gotten his spike so deep that Sharp surely would not be jumping anymore staircases.

Sharp didn't let Paud get away with it scott free. When he'd tugged his blade and met the resistance, he immediately realized that he had goofed. Paud was going to get in a lick. Thus, rather than trying to make up for his mistake, he decided to counter. Keeping his blade pinched between two of the claws on Paud's right gauntlet, Sharp bore down, pushing Paud's fist down until his blade was no longer suspended in the air but rather resting on the fishfolk's shoulder just above his gills. So as Paud impaled Sharp's thigh, Sharp cut into Paud's collar.

Both men recoiled. Sharp hastily flicked Paud's molten blood off his blade. Paud tore off his balaclava so that he could lick his eyes. They took a quick glance at their respective wounds then turned their attention back onto one another.

“I got all night, Civ.” Sharp grunted.

“We'll be in pieces by then.” Paud stated.

Sharp shrugged, “Den leave.”

“You first.” Paud snapped.

Sharp wasn't wrong and neither was Paud. The two continued to fight all night and by the time Solaris was beginning to peak over the horizon, they were both in pieces. Sharp's armor was falling apart and his scales underneath were either split or coated in blood. Paud's stealthy clothes had been traded for silvery, molten scars, leaving him nearly as naked as he was on missions back home on the sea floor. Sharp's sword was essentially totalled too. The cursed blood of the Gill family had so tarnished its edges that he'd gone about using it as a bludgeon for at least the last hour of their conflict. Both men exhausted, their attacks had devolved to a level of half-heartedness that seemed almost instinctual rather than intentional. As if they'd fallen asleep driving but somehow managed to keep the car on the road.

Finally, Sharp collapsed, laying flat on his back. He extended a hand to Paud who stood too far away to physically accept it.

"Break?" He offered.

Paud slumped against a pillar and slid down to his butt, unwilling to vocalize his acceptance but taking the break nonetheless. Sharp scooted on his back over to his own pillar. There, he propped himself up so that he could face his opponent during their little intermission.

"Who sent you anyways?" Sharp asked.

Paud licked his eyes.

"Trude, wasn't it?" Sharp pressed.

Paud's tongue stopped mid-lick on the second eye. This gave Sharp the answer that Paud hadn't consented to providing, but Sharp didn't seem to take this revelation with much surprise. Instead, it seemed he had already known, but that he was confused by it. That the real information he was after was not who, but why.

"Why does she want to kill da Princess?" Sharp asked, "Daffeega will never be Queen now."

Had he eyelids, they would've been narrowed. Was this some sort of trap? *Does it matter? I was wanted before this and I will be wanted after. If I fail, then none of this matters. If I succeed, then that is all that matters.* Still, Paud was suspicious. He responded slowly, "I'm not here to kill a Queen."

"Good." Sharp snickered, "Cause da Queen isn't here, she's MIA. Been MIA since she took da crown."

"There is no Queen." Though Paud said it as if it were a fact, he was obviously asking, "There's a King."

Now it was Sharp who was narrowing his eyes, "Civ..."

Paud's face was stonecold and still.

"Sorry, Mr. Shayu Shua, but da King is already dead." Sharp stated.

Though his jaw didn't drop, his lips parted, which for Paud was a drastic display of emotion.

"He died dis afternoon." Sharp paused as he glimpsed the sunrise over the horizon, "Yesterday, technically, now..." He shrugged, concluding, "Duifeen is dead, Civ, da disease finally got him."

Paud slumped down to lay flat on the marble floor.

"Farak, Civ..." Sharp remarked, slumping down to match his now ex-foe's posture, "dought I was da one set up. Fate took you for a fool, today. Maybe not dough. Trude can't be mad, dey got what dey wanted."

"In part." Paud stated, "I still owe Truth."

"Donum." Sharp sympathized, "I hear dey aren't someone you want to owe."

“Wasn’t my choice.” Paud sighed.

Both men could hear the faint sounds of marching approaching the chamber from behind the very double doors Paud had waltzed through hours before. The Royal Guard was finally doing their job. Neither got up from the floor.

“Dink dey dink dey’ll find us bode dead?” Sharp asked.

“Why would the Guard be in league with Truth?” Paud asked.

“Da Guard serves da Magi.” Sharp explained plainly, “Da Magi like da new Queen – dey didn’t like her sister and – far as I can tell – neider did Trude.”

“Her sister being who would’ve been elected if the King hadn’t died.” Paud realized.

“You got it, Civ.” Sharp sighed, “Now Daffeega is just anodder Princess.”

“What will they do with me?” Paud asked.

“If it were up to da Magi and da new Queen, dey’d probably kill you.” Sharp snickered, “But I’ll put in a good word for you wid Daffeega. She’ll get her sis to go light. Life in prison isn’t too bad, Civ, free room and board – and healdcare.”

“I’d rather death.” Paud muttered, before raising his voice for Sharp to hear, “Why do you care what happens to me anyways?”

Sharp laughed. For the first time, his laugh was cruel. Prior snickers and scoffs had been in good humor, but this time Sharp was legitimately laughing *at* his supposed foe. Sitting back up against the column to stare at the surrendered assassin, he said, “You’re Paud Gill, Civ. Aquaria needs da Gills and dere ain’t many left of you. Tiad...Wid Queen Suicine, Batloe may be da next Aquaria.” He shook his head, blood flew from the tips of his head tails, “Dey got your people trapped in da gold mines, dey’ll trap my people back on da moon.”

“Your people?” Paud bitterly shot back, “You’re Foxloen.”

“Nah, da workers are my people. I’m a Civilist, Civ.” Sharp winked, “Civs don’t let da revolutionaries die, brodder.”

Down the hall, the doors had been flung open and the Royal Guard were marching in but they were still some hundred yards away so neither combatant paid them any attention. Paud sat up against the pillar so he could look Sharp in the eyes. *He thinks I’m a revolutionary just because I’m a Gill.* Paud wanted to chuckle or scoff but he couldn’t. The criticism in Sharp’s tone had not been directed at Paud’s person, but instead at his words. Sharp didn’t believe Paud was being honest with him. And as Paud stared back into the chidra’s purple eyes, he couldn’t help but admit to himself that Sharp was right.

“Sometimes, staying alive when dey want you dead is revolutionary in and of itself, Civ.” Sharp said as he saw Paud’s expression shift. The chidra smiled, cracking the scabs that had just begun to stretch over his split lips, saying as blood squirted down his reptilian teeth, “Life in prison doesn’t mean life in prison – not in Batloe, Civ – just means you got a lifetime to figure a way out.”

With one last wink, Sharp turned away from Paud and got to his feet. The Guards swept in and Paud didn’t put up a fight. He vaguely heard Sharp hollering at them that he was to be taken to the healers and kept in the dungeon – that Daffeega would have full authority over his fate until the new Queen returned – but Paud wasn’t really listening. He was stuck deep in his thoughts.

What would being stuck in the dungeons of Tlow-Vare mean for Cassandra? Would Truth consider this a failure and hurt his sister in spite or would Truth keep Cassandra and demand a new favor of him? Truth had told him that when the King died, they would have power over Batloe. Is Truth the new Queen? Would the new Queen let her sister keep him in chains if

he could potentially out her for ordering the murder of her own father? Then what of Aquaria? *Is this the best I can do for my people, for my sister – as the Civilist had said – simply staying alive?*

The guards hoisted him up and began marching him out of the hall.

He decided to push these thoughts to the side. Preferring to fixate on the pain of his new wounds and that of the curse that constantly tormented his flesh, searing him incessantly with each pump of his heart. Pain wasn't confusing, it was simple. Then again, so too was staying alive. After all, what else could he do?

Chapter Eleven: Battle on the Marrialdo

Solaris never rose on that last day of May, not for Munkloe. The sun beamed down on Batloe relentlessly as moles and chidras alike took to the streets to hear Princess Daffeega eulogize her father and announce that her absent sister, not her, would be the new Queen, but Solaris was nowhere to be seen in the jungle beneath Sereibis, it was as if the night had never lifted. And while sunlight could hardly make its way to the forest floor, the rain seemed to have no problem.

Gallons gushed from the heavens. The rain pooled in the fat elephant-ear leaves of the canopy until each leaf collapsed under the weight and sent the water hurtling down to be traded back and forth by the next generation of wide green blades. When the rain finally crashed down to pound the soft ground, it burst through in thick spurts that blasted mud and moss in all directions as the water buried itself in the earth.

It wasn't the only thing being buried there. Ankle deep in the growing marsh, Thomas Hobbes was hard at work scooping up muk in his helmet and throwing it to the side only for more mud to seep right back in. It came from all sides. Not only did it seem to rise up from the ground, but it seemingly came down with the rain. It was almost as if he were on the floor of the Aquarian Ocean, shoveling away at some sandy quagmire.

Had he been able to dig a decent hole, his task would've still been impossible. Just as the jungle floor had turned into soup, so too had his comrades. The hisses had torn his vigilante squad to shreds. Their dismembered pieces lay scattered around him like the pieces of a puzzle. Shredded muscle and liquidized flesh dyed the mud. Many of the bones had been split and snapped into indiscernible shards, those that hadn't had been so licked clean of flesh that there was no telling one from another. There was no burying bodies in any sort of personal manner, their monstrous fates had assured that. And while Thomas had refused to accept that, the storm took the decision out of his hands. The jungle floor slowly rose to swallow them. The ex-Captain would've been consumed with his former comrades as well had not more of his brothers and sisters in arms arrived.

Letterlemurs had been watching him since the hisses left, sending a chain of messages back to the city. Those men and women that had broken their vows to Munkloe and taken up weapons, had not been the only Hobbes had propositioned but rather the first to take him up on it. Others had mulled it over, deciding in the dark hours of twilight to commit, only to hear of the demise they'd barely dodged. After the news spread, most lost their gall, but not all. A dozen men and women, six bears and six elves, met in the armory that morning.

By noon, they'd made it to their Captain. Without a word, they'd joined him in the ravine. The basin was half full, the muk bubbling up above their knees, but they took off their helmets and went about scooping up the refuse and casting it aside. As they started, Hobbes slowed to a stop. He watched the guards for a moment in silence. Even though thunder crashed above, the great Kapoks creaked and groaned, and the rain hit the earth around them with great claps like cannon fire, Hobbes' mind was quiet.

His hand shifted to the sword on his hip. *I've still got a job to do.* He raised his head towards the heavens. *Lord, forgive me. Munkloe, forgive me.* Then he looked back down at the disassembled dead scattered around him and the thriving new souls that had joined him in the ditch.

“More of us will die.” He hollered over the roar of the storm.

The volunteers stopped their shoveling and straightened up. They looked around at one another, then turned back to the ex-Captain. He bowed his head, pausing for a moment. He was overwhelmed with responsibility that once again faced him and more than ever aware of the consequences that may face them all, but his hand still held fast to the hilt of the Dreb Sword. *There is no going back.* Closing his eyes, he saw the face of the old silver haired King. He spoke Signan’s words aloud as he saw him speak them in his mind.

“Peace in the face of conflict is violence.” Hobbes drew the ancient sword and lifted it towards the canopy, “My comrades, there is a conflict. The people of Munkloe must be protected. What will you do?”

Thunder exploded as one woman stepped up. A young water elven guard. Mud sloshed as she waded forwards. She raised her fist in the air, “We will not be bound by peace!”

Hobbes stepped forward to meet her, lowering his blade to rest it on her shoulder.

“My name is Thomas Hobbes.” He said, “What is your name.”

As he traded his weapon over her head to rest it on the other shoulder, she answered, “Millie Drather.”

Then she bowed away and the next guard approached. One by one, he knighted them into their un-named league of vigilantes. The gushing of the heavens, the splashing of the mud, and the running of the blood that filled that ravine baptized them together. Then, when it was done, he sent them off to meet him at the harbor, asking for another moment alone to say goodbye to those that had so bravely followed him first.

This was mostly true, but there was another reason. After a long moment of silence, he turned to face the beast that was watching from the shadows of the kapok roots above the ravine. The sleuth exposed himself then, crawling out from under the gnarled base of the tree but remaining on the high ground above the large bearn.

“Fetch Eninac.” Thomas said.

The dog emitted a low growl in response. He knew that Thomas knew why he was there. He needed the shadows of the bearn’s fallen friends. Fetch also knew that most Munkloens – if not all – were not only repulsed by shadowmancy but outright enraged by the idea of scavenging the energy of the unconsenting dead. To make matters worse, the reason Thomas’ comrades were dead in the first place was because they’d been chasing after him. Fetch had every reason to expect Thomas to draw his weapon against him and so Fetch had his fangs bared. Shadows seeped out from between his canines, like hot breath on a cold day, rising from his fur like steam from a stallion. Fetch didn’t have much shadows, in fact, all that he showed off was all that he had left, but Hobbes wouldn’t know that – *or does he?* a voice in the back of Fetch’s head whispered, but Hobbes did not draw his sword.

“I am an outlaw now.” Hobbes stated, “Like you.”

Fetch ceased his growl and let his lips fall back over his maw, but he continued not to speak and kept his shadows dancing around him.

“Unlike you, however,” Hobbes voice was now a tone more intense than to described by “he stated”. Though his body remained absolutely still, without a hint of intention to reach for the Dreb Sword, there was now a threat in his tone, “I protect this nation and its people.”

Lest the bearn grow anymore aggressive, Fetch spoke up, “The Princess is safe.”

“If she weren’t, Sir Drahkcor would’ve slain you before I had the chance.” Hobbes barked back before pausing himself. He took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly then looked

back into the dog's eyes, saying, "Take the shadows and never come back. If I see you again, then I will draw this sword."

Hobbes turned and climbed out of the ravine, up the bank opposite the hound. He didn't turn back around, but continued onwards. Slowly trudging through the underbrush and the mud back towards the river where the city sat. Fetch waited until he could see the ex-Captain no longer, until even his crow eye couldn't make out the man's glowing aura between the gargantuan trunks of the kapok trees, and then he went about harvesting the shadows from the pieces buried in the ditch.

It wasn't a quick process but it was slower than it needed to be. These fresh, untouched souls slipped into his crow eye like morphine filling up a syringe and then, almost immediately, it surged through his body. Rushing up and down his spine like the neon lights on a tall carnival ride as the thrill of dark energy spread to every cell of his being – caressing and corrupting his nervous system as his endorphins sky rocketed to seemingly never-before-reached levels and yet, not quite as high as the last time – and not even close in comparison to the very first time. Still, he savored each rush, unable to quickly gather and go. There were enough shadows there to consume most shadowmancers. More than enough to send someone into a trip they would never return from, but Fetch had a genetic defect that, in this case, was a strength: he was mostly dog.

While beings like humans were still as undomesticated as wolves, dogs had biological benevolence bred into them. There was an overpowering sense of loyalty in the young rascal that kept jabbing at his conscience with a persistence annoying enough to interrupt the insidious inebriation.

"Ben!" He barked, his head jerking back towards the clearing beyond the ravine, "Lenga!"

With plenty of shadows to spare, he morphed back into a man and scrambled up the slope, rushing through the rain back to the campsite where his newfound comrades waited for him.

Their spot was quickly being overcome by mud. The tent had held as well as one could've hoped, but by high noon there wasn't a molecule on either of the four that wasn't wet. Despite the dreary conditions, when Fetch returned, Marvell, Lenga, and Bold met him with goofy grins.

"Guess what, pooch." Marvell winked.

"I did it!" Lenga proclaimed.

"Benji's back, lad!" Bold slapped Fetch on the back.

The force of the clasp sent him staggering forward, stopping only as Ben emerged from the lean-to. Fetch gasped as Ben extended his arms in a gesture the shadowmancer had yet been offered since they'd met only a few days prior.

"Looks like you didn't get me killed!"

"Yet!" Fetch slammed into the gmoat, nearly knocking him and tent behind him over.

As they embraced, Lenga slumped. Luckily, Bold was there to support her.

"Ya alright, lass?" Bold asked.

She nodded, but her voice was faint, "More anxious than exhausted."

"Yea." Marvell concurred, "We've got to leave soon if we're going to beat sunset." She turned back to Fetch, "You get the shadows?"

"Yea," Fetch pealed himself off Ben, "but I've got a bad feeling about that Munkloe Guard." His eyes met Lenga's and he saw a similar opinion in the glint in her eyes. He continued, "But I got the shadows."

“Hesitation’s a trehtar, laddae.” Bold warned, “Mehk ya lose the good thot moight bae won. Trust mae. Wae’ve got to go farward with it and if thangs get twisted backwards, wae just mehkh the best of it.” He shrugged, “Thot’s the best wae can do.”

With the wisdom of the dwarf steeling their souls, they gathered under a particularly broad, low hanging bough of a kapok and rehashed their plan and the storm continued crashing on around them.

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Tou’s arms pumped like pistons, launching him up with such force that his palms left the floorboards for a second before they slapped back down. Then, with his forearms folding to lineup parallel with his spine, he lowered his torso slowly towards the floor. The reason for his slow decline should’ve been solely in the name of the exercise, however, it was actually due to the fact that the floor was lathered in an oil that smelled like rotten fish. Even holding his breath, the scent still brought tears to his eyes, but this all worked in his favor as it motivated him to push back up to a plank position.

The culprit sat not far from him. Tabuh was perched on a stool by the window. The other stool, before her, held a jar of the pungent fluid. She carelessly stuck a bristly twig in, splashed it around, then pulled it dripping from the container to thrust it into the chambers of her revolver’s cylinder. One by one, she scrubbed them out and oiled them down. The gun was more than clean by this point but it was a calming practice for Tabuh, something she could do idly as she thought. Tou’s workout provided him the same meditative mental state.

The elves were broken from their trance when the door was flung open and the hulking first mate stomped in. Lightning struck outside the ship and thunder rolled in as he plopped down on the bed, cloaking the sound of the furniture moaning under his weight. The bearn sat there for a moment, looking from Tou to Tabuh without a word. The moment lasted so long that both Tou and Tabuh exchanged glances and looked back at Jason, ready to break the silence themselves before he finally opened his snout.

“Sentray, Fou,” he addressed them, “The dael’s off.”

“What?!” Tabuh jumped to her feet, throwing the brush to the side but keeping her gun in her hand.

The Giant shrugged, “Dael’s off.”

“Farakin hell it is?!” She shouted, taking a step towards Jason.

Jason was undaunted. He turned to Tou. Tou had also been alarmed, he’d just been quieter about it. He’d gotten out of his pushup position and sat cross legged on the whale-oil soaked floor. His brow was furled, his jaw set, and his arms crossed over his chest, waiting for the explanation rather than demanding it.

“You can kaepp the ship if ya want.” Jason shrugged again, “There won’t bae much of it left.”

Tabuh would’ve taken another step towards the bearn, but her ammunition was back by the stool. After one last second of glowering, she spun around and strutted back towards the box of bullets. Jason kept his gaze on the earth elf, acting as if he was almost unaware of the electric elf’s threatening behavior.

“This tahme, this battle,” the pirate gestured to the windows and the storm thundered on que, “the Captain is raellay retahring.”

“You said that last tahn.” Tabuh snapped as she slapped the container down on the stool next to the whale oil and flung open the lid, “Cept last tahn, there was supposed to be something in it for us.”

“You already got what you wanted, Sentrav.” Jason scoffed as she plucked a cartridge out of the box and turned to face him. He spread his arms out, opening his furry chest to her. The normally overly-armed man had come in weaponless. It was quite possibly the first time either elf had seen him without some kind of lethal tool at his disposal. Still, she didn’t put the bullet back – not yet, not until he finished pleading his case, “Mr. Woodsman should bae the angray one. Hae hasn’t a coin to his name. You, on the other hand, are the hair to all of Northern Assload.”

Her head twisted as she ground her teeth in a maniacal smile and dropped the cartridge into one of the chambers of the cylinder. With a flick of her wrist, the cylinder slapped into place. Tou, still on the floor, finally decided it might be time to speak up.

He stated plainly, “It isn’t about the bounty.”

“Then what?” Jason asked, “The clout? The reputation? Listen, if y’all wanna hook up with the Admiral and join Antipa, go for it. After the Battle, y’all’re already honoraray members! Lord, the *Mystakle Tahmes* will bae runnin with that headlahne whether you wanted it or not! If you came for a name, Mr. Woodsman, then ya got it.” Then he turned to Tabuh, “And if you came to escape yours and make a name for yourself, then what can ah say but you’re welcome!”

Tabuh’s rage subsided as confusion slipped in to take it’s place. Her shoulders dropped as she asked plainly, “Then what is this? An apologay?”

Jason stood up and said, “This is good bah.”

“What?” Tou and Tabuh chimed.

He no longer met their gaze, keeping his eyes forwards as he marched towards the door. His gait was slow, like a man being lead down death row, and his suddenly sober tone shocked the two as much as his initial statement had. As he shuffled, he said, “When wae get to Sareahbis, y’all oughta make a run for it.”

Tou stood up, “What about y’all?”

Jason stopped in the doorway, “The crew will bae raht behand ya.”

Tabuh put the gun down on the stool, “What about you, Drakken, and Dresdan?”

“Wae’ll bae finishing the job wae shoulda finished on the *Hong Chae*.” He stepped out into the corridor and closed the door behind him, adding quietly as he did, “Aeven if it’s the last thang wae do.”

Fire crawled along the curly cues of ink like a spark traveling down a twisted wick, burning up text as it traveled down each page. Every sheet of scripture was aflame, surrounding the patient with a natural amber glow as an unnatural aurous light also lifted from the fires, spiralling around the murmuring healer before curving down to splash upon the cerulean gash in the necromancer’s gut. A flat sapphire shard of metal rose from the incision, drawn out by Doc’s whispers. As it left Truth’s flesh, it took the glow from the wound with it. It radiated that vibrant blue, swelling and dimming in brightness as if the light were fighting against its steel confines in bouts. Once the jagged bottom edge left the flesh, a furry hand snatched it from the air.

The sudden act nearly jostled Doc out of her trance.

Remaining supine, the necromancer growled, "Is that it?"

Had she been a solid species, she'd have been grinding her teeth as she responded. After finishing the current verse, Doc said, "No."

"How much longer?" Truth hissed.

Longer now that you interrupted me. The spirit held her breath for a moment before responding politely, "Mere minutes."

Tossing the blade fragment into the pile beside her pillow bed, Truth grumbled, "I smell trouble."

Such a statement wouldn't mean much had it been uttered from the snout of any other old crone, but coming from a necromancer it was significant. Just as shadowmancers can see energy, necromancers can smell it. Truth's guard perked up at this statement. The chaperone was a shadowmancer and her crow eye had been scanning the ship up-down-left-right for a while now. She could see easily through the bulkheads and floorboards, keeping track of the glowing silhouettes of the *Marrialdo's* crew as they moseyed about. Though it was early evening, many of the pirates were just now waking up and, most of those, were hardly in states of full consciousness. Another day of indulgence and the crew might all need Doc's tender love and care. Still, not all of the *Marrialdo* were nursing hangovers. A few seemed quite sober and one of these few suspicious silhouettes was recognizable. Captain Smidt Cormac was up to no good and he was headed their way.

"I see trouble." The shadowmancer stated, "We may have overstayed our welcome. I'll handle it."

She marched over to the door, jerking it open before closing it quietly behind her. The Captain's office was the only room in the hall, the door split the passageway in two. Stairs ended the corridor on either side, these companionways doubled back and led to a nearly identical hallway that ran directly over the one the shadowmancer stood in. Stairing up through the ceiling, she watched three figures – one of which being the Captain – enter this vertically-parallel corridor. He took a right, his comrades took a left, and their pace was a good many strides quicker than their boss'.

Their left was her right. Without another moment of hesitation she turned and made her way towards the end of the hall. She slinked along absolutely silent, like a cat, one reason for her moniker.

"Catty."

Two nellafs snickered at her, one two steps from the bottom of the companionway and the other three steps behind him. The nearest had two machetes. The blades were dented and rusty, fitting weapons for a man with missing teeth and a layer of filth over his body that nearly made his pale white skin as dark as the twisting stripes of melanin that the nellaf race was known for. His comrade was cleaner, but that was somehow more unsettling. There seemed to be a glossy film over his eyes, not a single hint of an expression on his face, and such a faint hint of a twitch in his sword hand that Catty couldn't be completely sure whether or not he was quivering or if it was in her head. The dirty one chortled a little more.

"We could use a lady like you in the crew." He winked at her, "Use you well." He took the two final steps, approaching her as he continued, "Stay here with, Perry." Whispering in her ears as he passed by, "Keep your hands to yourself, now, ok-"

His breath was thrust from his lungs as her knee smashed into his diaphragm, slammed it against his ribs, lifted him off the ground, and sent him staggering back towards the stairs. Perry, who Catty was now sure was twitching, rushed past Dick (that may or may not have been his

name, but he was a dick so Catty gave him the title) holding his katana by his hip with the blade pointed towards her navel. Catty stepped back as shadows poured from her crow eye and into her hands, stretching out and hardening into her own one-sided blade, which she then used to slap away the swordsman's stab. His blade hit the wall and she kept her pressure on it, stepping in towards him with an elbow. But the elbow never landed. Twisting around the knobby joint, Perry bit down on her bicep.

"The farak?!"

Catty was more surprised than hurt. Her body was covered in a tight suit of leather armor and nellaf teeth weren't known for being particularly sharp. It was such an odd counter that it actually worked – not by dealing damage but by throwing his opponent off – giving him time to pivot his blade around to slip past hers and once again stab for her abdomen. Hastily putting her weight back into her weapon, Catty deflect the second stab and hopped back.

"Good boy, Perry!"

The machete wielding Dick leapt past the bitey buccaneer and led the attack again. Catty's biological eye rolled at the goon while her crow eye released a fat cone of shadows that coalesced in the shape of a giant fist – slamming the grimy goof in the gut and throwing him right back to the companionway he'd hopped up from. As Perry stepped forward once more to replace him, Catty stepped back and took a look behind her.

Captain Smidt Cormac stood at the other end of the passageway. His snarl was visible even from that distance. With a mock curtsy to her, he continued his slow strut towards his office. Her foes may have been beneath her, but if they could keep her from stopping Smidt then they'd have bested her nonetheless. There was no time to play with her prey any longer.

She hurled herself back into the fray. Perry was swinging for her throat, she parried it, holding her shadow-sword with one hand and extending a free hand towards his face. The odd man's eyes grew wide. His mouth instinctively opened and his neck seemed to almost reflexively jut forward as he sought to snag a taste of one of her splayed digits. Her fingers weren't protected by her black leather jumpsuit, however, they were suddenly protected by something black. When she'd yanked her hand away from the hilt of her sword, she'd taken some shadows with it. They now surged out from behind the back of her hand, slipping between her fingers, and jumping from her palm to Perry's palate.

The stupid sailor couldn't even scream as she sent more shadows from her eye down her arm, through her fingers, and thrust deep into his throat. The dark energy seared his flesh as it coursed deeper, sinking barb-like roots into his innards, before she yanked it all back out, taking his shadows with it. Blood and black splattered Catty as Perry tumbled off his feet, his flesh translucent without its shadows. Finally, the man was still.

Dick stood behind him, his machete-wielding arms hanging from his shoulders like limp noodles as he stared at his opponent who was now painted in the guts of his comrade. He turned to run back up the stairs but a snake of darkness wrapped around his neck and held him tight – and the grasp only got tighter. The shadowmancer couldn't help but grin. The energy from her last opponent was still seeping out of him and swirling into her crow eye, releasing wave after wave of euphoric endorphins throughout her brain. She nearly forgot about the fight as all she could think about now was shadows and how badly she wanted more. Fortunately, this had the same effect as focusing on the fight as the next closest source was the thug being strangled before her. That said, her high would be short lived if she didn't hurry up and stop Smidt Cormac. The threat of failing Truth was such a powerful stressor that it managed to pierce through her intoxicated state and bring her brain back down to Mystakle Planet.

Yanking Dick back around to face her for his last few seconds of life, Catty squeezed out one last little treat for herself. With a devilish smirk, she whispered in his ear, "I'll use you well." Then the shadows around his neck twisted, wrenching his spine apart, and she threw him to the ground.

She turned to look back down the passageway.

Smidt's snarl disappeared with a gulp. Not because his comrades had failed and not because Catty might now turn and come for him, but rather because he realized that she had been coming for him the entire time. As she had faced off with the two feeble felons, she'd been letting a slender thread of shadows sneak out of her eye and slip off in the separate direction. The tiny string of dark energy hid in the corner of the floor and the bulkhead, in the cracks of the crown molding, snaking towards the office where Truth was being healed and onwards towards the approaching Captain. He might've noticed had he been looking, but he'd just assumed she was held up with his hooligans and that was that, that is, until she was done and turned around.

Almost immediately, she thrust all her shadows into that thread and like a hose being flipped suddenly to full blast, it only took a second for the long tail of darkness to thicken at the end and rear up like a cobra ready to strike. Before his Adam's Apple had ascended from his gulp, he'd drawn his sword with one hand and whipped out his gun with the other. Unlike those he'd enlisted that lay dead behind Catherine, Smidt was competent enough to not immediately be best by the shadowmancer, but, unfortunately for him, Catty was not alone.

Before the shadows could strike and before he could cut them back, a separate actor entered the scene. Like the shadows, it had oozed under the radar of the Captain, sliding underneath the door of the office and rushing through the grooves in the wooden floor boards, racing past Catty's thread and attacking barely a split second before the shadowmancer. It was an offwhite fluid. It jumped up from the floor and wrapped around Smidt's wrists, solidifying like handcuffs, as more of the liquid rose before him like a pillar. Catty pulled back her shadows as she watched the amorphous blob take shape and darken into the form of the robed necromancer she thought she had been protecting.

Doc had finally finished the deed, Truth was back to her old self.

Smidt would've gulped again had an ossified binding not also wrapped around his throat and begun to lift him off the ground.

"Betrayal." The necromancer hissed. She turned back to look at Catty, "What do we do to traitors?"

Catty was reeling her shadows back in, fighting the urge to bask in the euphoria so that she could pay attention to her superior officer. Once again, she used her thirst to focus through the high. Smiling at the necromancer, she answered, "Consume them."

Truth smirked back saying, "Not yet." before turning to the Captain, "This one still has his uses."

"You do this..." Smidt croaked. He had little air left with which to work with, but seeing as his final words seemed to be upon him, he managed to growl out the rest of his sentence, "and every pirate on the planet will turn on the Disciples!"

"Poor, poor, raceless fool." Truth strode up to the old washed up rogue, her gnarled fingers pinched his greasy cheeks, "The Pirate Wars are over, your kind has served their purpose, it is time for mancers to rise, for the return of the true Black Crown."

Truth spoke on in the Sacred Tongue and as she did the bone bindings that levitated Smidt Cormac began to change in color. As they turned first to a pinkish shade, they also began to lose their opaque nature, replacing it with a glow similar to the sapphiric glow that had lit the

necromancers wound before, only this glow was indigo. His bindings grew too, no longer being constrained to just his hands and throat, but spreading to encase his entire body until he was trapped within the purple substance like an insect in amber. Then, as quickly as it had spread, it began to recede. It was as if it had never been there, except for in his eyes. The color remained their, coating his eyes so that neither the brown nor whites were visible. It was almost like Catty's crow eye, completely black, except purple. And once the rest of the mystical substance had disappeared and the Captain was placed back on his feet, Truth stepped back to appraise her work.

Smidt dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

"Why have you betrayed me?" Truth demanded.

He looked up, facing her with unblinking indigo eyes, "The *Obsidian Sail* is almost upon us."

Truth released an unintelligible curse before whirling around to face Catty, "Fetch me more bone-"

Catty began to turn, stooping like a sprinter about to dash.

"Not the from the crew!" Truth exclaimed, "The slaves. Slaughter the whole lot."

Catty took off.

Doc approached from the doorway of the office.

"You said we had another day." Truth said.

Doc kept her silver eyes on Truth's, straining so that they didn't waver even for an instant as she spoke, "That's what I was told."

"Fortunate that you were able to heal me in time." Truth turned away from the spirit.

When the necromancer looked away, the lilac flames in Doc's chest shrank, like a fleshed being's breast might fall with a heavy sigh.

Truth's nostrils flared, sticking out from her dark hood as she sniffed the corridor to taste the bone of the fallen brutes. Then she turned back to Doc, but did not look at her, as she strode back into the cabin saying, "Had you failed, I might've thought you intentionally lied to me. You did well. Gather your things and leave. Expect to hear from us in the future."

Doc nodded and obeyed. Truth's hypnotized pawn rose and joined them in what had been his cabin. The necromancer and her stooge stood by the windows that filled the outside wall, watching the storm crash down upon the treetop Capitol as they waited for the battle that was rapidly approaching.

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This was their third evening in the Munkloen harbor, their sixth night stuck on the *Marrialdo* since leaving Vinnum Tow, and now, thanks to the weather, they were all crammed below deck to nurse hangovers as rain pounded overhead like an incessant snare, rattling alongside the pounding drumbeats of thunder. Everytime lightning flashed outside, blotting out their portholes with white, the crew collectively winced and clutched their aching heads. Despite their bodies' explicit pleas for an end to the debauchery, the pirates knew only one cure for withdrawal: relapse.

The table was strewn with an assortment of illicit and licit substances. The surface was soaked with the syrup of stale stout, within this thick film were freckles of zirra that had been jostled from their place in line with the rest of the zirra that waited patiently to be snorted up into blood-crusted noses of the hellbrute nellafs. Crumbs of gogo and ash were forever glued to the

tabletop with the zirra, the layer of boozey goo had been cured by the smoke of the gogo that wasn't fortunate enough to escape the blunt. The makers of the mess were just as scattered as their debris. One sat with his feet up on the table, his chair rocked back onto its hindlegs, his head hanging over the back of the chair so that his snores howled towards the ceiling like a hound to the moon. Another comrade slept standing up, his arm wrapped around a porthole like it was an old friend, his head bobbing with the boat in the thrashing waves of the angry harbor. The other two were awake though their mental states might not have qualified as conscious, as one was so lathered in aquannabis that he couldn't trust his senses (and he couldn't quite tell what they were telling him anyways) and the other was so souped up on zirra that his blood had run cold, his heart nearly pumping out of his chest, and his eyes were zigzagging from one dwarf to the next, believing himself to be obsessed with details when in reality he was so paranoid that he was missing the very details that he really needed to notice.

One of the dwarves had wriggled free.

Their butts were strapped to stiff wooden saddles which they were rarely allowed reprieve from. This meant that their asses were so tender and sore it felt as if their ishiums, their sitting bones, would soon collapse from the pressure. Both of their feet were bound to pedals, like those of a bicycle, and they had to perpetually ride. The resistance was similar to that of a ride up a slow incline, just steep enough to demand a bit of extra effort. It would've been manageable for a short period but over longer period of time – say for instance, six days – the task became torturously growling. When their overseers did grant them a break, they were too weak to cause any trouble. This left the clever dwarf that had unhooked herself in a cruel position, mulling over the question as she continued to pedal: *What now?*

If she jumped off the bike, her legs would crumple beneath her. Her arms would catch her, for though they were stiff their muscles hadn't been shredded like those pedaling the contraption. Their hands had been bound behind their back in such a position that required them to constantly shift their posture to keep from cutting off circulation. This saved their upper limbs, but only further enflamed the rest of their bodies. So if she dove to freedom, her arms would catch her, but then what? Her legs were still dead. She'd be forced to grapple with these four men from the floor.

There was another option. It hummed beside her like a beehive and glowed the color of fresh, warm honey: the enertomb. The machine her bike was strapped to was shaped like a giant flat tire, round on top and flat where it touched the floor. In the center of this circle were a series of wheels, all spun by her pedals, and within those, at the very center, pinched between thin enchanted needles, was the enertomb. A blocky orb of contained energy. All she had to do was reach in, snatch the stone, and smash it on the floor. The entire room would be blasted out into the river, deep-fried fish-food.

Killing a couple hellbrutes and obliterating their merchandise would be a victory if the alternative was being worked to death and making their murderers rich in the process, but what a sweeter victory it would be to do the same and live to tell the tale? It was thoughts like that that had nigh convinced her against going out with a bang and taking on the four stooges when suddenly four more clambered down the companionway stairs with a familiar face in tow.

For a split second, the dwarves stopped pedalling, but the nellaf's didn't even notice as they were equally as shocked. Boldarian Drahkcor the Fourth arrived at the bottom of the stairs, bloodied, bruised, and shackled. Three nellafs stood behind him, but they were in the shadow of the leader of the entourage. Marvell of the Ax stood proud before her prisoner. As a bearn, her

head nearly scraped the ceiling of the hold and she towered over the slackjawed nellafs before her.

“Evenin, bastards.” She smirked.

The two sleeping “bastards” came too life a little too quickly. The man on the porthole slipped off as his legs went limp. The legs of the guy with his chair propped up did the opposite. His legs kicked, launching him into a backwards somersault out of his chair and onto his belly. The two seemingly-conscious “bastards” staggered over, giving Marvell one last moment of gaping before their jaws snapped shut and their eyes squinted with suspicion.

“Angine?” One asked.

“Garfield?” Asked the other.

Marvell rolled her eyes as the nellafs behind her stepped forward, but this only seemed to further perplex the nellafs before her. They had addressed Angine and Garfield, two of their crewmates, not three. Cocking their heads to the side like hoodwinked hounds, they asked the third.

“Who are you?”

“Revolc.”

Revolc was the correct name of a crew member. And Revolc answered with confidence. The only problem was that this “they” that answered was a plural “they”. All three of the newcomers had chimed in unison. Despite all their planning, all three had forgotten who they were supposed to be playing. Nonetheless, their plan was doomed to fail from the start. Marvell’s descriptions had led Fetch to make their disguises noticeably uglier than her late crew members. That’s how Marvell saw them. Unfortunately, that was not how her living crew members remembered them. That, plus a third fact: the real Revolc happened to be standing right there, staring dumbfounded into an uglier doppelganger of himself.

The real Revolc reached for his sword but as his hilt found the handle, he toppled forwards. The move initially appeared like a hasty dodge, one that saved his life as Marvell had beat him to the draw and Pride was cutting through the air right where his neck had been a moment before, but as Revolc folded forward, diving into the midst of the imposters, it was revealed that this was not an intentional effort but rather due to the glistening enertomb that had pegged him in the back of the head.

Though the pirates had caught on to Marvell’s ruse, the dwarves in chains behind the hellbrutes had not. Had another second slipped past, the dwarf that had slipped from her bondage would’ve realized that the bearn and hellbrutes with Bold were allies, but instead she’d chosen the very second before Revolc reached for his sword to snatch the enertomb from the generator she pedalled and chunk it. Thus, as Revolc flopped forwards, the explosive stone fell towards the floor as well.

Fetch and Ben, disguised as Angine and Garfield, dove for the bomb from different angles but their heads collided and they bounced off each other and out of the way allowing the last faux-nellaf, Boldarian disguised as ugly-Revolc, to dive over his concussed-clone and catch the enertomb before it could hit the ground.

Pride hit one of the cycling contraptions with a clang like a bell as Marvell raised the black, double-sided Joy over the real-Revolc. Again the pirate was saved in the nick of time as Lenga – disguised as a shackled, heavier-set Boldarian – shrieked from behind her, “Don’t kill him!”

This didn’t stop Marvell from trying, but it gave her half a second of hesitation that was long enough to give Revolc time to draw his sword and block the ax coming down for his throat

like the blade of a guillotine. Having escaped fate twice, Marvell decided to spare Revole's life for a third time. Rather than finishing him with her next move, she let him roll to safety as she snatched a ring of keys that had been hooked around one of his belt loops. Straightening back up, she turned to Lenga and tossed her the keys, hissing through clenched teeth, "Don't get killed!"

The shadows that masked Lenga were beginning to peel off of her like mist rising from the dew laden jungle floor. The robust belly she'd sported as Boldarian dissolved into darkness, revealing a heavy tome of spells beneath and it was on this old book that she caught the key ring Marvell had thrown. It wasn't just her shadows, those that hid the identity of the rest of their gang were evaporating as well. With the jig up, Fetch called back what shadows he could save from the charade and returned to his human disguise with a shadowy bludgeon in hand. Back on his feet, he charged the pirate by the porthole. Opposite Fetch, Ben was back on his hooves and with his elgroom raised and glowing a brilliant yellow, he charged the hooligan that had tumbled out of his chair when they first arrived. This left the fourth sailor to Bold – or rather, this left Bold to the fourth sailor, because having dove for the enertomb he landed at the feet of the aquannabis coated fourth.

"You're Bold!" The man gasped, kicking for the bomb cradled in Bold's hand.

"Yar bold!" Bold threw it in the air to avoid the boot.

He was on his feet in an instant, reaching to catch the stone he'd thrown only for the pirate to catch it first. With wild, dilated eyes and a yellow-toothed smirk, he tossed it over his shoulder. Rage rushed through Bold's body like the fire that would soon rush through the hold and cremate them all, there was no way he would be able to stop it from shattering against the floor this time. With futile fury, his balled fist rocketed up into the smuggler's chin, lifting him off his feet, and sending him crashing down on his back.

Behind him, Bold expected to see an explosion, but he didn't. His fellow dwarves had all stopped pedaling, their wide eyes looked at the same spot as he: the woman dwarf that had initially thrown it lay on her back between the generators, her arms outstretched, the glowing stone in her hands.

"Hold on to it, lass!" Bold commanded, "War gettin outa here aloive!"

Now he turned back to the broken-jawed pirate. Raising his foot over the still body, he was just about to crush the man's forehead like he had his chin when gentle hands clasped his knee. Lenga was beside him, she shook her head. Bold rolled his eyes, but respected her request and put his foot back down.

She passed him the keys, "I need to heal the sick."

Bold nodded, "They naeda bae able to run, Lil Lenga."

The two got started while the other three were finishing up. Ben's battle had gotten off to a bad start. The yellow shine of the stone in the crook of his elgroom meant that he was conjuring up electricity and, unfortunately, his foe recognized that. Apparently, he'd fought an elementalist before and while some attacks are easier to dodge than others, a lash of lightning was a rough one to evade especially in the confines of the hold. The correct strategy in such a situation was to charge so that at least if you got hit then you could transfer that electricity right back to your aggressor. Ben was as versed in offensive elementalism as he was defensive – not at all – so when the pirate lunged for him he just pulled the trigger and zapped him quicker. Not a moment after he'd struck the nellaf with a cat-o'-nine-tails of pure cobalt energy, the nellaf slammed into him and both men tumbled to the floor twitching as their muscles clenched and cramped.

While both men strained to regain control of their bodies, they still had full reign over their brains – this meant Ben could still attack! The enertomb in his elgroom turned from a

metallic yellow to a milky white. Still twitching as sparks continued to jump off him, the pirate had managed to get on top of Ben, straddling him, but as he pulled two daggers from his belt, Ben raised his elgroom before him to block and released a fan of ice. It hit the thug like a shotgun spray and launched him off Ben. Ben rolled away and bound to his hooves with some help from his tail then turned the elgroom on the goon to blast him again. But rather than peppering him again for a third time, Ben sought to ensorcel an end to their squabble. The creamy white light from the stone in his staff darkened, turning into a soft chocolate brown. As it did, dust from all over the room swarmed like hundreds of little hornets to cluster before Ben, levitating as they amalgated into a single, large stone. His foe, his clothes torn and chest bloodied, hopped to his feet and saw the fate that faced him next.

“Farak.” He muttered.

Ben sent the rock, launching it at the man’s head. He was a moment too slow. The nellaf ducked and the projectile continued on, crashing through the porthole window behind him.

“Farak.” Ben cursed.

The hellbrute nellaf hesitated for a moment. His arms were half raised, daggers still in hand, ready to throw, but something behind him pulled at his attention. Twitching as if still being electrocuted, he glanced back at the now-open porthole then back at Ben. Ben saw the thought in his opponents eyes and, to be honest, he didn’t mind. Lowering his elgroom, he shrugged. The pirate shrugged back then shoved his daggers back into his waistband, spun around, and dove through the hole. Preferring to face the fury of the river than the brutal magic of Benjamin.

Although, maybe this was not the case – maybe it wasn’t Ben’s brutality he was fleeing. After the nellaf wiggled through the orifice, Ben thought he noticed something odd in the storm outside. Rushing over to the window, he peaked through. His eyes grew wide.

There, between the thrashing waves of the harbor and the pounding rain that shrouded the bay in darkness, was a ship – one as large as the *Marrialdo* – and it was moving. *You can’t sail in this storm?* Its sails were as black as the clouds above and above those dark drapes were equally bleak flags. There was no insignia on the banners, they were just black. Obsidian, one might even say. Details of the vessel aside, what concerned Ben was the fact that the ship appeared to be heading straight for them. This brought an even more concerning question to mind, *Can they stop in this storm?*

“Fetch, Marvell!” He called.

Fetch didn’t hear, but Marvell did. Revolc had proven himself to be one of the more competent of the criminals on guard duty. Armed with the double-sided, black bladed Joy (as Pride was still lodged in one of the enertomb charging machines), Marvell had charged Revolc and he had held his own with his lanky khopesh. The traditional weapon of the Vinnum Tow colonizer, the blade was question mark shaped, the outside curve being extremely sharp while the top of the arch of the was blunt, like the head of a bat. As it turned out, the Hellbrute-style blade was perfect for fending off attacks from a battle ax. As Joy came crashing down for his neck, up went his khopesh. He caught one of Joy’s edges in the hooked inside of his sword and then spun in to keep her arm extended above him but her body open to attack. He drove a fist into her gut only to find that the flesh beneath the chainmail was even harder than the armor. As Revolc’s knuckles bounced off her abs, Marvell’s knee came up and clobbered him in the chin. He staggered back.

Again, Revolc was one of the more competent of his comrades, but that didn’t mean he posed a threat for Marvell of the Ax. Still, he was determined to try. Bouncing back from the jaw breaking blow, he sliced at the bearn. She deflected but her arms were too big to turn around her

parry fast enough to get back on the offensive. His blade bounced off hers but he brought it right back in, this time stabbing to jab her with the dull end of the khopesh. She hopped out of the way and he stepped forwards, turning his stab into a swing, but he'd gotten too close.

Her hand caught his wrist. He gulped. With her other hand, she brought Joy up and around and all Revolc could do was watch as it came down, unsure of whether to pray that it came for his arm or his head, but then the universe decided to spare the hellbrute for what may have been the thirteenth time that day as Marvell heard Ben call out for her and she stopped her chop barely a hair above his forearm to glance back at the gmoat.

"Come look." Ben said.

Marvell groaned. Turning back to Revolc, she thrust Joy forward so that the rod between the two blades struck the nellaf hard in the face. It broke his nose and knocked him out cold but also spared his life. Throwing the bludgeoned brute over her shoulder, she trudged over to Ben. He gestured out the window. She shoved Revolc out into the sea, leaving him in the universe's hands once more, then glared out the window. Seeing what Ben saw, she had a to take a moment. *I just saved that bastard's life.* Pulling her snout out of the porthole, she turned to Ben, mirroring his expression.

"They're going to crash into us." She stated.

Ben nodded, "We've got to get off this ship."

They both turned to call for Fetch. Fetch's goon – the one that had originally been sleeping on the porthole – had hardly even woken up to fight him. It was child's play. The only problem was that Fetch couldn't just kill the bloke, not while Lenga was looking, and he didn't want to win the fight by knockout because then he'd have no excuse to kill the guy. So, unfortunately for the guy, Fetch just pummeled him with a pole of shadows. Beating him back towards the companionway as he threw glances over his shoulder at Lenga.

Though their love was young, Lenga had a pretty good understanding of Fetch's character. Thus as she went around mending the dwarves shredded muscles and healing their bruises and abrasions, she kept one eye on her dog of a boy friend. Fetch knew that as long as he was in eye sight, there would be no claiming the shadows of the pirate, and so he beat the man back towards the stairs, praying he would take the bait.

And he did! After one last wrap on the head with his dark-magic-made bat, the nellaf fell back against the companionway with a gasp. No sooner did he feel the jagged stairs beneath him than did he flop around onto his feet like a cat and scurry up the ramp to the floor above. Licking his lips, Fetch bound up after the man only to be stopped in his tracks.

A new figure had joined the fray. Fetch would've been infuriated, having worked so hard to herd his enemy, but the sight of this new soul stole any thoughts of shadows from his mind. His jaw dropped and his heart nearly stopped for a second as it revved up to beat double time. As if an explosion went off beneath him, he rocketed up the stairs. Not to kill but instead to embrace as his long lost-

The sharp tip of a shadow blade pricked his chest, stopping him in his tracks. His goofy grin fell to a frown and his shoulders dropped. Though he was in human form, his one brown eye looked like that of a puppy's as he stared up at her, asking, "Catty?"

"Fetch." Just as he only had one mortal eye, so too did she. Her eye darted over to the water elf and rock dwarf freeing the slaves behind him before flicking back Fetch, "I don't think we're on the same side here."

Fetch scoffed, hoping to crack her cold demeanor, "That's cause you're on the wrong side."

“FETCH!” Came a call from behind him.

“What?!” Fetch crowed, whirling away from his fellow shadowmancer to glower at his comrades by the porthole.

“There’s a ship headed straight for us.” Ben stated.

“Huh?” Fetch muttered.

Even Bold and Lenga paused what they were doing to perk up and listen.

“A ship is going to crash into the *Marrialdo*.” Marvell reiterated before nodding at the woman above Fetch on the companionway, “Who is that?”

“A friend.” Fetch said, turning back to Catty as she swung at him with her shadow-made katana.

He tumbled down the stairs as she cleared up the matter for Marvell, “We’re enemies.”

“Men...” Marvell muttered to herself before asking Ben, “Fetch’s busy. Should we help?”

“He’ll be fine,” Ben shook his head, “we need to get the-”

“Enertombs.” Marvell agreed.

“Dwarves.” Ben finished.

Both cocked their heads to the side.

“If that ship hits, the dwarves will be crushed!” Ben argued.

“If that ship hits, then we *all* blow up.” Marvell countered.

“COMRADES!” Bold roared from the otherside of the hold, “Quit yar arguing and lend us uh hand!”

The dwarf was right. The gmoat snatched a ring of keys off the unconscious nellaf Bold had left just before the rows of generators while the bearn stole a knapsack from the card table and began collecting the enertombs. Meanwhile, Fetch and Catty started to fight like dogs and cats on the stairs and the storm raged on, the *Obsidian Sail* drawing closer and closer.

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The *Obsidian Sail* drew closer and closer and the storm raged harder and harder. The sound of explosive thunder was unintelligible from sounds of crashing waves as the river thrashed with a fury that matched the wake of a hurricane on the deep sea. The old ship shot up and over the crests, bounding from one tidal tiptop to smash down on the façade of the next. Busting through the wave, it then pitched violently to sail up another steep sloap. Tethered to masts and banisters by thick ropes tied in harnessing knots around their torsos, the crew was pinballed about the deck. Had they held fast to the ship, their arms would’ve been wrenched from their sockets. Instead, they clung to their cords and did their best to hop and skip to dodge one another as they were flung and jerked like yo-yos up and down the furious Sereibis River.

The city in the canopy was a shadow in the storm. Blurred by the torrential downpour it blended with the angry clouds above, but ever so often the harbor was illuminated by a bolt of lightning that evaporated the rain around it and allowed the Obsidians to spot their destination for but a moment before the rain returned. The *Marrialdo* bobbed anxiously before them, pinned between the piers, its flank exposed to the *Obsidian*’s bowsprit.

With five fingers wrapped around their ropes and five fingers interlocked with each other’s, Tou and Tabuh danced across the deck. They rushed towards the bow as the vessel climbed towards the sky then pirouetted as the ship jumped from its peak. As the *Obsidian Sail* plummeted down into the trough between waves, the couple bound back uphill for the stern.

Momentum was all they could use to maintain control and keep from being yanked to and fro by their safety lines.

On one of their sprints towards the back end of the boat, their eyes found their Captain's. His black scales glistened in the storm. Each lash of lightning flung across the sky was mirrored on his bare torso, as if the electricity was coming from within him. His head tails were lifted by the wind that whipped by, flapping behind him like the tentacles of a fleeing squid, and yet his wide-brimmed, witch's hat didn't budge from his scalp. Dresdan Otubak's indigo eyes bore into them, stopping Tou and Tabuh in their tracks for a moment, then he put his hand over his heart, saluting them, before turning his glare back on the *Marrialdo*.

The couple turned back too as the *Obsidian Sail* shot up another mountainous river wave. Tou had *Future* on his hip and Tabuh had her golden gun on hers, but they also both carried a small knife. Their fingers squirmed in their clasped hands as they palms tickled for said blade's hilt. This was what they were to use to cut the cords that connected their harnesses to the masts, that anchored them to the ship, but if they snipped their safeties too soon they could very easily be launched into the Sereibis where river monsters or the monsoon would surely claim them quickly. As they crashed over the tip of another wave and the ship left the surface of the river, hovering in midair for a moment before plunging, they pivoted and began their run back to the stern.

This time, their eyes met those beady eyes of the bearn that stood on the right side of his reptilian commander. Shirtless like his partner, his rain drenched fur made it look almost as if Jason the Giant were wearing a heavy jacket. His massive paw was pressed to his chest and he bowed to them when their eyes met. On the left side of the Captain was another furred comrade, the old boatswain. Unlike his compatriots, he was fully clothed. His red beanie was soaked and sagging down his face, the tip hanging off his snout. His snaggly teeth poked out from between his lips but he wasn't smiling, his face was solemn. His hand was not over his heart but rather pressed against his other, folded together, he wished them well.

As the ship reared again and the two were forced to tear their eyes away from the helm to look ahead. The wind rushed with them, lifting them up the steep incline of the deck. Simultaneously, they let go of each other's hands and grabbed their knives. As they ran, many of the other members of the crew ran alongside them. The men and women of the *Obsidian Sail* hooted and hollered with excitement, some sang shanties while other's chanted warcries, and then they all stopped.

The ship breached the top of the wave and hesitated there as if tiptoeing on a ledge. A flash of lightning blinded them, dialating Tou's mahogany eyes and Tabuh's golden for a moment, then as the *Obsidian Sail* tilted downwards and the thunder rolled in, their vision returned. There, at the bottom of the trough, was the *Marrialdo*. This was it.

As the vessel careened down the slope of the violent river, Tou and Tabuh turned to one another once more. With daggers in one hand and their ropes in the other, they didn't embrace, but their lips did. As their stomachs dropped with the ship, their affection injected warmth back into the empty pocket in their guts. They turned to look over the bow, shouting incoherently into the storm, and braced themselves.

The collision seemed to impact the atmosphere itself. Like the static in the air before a lightning bolt and the organ rumbling resonance from a clap of thunder, for a moment Mystakle Planet stood still and the universe itself trembled.

Tou and Tabuh were caught in midair. They'd leapt up and the ship dropped out from underneath them as the bowsprit impaled the *Marrialdo*. The *Obsidian* didn't stop there, it

pushed further into its foe, devouring the great façade of the hellbrute ship and destroying the head of itself in the process. Debris burst up towards the dark heavens as the rain continued to pound down and pirates filled the sky as they were launched onto the deck of the enemy.

Tumbling through the air, the couple separately brought their hands together, the rope in one and knife in the other. The slack in their safeties was quickly running out, so too was the time they had before they smashed against the slick surface of the next ship. They cut through the cord then did their best to train their eyes on the impending impact. Tabuh hit with a somersault, Tou landed running on his feet. As soon as she bound back upright, Tou had whipped around. They had enough time to make eye contact and then-

BOOM!

- - -

Her fist smashed through his shadow-made shell of an exterior, simultaneously dissolving his disguise and throwing him down the companionway so that he hit the deck in his true canine form. Despite the blow, no sooner did Fetch hit the floor than did he bounce back up yipping.

“You didn’t stab me!”

“I will next time!” Catty hissed.

Thrusting her index finger in his direction, three dark orbs rolled off her arm and shot towards the sable stray. He bound up the stairs, into the onslaught, squirming to avoid the first two and nearly dodging the third as it rolled down his spine, singing off fur and searing the flesh beneath. A rope of shadows trailed from his tail and it caught hold of the orb that had scraped him. As he ran, the rope grew taught and then, like a bungee cord, it slung the sphere right back at it’s shooter.

Catty easily evaded it, slicing through it with her shadow sword. The two halves continued on past her, diffusing into the air like smoke behind her, but before she could attack again Fetch was back before her, disguised as a human, swinging his shadow bat. Raising her sword from its swing, she blocked his bludgeon and their eyes met once more.

“Join us.” Fetch proposed.

She rolled her eyes, “I wish.”

“You do?!” Fetch exclaimed.

If his surprise hadn’t knocked the air out of him, the kick she delivered into his gut surely did. Once again, his human persona was obliterated while he flew backwards down the companionway, hitting the corner of the hold as a hound oncemore.

This time he was slower to rise. From the floor, he cut a line across the palm-pad on his right paw and let shadows seep out of his eye to mix with the blood. Intertwined, the enchanted plasma engulfed him and he slowly rose, morphing out of the black goo as a human for the third time. This time, if she socked him in the mouth or kicked him in the gut, he’d lose a tooth or break a rib, but he was less worried about that. Her denials were beginning to rub him the wrong way, like a stranger petting him against the grain of his fur. Despite his humanoid form, he shuddered from his shoulders and scowled at his adversary as she down a stair.

“I haven’t seen you since the Dragon Islands.” Fetch growled, “Come to think of it, you were a bit of a godi crow then too.”

“Not everyone’s brother is a king.” Catty spat.

“Not everyone’s lover is a tsar!” Fetch barked back.

As Fetch's fingers finished materializing, they wrapped around his club. Rushing forward, he swung the bat like he planned to knock his foe's head out of the park. She easily ducked under it, slipping in close with her saber aimed at his navel, but he kept with the momentum of the swing, his entire body pivoting with it, and Catty realized that his brash attack had been ruse. He had planned to knock her head off, but not with the bludgeon, rather with his foot. With his back to the cat who had foolishly lunged closer, his left foot came up off the ground to deliver a mule kick so fluid it would've made a ballerina blush. Instead of reddening the face of a dancer, he smashed the face of a mancer and sent her hurtling away to slam hard against the bulkhead at the base of the companionway.

"You chose the Disciples instead of me." Fetch stated.

She dropped her feet to catch herself, wiped her jaw with the back of her hand, and hocked a fat loogie of blood, glowering at Fetch, "A mancer has no choice. No more than a dog has over their master."

Fetch cocked back his bat and his tongue reared up to levy his retort only the clap back never came. Catty was ready. Both for insult and for injury. She was so ready that if he hesitated for but a moment she would've beat him to the punch, yet her counter never came either, because at that moment the hold exploded. However, before that happened, on the otherside of the room, Ben, Marvell, Bold, and Lenga were ignoring the battle and banter by the stairs and hurriedly preparing for the inevitable destruction heading their way. Though they were doing more towards avoiding impending doom than Fetch and Catty were, it wasn't altogether an organized effort.

Ben was struggling with freeing the dwarves. There were five different keys on the key rings and it wasn't as simple as one key per dwarf. One key might unlock a dwarf's wrist shackles, but it would take another to undo the locks on their pedals and a third to release the belt-buckle harness that strapped them to their seats, then he'd help the poor lad or lass off their pedastool, help them over to the door in the back of the room, then rush back to help the next only to find that the key which had unlocked the last dwarf's wrists wound up fitting the lock on the pedals or fit none of the locks at all and he had to try one of the other four keys. To top it all off, the keys were rusted and the locks weren't much better off. He had to jostle each key and smack the padlocks around to get the right key to work, more than once the right key fit so poorly he mistook it to be the wrong one and cycled through the four others before giving it another shot. When it finally dawned on him to use his elgroom, ice the chains, then shatter them, he only had time enough to free one more dwarf before the impending doom finished pending.

The gmoat's struggle might suggest that Marvell's strategy was wiser – that being, trying to secure the enertombs so that the entire hold didn't blow – but she didn't fair much better. After reaching for the first stone and searing off her finger prints, she realized that you couldn't pluck them out from the needles that pinched them while the dwarves were still pedaling. And this wasn't an easy fix. The poor prisoners were so malnourished and exhausted, they hardly had any control left of their bodies. Their legs perpetually pedalled, like a pendulum perpetually swings. As one foot mashed down and the other shot up, the inertia pushed them just enough that gravity was able to pull the other foot down and launch the mashing foot back up. Even after realizing Marvell's intentions were pure, many of the dwarves were helpless to stop themselves. Marvell had to wedge her self up under their bikes, not an easy feat for the giant, furred race, and then, with hands as steady as Indiana Jones', remove the enertomb before she shifted enough to let the dwarf shift and the machine churn to burn off her phalanges. The stones were hot enough

as it were. She was a little concerned they'd start a fire in the satchel she was placing them in and they may have, had there been a little more time for them to do so.

While Ben and Marvell toiled, Bold was nearly done. He had the same issues as Ben and though he had no magical staff with which to bully the locks apart, he had gotten a head start on the liberation effort. In fact, while Ben had freed three, Bold had managed to take the chains off of eight of his country folk, safely escorting them to the door in the back of the room, and there were only twelve total bound to the bikes. After helping over his ninth, he addressed the woman that had slipped out of bondage and thrown the enertomb at the beginning of the fight. She, JoAnn Brune, had been helping get the dwarves through the door, there behind the hold was a long storage corridor of sorts. Empty of hellbrutes but who knew what lay behind the next door. For that reason, they'd waited there, half in and out of the room, but fate only waits so long and both Bold and JoAnn knew the time had come to take the next chance.

"Go." Bold clasped her shoulder, "Wae'll brang the last two."

"No." She clasped him back, "You go, Oi'll steh."

"Oi con't laeve without the Princess." He stated.

"Wae con't laeve without ar Kang." JoAnn replied.

The old dwarf didn't have to look at his fellow compatriots to know that they were all in agreement with their leader and, as a wise old man and a dwarf himself, he knew that even if they weren't all about to be blown to smithereens, he didn't have enough years left in him to convince a dwarf to change their mind. All he could do was pray that there was time to finish the job and as he sought divine intervention, he turned and rushed forth to be the tool for the hand of God. As he ran back to the last bike, he glanced over at Lenga.

She stood in the center of the room, her eyes closed as she murmured almost as if in a trance. Flames flew from the pages of the book split open in her arms. A ribbon of golden light surrounded her, twisting around her like a tornado, fluttering her hair and tugging at her dress. It rose from her. The asklepian aura wrapped around and around the room, striking here and there like a cobra to engulf this or that wound. In a short period of time, Lenga had soothed inflamed thighs of tendonitis, placated charley horse's that had been bronking for hours, and calmed strained spines and aching abdomens, expending more energy than the enchanted scripture required so as to expedite the process and yet the energy she was exerting when Bold whirled around to free the final dwarf was far more than she had been before. Bold wasn't a mancer, he couldn't see or smell that energy, but he could hear it for he had learned in the very same school in which she was now Headmaster. This was a spell beyond his fluency, but not beyond his imagination. He caught enough words to realize what she was doing.

The ribbon of golden light was no longer targeting singular injuries, it was now wrapping around entire persons. Not just one individual, but all of them. It surged from one body to the next, twisting around them and then rushing on to tether the next. As Bold skidded to a halt by the final generator, he realized that he himself was surrounded in the warmth of her healing magic. Glancing across the room, even Fetch was glowing. In fact, the only souls not surrounded by the lemon luminescence was the unconscious stooge Bold had knocked out earlier and the long haired, shadowmancer sparring with Fetch in the corner.

"Shae's protecting us."

And not a moment too soon. The moment Bold realized, the bowsprit of the *Obsidian Sail* gored the great galleon, bursting the belly of the *Marrialdo* wide open. The mighty shaft penetrated the very wall of the hold in which they were in, it stabbed all the way to the other wall of the room – over Boldarian's head – and would've continued, dragging the body of the rest of

the ship after it, smashing everything in its path, but Lenga's magic refused to let up. The mast disintegrated as it passed through the flaxen light, wood splinters and metal shreds exploded in all directions, seeming to fill every square inch of space except for those engulfed in the spell. As the bow of the *Obsidian Sail* followed the sprit, bashing its way forth like a bulbous battering ram, it too was ate up by the light. It turned up floor boards and enertomb generators, pushing them out of the way and throwing them into the auro, forcing them to share in its fate. Where the light touched the floor, the floor persevered. The machines lucky enough to be tethered along with the living stood stoic like angelic steeds, obliterating anything that sought to budge them, but not all of the bikes were so lucky and, of the lucky ones, the entirety of their metallic frames were not saved – only that which was shrowded in the gold.

Before the collision, Marvell had managed to collect ten of the enertombs. The last two being the one in the machine the last dwarf was bound to – which was safely protected by Lenga's spell as was the dwarf – and the one in the last machine Ben had freed a dwarf from. That machine was not protected. And as the *Obsidian Sail* continued to push further into the *Marrialdo*, that machine was torn from its platform and tossed seat-over-wheels into the air, launching the enertomb free. The glowing orb shot towards the disintegrating roof, disappearing from view before it smacked against something hard and-

BOOM!

What matter hadn't splattered against Lenga's healing serpent now faced the wrath of a fiery explosion. Flames shot through the holes bored by the wreckage. Great arms of infernal fury poured through the halls, just beneath the deck, as the water logged surface of the ship bulged and then gave way, bursting upwards and tearing the *Marrialdo* nigh in half. What resistance the ship had to the collision was now completely obliterated as the two vessels were welded together. The collision was the smith's hammer and the ships their red hot steel.

Now the angry waves of the Sereibis would get to have their way and burry both boats, but the river took its time. Savoring the destruction and taking both apart piece by piece, as if enjoying the view of the battle that was beginning to end just as it began to unfold. This would not be like the Obsidian's last battle, this was a mad dash to survive.

In the hold, as the sound of the explosion was replaced by the sounds of the storm, Lenga collapsed. Bold dove for the Princess as the light surrounding him and his compatriots faded and the room around them began to trembled. That tremble lasted only for a moment before it was replaced with a quake and that quake was so violent that Bold lost track of what was up and what was down. All he could do was cling to Lil Lenga, cover her with his body as she had with her magic, and pray they wouldn't fall into the sea as debris pummeled him.

A guttural cry marked the end of the quaking. The *Marrialdo* hadn't stopped shaking, however, it had calmed a bit. Great chunks of wood and unrecognizable junk continued to fall around them, split floor planks gaveway and groaning walls collapsed. Bold lifted his head to see that they had indeed fallen through the floor, looking up he could not only see into the hold but into the floor above and even a dark sliver beyond that through which rain gushed through like a waterfall. Again the cry drew his attention.

Keeping Lenga in his arms, he turned to see the dwarf he'd been about to free, still strapped to a cycle. The machine had toppled over onto the prisoner and refuse had piled on top of it. Throwing Lenga over his shoulder, he clambered over the destruction to the flipped generator. Straining, he roared in unison with the dwarf this time as he lifted the machine.

With impeccable timing, Ben arrived behind them. He came in so fast that he slid off his hooves and under the machine to lie beneath the dwarf that now hung from the bike, limp from

illness, exhaustion, and now injuries. Holding the elgroom between them, the orb glowing white, he iced the locks that bound the poor man. Marvell got there next. As Bold continued to bear the wait, Marvell quickly reached in and removed the enertomb. As she tossed it from hand to hand like a hot potato, Bold looked away. Not wanting to witness the bearn's cavalier bomb handling and desiring a distraction from the strain of the generator machine on his arms, he again craned his head to look up through the many shattered ceilings above.

His eyes met two eyes, one brown and one black.

Fetch looked down from the jagged edge of the floor of the hold. Turning from Bold, Fetch glanced over his shoulder. Though Fetch said nothing, Bold sensed what the lad was looking after. Despite Bold's intense focus on the task at hand before the wreck, he had noticed the banter bouncing back and forth between the two shadowmancers. Plus, as a man that had been in many a compromised mission, where you had to pick between a rock and a hardplace, where saving one comrade meant abandoning another, Bold recognized the contorted expression on the young man's face as Fetch turned back to meet his gaze.

"Lad," Bold hollered, "don't-"

"Keep her safe." Fetch shouted, then he ran off.

Bold shook his head, but there was no time to brude. The frozen chains shattered and Ben and Marvell helped get the wounded dwarf out from under the contraption allowing Bold to set it down. The floor lurched from beneath them, but it didn't give...not yet.

Ben took the bag of enertombs and Marvell passed the dwarf off to Bold. Bold being dwarven height had an easier time helping his brother walk than the giant bearn woman. The other dwarves had been busy incapacitating the hellbrutes in the chamber they'd fallen into. Judging from the smashed bunks, they'd arrived in the berth. The hungover hellbrutes had been half dead before the destruction and were no match for the dwarves – even in their emaciated state. It was a good thing Lenga was out cold, for though her friends had managed to spare the bastards in the hold, the freed dwarves spared no expense for those unfortunate crows in the berth.

Again, the room groaned and this time the façade gave way as more of the *Obsidian Sail* pushed in. Flooring splintered, peeling back like a banana as the vessels merged further. With no sign of stopping and the very real possibility that they all might soon be smashed against the opposing wall, no one had to express the need to get the hell out. Limping and hobbling, they made their way to the only door left. River water was seeping up through the cracks in the floor as they filed out. It seemed they had dodged a dozen fates only to find themselves facing a dozen more, but they'd come this far.

With ringing ears, few could hear, but Bold was mostly preaching to himself anyways, murmuring, "Mehk the best of it, thot's the best ya con do." as they trudge onwards.

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They were launched into the air as fire burst from the belly of the boat like lava from the loins of a volcano. The entire deck of the *Marrialdo* rippled, as if the laws of physics had been temporarily skirted to allow the hardwood to undulate like the face of lake struck by a stone, but those laws quickly came back into play as part of the deck split and then exploded with the fire. The burst came with an extra lurch as the *Obsidian Sail*, which hadn't finish wedging itself into the vessel even before the explosion, jumped forward and split more of the *Marrialdo* in two. If it weren't for the storm, both ships would've gone up in flames but instead the heavens

thundered angrily, as if jealous of the enertomb's boom, and stomped out any chance of fire. Pummeled by the downpour above and battered by the waves below, it seemed water was determined to claim the two galleons and the two elves were determined to be gone before it did.

Tou and Tabuh hit the ground and bounced back up.

"Run!" they chimed.

They turned for the bow. The gangway to the peirs was up that way. Fortunately, like every bridge in Munkloe, it was made of planks and rope rather than posts and crossbars so though it launched any unfortunate soul into the ravenous river when the crash crashed, the gangway itself didn't fall into the bay. As they moved in that direction, their bodies picking up speed, their minds lagged behind. There was movement on the docks before the gangway. Movement that glistened in the lightning light, movement that rattled like a snair drum.

Though Tabuh was by his side, Tou had to holler over the storm for her to hear his question, "The Munkloe Guard?"

Tabuh squinted to double check but the scrutiny only increased her perplexion, "Can't bae, they got swords."

"So do we, pale elf."

A gang of men stepped into their path. All seven were nellafs and they were seething. The *Marrialdo* men had been jerked from their grueling hangovers, betrayed by former allies, and wedged between a rock and a hardplace. Though these specific men surely didn't know that their slaves had been stolen, their enertombs gone, they certainly figured that all was lost. Without fur like a bearn or blue skin like a water elf, they'd stick out like a sore thumb in Sereibis. Their best bet was a prison cell on God's Island – that is, until they saw the two elves. While the earth elf seemed insignificant, the yellow-eyed electric elf was highly recognizeable.

One of the nellafs stepped forward, chest stuck out like a cock ready to doodle-doo, he winked at Tabuh, "You're the Sentry Princess, aren't ya?"

"Y'all are knock off Darkblades, hellbrute scum, huh?" Tabuh shot back.

The goons drew their swords. Tou whipped *Future* out, ready to swing though his expression suggested otherwise. Having grown up in the woods and sneaking and stealing in the streets, Tou wasn't afraid to kill but he also wasn't fond of it. Tabuh's harsh words with these strangers suggested a prejudice that Tou wasn't sure was justified, then again, he wasn't as worldly as she. Most nellafs he met were from Iceload, but he knew nellafs also hailed from Vinnum Tow – the slave state. While most states were corrupt and obusive to the poor, inequality elsewhere paled in comparison to the desert continent. Discriminating against the Vinn was understandable. Problem was, the Sentry were known for discriminating against Iceloadic nellafs as well and discriminating against those folks as a royal Sentry would rub Tou the wrong way. Nudging Tabuh, he checked, "They're slavers, right?"

Tabuh nodded, "Oh yeah."

Tou sighed with relief as the men charged.

"Can ya cover mae whahl ah raeload?" She asked.

Tou gasped, "You aren't loaded?!"

Tabuh popped off seven shots in the time it took the attackers to go from one foot to the other. The first two bullets hit their targets in between their eyebrows, dropping them flat on their backs before they even knew she was aiming at them. The second two had a large enough fraction of a second to realize they were about to die, but that was it. There was no time for them to react before the slugs slipped under their scalps, unlike the third two. The first of which – the fifth foe – attempted to duck. This was a bad choice as this wasn't Tabuh's first rodeo. She

figured the last of the bunch would attempt to evade and so she didn't go for the head but rather the heart and, sure enough, she didn't miss. Popped right in the heart, the poor lad died quick. The sixth nellaf, however, made a wise decision. Rather than ducking, he raised his blade and sought to swipe the shot out of the sky. A good swordsman can block a bullet and even a bad blademaster can get lucky and apparently this bloke was one of the two for he was able to swat the slug and continue his stride. Unlike the sixth, it was clear which of the formerly mentioned types the seventh was: a good swordsman. Not only did he bat the bullet out of the air, but he knocked it back at the pair.

Tou lunged forward, swinging *Future* up to hit the bullet right back at the nellaf. It was an impressive display of defense, but it failed to be successful offensively as the projectile missed both foes and continued on to strike some other unlucky soul. With his sword already up, he brought it down to parry the swing of the sixth hellbrute then spun to parry the swing of the seventh. Bouncing off the blade, Tou motioned as if he were about to spin again but he stopped his pivot mid-pivot and twisted the opposite way – away from the man behind him and closer to the good swordsman before him. Apparently, good a swordsman as the man was, he wasn't as good as Tou. For when Tou slipped closer, he caught the nellaf off guard, and with one more stride he was behind the fool and stabbing *Future* backwards, just past the man's spine, impaling him through the heart from behind.

Tearing his sword from the foe, he turned to face the last of the “knock off Darkblade, hellbrute scum”. It turned out, this Vinn was not only as competent as his comrade but possibly more. For when he lunged at Tou, carelessly stomping on his friend's dead body, Tou was only able to hastily parry the slaver's swing. His arm hastily swept the man's attack away, drawing his blade away from his body so that his torso was open. Seeing his mistake, Tou hopped back a foot and it saved his life. The nellaf lunged again, stabbing this time, and though Tou didn't get run through, the nellaf was still able to slice on the withdrawal and nick the earth elf's side.

Cursing, Tou clutched the wound with one hand and readied to continue the fight with *Future* in the other, but he was spared the trouble with a BANG!

The man fell, steam rising from the hole Tabuh had bored in his head.

“Thanks.” Tou hollered back at her.

“Thanks for coverin mae.” Tabuh blew Tou a kiss.

The couple turned back towards the bow and both their hearts sank. The folks that had looked like the Munkloe Guard from afar had made it across the gangway. The gentleman that seemingly leading the bunch, a bearn, was kneeling almost as if he were praying despite the chaos surrounding him. Obsidains and hellbrutes were slaughtering one another, the two ships were rumbling like the thunder above, and, speaking of above, the rain seemed only to be coming down harder, but as they scrutinized the distant guardsman they realized why he was down. The silver chainmail that wrapped his thigh was slick with not just rain but blood. There was no foe near him, alive or dead, so at first glance the cause of his wound seemed mysterious, but then Tou recalled hitting the bullet back towards the buccaneers and missing.

“You shot him.” Tou stated.

“*You* shot him.” Tabuh snapped.

Tou shrugged, “We should run.”

“Good ahdaea.” Tabuh agreed.

As they swiveled around, looking to plunge deeper into the doomed vessels, they saw the hulking figure of Jason the Giant rushing below deck. The two elves exchanged curious glances, both understanding what the other was thinking. They were going that way anyways, why not?

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She saw it coming before it came, before she even knew exactly what was happening. Once the wall of the hold ruptured, her mind immediately turned to the fact that the chamber was chock-full of explosives. Without waiting to comprehend what was happening, she expelled all the shadows she had in her eye and let them twist around her, covering her like a cocoon and hiding her face from her foe – her old friend.

He stared at her with puppy dog eyes (well...puppy dog eye, his other was of course a crow eye). The last time she saw him, he'd given her the same look. But the time before that, it had been he that had left. Such is the way with young love. *The sooner we stop this charade the better*, she thought, *there is no such thing as fate*. She shut out the voices in her head that told her otherwise as she snuggled into the sable energy. Before being completely engulfed, she whispered one last thing to Fetch.

“Let me go.”

Then she was torn away. Hurling through the bulkhead behind her, thrust by the explosion, the debris ricocheting off of Lenga's defensive spell, and by her own efforts. She ran with the blast, smashing through wall after wall, clawing her way towards the rear of the ship like a furious feline tunneling after some borrowing beast.

While darkness surrounded had surrounded Catty, a brilliant light had enveloped Fetch. Protecting him from the collision, the explosion, and the refuse, the aurelian aura didn't hold him back. Fetch could've rushed after Catty. He wanted to. The terrible thing was that what brought him to hesitate, to turn back, wasn't Lenga but rather his new crew. He couldn't abandon Ben and Marvell and he couldn't desert the dwarves. The fact that Lenga was an after thought wasn't lost on Fetch, but that would be an issue he'd have to tackle later.

He turned to face the otherside of the hold and he saw that it was gone. The majority of the hold had caved in, crashing down on the room below. Rushing over to the edge, Fetch leaned over the lip. It seemed everyone had survived – aside from the unfortunate hellbrutes that had been in the room prior. The liberated dwarves, weak even as they were, made short work of those in the chamber. The other dwarf, Bold, was straining to lift one of the generator machines so that Ben could free the dwarf still chained to the thing. Lenga was limp and slumped over Bold's shoulder. Craning his head, Bold gazed up through the holes that rose like a column within the gutted ship until his eyes landed on Fetch.

Stern but soft, begging while reprimanding, Bold's stare made Fetch look away. Fetch glanced over his shoulder, peering through the tunnel left in Catty's wake, then turned back to Bold.

“Lad,” Bold hollered, “don't-”

“Keep her safe.” Fetch shouted back.

Then he ran off.

I'm sorry Lenga. He was unable to wipe the image of her slumped over Bold's back from his mind, everytime he blinked the sight flashed before his eyes as if it were painted on the inside of his eyelids. But when his eyes were open, one train of thought commanded his attention: *Catty. Catty. Catty*. One's first love is a hard itch to ignore, especially when you're a dog and, like a helpless hound, a regretful runaway rushing to find their way home, Fetch dashed down the collapsing corridors of the dying ship. He passed many a *Marrialdoer* as he hopped through the holes Catty had left in the bulkheads. He shoved past them, using his momentum or his

shadows, whichever was quicker, as he continued on. He didn't even bother to look back and check if those foes followed after him, even if he had, he wouldn't have stopped. Nothing was going to stop the poor pooch, well...almost nothing.

Far above Fetch's head, high up in the clouds, a lightning bolt had just finished being forged. The electric blast shot down like a battle ax, smashing the back end of the *Marrialdo* and cleaving off an entire chunk of ship. The storm couldn't have done it alone, the explosion of the enertomb and, most importantly, the ramming of *Obsidian Sail* had already shattered the *Marrialdo*'s structural integrity. The crazy cat lady carving an emergency exit into the hole was extra icing on the cake. As the explosive rumble of thunder clapped the ears of all those in the battle, Fetch was forced to stop.

Skidding to a halt on the splintered edge of the corridor, he watched as the floor before him fell into the river. The lapping waves of the frothing Sereibis obliterated the massive beams and boards of the *Marrialdo*, the wood and steel melted into the bay as if dissolved by lava. Fetch scanned the scene with his crow eye but saw no sources of energy that fit Catty. On the bright side, it meant she survived but, on the dark side, it meant she had gotten away. He shook his head, musing: *The dog never does catch that cat...* With a deep, shoulder heaving sigh, he turned around.

Five hellbrutes were sneering back at him.

"You're that shadow slinging mutt, aren't ya?" One jeered.

The Vinn's comrade elbowed him in the side, "I heard the Witch would pay a pretty penny for his fur."

The middle nellaf stepped forward, glancing over his shoulder to both pairs behind him, "Winner takes all." He pulled a dagger from his belt, saying with a smirk, "The last blade to stop his heart gets the pelt."

"Thanks guys," Fetch smiled sadly, "I can really use the distraction."

Shadows shot from his eye as fast as electricity had shot from the heavens. A black bludgeon materialized in each hand and he charged. The corridor was narrow. It was close enough to the angry river that when a particularly large wave hit, the water slapped over the side and ran down the passageway. There was a slight incline so that after the water washed into the hall, it then came streaming back out past Fetch's boots. Thus Fetch's charge was uphill but even with the high ground, the nellafs hesitated in the face of the shadowmancers eagerness.

The four behind the bold boy with the blades stepped back, but the bold boy took another step forward and slung the knife he'd pulled from his belt. No sooner did he toss one then did he yank another from his hip and launch it at the humanoid canine. Fetch had the time and agility to twist out of the way but instead he bat the blades to the side. They stuck in the wall, vibrating, and Fetch rocked back on his heels to come to an abrupt stop, using what momentum he had from his charge to fling his clubs like the hellbrute had flung their knives. He didn't throw them at the bloke that had just thrown weapons at him, however, but instead at the boys behind him and, as his bats pinwheeled past the first offender, Fetch yanked the daggers from the bulkhead. By this time, the knife thrower had thrown two more. Fetch twisted out of the way and, as he did, he threw the daggers he'd scavenged.

Plunk! Plunk!

One in the gut, the other in the thigh. The poor pirate fell to one knee and then Fetch was on him. The sole of his foot flattened the face of the fiend, pinning him down as he twisted the daggers free. Fetch turned to face the remaining four.

Their flinch plus the bats Fetch flung had done enough to stall them but now they were ready for revenge – and two had long range weapons. Three shots fired off. One hellbrute held a shotgun. Double barrel. Thus two of the shots. The other had a crossbow, hence the third. The fortunate fact was that now they both had to reload, the unfortunate fact was though Fetch had been able to materialize a shield of shadows to absorb the shotgun blasts, his shield had been bludgeoned out of existence by the impacts. He had attempted to strike the bolt out of the way with one of his daggers – and he did hit it, saving his life as it would've struck him fatally, *but* it did still hit him. Sticking fast in his thigh.

As he howled in pain, his enemies scoffed.

“We got a three legged dog!” One laughed, “Make it a twofer, Kenny!”

Kenny would've jumped at the opportunity but Kenny was no longer in jumping condition. The bats Fetch had tossed before had been a bit more than bats. Disconnected from him as they were, he still held onto their material from afar. One buccaneer was bright enough to break the beam, causing it to fade from existence, but the other bat was simply cast aside. It landed behind Kenny, the crossbowman, and after his bolt struck Fetch's femur, Fetch quickly called his abandoned bat to action. Not for blunt force trauma, this time, but for something far more sinister. See, from where it lay, behind Kenny, there was really only one vulnerable place immediately available to it. It would be an especially cruel attack, but in that split second after an arrow head fractured his bone, Fetch was feeling cruel (and remember, these people were slavers). The shadow cylinder rose from the floor and shot into the crossbowman's anus, slipping in and stabbing deeper, ultimately shooting out of his abdomen to the horror of the crew that had just applauded him.

Kenny fell onto his back. Three were left. Two drew swords as the third pumped his shotgun. This would not end well for Fetch. Maybe better than it had ended for Kenny – though, to be honest, it hadn't ended for Kenny. He was squirming on the floor, still bleeding out – but still, Fetch didn't find charging head on into two swordsmen and a goon with a gun to be a good idea. Instead, he tried the door next to him. Finding it unlocked, he opened it and dove through just as the shotgun went off behind him.

He didn't even really get to tumble, the room was hardly a room. It was a closet. And it was full. Boxes from floor to ceiling. There was just enough space for his scrawny humanoid form to fit between the crates and the wall. The shadowmancer would've been trapped there, but there was another option: the back half of the right wall was gone. Apparently, it had been a part of the chunk that had been chopped off by the bolt of lightning. Wind and rain spurted through the narrow crevasse between the boxes, seemingly taunting Fetch to squeeze through. It would be risky, but would it be any more risky than charging two swordsmen and a goon with a gun? No. So Fetch took his chance.

Listening to the footsteps drawing closer (straining to hear them over Kenny's screams), Fetch inched his way through the narrow crevasse between the boxes and the bulkhead. The footsteps stopped right as he got to the jagged edge. There was no time to look back, no time to cleverly plan his escape, he knew there would soon be a shotgun blast at the other end of his narrow alley and if he didn't move immediately he would bear the brunt of it. His mind was made up. He'd turn himself into a bird and to fly away. He'd absorbed a dozen of the deceased Munkloe Guard and hadn't used even half of those shadows up yet so he had more than enough energy left to do so. He was even halfway done with the process when a stick was thrown in the spokes. Previously, all the lurchings had been down in such a manner that knocked folks aft but this time – for the first time – the ship lurched forward. Fetch was thrown back, away from the

ledge. His foes too were thrown back, away from the closet door. And Fetch's attempts to turn himself into a bird were ruined as he was pummeled by the stacks of boxes that tumbled down onto him.

Not only was he now buried in boxes, but the arrow in his thigh was driven even deeper. He wailed in pain, temporarily rendered unable to do anything other than endure that bright flash of agony. That could've been the end of him had his foes recovered in a competent amount of time. When he was still alive a moment later, *that* should've been the end of him. He was still half buried in boxes. The process of pushing and wiggling out from under them gave ample time for the gun-guy or either of the two swordsmen to walk over and skewer him like a rodent caught in a trap. Neither did. He was fine. In fact, as he finally freed himself from the wreckage, he was shocked to realize that the passageway outside the closet was dead silent (aside from Kenny's muffled whimperings).

Is this luck or something worse? He wondered as he hobbled out of the closet. He peered out into the corridor then jerked his head back into the perceived safety of his pantry. What he saw did not answer his question but only further bewildered him. *Worse*, he thought, *definitely worse*. Still, despite this revelation, he stepped out into the hall and revealed himself.

"Howdy there, shadow slinger!"

"What do you want?" Fetch snapped.

His savior was covered in blood. Despite that, he had his hand out and extended to Fetch. Fetch would've had to stoop to accept it, which is saying much about his hero's height considering Fetch's lack thereof. The fellow was dressed in a tunic of sorts, one that was likely human sized but on his small, Knomish body it worked to be both a vest and a kilt. His belt was thick and seemingly useless aside from the fact that it held his little golden knife, the blade leaking blood down his leg like ink spreading from a broken pen. The Knome looked old, about as old as one could look, but also young. His grin was goofy, like a toddler up to no good, and his eyes were big and bright like a baby witnessing a novel world. Abandoning the effort to shake hands, the Knome put his hands on his hips, popped his chest out, and answered the canine's question.

"To free the dwarves enslaved on this vessel!"

"Ha!" Fetch scoffed, "*You're Antipa?*"

The Knome took his insult as a compliment, flicking the arrow sticking out of Fetch's thigh as if he were clapping him on the shoulder, "Nailed it!"

Fetch cried out in pain, falling to his knees.

"Emotional, huh?" The Knome chuckled before concocting a more serious expression, "I respect that." He extended his hand again which, now that Fetch was on his knees, was in reach, "The name is Unlucky."

"Unlucky?" Fetch asked.

"Unlucky." The Knome repeated.

"Unlucky." Fetch revelled, "Good name for a Knome."

"Thanks!" Unlucky exclaimed, "I made it up!"

"Ofcourse." Fetch shook his head, using the doorframe to help himself up. Looking down the passageway, he saw that this "Unlucky" had made short work of the other hellbrutes (although Kenny was still squirming on the floor). *A Knome with a tiny dagger bested those three?* He shook his head. *I'd suppose that lurch played in his favor. Unlucky my ass.* Outloud, however, he said, "So what's the plan?"

“You weren’t listening? We’re saving the dwarves.” Unlucky answered, a hint of frustration in his tone, “Do you know where they are?”

“*Do I!*” Fetch smiled, but then he asked, “How do you plan to get them out of this mess?”

“Same way I got into it.” Unlucky shrugged, “I’ve got a ship.”

“A ship?” Now Fetch was full on beaming, “Oh man, buddy, was this fate or what?”

“What?” Unlucky asked.

Shaking his head again and grinning like a dog when their master comes home, Fetch beckoned for Unlucky to follow him and hobbled down the corridor back towards where he had ditched his friends.

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As the heavens rained hell down upon the two ships, dropping gallon after gallon of fat wads of water onto the rupturing decks, deafening all those in the turmoil with each clap of thunder and blinding them with each javelin of lightning that struck the bay just outside the fray – as goons of the *Sail* and thugs of the *Marrialdo* clashed, scrambling from one ship to the other and then back again like two rival ant piles that had been suddenly smashed together – as all this chaos ensued, Jason the Giant and Captain Dresdan strolled off the *Obsidian Sail* and onto the deck of the *Marrialdo*. Their swaggering gait was like that of an award winner waltzing up to the stage to accept their prize, despite the fact that they were wading through wreckage and warfare. The trio made a bee line for the companionway that led below deck. The swain was with them though he couldn’t quite match his friends’ struts. Drakken was too short and too old to traipse over the refuse like his comrades. His walk was more of a combination of staggering and tiptoeing. Unlike the stoic expression of his Captain or the devilish snarl of the first mate, Drakken gulped and grimaced all the way to the stairs.

The three buccaneers twisted to let three fleeing nellafs by as they stepped down into the belly of the boat. Dresdan, Jason, and Drakken were familiar with the entrails of the vessel, they knew if Truth were still onboard she would be in the Captain’s cabin, whether the Captain liked it or not. Smidt Cormac would either be with her or grumbling through the corridors like a ghost, wallowing in his self-perceived emasculation, or at least the trio assumed. They were wrong. They quickly realized this as they reached the bottom of the companionway and found the *Marrialdo*’s Captain waiting for them.

The soggy algal bloom of a human stump grinned up at them, his eyes completely engulfed in an indigo glow.

“Corruption.” Drakken remaked.

“Truth’s recovered.” Dresdan cursed, “Donum.”

“Ah’ll take the bastard,” Jason declared, “y’all go. Trah and catch the bone bender.”

The mole and chidra kept their eyes on the pirate as they passed him but he didn’t move to stop them. It seemed his role was to hold Jason up. Despite the height difference, the two were quite the pair for a squable. Both had been in the industry long enough to prove themselves time and time again and both had mastered many different types of weapons. What intrigued Jason was whether Smidt’s possession would make him more formidable or less.

Both men had a list of swords, daggers, and knives strapped to their backs, hips, running down their legs and up their arms – not to mention the occasional mace, cleaver, or chain, but what Jason’s fingers tickled for was his revolver. It was time to see if Corrupted-Cormac was as quick on the draw as a Conscious-Cormac.

Jason hopped back and drew his gun, BANG!

Smidt was so quick that Jason wasn't sure whether or not the human had actually moved for his firearm before Jason had. Both boys had gotten their shot off at the same time, so similar were their motions that they perfectly mirrored one another's shot. The bullets collided in midair, bouncing off one another and burying themselves in the bulkheads on either side of the gunmen.

Before being able to register that their first shots had failed, they'd gone ahead and drawn a sword with their left hands (their dominant hands) and hopped back in for what they hoped would be an icing on the cake blow but just like the bullets had countered each other so too did the blades. CLANG! They held their sabers against one another for a moment, their right hands cocked back and aimed at the ceiling as they hesitated before making the next move.

"You're quick as ever." Jason noted.

Smidt smirked, speaking with his own voice though it wasn't his mind, "Smidt's still doing the fighting, I'm just holding the leash."

"Hae's lahk a godai boneguard, huh?" Jason remarked, "Just with the maet still on."

Sensing that Smidt was about to start blasting again, Jason pulled his saber from the parry and swatted the firearm away so that the bullet bit the ceiling. Moving his sword allowed Smidt to then cut in with his own. Jason expected this, that's why he dropped his right arm to plant a bullet in the bulbous buccannear's belly. He assumed Smidt would have to abandon his attack to block the bullet, as that's what the real-Smidt would've done, but apparently his master jerked the leash and commanded him to do otherwise. After all, while Smidt could still feel pain, he couldn't be bothered by it, not while Truth was holding the reigns. So as Jason pulled the trigger and blew Smidt's stomach out his asshole, Smidt's saber slid into Jason's gut.

Both pirates were knocked back, but while Jason clutched his gut, Smidt smirked. It was an odd expression. There was a hint of the pain behind the mask controlled by the distant mancer. For a second, Jason thought he couldn't imagine the hell that his foe was going through but, then again, he'd just been impaled so he actually had a good idea.

Before either could attack again, a convenient distraction gave Jason some time. Three hellbrutes hobbled out of one of the rooms along the corridor beside them. Having heard the pause in the gunshots, they decided to take this as their chance to rush for the companionway up to the deck. They didn't bother making eye contact with either the bearn or the human. Unsure who would be the biggest threat, the invader or the Captain they were deserting, they chose to try and slip by unnoticed. Their hopes came true – at least until they got up the stairs.

"What happens when Dresdan fahnds ya, Truth?" Jason asked, "Gonna faht us both at the same tahm?"

"If you're not dead in the next minute," Truth's Smidt barked back, "maybe I'll be able to pass on your last words to your snake of a captain."

The fleeing nellafs passed, Jason gritted his teeth and prepared for the next bout. Both had their guns raised, their barrels seemingly tracing the movements of the other. Smidt stepped towards Jason, Jason took a limping step back. *Hae mirrors mae in combat cept ah fael pain and hae's immune, how the hell do ah baet that?* The answer floated up into his brain just as soon as the question had finished formulating: *I feign.* He gulped. *I need to give him another shot.*

Jason limped forward, brandishing his sword. Again, they both cocked their guns back, pointing them at the ceiling as both waited for the opportune moment, sparring in the meantime. Smidt parried Jason's slice, bouncing off the bearn's blade to cut back in at the wound previously carved. Jason battered the attempt down, the tips of their swords both scraping the floor of the corridor as they lowered their guns, pointing them at one another. Jason knew how

this was going to go. It registered in his mind immediately: Smidt would either match his bullet or Truth would force him to take the shot to get a shot then, puppeteering him past the pain, she'd cut in with her sword as Jason staggered back and get two hits in on him for the price of one – surely winning the fight and sending the Giant straight to hell. So instead, Jason flopped back.

Even with the seemingly erratic move, he kept his pistol pointed at Smidt's so that as he fell and the human fired, he fired too. Their bullets smacked together and ricocheted away to lodge themselves in the walls like the others. As Jason hit the ground, he made it look as if the fall hadn't been calculated but rather caused by the growing significance of his wound, he even discarded his saber in the fall. This worked in drawing Smidt to seek to capitalize on the bear's vulnerability, but Smidt still sought to play it smart. The bear matched the human's gun and the bear was nearly twice Smidt's size so the human couldn't get close enough to drive his saber into the fallen Giant's inards once more – but he could nail the oaf's boot to the floor.

Smidt strode forward, flipping his sword around in his hand so he could plunge it through his foe's foot. Jason let him do it. As the weapon pierced his flesh, Jason reached with his free hand to his belt and claimed a throwing dagger. Slingshotting the knife and firing his gun, Smidt was able to block the bullet with a shot but he took the cutthroat to the cranium.

As the captain collapsed, the purple fading from his eyes as they closed, Jason screamed in pain, clutching the thigh of the leg that now had a sword splitting his foot in half. He had to fight to stay conscious as the pain pummeled him in waves. Even though his gut wound was the one he stood a chance of bleeding out from, his mutilated foot totally took precedence. The victorious Giant likely would've died there, had his two new recruits not arrived – against his order – to assist him.

Tou and Tabuh bound down the stairs. They'd been stalled by the deserting hellbrutes on their way down the companionway, killing two out of instinct before they realized the pirates weren't threats and simply sought to runaway. They would've killed the third for integrity's sake had they seen what the hellbrute's human captain had done to the *Sail*'s first mate.

The two fell upon Jason like doting parents while he protested like a toddler throwing a tantrum.

“Farak are you godai gops to still doing hare?!” He howled.

“Saving your farakin lahf.” Tabuh snapped.

Tou knelt down on the bear's left leg and yanked the saber out of his foot. Despite his weight, Jason was still able to kick, throwing Tou against the bullet riddled bulkhead. Jason writhed as Tabuh attempted to get him to lie still, complaining about treating wounds.

“Traeting wounds?!” Jason finally was able to verbalize, “Get mae up. Truth is hare. Facing off with the Captain!”

“She can't cast though, right?” Tou asked.

The two began to help him up, a daunting task.

He shook his head, “Shae's been haeled.”

“Already?!” Tabuh exclaimed, a pang of guilt tinging her voice, but her guilt was quickly replaced with hope, “Maybae the haeler's still hare!”

With Jason up on his feet, slouched over the two elves who stood a good two feet shorter than him, both Tou and Tabuh exchanged glances beneath his furry breast.

Tou murmured, “If there isn't a healer...”

“There will bae.” Tabuh assured him.

“If you two don’t stop worryin about mae, ah’ll kill mahself!” Jason crowed, “Now come on, wae gotta get to Dresdan!”

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Even though most of them were limping, they surged through the corridors like a pride of lions chasing a herd of caribou through a canyon. Those that didn’t have a comrade to hoist them dashed forward in spurts, hop skipping from leg to leg, crashing against bulkheads, but stumbling onwards. Since leaving the berth, the dwarves had yet to find a hellbrute bold enough to try and stop them which, to be honest, was the first sign of intelligence the dwarves had seen in the *Marrialdo* men since they’d been brought in through the back door like cargo.

While most of the dwarves were emaciated and exhausted, their dwarven savior was not. Bold and his team were all too ready to defend their compatriots, but members of the *Marrialdo* took one glance at the thirteen bitter dwarves, the mutinous ax woman with a bag full of bombs, and the scraggly gmoat with a glowing elgroom and they either fled above deck or hopped into the harbor. It seemed the battle with the hellbrutes was won. The battle with the situation was the issue now. The two ships would soon be at the bottom of the river, the fact that they’d lasted this long suggested that their final plunge would be abrupt and chaotic – something quite hard to escape.

As they got closer to the final companionway leading to the deck, their pace began to slow. Every soul they’d passed before had been traveling in the same direction, but now, just as they neared the exit, folks were beginning to rush back towards them. Hellbrutes that had slipped by before were now coming back, scurrying around them, and fleeing deeper into the *Marrialdo*. There was no time to stop and ask, but anxious glances were exchanged as they push on up the stairs and into the storm.

There was a battle being waged on the deck. Blue skinned water elves and dark furred bears, decked out in mismatched armor, wielding blades and bows, butchered the hellbrutes. Only the dark garbed pirates of the *Obsidian Sail* were allowed passage to the pier beyond, but they did such so quickly and quietly that they seemed almost like shadows and the murderous Munkloens seemed not to notice their escape. Standing in a V, so that the nellafs either fought them or were wedged off the ship if they didn’t turn and run, the Munkloen leader was the bloody bearn in front. His scowl was ferocious, few foes chose to attack the line where he stood. He brought the line further slowly, marching with a slight limp. His right thigh was wounded. When he saw the dwarves, he roared a command to his men and women but his call was drowned out by a spectacular clap of thunder.

Louder than any prior, this crash came instantaneously with the flash. All on deck were blinded as the bolt of lightning split the main mast of the *Marrialdo* as if it were a twig. The beam came crashing down, falling towards the *Obsidian Sail*. The crosstrees that intersected the mast perpendicularly stabbed into the deck of the black flagged ship, piercing the floorboards so that the main shaft of the sail could then burst through completely and plunge further into the heart of the vessel. It seemed the mast planned to nail the ship to the riverbed and the ship was going to drag the *Marrialdo* with it. If there was any doubt of the matter, then it was erased as the two tangled galleons shifted. The *Marrialdo* tilted, leaning to the side as the *Obsidian* rocked back on its haunches and began to reverse downwards into the Sereibis River.

After realizing that their demise would not, after all, be immediate, attention turned back towards the gangway – at least, for most. The Munkloen’s rushed in the opposite direction,

quickly surrounding the dwarves as they continued to block the Vinn of the *Marrialdo* from escaping.

“The Munkloe Gard?” JoAnn asked.

The leader, the limping bearn, twitched at the ask. Twisting his head, he said with a contorted expression, “The Outlaw Guard.”

JoAnn shrugged, “Law nevar helped us anyway.”

Glancing over her shoulder, she was about to beckon for her comrades to push onward but she hesitated.

“Whar’s Bold?”

The other dwarves realized it now as well. The old, dwarven freedom fighter and his friends (the water elf, bearn, and gmoat) were nowhere to be seen. The Captain of the Outlaw Guard was suddenly intrigued, clasping JoAnn on the shoulder, he commanded her attention. His eyes were wide and his awkward expression had been replaced with one of stern immediacy, “Where’s Bold?”

JoAnn scoffed, “You tell mae, lad!”

“He was here.” The bearn murmured, looking beyond JoAnn before looking back to her to ask, “With a gmoat, bearn, elf, and shadowmancer?”

Shadowmancer? The label rang in JoAnn’s ears and she realized why the guard was suddenly so interested. Just as the law never helped her, it seemed that it may not be helping her saviors either. She hadn’t survived slavery in the deserts of Vinnum Tow by being oblivious. Her eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms. A sly smirk slipped across her face.

The Captain recognized that the dwarf was not going to sell out her heroes. For a moment, he thought about forging onwards into the shipwreck to pursue the fugitives, but he’d made that mistake before and it hadn’t turned out well for his followers. Addressing his disciples, he beckoned for retreat. They were getting out of the mess. The dwarven refugees were safe, that was mission accomplished.

“Thank you, Munkloen.” JoAnn said, offering him her shoulder.

Though her shoulder was about hip height for Thomas Hobbes, leaning on her did help. They hobbled off the ship together. The bearn cursed the fugitives under his breath while the dwarf prayed for their safety. The storm raged on around them and the ships began to capsize.

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The *Marrialdo* was trembling as it was being pulled apart by the gargantuan forces of the storm, the river, and the ship that had wedged itself into the hull. The pirates, police, and fugitives only added insult to injury, taunting the corpses of the galleons as they headed into the final verse of their swan song duet. Two of the combatants, a mage and a blademaster, were rushing against the current in the corridors. While hungover hellbrutes were still stumbling to the realization of the situation and staggering down the halls, intoxicatedly attempting escape, Dresdan and Drakken plunged deeper into the destruction.

They’d come to an intersection, their corridor stopping as the hall directly above the Captain’s cabin crossed it. Neither being a mancer, they couldn’t see or smell through the walls. Having no way of knowing if Truth was still there, all they did know was that if she was then she surely knew they were drawing near.

She’s long gone by now, Dresdan lamented, *the witch is too smart to give me another chance.*

Oh, I'm sure she's still here. Drakken gulped, *Too much pride to give up a chance for revenge.*

Before they could turn towards one of the sets of stairs that ended both ends of the corridor, they stopped. A face protruded from the wall before them. Though translucent, like a ghost, her face was beautiful and young. This was no haunting, though as soon as the silver eyes recognized the two sets of purple eyes before her, her expression did change to a look of horror. As soon as the face had emerged from the wall, it attempted to slip back but Drakken was too fast.

The Sacred Tongue flew from his lips at a mile a minute – or, I should say, a selim a second – and his old, clawed hand shot out to grab the woman by a lock of long hair that had slipped out from the wall as she tried to run away. His hand was engulfed in an indigo glow, allowing him to grab hold of the being and drag her back through the wall so that she stood before them.

“I’m just the healer!” She exclaimed.

The spirit was stark naked. She had to be in order to slip unhampered through the bulkheads. As a spirit, her chest flame was her body’s sustenance and the risk of going nude was that – just as she could walk through walls – anyone could simply reach inside her torso, grasp at her fire, and snuff her out in an instant. Dresdan hadn’t even drawn his sword, but he had stepped towards her. In one swift motion, he could end her and she could tell that, from his glare, he needed a good reason not to. Her being “the healer” was not helping.

“You healed Truth.” Dresdan snarled.

With her hair still wrapped around one hand, Drakken reached out to gently brush his Captain’s wrist with the other.

“I’ll handle her.” He said, “You go on.”

Dresdan sighed, searing her a moment longer with his leer, then he turned away and rushed on down the corridor towards the stairs. As he departed, Drakken slid off his top robe. He didn’t have to loosen his grip to do so, once off his hand and out of the magic’s glow, her hair became gaseous again and the robe slipped right through. Holding it before her, he didn’t have to tell her what he wanted and, honestly, as a hostage, she was happy to cover up. Murmuring her own secret spell, she slipped the robe over her shoulders and wrapped it tightly around her, hiding her fire from her captor.

“What do you want?” She asked.

Drakken’s eyes narrowed, “If you’re a healer, then where are your pages?”

“Handed them off to a letterlemur.” She shrugged.

“Farak.” Drakken cursed.

At that moment, a guttural cry shot through the corridor like a long rolling clap of thunder. The roar was somehow louder than the general rumbling around them and Drakken immediately recognized it. For a moment, surprise and concern coddled him into foolishly dropping his guard, he glanced over his shoulder back towards the shout.

Doc acted immediately. Spitting out a short sentence of magic, “Neme ah Canaan, vahnt luhr laesh tim hoteth prahs rebas!” the silvery hair in Drakken’s hands split as if some invisible force had taken a pair of scizzors to it. In the same instant that it was cut, she spun and threw off her robe, rushing back to slip through the wall – only the robe didn’t come off. A powerful lavender light radiated from the back collar of the garment, turning her own translucent blue flesh purple like a rash. Were she able to turn her eyes inward like a shadowmancer, she would’ve seen the tag. Had she had physical flesh, she likely would’ve felt the scratchy scroll

against her spine, it was way too long for your typical tag and, unlike your typical tag, the writing on it did not provide washing instructions.

Drakken turned back to see her still kissing the wall and he smirked, “I work with pirates, Miss Spirit, I can’t have my favorite robes being stolen off my back.”

Doc scoffed as she turned back to face her captor, muttering, “I should’ve cut you instead of my hair.”

“I wouldn’t advise that, healer.” Drakken warned, “Save your energy for my friends. If you want us to spare you, then you better prepare yourself to adlib some healing.”

“Spare me?” Doc chuckled, surrendering to her fate, “Off the cuff healing will kill me before y’all can.”

“Mmm, Miss Spirit.” Drakken nodded, “Looks like you’re stuck between a robe and a hardplace.”

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“Well, if it isn’t the thorns on the rose.”

Truth stood in the center of the cabin. The walls were lined bookshelves, encased in thick layers of dust like artifacts in a tomb, but now as the ship trembled, the texts began to shake off their silt. The dust created a thick haze in the room. Three of the walls were reserved for the forgotten tomes, but the fourth was a façade of glass. It would’ve offered a beautiful view of the jungles of Munkloe but that view was obscured by the waterfalls of rain battering the window panes. The windows almost seemed to bulge under the pressure of the barrage, as if the storm wanted in. Books and pillows lay scattered about the floor, even the desk behind Truth had shifted in the collision, but what really drew Dresdan’s attention was the bodies that lay by the necromancer’s feet. The unfortunate souls were nellafs, so likely not a part of his crew, but what this signified to the old chidra was two fold. One, she’d had time to escape and chosen not to. Remaining behind, she’d poached the bone of fleeing pirates – which brought Dresdan to two: she had plenty of bone. Dresdan registered this as he strode into the room. Their battle ground lurched as he entered and more books pelted the corpses by Truth’s feet. The hardcovers shattered the brittle frames of the boneless bodies like they were ancient pottery.

“And the mole in the flowerbed.” Dresdan jeered back.

“What is it about me that has you so concerned?” Truth smiled although it was hidden in the shadows of her hood, “People have been experimenting with the Void since the first moon hatched. If it wasn’t I, then it would be someone else.”

“Then I will kill them too.” Dresdan growled, “What are you trying to bring from the other worlds? Creaton? The Queen of Darkness?”

“Ha!” Truth scoffed. Bone began to slip out from beneath her robe, twisting around her like a serpent, “Why bring them when I can wear the Black Crown myself?”

Dresdan drew his sword but held back still, fishing further for answers, “How? Another Plague?”

“No, silly snake, I don’t need to kill for the crown, those days have passed. Now you only need to kill to keep it.” The twirling ribbon of bone that surrounded her began to slip out across the floor. It split into multiple strands and stretched forward like an armada of slugs, stretching over the bodies from whence they’d come. She was creating a web of tentacles. But as she continued to prepare, she continued to divulge, “The Black Crown is granted by de facto democracy, Dresdan, I merely need the votes.”

For a moment, the old chidra forgot himself as a sudden pang of doubt shot through his consciousness like a cold blade of ice. His blade lowered for a moment, his jaw slackened just a bit, and his head tails fell limp.

“Wait,” he murmured, “are you Suicine or Daffeega?”

Dresdan knew he wouldn't get an answer. It was honestly not intended for Truth, it was merely a thought that had slipped out of his mind and off his tongue, but that thought left his mouth and hit Truth's ears like a spark. The conversation was over.

Her net of ivory appendages reared up, their blank points cocking back like cobras fixing to strike. The moment her tentacles hiked, Dresdan bolted forward – charging into their midst. Swiping up with his massive sword he split one of the ossein viper's in half. The thread retracted back towards its master as the other half, the pointy bit, dissolved into the dusty air. He may have stopped one from striking, but now it was time for the rest, and having dashed into the middle of the web there were now three aiming to impale him. Still, he kept his momentum and spun away from the severed strand to face the rest.

Truth could control where their state was more solid, like at their point, or more liquid, along their shaft, and all along the strands of bone was the threat of paralyzation. As a necromancer's favorite spell, Dresdan was sure Truth had applied “chilled marrow” before engaging him. Thus, while being impaled by one of her vile extremities would be crippling, being paralyzed by her tendrils would assure his death, and so as he twisted closer into the web of nequified tentacles he knew he had to take what damage he could manage to avoid her petrifying grasp.

The first of the next three stake-headed serpents missed his torso as he pivoted past (a victory for now, but they would surely soon circle back around). He kept pivoting and – as apparently, a spin is the most effective maneuver in Solarin combat – he slipped just by the second, it brushed the scales of his abdomen as it passed so closely that he could even feel a tinge of numbness before twisting away. As his legs and hips danced, his arms shifted. Having his sword already raised from his last upward swing, he turned his grasp so that the blade ran parallel to his body. Thus, as he danced past the murderous worms, his sword followed behind him, severing them from their source before they could curl around and stab him in the back. It was a nigh perfect maneuver, “nigh” being the key word. For due to his position, his weapon progressed a step behind his actual body. This was fine for the first two tentacles, but not for the third. The third tentacle's aim did not fail, though it did not aim for the more vital parts of his body, it still struck his upper arm before he was able to slice through. His inertia wasn't interrupted by the sudden spread of chilled marrow as the bone penetrated his bicep so he managed to complete his twirl and sever the connection before the paralysis could spread. The ivory energy withdrew and evaporated, blood spurting where the milky substance had once been, as Dresdan's left arm hung limp from his shoulder.

Holding his sword with one hand, he pointed it at Truth. While his veins bulged in his right, blood oozed down his left arm, looking purple against his black scales. Dresdan's sword, with its massive red-cross shaped hilt, was meant for two hands, but this expectation was for those beneath the caliber of the Captain.

“I'm surprised you haven't ran away.” He stated.

Truth still had four more pointy extremities to protect her, they extended from her back like scorpion tails, stretching out in separate directions and waiting for her murderous command. She didn't appear to need to run away. Especially not now that she'd essentially eliminated one of her opponent's arms. But Dresdan knew better. Truth had plenty of bone to finish the fight,

but not enough to teleport away like she had tried at the Deicide. Just as he had, she had to now choose whether or not she was willing to end their disagreement here and there. Leave now or fight to the death.

“Someone dies here today.” Truth replied.

“Let’s hope so.” Dresdan smirked.

Dresdan charged as the boney bayonets surged for his flesh. The first of the spikes shot up from below, aiming to gore him in the groin, but he hopped over it and left it for later as it hurdled on behind him. In mid air, his torso pivoted. He turned his left shoulder towards the next tentacle and kept turning until he was leaning far enough that he had ducked under it. He ignored it as well as it continued to snake further like its failed predecessor. It was the two on his right that he chose to deal with. After all, it was his right arm that was working. Using the leap and the twist to aid his swing, he easily cut through the other two serpent-like spears as he passed them – this was good, but this also meant that his swing ended with his blade extended behind him and his body landed right in front of his foe.

For a frozen moment, they were nearly face to face. Despite his stooped posture, Dresdan was still tall enough to look Truth, as a moleman, in the eye. Her jig was up. He could see within the shadows of her cowl and now he knew her face. But so too was his. Not because they were so close now that all Truth had to do was reach out and grab him by the throat, quickly freezing him in place, but because Dresdan’s arm had not been crippled.

Just as Jason had feined weakness to trick Smidt, Dresdan had tricked Truth that his left arm had been rendered unusable. The two buccaneers had trained together after all and you’d be hard pressed to find a better actor than a successful pirate. His arm was severely wounded, but not completely useless. And so, in Truth’s calculations, she was still safe. More so in fact, she would be able to start the next round of attacks while Dresdan still had to get his useful side between them. Had she known he could still use his left, she might’ve fought harder to keep some distance between them. As a necromancer, she smelled her mistake before she felt it. The scent of the energy in his arm was not consistent with the way in which he acted. Still, she didn’t even have time to curse her own failure before his fist came rocketing up, into her jaw, lifting her off her feet and flopping her back on the crooked desk behind her.

Dresdan couldn’t grab her, not with chilled marrow in play, but he could clock her. While wounded it wasn’t his best work however it gave him time to get his blade back around and stop the other two tentacles from impaling him through the back.

As Truth fell back onto the bureau, her nostrils continued to flare. Not just because of Dresdan’s ruse, but because she smelled the scale shifting. She still controlled the conscious of the dying Smidt Cormac so she knew that Jason had survived. Not only that, she now smelled that he, the boatswain, and two more Obsidians had captured her doctor and were heading towards the Captain’s Cabin. She had the bone to beat Dresdan but did she have the time? She could afford one last assault – there was just enough bone and time for it.

As Dresdan turned back to face his foe, she rolled off the desktop with bone pouring from her body. The ossein energy lifted the bureau, raising it between them as a barrier. Then, she divided the force so that two tendrils split off. One strengthened before her, widdling down to a similar size as the previous appendages then narrowing at its tip to be far sharper. This strand rose to slip up the side of the desk until it was perpendicular to the floor, preparing to leap over the lip and stab for the chidra’s face. Meanwhile, the second, far thinner, snaked left for the bookshelves.

While Truth prepped her check mate, Dresdan tried to guess what she had up her sleeve. The desk was hoisted before her, completely blocking her from his view. Should he dash around it and attack her? Or would that be exactly what she wanted? Either way, he figured waiting to find out was not the best option and he knew his friends must be arriving soon. So he back pedalled.

The tiny bit of distance he was able to put between him and the desk was imperative. When Truth engaged, launching the ivory tentacle over the edge of the desk, Dresdan had the time and space to whip his blade up and cut through the attack. Unfortunately, his retreat had not put him far enough away to avoid her secondary assault. The more elusive magical extremity had slithered across the dirty office floor to squeeze behind one of the many, wall-sized bookshelves. There, behind it, the bone had fanned out and, as one tentacle leapt over the desk to stab at Dresdan's face, this one flexed and sent the bookshelf shooting across the room like something out of a haunted library.

The furniture lifted him off his feet, knocking his hat clean off his head, but it didn't stop there. The bone piston's punch was hardly halfway done. The speed and force was unimpeded by Dresdan's mass. Books shot out all around the Captain, trapped in the same trajectory as the chidra, there wasn't a hint of hindrance to the motion until they smashed the glass of the opposite wall. The window façade burst immediately. The glass turned to shards the size of the rain that swept up the Obsidian and the books and hurled them into the river with a force that rivaled that of the necromancer back in the *Marrialdo's* captain's cabin. The thrashing waves rushed up to clasp the shelf and sandwich the Obsidian and yank him to the bottom of the Sereibis River like an anchor.

The storm rushed through the jagged hole in Dresdan's absence. Rain poured in sideways with such a fury that Truth, despite standing a good few yards away from the orifice, still caught a drizzle, but she didn't mind. She had won. Again. Aside from a sore jaw, she'd bested the old buccaneer for the second time. *The last time?* She looked out the broken window and shrugged. *If any river could kill Dresdan, it'd be the Sereibis today.* But she wasn't so sure anything *could* kill Dresdan, period.

Whatever the fate of the black scaled chidra, she needed to leave. The scent of his allies was only growing stronger and she had spent far too much bone to risk teleporting with what she had left. That said, she had enough bone to slip away. Just as she had used her energy to manifest a nest of ossein snakes, she now used it to convert her body into the occult liquid. The *Marrialdo* was old and, on this particular evening, it was especially strained. Cracks in the floor boards were abundant. And so, as Tou, Tabuh, Drakken, and Doc helped Jason burst through the door and into the captain's cabin, Truth dripped through the floor boards.

"Hae's gone!" Jason clamored as Doc simultaneously gasped, "She's gone!"

"As should wae bae." Tabuh stated, her head craning towards the creaking heavens, "Fore wae faed the brooks tonaht."

With Tabuh supporting Jason and Drakken watching Doc, Tou was able to rush over to the broken window. The wind from the storm fought him so much that as he made it to the edge, he had to grab hold of the sharp glass to keep from being bowled over.

"Dresdan had to go out the window." Drakken stated before grabbing the collar of his robe which was still wrapped around the spirit doctor, "Less you think she had the bone to teleport them both?"

“Out the window.” Doc grumbled, twisting hard despite the mole’s hold so that she could glower at the magician. She nodded towards the three dead nellafs by the toppled desk, saying, “Three hellbrutes wouldn’t be much more than enough to fight and flee.”

“Farak.” Tou and Jason chimed.

“He left his hat too.” Doc noted.

Sure enough, Dresden’s indigo witch hat had been left behind. It was so drenched with rain that it was stuck to the half shattered window like papier-mâché. Walking the spirit over with him, Drakken peeled the hat off the glass and popped it over his own little red toboggan.

“Out the window or with the necromancer doesn’t change the fact that wae,” Tabuh insisted, “naed to get farakin outa hare!”

As if to emphasize her argument, the ship shifted violently. The boat now pitched and plummeted like the *Obsidian Sail* had as they were careening down to crash into the *Marrialdo*, only this time it wasn’t moving forwards, it was moving backwards and diagonally so – towards the riverbed. Tou nearly fell out the window, but the shake up did help him eye a little row boat tethered below.

“There’s a dinghy!” He exclaimed.

Drakken moved to join Tou but paused, looking back to Tabuh, “Dame Sentry-”

“Shoot the spirit if she tries anything funny?” Tabuh already had her revolver aimed at the poor healer.

Doc grumbled unintelligibly while Drakken smirked his way over to Tou. He glanced back at Jason then back at the dinghy.

“I think we’ll all just fit.” The mage stated.

“Good thang...” Jason’s diction was excessively slurred, almost as uncontrolled as his bloodloss. Doc shook her head. They’d postponed even a basic healing in the hopes of helping their Captain, but alas. In her opinion, they may have just lost their Captain and his first mate but she kept her gaseous mouth shut and let the gargantuan oaf linguistically stagger onwards, “thang good...lost all this blood weight.”

“That’s raht, Jason,” Tabuh rolled her eyes, “Good thang.”

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When the mainmast of the *Marrialdo* came crashing down on the *Obsidian Sail*, like a hammer driving its nail into the wood, the two vessels pitched towards the bottom of the bay flinging everyone inside against the nearest bulkheads. The survivors rattled about like dice in a gambler’s hand and, like dice, the poor souls left in the sinking ships turned up with at least six different reactions to the situation. Some fled for the shore despite the visible vigilantes that had apparently hijacked the nonviolent Munkloe Guard while others chose to throw their fate into the hands of the thrashing Sereibis. Then there were those that plunged deeper into the guts of the galleons, betting against all odds in hopes to win big with some abandoned treasure or forgotten zoomer that could whisk them away to a safer place. Among that last group was Bold, Marvell, an unconscious Princess Ruse, and Ben – who couldn’t for the life of him figure out why they were.

They’d made it above deck with the liberated dwarves and then almost immediately pivoted on a dime to ran back below. Ben had seen the Captain of the Guard and that was one of the elements that perplexed him. *We’ve got a better chance at the mercy of Munkloe than we do going back underneath?!* They had the princess (relatively unharmed) and they’d saved twelve

dwarves. *That has to be worth some kind of pardon!* Soon as they got far enough into the belly of the boat for his comrades to hear him, he called out loud enough for them to screech to a halt.

“Where are we going?!” He crowed, “We should’ve turned ourselves in!”

“Go for it.” Marvell scoffed, “I’m-”

“What?” Ben yelled back, “Gonna try your luck at the bottom of the river?”

Marvell thought for a second then with a shrug and a nod she admitted that was exactly what she intended to do. The sack of buzzing bolders slung over her shoulder was jostled by the gesture, saying what Marvell hadn’t said outloud: *Who needs a pardon when you can be rich?*

Exasperated, Ben turned to Bold. Instead of a bag of booty, an unconscious water elf lay draped over his shoulder. The poor princess looked like some sort of royal sash or, maybe more accurately, a sweat towel – as the dwarf was dripping with perspiration. His chest rose with so deep a breath that he gained three full inches before exhaling.

“Laddae,” Bold stated, “ah can’t aeven swim, trust mae oi plan to get off this God farsaken vessel.”

Ben was bewildered, “So then-”

Bold interjected, “The dog.” He jostled the limp Lenga on his shoulder. “This lil lassae wehks up bock in the palace and haers that her boyfriend washed up drowned on the jungle flar-”

“He left us!” Ben complained.

“Aye, Lil Benji,” Bold disagreed, “Takes two to laeve.”

“That’s toxic.” Marvell stated.

“Says *you?*” Bold retorted. He cleared his throat then straightened out a more honest response, “Oi thank thar whole flang is toxic, Marvell, but shae’s moy Lil Lenga and it ain’t moy place to say who she loves ar hates.” He cleared his throat again, “Comrades, oi’ve lost my love. That’s a loss you can’t brush off. Oi can’t have moy God Daughtar going through graif loike thot if oi have it moi pawar to stop it. Loik it or not, oi’ve gotta sehve the dog man.” He gestured back towards the companionway, “Go ahead, sehve yarself, but oi’ve got to do this.”

Ben frowned. His hand drifted up to tickle the tufts of hair that stuck out around his horns as his brow furled deeper. He wasn’t really confused over what to do, he was confused over why he wasn’t. Every ounce of will in his soul was eager to run along with the bearn and dwarf to find their deserter friend and for some reason that truth struck him like that lightning bolt that had split the mast. It hit him in his gut and memories washed over him, as brief but also as powerful as a wave crashing against the beach. Blinking, he could see himself, years ago.

He clung to the bumpy, craggled façade of the cavern as stones tumbled down behind him, grazing his spine so closely that they tore at his shirt as they yanked at him. It was less the stones he was worried about, but rather the water they unleashed. Like a lake bursting through the wall of a dam, only the wall was a ceiling and it was directly above him. Water gushed down, striking him with incredible force. He was immediately surrounded by the torrent of falling water. It felt as if a ginormous hand had curled its fingers around his arms and torso and was trying to pull him from the wall – but he held fast. He held so tightly to that cave wall that his finger tips began to bleed as his skin split from the pressure he applied. But he had not come alone.

Old blind and chunky Chongo had been exploring the cave with him. The dog hadn’t the slightest clue what they were doing. The ancient canine was as oblivious to his surroundings as he was to his own capabilities. Chongo still possessed the confidence of a recently matured hound and, foolishly, Ben often fell into believing that Chongo still had it in him. Ben had followed Chongo into the cave, thinking maybe the old pooch had caught wind of a missing pup.

The dog had led him to the rockwall and above it, Ben could hear something. He quickly climbed the wall and nudged the rocks wedged there. One almost immediately fell out. It clattered to the ground and Chongo yelped. A trickle of water followed it. Then a low, distant groan filled the chamber like the call of a whale. Ben realized what it was and it wasn't a whale – it was the well.

Apparently, that thin membrain of stone had at one point wedged together to seal the cave off from the ground water reservoir that fed their well, but no longer. Ben had only been able to call out to his dog once before it all came crashing down. Then, as he hung there, fighting against the tug of the surging torrent, he knew he had to let go.

Ben could swim. Even if the cave filled up and he found himself at the bottom of the well, then he could swim to the top. Chongo could not. Even if he could, as Ben just witnessed, the poor beast had no sense of direction left in him. If he did the safest thing, clung to the wall until the water calmed and then swam to the surface, then Chongo would surely die. If he let go and swam after the dog, they both might die, but also, it was the only way in which they both could survive.

And so what did Ben do?

Ben shook off the memory and his eyes met Bold's.

"We're going after the dog."

"Cool." Marvell grunted before asking, "So...How do we know he's still here?"

"Hey, guys!"

Fetch came limping around the corner with a Knome striding beside his blood soaked thigh. First, the three were shocked by his convenient arrival but the importance of that coincidence was thrown out the window as they now became far more interested in the deserter's companion. Fetch's silver tongue was moving a lot quicker than his bum leg and he kept on talking before any of the three could get wise.

"This is Unlucky!"

"Good name for a Knome." Marvell remarked, tightening her grasp on her enertomb satchel.

Fetch continued, "He's gotta ship, tied up to this one, and he can get us out of here!"

"Woh, woh, woh," Unlucky interjected, having beat his guide to come to a stop before the three. He pointed at Bold, saying, "I see one dwarf, I heard there were twelve!"

"Ya, just missed em, lad." Bold grunted. His normally big brown eyes now narrow and squinty. Like Marvell, he adjusted his treasure, as if the Knome might try and steal the Princess off his shoulders. His glare turned to Fetch, "Who is this, lad?"

"Unlucky!" Fetch and Unlucky chimed.

"You know him?" Ben asked.

Fetch shrugged, "I do now."

"We may fair better at the bottom of the river." Marvell stated.

Unlucky now narrowed down his eyes, nudging Fetch with his elbow and unintentionally nudging the thigh with the crossbow bolt which dropped the man down to his knees. Seemingly oblivious, Unlucky acted as if Fetch had knelt down so as to get on eye level. He turned to Fetch to loudly whisper, "Your friends aren't Knomophobes, are they?"

Marvell rolled her eyes, "Your name is Unlucky, Knome."

"Well..." Fetch said through gritted teeth, clutching his leg, "He was lucky for me. Saved my tail."

"Then Unluckay far us." Bold grumbled.

“You’re the one that said we had to go back for him.” Ben asserted.

“Aw,” Fetch smiled, bouncing back to his feet, “y’all came back for me?”

“They did.” Marvell corrected.

“Wait,” the dark eyed dog-man froze with a realization, “*came back*. Y’all left me?!”

“You left us!” Ben crowed.

Fetch crossed his arms, muttering, “Takes two to leave.”

“Fair.” Marvell admitted.

“We don’t have time for this!” Unlucky exclaimed, “This boat is sinking and it’ll take my little galley down with it too if we don’t hurry!” He turned back to Bold, “Are the dwarves safe?”

“All except for this one.” Bold nodded.

“Well then,” the old Knome puffed out his chest and gave a broad smile, “looks like I will be saving a dwarf after all!”

Ben, Marvell, and Bold exchanged concerned glances but, in the end, they’d been looking for an escape raft anyways and now they’d found their stray dog. It seemed, “Unlucky” as he may be, they’d be fools to turn him down. With contorted expressions, Marvell and Ben gave their tacit approval. Bold withheld his for a moment more to threaten the new comer.

“If wae start sankin,” he growled, “just know Oi’m draggin ya down with mae.”

“I’m not worried.” Unlucky shrugged, turning to head back down the corridor, “Come on!”

“Good,” Marvell chuckled, following the Knome, “I’d hope you wouldn’t be worried about your ship sinking.”

“Oh no,” Unlucky spun around to face them once more, “I am always worried about sinking. The *Unluckiest* isn’t unfamiliar with the sea floor.” He beckoned for the others to hurry up and follow, even as his words advised them that they might be better off doing otherwise. He continued, “Just not worried about some crusty old dwarf being able to catch-”

“You farakin-”

Bold cut himself off as he dashed down the hall after the Knome.

“Right!” Unlucky seemed undaunted. In fact, he seemed relieved that one of his new comrades had finally put some pep in their step. Spinning on his toes like a ballerino, he dashed off deeper into the *Marrialdo*, half leading the way and half being chased, hollering over his shoulder as they ran, “Follow me!”

Marvell took off after Bold, the unconscious Princess, and the Knome, but Ben and Fetch hung back for a moment.

“You went after that shadowmancer,” Ben said, “why?”

“Long story.” Fetch grinned sheepishly.

“Give me the short of it.” Ben pressed.

Fetch pointed to his cursed eye, “She’s the one that gave me this.”

“Really?” Ben gasped.

“Really.” Fetch now gave Ben a real smile, then he turned to hop-skip run after their friends, clutching his thigh as he did.

Though none of the conscious four in the group had thought to ask why Unlucky was the name of the Knome and the name of his ship was the *Unluckiest*, the answer would still come as they found where – and how – he’d docked it to the *Marrialdo*. There was a gaping hole in the hull of the hellbrute ship, one that looked as if it had been cut with a laser. So smooth and square was the orifice, that – again, had they not been in a hurry – they surely would’ve asked how

Unlucky had pulled it off. The missing chunk was the back wall of a storage closet and outside the hole they saw the *Unluckiest* bobbing in the storm. It was a worn down vessel to say the least. Holes could be seen in the sails (even with them rolled up), few windows were unbroken, and it only appeared to be floating somewhat upright because the waves were bouncing it around so much that one couldn't tell there was a definite lean to the way it sat on the water. Just as ancient as the ship, was what sat on the ship and, though it did not explain the hole in the hull, it did explain how the Knome had gotten onboard.

When they arrived, Unlucky whistled, and the lumpy mound on his ship stirred. In the downpour, none of the new comers had a clue what it was until it budged. As it rose from the deck and spread its wings a collective, "Ahhh," passed through the onlookers. Like the sails, her wings were scarred and torn, but they stretched out and held strong despite the wind and rain slapping and pulling at them. Her lizard like face was old, her eyes cloudy, but the bored expression that wrapped her slack-jawed snout seemed to be a boredom born out of confidence. Using her wings like a sail, the galley shifted closer to the ship. Then, once close enough, the beast reached out her neck, opened her maw wide, and bit onto the lip of the wall that jutted up from the hole in the hull.

"This is my sky dragon," Unlucky explained, "Unluckier."

"Shae a dragon ar a bridge?" Bold asked.

Unlucky smirked, "You can jump if you prefer."

"Lard." Bold lamented.

"Little Knome," Marvell shared the dwarf's concern, "we're a bit bigger than you."

Already on the head of his sleepy steed, Unlucky turned and gasped as if he had just noticed. Ben stepped forward and the Knome's gasp turned into a grin as he saw the elgroom in the gmoat's hand.

"See, that's why we brought the elementalist." He patted his dragons head then scurried down the neck, "Come on Unluckier!"

As the dragon let go of the boat, Ben took its place at the edge. Closing his eyes, he summoned wind. It wasn't hard to do. The staff hardly had to summon, the weather rushing around them was eager to cooperate. The gusts coursing through the hole in the hull focused into tighter ribbons of rushing force, so tight that they could almost be seen as the rain drops were trapped inside their torrents. Like mysterious serpents, the separate tendrils of wind wrapped around each of them – including Ben – and lifted them up off the shuddering floor boards.

Marvell prayed to the universe while Bold prayed to his god and clung to Lenga as if she were the Mother Mary, meanwhile, Fetch kept his shadows ready to pop out his eye at any moment just in case, but none of this was necessary. Ben may have been knew to the art, but he was a natural. Just as he had saved Chongo from the belly of the well, he was now saving his comrades from the guts of the sinking ship. Within moments, they were onboard the *Unluckiest*. Still, there was yet one last surprise for them as they sailed away, leaving the storm and Sereibis behind, one last treasure that they unwittingly plundered from the Battle on the *Marrialdo*.

There was someone else on the *Unluckiest*. Unluckier had immediately pointed him out to Unlucky when he arrived and Unlucky now immediately showed the others. The man was bare chested, his black scales soaked in blood and water. His left arm was still bleeding. Bold quickly rushed to put Lenga inside the cabin on deck, taking her bookbag with him back to the unconscious man while Ben, Fetch, and Unlucky puzzled over his identity. Marvell, however, did not puzzle.

“That’s Captain Dresdan Otubak.” She stated, looking back at the black flags of the *Obsidian Sail* as it slowly slipped beneath the Sereibis River.

“How do you know?” Ben asked.

She smirked, “He’s worth a pretty penny. Alive or dead.”

“Aloive.” Bold stated, “Help mae get him insoide.”

Marvell didn’t protest.

Only the dragon, the Knome, Ben and Fetch still stood on the deck. The little galley was already moving away from the shipwreck. The glow of the enertomb on the humble helm, a small deck above the cabin, could be seen as magic turned the wheel this way and that – navigating them down stream. Mystical font began to glow along the masts as the sails began to unfurl.

“So where are we headed?” Fetch asked.

“You tell me.” Unlucky shrugged.

Fetch turned to Ben. The gmoat shook his head with a wry smile. For the first time in days, he remembered his mission. How many times had he thought it hopeless? And now there he was, sailing away from Sereibis with the runaway intow. “*Where are we headed?*” Ben couldn’t help but chuckle as he walked off to join the others in the cabin.

“What?” Unlucky asked.

If Fetch had been in his true canine form, his tail would’ve been firmly lodged between his legs. With a deep sigh, he told the Knome, “Set sail for Dogloe.”

PART THREE – THE DRAGON’S HEIST



Chapter Twelve: Different Directions

A thud cut the opossum off mid snore. One little black eye opened, staring in the direction of the sound despite the fact that a wall stood between them. The thud was followed by softer thumps, foot steps, and then a slightly louder thwack. The marsupial was just about to hiss when her nose caught the scent of the culprit and she decided otherwise.

Slowly unraveling her tail from the beam above, Laza lowered herself onto the stack of scripture beneath her. She landed without a sound. The pillar of papers was surrounded by other similar sized towers. She picked her way through the maze, moving from one to the next closest in height so that her sharp little claws wouldn't make so much as a scratch of noise as she made her way out of the book room.

From the doorway, Laza saw it: a letterlemur. Well, part of it. The primeape was laying on the couch which was facing away from the book room, but its tail was dangling over the of the sofa, limp but still swinging slightly. Peeking just over the back of the couch, likely sitting on the coffee table beyond, was the stack of papers the mail monkey had delivered. The lemur had done its job and yet it remained. In Laza's book, this went beyond laziness or loitering, this was an intrusion and it would not be tolerated. Laza also loved the taste of lemur but this was not why she had to do what she had to do. She was doing this to keep Doc's home safe. This was her solemn duty.

Licking her lips, Laza tip-clawed into the mainroom. She moved slow, pausing between steps to twitch her tiny black ears and flare her itty bitty pink nostrils before continuing, but the lemur never saw her coming.

She pounced, her mouth splayed open like an alligator's, and clamped down on the tail. The lemur shrieked, their entire body seizing, launching it from the couch and dragging Laza up with it. They shot towards the ceiling like a spaceship rocketing up towards outer space – then the door swung open and Doc strode in.

Laza immediately lost control. Her body went completely limp. Her jaw slackened, allowing the tail of her prey to wiggle free. The lemur careened down into the outstretched arms of spirit, while Laza appeared to be suspended in the air. Her body pivoted, belly up like a dead fish floating to the surface, except unlike a dead fish, Laza sank. THWACK. The opossum hit the floor hard as a rock and lay there, her tongue lolled out of her snout for dramatic effect (although the lemur's blood that still dripped from her teeth was far more provocative).

The lemur crawled around Doc's robe, setting its haunches down on her shoulders. Hollering, it pointed at the marsupial with one hand and clutched its chewed up tail with the other. Rolling her silver eyes, Doc strode on into the room. She kicked her pet with a gaseous foot, not actually making contact but still sending the message that it was time for resurrection. As Laza recovered, Doc stepped over the opossum and brushed the letterlemur off her shoulder as she made space in the entryway for her new guests.

First came an earth elf. He lunged through the doorway to catch the wounded lemur that Doc had just discarded like dust off her lapel. He was followed by a pair: an electric elven woman and a bearn so big that he made other bearns look elf-sized. The entire bottom half of the bearn was covered in blood. He'd bled so much that even the storm hadn't been able to wash it all away and, though his wounds no longer had any more to offer, his blood-drenched boots still left crimson footprints as he shuffled into the house. The earth elf – who appeared to have a hip wound himself – tossed the lemur gently to the side then rushed back over to help the electric elf

lead the dying bearn in. It was such a clumsy endeavor – as he barely fit through the door – that once they'd gotten him inside, both elves took one look at the couch across the room, adjusted their holds, and then shoved him into it. Falling head first like a tree, the bearn dove over the coffee table, through stacks of paper, and into the couch which then bowled over onto its back and spilled him out rolling to a stop against the wall with a loud THWUMP.

The entire shed shook as if it might fall out of the tree that held it.

Pages of the Sacred Tongue were still slowly falling to the floor when the fourth guest entered: a moleman with a flamboyant purple witch hat.

“Laza,” Doc said, her voice almost as deadpan as the bearn on the floor, “meet my new patients.”

The opossum hissed.

“Same.” Doc said with a sigh.

“Tou, help mae get Jason back up!”

Tou was already on it but as Tabuh and Tou trampled over the scattered sheets and around the toppled sofa, Doc jumped in front of them with arms spread wide.

“Leave him on the floor!” She pleaded with a wry smile, “Already got enough blood on the couch, I'd really rather not to get anymore.”

“Do you need any-” Tou began.

“How's your hip?” Doc interrupted.

Tou looked down as if he'd forgotten. His pain receptors certainly hadn't. The blood was trickling out and Tou wasn't sure if this was because he hadn't much left to offer or if the wound had actually started to coagulate. Either way, Jason's injuries were far more severe. Clamping his hand over the gash, he turned back to Doc but she didn't even wait for his consent.

“Good.” She said, “Then wait outside.”

Tou took a step towards the door but this time Tabuh's hand shot out to stop him.

“And laeve you in hare to conjure up some trap for us out there?” She scoffed.

“Fahn.” Doc mocked, though the flare in the golden eyed elf's glare curbed her sarcasm after that. Clearing her throat, despite not having a throat to clear, the spirit continued in her own accent, “Neither of y'all speak the Sacred Tongue. I could conjure up a trap with or without you listening.”

“Wait outside.” Drakken stated, “I'll watch the healer.”

“You sure?” Tabuh asked.

“Come on.” Tou said, “She needs to get started.”

Tabuh muffled her groan with pursed lips but conceded. The two elves left the hut and went to sit on the stoop. Hardly a moment later, Laza joined them. Though the opossum came bearing gifts – a leather flask full of water – her true purpose was the same as Drakken's. She was keeping an eye on the young people.

“Can you thank of uh worse guard than a opossum?” Tabuh asked.

Laza rocked back on her haunches and hissed, her lips curling to reveal her miniature alligator grin. Tabuh scoffed in response. Tou didn't seem to be laughing.

“You've obviously never been bitten by a opossum.” He stated.

“Of course, Mr. Woodsman's been bit by a opossum.” She snickered.

The fact that the mockery had switched targets was lost on the mad marsupial and it decided to charge. Tabuh shot up from her seat on the edge of the stoop and in an instant the furry little critter was staring down the barrel of her revolver. Tou didn't move from where he was perched. Instead, he fixed his gaze down the path that led away from the cabin.

The house sat in a little ray of sunshine – or well, it normally did. Currently, clouds still cluttered the heavens and a slow drizzle trickled down around them. It was far lighter beneath the awning of Doc’s front porch than it was in the city proper. The branch her hut sat on stretched back towards that dark shroud of civilization, making it hard to see further into the jungle. If it weren’t for the distant city lights, flickering as leaves and limbs bounced in the wind, one might’ve thought the treehouse was a lone structure rather than a cabin resting on the outskirts of the Capitol. Tou didn’t mind the distance between them and the urban center. Though they’d apparently been somewhat in cahoots with the Munkloen government – sabotaging known enemies of the Empire – the Obsidians were probably still not explicitly welcome in Munkloe. *Especially, Tou though, after we got the Captain of the Guard shot in the thigh.*

Thinking of which, Tou nearly had a heart attack as he watched the Captain of the Guard limp out from the gloomy shadows. The two instantly recognized each other, but neither commented. He had quite a way to hobble before they could talk in a reasonable tone. As the guard continued down the branch towards Doc’s hut, Tou turned to his comrade. She was still pestering the opossum. The creature was rolled over onto its back, clearly deceased, and Tabuh was busy playing a game of Ipativian Roulette with her revolver. Pressing the barrel to Laza’s fluffy belly, she pulled the trigger.

“Uh oh,” Tabuh warned, “there’s only one more chamber.”

The opossum’s eyes opened wide as Laza considered whether or not it was worth giving up her one and only trick or if she should stick to her shtick, even if it meant taking a bullet. Fortunately, Laza was spared the decision as Tou nudged Tabuh and gestured towards the approaching bearn.

“Taiad.” Tabuh cursed.

“Is there really a bullet in that last chamber?” Tou asked.

“Nope.” Tabuh said.

“Maybe he just needs a healer?” Tou hoped.

Tabuh snorted, “Tou. Sareabis is haeler central.” She gestured to the shack behind them, “Doc, in there, is a black market medic. In it for the gold. Not sure whah uh guardsman would bae going to her.”

“The Munkloe Guard isn’t supposed to be armed, right?” Tou asked.

“Good point.” Tabuh admitted, “May have a black market marshal on our hands.”

Tou gulped, “Good or bad?”

Tabuh shrugged, “Let’s find out.” She raised her voice and addressed the slow strutting Captain, saying, “Are you hare for us?”

“I wasn’t,” He hollered back, “but should I be?”

Tou stood and reached for his sword but Tabuh put out a hand to calm him.

“Captain Thomas Hobbes.” the bearn introduced himself, his haggard pace not slowing but nor did it accelerate, “Captain of,” his hand went to the hilt of the sword on his hip, “the Outlaw Guard.”

“Friend or foe?” Tou asked.

“You’re Obsidians?” Hobbes asked back.

The two nodded.

“Then Friend.” He grunted.

“You’re Antipa?” Tabuh asked.

Hobbes shrugged, “I am now.”

He reached the porch and paused. Standing in the drizzle, he eyed the two elves. The two scooted aside, assuming he wanted to go on in the shack or that he at least wanted to get out of the rain but it didn't seem he intended to do either – at least not yet.

Finally, he said, "You're Tabuh Sentry."

Tabuh sighed.

"Who are you?" He asked Tou.

"No one." Tou said.

"That's Tou Fou." Tabuh corrected, elbowing him (fortunately in the uninjured side), "You can call him Mr. Woodsman."

Hobbes bowed his head to them both, then asked, "Who's in there?"

"Jason the Giant." Tou answered.

"And Drakken, the boatswain." Tabuh added.

"And Dresdan?"

The two shook their heads.

Hobbes cocked his to one side.

"Dresdan took on a powerful necromancer, one on one, and both disappeared." Tabuh explained.

"Once we get healed, we'll go after him." Tou continued.

"Wae will?" Tabuh asked.

"I am." Tou stated.

Tabuh turned back to the Captain, "Wae'll daesahd what wae're doing after wae get haeled." Then back to Tou, "Wae'll daesahd *together*."

Tou shrugged.

Hobbes ignored the tension and finally took the space they had offered between them so that he could enter the shack. He went up the steps slowly. Each time he cringed in pain, Tou and Tabuh did too. As he climbed, he said, "I can sneak y'all into the dragon yards and show you to a pilot you can trust. They won't be free, but they're worth the gold. Either way, chasing after Dresdan or not, you'll need to get out of Sereibis."

"Thanks?!" Tou and Tabuh exclaimed before Tabuh hesitated, asking, "Don't you naeda laeve now?"

The Captain shrugged, "I may be an outlaw now," he paused to force his sad frown into a sly grin, "but who's going to arrest me?"

As he hobbled into the shack, Tou and Tabuh turned back to one another.

"Wae're going after Dresdan?" She pressed again.

Tou raised his hands in defense, "I thought you wanted to be Antipa?"

Tabuh's bottom lip jutted out in that sort of frown that isn't really a frown but more like a, "Fair enough" sort of expression when combined with a repetitive nod. Tou took it and ran with it.

"We find Dresdan and help him take down Truth. We already got a resume – we've sank two enemies of the Empire in less than a week! Not to mention recommendations! We just met this...Outlaw Guy."

"Thomas Hobbes." Tabuh inserted.

"Yea!" Tou kept rolling, "We've worked with the Admiral."

"Zaria Ein." Tabuh interjected.

"Mhm." Tou went on, "We'll have a whole roster of folks to reach out to by the time we're done. Sure, everyone knows you as Tabuh Sentry now, but soon they'll know you as..."

he floundered for a bit, his tongue flip flopping in his mouth like a fish on dry land but then a spark went off in his head, he found the words, and he rattled on, “The Golden-eyed Gunslinging Vigilante that rebelled against tradition and forged her own future!”

Though no pun was intended, it was too good to let pass. Drawing his sword, the sword she’d forged for him, he raised *Future* towards the heavens. It was a great little gesture, but the motion reawakened his wound. With a spurt of blood and a wave of pain, Tou nearly collapsed backwards had Tabuh not been there to catch him.

Giggling to herself, she lowered him to the deck. Fortunately, his dark skin hid his blush, but Tabuh’s shone unabashedly. Smiling like a fool, she ran his words over in her head. *The Golden-eyed Gunslinger*. Smiling even bigger as she looked at the man beside her, she said, “Not bad for a kid from the woods.”

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The quaint vessel rumbled like the sinking ships had in the harbor they’d just escaped, only this quaking wasn’t caused by a storm or a lack of structural integrity but rather it was caused by the stomping gaits of Marvell’s lunges as she chased the Knome around the masthead. Though it wasn’t the structural integrity, the decrepit state of the *Unluckiest* had caused Benjamin Fasthoof much concern even before the commotion had occurred. With his anxiety creeping up towards an all time high, he could almost hear nails rattling from the hull and plopping into the thrashing sea. In his imagination, God’s Ocean was already rushing in between the bent and buckling planks. Had he dodged half a dozen deaths in Munkloe only to succumb to a maritime fate because of the antics of two strangers. The young gmoat’s fuse was short. Finally, the very same imagination that conjured up images of his demise switched over into action as he raised his elgroom high and froze the two fools in their tracks.

Neither put up much of a fight. Marvell hadn’t known Ben long but she’d known him long enough to trust he was a fair man. Unlucky, on the other hand, hadn’t known either long but he knew the look in Marvell’s eyes meant that only her friend could save him from her furry fury. Both pulled their glares away from one another to bow to Ben’s interference and with that concession he melted the ice around their ankles almost as quickly as he had first conjured it.

“Give her back the sack.” Ben commanded.

Unlucky sighed but tossed it back.

“What do we do with him?” Marvell growled.

“We leave him be.” Ben answered, “But we definitely don’t owe him any favors now.”

“Aw, come on!” Unlucky complained, “Those rocks have blood on them. Unless you plan to use them to liberate the dwarven people, then they belong at the bottom of the sea!”

“And whot mehks you the arbitar of fehrness, Knome?” Bold emerged from the cabin with a scowl and a snarl, “The blood on those enertombs won’t wosh off anaymar in the sae than they would on the market.”

“That’s right!” Marvell concurred.

But then Bold turned his glare on his ally, “Y’all woke up ar patient with yar godai capitalism.”

Despite the information coming in the form of a thorough scolding, the news that the lone pirate was now conscious got both Marvell and Unlucky to smile. Even far less nose-y Ben was intrigued. In fact, so curious was the crew that even Unluckier – who had been swimming along the boat, gorging on fish – shot up out of the waves and slammed down on the deck (this did ruin

Ben's interest as he was immediately thrust back to contemplating their safety as he struggled to stay vertical amidst the ship's oscillation). Unlucky patted his reptilian steed on the nose, telling her to stay, then rushed past Bold into the cabin. Bold gestured for Marvell and Ben to follow, then did the same.

Inside the cabin, on the right, a long red booth circled a tabletop littered with ash from burnt up holy texts. The victim, Lenga's healing book, still lay sprawled open amidst the refuse. Across from it, taking up half the booth, was the dark scaled chidra they'd found unconscious on the deck back in the harbor of Sereibis. The man was leaned back and stretched out, taking up half of the booth with his legs. His shoulders were over the lip of the couch and his head cocked back so that he looked down his nose at the new comers despite sitting beneath them.

"Sorry for waking you up, Captain Dresdan." Unlucky muttered, shuffling his feet.

Not adjusting his posture, Dresdan replied, "Apologize to the dwarf, I was wide awake."

Bold smiled sheepishly as the Knome and bearn shot him daggers.

Lenga was sitting on a loveseat on the other side of the table from Dresdan's booth. She appeared to have gotten her sleep and recovered before the commotion outside could've woken her. She looked refreshed, her long purple hair had even been brushed out, but her face was a bit contorted. Her brow a tad furled.

"He wants us to change course." Lenga explained.

"To where?" Ben asked.

"He doesn't know." Fetch's voice came from behind the new arrivals. On the other side of the cabin from the booth, there was a little kitchen area. Fetch was perched on the counter there, his eyes trained on the Obsidian even as he spoke to the others. His brow was a tad furled too, but his confliction wasn't with regard to everyone getting along, it was due to the mental civil war being waged between his curiosity and his precaution, "He's chasing a necromancer."

"The necromancer." Dresdan interjected, still not moving, "Truth. You haven't heard of her?"

"No." Ben and Marvell chimed.

"Aye." Bold nodded, his head now tilting back so that he was looking down his nose back at the pirate, "Whot business do ya got with em?"

"I aim to kill her." Dresdan replied.

Bold dropped his chin and looked straight at the chidra, "For who?"

"For myself." He lowered his glare too.

"For all of us really." Fetch inserted, "Truth's as bad as Shalis."

Grinning sheepishly, Ben asked, "Shalis?"

"The Sheik." Fetch elaborated, "She's basically the queen of the shadowmancers and necromancers, her and Truth together, they run the Disciples of Darkness and the New Pact." He nodded over at Dresdan, "They're bigger threats to the Empire than piracy ever was."

"Even more than you know." Dresdan agreed.

"Aye." Bold concurred, "That witch was thar when oi eschehped." Bold spat on the floorboards, the act cause Unlucky to flinch and Lenga to cringe but the ensuing tale vanquished all thoughts of etiquette. Bold continued, "Wae war set to sehve a couple hundred loives thot deh. Instead, hundreds doied. Laest a thousand loives will bae lost, they haven't stopped the executions since oi left Vinnum Tow, and oll baecause wae happened to plan ar revolt on the donum day those bastards daesoided to visit." Bold shook his head.

Despite the melancholy that filled the cabin, Unlucky bound forward and hopped onto the kitchen table, stabbing his pointer finger into the air like a lightning rod, “Let’s do it! Let’s go kill us a necromancer!”

“I don’t need help.” Dresdan stated, “I simply need a ride.”

“Great. Perfect.” Marvell stepped into the center of the room, pivoting so that she could eye each of her new comrades as she made her point, “We’ll tote him wherever and send him on his merry bone bender bashing way. You know,” she raised her shoulders in the first half of a shrug but held it to emphasize that she’d already given up on the suggestion she was about to offer...but had she though? She continued, “I thought we could correct course, sail to somewhere outside the Empire like Sondor or Iceload, hand him off and collect the bounty but maybe that was just me.”

Dresdan seemed unphased, “If you think you can subdue me, then by all means.”

Ben joined Marvell in the middle of the room but completely ignored her comment, “Sorry, but, let me get this straight. We aren’t seriously thinking about going to hunt down this necromancer. Who, from the sounds of it, is the strongest necromancer in the world or close to it.”

“Yup.” Fetch said.

“This guy doesn’t even think we can beat him,” Ben pointed out, “so what makes us think we can beat the guy that beat him?”

“Gal.” Dresdan corrected.

“Wae can baet em.” Bold assured Ben.

“If you’re scared, then we can drop you off.” Unlucky suggested from the tabletop.

“I don’t need help.” Dresdan restated, slipping his words out between gritting teeth, “I need a ride.”

Fetch crossed his arms, “No bounty and no glory sounds like a bum deal to me.”

Marvell jumped at the sound that someone might be on her side, “We could turn him in and sell these enertombs then take the rest of the year off!”

“Selling sentient beings.” Unlucky sighed as he turned to Bold, “I warned you about her.”

“Handing him ovar is out of the question.” Bold growled, “Wae should go sae Saint.”

“The Emperor?” Ben croaked.

“Wouldn’t he just arrest Dresdan there?” Lenga asked.

“I know Saint.” Dresdan assured her, “He’ll tell you to let me go – to let me continue my hunt alone – however, I’m not so sure he’ll let your friend over there go.”

Fetch gulped, “Yea maybe God’s Island is a bit much, huh?”

“See,” Marvell scooted over to the kitchen counter, clutching her sack of enertombs to her breast, “maybe they drop us off in Sondor or something.”

“We’ll protect you.” Lenga assured Fetch.

“Aye,” Bold nodded, “the old bastard owes mae.”

“Can we really just sail up to God’s Island and meet the Emperor?” Ben was as pale as an electric elf, his fingers nervously playing with the hair sticking out around his horns.

“We’ve got a princess and the leader of the dwarven revolution with us!” Unlucky laughed, “Of course we can!”

“What about Doggenham?” Ben pressed.

“God’s Island is on the way!” Unlucky exclaimed.

“That is true.” Lenga admitted.

“I’d say we should vote but I think we’d still lose.” Marvell lamented.

“And it’s my boat.” Unlucky said with a tone of seriousness that seemed a little too intense to suddenly come from the previously jovial figure, but with a broad smile he quickly switched by to his prior flippant intonation, “To God’s Island!”

And that was that.

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Cursing, he trudged forever onward. Just as the current of the water that rushed along the river floor pulled at him incessantly, so too did the curse that bound him to what was left of his existence. Water now rushed through the wound that slipped through his stomach as there was no blood left in his body to take its place. The dagger in his temple remained, poking out between his eyebrows like the horn of a unicorn. He could’ve removed it, but there was no reason to. He was already being covered in barnacles and algae. His flesh, only recently dead, would soon be long gone as schools of bottom feeders rushed by to claim chips and flakes of his rigamortified body. He was leaving the riverbed and marching out into the bottom of the ocean. One foot rose up out of the muck, stretched out, stomped down, then up came the next.

Smidt Cormac had been doomed the moment Truth had corrupted him. For a split second, when the throwing knife split open his skull and everything went black, he had a second of hope that he might actually get the chance to die but alas, Truth was a hoarder and she perceived her pawns as her property. Before his consciousness could slip off to wherever they go when their shell begins to decompose, Truth used her grasp on his mind to not only convert him into a necromancer but to then turn him into a boneguard. A semi-sentient undead-being forced to forever obey orders and, for the time being, his orders were to traverse half the globe via the sea floor to meet his master on her throne in Batloe. Though his audience, on the sea floor, couldn’t understand his grumblings, his thoughts were heard loud and clear by his master no matter how far away she might be.

“CONSIDER YOURSELF FORTUNATE,” Truth’s voice screeched through his mind, “EXISTENCE IS RARE AND FLEETING.”

By the time I get to Batloe, the Empire will know who you are.

He could sense her shrug of a response and to be honest he didn’t mind. He fully understood his fate and didn’t really relish any attempts of his new master to sugar coat it. On he marched, through the bottom of the sea. The bleakness of his situation did make him smirk. As an undead, he felt no discomfort and yet he had never been more uncomfortable in his life.

Chapter Thirteen: Behind the Dragon's Mask

The balls of his feet only touched every other rung as he bound up the ladder. He dared not watch his step as his head was craned and his gaze fixated on platform above. A thin sheet of metal made the next floor but it wasn't this tier he was concerned about, but rather the ladder that started there, rising diagonally opposite his own. The clamor and commotion of a hundred separate stomping feet on steel scaffolding and the shouts as sportsmen hollered back and forth should've made it impossible for him to tell that any specific set of sounds was coming from that platform two stories above, especially as he himself charged loudly upwards, and yet, thanks to his brothers tech, his hearing could hone in and he was positive.

Though few noticed the back quarters of the mask due to the gargantuan snarl that extended from the front of his face, the tympanic membranes that protected his ears were not only anatomically incorrect for a dragon but they were actually operational. He couldn't quite make out the conversation above him, but he got the gist and it told him that he was closing in on his target. The ears didn't just help him hear what he wanted, they also allowed his brother to chime in from afar – which his brother now did to remind him: there were *two* targets.

“Get the clamps!” The intercom screeched.

The Dragon skidded to a halt, halfway through his pivot to head up the last ladder. With a groan, the hunter turned and ran down the platform. He came to a stop at the edge of the planking. The view below was spectacular, well...for an athlete it was. He was nearly at the top of a massive fort made of scaffolding and, across from him, beyond a vast desolate battlefield, was what appeared to be a mirror image. The distant tower wobbled in the wind like the very one he stood in. Warcourters rushed throughout the structure, like an army of ants waging war against a commune of termites. Builders scrambled, adding new supports here and there and brandishing them like spears against the pesky pillagers that chased them, eager to brutalize both the constructors and the construction alike, meanwhile, the hunters prowled, searching within the maze of sheet metal and plywood for their enemies' beloved relic.

“Now or never, bro, bash those clamps!”

Snapping out of it, he whirled around and with one swift jab he brought his staff down on the little metal binder that connected a runner to a bearer to a post. The thing snapped clean off.

“Too much!”

The entire structure groaned and the wobble now came with a distinct lean.

With a gulp, the Dragon turned to the other corner. He rose his staff with a little more control and precision. This time when he brought it down, the clamp bent with a shriek but it didn't snap clean off. As it continued to groan, straining the bend evermore, the Dragon turned back to the ladder which separated him from his final target. Only now that ladder wasn't the only thing in the way.

Three Royals blocked his path. One of which was an actual royal, the daughter of Zion Cage herself, Princess Melaruse, and she should not have been there. Not because she was royalty, she was the team captain after all, but rather because she was the Royals' best hunter and it was not a good sign for a hunter to still be in their own fort this late into the game. Looking her

up and down, she didn't appear especially wounded. Thus, the Dragon had only one explanation left and it, as it often did, happened to line up with what his ego first suggested.

"Is this a date?" He asked.

Her cronies charged. They were massive men, which wouldn't have so concerned the Dragon had he not just crippled the integrity of the supports which held the metal plank beneath him. That, combined with the fact that as the two combatants clomped, the Dragon's helmet-comperked back up and his brother's voice anxiously pointed out that:

"I would've said you had five minutes but now...maybe one."

The Dragon would've come up with some quippy clap back but he decided to use his cleverness for survival instead. Rushing forward, he slid to his knees and ducked under the swing of the left oaf's bat. As he scooted past, he jabbed behind him with his staff, hitting the brute in the pit of his leg, dropping his foe to his knees. Unfortunately, that hit left the Dragon with less than enough time to raise his rod and block the bat of the second oaf. Instead, he ducked into a roll and barreled into the man's shins. As this second fellow bowled over him, the Dragon shot back up to his feet and hurriedly raised his staff out in front of him – it was pure instinct and, as his ego had been before, it was spot on. Melaruse had followed her goons and gone in for the kill with her own staff.

If only she could've seen his smirk, "Now it's a date."

Instead of a ridiculous mask, she wore a more reasonable Cagistan-style helmet – visorless with a Y-shaped opening – so the Dragon could see her smirk back, "Take off your mask if it's a-"

Pushing out of the parry before she could finish, the Dragon got her to stagger back. That gave him enough time to turn and face the fools he'd bested a mere moment prior. The first fellow had finished his knee slide and reached for a pole for support as he rose. Unfortunately, the bearer he went for was the one with the clamp still squealing as it resisted the bend that would soon snap it. With the Royal's weight, it immediately snapped. The crossbar popped free and the warcourter tumbled over the now nonexistent railing, diving head first towards the dusty court turf.

While death wasn't uncommon in warcourt, much like in war, seeing a team mate plummet to their death tended to rev up their comrades (also like in war) and as the entire fortress began to lean even worse, the second oaf appeared not to be worried about sharing his companion's fate. Rather, from the fire in his eyes, it seemed the Royal was now only worried about slaying the Dragon.

He could hear his brother gulp before informing him, *"Definitely one minute now."*

Knowing that Melaruse would soon be whacking at his back, the Dragon rushed her last cronie. This time, the fellow faked his swing high and moved to swing low. The Dragon also switched it up. He didn't go for the big boy's legs, he didn't go for him at all. Jumping up, he grabbed hold of the barrier post above him and swung his legs up like a pole vaulter. Rather than clearing a high bar, he simply had to clear the his opponent's scalp.

Yet, before he could land on the otherside, the steel flooring gave way. As pillagers all over the fort had been breaking connectors and loosening clamps, the frame was now so wobbly that some platforms were being jostled free – such as this one. The metal planking slipped out from its supports and spilled the oaf down to the floor beneath. The impact of the athlete caused the next floor to buckle. This one shot the man horizontal, his back smacking against a bannister that then immediately popped free. For a moment the arch of his boots caught the edge of the

scaffolding and he teetered between the fort and the fall, his arms pinwheeling in a feeble attempt to catch wind, and then the Royal tumbled over the side.

The Dragon hadn't even seen the man begin to fall. The minute he hit the floor beneath him, he scrambled to his feet and took off – bounding over hole left behind by his victims and heading for that ladder he'd originally been climbing before he'd stopped to bash the bindings that had just saved him.

The Dragon froze at the bottom of the ladder. Melaruse was waiting for him at the top. Looking down from above, she made an offer, "I'll step aside if you take off the mask." "At least buy me dinner first!" The Dragon crowed.

"*Abandon the relic!*" His brother pleaded in his ears, "*Get out of there!*"

His little brother didn't realize, the Dragon wasn't there to win. The moment he realized that the Princess was hunting him and not his team's relic, everything changed. *The Cagirent has finally taken an interest in me*, he sneered inside his helmet, *now I've just got to get them to take the bait.*

The scaffolding groaned – accompanied by a chorus of screams and shouts as warcourters were thrown from the structure or crushed by the collapsing posts and planks – but neither the Dragon nor the Princess budged. The ladder attempted to fall aside but both grabbed hold and slammed it back in place.

"When and where?" Melaruse asked.

"Tomorrow night," the Dragon replied, "your place."

Even the rather stoic Melaruse gasped at the suggestion, "My father's birthday?"

"*BROTHER-*"

Gritting over the sound of his shrieking brother, the Dragon maintained his composure, shrugging as if he wasn't asking to crash the King's birthday while fighting his daughter in a collapsing makeshift fortress, "What should I wear?"

"*-JUMP NOW!*"

Whether or not the Dragon would've listened to his brother on his own, no one would ever know, as fate had decided to intervene. Across the court, on the fortress constructed by the Dragon's team, the Mainlanders, a large tower of scaffolding had been completely severed from the rest of the structure, not only that but the pillagers had set up the planks of plywood and sheets of steel that had been floors to work instead as walls which had the ultimate purpose of catching the wind like sails. Their hope was that it would help them topple the entire structure but, as mentioned before, it seemed the universe had decided to switch things up. Namely: the wind. No sooner had their scheme been complete than did the wind switch and a vast gust sweep through the fortress, catching the cut free clump of scaffolding and sending it plunging like tumbling tree towards the face of the Royal's fortress. The face which the Dragon found himself staring out of from between the rungs of the ladder that he and the Sondoran Princess held on to. As the towers smashed into the fortress, the plank beneath the Dragon collapsed and it shot him straight down into the very mix of the continuing destruction of the collision.

Now the sounds of wrenching metal were completely unintelligible from the sounds of terrorized sportsmen. All noise had been reduced to one thunderous roar that completely overpowered the deafening mechanisms in his helmet as he descended through the web of the crashing structures. Gnarled panels of metal cut by like giant frisbees, their edges now serrated and chopping anything they collided with. Volleys of posts shot down around him, their ends, snapped and sharp as spears. He fell in segments, like a pinball ricocheting from one side of the machine to the other on its journey back towards the flippers. The structures didn't immediately

collapse. The intruding tower was still pushing the intruded fortress over, every five seconds it shifted closer to demise and dropped more sections of scaffolding so that just as the Dragon was able to collect himself he was thrown again towards the ground. All he could do was dodge the torn metal and splintered wood as he was tossed back and forth.

His brother's voice broke through the chaos, "*YOU'RE GOING TO BE BURRIED ALIVE!*"

"Love the encouragement..." The Dragon retorted.

His pessimistic sarcasm suddenly slipped his mind as he saw an opportunity. After bouncing off the floor of a leaning section of falling scaffolding, he was launched parallel to the ground. Before him, standing like a goalpost at the back of the inzone, was a shell of a tower that had either been abandoned mid-assembly or had been so dismantled that it looked skeletal. Aside from two posts, stabbed into the ground far below, the thing consisted only of one more bearer-pole, stretching perpendicular from the others to connect them. It wouldn't last long, one stray piece of debris could probably bring it down, in fact, even the Dragon's own weight might do the job – but if he was quick, he could use it to slow his fall. Getting his staff ready, he raised it above him. He shot through the upright posts like a football and his staff hit them both, yanking him to an abrupt halt. Immediately, the two posts began to lean, collapsing towards the ground, but doing so at a speed that wouldn't snap the Dragon's shins in two.

"NOW GET OUT OF THERE!"

"Just when I was thinking about sticking around!" The Dragon scoffed.

As the goalpost was about to smack flat against the ground, the Dragon twisted his staff and jumped to freedom – though he still had a way to go, he could literally see the light at the end of the tunnel. Zig-zagging to dodge the falling debris, he sprinted out with the rushing dust as the fortress finally fully collapsed around him. The gust even gave him a bit of an extra boost.

With victory now nigh assured, his brother could stop focusing on his safety and turn instead to his motives, asking, "*What was that about back there? Why do you want to go to the Cagirent's birthday party?*"

"You'll find out." The Dragon teased.

"Is it part of your plan to get your sword back?"

As the Dragon bound out of the shadows of destruction and into the light of Solaris, he reached up and cut off the helmet-com. Turning to listen only to the sounds of catastrophe as the Royal's fortress settled into a massive pile of refuse. Survivors of both teams were staggering out, limping towards the edges of the court as medics rushed in to meet them. The Mainlanders that passed the Dragon made sure to clasp him on the back, as did he, as the warm high of victory began to replace the cold, clammy anxiety of gametime. His reveling was eventually interrupted by a congratulations he didn't expect.

For one, the Dragon figured he'd be the last person she'd want to see now and, for two, he was impressed that she had survived. She stopped before him, glaring into the eyes of his mask though her smile seemed genuinely congratulatory.

"You win." Melaruse said.

The Dragon cocked his head to the side, gesturing towards the wreckage, "Obviously?"

"No." She rolled her eyes, strutting past him and shaking her head, explaining as she walked away, "I'm buying you dinner."

"Tomorrow?!" He exclaimed.

"Yea," She hollered over her shoulder, glancing back to wink, "use your winnings to clean up a bit. That face better live up to that mask's infamy."

The Dragon now turned from the refuse completely to watch her waltz off. *She sure isn't walking like a loser.* He gulped. After tomorrow, his mask would no longer protect him from the Cagirent. While it was a necessary evil, a part of his plan, it wouldn't be easy. In fact, compared to what he needed to pull off next, the Warcourt match was the easy part. *The game has only just begun,* he thought. With that, he headed off the field to join his mates and brag about the date he'd just scored. Whether you were a patriot or not, dinner with the Cagirent as his daughter's plus one was quite the accomplishment. In fact, some might even say it was an opportunity to die for.

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In the fascist utopia of Sondor, known as the Cagirent, there was no homelessness or unemployment. If you couldn't afford a home, then you were given one in exchange for mandatory labor. If you couldn't keep up with the job, they didn't take your home from you, they just switched your home with another. You moved out of the labor tenement and into the prison. And there, in prison, everyone kept up – everyone that lived, that is. Thus, in the Cagirent, the unemployed and homeless did their best not to exist. Fortunately, tenancy turnover in the labor tenements was so high that there were quite a few of the stumpy star pillars empty, even downtown Cage Town, encircling Zion's Mountain where the Stronghold (the Cagirent's militaristic take on a palace) overlooked the city.

The Mountain was more of a plateau, although that was not a downgrade as it was a miraculous natural formation and it rose as high as a mountain before flattening out as if the peak had simply been lobbed off. The initial city was born there on that elevated plane and it spilled out from there over the centuries. Each century it slipped further down the facades, where horizontal layers of colorful bedrock denoted the different ages the mesa had endured before humans came to cover their cliffs. By modern times, those original stripes of red and orange were only a part of the spectacular view, as they were now hidden behind the vertical columns of civilization. From afar, Cage Town appeared like a giant checkered stump – as the colors of plateau peaked through the columns of the city – and Zion's Stronghold rose above the mesa like a fat-bottomed stormcloud, ready and willing to smite any who dared question the authority of the authoritarian regime.

Still, plenty did question that authority. The problem with demanding that a group of people share a certain set of opinions, is that policing opinions is impossible and groups of people are assholes. Even if the Cagirent was an actual utopia, there would still be contrarians determined to be too cool to be ruled, but the Cagirent was not a utopia. In fact, it teetered on the verge of a dystopia like the Capitol fortress' walls teetered on the verge of tumbling off the ever eroding plateau. And, ironically, those resisting-troublemakers took refuge just beneath those walls, in the abandoned labor tenements that rose up around Zion's Mountain.

It was on the doorstep of one of those supposedly vacant towers that a chidra, bearn, and undead foxbird found themselves waiting on a blistering hot morning in early June. Bearn's weren't as proficient sweaters as other mammalian races but, even so, Sniper was drenched and dripping. Peshkova was normally fine with heat, as a reptile, but she was having flashbacks to her days working next to giant engines in the factories of Foxloe. Only Einna didn't mind. As a banshee, she couldn't feel a difference between a heatwave and a blizzard, all she had to tolerate was the incessant grunts and groans of her comrades as they waited for someone to answer the door.

When the door finally opened, Pesh was halfway done hallucinating her through the assembly of some sort of geared device and Sniper was struggling with Einna in an attempt to hug her and attain the deadly cold of a banshee's touch.

"What do we have here?"

Both snapped out of it and Einna nipped at the bearn before addressing the door opener, "Wary travelers."

The door opener scrutinized the wary travelers. There was enough to scrutinize even before the bird spoke. In fact, the bird alone was odd. Foxbirds were not native to Sondor nor were they cheap pets. They were from Foxloe, as were many chidras, so it made some sense being in the company of the chidran woman but she wore the robes of a mage which made it appear as though she were a Batloen chidra rather than a Foxloen one. The final oddity was the bearn. Bearn in Sondor were a rare occurrence. The climate was simply not designed for people with thick fur. Thus, the fact that a bearn was there, meant to the door opener that though they were definitely wary travelers, but they did not appear to be wandering travelers. They knew where they were and were there for a reason.

As the door opener did her math, so to did the two heatstroking individuals and their undead friend. The banshee couldn't see much other than the fact that their potential host had formidable energy. The chidra and bearn, however, could see much more. She was an earth elf. While earth elves were nearly all Tadloen, Tadloe was Sondor's closest neighbor so it wasn't such an oddity to see a dark skinned elf on the hot plains of the human continent. What was interesting, though, was her armor. It was a hodgepodge of miscellaneous plates and pads that must've been accumulated over a multitude of years of switching this out for that to maximize the utility of her defenses, all accentuated with the bulbous left shoulder plate. A line of obsidian spikes ran over the large turtle-shell shaped piece and it had been beaten and dented so much so that it had lost the glossy shine metal typically has, making the scarlet hue of it look opaque...and making the two potential guests wonder whether or not it had been painted with blood. But the true peculiarity was the very fact that she was wearing armor. From head to toe. On a particularly hot Spring day while standing in the doorway of a supposedly abandoned building.

"Where's da war, Civ?" Peshkova asked.

"Where is it not?" The woman replied as she stepped aside and gestured for them to come in, "I'm not giving y'all the benefit of the doubt, letting y'all in, I'll still kill you if one of you starts acting funny."

"Good luck." Peshkova smirked, walking in.

"You're walking into a den of thieves." The woman warned.

"Yea, well," Peshkova nodded to the bird between her and Sniper, "she's a banshee."

The woman jumped nearly two feet in the air – which may not sound like much but she was wearing at least fifty pounds of armor – and drew her sword, placing herself between the three and the rest of the vacant structure. Which the three now saw to not be vacant. Not only was it not vacant, but the lack of vacancy was now closing in upon them. From the dusty shadows, a makeshift militia appeared to surround the three. There was no going back and, as they glanced from one glare to the next, the three weren't sure there was going to be a way forward.

"Doom Warrior?" The earth elven woman demanded.

Her katana pointed at the foxbird, the tip of the blade dipping into the flames that now began to seep out from the large animal's feathers. It wasn't fire, but that was the only way to

describe it. The gaseous scarlet – the same shade as the hilt of the blade that threatened the aura – danced like flames as it's color assured all observers that it was something far worse. The feathers of the bird began to mold together, turning into a warrior's leather corset. It looked as if it had seen many battles and the women wearing must've seen many more for she was nothing but red fire and bones. As the body of the bird turned into the skeleton of a woman, the talons turned into the assorted weapons that skirted her hips: longbow, crossbow, rifle, handgun, throwing daggers, throwing axes, and even the long barrel of a blowgun.

Though the earth elf was Tadloen, even she recognized the Sondoran banshee for who she was. Her blade slipped back into its sheath as the rest of her comrades began to murmur. Then the undead archer spoke with a crooked smile.

"I kill Doom Warriors."

The earth elven warrior fell to one knee and bowed her head as she introduced herself, "Wake Ragashi, Captain of the Kou Warriors."

"We're here to speak with the General." Einna stated.

"Well," Pesh peeped out from behind her infernal companion, "specifically, to speak wid his brudder."

Wake got up from her knee, her head cocked to one side, "Little Kou?"

Pesh, Einna, and even the seemingly-mute furry-giant behind them nodded in unison.

"Is he here?" Einna asked.

"Yea," Wake shrugged and gestured for them to follow as she whirled around before they could see the smirk slip across her face, "good thing you don't want to talk to the Big Kou. He's hardly capable of anything more than moans and snores right now."

The crowd began to disperse as the three followed Wake deeper into the building. It was ironic that those gathered there had once been homeless – which meant they'd been deemed by the state to either be unwilling or incapable of work – and yet here they were working for a playboy militia leader with enthusiasm and efficiency. Almost immediately after Wake agreed to take them to the General, the congregation went about their way. The clanging and banging of labor filled the wide chamber. The dark edges of the expansive room – which they now saw encompassed the entirety of the first floor – suddenly lit up as runes came to life encircling the walls.

"Deafening magic?" Pesh wondered.

"They're up to something." Einna concurred.

Sniper broke his silence to point that something out, "Or down."

They stopped reading the writing on the walls and looked where they were going once more. Before them was a massive hole. It bore into the ground at a gentle slant and for good reason, a human was in the process of pushing a wheelborrow up the ramp – full of rocks and dirt. Wake hadn't stopped for them to ask questions so they had to hustle a little bit to catch up.

"Hey Civ! Where's da tunnel go to?" Pesh asked.

Still not skipping a stride, Wake responded, "The Plains."

"Won't da Cagistan just follow you dere?" Pesh pressed further.

Wake scoffed, finally stopping by another hole – except this hole was in the roof. Looking up the empty shaft in the ceiling, she hollered something in Ancient Human, "Pole-ii!" More clanking and rumbling suddenly joined the cacophony of clamor that reverberated throughout the chamber. As this new commotion grew louder, Wake turned back to her guests and explained with a wink, "The Cagistan can follow us to the Plains if they want to, but the problem is they don't want to. They catch us here? They'll squash us like bugs. Out there? Oh

no, they don't want that. The Cagistan is like a little dog behind a fence, barking its godi head off, but the minute you open that gate--"

BAM! A giant slab of metal smashed the floor behind Wake, thrusting a cloud of dust in her audience's faces. It was roughly the size and shape of a queen sized mattress, with gaudy rings on each corner that were attached to even gaudier chains which ascended into the hole in the ceiling. As Pesh and Sniper cleared the dust out of their eyes, Wake and Einna stepped onto the platform. Wake's speech about the power of the resistance warmed Einna's frozen heart. Long ago, she'd liberated the humans of Sondor but when she lost her flesh she lost her hold on her people. While not dead, as an undead she was still relegated to the shadows where her aid could only go so far. Einna reached out to clasp Wake on the back but missed as Wake quickly side stepped the affectionate gesture.

"Woh, there banshee!" Wake laughed.

Einna shrugged it off, continuing with what she was going to say nonetheless, "Y'all getting ready for another Clan War?"

"That's the hope." Wake nodded.

Now that they could see, Pesh and Sniper joined the two women on the platform.

"Pole-ii!" Wake called.

With a groan and then a heave, the elevator began to rise. Wake, Einna, and Pesh were undaunted, but Sniper suddenly jumped. His legs kicked out so that he stood in what was almost a squatting position and, somehow, in the blink of an eye he'd snatched an arrow from his quiver and knocked it into his bow. This wasn't all. Due to his stature, the entire plate upon which all four stood began to bounce on its chains. Tilting this way then that like a dish balanced on a stick, nearly pitching his comrades off into the shaft. As everyone regained their composure, Wake reached for her sword and Einna and Pesh quickly stepped in between the two despite being just as bewildered as the earth elf.

"Sniper?" Einna asked.

"Bearn?" Pesh asked.

The bearn cleared his throat and slid the arrow back in his quiver. Averting his gaze, he snapped his bow back into its strap and stood up straight. His throat finally clear, he explained simply, "Never been on a lift before."

"And you won't be allowed back on this one after that stunt." Wake grumbled.

Sniper kept his eyes away from the others, his body still visibly tense.

Pesh, feeling bad for the giant marksman, changed the subject, "What's with da clodes lines, Civ."

While the first floor had been a massive, almost cavernous chamber with nothing more than people and columns filling it, the second floor and those following were walled with curtains and drapes hung up on a network of cords that criss-crossed against the ceiling like spiderwebs. Ever so often, people could be seen rushing by, slapping a sheet aside and bustling on to where ever they were headed.

"We took down all the walls." Wake explained, "It was easier than smuggling in all the materials we needed for supports in the tunnel."

"Farak..." Pesh sighed, "Wish I'd been around for that. I'm da best bomber benead Solaris."

"The lad you're going to meet would disagree." Wake countered.

"Who den?" Pesh asked.

"Himself." Wake smirked.

With another lurch, the elevator came to a chain rattling stop. Sniper held his cool this time, though mostly because he hadn't loosened up since his first jolt. As the platform slowly stopped swinging, Sniper looked up to see the mechanisms that had lifted them. Apparently this wasn't the top floor, as the floor above held the four massive cranks which wound the chains around gigantic cable reels. Enertombs studded the flanges on either sides of the crank. Sniper wondered if the fact that the Kou Warriors were too cheap to smuggle in construction supplies might've been because they spent all their loot feuling the lift.

"Stairs are better." Sniper grunted.

"Huh?" Pesh asked.

Sniper shook his head.

"Follow me." Wake ordered.

Two armored men stood before them – their suits looking just as mismatched as Wake's – and they stepped aside as the four joined them on the landing. Like the other floors, this one also had the maze of drapes albeit far less than those floors prior. As Wake led them through the linen labrynth, they began to hear a low rolling lamentation, like a fallen cow crying for the farmer to come lift it back onto its feet, and it only got louder as they went further. Now the elevator made more sense to Sniper. After all, lots of large livestock struggle going down stairs. But when they reached their destination and Wake whipped back the curtain, the old barn was shocked to see that it was not a heifer hollering but rather a howling human.

Laying on his back with his feet propped up on one armrest and his head propped up on the other, was the General. One arm was draped across his forehead while his other hung limp off the side of the couch, a cigarette pinched between his fingers. He didn't react when they entered, other than to lift the stoge to his lips and take a long drag.

"Meet Tenchi Kou," Wake's voice was dull and dry, "Wielder of the Mystak Blade – or should I say, ex-wielder."

Tenchi exhaled what he'd inhaled and then gave an excessively loud moan.

"Who weilds it now?" Pesh asked.

"The farakin godi Cagirent, that's who." Wake was cursing the King but her eyes seemed to be cursing the General.

Finally Tenchi spoke up, "Not true! No one wields it now. It just sits in his farakin castle like a crimsin tiad trophy cause the godi gop on the throne needs my cursed blood to touch it – but it's all a part of the plan." With great effort, he lifted his arm off his head and turned so that he was sitting up straight and looking at his guests – when his eyes registered what he saw: specifically the skeleton engulfed in crimson flames – he jumped up from his sitting position and landed on the back of the couch, perched like a cat that had just seen a dog. Suddenly, there was a pole in his hand too though no one had seen him grab it or had any clue where it came from still, it was there, and he was waving it at Einna Yelkao with crazy in his eyes.

"Creaton Live?!" He shrieked.

Einna decided to go with it, curtsyng.

His shock reduced just enough for him to realize that her armor looked as if it had once been fitted to a woman's chest rather than a man's. Then his eyes noted her assortment of ranged weapons and realization began to trickle in. Before he could figure it out, however, Wake gave him a hint.

"The Guardian of Sondor."

"Einna Yelkao!" Tenchi exclaimed.

Now she bowed.

“To what do I owe this honor?” Tenchi hopped off the couch and walked over to shake the banshee’s hand. Einna reached to do so but Wake slapped Tenchi’s hand down, her stern glare reminding him that it is best not to make physical contact with an immolated ghost. The Captain’s act annoyed the General – despite the reasonability of it – and he shot her a dirty look before relifting his hand but this time offering it to Peshkova, “And you are?”

“Peshkova Fang.” Peshkova said.

He moved from her to Sniper. As they shook, Sniper remained quiet, watching Tenchi. He didn’t let go of the humans hand either. After a moment, Tenchi turned back to Peshkova.

“Dat’s Sniper.” She explained.

“Ah.” Tenchi noted, prying his hand from the giants grasp then gesturing to the couch, “Please, sit.”

Sniper and Peshkova walked over to the couch and sat down. The poor sofa groaned under the bearn’s weight and something buckled within the furniture but it held...at least for the moment. Tenchi went over to a desk that sat opposite the couch. Behind which was a torn-leather chair, it looked almost as rough as Einna’s centuries-old armor. Wake stayed where she was and Einna did too, being polite about her ungodly curse for once. As the others got settled, the undead got the conversation going.

“Where’s your little brother?” She asked.

“Who knows?” Tenchi shrugged, whipping his pointer finger around in the air to insinuate the kid could be anywhere, “Anyway, what’re y’all here for? Back up for the heist tonight?”

“Heist?” Peshkova asked.

“The heist – the plan.” He nodded, “Getting the sword back before midnight.”

“How?” Pesh and Sniper chimed.

“Well, see,” Tenchi winked, “I’ve got a dinner date tonight with Princess Melaruse herself.”

“HOW?!” The two chimed again.

“As much as we’d love to ruin Zion Cage’s day,” Einna jumped in, “we’re here on separate business.”

“They’re here to speak with Little Kenchi.” Wake revealed.

“Huh?” Tenchi frowned.

“Da little Civ’s got a...uh...” Peshkova looked to Sniper for help but he was looking at Tenchi and appeared not to notice her attempt to get him to tag in, so then she turned to Einna who – though expressionless due to having no flesh on her face – seemed especially blank-faced at the moment. With nowhere else to turn, she turned back to Tenchi and did her best, “dat little map ding.”

“The Globework?” Wake asked as Tenchi said, “Atlas!”

Somewhere, from behind a couple different walls of drapes, someone responded, “The one and only.”

Both Wake and Tenchi rolled their eyes.

“Yes, dat!” Peshkova exclaimed, “We need it.” She looked to the others, this time looking for concurrence which she got in the form of nods, “For Rosedorn dings.”

“Rosethorn.” Tenchi muttered, “Godi Antipa.” Turning to Einna he asked, “I thought the Golden Dagger wasn’t Antipa?”

“We’re not.” Einna stated.

“But dey’re anti-Pact.” Pesh countered.

“We are anti-Pact.” Einna agreed.

“And I assume you’re anti-Pact too, right, Civ?” Peshkova asked Tenchi.

“Ha! I’m out of the Empire. I’m Anti-Cagirent. I don’t have time to care about the Black Crown Pact or the Disciples of...” He paused, his brain gears finally shifting to scheme mode after being gunked up from the residual alcohol still in his system from the celebrations of the night before, “What’s the Rosethorn need Atlas for?”

Again, from somewhere in the flat came the faint sounds of an animatronic voice saying, “The one and only.”

“Who are you looking for?” Tenchi continued.

“Truth.” Einna answered.

“Aren’t we all.” Tenchi sighed.

“The necromancer?” Wake asked.

“Dey dink she’s up to no good.” Pesh said, “Playing wid magic you aren’t supposed to play wid, Civ. Portals and teleportation, messing wid da Void.”

That was exactly what Tenchi was hoping they’d say. Lifting his cigarette to his lips to mask his smile until he could get it under wraps, he took a puff and said, “That’s not good.” He exhaled, forcing his audience to wait for the obvious elaboration, “You’re worried the Disciples of Darkness have grown tired of waiting for their Black Crown to come back and are taking matters into their own hands – they’re trying to bring him back themselves?”

“Or her.” Wake interjected.

“Even worse.” Tenchi agreed, “So they’re messing with the Void and at what a terrible time to do it. The Voidstone sits in the castle with the totalitarian Mystvokar in Iceload – and he hates the Trinity Nations. It looks like there’s no point in trying to stop Truth. You knock them out, another mancer will take their place, and the Mystvokar will let them do whatever they need to do just to mess with the Empire. Y’all are screwed.”

Surprisingly, Sniper jumped in, “It can be stopped if it hasn’t happened yet.”

Tenchi kept his cool, “But if you fail, if Creaton – or worse, the Queen of Darkness herself – comes back. Then what?”

“Then we stop them.” Sniper shrugged.

“And how do we do that,” Tenchi’s composure broke and a smile slid across his lips, “without the Mystak Blade.”

“We don’t need your magic sword.” Einna scoffed.

“Maybe not.” Tenchi admitted, “But like the Voidstone in Iceload, the Mystak Blade sits in the castle with the totalitarian Cagirent in Sondor – and he hates the Trinity Nations. What happens when he hands the sword over to the Queen of Darkness? You’re going to take on the most powerful person alive with the most powerful sword ever made?”

Einna was undaunted, in fact, she was smirking though no one could tell, “She’ll have to get your blood first. So, to be safe, if the Queen comes back or if Creaton comes back, we’ll just send the Golden Dagger to make sure you’re good and dead before they switch over ownership of your magic toothpick to the Black Crown.”

Wake drew her sword and Tenchi his stick, but Einna began chuckling and both warriors gave up being hard asses.

Despite being the demolition expert, Pesh decided to defuse the situation, “I’m not opposed to helping da Civ. We scratch his back, he scratches ours.”

“I’m not opposed to that.” Tenchi admitted, sitting back down.

Wake sheathed her sword, “Little Kou may be.”

“Where is he?” Einna asked.

“Here!”

Flinging the curtains aside, Kenchi Kou waltzed in with an animatronic head tucked under his arm like it was a football – a football which was immediately fumbled when his little brown eyes fell upon the blazing inferno of crimson combustion and the skeleton within. Bouncing off the floor boards and leaving craters of dust, Atlas (the one and only) came to a rolling stop underneath the blistered boot of the banshee.

“Woh.” Kenchi gasped, turning his wide eyes to Tenchi as he pointed at the burning bonehead, “Is that the godi gopping Black Crown?”

“Language!” Tenchi crowed.

“Dat’s how you Civ’s react to finding Creaton Live in your faraking secret base?” Peshkova’s scaled brow rose in a display of disappointment, “Dought the Kou Warriors were better.”

“We are.” Wake jumped in. Her brow lowered in opposition to the chidra’s, “That one,” she pointed at Tenchi, “is just hungover and this one,” she pointed to Kenchi, “is a toddler.”

“I’m a kid, Captain Ragashi, not a toddler.” Kenchi snapped.

“Dis kid built dat?!” Peshkova yelped.

“Never underestimate a Kou.” Einna nodded, reaching down to pick up the owl-eyed mechanical melon, “How much for it?”

“Atlas-”

“The one and only.” the robot sighed.

“-is not for sale.” Kenchi finished.

Tenchi jumped in, “What if we let them borrow it?”

Kenchi turned to squint at his older brother, “What’s in it for me?”

Tenchi turned back to his visitors, “They help me steal my sword back!”

Peshkova and Sniper turned to Einna but she herself seemed torn, saying, “As much as we’d love to ruin Zion Cage’s day-”

“You haven’t even heard my plan!” Tenchi interrupted.

Then Kenchi interrupted, “I haven’t said okay to any of this!”

Tenchi was suddenly out of his chair with his hand clamped over his little brother’s chomper, saying, “You’ve got to hear my plan before you refuse the deal.”

“Fair.” Einna agreed.

The General was about to begin but his little brother had just bitten into his fingers, causing the two to tumble into a half hazard scuffle, flinging dust up around them as the leader of one of the greatest mercenary armies in the world struggled to tear his fingers out from between his little brother’s teeth. Luckily, Tenchi told his righthand woman everything and so Wake was able to step up to the plate and fill their new friends in.

“Tenchi is the Dragon.” Wake stated.

Einna frowned, “Like the Eninacs are dogs?”

“No, Civ.” Peshkova giggled, “Da Dragon is a Warcourter. He wears a dragon mask for a helmet and no one knows his true identity.”

“And he’s been making the Cagirent uneasy.” Wake continued, “You see, the Dragon is far more popular than the Cagirent and when a charismatic, athletic, celebrity is out polling the fascist dictator, the fascist dictator has to do something about it.”

“So his dinner date with the Princess is more of a hostage situation?” Einna asked.

“Well, King Zion doesn’t know the Dragon is Tenchi.” Wake said.

“He’ll know when Tenchi sits down to eat at his table!” Peshkova explained.

“Exactly,” Wake nodded, “and all Tenchi has to do before that is find out where Zion is hiding the Mystak Blade.”

“Why would Zion ever reveal dat?!” Peshkova howled.

“Zion is a braggart.” Sniper stated.

The whole room fell quiet, again caught off guard by the bears sudden vocalization. Even Tenchi froze up, giving his brother the upper hand so that the little felon was able to release his finger and thwap him on the forehead before retreating to the safety of a corner. Tenchi would’ve pursued the little brat but he too was curious. The silence seemed to insist that Sniper had some more information to offer.

“It’s in the throne room.” Sniper continued.

“WHAT?!” Tenchi and Wake roared.

Sniper nodded, “It is mounted above the throne like a trophie.”

“I knew it!” Tenchi exclaimed.

“How do you know that?” Wake demanded.

“I killed his nephew the other day.” Sniper replied.

“*You killed the Governor of Mannistan?!?*” Tenchi screamed.

Sniper nodded.

“Your new friends are cool.” Kenchi commented.

Sniper continued, “He thought I was with you.”

Tenchi gulped.

“Told me where your sword was, then I killed him.” Sniper concluded.

“Da Civ nearly died too.” Peshkova added.

“Still impressive.” Wake complimented.

“I don’t hire losers.” Einna said.

“Okay, so,” Tenchi sputtered for a bit then his tongue found its footing, “now I don’t have to find out where it is, I just have to get to the throne room before they find out who I am and kill me.” He turned to Wake, “This may actually work.”

Wake chuckled despite being obviously uncomfortable with their plan, “Tenchi will have a signal cicada on him and we’ll be waiting nearby in one of Kenchi’s machines.”

“The one and only Kaboomer!” Kenchi proclaimed, “It’s an armored zoomer that can crash through walls!”

“When tiad hits the propellers, Tenchi calls for backup, we bash our way into the royal chambers, pick up the General and his sword, then high tail it back here and the whole lot of us make a run through the tunnels to the Plains.” Wake eyed Einna’s weapons, then Sniper’s bow, and finally Peshkova’s bombs which, strapped around her torso, were peaking out from her healer robes, then the Captain continued, “The more fire power we have on Kenchi’s machine-”

“The Kaboomer!”

“-the better.” Wake then turned to the interrupting child, “Can we loan them your Globework if they help us turn this suicide mission into a successful heist?”

Kenchi let out a deep sigh and just as it was about to end, when it looked like he might concede, his eyes lit up like as though he’d just stubbed his toe. He whirled around in a full circle before stopping again to query Einna, “Can’t you just turn Tenchi into a banshee and then he can Total Darkness himself to safety when the time comes?”

“Kenchi!” Tenchi protested.

“That isn’t a bad idea.” Einna admitted.

“I thought you weren’t a Doom Warrior.” Wake snapped, “Isn’t Total Darkness a Doom Warrior spell?”

“When I kicked Flow Morain’s ass ten centuries ago he taught me a few things.” Einna said before admitting her true opinion on the Little Kou’s suggestion, “I can’t turn Tenchi into a banshee,” she turned her empty eye sockets on the annoyed eyes of Big Kou, “he may need to have babies one day.”

“A little brother is enough for me,” Tenchi assured her but then he too admitted, “but yea, Kench, I’d rather keep my flesh on my bones – you’ll understand when you get older.”

“Fine...” The little boy bowed his head in defeat, “Y’all can use Atlas.”

“The one and only.” Atlas interjected.

“But if Tenchi dies,” Kenchi added, “no deal. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Einna stooped to extend her hand to the little man but Wake dove between them and tackled Kenchi out of the way. Peshkova and Sniper turned to Tenchi.

“When do we start?” Pesh asked.

“Can you heal a hangover?” Tenchi asked back.

“Easy.” Peshkova smiled, “Pay me in zirra?”

“Only if you share.” Tenchi smirked back.

Peshkova nudged Sniper, chuckling, “I like dis guy.”

“Eh.” Sniper shrugged.

- - -

Zion’s Stronghold rose the same height as the plateau upon which it rested, doubling the natural landmark’s reach in an unnecessary display of mankind’s ability to echo Mother Nature’s greatness. It could only qualify as an echo, for though the main palace itself was a phenomenal piece of architecture, half the structure was hidden behind walls as vertically-grand as they were visually-bland. The epic facade of the bluffs beneath were layered with tiers of vermilion, auburn, and amber. The flat stone of the ramparts above were a pale white that was blinding in the sunlight.

Still, the palace managed to peak over the high partitions. The Capitol was laid out like a coiled snake segmented into a series of horizontal rectangles, each contained between stain-glass paneled walls beneath vaulted ceilings that were capped with extended hip-and-gable roofs which sloped down on oneside and bore the weight of the next oblong chamber on the other. If it were indeed a serpent, then it was long dead – impaled by the towers that connected the lower tiers to those above. Only one of these towers, however, led to the ophidian head of the castle and it was intentionally vague which it was as Zion’s Stronghold – despite the name suggesting a certain level of impenetrability – had switched hands numerous times over the centuries. Each minaret rose to the same height and only one accessed the Royal Chambers of the top five floors – the lowest level of which being the throne room.

A humbler person could access a different sort of throne quite easily, in fact, there was an entire tower dedicated to the porcelain seats and it was there that Tenchi Kou, hidden beneath the mask of the Dragon, sought refuge from the anxiety inducing dinner date he’d only just begun to endure. He struck out at the first bathroom: two stalls were occupied and the urination trough – which was unoccupied – could be shared but would not meet Tenchi’s needs. Shutting the door with a grunt, he climbed further up the winding tower stairs. He emitted two more grunts on the

second and third floor respectively, not even deigning to peak inside the depositories (this was in part because he figured the lower level locations would be more populated but it was nearly entirely because he could already smell the sour must of foul spirits simmering in ceramic caldrons. If not occupied, then they had been recently so. The fourth floor it was. *No one will bother to climb this high*, he figured, and without even checking to be sure this was the case he strolled through the door, into a stall, shifted his fannypack to the side, and plopped down on the toilet. He pulled out one of the many pre-rolled cigarettes he'd brought to help cope with the stress of the heist. He slid off his helmet, hung it on the back of the stall door, and struck a match. As he inhaled he leaned back against the tank – then he heard footsteps.

Smoke streamed out his nostrils and his eyes rolled but his ears focused on the footsteps. The intruder stepped lightly and their gait was quick though it seemed not to get them very far. *Either short or strange*, Tenchi hypothesized, only to quickly discover that this wasn't an either-or situation. The individual stopped before his stall and he could now see the tips of the persons slippers – no bigger than the moccasins of his kid brother.

“Excuse me, sir,” the little man said, knocking, “can I-”

“No.” Tenchi growled.

There wasn't even a pause, almost as if they had cut themselves off before Tenchi had, “Sir, the other stall is occupied.”

Tenchi choked a bit on his smoke, turning to look at the wall that separated him from his neighbor as if he might be able to observe them through it. *Crimpsin tiad*. As his quiet neighbor remained silent and he himself said nothing more, the newcomer continued.

“You know this is Sondor, right, Sir?”

Tenchi chuckled, “Oh, thought it was Iceload.”

“A little warm for Iceload, don't you-”

“What's your point?” Tenchi interjected.

“Tobacco's legal.” The person stated, “You don't have to hide on the toilet.”

Tenchi took a deep breath away from his cigarette, inhaling all the secondhand smoke that had gathered in his stall, then let it out slowly.

“So can I use it?” The person asked, adding one last, “Sir?”

His sigh complete, Tenchi slid his mask back on and opened the stall door.

Unsurprisingly, the invader was a Knome. Smoke rushed out to greet the desperate little fellow, blowing back his curly locks and tugging at the floppy red cone on his head. Despite the pollution, his eyes grew wide as they ogled the man that had been hogging the pot. He staggered back, as if a second wave had struck him, and pointed up at the reptilian mask that hid Tenchi's identity, gasping, “Oh tiad!”

The Dragon bowed, stepping aside to allow the Knome to take the stall.

But the Knome didn't budge, his hands now both flew into the air, “No time to tiad!”

Tenchi frowned.

“I'm late!” The Knome's hands flew down to his hips. One yanked a large silver key from his belt while the other snatched a similarly sized golden dagger. As he turned away from Tenchi and faced the other stall, he continued, “And you're about to be!”

“Huh?” Tenchi remarked.

“Get the sword!” the Knome commanded.

“What?” Tenchi's confused frown now turned to one of suspicion. His brow furled to signify this but the Knome had lost all concern for him. He was focused on the second stall. Tenchi reached forward to grab the little man's shoulder, “Hey, Knome, what're you-”

The second stall door flew open. A wild eyed human stormed out, dressed from head to toe in a mismatched assortment of the Royals' merchandise. In fact, the only non-team associated accessory on the secret-shitter was the revolver in his hand that was pointed right at the Dragon's heart.

That is, it was pointed there for a mere second. Then it was pointed at the roof and next the floor, as the little Knome between the Dragon and the assassin had separated the man's hand from his wrist. The small dagger the little goon had removed from his belt was no longer small. The weapon was the size of a broadsword, far larger than the weilder was tall, and it's opal blade was now splattered with the blood of the Royal.

As the gun clattered to the bathroom floor, the gunman staggered back and his jaw opened wide but before he could shriek the little Knome drove his sword up through the man's chin, piercing the roof of his mouth, and continuing on until it finally came to a stop scraping the inside of the poor fellow's skull.

Tenchi yelped, "Farak!"

"The King isn't the only Sondoran who wants you dead!" The Knome exclaimed, "Now go!" Whirling to face the still shocked Tenchi, the Knome left his sword in his victim and rushed to grab the Dragon by his fanny pack in order to spin him around, "Get the sword!"

As the old man began to push him with both hands – and with surprising strength – Tenchi dug his heels in, complaining, "I don't even know where–"

"The throne room!"

Tenchi's resistance was futile as he was scooted forward on his heels like a handtruck with broken wheels. Still, he protested, "I know that, but–"

"Go up!" The Knome seemed to be losing his patience.

"Up?" Tenchi muttered, opening the bathroom door to avoid being smushed against it by the determination of the fellow behind him.

"Opposite of down!" The Knome clarified, "Up!"

Finally, Tenchi was out in the hall. He began to turn back around but the Knome had shut the door behind him and, from the sounds of it, locked it.

"The farak was that." Tenchi muttered. He paused a moment longer, taking a puff from his cigarette which was now bent into a zigzaggy-Z. Then, as he exhaled, he shrugged, whispering to himself, "Get the sword."

And so up he went. Bounding up the winding staircase, he rose past the fifth and the sixth floor bathrooms and then stopped. Leaning out over the banister, he could see that the tower only climbed two more floors. Looking out the window to his right, he could see a sloped roof level with the window sill. He skipped up to the next landing where the window faced the interior of the fortress. There the roof still climbed with the tower but now he could see above the shingled ridge, he could see the center most part of the castle. It was a stocky tower, skirted with sloping tiled eaves that denoted each floor. These extended roofs were split with gabled dormers in a very similar style as the Tenshu castles of Japan (like the Himeji). Tenchi, of course, didn't make that connection. Nor did he know of the Himeji, but he did recognize that the architectural style was not just easy on the eyes. It would also be easy to climb. Squinting through the old glass, wavy and coated in dust, he tried to peer through the windows of that rising structure but to little success. Still, he was quite sure. It was flamboyant and centrally located, it had to be the Royal Chambers.

Tenchi had been in the Royal Chambers before. He'd been quite drunk on his way in and excruciatingly hungover on his way out – hence not remembering how to get there – but he

remembered what being “there” felt like. Thus, with instincts and logic combined, he only needed a slight nudge to convince himself to rush out onto the roof.

Commotion below made up his mind. He doubted folks had noticed the dead assassin in the bathroom, although he wouldn't be surprised if the Knome had gone on down to the Dining Hall and stirred up trouble trying to sneak a slice of the Cagistan's carrot cake. Eitherway, folks were hollering and storming up the stairs below. It was now or never.

He reached back for his fanny pack. It wasn't there. His heart sank and his blood ran cold. Twisting around to check his hips, he confirmed. The fanny pack was gone and, with it, the signal cicada. *How did I-*

“Stand back!” He heard the Knome holler far below just before metal clanged against metal, “You'll go no further!”

“That farakin theif!”

But why would the Knome save his life just to condemn him? Was it unintentional? Just a Knome being a Knome and instinctually stealing his purse off him without even meaning to? Whatever the answer, it didn't really matter. If the jig wasn't up before, then it surely was now. All he could do was sprint to the sword and pray that his brother would jump the gun without the signal. Throwing back on his mask and saying a quick prayer to the universe that he might survive so that he could one day kill that Knome, Tenchi burst through the window and tumbled out onto the rooftop.

Scurrying up the incline and over the ridge, he slid down until he hit the façade of the Royal Chambers. Peeking through the window beside him, he saw a long and wide hallway. Simply a buffer hall that operated like a holding chamber for the throneroom above, but even it had a good number of guards posted by all the entrances. Even a few by the windows, including the one Tenchi was peaking through. He was staring through the legs of a soldier. Fortunately, the officer wasn't looking out the window. Still Tenchi nearly yelped. Pulling away from the window, he looked up. He couldn't climb directly to the next floor, decorative rafters girded the next tier, but he could run back up the ridge and hop from its peak onto the extended roof that trimmed the next chamber up – the chamber he believed to be the throne room.

So that's what he did. Flicking his cigarette at the window behind him, he rushed back the way he came, scampering on all fours like a charging bear. At the crest he clung on to the shingles and came to a halt. He perched there for a moment. Cage Town lay sprawled out before him. He could see the star pillars over the walls of the Stronghold, many of which had been abandoned due to the faulty leadership of the throne behind him. The once great city was half empty. It was disintegrating like the very plateau beneath the chateau upon which he stood.

“I'll save you Sondor.” He murmured, “I'll-”

An arrow shot past his face, bouncing off one of his helmet's reptilian horns. With a shriek, Tenchi turned back to face the interior tower of the Castle. Back tracking hastily, he began to run along the rooftop ridge, ignoring the fact that more arrows were now flying past him, until he had picked up enough speed (and courage) to make the leap. He nearly missed the roof, but his lanky arms slapped down on the rough-textured shingles and he was able to pull himself up. Once up, he dashed up the inclined of the extended roof, his eyes on the prize: the nearest window. He didn't even stop to check what may lay behind the glass, preferring whatever threats he'd face inside to the idea of being shot off the roof like a pigeon. Bowing his head, he crashed through the glass helmet first.

Rolling to his feet, his eyes first found his weapon: the Mystak Blade. To the ignorant, the sword looked like any other Fou-style katana. It was a long single-edged saber with a slight

curve. The hilt was separated from the blade by a circular guard, decorated with gold lace on a black plate. Wrapped in brown cloth, the hilt was long enough for two hands to shift up and down it. Between ones' fingers and the wrap, one could see translucent stone beneath – stone that, at least in part, was made of void-dust.

The Mystak Blade was cradled in a manger that was staged in a lifted gazebo. The architecture was polished, but old. Four skinny gold pillars lifted the vaulted pavilion top. Between aurelian beams, crimson cloth stretched like wall paper to complete the royal aesthetic. They bore the banners of the Cagistan: a tawny ax encircled by golden fronds of wheat, these tiny symbols checkered them like stars in the sky. On the top side of the sword's little rotunda, was a metallic replica of the Stronghold itself. It was made of all sorts of metals and it shone in the multicolor light of the stars glaring through the stained glass windows that rose behind it.

This lifted gazebo sat atop a longer gazebo which touched the floor of the throne room – and that was where the throne was. Just as immaculate as the aurus awning that housed the Blade, this larger canopy had the space for wider golden columns, thicker golden beams, and larger axes and fronds. Beneath the bronze and burgundy belvedere, sat the Cagirent. His hair was matted down with sweat and grease so that the short curls didn't fluff out but instead lay flat like fossilized snailshells against his tan, clay colored skin. His brow was uninterrupted, drawn together into an extreme V that cut across his forehead to make a diamond with his receding hairline. A dark glare, so dark and black that it reflected light with a twinkle, bore down on the Dragon as the King rose and stepped down from his cathedra. He was still dressed for dinner, but that quickly changed. As he strolled down the stairs that encircled his platform, he tore off his decorative robes and revealed freshly polished armor beneath. Slapping his thigh, a slender rod popped out from a sheath hidden in the armor as if it had been implanted in his leg. Yanking it free, a blade popped out from the baton. It extended three feet. Two barbs poked out on either side of the blade just six inches up from the hilt. Holding the sword in one hand was an accomplishment in and of itself, but Zion Cage the Fifth refused to let his strain interfere with his expression of fury. Before speaking to his guest, he raised his free hand to warn the guards that lined the chamber to stand down. He continued his strut in silence. The distance between the throne and Tenchi was just enough to make his pace unreasonable. So much so that Tenchi even found himself looking around as if maybe the slow approaching King was somehow a distraction.

The chamber's extreme décor didn't stop at the bottom of the throne-stage stairs, it continued along both walls. While the stained glass was dark aside from the silver light of the stars and moon, the torches along the walls illuminated the figures of past monarchs. Faux pillars rose between windows, rising halfway to the roof before stopping to make a platform for the sculptures of deified humans. Many had been destroyed and replaced over the years. Despite claiming to abolish clans in an effort to unite all humans, the only statues that remained were ancestors of the Cage Clan. It began with Melaruse – who the Princess was named after – of the Third Century. She died defending Cage Town from the cursed Kou, her effigy held high a shield emblazoned with ax and wheat. The buckler half masked her scowl. Across the hall from the first true Queen was Jerome Cage – a hero to even those humans that hated the Cagirent. He defended humanity in the Second Void War against hordes of undead and the animatronics that came shortly after. Next to Melaruse the First was another Queen, Kryziera Cage, the first to unite the human continent under a single flag. Though many would substitute the word “unite” for “subjugate”. Facing Kryziera and beside Jerome was another Queen and another universal Sondoran hero: Zenobia Cage. She married the Queen of the Kou, Ecaep Kou, in the Tenth

Century, to unite the humans against the threat of Einna Yelkao. Zenobia even adopted Iahtro – the boy that would become the Storm – and it was Iahtro that stood diagonally across from her, though his statue had been torn down. The wife of the King across from where Iahtro once stood was responsible for the defacing of the effigy, for the King died within the eye of the Iahtro Storm. The first Zion Cage met his fate in the first Battle Grand hosted by the organic hurricane. After this row, the pillars were dedicated to the Zion Cages. The Second being the saintly type, bringing Thoran Christianity to the humans. The Third, who faced the faithful, began the Pan-Clan Drive, seeking to unite humans by abolishing their socially constructed ethnic differences. The first three Zions weren't really all that impressive, but thanks to the Fourth, the historians did their best to make it seem otherwise. It was Zion Cage the Fourth that really put the Zions in the history books but the narrator need say no more. After all, Zion Cage the Fifth was not one to let you forget the legend of his father.

Shaking his head, Tenchi turned back to face the Fifth. Zion had stopped five yards before him. Tenchi couldn't help but wonder if the slow stroll had been in order to allow him to take in the grandeur of the chamber and the legendary exaggerations of the King's ancestral glory. After a deep sigh, Tenchi chose to start off nice.

"Happy birthday." He offered.

"You were supposed to say that at my dinner party." The Cagirent replied, "Why are you here?"

Glad to still have his mask on, Tenchi gulped. His eyes shot towards the windows and his mind sent a quick plea to all the gods he knew of, begging some higher power to signal his brother and the others, but then – with a second gulp – he swallowed his anxiety and puffed out his chest as he fixed his eyes back on the fascist in front of him. One hand moved slowly to his mask but before he could remove it or respond to Zion's question, the King directed Tenchi to wait. Shaking his head, a smirk stretched across his lips as he turned from the Dragon and addressed his guards.

"Who was the last man to be unmasked in my father's Stronghold?"

Rather than rising to the challenge, the guards murmured and exchanged glances. Their armor rattled as they debated the price of the wrong answer and the tease that was the fact that, for servants of the Cagirent, the pop quiz was a no brainer. Finally, one brave soldier raised his hand. The King pointed his long sword at the man as he answered.

"Your Father."

"Indeed." Zion replied to the soldier, "In 1769-"

"Nice." Tenchi remarked.

Pointing to the statue of the man that rose to his left, Zion continued undeterred, "-he snuck into the Capitol, sabotaged the defenses, and delivered the Stronghold and Cage Town to the true patriots of Sondor. Removing his mask on the ramparts that surround us today, he revealed himself to be Zion Cage the Fourth – the rightful leader of the human continent." He whirled around to face Tenchi oncemore, his sword pointing as his eyes stared daggers, "Now, Sir Dragon, tell me. Why are you here?"

The doors to the throne room flew open behind Tenchi. He pivoted to turn sideways so that he could look from the King to the new comers and back and forth. Leading the pack was his date: Princess Melaruse. Her fury was hidden behind a devious smirk. A hand rested on the hilt at her hip, the other propped her chest up so that she could lean back as she strutted and look even further down her nose at her masked rival. She seemed to be walking on her tippy-toes she was so triumphant. An assortment of other royals (not fellow athletes from her team, but actual

royals) and guards followed closely behind her but Tenchi didn't bother himself with them. If his comrades didn't crash the party then he was dead in the water, thus all he focused on was maintaining his resolve. He'd be farakin crimsin tiad donum before he'd cower before the enemy, even in the very face of death.

Though he didn't know it, that face had stayed in the doorway. The wife of the Cagistan – the Queen – was a woman the Dragon had been more than familiar with before. She was beginning to detect his true identity. She had felt that his mannerisms and voice were familiar when they first met, but only after that memory marinated in her mind for some time did she begin to recognize where that familiarity originated. It was there on the threshold of the Throne Room that the realization sparked to life. Her hand slowly traveled down to the twisted dagger at her waist. Meanwhile, Tenchi focused on the other Cages, not even noticing her behind the crowd of new comers.

“Ah, better late than ever,” he slapped on a crooked smile even though his mask still hid his face, “I'm here to woo the Princess.”

The Princess stopped before Tenchi, her dark eyes drilling into his, but her father continued to pace, “You've garnered quite the fanbase across Sondor, Sir Dragon.”

“Sondor?” Tenchi scoffed, “You mean across all of Mystakle Planet.”

“Mystakle Planet?” Princess Melaruse spat, “You mean Solaris, Clansman?”

Zion jumped in before her hand could clench around her hilt, raising his voice to remind all that he was the Cagirent and he was in charge of the interrogation, “Are you a Clansman, Sir Dragon?”

This was the final question and Tenchi knew it. To not answer truthfully would mean to cower. While the term left much to be desired (especially for any aliens from Earth) Tenchi was a Clansman. The ethnic Clans of Sondor were subjugated within the Cagistan government – especially those linked to the Crystal Council of the Trinity Nations Empire. After all, one could only have loyalty to the state to be a true patriot in a fascist society. Soon all Clan identities would be banned in Sondor and already the Empire-friendly ones had: the Pow, the Eninac, and most notably the Kou (the ancestral rivals of the Cage Clan). Not defending his identity as a Kou would be an act of betrayal to his people. Professing his identity as a Kou would be an act of treason to the regime. Thus, it was at this point that he decided he might as well pull the plug. Had he noticed the Queen lurking down the hall, he might not've been so hasty but alas. There are no do-overs in life.

The Dragon ripped off his mask, declaring, “My name is Tenchi Kou,” he pointed past Zion to the sword mounted above the throne, “and that is my sword!”

Gasps filled the chamber before being overpowered by the bellowing Cagirent himself. The King's face had turned beat red. His dark eyes were now so wide there was more white than darkness. His armor rattled simply from the excessive pulsing of the blood through his royal veins. For, though Zion did not know Tenchi's face, he knew his name and sword.

His sword, the Mystak Blade, had been found in the room of his dead son.

Had Tenchi not been facing Zion, he would've realized that it was not just Zion's roar that rocked the room. Another roar came from behind him. From the doorway, the Queen belted out a guttural lamentation as she lurched forward. It had not been the King that had found their child dead, but rather the Queen. She'd caught Tenchi shortly after and it was this confrontation that caused him to leave in haste and forget his beloved blade. She knew Tenchi's face, but now all she saw was red.

She rushed forward with such speed and precision that no one was able to stop her. Tenchi didn't even see her coming nor did he feel her dagger slide into his back until she ripped it up his spine. She bore down on it and twisted to split open his heart and wrench the life right out of him.

The last thing Tenchi Kou felt was hot phlegm as the Queen spat on his face.

Chapter Fourteen: Can't Trust a Pirate

Now that overcast skies would've worked in their favor, Solaris decided to break through the clouds and illuminate the entire jungle. Every little dew drop and rain puddle seemed to glow in the afternoon sun, leaving hardly a shadow on the dragon yards below the treetop city of Sereibis. Only a local would be capable of finding a path of darkness through which to hide from the curiosity of passengers and pilots, dashing from tree trunk to tree trunk on the edges of the field for as long as possible before braving the exposure of the wide open plains.

Though the Captain himself was still having his leg mended by Doc, he'd sent for two of his Outlaws to accompany the Obsidians and take them to their dragon rider. While the two Munkloens struggled to keep them in darkness, Tabuh struggled to shed some more light on their plan before they strapped in for the long flight ahead.

Jason the Giant trudged along ahead of the others. In part because he was annoyed with Tabuh's constant questioning, but also because he felt insecure about the agility of the two bears that led them. This meant that he was pushing himself far more than someone who just had their stomach skewered and their foot chopped in half less than 48 hours ago. The poor boatswain behind him was forced to constantly call for the first mate to calm down while also trying to calm Tabuh's nerves about their plan.

"Ah'm just not so sure saeking the help of another buncha pahrates is a great ahdea." Tabuh reasserted, "Figure word has spread bah now that the Obsidians aren't to bae trusted anymore. Can't wae fahnd another mapwork – maybae somewhere closer?"

"Remember, Dame Sentry, pirates never trust each other anyways." Drakken paused to holler with as hushed a tone as he could, "Branch!"

The bearn was so focused on not tripping over the roots that he'd forgotten to look up for low hanging branches. Fortunately, the hard headed oaf was a hard headed oaf. His head smashed through the branch Drakken had warned him about and it went flying off into the jungle. The two guards before them skidded to a halt to whirl around and shush the lot. Jason, still rubbing his head, turned to his comrades with a stern glare and a frowning snout.

"Kaep it down back there." He growled.

Drakken rolled his eyes and turned back to Tou and Tabuh as the group started moving once more. Explaining, "The Reds only care about money."

Tou was beginning to share in Tabuh's concern, pointing out, "But aren't we dropping all our gold on this flight?"

Drakken was undaunted, "We've got accounts in Tadloe."

"Bank accounts?" Tabuh asked.

"In a way," the old mole chuckled, "there are folks we pay to protect certain stashes. The Reds use many of the same folks, specifically the Red we're going to see: Crimson."

"I've heard of him!" Tou gasped, surprised that he actually recognized a name for once.

"As have ah." Tabuh's upper lip curled, "Hae daels in tobacco." She spat, "That drug is worse than mancy."

"He also deals in information. Which is why we're willing to fly twelve hours--"

The guards held up their hands and again the group came to a stop. A dragon had just landed maybe ten yards away, right on the edge of the tree-line. Mud and moss erupted from the earth, pelting the trunks they hid behind like shrapnel. A water elf slid down the side of the

massive reptile, the side facing the jungle, and the dragon flopped down to sit behind them, curling up like a dog. Leaning back against their steed, the dragon rider began to pick at their nails as if to justify keeping their gaze low. Before the Outlaw Guards said it, the Obsidians knew this was their pilot. Without a word, the two guards motioned for them to wait in the shadows as they scurried over to the edge of the forest to make contact.

Slumping down into a nest of roots, Drakken continued explaining, “Crimson’s ship is outfitted with the most extensive mapwork collection beneath Solaris.”

“That’s what everayone says.” Tabuh plopped down across from the moleman and crossed her arms, “Ah doubt a pahrate has that nahcest mapwork benaeth Solaris.”

Jason crashed down perpendicular to them, his weight causing the roots beneath the lot to lift and strain, popping both Tabuh and Drakken up an inch or two and forcing them to stoop to stay in the shadow. Jason seemed not to notice, reaching up to continue rubbing his head as he said, “When it comes to pahrate-friendlay mapworks, you’ll fahnd no better.”

“But is it worth a twelve hour flight and having to trust a tobacco smuggler?” Tou pressed, squatting down next to Tabuh.

She clasped him on the shoulder to show her concurrence, adding, “A tobacco smuggler that lahklay thanks wae’re aither bad luck or farakin traitors!”

“Do you have any alternatives, Dame Tabuh? Do you, Sir Fou?” Drakken asked, his expression masking the rhetorical nature of the question for just a moment before he continued, “Plus, Crimson hates Truth.”

Both Tou and Tabuh cocked their heads to the side.

“Crimson fought with us in the War of the Tahger.” Jason stated.

“Truth hired both the Obsidians and the Reds.” Drakken elaborated, “Things went south for Crimson – he lost his fleet and most his crew, but we managed to save his ship and what was left of his life. After a long recovery, he went looking for Truth. Apparently, he’d never been paid. Then, when he found her-”

Jason jumped in to wrap the story up, “The witch stiffed him.”

“So wae’re praying his grudge is stronger than his suspicion?” Tabuh clarified.

“No,” Drakken corrected, “we’re *paying* so that his grudge is stronger than his suspicion.”

“We should’ve brought the healer with us.” Tou stated.

“No godai joke.” Tabuh cursed.

The Outlaw Guards were trudging back towards them now. The water elven pilot had gone back to picking their fingernails. Jason and Drakken stared down at their younger comrades, their eyes asking the only question left – the one Tou and Tabuh had to answer. Were they down for another roll of the dice?

“Alraht.” Tabuh sighed.

Tou nodded in agreement.

Then, with that, they followed the guides to their dragon, payed the pilot, hopped on board and settled in for what would be a greuling, twelve hour flight.

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The Cathedral was the largest building beneath Solaris – both tall and wide. There was more space in the Emperor’s church than there was on the rest of God’s Island. The walls that encircled the enormous edifice split the isle in four sections, commandeering the center of the

landmass so that the three peninsulas of God's Island appeared to be separate keys connected by the Cathedral rather than peninsula's extending from the mini-continent's center.

Bubbling up from behind the walls came a series of copper domes, seemingly budding off from one another as they climbed until one bold blunt belfry broke past their brother's ranks and rose alone towards Solaris. Although, these towers weren't really standing alone, they had the support of flying buttresses that encircled them. Pointy towers rose from the buttresses to stand as equals with the rounded minarets but the verdigris cupolas one upped them: sprouting from their highest point, they bore buttresses which supported the Cathedral's premier hall: the Chamber of Councils. This gaudy garret looked down on the clouds and blotted out Solaris. The towers atop the supports which surrounded the Chamber reached higher than any artificial structure on Mystake Planet – they literally tickled the heavens. Their roofs were sharply sloped like the spears of a palisade and from their vantage one could spy over the parapet that encircled the Chamber's roof.

Well, one normally could. The windows had all been shuttered and the turrets boarded up. Few dragons would be willing to fly that high and even fewer would be willing to risk whatever consequences came with disobeying the Emperor in his own home. Since the lightning scrawled the prophecy across the Cathedral roof, Saint had been clear about who was allowed to view it: No one. And yet, on June 2nd, 1993 – mere hours before Tenchi Kou was killed in Zion's Stronghold and just as Tou, Tabuh, Jason, and Drakken arrived on the *Red Barren* to meet Captain Crimson – someone was standing on the roof of the Chamber of Councils.

When they arrived, so too did darkness. All the pockets of space that light once filled had been replaced by a thick black abyss. Solaris ceased to shine – their rays cut off and their nucleus frozen, prevented from sending more – but there was still some light. Life. Energy fought back against the blanket of blackness. From the conscious being to the empty inanimate object, a tiny bit of energy was present within every particle in existence. All one could see was on a spectrum between black and white, weak and strong, and this proved to be quite frustrating for the intruder. For though it was this black magic that allowed him to sneak onto the top of the Cathedral, it was also this magic that made it nigh impossible to read the secrets he'd come to steal. Had he eyes in his sockets he could've squinted but his eyelids had long since rotted away. It took him an hour to make out the first name.

“Tou Fou.”

Before he could decipher more of the scribbles, he was interrupted. There was another intruder. The moment this second invader appeared, the first sensed their presence. As the supreme controller of the dark dimension, he immediately disappeared into thin air. Then he heard this new comer call out his name.

“Flow Morain.”

Flow reappeared across the prophecy from his opponent. The figure was small in stature but vibrant with his glow. Had Flow been a more humble character, he might've even considered his opponent's light to out shine his own but, of course, humility was not Flow's flow.

The brilliant silhouette was as unintelligible as it was obvious – the only characters that could fit the build were all the same to Flow. The Doom Warrior growled, “Knome.”

“Capitol City Police, you're under arrest.” The Knome snarked back.

With a voice like metal grating on metal, Flow responded, “Let me grab my ID.”

The banshee wore a heavy suit of armor. It was old fashioned – literally, fifteen centuries old – and a gargantuan leather strap belted all the dented and deteriorating metal plates together at his waist, clasped by a four pointed compass rose. His left hand reached towards the buckle as

if to unclasp it but instead his fingers pierced through the metal as if it were all an illusion. From within his body he withdrew his identification: a long, one sided broad sword. The blade was shaped like a saw, the jagged teeth facing downwards like the top jaw of a shark and like the jaw of a shark the teeth were seemingly arranged at random almost as if each saw-tooth was actually an accidental indentation made in the heat of battle. The weapon was actually a sibling of the weapon it opposed. Flow Morain wielded the Ruikii while his opponent held the Suikii. It was less impressive than Flow's abominable brand, but just as fantastical. A slender katana with a supernaturally dull-black blade, the sword intended to slip under the radar and – as you will see – it often did. Both weapons were members of the Four Swords – a collection of blades made before even Flow Morain was born, forged by the very Knome that stood before him now.

“Grandfather.”

Flow charged and as he did he sliced through the air with the dull edge of the Ruikii. Despite being blunt, the speed of the swing still split the atmosphere and sent a powerful gust hurdling towards his opponent. The tactic was known as a “sharp wind”. Something that supposedly only the banshees could pull off, though that wasn't necessarily true. Still, Grandfather didn't try and counter it. He cut through the arch of murderous wind with an upward swing of the Suikii and it split off in separate directions, carving up the sides of the Cathedral roof top behind him before smashing into the facades of separate buttress towers. Grandfather's slice didn't split the atmosphere in the same way that Flow's did, but it did split the atmosphere. Each of the Four Swords had a special power. The Suikii had the ability to open windows between two separate places in time and space. That was how he was able to challenge his foe in the dark realm of the undead in the first place. This specific window opened up behind his charging challenger and so as Flow bound forward ready to chop him in half, Grandfather bound forward as well. The Knome fell out of the hole in the sky behind Flow and the portal closed behind him. Seeing him disappear, Flow figured the old man wasn't running away just yet. The knight assumed correctly that Grandfather would be popping out of his portal somewhere behind him to levy a counter attack. However, Grandfather wasn't the only one with the ability to teleport. In his undead dimension, known officially as “Total Darkness”, Flow could teleport as well. And so a moment after Grandfather appeared behind him, Flow disappeared.

Grandfather rolled his eyes as he pivoted in midair.

Flow reappeared, swinging the Ruikii upwards, as Grandfather twisted to face him, bringing the Suikii down. CLANG! Parrying one another, Grandfather landed back on the roof and Flow took a step back as they exchanged scowls for a moment. Grandfather was now standing on the enscribed prophecy.

“Isn't it sacrilegious to step on the words of your Lord?” Flow asked – his voice echoing off the obsidian heavens as if they were in the confines of a cave and not perched high above the world.

Grandfather clapped back, “Wasn't God that wrote these, Flow, just coincidence.”

“Ah yes,” Flow snickered, “a bolt of lightning, right?” He gestured to the faint tufts of clouds beneath them. The frozen energy of potential electricity glowed within them like electric eels within a coral reef. Flow said, “How is it that lightning wrote on the roof of a building that stands above the clouds?”

“Are you calling the Emperor a liar?”

Flow's helmet tilted as he prepared to respond but before he could speak, his agitated adversary lobbed the Suikii at him as if it were a spear. With a flippant swing of the Ruikii, he knocked the black blade up over his head and strode forward to respond to the Knome's question

with a downward chop but the Knome slipped through a hole that suddenly appeared beneath his feet. The Suikii spinning over Flow's head had saved its master. Grandfather caught the hilt as he fell through a portal above Flow but, again, before he could capitalize on the trick Flow disappeared.

"Wanna do this again?" Grandfather grumbled, "Fine."

Before he landed back on the roof, Grandfather sliced through the universe and disappeared through another portal. Flow reappeared above the hole Grandfather had previously fallen out of and he immediately saw that the Knome had gone. Before he himself landed on the roof, he rolled over. Sure enough, there was the Knome. Popping out of a knew portal higher up. Again, they parried one another's blades and plopped down on the roof of the Cathedral.

"The Emperor is a man of integrity," Flow's voice scraped Grandfather's ear drums as it filled the unholy realm, "not a coward like you."

"I'm the coward?" Grandfather scoffed, "Then how about you turn the lights on and we finish this fight in a neutral realm."

Flow reared back as if to swing but then a proposition struck him. Hesitating, mid chop, let go of the Ruikii with one hand and pointed to the engraving on the rooftop between them, "I'll end Total Darkness if you read me one of those names."

Grandfather shrugged, "Deal."

Immediately light exploded back into the world and with it came time. Wind rushed around them, slapping and tugging them as it shifted the clouds across the sky below. Though color had returned and with it the definition of shadows and distance, Flow Morain's undead vision didn't change. Grandfather, as a mortal, could now see as mortals do and, as he promised, he ran his eyes across the list of names beneath the banshee and landed on the one he would divulge.

"Tou Fou." He said.

Flow stomped, "I already read that one!"

Grandfather smirked, "Too bad."

"Another!" Flow demanded.

The Suikii temporarily disappeared to allow Grandfather to cross his arms as he said, "No."

"Bastard!"

Flow charged and Grandfather quickly remanifested the Suikii (technically, the Suikii manifested itself in an effort to defend its master but for all practical purposes, it really only matters that Grandfather had his sword back in his hand and was able to slice through another sharp wind). This time, after blocking the sharp wind, Grandfather didn't open a portal. Instead he strode forward as if to block Flow's attack but ducked beneath it and slid – like a soccer player performing a slide tackle – between the behemoth's legs, smacking the man's shin with the dull of his blade as he did. It knocked his foe's leg out from under him but he was able to use this to his advantage. Utilizing the momentum, Flow extended his left leg into a backwards kick and managed to place his boot square in the middle of the little Knome's back so that he launched Grandfather across the roof as he himself tumbled forward.

By the time either had recovered, both had. Once again they were glaring at each other over the scribbles of the Foretelling.

"Conned me out of Total Darkness," Flow snarled, "I suppose it is time for you to run away now?"

“I don’t run away.” Grandfather corrected his old rival. Again, the Suikii disappeared so that he could cross his arms as he stuck his nose up in the air as if he couldn’t stand the smell of the Doom Warrior’s conjecture, “I’m not a coward, Flow, I don’t run away. I forfeit.”

“And the difference?”

“I’m not immortal.” Grandfather elaborated, “I’ve got things to do.”

This time Grandfather charged and Flow held his ground. The Knome didn’t even bother to try and open any portals until he got up close and personal with the old Doom Warrior. As he brought the Suikii up and Flow brought the Ruikii down, he opened a portal to his right. It hung there in the air, looking like hardly more than a blur as it appeared to reveal almost the same space that it had split. Both ignored it however and Flow swung his giant saw-bladed sword upwards to tear the old smith in two. The Knome jumped, whacking the upward swing with such force it bounced him up a bit more, and as he hurdled the blade, he cut a portal open in the sky above him before landing back on the roof top. Taking a step back, Grandfather created a third portal on his left. All three stayed open but the Knome didn’t hop through either. His sword rattled with impatience and frustration in his hands. So too did his foe.

“Why interfere if you’re not going to stop me?” Flow asked.

Grandfather shook his head, “I’m not done yet.”

Scraping the Suikii along the roof top, scratching a line down the middle of the prophecy, he opened a fourth portal in the floor. Jumping up and falling through with his legs together, like a diver doing a pencil into the pool, he slipped through the mystical hole and it closed behind him.

Despite having no lungs, Flow Morain let out a long sigh. He knew Grandfather was up to some kind of trickery – when was a Knome not? – but after a moment revelling in his frustration, he got over it and re-determined himself to throw a stick in his old foe’s spokes. Stepping towards the portals, he thrust the Ruikii up so that a good foot of the blade poked through the window above him. The tip of the blade then appeared, peaking out of the portal on his left. Immediately, he suspected the portal on his right. Lowering his weapon, he moved towards the left portal and faced the right but Grandfather had already hopped out. The little man shot through like a torpedo – his body still rigid just as it had been when he had disappeared, arms pressed to his side, legs together – feet first right into the chestplate of Flow Morain then, as the banshee staggered backwards, Grandfather hopped to his feet and cut another portal on the floor.

“You farakin-”

Flow fell backwards through the portal that had been on his left.

He then reappeared, falling from the portal above Grandfather.

“-coward!”

This portal being now directly above the fourth portal Grandfather had made. Flow never touched the ground. He went from one to the next, slipping through the portal on the floor and disappearing as all the portals themselves sealed up leaving Grandfather alone on the roof of the Cathedral. Even the Suikii left, likely tired from all its hardwork, disappearing to wherever the weapon went when it retired.

Grandfather sat down on his butt with a groan. He shook his head as he looked over the scraped up Foretelling engraved on the roof before him.

“Saint really needs to enchant this place.” He muttered, “I’m getting too old for this.”

Then he leaned back and closed his eyes, relaxing in the light of Solaris and letting the wind whistle past his nose.

Meanwhile, far less relaxed and far, far below the roof of the Cathedral, Flow Morain appeared from the Suikii's portal in the courtyard. His bulky boots touched the ground a mere ten yards from the Cathedral's second Knome. Although more colorfully dressed than the black garbed Grandfather, this Knome also held a sibling-blade of both the Ruikii and the Suikii. It was currently in the form of a tiny golden dagger, tucked between his tunic and his belt, and though Flow immediately recognized the weapon's shine he was more annoyed at the presence of another Knome than curious in the presence of the sword. Still, the curious crew behind the Knome distracted him enough to forget his disdain for the shortest species of beings.

Each of the team had a spectacular glow (of course, none as bright as his own, but still). From their brilliant silhouettes, he could tell quite a bit. First, there was a gmoat. Quite obvious from their shape thanks to the horns, hooves, and tail, but the L-shaped staff they were half reaching for was another interesting feature. Flow scoffed to himself at the way the gmoat had thought to grab his weapon then the gmoat froze mid-move with the realization that they could do nothing to save themselves if the Doom Warrior decided to attack.

Much like the bloke beside him: the shape could've been any race, but the glow had a feature to it that told Flow all he needed to know. The soul of the shine came from the fool's left eye. *Shadowmancer*. On top of that, the displacement of his illumination showed that most of his body was artificial. As someone who had seen a similar glow in a being before, Flow knew what he was looking at was not technically an "intelligent being" but rather: *Canine*. Had he a face, Flow would've smirked. *An Eninac*. The Eninac hadn't reached for a weapon – as a shadowmancer, all their weapons were held within – but they had reached to protect another and, like the gmoat, had frozen midway. Would defending their friend then lead the banshee to target said friend? That's what Flow presumed the poor pooch had thought before freezing.

Said friend was interesting. A notably feminine figure, her body shape also did not immediately portray her species but her possessions did portray her skillset. Square objects glowed like spotlights from a pack on her back. She was either a mage or a healer and potentially both.

Beside her was another similarly packaged individual however they stood quite shorter than their comrades, only standing taller than the Knome. The girth of the figure's muscular torso assured Flow that this was a dwarf. Judging from the books in their backpack, they too knew magic, but no book shined brighter than their knuckles which meant to the old banshee that this fellow could pack a punch. The dwarf had frozen up like the hound, but they were stuck between deciding to defend the woman or attack the banshee. Still, their locking up was just as much of a failure as any others. Flow could've easily dismantled the boxer before they'd have a chance to cock a punch.

The fifth figure was obviously feminine too, however none of the four had moved to defend her. She stood taller than all the others, her shape giving her away to be a bearn. Her hesitation had been the cause of indecision. She was in the middle of reaching for both axes on her back, but neither had she been willing to risk against Flow's undead armor. This was a failure but also a sign of intellect for this meant she knew the risk of using mortal weapons on an immortal foe. Apparently, she cared more about her axes than she did her own hide for her indecision could've been the end of her.

Finally, last but not least, came the one individual amongst them that did not flinch in the face of potential doom. Not that they made a smarter move, rather they made no move at all. Tall and armed, the shiny silhouette of this last bloke stood with a relaxed posture, staring boldly at the sudden appearance of a banshee and making no move of defense or aggression. Flow didn't

want to give the man credit for the boldness of their stance, he figured it was entirely due to the fact that they knew each other.

“Captain Dresdan Otubak.” Flow nodded his helm in a quarter of a bow, then he addressed the others, “Calm down, you all aren’t worth killing.”

“Whot’s thot supposed to maen?” The dwarf barked.

“It means I find you worth leaving alive.” Flow growled back, “Most of you, anyways.”

“Most of us?” The bearn snapped.

“All except for the dog.” Flow explained, “But I don’t kill dogs.”

“Well I kill banshees!” The dog shot back.

The whole lot then jumped forward to hold the faux-human back.

“No one is killing anyone today.”

A man stepped between the banshee and the group seemingly out of nowhere. It was almost as if he had teleported – and he was powerful enough he could probably afford such a spell – but that was not the case. The Emperor simply carried himself with a comfortable self-confidence that didn’t intrude on anyone’s awareness until absolutely necessary. Despite being on the lease the largest person-made structure beneath Solaris, he slept in a tent in the shadow of the Cathedral. His robes were old and dingey, they came in hues of basil green and tawny brown. Even his crown was hardly noticeable. A dull, golden band half covered by long silver strands of hair, with a clover insignia that hardly fit the criteria for the crown jewel. The half-elf’s most defining feature was the patch that covered his left eye – something that might’ve been a sign of weakness had anybody not known who he was. And had that person not noticed the rippling muscles that hid beneath his lose robes, only noticeable when the breeze pushed by with just enough force to reveal the outline of the sort of build that only an old man who had seen hardship and persevered for centuries could retain. He offered the Doom Warrior a quarter nod.

Marvell gasped, “Saint!” She looked from Flow to Saint then back again, “Battle Grand rematch?!”

Ben turned to Fetch to whisper, “Battle Grand?”

Fetch had justed opened his mouth to answer when Marvell turned on the two boys with an energy and enthusiasm neither had seen out of her since they met her in the canopy of a kapok tree, “In the 1700s, the Iahtro Storm hosted the Battle Grand III”

“It’s just Warcart in the skoy.” Bold interjected.

“*Exactly!*” Marvell exclaimed, “*Its farakin Warcourt in the sky!* Heroes from all over Mystakle Planet are kidnapped by the Iahtro Storm and forced to fight to the death while the violence is broadcast across the heavens on clouds forcing all of Solaris to stop and watch!”

“Most historians describe it as hellish.” Lenga noted.

“And in the 1700s, Saint faced off against the faraking brother of Creaton Live brought back from the dead: Malcova Live-”

“That’s a myth.” Dresdan corrected.

“Oi wish it war.” Bold growled, “Oi saw it.”

“*And Flow Morain!*” Marvell concluded, “And after the battle ended in a three-way stalemate, Saint and Flow and Iahtro fought on for 30 years!”

“That’s when you grandmother was Emperor.” Unlucky added.

“Huh?” Ben yelped.

Saint raised his hands in a quieting gesture. Flow had already left. Pivoting away from the seven, Flow marched off through the courtyard. Despite having been an enemy of essentially every stated for the last fifteen centuries, he moseyed around the Cathedral courtyard like a

tourist. The gang fresh off the *Unluckiest* were left bewildered but Saint didn't leave the silence open long, it was the Emperor's turn to talk. Striding forward, he embraced Boldarian and nearly tackled him off his feet – which is saying something what with the dwarf's low center of gravity. The others shifted their weight between their feet (or hooves) awkwardly, except for Unlucky. The Knome hopped forward to join in the hug and successfully ruined the moment. Still, the old friends were cordial to the interloper and simply separated without addressing it.

"I wasn't sure you'd survived." Saint's smile was so wide it looked as if it might split his face in two, "Princess Ruse's father wrote me immediately but for four days no one knew for sure." Then that gaudy grin began to decline as the Emperor's shoulders sagged. Still, he kept his one good eye up, meeting the dwarf's unwavering gaze as he said, "I'm so sorry. So many brave men and women..."

"Thousands mar still will doie." Bold stated. His face was blank. So much so that it was an expression in and of itself. He wasn't blaming Saint, he was just stating facts, "If not oll of us befear liberation." His lips turned into a performative crooked smile, "But that's none of yar Empahr's business, aye?"

Now Saint broke eye contact but only to bow his head, nodding gently, "You're not wrong, Boldarian," then he re-met Bold's stare. There was a desperate twinkle in his eye, "but there is plan in the works."

"Far the dwarves?" Bold scoffed.

"For everything." Saint said.

Bold laughed out loud, "Ha!"

"The Foretelling?" Lenga asked.

"Indeed." The old half-elf nodded.

Marvell rolled her eyes, "Another vague prophecy."

"Prophecies are supposed to be vague, Marvell." Unlucky explained, "That's why they always come true!"

Ben turned to Fetch only to find the humanified-canine staring just as cluelessly back at him. While Ben didn't yet have the courage to speak to the Emperor, the comradery of confusion he offered Fetch gave the shadowmancer the confidence to reveal his ignorance and ask the question they both wanted to:

"What's the Foretelling?"

"Where've you been?" Marvell snickered, "It was all anyone was talking about this time last year?"

"This time last year," Fetch snapped, "I was in Kein."

Marvell shrugged and raised her hands to claim her innocence, "I didn't know."

Lenga stepped up to gently clasp her boyfriend's shoulders. She, herself, hadn't known Fetch had been in Kein but she knew that if he had been then he'd been traumatized. Kein was a part of the Dragon Islands which was where mancers were sent after the passing of the Mancy Nonproliferation Treaty. As it was illegal to be a mancer but nearly impossible to unconvert, most nations either imprisoned or executed mancers before the Treaty. By shipping mancers off to three secluded islands, mancers would be allowed to live free from persecution and the rest of society wouldn't have to worry about said mancers making anymore mancers. There the dark magicians could grow old and die off until eventually the forbidden arts would be lost for good. Except, almost five hundred years later, the populations of mancers on Mystakle Planet had not been reduced while the living conditions on the islands surely had. By the 1990s, vicious warlords kept the necromancer and shadowmancer islands in a constant state of war and, just as

the countries of the Trinity Nations turned a blind eye to the slavery of the dwarves in Vinnum Tow, the Empire completely ignored the violence in the Dragon Islands. Bold had gotten to air his grievances to the Emperor, now it was Fetch's turn. Licking his lips and picking his words, he was about to unleash when Lenga quickly changed the subject.

"Is Flow Morain one of the prisoners here?" Lenga asked.

"Not prisoners, citizens." Saint corrected before he answered her with a soft chuckle, "But no. We couldn't make that old Doom Warrior stay here even if we tried."

Lenga gasped, "You let him come and go?"

"Wouldn't be worth the hassle to try and stop him," Saint shrugged, "just ask your Warcourter historian to rehash what happened last time I tried."

"Oh!" Marvell yelped, "Tell us about-"

"Not now." Saint turned her down with a smile, then addressed the rest of the group, "Walk with me. We've got a lot of things to talk about."

The gang wasn't going to say no to the Emperor but, then again, Dresdan wasn't part of the gang. Before Saint turned to lead them on a tour, Saint's old, bronze eye met Dresdan's violet gaze and the Emperor winked. Though, due to the eye patch, one couldn't really say whether or not it was a blink or a wink, but Dresdan knew. That was because he was half turned to walk the other way when Saint caught him with the look and after it both men finished their about face. Saint headed one way with the gang following like ducklings while Dresdan headed the other with the gang none the wiser.

Especially not Lenga, who was practically stepping on the Emperor's heels. She continued to press him about the banshee, "I can't believe you let him in here. You know what he's done – he's evil!"

"Evil is a strong word." Saint countered, "It describes actions, not people."

Despite Solaris being high in the sky, nearly directly over the center of the Cathedral, the structure was so vast that the group was still standing in its shadows. Saint was taking them further into the shade, towards the palace walls. The path was dirt, it ran along an elevated mound. Similar mounds zig-zagged all throughout the grand courtyard, operating as both pathways and as a means to quarter off different sections. Very little of the palace greens appeared to be decorative – in fact, the only statues and gardens they saw were in the process of construction. *Everything* was in the process of construction. Folks in robes much like Saint's moved here and there. No one seemed to be in a hurry but everyone seemed to be moving with a purpose – there was no dilly-dallying. They looked like ants marching in and around their antpile. Hedge mazes were being trimmed, flowerbeds were being weeded, fields were being tilled. A multitude of fountains were being renovated between the legs of cranes that were either in work or being constructed to be in work so that this or that project could be completed.

"Besides," Saint continued, "no one today is alive from the time when Flow committed his crimes."

"I am!" Unlucky interjected.

His remark went ignored as Saint continued, "And I let everyone come and go. I'm letting y'all come and go, aren't I?"

"But we aren't..." Lenga's words trailed off as she thought about where they'd just come from, her confession escaping her in a whisper beneath her breath, "...are we criminals now?"

As blush began to turn her cheeks purple, Ben piped up, "So did you say these people are prisoners?" He slapped his hand over his mouth then immediately peeled it off, yelping,

“Citizens!” Only to realize he now had no clue how to ask his question, “I mean...all these citizens are...huh...”

“They have all been convicted of crimes, yes.” Saint’s amusement was hidden by the back of his head, “They elected to come here to serve out their sentences.”

“And they can *really* just come and go?” Marvell queried.

“It is a little more complicated.” Saint admitted, “As citizens here, they are members of a republic. They free one another after a series of hearings and votes.

He turned the group west, away from the castle, and marched them down a series of stone steps that intersected their mound. The stairs led down to a sprawling quarry shaped like an inverted pyramid. On all teirs, men and women were hard at work, polishing the upper levels and chipping away at the lower ones. Some held large nails while others smashed them into stone with hammers, some carted off debris while others packed the wheelborrows, and some simply oversaw the process. They barked orders, scribbled new plans, and counted the products of the labor. As Saint led them down the rigid spiraling slope, the workers stepped aside. Most nodded or bowed, some even patted Saint on the back or made a little bit of brief small talk as they passed.

“What up, Emp?”

“Beautiful day, huh, Saint!”

“Ma said, ‘Hello’!”

The old white haired Emperor responded to each quickly, addressing them by name as well, but then quickly got back to what he was saying to his visitors.

“As they reform and wait to leave the island, they learn new trades or study new sciences so that they have the skills and wisdom to avoid the mistakes desperation drove them to make in the past. It isn’t perfect,” he admitted, “but recidivism is drastically lower in the Captiol than it is in the dungeons beneath other King’s castles.”

“Sounds all fine and dandy for bank robbers and tobacco smugglers, but what about murderers and,” Marvell asked, eyeing each “citizen” they passed with no attempt to hide her distrust. She tore her eyes away from the workers only to spit on the dirt and stone between her boots before finishing, “*rapists?*”

“Don’t warray, lass.” Bold growled, “Thar’s still a dungeon undar ol Emparar’s castle.”

“Bold is correct. All citizens of the Empire that are convicted of crimes are allowed to come to the Cathedral, but not all citizens are allowed access to the grounds.” Saint explained, “Their republic metes out liberties as they are earned and as the citizen is proven capable of respecting the liberties of others. Again, our system isn’t perfect but...” Saint paused, turning to face Bold with a sly grin stretched across his old, war torn face. He asked, “What is it you always say Boldarian?”

Bold was about to roll his eyes before he gave in, cracking a smile even as he shook his head saying, “Wae gotta mehk the best of it, thot’s the best wae can do.”

Behind the Emperor a tunnel jutted into the wall of the quarry. Stepping aside, Saint gestured for them to go on inside ahead of him. Bold led the way, although Unlucky quickly shoved past him. Marvell and Ben went next. Leaving Lenga with Fetch who was hesitating. The water elf took his hand, squeezing it gently. It worked to keep him from lashing out, but still he had to say his piece.

“Murderers and rapists.” Fetch didn’t spit in the dirt like Marvell, he hardly even frowned. Instead, his eyes were big and wide – like a puppy’s – and though Saint was a good six

inches shorter than Fetch's human manifestation, thanks to the elevation Saint stood on in the lip of the cave, Fetch stood looking up at the Emperor. He continued, "But no mancers?"

"My son," Saint frowned, reaching out to put a hand on Fetch's shoulder. Fetch initially pulled back but he stopped himself, allowing the gesture. He knew what Saint was going to say. This was not the first time he'd gotten the following offer, "let me take the eye. Just like your brother, we have legal magic that can allow you to keep your human form."

"And all the other mancers?" Fetch asked, "Those without famous brothers?"

Saint's grasp tightened. It was firm, just as tight as it could be without hurting. Leaning in, he whispered in Saint's ear, "Every mancer you bring me, we will fix. There is a plan in the works."

Fetch cocked his head to the side, his mannerism giving his true identity away, "The Foretelling?"

Saint nodded, "Now come, that is what I have taken you all here to show."

Releasing Fetch's shoulder, Saint strolled in behind the others. Both Lenga and Fetch exhaled as if they'd been holding their breaths (and Lenga had been). They looked at one another, eyes wide and excited, but then Fetch flinched. Now it was Lenga who cocked her head to the side and she wasn't even half dog.

"What?"

"I can't give up the eye." Fetch stated.

"But-"

Then Fetch turned his back to her and followed Saint. Crestfallen but not quite hopeless, the Princess filed that argument away for another day and went on in. The tunnel wasn't long but it was nearly pitch black until they got to the end: a large bulb of a room with a vaulted ceiling pierced by a single hole where light filtered in. The amount of mirrors it must've took to whip Solaris' light around the enormous Cathedral so that it could prick through the little orifice likely cost more gold than any (aside from Lenga) of them had ever seen.

The chamber wasn't empty – there was a structure in the middle and an odd character clambering around it. Odd might have not been the correct word. Terrifying would've worked better. The thing had long since been without flesh. In fact, it was so old that in the absence of fossilization even its bones should've been dust by now but, of course, magic has a way of interfering with science. The skeleton wasn't like that of your typical being, rather it was almost dragon shaped except it had no sign of wings. Stooped forward on large haunches, like a bird, but with smaller arms that folded up against the breast like a kangaroo. Had the lot in the cave been from Earth, they would've instantly recognized it as a dinosaur but instead they found themselves cluelessly staring at what they could only imagine to be an undead flightless dragon.

"Did you cut the wings off so it couldn't fly away?" Marvell guessed.

"Perfect timing." The reptilian skeleton whirled around and everyone (aside from Unlucky) jumped nearly a foot in the air. The creature continued, extending an arm as it bowed saying, "The name is Bonehead."

"Bonehead?" Ben and Fetch blurted before covering their mouths to cork their giggles.

Bold snickered, "Whot sart of bonehead nehmed ya thot?"

"It was offered as a term of endearment." Bonehead replied, his tone suggesting there was no offense but possibly a waning patience. He turned to Saint who passed his visitors to approach the skeletal creature, "Saint, have you spoiled the surprise?"

"No, old friend, the pleasure will be all yours." Saint assured him.

“Selu.” As a creature, lacking lips didn’t mean he couldn’t smile and show off his appreciation, a tail wag was more than enough and even a skeleton could do that.

His long wagging tail did draw folks attention back to the other object in the chamber: the structure. Two pillars rose from the gravel cave floor. At their tops they jutted inward towards each other, like the flying buttresses of the Cathedral, until they met in the middle to form an obtuse point. Not only was it shaped like a wishbone, it almost appeared to be made out of such. In the gray light of the chamber, it was hard to tell whether the senewy texture was that of dry rotted wood or actual ancient bone having long since started deteriorating to reveal the coarse interior. Whatever the material, there were far more identifiable materials alongside the skeletal arch: radiating jewels and glowing runes. While Lenga and Bold were able to recognize much of the writing as both were well versed in the Sacred Tongue, even the others noticed some familiar stones – enertombs much like those in Marvell’s satchel studded the ivory lean-to. Those glowing gems they didn’t recognize, they still had hunches about. They were more jagged, more crystal than jewel, and they glistened an unearthly cerulean blue. As the guests scrutinized the structure, the undead dinosaur murmured a hurried incantation so that by the time they finished looking they were beginning to hear it: a hum, like a beehive that was slowly getting more and more agitated, began to rise with the radiance of the magic stones and symbols.

“Void-dust.” Fetch and Bold murmured in unison.

“Void-dust?” Ben and Marvell gasped in disbelief.

“Definitely.” Lenga and Unlucky confirmed.

“This portal,” Bonehead explained, stepping out of the way and joining Saint behind the lot of them, “is a window to the roof of the Cathedral. You’re bearing witness to-”

The grey light that trickled down from the hole above was suddenly replaced by the blinding pure light of Solaris and with it came a whistling gust of wind. Covering their eyes with their hands until the initial spray of dirt and gravel ceased, they could only slowly reopen them as they got accustomed to the sunlight now pouring through the arches. Before them sprawled the roof of the Chamber of Councils. Looming over it, rising from the clouds in the distance, were the buttress towers – boarded and shuttered so as not to steal the view that the group was getting.

“-the Foretelling.”

“Oh my God.” Lenga gasped.

Bold fell to one knee, clutched his chest, and burst out laughing.

“It’s all scuffed up!” Fetch cried, “Can’t read tiad?!”

“Is this a joke?” Marvell asked, the half smile already on her snout, impressed with either the Emperor or the universe’s sense of humor, “Faraking got me!”

It was, indeed, ruined. The rooftop had been carved up and pummeled as if two ancient warriors with supernatural strength had sparred across it. It seemed this caught even Saint off guard. Before their audience could turn back to him for an answer, Saint conferred with Bonehead under his breath, “You did write it down, didn’t you?”

Now Bonehead really wished he had lips so he could offer an uneasy apology in the form of a smile, instead all he could do was whisper back an excuse, “I’ve been working on the portal...”

Saint gulped.

Raising his tiny arms, Bonehead offered, “I think I remember most of it...”

Fortunately, Benjamin Fasthoof was still squinting into the portal and he was able to actually make out a few words. While he was not always the optimist, he rose to the occasion.

Saving both their host from complete embarrassment and his comrades from a full loss of faith. He read the first name he found aloud, “Marvell Azuran?”

“Marvell of the Ax.” The bearn snapped back but then she saw her gmoat friend pointing to the name he’d just read, just barely legible, amongst the rooftop debris, “Crimpsin tiad...” she murmured, then she turned to the Emperor, “How’d you-”

“It’s like the most common bearn surname.” Fetch scoffed, though his snickering stopped as he continued to read the names, “Benjamin Fasthoof, Fetch Eninac, Boldarian Drahkcor the 4th...where is Lenga Ruse?”

“Or Unlucky?!” Unlucky chimed.

“Not all of our heroes will be Samurai.” Saint stated.

“Samurai?” Ben repeated with a tone that made it a question.

“Mystakle Samurai.” Marvell said, her own tone giving no opinion away, which in itself was a signifier. Marvell without an opinion was a Marvell the gang had yet to witness. She elaborated with more dead pan, “The first group of heroes in the Foretelling.”

“Twelve Samaroi,” Bold concurred, “Oight Knoights, Far Paladins.”

“And probably no Knomes.” Unlucky harumphed.

“I see an Otubak on there but the old Captain’s not on the list either. Dresden, is your real name-” Fetch had been slowly pivoting as he turned around but he found himself staring at the portal again without his eyes ever having crossed over Dresden. Fetch jumped like a dog hearing a knock at the door, “He’s gone!”

“What?!” While the others looked around, Marvell whipped around. Her tone was definitely no longer opaque and a slew of cursewords began to flow from her mouth at such a rate that she might’ve wound up vying for a spot in the Cathedral dorms if the Emperor hadn’t interjected, “Farking, crimpsin tiad, godi gopping-”

“He is being followed.” Saint assured her, “No worries.”

She was still worried, “No worries? I assume that means no bounty?”

“The Empire may not do much to stop slavery outside our borders,” Saint admitted, “but I personally am not in the business of selling sentient beings.”

Unlucky stomped on Marvell’s boot – an act that did nothing to discomfort her but did at least gain her attention so that the Knome’s little, “Mhm” really drove home the, “I told you so” that he resisted saying out loud.

Saint gestured back towards the portal, “You’ve obviously got bigger chickens to fry now – Samurai.”

Despite rolling her eyes, Marvell gave in, “What’s that even mean? Lightning wrote our names on your roof. So what – do we work for you now?”

“I’m not hiring.” Saint chuckled, “It’s a prophecy.”

“Well what are we supposed to do?” Ben asked, nodding to Fetch beside him, “Remember, we missed the announcement. Twelve heroes, heroes of what?”

“Y’all are supposed to triumph over an impending doom!” Unlucky exclaimed.

“Aren’t wae supposed to fehl farst?” Bold asked.

“Who knows? Like any good prophecy, it’s too vague to fail.” Marvell remarked.

Fetch, again, reminded the others that he and Ben had *no clue* what the prophecy even was, “*What is the prophecy?*”

“Uh...” Saint turned to Bonehead.

Bonehead cleared his throat – despite having no throat nor phlegm – and clasped his little hands together like a school child about to recite a classic poem:

*“The Twelve will rise from the dark,
through ice and fire they prevail,
falter they before their mark,
and She will come when they fail.”*

*“Sun Child will guide Eight with heart
though they cannot drive the nail,
they strike the rock, hence the Spark,
back come Twelve from yonder veil.”*

*“She wars on to tear apart
til Four thought beyond the pale
bring the final end to start
of the neverending tale.”*

“The godi tiad is that?” Marvell blurted.

“Makes no sense.” Fetch agreed, “And it sounds like we die?”

“Aye, wae’re supposed to soign on to get baet then get brought back to get benched? Thought this was supposed to solve ar problems, lad?” Bold protested.

Ben even spoke up, “To be honest, I was already skeptical but this didn’t help.”

Lenga nudged Unlucky’s foot with her own, smiling, “Not so bad to be left out now, huh?”

“No kidding.” Unlucky agreed.

“Hold on!” Saint demanded, “The second verse is better!” He turned back to Bonehead, “Do you remember it?”

“I think I can recall the last part?” Bonehead shrugged.

“Good enough!” Saint turned back to his unruly audience, “That’s the hopeful part, you’ll see.”

Again, Bonehead performed a fake gulp then rattled off one last stanza:

*“Twelve harken to the Light
as Spark and Blaze combine.
For in the end the sun will rise
and light life forever time.”*

“See, the sun rises!” Saint exclaimed, “Life prevails!”

His guests were unconvinced but Ben and Fetch saved the Emperor and his undead assistant from ridicule as the two Dogloen’s turned their ire on their comrades for ever having put faith in the silly riddle to begin with.

“Y’all thought this was legit?” Fetch crowed.

Bold back pedalled, “Aye, lad, oi don’t remembar it baeing this bad...”

“Plus we never said we bought it!” Marvell joined the dwarf, inching back towards the tunnel.

Unlucky tried to point the finger back at the prophecy-peddlers, claiming, “I think that dead flightless dragon just remembered it wrong.”

Ben stepped up to the plate, unwilling to let them dodge their due blame, “But Bold did seem to remember that the twelve initially fail.”

Finally, Lenga saved the day. Defending both her friends and their hosts. Coming from a religious perspective, she explained, “Prophecies often aren’t what you want them to be. As our

Knomish friend summarized earlier, it is a story of heroes triumphing over an impending doom. What sort of doom do you expect to triumph over without incurring any losses?"

Despite not sharing her faith, Fetch wasn't about to besmirch it. Ben was half in and half out of religion, but he couldn't contradict the facts. If they were indeed facts. Turning back to Saint, Ben asked, "Lightning really wrote this on the roof of the Cathedral?"

Saint nodded.

Ben shrugged his backpack, drawing attention to the elgroom strapped there, "Couldn't it have just been an elementalist?"

Saint shook his head, "I was there."

"In the middle of a storm?" Marvell challenged.

"God called me." Saint replied.

"Meh the Lard coll ya to wroite the next one down." Bold grumbled.

"How does this solve our problems?" Fetch asked, jerking a thumb in the dwarf's direction, "Slavery, mancy – you said the Foretelling was the solution to our problems, right?"

"Eventually." Saint said.

"So where do we start?" Ben asked.

"Batloe." Saint stated.

Another strong gust rushed through the portal, forcing them all to hush for a moment. It was almost as if the wind washed away their impatience, the moment of silence convincing them to give the Emperor the benefit of the doubt once more. In the meantime, Saint motioned for Bonehead to return to the portal and as the air settled back down the dinosaur began to tinker with the structure. While Bonehead worked, Saint continued.

"But before I explain, first I must ask: Are you all familiar with the Samurai Principle?"

Fetch nudged Lenga, "Isn't that what your dad believes?"

"The opposite." Lenga corrected, "That's what the new Captain Hobbes believes."

"Voilence's nevar justifooid." Bold stated, "So a few folks have to tehk on the barden of thot sin to protect the innocent from othar sinnars."

"Exactly!" Saint clapped his hands together, "It was an idea I borrowed from a team of heroes I met in Delia and it changed their world! I'll elaborate. What would happen if the Trinity Nations raised an army and invaded Vinnum Tow to free the dwarves?"

"Sondor and Iceload would invade the Trinity Nations." Unlucky said, wagging his finger as if he thought Saint was actually considering such.

"And Vinnum Tow would kill a dwarf far everay second thot war was waged." Bold added.

Saint jabbed his finger towards the vaulted ceiling above as he triumphantly delivered his final question, "But if a band of vigilantes did?"

"Vinnum Tow would still kill a dwarf far everay second thot war was waged." Bold grunted. Saint's crest fell and with it his hand. Despite being right, Bold still felt a bit bad for bashing his old friend. After a deep sigh, he admitted, "Still, thot's the onlay weh it'll evar happen."

Saint bowed humbly to the dwarf's concession.

"So, we're supposed to run around solving the world's problems?" Ben summarized.

"And take all the blame when it goes wrong." Fetch clarified.

"Won't that land us in prison?" Marvell pointed out.

Bold's eyes grew wide as he realized, "Whar wae'll bae voted roight back out!"

“That is,” Lenga paused, her normally sapphiric skin looking a bit opal, she had to strain just to complete the accusation, “the definition of corruption.”

Saint spread his arms, palms up, confessing outright, “The burden of the Samurai.”

“This is fantastic!” Unlucky exclaimed, “Where do we start? Vinnum Tow?”

“No!” Bold blurted. Then he took a breath and patted his fellow little man on the back, “Too soon. Moy paeple naed to recovar from the last...the last attempt.”

“Batloe.” Saint brought it back.

“That is where you will find the other eight.” Bonehead explained.

Saint continued, “There is a revolution brewing in Batloe. King Duifeen Shelba died before he could enact democratic succession. His youngest daughter was the people’s choice but his oldest daughter now wears the crown. Any day now, violence will break out and, when it does, it will not be good for the people. They will not defeat the Queen – she has allies outside the Empire – Vinnum Tow, Iceload, and I believe with the Disciples of Darkness as well. If I were to directly intervene, it could start a world war, but if no one intervenes, then I believe the Empire will lose Batloe for good.”

“Batloe controls the moons.” Fetch murmured.

“Yea, and with it the solar enertomb supply.” Marvell agreed.

“Essentially all magical material produced beneath Solaris comes from Batloe – at least what isn’t made in Munkloe does.” Lenga mentioned.

“Don’t forget science.” Unlucky reminded them, “Foxloe may make the gadgets but Batloe designs them.”

“Batloe would tip the scales out of the Trinity Nation’s favor. If Sondar, Oiceload, and Vinnum Tow teamed up with Batloe, they’d towar ovar the Empoire – par thot with the roise of the New Pact?” Bold surmised, “Moight as well brang the Quaen of Darkness bock.”

“So what do we do?” Ben asked.

Saint looked away. He gazed back down the tunnel, towards the Cathedral, and took a deep breath before letting it out slowly. Fetch turned to Ben who looked back with equal surprise. Both had a feeling they knew what the King of God’s Island was about to ask them to do. Their eyes then dropped to Bold. He too was shocked. Furling his brow, he turned to Marvell and dragged the boys’ gaze with his. Marvell’s surprise was more suspicion than surprise – such a strong sense of apprehension that she didn’t meet her friends’ looks even as their eyes bore into her cheek bones. Poor Lenga was the most caught off guard of all of them. Her dark blue skin had only continued to pale since the Samurai Principle had been brought up. Now, her skin was almost as white as an electric elf’s. As a nonviolent Munkloen and a true believer in the benevolence of the Trinity Nations, this conversation was triggering a paradigm shift in her understanding of the world. The juxtaposition between her and the Knome beside her was as drastic as could be. Unlucky seemed completely oblivious. In fact, he was turned around looking at the wall as if he had lost complete track of the conversation. He’d even started to whistle, faintly, before Saint spoke back up.

The Emperor didn’t turn around, but he did finally continue, “I want you to go to Batloe, join the rebels, and kill the Queen.”

Lenga gasped. Nearly falling to her knees had Fetch and Bold not swooped in to catch her. Saint turned. His brow furled just a tad, his beard contorted with a subtle frown, he spoke directly to Lenga, “Lenga, your friends will need you. There is no better healer on Mystakle Planet. That said, the choice is yours. As Headmaster and Princess and as an ardent believer in nonviolence, I know this will pain you...I ask only you do what you feel is right.”

Then he turned to Unlucky.

“Little Knome-”

The old man spun around like as though he’d been caught in a sudden whirlwind.

“-you’ve got a boat, yes?”

“Barely.” Marvell and Fetch chimed.

“*The Unluckiest!*” Unlucky exclaimed.

“Alright then,” Saint clasped his hands together, “you should leave for Batloe tomorrow. Sail straight to Flow-Vare and, when you get there, find the sister of the Queen: Daffeega Shelba. It shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“And she’s going to be cool with us wanting to kill her sister?” Marvell asked.

Saint cringed a bit, “Maybe keep that bit to yourselves. Tell her you were sent by the Emperor on behalf of the people. She’ll be ready for you.”

“Do we *have* to kill the Queen?” Ben asked, “Can’t we just stop her?”

“I wish you could.” Saint frowned.

Lenga perked up, “Well then maybe we can!”

“So long as Batloe is saved.” Saint said even though his sad expression suggested that he did not believe there would be an option. Rather than instilling more false hope, he pointed back to the portal behind his guests, “A tent has been set up on the grounds for you all. Bonehead will show you the way.”

Looking from the Emperor to the portal they saw the view of the Cathedral and the sky above had been replaced by a shady pavilion. The old, deteriorating skyblue scales of Unluckier could be seen curled up in the center of the tent waiting for them. Bonehead extended a tiny extremity towards the portal like a host opening the door for the guest. When they glanced back towards the tunnel, they saw Saint was already leaving. Exchanging assorted glances, the gang wandered through the magical window and into their humble suite. The fact that the bedding was little more than pillows and padding on the floor was of no concern to them as none felt sleep would come easy. Even if they had the most luxurious accommodations, their visit to the Capitol had been anything but what they had expected.

There is little odder than the revelation of high expectations, especially when those expectations are of as colossal a scale as those just revealed. Yesterday, they were running from the law of the Empire hoping to make a bounty off a pirate and sell a sack of enertombs then today they were told that they would somehow save the world and, in the meantime, asked by the Emperor to assassinate a Queen.

As Ben, Fetch, Marvell, Bold, Lenga, and Unlucky joined Unluckier in the pavilion on the campus of the Cathedral court, far beneath them in the dungeons a prisoner was stirring. Despite being covered in at least four layers of robes, the mage shivered. His brothers often joked, calling him cold blooded. No matter where he went, his poor frail frame trembled as if he were back home in the icy mountains of Icelore – for which he was named: Sorelac Icelore. Friend of the necromancer Truth and brother of Talloome Icelore the King – or Mystvokar, rather – of Iceload, Sorelac had spent the better part of the last week shivering in his shawls in a cool dark prison cell.

Despite having lost his liberty, he couldn’t complain about his accommodations. Thanks to some wizardry, the light of Solaris was somehow beamed down into a corner of his cell, illuminating a plush reading chair and the small, desk-height bookshelf beside it. He’d spent most of his imprisonment reading those texts (still had two to go) and he was quite sure the selection had been catered to his interests: inter-dimensional magic, histories and myths about

the Voidstone, and a magazine on the most fashionable “Cloaks to Keep you Warm” of the 1990s. Across from the library nook was a door – that’s right, his cell had two rooms. Granted, the second room was little more than a bathroom stall but still – having a bathroom with a door in a prison cell was something seemingly more mythological than the Well of Youth. His bed was still out in the open, parallel with the bars that reminded him this was no dorm room, but it wasn’t bad. One a scale of one to ten, one being a stiff cot and ten being a plush-mattress, he’d have to give his bunk a solid seven. Ironically, on his third day, the criminal-republic had offered him a tent in the courtyard but he was so comfortable in his little cavernous cubicle he’d declined the offer. Now, however, as a dark figure waded down the hallway towards his cell, he was beginning to wonder if maybe that had been a mistake.

The figure didn’t brighten much when he stopped halfway in the ray of sunlight that stretched out from between the bars of his confines. Few beings on Mystakle Planet had as dark a complexion. Solaris bounced right off his black scales.

Sorelac, both shivering and trembling, approached his visitor, clenching his teeth to keep them from rattling.

“You took her away from me,” Captain Dresdan said and as he did he pulled a key from his pocket, “now you’re going to take me to her.”

“She’ll kill me.” Sorelac stated.

“So will I.” Dresdan growled. Slipping the key into the hole but not turning it, he let his hand fall back to the hilt on his hip. Cocking his head to the side, his indigo eyes bored into Sorelac’s dark, chocolatey brown, “What say you? Would you like to spend a few more days on Mystakle Planet or shall I go ahead and send you off to Solaris?”

“My brother will kill you.” Sorelac warned.

“You can tell me ‘I told you so’ in the afterlife.” Dresdan smirked. Leaving his sword where it sat, his hand went back to the key. Unlocking it, he swung the door open and stepped aside, “Take me to Truth.”

As Dresdan led Sorelac out of his cozy cage and out the dungeon’s backway, another dark figure trailed behind. Though this figure had pale white skin compared to Dresdan’s dark black scales, this garb matched the chidra’s complexion and his blade was even darker. The only thing darker than the sword in the spy’s hand was the darkness of the spell he’d just escaped after his duel with a Doom Warrior on the Cathedral rooftop. When he’d claimed to be Capitol City Police, it had been a joke, and yet now here he was. Moments after fending off an intruder he was in pursuit of a jail break. The old Knome, Grandfather, shook his head. *Saint has got to get some better security in this place. It’s almost like he wants folks to escape.*

The black sword in his hand rattled in his grasp.

Okay, I know, he wants folks to escape. Grandfather sighed. He’s never been good at disciplining pirates. Likely from his days on the Rising Sun. Still I’ve got to talk to him...one day he’s gonna want to keep the back door locked.

Another rumble from the katana.

I know it’s all a part of the plan! Grandfather snapped silently before he banished the Suikii back to whatever dimension it went to when it disappeared. His mind continued to monologue, I made the godi thing and it has the gall to tell me...He rolled his eyes. Who am I even thinking to?

Banishing his thoughts just like he had his blade, he tip-toed on after Dresdan and Sorelac. Though, despite his best efforts, one last retort escaped his consciousness, echoing in a whisper down the hall as he muttered it bitterly into the abyss.

“Can’t trust a pirate...”

- - -

Rearing up from the clapping waves of the bay, a scarlet beast slammed its head into the bowsprit but it did not crash back down into the sea. Not only was its face frozen in a ferocious snarl, so too was its body petrified. Despite rippling muscles and a haunting scowl, the creature was not real but rather a replica carved from ancient cedar and preserved by magic. It prowled the oceans of Solaris just as its real-life doppelgangers prowled the woods of Tadloe, both terrorizing any life form that happened across their path. The beast, known as a barren, may have been Tadloe’s mascot but it was also the local’s nightmare, waiting just outside the city limits to feast. Town guards were as likely to challenge the real creature as they were to challenge the wooden figurehead beneath the bowsprit of the *Red Barren*.

Barrens were once considered demonic, their species looking unlike any other creature taxonomically close to them. With horns like that of an ox, one might say their long snout was similar, after all they were furred, but in reality their jaws had more in common with that of an alligator: long and toothy capable of chomping down with the force of a sledge hammer. Again, they matched large cattle as their bodys extended behind their gaudy necks with a large gristly buffalo hump rising between their shoulder blades but then, looking beneath those muscled traps, their feet didn’t share the hooves of cattle but rather the wide, clawed paws of giant felines.

In this sense, the *Red Barren* was like a barren. It didn’t look like any other pirate ship, though it quite obviously was one. The cannon barrels studding the port and starboard sides assured any observer that this ship was meant for violence and the mansion that had been seemingly dropped on the stern clarified that this was no professional military vehicle. There really is no other way to describe it, a house had been built on the back of the ship. When the *Red Barren* anchored in this or that bay, the towering structure could blend in with the other buildings of the skyline if you couldn’t make out the boat beneath. It was an interesting style – architecturally Aquarian (minka-like for you Earth-lubbers): large-windowed walls stacked on top of hipped yosemune roofs that hoisted verandas while simultaneously sheltering the balcony below. It rose four stories above the main deck, expanding out in the middle, narrowing towards the top, then adding two more tiers in a small tower that leaned out off the stern. The Captain of this ship was obviously a man who liked to be comfortable and, after what he’d been through, could you blame him?

Over half of the Captain had been lost with his crew during the War of the Tiger and the missing pieces had been replaced by machines. What magic couldn’t heal, the mechanics of Batloe and Foxloe could recreate – for the right price. His left arm and right leg gleamed like gold in the light of Solaris. The plates were intricately fitted together so that it was completely seamless, one might even think it was some sort of high-tech armor and that there was flesh underneath had they not known what had happened to Crimson. A thematic scarlet strip slid down the back of his arm, curving up from his elbow to run across the top of his forearm then as the stripe hit his balled fist it filled out so that his entire hand was as red as his name. His right leg had a similar aesthetic, but his right arm and left leg looked quite different. While his golden limbs had come from the best Batloe had to offer, they stood in direct contrast to the limbs constructed by the more affordable, albeit just as renown, Gear Baba. No sleek panels hid the robotic skeleton underneath, the pistons and gears shone like silver bones. Rather than a red stripe, there were red wires and hoses that looked almost like exposed muscle. His right arm and

left leg told the story of what happened and revealed what he was, that is, less human than even an Eninac.

What money had been saved on the more gorey robotics had been spent on the chest plate. His abdomen remained intact, but the top half of his ribs had been replaced. He'd intrusted Batloe with replacing his heart, potentially why he remained a capitalist and hadn't gone the Civilist way of the Foxloen, thus his gilded breast and shoulders. Above that, descended a well-kept red beard, twisted into locks, but his scalp was bald and as glossy as the metal that beamed beneath it and the twisted snarl of a grin in between.

"Arr, matey!" He growled at his guests.

The crew around him snickered – aside from the two directly behind him. These two were rather captivating and for multiple reasons. What you noticed first would say a lot about your character, as they were rather scantily clad. One could argue their outfit was armor, as it was made of metal, but their plates would be as likely to pass a safety test as they would the Bechdel Test – these things were little more than bikinis. Now, if you were caught staring at their chests, you would have an excuse. The stones between their breasts were not something you see everyday. Sitting high on their sternums almost like medallions, were chest stones, making them pyromancers. Fire swirled within these translucent rocks, churning as if restless. Pyromancers weren't allowed outside the Dragon Islands – as they were, for all practical purposes, living and breathing bombs – and, unlike necromancers and shadowmancers, pyromancers far rarely escaped simply because they were a lot harder to disguise. Still, their outfits and their mancy weren't the most interesting elements of their appearance. The most intriguing was their race. While they had red hair like their Captain, many humans had red hair. Their slanted eyes could've also been human, but when combined with their pointed ears it meant they were elven – specifically, fire elven, and the fire elves had left Solaris centuries ago, taking refuge beneath another sun known as Delia. While bikini armor was uncommon and pyromancers were rare, Delians were essentially non-existent on Mystakle Planet. And these two wore large metal collars that were connected to chain link leashes both hooked onto Captain Crimson's belt.

Tabuh felt inclined to try and save the two women, however the way they leered at her made her wonder whether or not that would be a good idea. Glancing over to Tou, she saw that he had his eyes hardwired on the Captain as if he hadn't even noticed the cyborg's slaves. Jason and Drakken also seemed to be above ogling the objectified aliens, focusing intently on Captain Crimson as well and getting right down to business.

"Aevenin, Captain," Jason bowed, "wae're hare to ask a favor."

"The kind of favor we pay you for." Drakken clarified.

"Aye," Crimson spat on the floorboards, the wad of mucus splattering a little too close to Tou's boots. He waited a moment to see if Tou was going to flinch but when he didn't the Captain went on without revealing any disappointment, "hare far the mapwarks?" Even before they answered he'd already turned and beckoned for them to follow. Shouting to the crew as they headed to the main companionway, "Back to wark ya godai gops!"

The stairs were brief, taking them just below deck before splitting in a three-way fork. The left and right options continued further down into the depths of the galleon, but the mechanical marauder kept heading straight down a passageway that cut through the center of the ship towards the stern. He kept his enchained odalisques between him and his guests, forcing the Obsidians to wonder whether or not he did this as a powerplay, to make them uncomfortable, or as a defensive means in case his visitors decided to try and take advantage of his exposed back. Either way, it definitely made the journey awkwardly quiet as they ambled behind the sauntering

slave women and their master. At the end of the corridor, there was a large wooden door with a rounded top. As Crimson approached it, his elves increased their pace, passing him on either side so that one could open the door and the other could take his hand – as a gentleman might a lady’s when helping her step over a puddle – before leading him into the room beyond.

Tabuh shook her head but Tou couldn’t help but chuckle. Jason and Drakken simply followed, focusing on keeping their faces devoid of emotion as they attempted to read the emotions hidden behind the perpetually grumpy asymmetrically-animatronic man. With their guides inside, they followed.

This was hardly the sort of cabin one would expect after having stooped down the cramped corridor before and it was obvious that it had been widened post-construction. One could tell such by the exposed rafters that stretched across above, no longer bearing the ceiling but rather framing the second half of the room overhead. Not only was the chamber taller, it was wider. Walls had been knocked down and, like the beams above, wooden baulks that cut through the entirety of the ship rose naked in the berth like decorative columns. The supports that crisscrossed the chamber garnered little focus though as Tou and Tabuh spun around, their heads swiveling, as they counted the boxy mapworks that cluttered the room. Rather than having one large map, like most mapwork rooms would, Crimson had collected dozens of portable mapworks. They varied in size. Some were as thick as three feet, sitting on stumpy sawhorses so one could still see the face of the map, while others were less than a foot thick thus were able to be mounted to the walls. Library ladders leaned against the pillars and the trestles above so that cartographers could get up close and personal with each individual map. Most of the maps were already moving. It wasn’t immediately noticeable, the shifting of the tiny waves and the rustling of the mini forests, but what gave the moving maps away was the little red speck. Those that didn’t budge missed the red mark, but those that were alive each had a tiny red glow twinkling like a distant dwarf star. These crimson cursors symbolized an individual or item that Crimson was tracking and beneath each moving map was a wooden slab with the name of the target carved across it. Tou and Tabuh exchanged a glance to make sure they were on the same page, then they went about scowring the room in search of a block with the name of their absent Captain.

Meanwhile, the extremely-present Captain, turned to converse with his old war comrades, “Y’all must have uh lot mar gold tucked aweh in Partville than oi thought, aye?” He turned to one of his concubines, a key suddenly appearing in his metallic hand. As he unlocked her neck-cuff, he continued to speak but he no longer looked at the two Obsidians, “Cause thar ain’t enough gold in any of the stashes of the accountants wae used to shehr.”

The comment caused Jason and Drakken to turn to one another. They were not on the same page as Tou and Tabuh had been, though both were concerned. Drakken assumed their secret was out but Jason wanted to roll the dice and maintain the façade and, despite Drakken’s silent plea for hesitation coming in the form a furrowed brow, Jason turned back to their host with a dumbfounded tone and dark empty eyes.

“Prahce go up since wae last stopped bah?” The bearn asked.

Free from her chains, the first fire elf tiptoed away – over to the side of the map-library where Tou was searching for Dresdan’s name. Tou tensed up, noticing he was now being followed, but when she did nothing but narrow her eyes when he met her gaze, he hesitated a moment longer then went on with the hunt. Crimson slid the key within a clump of wires exposed between the silver rods of his forearm and plucked out another which he then took to the neck of the second pyromancer. His voice was cool and preoccupied, but neither Jason nor

Drakken bought that unlocking his female-friend's collar took as much focus as he seemed to be making it out to.

"How long ago was thot, mate? How many yaers?" He hummed as if pondering for a second and then began to count aloud, "One? Two? Thrae? F-"

"Fahv, Crimson." Jason stated.

"Foive yaers, mate." A speck of emotion began to trickle into the cyborg's tone, the fake dead-pan of distraction dissolving as a grouchy gravel returned to his voice, "Foive yaers."

Uncuffed, the second fire elven servant slipped off. Tabuh had stopped searching by this point. Having sensed a rising tension, she had begun to watch the three pirates by the front of the library. Now that one of the pyromancers was heading over to apparently stalk her like the other was Tou, she was quite sure that something was about to go wrong. On her side of the chamber, there was a door and it was wide open. Some sort of stern-side mezzanine waited beyond – a great option for escape however it would mean abandoning her comrade as he continued to search mapworks on the otherside of the room.

Crimson didn't waste anymore time, "Foive yaers Oi've waited far ya to pay mae back far whot you took from mae and moine."

Jason took a half step back, raising his hands away from the weapons that line his belt, "Crimson-"

"Ya took moy share." The ginger-haired captain cut him off, "Wae fought together and y'all took moy share?"

"Captain," Drakken jumped in, "Truth paid us what she paid us, we didn't know-"

"Ya didn't foind out aithar?" Crimson snarled, "In foive faraking yaers, ya didn't figar that out, eh?"

Jason took back his backward half step, stepping towards the old comrade. His hands had lowered a little bit and if Crimson hadn't noticed then he would've surely noticed the shift in the bearn's tone, "You woulda done the same."

"Yea, mate, Oi woulda but ya know whot?" Crimson cocked his head to the side, his eyes twinkling as he smirked a smirk as eerie as a bare skull, "If Oi woulda, then Oi wouldn'ta shown back up, in the middle of the noight on the godai darstep of the vary bastard Oi robbed."

By this point, Tou had caught on to the tension. However, he hadn't stopped and turned to face it. Realizing that weapons would likely soon be drawn, he was determined to find the map before that happened. After all, though he had never fought a pyromancer before, Tou was a bit concerned that many of the maps wouldn't make it through a full on fight in a library full of kindling. And just as he was puzzling over the riskiness of his decision, his eyes caught a glimpse of what looked to be a capital "D". Above him, between the rafters, in a nook just beneath the ceiling, Tou was reasonably certain that he saw the name "Dresdan Otubak".

"We may not have enough accounts in Portville, but we've got accounts." Drakken said. The old moleman was typically the epitome of amenable, but there was a sudden chillness in his voice now. Each syllable was pronounced exactly, as if he were concocting an audible contract – a last ditch effort to resolve the situation without physical violence, "We will pay you what is due."

"Aye, ya will." Crimson's snarl was a bit held back as the scent of silver started to waft up his still-human nostrils, "Plus intarest."

"Plus interest." Drakken agreed.

His hodge-podge-hand went up to his beard, twisting the dreaded lochs of red ruffs. Drakken and Jason had not been wrong when they'd assured Tou and Tabuh that money came

first for the red raider. However, they had been wrong when they withheld the truth that Truth had paid the Obsidians (and the other allies) the money meant for the Reds after Crimson fled the war to survive. They'd kept tabs on the *Red Barren* – knowing that if Crimson ever found out what they'd done, there would be hell to pay, but this had never happened. For the last five years, everyone involved had kept their lips sealed. How now, when they finally needed the cyborg's help again, did he suddenly know that the *Obsidian Sail* had been paid what the *Red Barren* was due? Well, the answer suddenly strolled in behind them. \

“Can't trust a pirate.” The blokes voice was immediately recognizable to all those in the room but even those that had never passed the fellow would've known who he was after first glance. If Drakken embodied gentility, then this gentleman embodied piracy. From the tricorne hat to the vest-bound poet's shirt, solidified with sea-worn combat boots and a gaudy belt – no one could look more pirate than John Pigeon. The gaudy belt was more than just that, as those in the map cabin knew all too well. The clasp was shaped like the head of a barren (the same beast for which the ship was named) was more than just a buckle. It was a translucent stone, one that could be filled on command by the weilder's imagination so long as Solaris had given it charge and judging by the deep, leathery tan of the man, he had gotten plenty of sunlight, “Especially ones that claim to have a conscience.”

Jason's hands went straight for his weapons. Drakken's tongue smashed against the roof of his mouth, preparing the next syllable to be of the most violent in the Sacred Tongue's repertoire. Tabuh reached for her revolver, her golden eyes meeting the glare of her pyromantic pursuer head on. Only Tou continued as he had, though a notch or two quicker than before. He'd moved one of the library ladders into place and was climbing it now to find out if the little wooden block beneath the mapwork above him was in fact his old Captain's.

“Oi got maps of oll the old bastards, ya know.” Crimson said, snapping his metallic fingers to bring attention back to him. He pivoted to gesture towards a saw-horse-mounted mapwork. The piece wasn't moving and there was no red glow to be found. He explained, “This was Ching Shih's, mate.”

Leaving the ex-Sea Lord Captain's blank chart he strolled starboard past two more before stopping at another table-top map, “This was Smidt Carm-” he froze, his eyes drawn to the map. The red light was back on – though he was sure he'd seen it go dark. Whatever the matter, he ignored it for the moment as his point still stood, “Ya war thar when the Sae Lard's sank. Ya war thar when the *Marraialdo* sank. Now ya come hare. Whot am Oi supposed to thank?”

“Pawns of the Empire - traitors.” Johnny answered for the Obsidians, hocking a loogie on the floor before continuing. He strode past Jason and Drakken, twisting around the mapwork tables to pass Captain Crimson too. He finally came to a stop beside one of the pyromancers. Stooping, he clasped her hand and kissed it, winking to her before taking hold of the library ladder she guarded – the one Tou stood atop – and turning to his audience, “Coming here to look for your traitor Captain – we've been watching him too, you know.”

Suddenly, a pale light shot from the buccaneer's belt buckle like a beam from a flashlight. Once it hit the floor boards, it grew exponentially and lifted Johnny with it. Dust shot out in all directions as the narrow column of gust hoisted him up by his groin and lifted him into the rafters. As the light went dim, he landed on a beam behind where Tou stood. The earth elf had turned from the mapwork, taking the balls of his feet off the rungs of the ladder and switching them for his heels as he turned to face the human.

Nodding to the barren bedazzled band, Tou noted, “See you got a new belt.”

Johnny ignored the callback, peering over Tou's shoulder with a sneer. He hollered back to the others, "Y'all wanna know where your Captain is now?"

"Oi do." Crimson growled.

"As we faraking speak," Johnny paused, pulling his eyes from the map to lock back onto Tou's dark chocolate glare, "Dresdan Otubak is leaving God's Island, having just spent the evening kissing up to his godi master – the crimpsin tiad Bastard Emperor."

There was a single second of silence – verbal, silence, at least. There was still the faint sound of harbor waves wapping the hull. Distant creaking of moaning timber as wood beant and bowed. Cutting through the sounds of the ship was the pulse of the people gathered there, pounding like distant war drums, and one single heartbeat hit in that silence, like when two lines of a great army halt parallel to one another, taking a short breath before their leaders give the order to charge. The next heartbeat would be hidden beneath the blare of battle.

Drawing his sword, Tou bound from his perch atop the library ladder, boldly leaping towards Johnny. It was less brave than it was a calculated measure: figuring the fire elf below would yank the ladder out from under him, he literally wouldn't have a leg to stand on if he didn't take to the rafters with the rogue opposing him. Still, no sooner did he jump than did the goon's girdle come to life with another pale gray light – a blast of wend hit Tou in the gut like a bag of bricks and back he went. Ironically, his other foe, the pyromancer below, in her attempt to sabotage had saved Tou from imminent injury. Before realizing the earth elf was going to take to the air, the fire elf jerked the ladder away from the wall in hopes of flinging him towards her comrade with the magic belt. This meant that when Johnny launched Tou back the way he'd bound, he fell back onto the ladder, catching himself close enough to Johnny for *Future* – his sword – to slice him.

Slice him Tou did not. Again, he figured his foes intentions wisely. As Johnny's belt still shone with a shade of gray like angry storm clouds, Tou took to the air again but this time in a separate direction. As another tornado-like punch thrust forward from the pirate's hips, Tou hopped aside – picking a rafter that put a pillar between them and, finally, garnering himself a second to strategize his next move. With the beam blocking the pyromancer's view below, he now only had to deal with the elementalist behind the pillar. Extending from the pillar – In a display quite the opposite of an olive branch – was an icy saber.

The owner of which spoke, "Round two, dirt elf, and this time lets aim above the belt."

Hopping back a rafter, Johnny now was in Tou's line of sight. He gestured with his right hand – the one engulfed in ice like a giant, blade tipped gauntlet – for Tou to advance to the plank he'd just left. It could be a trap, sure, Tou acknowledged, but it seemed a bit unnecessary after all now that Johnny could see him he could shoot whatever magical projectile he wanted at him. Despite being told by the man himself to never trust a pirate, Tou had a feeling this bloke's bravado made the offer for a fair duel likely. Tou had made him look like a fool in the Deicide. Now Johnny wanted to redeem himself.

Slipping around the mast like column to the rafter that Johnny had just left, Tou accepted the challenge with a nod. While the two men tested their masculinity in a terrifically morronic way, below them the rest of the battle raged on. When Tou had drawn *Future* and charged Johnny, the forger of his sword had also attacked her opponent on the otherside of the mapwork library.

BANG! The markswoman that never missed didn't technically miss, but she didn't hit her target either. Blades have been known to block bullets on Mystakle Planet and pyromancers can condense a stream of fire so tight that the flame takes on all the properties of a physical

object, hardening enough to stop a bullet fast, but to do so takes time for the average pyromancer. Thus, Tabuh's stalker was unable to block the bullet even as a tendril of flame leapt from her chest and engulfed the bullet like a frog's tongue snatching a fly. While it was no block it was still effective, the fire elf was able to alter the course of the projectile. Her flames yanked it away from its trajectory, letting it instead smash into her breast.

"Seraiouslay?" Tabuh gaped.

The force of the hit still threw the pyromancer backwards, but the bullet bounced right off her brass brassiere. Despite 95% of the woman's flesh being naked and exposed, the pyromancer had managed to bounce the bullet off her armored boob and survived to live another day. This was either incredibly lucky or incredibly skillful and Tabuh intended to find out.

Pointing her auric firearm at her foe as they staggered back towards Tabuh, the electric elf fired her second shot: BANG! Again, with a whipping lash of spitting lava, the fire elf grabbed the bullet out of thin air and gave it enough of a tug for it to miss her temple and instead hit her titty. The smush-headed slug fell to the floor.

Tabuh gasped again, "Ah'll bae."

With only five bullets left in the cylinder, it was time for a new plan. Especially now because she was on the defensive. That long arm of infernal energy hadn't disappated since it defeated her bullet. Now it was reaching out to defeat her. Tabuh rocked back until her shoulders hit the top of the mapwork table behind her. Lifting her feet up off the ground, she kept her legs spread as the flame surged forward like a striking snake slipping between her thighs. The fire reared back, now less serpentine and more hammer like. Continuing her backwards tumble, she heaved her hips over her head and rolled off the table as the flame came down, splitting the map with a small, fiery explosion. Gears shot out in separate directions as singed wood shards followed.

On the other side of the table – or what was left of it – Tabuh ducked low and raised her revolver, pulling the trigger as the smoke cleared. BANG! Again, the pyromancer sucked the bullet to her bossom and staggered backwards. But this was the new plan. Now that Tabuh was on the bow side of the room, her enemy was on the stern side. A doorway sprawled open behind her opponent. Behind that, was some sort of open air balcony with a view of nothing but the Aquarian Ocean and the midnight sky. Tabuh planned to shoot and shove her adversary off the edge of the ship and she had four more shots with which to do it. Still, why waste a shot when a foot could work just as good.

Rather than firing, she faked a rush to her left. Sticking out her boot as if taking a step she instead planted her toes and pushed off as the balls of her feet hit the floor boards – charging in a semi-circle route around the debris of the table. As she did, the fiery ribbon smashed where her next step would have been behind her. Sprinting past the broken mapwork, she grabbed a table leg that was still wobbling in place, yet to tumble since being torn from it's tabletop, and brandished it like a bludgeon. Of course, the pyromancer focused on that, moving from her second missed fire-plume pound to target the mahogany mace. But the bat wasn't meant for the fire elf it was meant for the blaze. Tabuh leapt up, beating the fire back as she raised her a foot to kick her foe in the breast.

It worked and hurt: the pyromancer staggered back towards the door while the firey arm extending from her chest smacked the table-leg aside to slam Tabuh to the floor. Despite having had the wind knocked out of her, Tabuh didn't stop. Again, duping the Delian, she feined a roll to her right and instead rolled left: over the embers of the obliterated mapwork table. With

embers and sparks still cackling on her clothes, no sooner did she roll back onto her back than did she sit up and fire – two shots.

BANG! For the fourth time, the tongue of flame snatched the bullet, smashing it to the pyromancer's chest like a drunkard might an empty can. It threw the poor woman back, into the open doorway now.

BANG! With her hands on the door frame, she tried not to stagger back further but it couldn't be helped. The fire smacked the bullet to her boob and out onto the porch she was thrust.

Tabuh was about to fire a third but she hesitated. Her clever competitor had gotten her fire to split as she stumbled back towards the banister – the majority of it held back to save her from Tabuh's shot, but the other half of the forked tongue of flame snagged the open door so that as she caught her balance the door slammed shut between them.

Tabuh hesitated as she realized she would now be firing blind, then made a guess and fired anyways.

BANG!

The bullet blast a hole in the sea-worn door – one through which Solaris poured preventing Tabuh from peaking through. She was immediately unsure why she'd done it. Having never missed once in her life, shooting blind put her reputation on the line. As fast as the cylinder rolled over to prep the last bullet for fire, Tabuh was back on her feet flinging that door open. There, on the balcony, leaning against the banister with amber hair glistening in the sun, was the fire elf. She still stood in line with the hole Tabuh had shot in the door and a new hole was forming. The slug from the Sentry's golden gun was lodged in the giant stone that was planted in the pyromancer's chest – between her armored breasts. Tabuh had shot the chest stone and it did not look good. Fissures were already forming away from the bullet. The stone was radiating in waves like its owner was breathing in deep breathes, her eyes were wide with fear and fury but she knew fighting back would do her no good just as Tabuh realized fleeing would likely be equally as helpful – still, Tabuh tried.

As the stone split it released all the fire power it held within and obliterated the flesh of the elf and the wood of the ship alike. Tabuh slammed the door shut behind her. She moved to jump, both feet planted on the door in hopes her legs could launch her across the library before the explosion grabbed her by the ankles. Fortunately, the door was on her side. The blast thrust the door off its hinges and sent Tabuh hurtling through the chamber like a cannon ball. The door got off easy, the wall – not so much. The furious flames of the lost Delian consumed half the stern-side wall in one infernal bite, splintering mapworks and woodboards alike and spraying them alongside their embers on all those within the library. The very ship itself rocked and the blast drove the final nail into the coffin of the fight – but you haven't even heard what Jason and Drakken were up to this entire time.

When Tou jumped off the ladder and Tabuh fired on the fire elf, Drakken began to recite the Sacred Tongue, calling on the name of the Delian God of the Sea, “Neme ah Barro-”

As the boatswain belted his bewitching benediction, the bearn beside him bared his blade. Jason had chosen one of his cutlasses, bringing it up and then down towards the bulging veins in Crimson's neck only for the edge to be stopped in the nook between the Captain's metallic thumb and pointer finger. As Drakken finished pronouncing the name of the oceanic deity, the cyborg clinched his fist and shattered the saber – bringing up his red left hand as Jason drew his next weapon.

“-ballah mia nikk,” Drakken continued, “et canna shat-”

Jason had chosen his chain. As Crimson's scarlet southpaw soared up towards Jason's jaw, Jason dove to the side and threw out his metal chain like a fly fisherman flicking their rod. The fist missed and the chain caught, slapping the human's robotic wrist and wrapping around. Rather than continuing to plummet towards the floor – as his dodge would've caused – Jason instead yanked his chain, throwing Crimson off balance in order to bring himself back up onto his feet – but before planting his feet, he rose his knee and smashed it into the bearded chin of the buccaneer. Then, releasing the chain, Jason brought his elbow down on the Captain and let him fall to the floor as he himself reached for another weapon on his belt.

“-elpeorebas oh sularebas wrate cadrawn-”

Having definitely won the first bout, Jason had drawn his gun and was ready to finish the Sondoran smuggler but unfortunately this opportunity would be robbed from him. Without the backup he expected – for though Drakken still chanted, he had yet to enchant anything – he was easily blindsided. When Tou and Johnny started sparring in the rafters, the pyromancer below turned her attention towards the fight that mattered more to her: the fate of her flame (not in the sense of fire, but in the sense of the fiery passion she felt for the man being brutalized by the bearn across the room). Seeing him take two blows to the face, she shrieked with rage. Throwing back her shoulders so that her chest stone jutted out, she shot a searing sphere like a cannon ball at the Obsidian. The blast hit him just as he pulled the trigger, causing him to miss Crimson's head and instead hit his armored shoulder. As the bullet burrowed into his opponent's metallic muscle, Jason broke through a nearby map table and crashed through the next two before skidding to a halt in a pile of debris on the floor.

In another flash of fire, the pyromancer zoomed across the cartographical chamber, stopping by her Captain's side. She stooped with one hand to help him up, while her eyes stared daggers into the mage standing only five yards from them – still sermonizing.

“-shaanzeruga prezarta shaanzeruga mai evah-”

Fire swirled out around the pyromancer like the tentacles of a giant squid about to wrap around their prey. Crimson too prepared, moving to step forward and pummel the moleman magician. Their preparations took less than a second and yet they still took too long. Even as Jason flew through the air, flames still sizzling on his side, he'd cocked back the hammer and the cylinder rolled another bullet into place – ready to be delivered and so it was. Rearing up from where he lay on his back, still sliding in backwards, he fired.

BANG!

Jason wasn't the shot that Tabuh was but he was still plenty good with a handgun. Missing his target – the red haired scalp of the scantily clad sorcerer – he still struck her above her breast plates, the slug cutting through her collar bone and crashing on to break another mapwork on the far wall.

Before even knowing the fate of his boo, Crimson shifted from striking the shaman to saving his lover and maybe himself. It was a gamble, who knew what would happen when Drakken finally finished his sentence, but a gamble he couldn't afford to ignore for Jason had four more shots and – having been in battle with the bearn – Crimson knew the Giant was fan of fanning (that is, holding your firearm in one hand while the other rapidly rocks back the hammer so the cylinder keeps turning over to allow the next shot). So the Captain turned and raised his arms, ready to swat the slugs, then he stopped. His right arm, the silver one, worked just fine but the left arm, the golden one, was glitching. The bullet that had missed his throat had struck a nerve in his shoulder. Still, he tried.

BANG!

He caught the shot with two chrome fingers, the bullet so close to his eye that he could see his iris reflected in the copper head.

BANG!

The second was a cheapshot – one that forced a flinched response despite not being fatal – Jason had taken aim at his enemy’s groin. The gargantuan golden arm had shot down, despite its mechanical failings the downward motion was doable. He beat that bullet away before it could burst his balls but now his belly was bare and wide open, for it was raising his left arm that was a problem. He would’ve moved his right arm down in preparation but the next shot was aimed back up at his brow.

BANG!

This one his hand palmed and bullet didn’t bounce off. It lodged itself in his palm causing his phalanges to spark but the projectile stopped short of popping out the otherside. The next shot would be Jason’s last – both men knew this – and both men knew what would happen before it did. Like a chess game between two masters. There was nothing to be done, the game had been won. Jason had handicapped Crimson’s left arm and forced him to leave his gut wide open. From across the room, the bearn brought back the hammer, the cylinder rolled over, the bullet slid into the chamber and then-

BANG!

-it struck his stomach. The slug slipped through his intestines, bursting them within him, before slamming to a stop in his spine. His beady eyes were wide for once. His golden arm finally made it up to cover his belly, but it couldn’t stop the blood spurting out. He staggered a step back, then toppled over with a groan.

When Crimson fell, Jason stood. He had no more bullets but he knew the pyromancer would’ve recovered by now and he would need to rush to Drakken’s aid. However, Drakken had finally finished his spell and the old mole no longer needed any help.

“-ba nock!”

Water unfurled around him as if it had been bunned up behind his scalp. It remained contained tight like a ribbon as it wrapped around his frame then – just before it touched the floorboards – it bound up from below like a lion dragon and lashed out to catch the opposing pyromancer. The enchanted fluid curled around her as she struggled, binding her like a spider binds its prey, so that within moments she was completely encased in a rippling orb of liquid. Her stone pulsed as fire tried to break through but the spell was too strong – so strong, in fact, that water surged through her nostrils, slipped through her pursed lips, and pounded on her ear drums. The water may have made it to her brain before it could’ve drowned her had not there been interference.

The entire battle was suddenly thrown on its head when Tabuh broke the chest stone of the pyromancer she dueled against. As mentioned before, this was the final nail in the coffin. As half the stern-side façade of the *Red Barren* was shredded into pyres and pikes, those before it were pelted. The initial blast of the explosion hit with a force that prevented any from raising their defenses, instead, they were left with what shields they had up. Drakken and his victim were therefore fortunate. Both were surrounded in thick mystical water, no flames could penetrate and wooden splinters stuck fast as if the liquid were some kind of durable plastic. Tou and Johnny were lucky as well, they were still slapping swords in the rafters. The blast threw them off their feet as if a rug had been pulled out from under them, but they fell with the debris instead of being pelted by it. Captain Crimson – who lay on the floor, slowly bleeding out – avoided being pummeled but instead was buried by the wreckage. Tabuh was saved by the

onslaught, though she was tossed across the room like a sports ball, the door that flung her shielded her from any worse damage than the impact of her landing. There was only one individual that took the hit head on: Jason the Giant.

Having rushed to his feet after unloading his revolver, he was standing straight when the explosion tore through the wall. First the wind blast hit him, bowling him to the side and keeping him from raising any sort of defense – as if there was anything he could do – before he was assaulted by the scorched spears of broken boards. He was hit like a front line soldier under the first volley. Coral gears and glowing wires sprayed him – turned orange by the eruption, these pieces of the mapworks sprang free from their confines with extra propulsion, peppering Jason like sparks before the worse projectiles followed. They bounced off his clothes and fur leaving only small burns like cigarette butts. It was the jagged broken frames and split planks, dragging flames behind them like makeshift battle flags, that dealt the real damage.

A splinter the size of a human-femur punctured Jason's brawn-calves – somehow able to fit between his fibula and tibia – rendering his entire left leg useless. A sliver far thinner shot past his left leg to strike his right. Unfortunately farther up than the last, it hit his upper thigh and impaled the infamous femoral artery. In the absence of a miracle, such a strike was a death warrant but this fatal edict was not alone. A large plank punctured his breast, sliding between the muscle to penetrate his heart. Jagged as the piece was and not stopping immediately once entering the organ, it left open a small hole through which blood could pour. Like a water faucet cracked open, his chest threatened his thigh in a race to see which would drain his life away first. There was no question about it. Jason the Giant was going to die in the mapwork room of the *Red Barren*. The only question was: Who would join him?

Tou no sooner slammed to the floor of the library than did he see Jason leaning like a falling tree. Before anyone could yell, "Timber!", Tou had scrambled over to the Giant and cradled him as he landed in the embers, ash, and wreckage. His foe preoccupied, John Pigeon himself popped upright and reached for his bewitched belt-buckle but before he could bother to conjure up any ideas his eyes met the golden barrel of the golden-eyed smith from Sentrakle. She'd rushed to get back to the fray as fast as any other and having been tossed across the room was a lot less of a setback than being thrown from the rafters.

"Don't move." Tabuh snarled.

Johnny didn't light his belt but he let his fingers wrap around the buckle, testing his foe's resolve, "Your mortar against my magic?"

"Mine too."

This threat came from Drakken. Water still twisted around him, churning like a miniature hurricane. He'd released the fire elf – apparently – and while this would seem to be a mistake the mole had wagered rightly, she ignored the conflict surrounding the Sea Lord and instead rushed to her fellow Red, the downed Captain Crimson. The old, red bearded cyborg was surely dying but not dead and, by virtue of his intestinal wound, he would die but no time soon. Spitting up a bit of blood, his lover wiped it from his lips with her thumb – her own shoulder still trickling blood as well.

Johnny was on his own and cornered. Well, for a moment he was. The great explosion in the rear of the vessel had triggered the crew. An even greater commotion had begun throughout the ship. Clamor above and below and back towards the bow. The Reds were coming and they knew where to look. There was a mere matter of moments – far less than a minute – before the crew would arrive and they would surely not like what they would see.

"Everyone out on the balcony!" Drakken commanded.

“I’ll find that black chidra before you do.” Johnny growled.

“He didn’t kill your Captain.” Drakken stated, but he was less concerned with Johnny’s threats than he was with Tou and Tabuh’s lack of movement towards the, “Farakin balcony, NOW!”

Tabuh would’ve happily back pedalled with her sights staying on the blue-and-red buccaneer-with-the-belt but Tou wasn’t budging. Once Tou had slid to Jason’s side, he’d ignored all else going on. His prerogative was Jason. Nothing and no one else. The boisterous bearn was not gone yet but Tou could do nothing about it. The tears streaming down his cheeks flowed at a speed that challenged the blood pouring from the First Mate’s chest and thigh. Moments being all they had left, there was no time to dwell. Fortunately, even the most mundane statement would remain potent – well, that would be the case if it weren’t for the fact that Tou was a boy raised in the woods. He could stare death in the face and still scramble around like it might not be the case. There was no giving up for Mr. Woodsman.

“We gotta get you up! We gotta get outa here – withouta healer-”

“Ya gotta point lad...” Jason croaked, blood spurting from his lips as he chuckled up at the young man, “...but ah’m done for. Wrong sahd of the grass an all...”

Tou had Jason by his shoulders. His arms nearly spread full wide just to grasp them. There was no budging the bulging oaf. Jason was lying where would die and that was that.

“Jason!” Tou pleaded, “Come on!”

“Fou...” The old man stammered, his eyes already rolling back. He fought it though, pulling them back down so that they could bore into Tou’s – so that they could maybe drive home some resounding lesson from their brief time together. He licked his lips, then said, “Tou. Mahnd ovuh matter. Ah’m done. You’re not. Go on. Get.”

Then his eyes went white. His head fell back. And his body went limp.

Someone rushed up to Tou’s side and he whirled around ready to murder even though his eyes were so full of tears he likely would’ve not been able to tell whether or not it was the Emperor or the Queen of Darkness.

“Tou,” Tabuh begged, “Wae gotta-”

Tou was up. Both elves wiped tears from their eyes as they turned to Drakken. The moleman still stared down Johnny, but Johnny had pulled back. His hand was off his belt and he’d resigned to simply smirk. Listening to the crew of the *Red Barren* draw ever closer. Without pulling his eyes from the pirate, Drakken commanded for a third time.

“BALCONY.”

Tou and Tabuh obeyed. The earth elf led the way while Tabuh back pedaled, her gun up and aimed at the last buccaneer. Drakken slowly wandered back with them, both he and the mage maintaining sight of the Sea Lord even as they passed beyond the skeletal façade of the backwall of the ship. Only Tou had turned towards the sea, looking over the blistered balcony.

“Are we jumping?” He asked.

“Yup.” Drakken and Tabuh claimed in unison.

“On three?” Tou asked.

“Now!” Drakken and Tabuh declared.

The first wave of Reds could be seen clamboring down the hallway towards the entrance of the mapwork room. Johnny was already laughing – laughing a little too hard to be honest, as if he was on drugs (which later, folks would find that he was). But there was no more time for hesitation. Only the sea could save them and even then that savior was a short-term solution. They’d be wading over to the mainland and they knew the Reds would be following them. A

Captain had been killed – the third Captain since Tou and Tabuh had first joined the Obsidians – and now nearly every pirate alive wanted them dead.

Still, they hadn't really slain three Captains. Ching Shih had been killed by the Empire's Admiral and apparently Captain Smidt wasn't dead. Crimson too was still alive. Though his wounds were as fatal as Jason's, he had a lot more time on the clock. While one would typically need a healer to survive his condition, there was another solution. A similar solution to that which saved Smidt albeit completely different.

Reds stormed the chamber – they hooped and they hollered and they made the mess that was the aftermath of the brief-but-destructive squabble even worse. Like hounds on the hunt having just caught sight of the fallen alpha, they erupted. Surging around their Captain and then spreading out to pre-emptively morn. A large portion clustered around Jason. The bearn was good and dead but that wasn't enough for the vengeful Reds. Within moments, his body would be unidentifiable and his weapons would be distributed amongst the marauders. Others gathered around those few mapwork tables still standing, eagerly plotting revenge, replacement, or going on the run. Could the Reds survive without Crimson? Would the crew self implode fighting to replace him? From the scene in the mapwork library, the latter seemed far more likely. Through all the cacophony, Johnny stood silently in their midst, pointing aft but saying nothing. Those that could, followed his finger but there wasn't much room on the elevated esplanade, especially not since it had been exploded. A few jumped in the water after the offenders while others fell in pushed by the rush of the crowd – neither would come close to catching the Obsidians. They'd sooner beat them to shore by turning around and taking a tender to Tadloe than by swimming after them, but they were picked up by the energy of the mob and the enormity of the situation – and those that managed to balance on the burnt balcony got to witness that enormity expand.

A swirling serpent of sulfuric scintillation rose from the sea like a lightning bolt striking from the clouds. The brilliant flame reached almost as high as the ship before stopping abruptly as if it hit a barrier and bouncing back down towards the pulverized promenade. The pirates there surged back into the library, trampling one another to escape the stabbing pillar of fire that descended upon them. They cleared just enough space for the flame to land and when it did it held its position. Still twisting and churning, like a dying snake thrashing itself into a knot, the combusting essence took a more identifiable form: that of a woman. A voluptuous woman at that.

As the woman waded through the crew, murmurs followed her, "Zynzia!"

The collection of these whispers drew the attention of the pyromancer still stooped over her lover's dying body. She looked up as the immolated being approached and instantly recognized her as the third member to their throuple. Even if she hadn't, Zynzia quickly filled her in. Though she signed it, she also spoke it. For the first time, Zynzia's voice was heard and it was heard saying softly, "Zanaza."

Even if Zanaza could speak, she wouldn't have been able to. She'd already been weeping over Crimson but now a new wave of tears rushed in, brought on by a bewilderment that was equal parts hope and doubt. Zynzia's flesh was gone. Even her chest stone – it was still caught in her flames but in shards, jagged empty stone like fragments of glass. The only physicality to her being was a cerulean mass located center-left in her breast. It was almost amorphous but a keen eye could identify the shape. It was a heart – a frozen heart. Suddenly, Zanaza, the fire elf kneeling by Crimson, realized what Zynzia had become. Those flames which formed her weren't just regular fire, some of those thrashing flames were other worldly. Zanaza signed it as a question although she knew it must be true.

Banshee?

Stopping at Crimson's feet, Zynzia bowed her head in a solemn nod.

Again, Zanaza signed, *How?*

The fire shrugged, then gestured for Zanaza to move aside, "I can save him."

Zanaza hesitated. *Save*, this was a thought, not a sign, *is it saving?* How could she question it? Zynzia stood before her, conscious. She'd lost her flesh but yet her mind remained intact. Not to mention, she could speak now. And it wasn't like there was an alternative. Crimson's mind would be lost to the abyss in minutes. What importance is there in mortal flesh? Especially when the Captain's body was already half artificial to begin with. Zanaza moved aside.

Crimson couldn't sit up, but he had been straining to watch and had been listening to what he could. He understood what was about to happen. And his thought process followed a similar trajectory to Zanaza's. He couldn't quite speak, but Zynzia could sense his consent. The three had been together for so long, words were often not necessary.

The flames descended upon Crimson like a blanket. By this point, the crew was still and silent, watching in awe. Zynzia's body was no longer differentiable, she was just fire. It was as if someone had poured fuel on Crimson and tossed in a match. Though, he was still. The heat of her fire had at first caused him to tense but it was almost immediately stopped and replaced with an ephemeral chill. The cold of the undead. It stabbed him like daggers and needles, causing certain discomfort but somehow alleviating pain. His severed spine, split by Jason's bullet, had caused a numbness but this sort of numbness was different.

"Join me, Crimson." Zynzia whispered. Her voice didn't come from a single point, but rather from all the fire. Every flickering tongue of flame seemed to whisper, "Now we can love forever."

Zanaza shifted. She was kneeling hardly a foot away from the two. Her shoulder wound suddenly throbbed more pronouncedly and she flinched. What a blessing for your lovers to dodge death, but what a curse to know you'll never again be able to feel their warm embrace – at least, unless you join them – and so, she did. She took one last breath of real air and then threw herself on the pyre.

Crimson had already moved over – metaphysically. No longer was he dying, but rather he was already dead. The chill had subsided and the numbness had become absolute. Embracing his lovers, the red flames grew. His crew had to give the three a wider berth as they continued to watch.

"Let us all live forever, my loves." He whispered, then he raised his voice to the crew, "Long live the Reds!"

And the resounding response from his fellows, "Long live the Captain!"

Chapter Fifteen: Knomery

Their boots stomped in unison, like a slow drum roll, and the clomps bounced off the stone floor to break in half against the columns before smacking against the vaulted ceilings and bouncing back down. The room was as long as an average Flow-Varean apartment building and the high roofs meant it certainly might've been just as tall. Despite his dilemma, Sallis couldn't help but chuckle at the thought: *My entire neighborhood could fit inside this chamber.* And yet, no one lived in the Mosque of the Magi. The temple was completely ceremonial but even then ceremonies were few and far between – at least these days. The pews that filled the three main halls, split by the pillars that lifted the dome overhead, only entertained the lay people that were fortunate enough to be tasked with dusting them. None of Sallis' neighbors had ever seen the Mosque from the inside. They'd only ever seen it's glass cupola's glimmer in the desert sun as they stared across the Rift at the Cloches palace. *Shame I likely won't live to tell the tale.* Sallis thought.

The boots stomping around him were not his comrades' nor were his included in the cacophony. His slippers dragged behind him as he was hoisted by his armpits and carried down the hall. While the Royal Guard was not gentle with Sallis, he still couldn't help but feel a bit pampered as he was toted through the spectacular chamber. Rather than struggle, he kept his head on a swivel. Trying his best to take in the view for, if by the grace of some god he was released, then he would kick himself if he couldn't describe the room in which their country was ruled. While Batloe still had a throne, it was those that stood behind the crown that had ruled it for decades.

The Magi sat on a raised platform. This was no mere stage, it was a pillar in and of itself. Fat and wide, it was nearly as big around as the large glass dome it climbed towards – but not quite – those in the pews below wouldn't be able to see those in the cathedras that sat along the back edge of the rostrum. The glass dome, Uthemarc's Cloche, as it was called, rose like a cylinder before curving in to its rounded peak. The platform upon which the Magi's sat stopped at the lip of the cloche so that the politician's were surrounded completely by the glass – giving them a three-sixty view of the rest of the palace and Vare beyond. Had it not been for magic, Solaris' glare would've made it impossible to sit beneath the bulging window – let alone take in the view – but long ago Uthemarc had cast a climate controlling spell on the rounded pane and thus he'd been honored in the name. Many would claim that there was no cooler place in the palace than standing on that raised rotunda and facing the monarch's Magi, but that “many” relative to the population of the nation was few for Sallis might've been the first non-noble in his generation to have ever stepped foot on the stage. And while the temperature may have been cool on the elevated platform, he certainly didn't notice. For when the guards finally released him to stand on his own, he was in the hot seat.

Stairs circled the stage, spiraling around the back before ending above where they started at the front. The Royal Guard surrounded the pillar and waited on those steps. Those that toted

Sallis were leaders of the troop, magicians known as Arcane Sentinels. They were a member of a select few that had been chosen from the Royal Guard to learn the Sacred Tongue, becoming as proficient with the book as they were the blade. While they had shredded their armor for dress robes, their magic armored them better than the metal plates that weighed down their men.

The Magi were dressed like the Sentinels, though their cloaks were far more flamboyant than the uniform purple and red of their guards. Each Magus had their own colors. Had Sallis been versed in the lore of the noble families then he would've been able to identify each of the fifteen, instead he only recognized two as their colors matched the logos of corporations he'd once served. The recognition did not garner good will, but rather the opposite.

Wearing the gold and white of the Moonrush Mining Company, Sallis recognized Larahga Selter. She'd once owned more contracts than any other robber baron – meaning, at one point, she owned the rights of enough Batloen's that she could literally sway an election. Though the former King and new Queen rarely held things up for a vote, it was just nice to know how the ballots would look if they did. Larahga wasn't a big fan of leaving things up to chance. When you signed on to one of her Moon Mining Contracts, you didn't just promise your labor. You actually sacrificed your liberty. And despite the company moniker: Moonrush – this was not get rich quick scheme. At least not for the poor laborers that signed on. After your years chipping tombs in outerspace, you weren't sent home with gold. Need Tickets were the reward. They hardly afforded one a year of bread and they certainly didn't provide anything more. King Duifeen put an end to the indentured servitude system a little over two years prior but that didn't stop Magus Larahga Selter. For though the poor were now paid in gold, they were still poor, and if they went to mine on the moon then their only way home was on a Moonrush shuttle. Still, Larahga Selter had been reimbursed for the sudden end of the program. Recalling the uproar the corporate elites had raised before receiving reparations brought a smirk to Sallis' snout. It was a bitter smile, however, for his contract had ended right before the legislation. By the time he returned home with his stack of Need Tickets, the vouchers were no longer valid. He could afford neither bread nor roses. Thus, the honorable Sallis had been driven to take it.

The second corporate colors he recognized shared one color with Larahga Selter, white, but instead of gold, Malas Oturan wore black. His suite was striped in black and white in the same way his laborers were for when King Duifeen ended indentured servitude on the moons, he didn't touch the peculiar institution in the prisons. This is how Sallis met Malas, or rather, how he met Malas' corporation: the Emendation Enterprise of Batloe. After six months of freedom, he lost a year for stealing a pepper. That year would turn into two when he was caught stealing the products of the labor the prisoners were producing: magical tomes of the Sacred Tongue. Tomes not unlike those in the satchels of the two Sentinels behind him. Though he couldn't read the words, he could sell them to someone who could, but instead he left prison not quite a full year ago with nothing to show for his labor.

The Sentinels kicked him in the nook of his knees and Sallis fell to kneel.

Magus Malas Oturan addressed him, "Prisoner 10642." A stone tablet levitated over his lap. The chidra slammed a scroll down on the slab. Unfurling the parchment, he murmured a

quick sentence in the Sacred Tongue and two small weights manifested to hold down the edges. Adjusting his glasses, the Magus read, “Released from EEB under a conditional probation. Duration: one year.” Malas kept his head tilted down but his indigo eyes glanced back up at Sallis as he said, “The conclusion of which would be next month?”

Sallis stared back in silence until one of the Sentinels gave him a soft kick in the back. “Sound’s right.” Sallis shrugged, “You’ve got the scroll.”

Again, the Magus whispered some magic. The paper weights disappeared and the scroll whipped back into a roll. It began to levitate like the slab it had rested on. Instead of continuing to hover over the advisors lap, however, it lurched forward and flew over to Sallis. Sallis was a bit surprised but he managed to catch it nonetheless. He opened the scroll and his eyes ran over the contents. After a moment in which he had still said nothing, the Sentinel kicked him again.

“I can’t read.” Sallis stated.

There was a quiet chorus of muffled gasps and throats clearing from his audience which prompted Sallis’ eyes to roll in their sockets, but Magus Larahga Selter stepped up to the plate to pick up the mic for her corporate comrade. She asked, “You’re involved with the anarchists. Are you not, 10642?”

This time, Sallis needed no prompting, “I’m not involved with any anarchists.”

Larahga scoffed and said, “You were there when the anarchists looted the bars and restaurants of Vare.”

Sitting the scroll by his knees, Sallis crossed his arms, puffed out his chest, and stated, “I’ve never been witness to looting.”

Malas jumped in, “You were there when the anarchists raided the Registrar of the Royal Sacred University.”

For a moment, Sallis’ chest deflated. His head pitched to the side causing the floppy top of his phrygian cap to switch sides. Squinting as if thinking, he asked, “Was that when the people went to the library?”

Murmurs of disdain circled the chamber. Both Malas and Larahga shared a glare, as if empowering one another with mutual fury before tagging the other out. Larahga answered, “When the anarchists swarmed into the holy halls of our oldest institutions, creasing and tearing our tomes and texts with unwashed hands, leaving tracks of sand and mud from their bare pads and scratches from their naked claws, scaring off and bullying the students who laboriously train in those chambers to become the very adhesive that holds our civilization together!”

Sallis shrugged, “I can’t read.”

“So you weren’t there?” Malas snapped.

“Nope.” Sallis said, then clarified, “I’ve never been witness to the bullying of any students.”

“Well then lets forget the past for a moment.” A new speaker stepped up to the podium. Unlike the two previous Magi, this person wasn’t personally familiar to Sallis, however he knew them well: Tull “Magus of the Pyramid” El. His last name would’ve been unremarkable, a common surname among working class moles, but the fact that it belonged to a magus made it

quite significant. His first name was also significant. “Tull” was the name of a moleman that had joined the Doom Warriors during the Second Void War – the moleman that went on to fight against the living even after Flow Morain retreated to his frozen fortress. Few would willingly bear such a name but Tull wasn’t a normal man. He’d been born poor like Sallis. Worked on the moon and served time in prison as well. In the depths of the Batloen dungeon, he’d found his key to nobility: he climbed up the rungs of the caste system by scaling the blocks of a pyramid – the Gladiator Pyramid. He bought his freedom with the blood of his fellow prisoners and displayed such ferocity that he was almost instantaneously entered into training to become a part of the Royal Guard. From there, he graduated to become an Arcane Sentinel. His tale captured the hearts and minds of the Batloen people. When he was chosen by the Magi to replace a senior member, the people saw him as one of them. The only Magus that knew what it was like to survive in Batloe. But that didn’t last long. Tull was known as the Magus of the Pyramid. He missed his glory days so much that he often interfered with matches. Inserting himself into the fray so that no contestant found victory. Prisoners that signed up for the contest would often die trying to maim themselves and escape the challenge if they saw that Tull had entered the colosseum. His presence had become as ominous as his namesake. His speaking up made the hair on Sallis’ spine stand straight. Tull continued, “Let’s speak of the future. You *will* be at the insurrection tomorrow.”

Sallis glanced back at the Royal Guard. Even the two Sentinels seemed on edge. *He can’t kill me here, can he?* Sallis gulped before turning back to face the Magus. *Well I won’t sacrifice my pride even if I must sacrifice my life.* He forced himself to meet the gaze of Tull. One of the ex-gladiator’s eyes was white, a scar stretched from his scalp to his snout, split only by the lunar-eye. Sallis stared at that blind eye as he rose from his knees to stand before the fifteen. For a moment he waited, expecting the guards to knock him back down but they never did.

Magus Tull El continued, “You *will* be there when the anarchists march across the Rift Bridge. You *will* listen to whichever leader stands to spout their treasonous propaganda. And then you *will*—”

The scroll at his feet jumped into the air, causing both Sallis and the constabulary behind him to jump back. Their flinches were even more justified for when the paper arrived at head height, it was no longer parchment but rather cold purple metal. The scroll had been transformed into a jagged shiv. Beyond the shiv, in the midst of the semi-circle of thrones, Tull El’s prosthetic arm was raised above his head. A gem in the palm of his hand glowed the same indigo shade as the blade that levitated before Sallis. All this happened in a moment in the middle of the Magus’ sentence.

“-*kill* the traitor.”

“I’m not a murderer!” Sallis yelled.

“Are you not a patriot?” Tull El barked back.

“I am!” Sallis swallowed. It wasn’t a gulp like before. His outrage had saved him from his fear. He took a deep breath and said, “I’ve never been witness to any treason. I’ve never been witness to any anarchists. I am Batloen!” He was beginning to tremble. The chills that ran down

his spine before had been replaced with a furious heat behind his eyes. He growled on, “You are our leaders so who is it do you intend for me to kill?”

A furry hand curled around the violet dagger that hung in the air before Sallis. This hand seemed at first unattached but slowly the owner unwrapped from the wrist. The arm led to a sleeve, the sleeve to a shawl, the shawl to a neck, then a head to a crown. Again, both the defendant and the guards took a step back. The new Queen of Batloe had just appeared before them.

Teleportation was no easy feat. The spell wasn't illegal, but the amount of energy required to pull it off often meant it wound up being a part of an illicit practice. Only a monarch could manifest the mystical fuel necessary to perform such an enchantment and, even then, it shouldn't have been done willy-nilly. There wasn't a soul beneath Uthemarc's crystal dome that wasn't a bit taken aback by her sudden arrival and before anyone could regain their composure, Queen Suicine Shelba took control of the moment.

Holding the dagger with one hand, she smashed the foot of her staff against the platform with the other, “Prisoner 10642,” She snarled, “you hired the Shisharay to kill my father.”

Sallis' jaw dropped. He glanced over his shoulder at the Royal Guard, as if they'd offer support, then back at the Magi behind the Queen. Their blank expressions seemed just as bewildered as his own but none among them would even consider stepping out on a ledge for the likes of a poor ex-con. Snapping his jaw back up to his snout, Sallis used his indignation to power his resolve, barking back at his majesty, “That's ridiculous!”

“And the Golden Dagger,” the Queen continued. Her beady eyes did not dwell over her victim, but instead they scanned her servants. Both those in uniform and those on the cathedras. It was their response to her accusations that mattered to her, not his, “the Gill assassin, you hired him too.”

“That's crazy!” Sallis crowed.

She tore her eyes from her guards and advisors to snap back at Sallis, “What's crazy is a prisoner peasant condescending the Queen.” Suicine lowered the dagger, holding it by her hip as if she meant to shank the defendant, “The anarchists plot against the Crown, failing to fight against them is treason. You may not have hired the Shisharay or the Golden Dagger yourself, but you are complicit. Freedom is not free.” Flipping the blade around, she held it out to Sallis, concluding, “It's price is loyalty.”

Before Sallis could respond, the doors all the way down at the end of the chamber clattered open. Their echo rushed down the hall like ripples through water, followed quickly by the distant holler of the culprit.

“STOP!”

The three newcomers had quite a distance to traverse, but all those present instantly knew who they were. No one else with access to the Mosque of the Magi would have deigned to interrupt the Queen – especially not on the behalf of some random pauper – except for the People's Princess, her shoulder monkey, and her loyal bodyguard.

“Stop, Sister, my Queen, please!”

Stepping away from Sallis, Suicine sighed through her nostrils. The crooked shiv in her hand morphed back into the scroll. As Suicine stomped away from the peasant to stand in the middle of the semi-circle of seated Magi, Daffeega and Sharp continued to march down the long hall before the rounded stage. For a full minute, there was nothing but echoing boots clomps and padded footsteps until finally the Royal Guard shifted to let the three climb the stairs that encircled the platform (this took another excruciating thirty seconds) When they arrived to stand between Sallis and Suicine, they had to pause to catch their breath, leaning on one another for support as they doubled over – Daffeega nearly spilling the monkey off her shoulder.

Sallis dropped down to kneel so fast that he bruised his kneecap. Bowing his head, he began to honor the Queen's sister, "It is an honor to be-"

"Oh hush." Daffeega cut him off, pausing to pant a bit before continuing, "Get up." With his head still bowed, Sallis slowly rose to his feet. Leaving the support of her bulky bouncer to lean instead on her old, twiggy staff, Daffeega stepped up to Sallis and lifted his snout with her index finger until his indigo eyes met hers. With the deep soft voice of a mother, she commanded, "Now trust me." Then she began to recite a spell, "Neme ah et kolp oh et Ydnul-"

The Sentinels behind Sallis gasped. A wave of mutterings washed over the Magi – as it had already numerous times in the last few moments, and for similar reasons. Just as they had been shocked by the excessive use of energy squandered by the Queen to interfere with the trial, they were now shocked by the Princess' magic. While the spell she crafted wasn't necessarily difficult or expensive, it was illegal. The Princess was known to skirt the rules to serve her own purposes, the monkey on her back was a testament to that. He chittered anxiously as his big brown eyes jerked back and forth from the Magi, to the Princess, to the Queen.

"-ere luhr elpoep nepelpe vor a ronim zarta vor rate re kaeps caniaga tirpsednop-"

Suicine was the supreme authority of the state. The Magi were merely advisors. While under Duifeen, the previous King, they'd often acted as if the buck stopped with them, they were still testing the waters with their new Queen. They certainly were not about to wield the power of the state in the presence of their Crown without permission – at least not yet – and so none made more than a murmur as the illegal incantation proceeded. If Suicine didn't stop it, then no Magus would. And so, Daffeega concluded.

"-nock ere reh ot kaeps to miameh irtarps-enot."

Her index finger was still touching Sallis' jaw. Upon the completion of the spell, a purple auro began to seep out from her finger like smoke from a wic. It curled around Sallis' snout, as if it might clamp his jaws shut but it didn't because he gasped and opened his mouth when he saw the violet tendrils. The gas then jumped into his mouth – which only served to shock Sallis more – but it went no further. It simply pooled up in his mouth. When he closed his mouth, the purple was gone. When he opened it, one could see it again, seeping out around his teeth and wafting up like steam.

"It's a truth telling spell." Daffeega explained to the target and her audience, though most already knew from the words she had used. The Princess continued, "While technically illegal-"

"Technically, Civ?" Sharp scoffed.

Daffeega cleared her throat and proceeded, “It *is* illegal, but I am using it in our Queen’s service.” She glanced back at her sister, saying, “We need to be sure that this man is not involved in the orchestration of the assassination attempts – this is for the safety of the Crown and the Kingdom.” Turning back to Sallis, she asked, “Were you, in any way, involved in the attempts to harm the royal family?”

Though Sallis would’ve yelped this under normal circumstances, he was even more compelled to do so now. He almost couldn’t help but interrupt the witch before responding, “No, your majesty!”

“You had nothing to do with the Shisharay assassins?” Daffeega clarified.

“Nothing!” Sallis hollered.

“What about with the Golden Dagger assassin?” Daffeega specified, “The Aquarian?”

“Nothing!” Sallis swore before coughing out, as if the magic was throttling his airways, “Your majesty.”

Daffeega looked back at the Magi and her sister then kept questioning, “Are you involved with any anarchists?”

“No, your majesty!” Sallis exclaimed, “We love the state!”

“Are you a traitor?”

“No, your majesty!” Sallis proclaimed, “I’m a patriot!”

“Splendid! Case closed.” Daffeega declared.

“Not yet.” Suicine whispered in Daffeega’s ear. The Queen had moved stealthily over to the trio in the middle of the platform during the last series of questions. Only the primeape had noticed. He’d carefully tiptoed from one shoulder to the other so that he could hide from the approaching sovereign behind his master’s head. Daffeega flinched at her big sister’s quiet contradiction. The Queen moseyed on to stand between the Princess and the peasant, asking, “Who is it you’re involved with?”

His snout opened but no words came out. The lavender mist in his mouth churned about but even it seemed to be at a loss for words. Finally, Sallis was able to sputter some sort of response, “The people.”

“The people?” Suicine repeated. She jerked her head to meet the eyes of each different group gathered there before returning them to Sallis, saying, “Well that bewilders me. We’re people, are we not? The Royal Guard and their Sentinels, I, the Queen, and my Magi. We’re a part of the people, too. So are the citizens of Vare and the students of the Royal Sacred University – but they and we aren’t a part of the people you’re involved with. Those people oppose us. They mock and resent people like us. Who are those people?”

“You know who.” Sallis stated.

“Who?” Suicine pressed.

Sallis shrugged, “The people of Tlow-Vare. The people who mine the moon, the people who dig in the Rift, the people who transcribe the tomes, the people who build the houses, and the people who cook in the kitchens. The people with no titles or knowledge.” He shrugged again, summarizing his list into one word, “The laymen.”

One scantily furred finger shot towards Uthemarc's Cloche above them as Suicine snarled with glee, "Were you there when the Laymen crossed the Bridge?"

"Yes." Sallis stated.

"Were you there when the Laymen rushed the Library?" Suicine asked.

"Yes." Sallis stated.

Suicine slammed her staff down. The crack of it smacking the stone platform resounded through the chamber like the hatching of a moon. Her pointing hand fell from the sky to stab towards Sallis. Raising her voice, she demanded, "The Laymen want to upset law and order! Yes?"

Sallis' eyes grew wide but he could not stop himself as he repeated for a third time, "Yes."

"Anarchists!" Came the cries from the cathedras as the Magi began to shriek in horror. It was as if Sallis had suddenly turned into some kind of terrible monster – as if the Black Crown himself had reanimated before them, engulfed in holy fire and prepared to spark a Fifth Void War. The Magi likely would've continued clucking like chickens had Suicine not raised her hand once more to silence them.

But before Suicine could hit him with another inflammatory inquiry, her younger sister chimed back in to the interrogation, "Do the Laymen want anarchy?"

"No!" Sallis yelped.

"What do they want?" Daffeega pushed.

"Democracy!" Sallis exclaimed.

"The will of the people!" Daffeega concurred, whirling around to face the frightened advisors. She asserted, "The will of the people is *not* anarchy and," she paused, turning back to her sister, the Queen, "It is not illegal and it is not treasonous to advocate for it. You and I both know it was the will of our father as well. Advocating for democracy is down right patriotic, sister."

"Queen!" Suicine barked.

Daffeega curtsied, "My Queen."

Suicine looked up towards the glass dome. She was older than Daffeega but not as old as she appeared. Her fur was splotchy and the skin of the bald patches were translucent and varicose. Her teeth, what of them were left, were widdled down to sharp blades by erosion and yellowed like a Sondoran tobacco smuggler's. She did wear the flashy garments of royalty – the crown and the robe – but they seemed only to highlight her visible inadequacy for the position. She appeared sick. Much like her father had before he passed. Suicine Shelba resembled the very characature she embodied in the minds of the Laymen she despised: wasted glory. She took all the power Batloe had to possess, all its money and magic, and spent it playing with magic in the dungeons. She leaned on the very product of her hobby. Her beloved staff stood far straighter than her sister's twisted tool. Daffeega's staff, a family heirloom, looked like it had been snapped off an ancient tree. Suicine's staff, made by herself in her lab, was rigid and such a shade of pale

blue it seemed not to match any other organic hues. The gem on top of the rod, however, was a familiar color. It was blood red. Suicine looked down from the sky and spoke.

“Tomorrow, when the Laymen cross the Rift Bridge, their Queen will meet them there.”

Daffeega, Sharp, the monkey, and Sallis exchanged anxious glances. So too did the guards behind them and the advisors behind the Queen. The garnet gem atop Suicine’s staff seemed to sparkle in the quiet chaos she’d just created.

There was no more elaboration. The vagueness was very plainly intentional. After a moment, the Sentinels directed the Royal Guard to stand aside once more. Daffeega took this as her cue so she nodded to Sharp and together they ushered Sallis out of the Mosque. Their curiosity would be satiated soon enough. While Daffeega and Sharp had likely little to worry about, Sallis couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d held onto his freedom for one more day only to ensure that his liberty would be damned from tomorrow onwards. *Did I doom my fellow Laymen?* He wondered. Until that question was answered, the only solace for Sallis was the fact that, in all likelihood, there was never any hope for them to begin with. Had he known the monkey on Daffeega’s shoulder had been spared the judgement of the Magi, he might’ve asked the Princess if she was interested in adopting one more.

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PLACK!

Commander Shaprone slapped a small blue circle down in the top right corner of the tetra stand. The stand consisted of four glass boards stacked on top of each other with just enough room for a player to reach their hand in between each layer. The lines that criss-cross the boards were opaque, dividing each board into sixteen squares or sixteen spaces where a player could place their pieces. The goal of the game was rather simple: align four pieces in a row. Rows could be flat across or vertical up and down, diagonals were allowed too (imagine a 3D game of tic-tac-toe except you need four rather than three). The simplicity was rather misleading. Victory typically required trickery. The winner had to distract their opponent from their plan by letting their foe foil side plans instead – that or by getting their enemy drunk. Satisfied with their decision, the Commander snatched his glass of snowball root vodka and swiveled it around so that the ice cubes clanked while his opponent devised their next move.

Mimicking Shaprone inversely, Master Caleros lifted his Hellbrute Whiskey, took a sip, and then placed his green chip on the bottom board, top right corner, three levels below Shaprone’s blue. PLACK! Shaprone smirked, tasted his liquor, then plucked up a little black disk and pondered. His coins were in the color of his state: blue and black for Iceload. Master Caleros was Iceloadic like Shaprone. In fact, Caleros Icelore was a brother of Talloome Icelore (the Mystvokar), but he did not live in Iceload. He was the Master of Oreh Island. Throughout the centuries, the island had switched allegiances back and forth between Iceload, Tadloe, and even the Aquarian Ocean. It’s inhabitants were incredibly ethnically diverse. The indigenous Oreh people were members of the Trinity Nation, their ethnicity was represented in the Crystal

Council, however the government of the city-state itself was not currently in the alliance. The indigenous Oreh and families who had immigrated in recent decades or in former centuries all adored Master Caleros Icelore because he defended their small island from foreign influence without hurting the egos of the monarchs thirsting for the island's allegiance. Caleros played with the tetra chips of Tadloe while he sipped liquor banned in the forest nation. Tadloe, in the Empire of the Trinity Nations, couldn't interfere with his sovereign rule, not so long as Oreh natives continued to vote for him and the Mystvokar of Iceload wouldn't dare insult the authority of one of his little brothers. As for other nations, well, if they challenged Oreh, they'd find themselves facing the fury of both the Trinity Nations and all of Iceload. The inhabitants of the island had found the key to their independence in their beloved Master and he had found a home in their favor.

PLACK!

WHAM!

Shaprone's hand was still stuck inside the tetra boards when the door to the study flew open. Had he not been a veteran of battle he likely would've flinched and thrown the entire game out of whack. Instead, he kept his hand still as his head turned to scan the intruder.

The intruder was an ally, Shaprone's new righthand man: Justin Kakal, the ex-Sheriff of Yelah. Justin had the upmost respect for Shaprone. Barging into the Master's study was not in character for the soldier. If he had to, then he would've normally exploded with apologies and explanations but instead he simply stood in the doorway, wide-eyed, and fumbling for words.

"Spit it out, Justin." Shaprone said. His tone wasn't harsh, but rather soft and curious, "What is it?"

Master Caleros was perched on the edge of his seat. Both men had completely lost track of their gameplans. Tetra was done for the night.

"Ah don't know where to start." Justin muttered.

"Well start somewhere!" Caleros exclaimed.

Justin nodded. He met the Master's gaze and said, "Your brother, Sorelac, is on the move."

"Leaving God's Island?" Shaprone whirled from Justin to his drinking partner, "The Emperor would've sent word, wouldn't he?"

"Less he's on the lam." Caleros stated.

"Laeving the Ahland, sailin North." Justin detailed, "Should bae in our hemisphere bah sunrahs."

"Selu..." Caleros murmured.

"Depending on who broke him out." Shaprone warned.

"Farak." Caleros grunted, "You don't think it was that necromancer?"

Shaprone started to shrug but Justin piping back up froze him in his tracks.

"Somethang's up with the Sentrays too."

"Tabuh." Shaprone wasn't saying her name to clarify. Neither Justin nor Caleros had any doubt which Sentry Justin was talking about. The name just slipped out of his mouth. They'd

been tracking her since the Deicide. Four days had passed and in those four days Tabuh had only gotten herself into more trouble. From Oreh Island, Justin and Shaprone could only watch her little red mark on the mapwork table while reports of the Battle on the *Marrialdo* poured in. The light hadn't dimmed on the mapwork, however, and, apparently, finally it was on the move again. Shaprone asked, "Where are they going?"

Justin froze up a little again. He couldn't quite stand straight in the doorway. Bearn's were massive to begin with but Justin, like his twin brother, was a giant even for his species. When he reached up to scratch the fur along his scalp and his elbow hit the doorframe. A few weeks ago, that bump would've sent him straight to the floor. The wounds Tabuh's bullets had left had finally been properly healed thanks to Shaprone. Now the bump only embarrassed him. The goofy gaf out of the way, he had no reason to fear making a fool of himself again so he just went ahead and explained it as best he could.

"Two places at once."

"What?" The Commander and Master chimed in unison.

Justin stepped back from the doorway and into the hall, offering, "Ah can show ya-"

"No time." Shaprone stood from the table, "We need to go after her."

"That's the thang, though, Commander." Justin sighed, "Which her?"

Caleros stood with Shaprone, asking, "There are two marks on the mapwork?"

Justin nodded, "A second one just appaered this aevenin – in Sondor."

Shaprone turned to Caleros. The already pale elf's face had suddenly become paler. Caleros luckily had the black stripes of a nellaf to hide some of his concern. Reaching down, he grabbed his whiskey and lifted it to his lips, drinking until the ice gathered up around his mustache.

Justin stepped back into the room, lowering his voice to ask, "What?"

With his back still to his soldier, Shaprone picked up his glass. He said, "There was an attack in Zion's Stronghold."

As Shaprone went about finishing his vodka, Caleros set down his empty cup and divulged further, "Early reports suggest there was an assassination attempt on the Cagirent. They're keeping it pretty quiet so far. I doubt they got Zion, but the secrecy suggests someone of some importance has likely lost their life."

"Antaepa." Justin gasped.

"Could be." Caleros nodded, "Or could just be Clansmen."

"Or both." Shaprone concluded. He sat down his glass and turned to Justin, "Where is the other mark headed?"

"Tadloe." Justin said.

"Westport, Eastport?" Shaprone pressed.

"Naither." Justin shook his head, "Looks lahk they're passin through or stopping somewhere central. Suinus, Ta-Nissassa-"

"Portville is a big pirate haven too." Caleros carefully moved the tetra stand to one of the counters against the wall of the study. Beneath this counter, he opened a drawer and pulled out a

coiled up map. Unfurling it on the table, he sat Shaprone's cup on one corner and his on the opposite. In the Southern Hemisphere, Oreh Island sat in the middle. Caleros' index finger poked their location first. Then he traced the path to Portville, saying, "Three hours by dragon." Portville was almost level with Oreh latitudinally. A river ran across Tadloe, starting at Portville on the West and ending on the East with, "Ta-Nissassa is six hours." His finger stopped halfway to Ta-Nissassa, there was another symbol inbetween. The symbol was smaller than the prior two points because, "Kemplor is a small village in between. Four and a half hours to get there. But from there you're an hour and a half from both Portville, Ta-Nissassa, and Suinus to the north. If they're stopping in central Tadloe, then your best guess is one of those three and rather than putting all your eggs in one basket, I'd say hit Kemplor first."

"They'll have landed before we arrive." Shaprone noted, "Can you have your cartographers send word?"

"Of course!" Caleros agreed.

"What about the two marks?" Justin asked.

"Must be a malfunction." Caleros assured the bearn.

Justin was still unsure. So too was Shaprone. To be honest, Caleros was also. The three men exchanged frowns and furled brows. Not a one of them had ever known a mapwork to malfunction in such a way. Maybe a gear broke or a spell faded and the machine would no longer highlight their marks, but never had they heard of a false mark appearing out of the blue. Still, what alternative explanations existed? There was only one feasible explanation and that was that there must be some kind of mistake being made by the machine. Well...that or:

"Or Knomery." Shaprone suggested.

"Ah!" Justin and Caleros chimed.

"Godai Knomes." Justin concurred.

"Must be it." Caleros agreed.

And with that, the three decided to act as if the mark over the Sondoran continent did not exist and they rushed off to the dragon yard where Shaprone and Justin would leave Oreh Island to arrive in Kemplor, Tadloe in the wee morning hours of June 3rd.

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The only solace that came as the sound of the seagulls squack grew louder was when that sound began to be overcome by the squeak of timber as both berths and boats bowed and bent with the pressure of their cargo and the tension of the sea. Waves stopped applauding one another and began to clap against the cobblestone embankments that seemingly lifted Portville above the bay. Unfortunately, though the sounds of the harbor beat the noises of the bay, the smells certainly did not. Fish may not be known for their taste in perfume, but seamen certainly aren't known for their taste in cologne and public restrooms weren't common along the piers. Still, despite gasping for breath and catching a good bit of that harbor water in their mouths as they did – the very same water that scraped the filth off the piers when waves crashed over – Tou, Tabuh, and Drakken were relieved to have arrived.

They'd swam all the way from where the *Red Barren* was anchored. It took over an hour and was likely just as dangerous if not more than the conflict that had caused them to leap into the sea in the first place. When they clambored up onto a small dock, hidden behind a maze of bigger wharfs, they certainly looked near death. Even if they hadn't been beaten and bruised, huffing and puffing and sopping wet was enough of a giveaway. The fact that their ethnicities were from here, there, and the other didn't help. Folks were immediately suspicious.

"Pirates." Was the grumble from the lot in their little corner of the harbor. While it contained just as much disdain as it would have anywhere, it was notably less a call for conflict than it was a call for coin. If you lived in Portville, then you were well aware of the price pirates paid to be left alone. Had these three a crew, the proletariat of the pier might've been less explicit but they were few and on the run so they couldn't afford not to buy a blind eye. The verbal recognition of the breed of the buccaneers climbing up into their cove was followed with open palms and a simple demand, "Gold."

Tabuh was the first up the ladder onto the pier. As a woman that had spent a fare share of time in port towns, she immediately recognized the looks on the faces of the folks slowly cluttering their escape. Turning on a dime, she stooped back to the ladder as if to help Tou up but instead she leaned further, past his shoulder and whispered as Drakken followed behind the earth elf.

"Wae're broke, ain't wae?"

"Broke as," Drakken coughed up a bit of sea foam before finishing, "a Knome."

Tabuh straighted back up as Tou found his own way onto the dock beside her.

"They want money?" Tou asked.

"Monay wae don't have." Tabuh nodded.

Their particular pier was blockaded by a handful of the curious masses. Most townsfolk could only afford to slow their stroll and leer as they passed – hoping they might've crossed by at the moment of compensation – only a few, likely those that worked this specific jetty, had buckled down and applied themselves to the exit. In the absence of gold, there was only one other way to barter.

"You got bullets?" Tou asked.

"One." Tabuh turned to Drakken, "You got magic?"

Stooping over to pant, a bucket of bay was unleashed from the folds of his cloak. When he straightened back up, huffing and puffing and severely reduced in size as his fur was pushed close to his frail frame, Drakken couldn't even find the strength to answer before his two elven comrades drew their conclusion.

"Hae naeds to meditate." Tabuh explained as she looked back to Tou. Upon seeing his expression, she elaborated with a shrug, "Hae naeds rest – no magic."

"But he's gotta book!" Apparently Mr. Woodsman wasn't as ignorant of wizardry as the noble lady thought, but Tou was still unsure, "Right?"

Again, stooping over, Drakken reached beneath his cloak and withdrew the book. The hump suddenly disappeared from his spine, meanwhile the spine on the tome was looking a bit worse than it had prior. The front and back were hardly parallel and the spine bent forwards as if leaning over so that the cover was pushed out. Far too many pages had been burnt away and far too few replaced.

Still, Tou was impressed, "How'd you-"

"Charm of buoyancy." Drakken explained, muttering on, "It saved my life."

The earth elf raised a brow, "A bit coincidentally convenient, yea?"

“After the *Hong Chi* and the *Marrialdo*?” Drakken challenged.

“A bit coincidental that ya didn’t whip that book out back on the boat when-”

Drakken’s neck snapped up so that he could stare into the face of Tabuh’s judgement, “When surrounded by arsonists?”

“Ah...” Tabuh bowed out of embarrassment, turned it into a spin, and began strolling towards their vigilante-tax-collectors that had, by this point, begun inching down the dock towards them. Raising her golden gun and covering the cylinder as if ready to fan the chamber but rather preventing any extraordinary eyes from noting the fact that there was only one bullet in the chamber. She squinted her eyes as if taking aim, “Hello, ladaes and gentlemen. Can’t pay ya in gold but ah got plenty of lead for ya if ya insist.”

A bold bayman budged forward. His long earth elf ears quivering despite his challenge, “That’s a wet gun.”

“Wet guns still shoot.” Tabuh clapped back.

“No they don’t!” The earth elf protested.

“Whatchya willinta bet?” Tabuh smirked.

A leery longshorewoman stepped up from behind the docker and clasped him on the shoulder, directing his view with her index finger along his neck, “They’ve gotta mage.”

Sure enough, fire had just sparked to life on the first symbol on the page that Drakken had settled upon. He knelt with the book on the dock, only visible between the legs of Tou who stood with his sword drawn. Tabuh stopped. Halfway between the locals and her companions.

“Wae’re outa gold.” Tabuh stated, “And wae’re outa tahme.”

“Let us pass.” Tou said. His voice was deep and stern, but not demanding. It was a sincere request, “Anything you take off us will only get you killed.”

“If you’re lucky enough to bae the ones to survive.” Tabuh concluded.

The first two backed off, leaving the wharf and not looking back, but the three others remained. One of which was quite a gaudy fellow. It was he that stepped up to the plate next.

“If you’re lucky enough to kill us,” he growled, “then you’re good as dead.” His finger jutted up from his pocket with such vigor it caused Tabuh’s finger to slip to the trigger. Fortunately, she was no novice and didn’t end his life. So, the bloke continued on, “That there is Drakken. Boatswain of the slain *Obsidian Sail*.” The finger then turned to point at the gun that pointed at him, “And that there is Tabuh Sentry. Daughter of the Imperial Admiral.” He shook his head and took a brave step towards Tabuh, saying, “If you don’t coat our pockets, then you ought to wait until the law arrives, like a good citizen of the Emp-”

As he began to embark upon the next syllable, his vocals stopped and were replaced by a gulping burp like sound. Then his legs whipped out from under him, flopping forwards before flopping back behind him. After nearly heel kicking himself in the back of the head, they came back down different. Twisted around and naked – sort of. Scales were now rolling out as his britches receded. They didn’t just course down from his waist but they rushed up, plating his chest like some sort of fancy armor. Much like his legs had, his arms also began to flail. They squirmed about like worms on a hook, folding in and out until his wrists had combined with his shoulders and his elbow fanned out into fins. The poor elf’s ears were slurped up into his head as his mouth widened and his eyes bugged out – as was typical for his new species. By this point, the transformation was complete. The brawny bayman was now a largemouth bass. With a loud slap, the fish fell to the dock.

Tou and Tabuh whirled around, as wideyed as the fish behind them, to see Drakken slap his book shut. The wizard tucked the tome back in his robes and rose to his feet as his comrades descended upon him.

“You turned him into a fish?!” Tou was appalled.

Tabuh was impressed, “Cast that spell lahk it was noboday’s business?!”

Drakken responded to both as he brushed past them, “It’s temporary, Sir Fou, and, Dame Sentry, I suggest we get off this pier like it’s nobody’s business.”

As the two elves turned to follow their moleman magician, each taking a shoulder to help him scuttle along, the elves that had blocked their way scrambled to the aid of their fishy friend. No longer had they any desire to get in the way, even revenge would have to wait, they had to get their little sea creature back into the sea and it was none to easy. The bass was flopping around hysterically. One elf went to snatch him and cut his palm on the sharp spines that now ran down his back. As he recoiled the other panicked and kicked their old pal like a soccer ball. As soon as the fish splashed into the water, the kicker gasped, realizing a terrible truth: How would they find him again? He and his comrade exchanged one glance at one another before they dove into the water after the fish. But, before they could even spot their bass below the surface, he burst back out of the sea an elf once more, leaving all three treading water in the bay like buoys. By then, the intruders had made it to dry land. Only the Tadloe Guard could stop them now.

And the Guard was on their way. Shimmering in the dawnlight of Solaris, they bobbed up and down in the distance as their beleaguered trot drew them closer. Chainmail and armored plates both protected them from villains and protected the villains from being caught, it gave Tou, Tabuh, and Drakken precious time to escape. Time they needed, after all, Drakken was moving slower than the police.

“Want to hop on my back?” Tou suggested.

The magician ignored the earth elf, instead divulging their destination, “To the Barren’s Mullet!”

“A bar?” Tabuh scoffed.

“Aye.” Drakken confirmed.

“Won’t we have to buy a drink?” Tou asked.

“Not at the Barren’s Mullet.” Drakken assured them.

“A pahrte friendly bar?” Tabuh laughed louder this time, “Sure, the cops will never look there.”

“Who else,” Drakken paused to huff and puff, “would have us?”

As Tabuh began to retort, Tou tuned out their debate. He craned his neck to peer down the cobblestone embankments behind him. The thugs they’d thrown into the sea had gotten back on their wharf but were no longer pursuing. Whether they were scared of what else the mole had up their sleeves or simply surrendering to the authority of the state, Tou couldn’t say, but all he knew was three less pursuers didn’t much impact their odds. From the looks of it, a dozen Guards were on their tail. Their halberds and Fou-style katanas wouldn’t be much an issue, but even from far away Tou could make out the limbs of crossbows peaking out by their biceps. Once they slid those off their backs and took aim, they didn’t need to be close. Tou turned back to his comrades. They had just made it around the corner and off the main street that circled the harbor. Drakken was wrapping up his closing statement.

“I lost my brother today, Dame Se-” his words were cut short by both breath and emotion, but he persevered, “Dame Sentry, don’t make me lose his children.”

Tabuh opened her mouth to protest but stopped. The boatswain had won. Her concession was all Tou needed to have the courage to bring up his prior suggestion and, this time, it was not a request.

“Then hop on my back.” Tou ordered.

Both friends were a bit surprised by the authority in Mr. Woodsman’s voice but after the initial shock, they followed his command. Tabuh helped the boatswain clamber up to rest most his weight on Tou’s shoulders and, once situated, off they went with Drakken pointing them this way and that.

Their path created a zig-zaggy spiral towards the center of the city. The spiral wasn’t for speed, but rather employed in hopes of tiring out the Tadloe Guard and obscuring their ultimate direction from any more enthused reinforcements. Portville had one of the most rigid grid systems in existence beneath Solaris. There were no diagonal alleys or rounded circle streets. If you wanted to run in a straight line from one end of the town to the other, then you could pick literally any road in Portville and it would stretch the expanse uninterrupted, intersecting only with their perpendicular piers of identical lengths. This was because Portville was founded by Creaton Live in the First Void War, the formation was anything but organic. Yet, as is the way in Tadloe, the municipality managed to share its space with the forest. Entire blocks were undeveloped, retaining the original woodlands that had existed before the grid girdled them nearly two thousand years ago. Space was shared both horizontally and vertically, both towers and trees dared not reach higher than six stories. So while there was shade to be found on any given avenue, if clouds permitted, there was also sunlight.

One of the sixty foot structures was a bit of a hodgepodge. It began at the street level with a gaudy square of a building. Above this cornerstone establishment rose four conjoined townhouse towers. It appeared the slab like first and second floor was necessary to bear the weight of the limestone row houses and the heavy, reddish wood that decorated them. It was quite imposing to be donned something as goofy as the Barren’s Mullet. And though one day it would live up to it’s impressive appearance, the business in 1993 was a little less than booming – especially at the crack of dawn.

Leaning across an empty bar, the owner stooped over a half empty stein. A dust allergy kept his nose clogged so he breathed through his perpetually agape maw, misting the better half of the tankard. Despite his inebriation, he was still sober enough to be perturbed by anyone more intoxicated than himself and it just so happened that the most intoxicated individual beneath Solaris was staggering around the round tops half-hazardly organized about the dining hall. Like a pin ball, the goober bounced from one table to the next. The tables alone couldn’t have kept the drunkard from collapsing but the mop in his hands, clung to like an old crone clings to their cane, propped him up when all else failed. Despite this behavior, it wasn’t his actions that typically garnered attention. His appearance was quite unique for Tadloe. His skin was as pale as an electric elf’s but it was lacerated with stripes blacker than the chocolate brown complexion of earth elves and his hair was just as black but long and greasy, with not a hint of a curl. The tippler was a nellaf, a race native to Icelore, the frozen island off the western coast of Iceload. If anything, his drunken state reduced the attention garnered by his alien status. This would’ve been the perfect excuse for his indulgences, had he the mental clarity to come up with it.

“Meh bae toime to muddoy down thot booze and get some grub in his gullet, aye, Sam?” The suggestion came from the kitchen door. It was just outside the bar, to the owner’s, Sam’s, left. Though Sam wasn’t particularly tall, he was a human and thus taller than the cook – who stood hardly a foot higher than the surface of the bar. While the drunk nellaf might’ve been a

rare sight to see in Tadloe, the dwarven cheff was even rarer a sight. Few dwarves existed outside Vinnum Tow and even fewer managed to maintain such an existence for long. The dwarf responded to his boss' glazed gaze by continuing, "Oi con getta hardar's poie readay?"

"Waste herder's pie on farakin Cootie?" Sam retorted.

Cootie finally escaped the maze of round tops and found himself on the open floor between the dining area and the bar. For a moment he loomed there, the mop held out before him as if it were a weapon raised to threaten an invisible foe, but in his looming he teetered just a bit too far forward and began to fall like a timbered tree. The large man would've collapsed had he not been spared by a larger man. Well, large isn't exactly accurate, after all his flesh was of a gaseous nature, but the armor that encased him did give him a bulky shape. Much like the black tattoo-like stripes that laced Cootie, the armor that covered his savior was covered in vine like patterns of white engravings. As intricate as it was comprehensive, there was not a bit of body visible beneath that suite of armor. No one would've known his race had he been on a battle field, but in a bar, a man in a full suite of armor gave their kind away. Cootie's hero was a spirit.

"Zachis, Zachis, Zachis..." Cootie murmured, patting his hero on the back as he was stood back upright, "thankis, thankis, thankis..."

"Alright Bold." Sam sighed from behind the bar, "Waste herder's pie on farakin Cootie."

Chef Bold nodded and went back into the kitchen. The armored spirit escorted Cootie over to the counter before letting him go. His silver eyes met Sam's, squinting through the slits in his helmet. Sam bowed his head in thanks and said, "I'll handle the gop from here. Go on ahead and get ready for breakfast."

Turning back to Cootie, Sam shook his head. The nellaf was beginning to crumple over the counter but the mop was still between him and the bar. The tip of it cought his nose, compressing it until bumping against his nasal bone. This perked him up. He straightened and lifted the mop to hold it flat across two open palms like a squire might present a blade.

"Flurs cean."

Sam rolled his eyes. Rather than receiving the mop, he received his mug and downed the rest of his beer while glaring down the stein at Cootie. Cootie was offended. Setting the mop on the bar top, he backed up and folded his arms over his bulging belly. He blinked one eye at a time then burped.

"Ceanist issever been."

Sam went to the tap and began to pour another beer. No sooner did the head began to topple over the rim of the glass than did a dirty hand reach out and snatch it from the bar owner's hands. The quiet fury within Sam suddenly flipped on its head. An otherworldly squeal emitted from somewhere within him, as if steam were squeezing out his narrow ear canals, and his hands grasped the first thing he could find: the mopstick. As Cootie reared back to guzzle, Sam reared back to whap the drunkard. Yet, as the wooden rod came coursing down to clunk him, he twisted out of the way without even looking up from his drink.

This only increased the temperature of the rage within the human behind the bar. Without the reach to thwap the tippler nor the energy to rush around the counter, all he could do was shudder and shout.

"TWO YEARS!" He roared, "TWO CRIMP SIN TIAD YEARS YOU'VE DRUNK ON MY DIME!"

Cootie's elegant dodge had continued into a dance. Done with the beer, he now held both hands above his head and traipsed about the space between the tables and bar. Singing and slurring Sam's own words right back at him.

“Two yers, two yers, two yers – to many more two yers – two yers, two yers, two yers!”

“I oughta sell ya out. Bet they’d make me rich! Turn ya in to the Mystvokar, huh?”

The name of the Iceloadic King broke through Cootie’s stupor. He froze mid pirouette, his back to Sam Budd. His words were garbled, but there was an attempt in his delivery to be taken seriously, “Thasn funny.”

“I’m not laughing.” Sam snapped back.

Cootie turned slowly, just enough so that one dark eye could see Sam as he said, “I’m sober up.”

Sam shook his head, chuckling, “Now I’m laughing.”

Cootie did a full about face, declaring, “I’m sober up!”

“When?” Sam continued to scoff, “After your morning beer?”

His eyes rolled back in his head for a moment as he looked over his thoughts, then they returned with an answer, “After lunch.”

Sam wiped his hands on his apron and grabbed a clean glass. Repressing the doubt, he tried to ask with sincerity, “Where?”

Cootie staggered back a step, “Her!”

Pouring his beer and holding on tight this time, Sam raised an eyebrow, “You can’t sober up in a bar.”

Cootie was so offended he could only grunt.

“You’ve been trying since you got here, ya gop!” Sam crowed, “You’ve got to move on.”

Cootie gasped with such passion that his arms flew out wide. The force of this motion caused him to lose grasp of his stein and launch it at the wall. The sound of glass shattering distracted him for a moment, but he shook his head and got back to the task, “Where cud go, Budd?!”

The front door flew open. Zachias, the armored spirit, stood in the doorway. As he explained himself, he strung his bow, “We’ve got company. They look to be pirates.”

“The good kind?” Sam asked.

“No good kind pyred.” Daernar grunted.

“Better kinds than you.” Sam grumbled.

“The asylum seeking kind.” Zach clarified.

“Crimpsin tiad.” Sam muttered, “Say good bye to the breakfast crowd.”

In they came – still sopping wet. Tabuh rushed in first. Her golden eyes quickly scanned the tavern – hesitating for a bit over the drunk nellaf – before coming to a rest on the bow (now with an arrow knocked and ready) in the armored spirit’s gauntlets. As her hand moved to the handgun at her hip, the spirit raised his bow and she froze. The other two squeezed in behind her, Drakken still riding on Tou’s shoulders. No sooner did the mole slide off the earth elf’s back than did the earth elf crumple to the floor like a necromancer had just sucked him dry of bone. Tabuh flinched as her instincts encouraged her to catch him but she didn’t budge further – her golden eyes bound to the silver eyes beneath the visor of the archer’s helm.

“The boat-swine,” Despite the racial slur, Sam Budd’s tone was cheerier than it had been in days, he even began to hum as he hurried around the bar to his old friend, “seeelu! Ya old desert rat!”

The damp moleman bowed as if the hate speech was a great honor. When he straightened back up he went on to actually honor the bastard, “Sir Fou, Dame Sentry, meet the Master Mixologist!”

“Oh farak that,” Sam still hadn’t torn his eyes away from Drakken, “I just pour beer! Drakken, you old rascal,” Finally he’d made it over to the magician and was able to embrace him, “what brings you?”

The human’s hug knocked the breathe out of the frail old wizard, leaving a blank hanging in the air after Budd’s question mark. That blank was filled by Zachias, the spirit. It only took a subtle gesture to end the stand off between himself and Tabuh. His silver eyes glanced towards the door then back. Tabuh let her gaze fall so that she could nod in approval. Stepping over the still trembling earth elf, Zach peered out the front door. A brief look was all he needed. Closing the door behind him he said, “The Tadloe Guard is on their way.”

Sam pulled back from Drakken who offered an uneasy sharp-toothed grin.

“Damn Sentry?” Cootie blurted. His dialated eyes bounced around Tabuh as he did his best to squint, “Dame Sentry!”

Tabuh traded her distrust of the armored bowman for disdain for the drunken oaf.

“A drunken nellaf.” She spat, “Must bae an Asslore.”

“Ain’t no Iceler,” Cootie growled, “I’m-”

“A drunken donum nellaf.” Budd interrupted, moving to physically interrupt the glowering two, “Pleasure to meet you Tabuh Sentry. I’d heard you’d been traveling with the Obsidians.”

Tabuh forgot Cootie as she turned to Budd and gulped.

Tou even perked up from the floor, “Everyone knows?”

“Of course.” Budd chuckled, “There’s a bounty.”

Tou and Tabuh exchanged glances. Both unsure why this revelation made them uneasy when they’d previously thought this too be some part of their goal. They’d have to save that for the couples therapist some other day because currently the gaseous bouncer at the door was reminding the room that, “The Tadloe Guard is on their way.”

Tou was back on his feet and moving, exclaiming, “Behind the bar-”

Sam Budd’s hand stopped him fast, his palm flat against Tou’s soggy vest, “And get me shutdown by the Health Bureau?”

Spinning away from the bartender’s hand, Tou strode towards the stairs that rose against the wall opposite the door they’d come through, narrating his plan as it manifested, “We’ll hide upstai-”

This time Sam caught him by the collar as he passed, “Hold on there, buddy, they know you’re here.”

As Tou skidded to a halt, Tabuh hopped off the bench. Her eyes darted from the Sam to Drakken to Sam, “You turnin us in?”

“Of course not,” Sam hollered, stomping his foot as if that added assurance, “but I’ll be faraked fore I go down with ya.”

“Then what’s the plan?” Drakken asked.

“Da Knome!” Cootie barked.

Tou and Tabuh exchanged doubtful looks, “A Knome?”

The armored spirit stepped up to clasp Tabuh on the shoulder. He nodded to Cootie, saying, “The nellaf may be a drunk, but the Knome can help you.”

“The Knome got Zachias and Bold here in one piece. Cootie too.” Sam concurred, “The Knome can get y’all out. Cootie can take y’all there.”

“Can he walk?” Tou asked.

“Canny alk?” Cootie gasped. His hand slapped the stained apron that clung to his breast. Apparently, the gesture was a bit too powerful as he began to stagger backwards. Bumping against a table, his legs kicked up in the air and he fell flat on his back. SNAP. The legs of the table buckled, flying out in every direction. Cootie and his tabletop slammed to the floor.

“He can walk.” Sam Budd assured them. Yet, as he did, he was inching away. Slowly, moving down the bar so that he could slip back behind it. This did not reassure the soggy seamen, so he continued, “Once y’all start fighting, he’ll wake right up.”

“Fighting?” Tou and Tabuh yelled.

Zachias started to follow Sam. His bow still in his hands. Tou and Tabuh turned from the two strangers to look at their friend, Drakken. The mole stood halfway between them and their new acquaintances and the way his lips curled into a half smile did not give the couple much hope.

Drakken asked Budd, “Pulling a smollett?”

Budd nodded, “Pulling a smollet.”

Drakken turned back to his soggy comrades, “We’re pulling a smollet.”

The two blinked in response.

Drakken sighed then explained, “The Barren’s Mullet is a safehouse for the Rosethorn.”

“Rosethorn?” Tou repeated.

“Antipa.” Tabuh elucidated.

“The Guard typically turns a blind eye, but if they catch us trafficking the crimpsin tiad kidnapped daughter of a godi Crystal Council member – I figure they’ll start seeing us in a whole new light.” Sam Budd elaborated, “So we’re pulling a smollet.”

“I’m going to shoot at you,” Zach warned, behind the bar with Budd now, “but my arrows will miss.”

“You’re playing a gang of thugs,” Sam concluded, “over power the Guards and get outa here.”

“Da Knome!” Cootie was back up. Standing on the remains of the table he’d destroyed.

“Follow Cootie to the Knome.” Drakken said.

Tou and Tabuh had finally gotten a grasp on the plan but Drakken’s command threw them off. “*Follow Cootie to the Knome.*” Tou and Tabuh checked each other’s expression to be sure they both inferred the same thing. *Drakken isn’t coming?* They both opened their mouths to vocalize the question but that opportunity never came: The Tadloe Guard had arrived.

Somehow, all five squeezed through the door at the same moment, this was despite two being bears with shoulders about as broad as the doorway alone. The other three were earth elves. All were dressed from head to toe in mismatched armor. Bits of plates strapped here and there over sheets of chainmail that gave away their different ages by the colorization, dents, and rips in their metallic rings. There were assorted weapons too. All five had swords, but only the bears carried crossbows and the two of the earth elves had halberds while the third carried a plain wooden staff. It was the wooden staff wielding one that stood before the rest, she addressed the five in the tavern immediately.

“Sir,” she pointed her stick at Tou, “state your name.”

“Uh...” Tou hesitated. Tabuh, beside him, had her back turned towards the door, hiding the fact that she was reloading her revolver. Noticing this, Tou continued to hesitate, “...why?”

“You’re under arrest for kidnapping Tabuh Sentry.”

The other officers were fanning out. The two bears stood just behind the staff-wielder’s shoulders. The two other earth elves moved to their sides. The earth elf on the far left (left from

Tou and Tabuh's point of view) was then standing within five yards of Cootie (who still stood on the broken tabletop). This Guard was aware of Cootie and Cootie wasn't doing much to help the matter. His face was contorted in a drunken snarl. His eyes mere black beads of scorn. The nellaf's expression expressed quite clearly his intentions of violence. Thus, this fifth guard's hand moved to the hilt of the sword sheathed at his hip – a reasonable but ultimately foolish move.

“ARRRGUH GARRRGLE ARRRG!”

A table leg flew through the air, clunking against the half helm that protected the fifth guard's helmet. As it collided, another table leg thwapped the hand that was reaching for the sword and knocked it away from the hilt. Instinctively, the guard reached with his left hand for the sword but before that hand could cross his waist it was smashed by a third table leg. This table leg came up from between the guard's legs like bludgeon, wielded by his beligerant assailant. The earth elf was lifted off the ground from the force of the blow and, as his boots cleared the wood floor, he was bashed across the head by the fourth table leg. The poor bloke flew out the front door as if he'd just been hit by a cannon. In his place stood Cootie, with two table legs in his hands.

He turned to the four remaining guards.

They had all turned to him.

“No.” He said.

Then all hell broke loose.

A bearn was the next closest to the drunkard and that bearn drew his sword then stepped towards the nellaf to engage only to recoil as an arrow zoomed past the vizor of his helm. It perfectly split the space between the cop and the Cootie, sticking in the wall by the door beyond them. This pause was all Cootie needed to get the jump on his new adversary (a jump he jumped into since he was so drunk he hadn't even noticed the arrow that allotted him the opportunity). Surging forward, Cootie swiped upwards with his right arm. This was just as the bearn drew his sword. The table leg knocked the blade up, over the bearns head, and allowed Cootie free rein to whack away with his left arm. He thwacked the bearn's ribs so hard that he dragged the table-leg-club across his foe's gullet and was able to thwack him again from the otherside. Working his way up, he battered the boy's ribs then breast then bear-like beard before he finally finished by rearing back and slamming his boot square into the guard's chest. Just like that, Cootie bowled his second adversary out the door.

By this point, Tabuh had reloaded and Tou had drawn *Future*. The two had taken one step towards the officers, but there they paused. The officers had completely lost interest in retrieving the Sentry Princess. The entirety of their attention had turned to the drunkard. That is, except for their captain. She still stood firm in her agenda, literally, blocking Tou and Tabuh from the door.

Tabuh raised her revolvered.

Tou clasped her hand to lower the fire arm, “Save the ammo.”

An arrow flew between their heads. Conceding to Tou's plan, Tabuh came up with a new move. She turned on the bar, aiming her gun at the armored spirit. Though the spirit's shoulders sagged with relief, he quickly picked them back up and got back in character for the ruse. Dropping his bow, he raised his armored gauntlets towards the ceiling. Sam Budd followed suit beside him.

Now Tou advanced on the captain of the five guards. His blade raised against her staff.

“This is steelwood.” She warned, “Don't want to chip your pretty sword.”

Raising an eyebrow, Tou brought down his pretty sword. The guard parried – well, at least, she would have parried had her staff been stronger than steelwood. Instead, *Future* sliced through the top quarter of her stick and continued on towards her collar bone. She had to sweep her own foot out from under her to avoid being crippled. Falling back to one knee, with one hand on the ground to catch her, she stared at the severed end of her staff with wide brown eyes.

“This is a Sentry sword.” Tou smirked, “Sorry.”

Tou had won the retorts but he hadn’t won the war and the captain wasn’t ready to surrender yet. From her stance, crouched low, she popped up. She rushed forward, yanking her staff up from her side to strike Tou’s ribs on his right side. Tou could’ve blocked, but he was used to being hit with sticks. Instead, he let it happen. He even moved in to the blow. And, rather than defending, he simply put *Future* to his foe’s throat.

“Drop it.” He commanded.

“Donum.” She cursed.

“Leggo!” Cootie declared.

Behind her, was Cootie. Her team was gone. Thrown out the door by the befuddled brute. The captain was surrounded. Tabuh shoved her gun back in its holster and stared at the belligerent nellaf with newfound respect.

“Saelu,” she murmured, she glanced back at Sam Budd, “wae’ll take him!”

Meanwhile, the captain gave in to Tou’s demands. She dropped her staff. Tou beckoned for her to drop down and she did. On both knees, she bowed her head.

“Thank you.” Tou said, sheathing his sword as he passed her, “We’re leaving. We don’t intend to give you anymore trouble.”

She didn’t look up to grace his gaze but rolled her eyes nonetheless.

Tou and Tabuh slipped by the guardsman and joined Cootie by the door.

“To the Knome?” Tou asked.

“Aye, elf.” Cootie barked, “Tootie home.”

As they strolled out the door, the chef strolled out of the kitchen with a cast iron skillet full of herder’s pie. Seeing the guard captain kneeling before the front door, Sam Budd and Zachias with their hands raised behind the bar, and Drakken sitting at a table by the stairs, he lowered his masterpiece and sighed.

“So much far breakfast.”

Drakken piped up, “I could eat.”

Sam Budd lowered his hands, “Over the police report?”

The captain concurred, “Might as well.”

While breakfast started in the Barren’s Mullet, Tou, Tabuh, and Cootie sprinted through the streets of Portville. Both elves were quite impressed with the old drunk’s stamina. They themselves were having to do their best to keep up, meanwhile their guide was still taking shots from a flask everytime they crossed another block. Guards were closing in on all angles. Not only were they tailed but each intersection they added more tails. Traffic sentries, merchant regulators, and opportunistic bounty hunters all stopped in their tracks at the sight of the running trio and set after them.

“KNOME!”

Cootie finally came to a stop at an intersection that opened up into a large cobblestone courtyard. The enclosure was full of people. Folks were hustling here and there, everyone seemingly muttering and hurrying. Shop stands lined the taller shops that walled in the piazza, flags extended above these booths to display the symbols that denoted what they hocked. Most

icons represented produce – vegetables, fruits, herbs, and grains – and after that came wood and furs, but in between these majorities were the smaller craftsmen. Welders, carpenters, plumbers, and wirers. Then even more specialized artisans: clockworkers, jewelers, cobblers, and locksmiths. Well, actually, there was only one locksmith.

“KEYS!”

And that was where Cootie led them. He shoved his way through the crowd, the table legs still in his hands proved quite useful in getting folks to let them by, making a bee line for the stand with the flag bearing a key that sat across the cloister. Tou and Tabuh followed but their heads spun on a swivel. Though the entire courtyard was clamoring with conversation, they heard their names everywhere. Each glare that met their gaze was suddenly suspicious. *They know!* Halberds bobbed on the fringes of the crowd, on all sides. The couple was rapidly losing faith in the plan. How could a Knomish locksmith help them now? But seemingly surrounded, they figured it would help to at least get off the streets.

“KNOME!”

Cootie stopped. The three were at the edge of the crowd. They stood before a leaning wooden stand stuck together with rusted nails that were slowly wiggling their way free. There was an abnormal amount of space between the throng and the stall. It was almost as if there was an invisible forcefield around it, not only keeping folks at bay but also keeping their attention directed elsewhere as if the vestibule didn't even exist. Hopefully, this invisibility would work on the cops too.

On the counter sat rows of locks and keys, massive metal combination locks, collections of dead bolts, lock cylinders, and even little hair pin like needles created precisely for picking the very products being sold. The shop keeper could hardly be seen above his own display. All that showed was the black cone shaped hat that sat atop his head.

“KNOME!” Cootie exclaimed.

“Dae-” the old Knomes young eyes caught sight of his elven companions and he coughed into his hands until he could switch his vocal chords around to a new syllable, “Drunkard! What can I do for you – for y'all!”

“KEYS!”

Cootie dove headfirst over the counter which was quite a feat for a man with such girth in his mid section. Not to mention the fact that he was also completely plastered. Tou and Tabuh were beginning to realize that this nellaf regularly defied modern expectations for what one was capable of while nigh-fatally inebriated. They didn't even blink an eye when he landed his dive by tucking his head and rolling to his feet, stopping at the door of the shack behind the Knome's stall. Undaunted, they split and walked around the vestibule to join Cootie on the otherside.

The house was of the same ilk as the stand. Despite being wedged between two townhouses, the structure still found a way to lean. The door was wedged in place, its hinges having long since rusted out of existence. One might at first mistake the home to be made in the garrison style, with the second floor overhanging the front, but in reality the second floor was jutting out over the street because the structural supports within had begun to lean such that eventually the whole thing would topple over and crush the key shop beneath. When Cootie yanked the door open, both Tou and Tabuh flinched. They waited a moment before following him in, cringing as the building moaned and creaked.

Inside wasn't much better than out. In fact, it was arguably worse. A thick coat of dust covered everything. Bookshelves lined the walls but their spines were illegible under the smut. Windowed cabinets were now tinted with filth, their glass having melded with the soot so that

they were rough and sticky. The floorboards of the room were completely hidden, the floor instead looking lumpy and unlevel. Even the air appeared full. Dust floated, not rising or falling, like mist, only shifting when Cootie rushed by.

He brushed the smut away as if he were wading through water as he made his way over to the bookshelves. There, he began to throw books to the floor. Only stooping to pick them up if they didn't open up on the ground. He'd flip through the pages rapidly, as if looking for a lost bookmark, then discard them and keep going.

Tou didn't bother asking, instead, he went to the windows. Blurry as they were, he could make out the shadows on the otherside and it appeared the Tadloe Guard was moving through the crowd in the general direction of the locksmith's shop.

Tabuh didn't bother asking either, but she was curious. *What could hae possiblly bae looking for? A spell book? This drunkard can't possiblly cast! And judgin from the filth, the spells would probablly bae praehistoric!* Yet, as this thought crossed her mind, she noticed a bit of empty air between her and the dust cloud that filled the room. She turned around. The space trailed behind her too. Between her and the door. Then it followed the paths Tou and Cootie had blazed. That wasn't very surprising, but what was surprising was that there were no more trails. Not even Knomish sized ones. *Does that Knome not even live hare?* Maybe, but there were signs he had been inside. Between her and the door, there were Knomish footprints. She saw them travel all the way up to where she stood – well, almost. She hadn't really noticed it before because of the immense amount of dust coating the floor but she was actually standing on a rug. A small, rectangular rug. One you might put by a front door to wipe your feet off before going further inside. The Knomish footsteps stopped at its edge. She noticed that the rug she stood upon seemed to have far less dust than the floor around it. It was still filthy, but less so.

She stepped off the rug, knelt down, and lifted it.

Underneath was an old, rusty key.

“Cootae!” Tabuh hollered.

WHAM! An entire bookshelf crashed to the ground, emitting a plume of dust that almost immediately filled the room so that no one could see for a good moment or so. Making no attempt to clean up after himself, the drunkard staggered away from the toppled shelving, heading in the general direction of Tabuh's voice. As he came, Tabuh, covering her eyes, reached to lift the key so that he could see it once the dust cleared. Except, once her index finger touched the silver ring at the end of the key – even with her eyes still clenched shut – she saw a brilliant light. It was almost enough to be blinding but not quite, she could see. It wasn't a light as much as it was a color: pure, unadulterated whiteness. In fact, after the first second of seeing what she saw, she realized there might not be any light at all. There were certainly no shadows – and there should have been, for aside from the whiteness, she saw rows of dark wooden walls. They seemed not to reach a ceiling though it was hard to tell because both the ceiling and floor appeared to be the same shade of white as everything else was except for the rows of walls. Pegs studded the walls and on each peg hung the ringed-end of a key. These keys were similar in size and shape as the one Tabuh had found under the rug – like the one that hung from her index finger.

Cootie yanked it from her grasp and she flinched. Her eyes opened and almost immediately clamped shut as dust bombarded her. Rubbing her eyes and coughing she recoiled while the drunkard dealt with the same vision she'd received upon touching the key. Meanwhile, Tou was ignoring the two, still staring through the window though now he had clamped his

hands around his eyes, cupping them to the glass to protect from the dust that still clung to the air like fog.

“Guard is closing in.” Tou warned.

“Cootae’s gotta-” Tabuh paused to hack a bit of dry filfth up, “-kay!”

“To?” Tou asked without turning.

“To?” Tabuh echoed.

“Lie berry.” Cootie stated.

Thrusting his hand forward, the key clutched in his grasp like a shiv, whiteness split the filthy air before him as if he’d unfurled a blank canvas. Tabuh could only see blurs due to the debris in her eyes, but that was enough for her to tell that what she had seen when she touched the key was now expanding before Cootie. It was as if there had been a window there, hanging in the space just in front of the nellaf, and it had been disguised with some optical trickery but now they could see through the window to the room hidden beyond.

“Yamon!” Cootie hollered as he strode out of the dust cloud and into the blank chamber. His body was now mostly hidden behind the frame of the strange portal. He turned around and peaked out to repeat himself, “AHURRUM!”

Though Tou and Tabuh had no idea that his second statement was a reiteration, they clearly understood his intent. And Tabuh, having seen the vision just a moment prior, was actually inclined to trust the belligerent busboy’s prompting.

“Tou!” Tabuh yelled.

“Tabuh, we-” Tou looked away from the old window and saw the very new window, “The farak?”

“TOU!” Tabuh exclaimed.

The door to the house flew across the room and a guard took one big step inside. This put the officer nearly next to where Tou was standing by the window. The guard hadn’t seen Tou yet, fortunately, because instead he saw nothing. Doubling over, he began to cough and scrub at his eyes as the hanging dust suddenly surged out the door like a genie attempting to escape it’s lamp.

Tou didn’t let this good luck go to waste. Despite having no clue what to expect, he rushed forward. Tabuh met him before the portal. The two took hold of each other’s hands and then bound through the mystical window and into the white realm with the wooden key shelves. They parted to step around their drunken guide who then flamboyantly thrust the key back out the portal – as if inserting it into an invisible key hole – and twisted his wrist.

The dusty Knome’s house disappeared. Now it was just the three of them and the rows of keys. Well, it was for a second or two, then someone stepped into view. At the end of their row, where a perpendicular aisle intersected, a figure stood armored from head to toe like the spirit from the Barren’s Mullet had been.

“Zach!” Cootie blurted.

Both Tou and Tabuh grabbed the oaf by the arms but the damage was done. The figure spun on a dime to face the trio. Again, like the spirit from the Barren’s Mullet (Zach), this being had silver eyes squinting at them through the narrow slit in their helmet. They did not appear to be squinting to get a better look either, especially not as their gauntlet slowly reached back to grip the hilt at their hip.

“Leave the Knome.” The suit commanded.

“Huh?” The three responded.

Their confusion was instantly eradicated as a Knome soared out from between them as if he'd been launched from the white abyss between their feet. The tiny ball of a man slammed into the chest of the guard and then landed on his feet as his foe bowled over. Waisting no time, the dark clothed lilliputian rushed onto the breastplate with his black saber raised high over the cone on top of his head. The Knome flipped the sword so that the blade pointed down. The guard reared once more, as if to fight back or cry out but they were too late. The obsidian sword slid through the armor as if it were nothing more than parchment and immediately the spirit went limp. Though the three couldn't see it beneath the metal exoskeleton, they could tell nonetheless. The guard was gone.

There were about a dozen reasons to be perplexed. Tou and Tabuh had no clue where to start. The horror of witnessing such a sudden slaying only helped to fog their figuring further. Somehow, the foggiest one amongst them snapped to first.

"KNOME!" He bellowed.

"Wait?" Tabuh frowned, "That's the Knome from outsahd!"

"Are you sure?" Tou echoed her expression, "They all look so similar."

"Hae's in all black." She shrugged.

"Knome from outside?" The Knome turned, still standing on the now empty breastplate. His head cocked to one side, "Knome from outside!" He hopped forward and bellowed like Cootie had a moment before, "THAT OLD KNOME BASTARD WRECKED MY BOOKSHELF?!"

Tou and Tabuh were now even more confused than before.

Cootie, on the other hand, was now quite aware of what this new (or same?) Knome was thinking and he was a fan of keeping it that way, "Yup! Dat uh...udder Knome..." He shook his head, as if mourning, "...sheesh."

"Meow."

While there had been about a dozen things bewildering them before, there now seemed to be about twice that as Tou and Tabuh turned around to see a small black cat sitting on the top of one of the wooden key shelves. Although the shelves certainly sat on the essentially invisible floor, they apparently didn't rise to the equally as invisible ceiling. This thought led Tabuh to gaze up and that act led her to keep craning her neck until she almost fell backwards – there was nothing but whiteness for as far as they eye could see. As she speculated on the confines of their enclosure, Tou speculated on the fact that the feline appeared to be communicating with him. When the cat meowed it had coincided with a thought popping up in his mind. The thought had felt like a sound. Like something you might hear someone say but what they said only registers in your brain a moment later. And while it still could have been his thought, he certainly hadn't thought it as if it were. Then, just as he was about to move past it and act like it had all been spawned from his imagination, the cat meowed again.

"Meow." *Follow me.*

Bounding off the breast of the dead and disappeared spirit, the black garbed mini-man burst past the trio for a second time, raising a fist at the feline as he shouted at her, "Shut up, ya old gop!"

"Hey," Tabuh yelped, jumping between the two, "shae's a cutae!"

Tabuh reached up to pet the creature but the Knome leapt up and grabbed her wrist. Running with it once he hit the ground as he ran his mouth just as fast, "She can't understand me, don't worry. Now follow me!"

The cat waltzed further down the top of the shelf, its eyes boring in to Tou's as it spoke again, "Mrrrow." *Follow me.*

"Elf." The drunk barked.

Tou turned from the cat to see the nellaf had grabbed his wrist like the Knome had Tabuh's. Tabuh, meanwhile, had already been hustled halfway down the hall. They were carefully stepping over the crumpled suit of armor. She was resisting, but only to slow her guide as she looked back and gestured for Tou to follow, shrugging even as she did, "Drakken said to go with the Knome!"

"He definitely never mentioned a cat." Tou muttered.

He started to move with Cootie, though he still craned his neck to glance over his shoulder at the cat. As he did, he caught a glimpse of something else. Straining further as he stumbled onwards, he was able to see down at the end of their aisle. There another perpendicular aisle intersected to create a fourway intersection and in that intersection a figure had stepped into view. They were just as covered as the armored man had been, but instead they were draped in black robes. No skin was visible – not while the person was looking away – but as they turned to move down the aisle towards him, Tou caught a brief glimpse underneath the sable cowl. He immediately cringed away, rushing along with Cootie after Tabuh and the Knome but the glance was branded in his mind. He couldn't be sure. Only two elements of what he saw were clear. That was the off-white color of the object beneath the hood. Not quite peach enough to be a pale elf and no where near dark enough to be any other skinned race. It was more like the color of bone. This is why the second element was so haunting. Two wide empty eyeholes. He couldn't be sure, but he was pretty sure there was a skull under that hood and the chills that still rode up and down his spine urged him not to clarify with a second glance.

Cootie tossed the key on the empty chestplate of the spirit and he and Tou followed Tabuh and the black garbed Knome down the hall. They took a right at the first intersection. The avenue appeared to continue on forever. There were shelves and shelves and shelves until their vision blurred them all together. After they passed four or five, they took another hard turn, left this time, and as they dashed down this aisle their guide piped back up.

"So what's the situation, son?"

Tou and Tabuh exchanged glances but the sloppily jogging sipper stepped up to the mic with a grunt, "Thlam."

Tou and Tabuh continued exchanging glances, rolling their eyes so simultaneously they didn't even break eye contact. That is, until the Knome completely comprehended the hooligan's unintelligible hoot.

"On the lam. Got the cops on to ya." The geezer shook his head, his cone hat flopping left and right. They reached the end of another aisle and again took a right to rush down a row of intersections, "Well, it was about time. You'd been dodging them for-"

"NO!" Cootie blurted.

The outburst was so abrupt and unreasonably loud that the Knome spun in the air mid jog just to run his eyes over the oaf. Cootie spread his arms wide so that the backs of his hands slapped his two compatriots – an act that had a considerably different effect on Tabuh than it did on Tou but she gritted her teeth through the pain and ignored the absentminded assault.

Tou answered, "We killed Captain Crimson."

"Doubt it." The Knome scoffed.

He yanked them all left and they descended down another row of keys. They didn't go far before the Knome skidded to a halt and reached for one of the keys on a lower hook.

“And the Empahr thanks ah’m kidnapped.” Tabuh added.

“And you picked a fugitive to hideout with!” The Knome crowed. He turned full circle so he could give the two elves a condescending glare. Abandoning the key he was about to snag, he embarked on down the hall once more, “Hope Zach and Bold are okay.”

“Dragons of tale.” Cootie shrugged.

Tou and Tabuh again conferred with their eyes. They were still stuck on the Knomes first statement, “Fugitive?”

The Knome continued unencumbered, “Dragons of a scale, indeed, Daernar-”

“Daernar!” Tabuh exclaimed.

“Why not run off with another outlaw while your at it. The more the merrier, right?”

Again the Knome came to a quick stop. He turned to the shelf, pausing for a moment to catch his breath yet still rambling on as he did, “I’ve got the perfect key for y’all – you’ll have to earn your stay but, hey, I’m giving you the get-out-of-jail-free card for free so...” Hopping up, he snatched a key off a peg that had been at least a foot above his head. Landing, he shook his head and said, “I scratch your ass, you scratch mine.”

“Hey!” Tabuh warned, “Just cause wae’re wanted by the authoritaes doesn’t maen wae want to stay that way! Wae’re pro Empahr hare!”

“More Antipa than Empire though!” Tou interjected, uneasily nudging Tabuh while hiding his nudging-arm behind the drunkard, “So depending on the outlaws, maybe-”

“How’s helping out the Kou Clan sound?” The Knome suggested. He paused to lift the key to his mouth. All three cringed (though Cootie cringed a good second later than the other two) as he put a few teeth of the key between his teeth and clamped down. There was a metallic chipping sound which one could only hope was in fact metallic and then he spat and said, “Sondor?”

Cootie bumped the two elves with his shoulders, attempting a whisper though he spoke at full volume, “They got beer.” He winked...with both eyes.

Tabuh shoved him off, but was satiated with the option, “Sondor works. Raht, Tou?”

“Sure.” Tou nodded, “Never been.”

“Well, today’s your lucky day,” twirling on one tippy-toe the Knome presented the key to Tabuh, “one way ticket to the land of man!”

Taking the key, Tabuh let the vision wash over her. The new room was flamboyant but tight. The crown molding was gold, as were the doors. Half the tiles that lined the walls were gilded as well, aside from the crimson tiles they were checkered in between. Even the urination trough appeared to be gold the way it glistened and – *Wait, urination trough?* Suddenly, she noticed the mirror (with it’s glorious aurous frame) and in it the two ajar bathroom stalls. She was so shocked at the fact that the vision had taken her to the men’s room that she hardly had time to shrink away at the blood that slashed across the mirror glass (and in her defense, it matched the scarlet tiles).

Shuddering out of the sight, she exclaimed, “A bathroom?!”

“A bathroom in Zion’s Stronghold!” The Knome protested, his hands clamping down on his hips, “You should be so lucky!”

Tabuh had a retort for that but neither Cootie nor Tou heard it. Cootie because he was plastered and his eyes were fixated on the key. Nothing came in or out of his ears. His thoughts were too loud for him to hear anything else. All he could think was: *I gotta get that key.* And even that thought quickly devolved. *I gotta get key. I gottaga key. Uhgottaka. Uhgottaka. Uhgottaka.* Tou, on the other hand, had instinctively looked over his shoulder and noticed that

the particularly shadowy figure he had glimpsed before appeared to be back on their trail. Granted, the fellow was a few aisles down but they weren't moving slow. The individual's very motion made Tou shudder. Their body didn't shift, they glided forwards. Tou turned back to the gang.

Cootie snatched the key. This shocked both Tabuh and the Knome because the nellaf hadn't exactly been exhibiting a lot of dexterity prior. Even more impressive, he continued to act despite the vision that surely rocked him (unless alcohol made him immune?) and thrust his arm forward with a twist. The portal opened such that the Knome had to step aside to still keep his eyes on his followers and, when he did, he saw what Tou had seen coming towards them. The Knome's eyes widened.

"Death!" He exclaimed.

"What?" Tabuh yelped.

"Death?" Tou murmured.

Cootie, hollering unintelligibly, shoved Tabuh through the magical window he'd opened and hopped in after her. Tou was moving to follow, but as he did, with eyes as wide as the Knome's, he asked the question without saying anything outloud.

The Knome shook his head. That answer would be for another day. Instead, as Tou stepped through, the Knome told him to, "Listen to the Knome!"

"Another Knome?" Tou lamented as he peaked back through, his body hidden in another time and space but his head still levitating out of the magical hole.

"He's hideous, I know." The Knome sighed, "But go!" With an astonishing hop, the old crone jumped up to eye level with the earth elf. Pressing an index finger to Tou's temple, he pushed his head through the portal, saying, "Listen to him and signal the cicada!"

Submitting to the minikin man, Tou turned around to meet the next. The being bowed so low to the ground that, considering the stumpiness of his legs, he was practically lying down. His red cap's rounded tip brushed the bathroom floor where it began to soak up the blood that was still spilling out of the body. This body was only half visible. For the Knome stood between his legs which were sprawled out, the rest of the victim was presumably propped up against the toilet within the stall that hid them. Though, one last piece was visible. Their hand. Which still held a gun in a puddle of blood on the bathroom tiles between the Knome and the three that had just arrived. Straightening from his bow, the bearded little man winked at his new guests as he stowed his bloody dagger back in his belt and introduced himself.

"Call me, the Klansman!"

Tabuh recoiled, "The Clansman?"

Tou and Cootie were not paying attention to the itty-bitty-butcher. Both men initially gagged upon arrival. Tou because of the immense amount of blood and the severed hand. It wasn't like this was his first time seeing a murder (or the aftermath of one) but still every once in a while the gore would get to him – as it would most decent folks. Cootie, on the other hand, was simply gagging as he did occasionally due to the immense amount of alcohol he had consumed. So, as Tou regained composure, Cootie reupped. Pulling a flask from his back pocket (hopefully, that is where it came from) he screwed off the top and took a quick swig of his medication. Meanwhile, the supposed Klansman explained his title.

"No." The Knome rolled his eyes, "The *Klansman*. With a 'K'. Cause I'm a Knome and I support the Clans."

"Wae're not calling you that." Tabuh insisted.

Now the Knome recoiled, "Why not?"

Distracting himself from the carnage, Tou took in the less murderous parts of the lavatory and his eyes were almost immediately drawn to a package by the sink. It was a small satchel, like a purse, that would've seemed quite normal on a bathroom counter but what caught Tou's attention was the fact that it budged. In fact, it continued to do so.

The cicada! Tou realized.

All around Solaris, there were different forms of long-distance messaging technology. In Batloe there were mailbats, in Dogloe there were postdogs, and in Munkloe there were letterlemurs. Iceload had shield dragons, Aquaria had callphins, and Tadloe had cockatunes. Sondor too had their own unique tech for contacting folks far away: signal cicadas, little bullet shaped bugs that could screech to one another. Before when the Knome had mentioned a cicada, Tou hadn't thought much of it. He was more concerned with the jumping-through-a-portal-into-a-fascist-king's-castle part, but now it made sense.

"The humans of the Clans don't aeven lahk baeing called Clansmen!" Tabuh exclaimed.

"Yes, but I'm not a human." The Knome defended.

"EXACTLAY!" Tabuh proclaimed.

Tou squeezed by the two bickering and snatched the fanny pack. Cootie was done slurping his poison and watching intently as Tou removed the insect. The creature appeared to be just as agitated with the Knome as Tabuh was. It's wings buzzed about and it fidgeted in Tou's hands a bit but it calmed down with each passing second. And seconds passed cause, though he knew what it was, Tou didn't know how to get it to work. He turned to Cootie. Cootie shrugged. Reaching out, he poked the bug between its big round eyes.

That did the trick. Tou jumped as the thing began to rumble in his hand. Had it been agitated before, that irritation was nothing compared to it's furry now. The little creature screeched to the heavens with a volume that rivaled the most obnoxious Earthen fire alarm. And yet, despite the defening insect squeal, the Knome and electric elf still managed to continue their argument.

"FINE!" The Knome yelled, "CALL ME UNLUCKY."

"FAHN!" Tabuh yelled back, muttering after, "Rather ominous though..."

Then, almost as soon as it began it was done, the cicada was finished. The rattling that had accompanied the screeching switched off and was replaced with trembling. All the little guy could get out was a few more clicks as he flopped over onto his side, nuzzling his stumpy head into the pads of Tou's palm.

"Put the bug in the bag!"

Yanking the fanny pack off the bathroom counter, Unlucky opened it before Tou. Tou took a step back, holding the creature closer to his chest. The Knome's eyelids fell to halfmast as he glowered up at the earth elf. Extending the pouch further, he shook it under Tou's hand.

"We're here to save intelligent life," Unlucky groaned, "not creepy crawlies."

"Intel itch and knife?" Cootie stammered.

The halfmast eye lids fell completely now as he rustled the bag oncemore, explaining despite his disdain, "The weilder of the Mystak Blade will die if we all don't skedaddle."

"And that'll save intelligent lahfe?" Tabuh scoffed.

"You all wanna be Antipa don't you?" Unlucky snapped at Tabuh, snickering a bit before deepening his voice and furling his brow, "'Rosethorn', right?"

She flinched, "How do you..."

He turned back to Tou, "The Cagistan is fixing to kill a member of the Crystal Council and I can tell you how to save him."

Tou dropped the bug in the bag. Tabuh was about to drive her elbow into his ribs (a common electric elven gesture meaning, “Are you serious?”) but Tou, already quite used to his friend’s body language, hopped aside and defended his decision, “Drakken said to follow the Knome!”

“Not this Knome!” Tabuh crowed.

“Well that Knome said to listen to this Knome!” Tou protested.

“Fahn!”

“Splendid!” Unlucky exclaimed. The clasp of the bug-bag snapped closed around his haunches and as if it were the crack of a pistol at the start of a race, those haunches started pumping like pistons. The Knome brushed past the two elves and drunken nellaf, bounding to the doorway of the bathroom. His words were distorted like the wail of an ambulance zooming past, “Let’s goooo!”

The little man ran head first into the armored kneepads of a Sondoran Guard. It was almost as if he had lowered his head with the intention of smashing his skull into the metal-plated patella despite having seemingly no way of knowing the fuzz was so hot on their tail. Even more surprising was the fact that his noggin didn’t knock against the man’s knee and bounce back. Instead, he drove onwards. His head moved the man’s knee, pushing it like a pendulum into his other knee. They clanged together and sent shockwaves up the thighs to the spine to the poor policeman’s head and for a split second the guard saw nothing but stars. When he regained vision, he was toppling over the bannister and plummeting towards the floor of the stairwell.

The soldier hadn’t come alone. As Tou, Tabuh, and Cootie saw, joining the Knome on the platform just outside the bathroom door, there was an entire line of Cagistan cops scaling the stairs single file. They’d only stopped due to the shock of seeing the Knome suddenly throw their leader over the railings. That shock was quickly replaced with rage. They surged forward, metal axes out and up.

“Stand back!” A blood splattered opal blade clanged against the ax of the first foe. The dagger in the Knome’s belt was now a massive sword in his grasp. The Knome held his blade against the edge of the man’s ax a moment longer, warning through tiny little gritted teeth, “You’ll go no further!” Then, twisting his head with slow jerking twitches, he made eye contact with the trio out of the corner of his eyes and whispered, “Go further!”

“Further?” Tabuh repeated, “Further where?”

Glass shattered above them. Tou, Tabuh, and Cootie all instinctively looked up, nearly snapping their necks off with their abrupt reactions. Fortunately, the broken glass was at least a couple flights up the stairs and it wasn’t now raining down on their faces.

“There!” Unlucky exclaimed.

Tabuh and Cootie got it, but Tou hesitated, asking, “Will you be-”

Rather than wait for the four intruders to come to agreement, the soldier Unlucky was parrying decided to act. Keeping the blade of his ax against the blade of his foe, he pivoted forward with one knee and swung in with his shield arm. Keeping the shield flat, parallel to the floor, he drove it towards the Knome as if the round shield were an ax itself. The edge of his shield never struck the little swordsman, but the flat façade of the buckler did – it touched his feet. When the soldier made his move, the Knome made his. His head whipped back around and he leapt into the air. Rather than landing on the shield, he kicked off it and rocked back so that, when he planted his feet, he planted them on the collar bones of the Cagistan conscript.

While Unlucky didn't weigh much, his inertia was enough to throw his victim off balance. As the guard fell backwards the victor rode him like a skateboard, switching his feet so that his left moved back onto the soldier's sternum and his right shifted forwards to mash down on the tab of the helmet that guarded the bridge of the human's nose. The helmets of the Cagistan guards were uniform. Rather than sitting on one's head like a bowl, they were more cone shaped. The aspect, however, was rather narrow so that it looked more like a funnel than a martini glass. Thus, the tip was long and narrow like a spear. Dull as it was, it still was more than capable of poking someone's eye out and that it did. As the guard went down, Unlucky stomped on the helmet so that the poker fell right into the eye of the next soldier on the steps.

The trooper only had a moment to cry out in pain before the body of his comrade slammed into him and knocked him over. Now the Knome's skateboard was two soldiers thick. It seemed that would be the maximum. Not because the Sondorans would soon get the better of the boy-sized brute but because fate and the physical world did them a favor. The stairwell was rectangular. The staircase was split by landings in between each floor so that one could have a pace or two on flat terrain before ascending (or descending) further. This meant that even if Unlucky rode his two into the third, then they would next run into a wall. So after tipping over the second, he leapt over the head of the third. His stubby legs spread wide to just miss the point of the third's helmet. His feet then snapped back together so that his tiny moccasins could press off the tower wall and launch him like a pinball at the back of the foe he'd bound over. That poor Cagistani tried to turn and raise either their ax or shield for defense but they were too late. The pale white blade of the Knome's sword smashed their chainmail cowl just below the helm. The rings of mail were no match for the sharpness of the sword and the force with which it was swung. Though the armor managed to keep the poor soldiers head on their neck, the impact fractured the spine and the gash gushed like a fountain. As the third guard staggered around in a circle, dropping their hatchet and buckler to clutch at their throat, blood sprayed the walls of the stairwell above until they finally fell to the floor.

The Knome had also landed on the floor, standing on the platform in between stories. One of the guards behind him had recovered but was busy helping the poor lad with the helmet in his eye. The other guards were below Unlucky. They looked up at the Knome, shifting in their boots.

"Saelu!" Tabuh shook Tou's shoulder, "Hae'll bae fahn – let's go!"

Tou turned to Tabuh, saying as they started up there stairs, "Remind me to never cross a Knome!"

"That ain't no normal Knome." Tabuh assured him.

Cootie had gotten a headstart on the two as he hadn't stuck around to watch the carnage but when he heard Tabuh's claim he stopped fast in his tracks so abruptly that Tou and Tabuh nearly smashed into his butt on their way up. As they passed him, he opened his mouth to speak but only a burp came out. Trudging after the two elves, he waited for the belch to end then barked with a level of enunciation hitherto unseen, "A Knome beat the Queen of Darkness."

The platform on the fifth floor wasn't of much notice. The trio kept rushing upwards. The only thing that was noticed when each took a brief stop to pivot and dash on was a new sound. To go along with the clamor of violence below, they now could hear wind whistling above – wind that hadn't whistled before the shattering of the glass.

Jumping three steps at a time, Tou asked, "Is that true? A Knome beat the Queen?"

“As true as anythang else...” Tabuh paused, letting her inquirer take the lead as she peaked over the banister and looked up the tower to count the floors. Returning to the run, she finished, “...anythang else written in a historay book.”

“My Mother knew him!” Cootie hollered.

Now Cootie passed Tabuh. He continued to romp on but Tou stopped on the sixth floor when he noticed Tabuh had frozen. Looking diagonally across the stairwell, his eyes met hers.

“Hae thinks hae’s Daernar Darkblade.” She murmured.

“Nope!” Came the drunkard’s shout above them.

“Who?” Tou asked.

“Nevermahnd.” Tabuh shook her head like a dog shaking water from their fur and kept going, “Wae’re hare to fahnd the Kou man.”

“Found him!” Cootie blurted from the seventh floor.

“Come on!” Tou and Tabuh chimed.

Bounding up the stairs, the two elves joined the nellaf at the shattered window on the platform of the seventh floor. The window opened towards the middle of the palace. The large central tower of Zion’s Stronghold rose before them. It was so wide, one could hardly call it a tower. It was almost a castle in and of itself – plopped on top of the rest of the fortress as if it had been torn from some foreign land and added as a trophy. The roof of the lower fortress – from which their tower rose) sat just five feet or so from the window sill then it extended like a bridge to the central tower. It was there, on the ridge that girded the heart of the palace, that Cootie had spotted the “Kou man”.

“The Dragon!” Tabuh gasped.

He was perched on the peak of the roof that extended from the broken window. His head was covered by a decorative helmet designed to look like a dragon. His dress was at first glance fancy – like Tou’s had been when he met Tabuh in Yelah – but in the wind that whipped between the towers, flaps of his garments were brushed away to reveal metallic plates beneath. He was armored and yet seemingly unarmed.

An arrow wizzed by and bounced off one of the horns on his mask. The rooftopter hollered like a startled hound and spun on a dime. Tou and Tabuh ducked out of the window frame but Cootie didn’t budge. Though the masked man was now running towards them, he was not looking at the window. He was too busy watching his feet so he didn’t slip and fall off the roof. As more arrows began to fly – from above and below, it seemed anywhere there was a window with a sight on the poor parkourer there was a loaded bow twanging at him – the Dragon about faced, putting his back to the trio, then he tip-toe sprinted back the way he had came. As he passed where he had previously perched, he jumped.

“Look!” Cootie exclaimed.

Tou and Tabuh popped back up to watch. The “Kou man”’s arms caught the lip of the roof that extended from the façade of the central tower and he yanked the rest of his body up with the efficiency of a feline. The Dragon kept going at full speed. Zooming up the sloped roof, he tucked his head into his chest and crashed head first through a window.

Tabuh gasped, “Taiad.”

Tou gasped, “Selu...”

Cootie belched then said, “Leggo!”

“Wait!” Tabuh snatched him by his scraggly locks and he squealed like a pig, “How do wae know that’s him?”

“Who’s the Dragon?” Tou asked.

Without relinquishing her grip on the glossy-eyed goof ball, Tabuh answered, “A Warcourter – hae’s famous.”

“The Knome said go up!” Cootie moaned.

“Then let’s go on up.” Tabuh suggested, looking to Tou for agreement rather than the nellaf. She nodded at the next floor above them, “Wae could sae into that building from up there.”

Tou nodded, “Okay.”

Releasing Cootie, the two elves hurried up to the next platform. Cootie rubbed his scalp and glared at his climbing companions. Like a scorned toddler, he stubbornly stayed behind, content to watch out his own window below them. On the next floor, they found the window in a terrible condition. It appeared the glass was as old as the castle or worse, it may have been as old as the plateau upon which the Stronghold stood. The pane was painted with filth, making the evening look more like night, and the glass was distorted with ripples and blurs so that straight lines curved and swirled. The two immediately set to lifting the thing but even that took them two or three heaves before it began to budge. Finally, once it shifted, their fourth heave got it up high enough for them to drop down to their knews and peer through.

Their hands slapped over their mouths as their jaws dropped. They literally held their breaths as the sight sunk in, as if those they spied upon might somehow hear their gasps. If the Dragon was the Kou, then the atriarchs of the ancestral leaders of Sondor were now face to face. The Cagirent himself, King Zion Cage the Fifth, stood mere yards from the dragon-masked man. Even Tou, who was not as well read as Tabuh, recognized the dictator. The man’s anti-ethnic propaganda was not confined to the savanna’s of man. There were disciples even amongst the earth elves of Tadloe, where anti-clan rhetoric became anti-tribe. As an orphan, the message had even been attractive to Tou, however the messengers always turned him off. He’d yet to meet someone who opposed the Empire that didn’t ultimately just want to replace it.

The vanguard of modern fascism gazed up into the champion of the old way’s reptilian helmet. The Dragon stood over six feet, the Cagirent stood well under, but this worked in his favor. While the two likely could match one another in the gym, the rebel looked scrawny compared to the bulk that filled out the king’s armor. If there was any question whether or not monarch’s muscle truly did press up against the bulbous metal plates that protected him, the three foot long blade that he held in his right hand dismissed such suspicions.

Tabuh drew her gun but held it just beneath the window sill. Tou noticed and Tabuh saw his eyebrow raise out of the corner of her peripheral view. Keeping her golden eyes on the prize, she justified her actions.

“Wae’re hare to save him and Kang Cage has his blade out.”

Apparently, her logic wasn’t what Tou was hung up on. He asked, “Can you shoot from this far?”

“What’s the alternative?” Tabuh shrugged, “The question is, aeven if ah can. Then what? Hae’s surrounded bah guards in there.”

As if on cue, the Cagirent turned away from the Dragon and addressed his security forces just as the Dragon had reached for his helmet as if to remove it. It did not appear there was a conversation being had but rather something more like a lecture – or an executioner’s speech. The beads of sweat sliding down the two elves’ brows felt like grains of sand slipping into the bottom chamber of an hourglass. The clock was certainly ticking.

“I’ve got to go.” Tou stated.

“Go?” Tabuh looked away from the window for the first time since they’d gotten it open, “Go where? There?!”

Tou met her gaze and nodded, “Wait til we’re almost in, then take the shot. Cootie and I will bring him back.”

“What if ah hit y’all?!” Tabuh crowed.

Tou clasped her on the shoulder, saying, “You never miss, right?”

Tabuh continued to howl, “This is crazy! You’ll dah!”

“This is what we came for!” Tou ripped his hand from her shoulder so that he could raise his hands in exclamation, “You suggest we just let him die?”

Now it was Tabuh who clasped Tou, “Has Cootae been sharing with you?”

“No...” Tou brushed her hand off, rolling his eyes as he began, “Cootie hasn’t-”

Just as her eyes had caught his look before, he noticed something out of his peripherals. Looking away from Tabuh, his attention was not drawn to the two humans confronting each other in the central tower but rather to the rooftop below them.

“Cootie is...”

Tabuh turned too, saying as she saw what he saw, “Donum.”

Cootie was on the roof. With arms flailing above his head, flapping like flags in the wind, he tip-toed across the ridge. Hooping and hollering, he teetered this way and that as his boots clomped down a little off center of the crest but he pushed through each stumble and bound forward once more. His limp-noodle arms would suddenly snap into action and seemingly grab hold of thin air, like a mime caught in a match of tug-of-war, yanking him back upright just as he was about to tumble over one side or the other. He’d made it halfway to the point on the roof where the Dragon had made the jump to the extended roof of the central tower when arrows began to fly.

Had his scampering been haphazard before, it was now fullhazard. He spun around, dancing on the balls of his feet like a gymnast on a balance beam, arms slapping at projectiles like they were swarms of bees. Now there were shrieks added to the chorus, splitting the monotony of the hooping and hollering.

Tou stood up. Tabuh took a deep breath and let it out slow, tacitly conceding to the plan. Though, before he left, she did make a demand. She met Tou’s big brown eyes with a wry smile, saying, “If wae survahve today, then wae’re taking a vacation.”

“Bet.” Tou nodded. He glanced out the window but withheld a twitch. He could tell Tabuh wasn’t quite done yet, her lips were still slightly parted. Turning back to meet her big golden eyes, he grinned, “Where to?”

“Batloe. Tlow-Vare.” Tabuh said, “Fahr Lake is baeautiful this tahm of yaeer.”

He stooped down to kiss her, holding her chin in his hand, then as he pulled away he stopped. Their faces were so closed that the tips of their noses were still almost touching, “Batloe it is, Tabuh Sentry.”

She blushed, smirking back at him, “Bae safe, Mr. Woodsman.”

“AAARRGGH!”

The two elves heads whipped around to look out the window oncemore. They saw Cootie hovering in midair. Both of his feet had left the rooftop ridge. His back was now parallel with the plateau upon which the Stronghold sat. His head was rocked back and it seemingly directed his descending trajectory. It was quite an impressive fall. It appeared he would complete full flip and slap back down on the sloped roof. The question was: would he be able to hold on or would he

bounce off and fall to his death. The answer would come in a matter of seconds but before it came in Tou took off.

Tabuh watched as Cootie came crashing down. The top of his torso hit the lip of the roof and his face smacked hard against the tiles but his hands came down like grappling hooks, his fingers piercing the shingles like the teeth of a pitchfork. Still, the weight of his lower half won the day. Those dug in phalanges held their position, but merely scraped rivets in the tile as he slid down. All hoopery and hollery had ceased, now only shrieks remained. There was no way Tou would make it in time. They needed a miracle.

And a miracle came. Although, no god would likely claim this *deus ex machina*. Up until this point, all the arrows that had been zooming and zipping around had missed the drunkard but finally one landed. As his blood-smeared face left the lip of the rooftop, leaving only his forearms and fingers still clinging, and arrow struck his right hand. The bolt penetrated all the way to the feathers. As his other hand was torn free of the roof by gravity, his right hand held fast.

“Saelu.” Tabuh murmured.

Meanwhile, Tou had just made it out the window below.

“Farak!” He exclaimed.

Arrows still flew. The aim of the archers was so bad it was impossible to tell if they were still shooting at Cootie or if they were now aiming for Tou. Tou was certainly more concerned of losing balance than he was of being punctured. Still, he did his best to watch and duck as the darts dashed by, while also looking down to watch his feet as he scurried across the ridge and then down the slope to where Cootie dangled by his hand. No more hooping, no more hollering, no more shrieking, now there was only lamentations as he was forced to wiggle this way and that lest he be hit by another projectile while he hung.

After seeing the arrow save Cootie’s life (at least temporarily), Tabuh glanced back across the way at the central tower and saw that things had changed. There were now more humans in the throne room and none of them looked sympathetic to the man in the dragon helmet. He was pinned between the King and the Princess. She glowered at the intruder, attempting to look down her nose at him but as she stood only as tall as her father this required her to tilt her head so far back that her face was nearly parallel to the vaulted ceiling. She looked like her father aswell. Big dark eyes and curly black hair, hers cut close to her scalp so that it could be hidden away beneath a helmet, and like the Cagistan, she had her hand on her weapon. The Princess hadn’t come alone. Almost a dozen more guards accompanied her – likely more, for some appeared to be standing out of view from Tabuh’s vantage. She saw the edges of two other noblemen, unarmed and unrecognizable to her although she was not familiar with the faces of the Sondoran nobility outside of the Cagistan’s nuclear family. The Queen appeared to be missing, Tabuh noticed, or standing back. This struck her as odd. Queen Kryziera was not known to be weak or vulnerable. If anything, her aggressive nature had been one of the greatest threats to the Cagistan’s reign. While the King might bark at an intruder, the Queen would bite.

There was no time to dwell on her majesty’s absence as it seemed soon she would need to take her shot. Turning her gaze back towards the roof below her, she caught a glimpse of something odd. Checking on Tou and Cootie would have to wait as she redirected her attention to some sort of flying object which appeared to be carrying – her eyes grew wide as ancient legends surged to the forefront of her mind: *Creaton!*

The being was engulfed in scarlet fire, like legends said of the Moon Dragon Man, but the Moon Dragon Man was supposed to have the dark skin of an earth elf. Not only was this

person far lighter, this person also appeared to not be skinned at all. Simply fire and bones aside from the immense amount of weaponry that girdled their armored hips. *Creaton?*

The Black Crown himself was also supposed to sport massive black wings, feathered like an eagle's with a span as wide as a dragon's, yet this was not the case. Had it been, then the fiery fiend would've likely been flying of their own accord rather than riding upon some sort of Space City machine.

Most zoomers looked relatively similar to a small boat, but the bow of this particular hover craft had been so altered that one would not have immediately expected the vessel to be a zoomer. The front part of the hull was hidden behind a giant metal grill. The base of the steel plate was sloped down, like the tusks of a shovelasaurus, and the top fanned out like a triceratop's crest. If it weren't a flying vehicle, then it would've looked like an oversized snow plow. Orbitting the castle, all it could scoop up was clouds. Though, Tabuh had a feeling it was less for scooping and more for smashing. The blazing banshee on board was not alone. They were accompanied by a bearn, a chidra, an earth elf, and a dark skinned little Knome.

Must bae on our sahd. Tabuh thought when she saw the puny pilot, though, a Knome – even if on your team – wasn't always a good sign. *For better or for worse.* And a banshee on her side made her for a moment question whether or not she was, in fact, on the right side to begin with. *Too late now,* she figured. As the monstrous zoomer careened around the bend of the central tower, she turned her attention back to the two boys she'd come with.

Her heart sank.

Cootie was upside down now. The toes of his boots were wedged into rivets he'd made in the shingles, his head was still at the edge of the roof. His left hand grasped that edge so tightly that his nellaf stripes turned pale as blood fled his fierce grip. Straddling the drunk, was Tou. Both his boots were treacherously placed on the lip of the roof. Both his hands were clutching at the end of the arrow that pinned Cootie's right hand.

"Ready?" Tou asked.

Cootie could only wax unintelligibly. His lamentations abruptly ended with a yelp as Tou didn't wait a moment more. Locking in his upper body, the earth elf lifted with his legs in one fluid upward motion. The arrow was yanked from the roof, though it kept Cootie's hand rightly pinned, and for this Tou was thankful for as he stood back upright he lost his balance and nearly tumbled over the nellaf and off the roof. The kitchen boots held fast behind him and Tou held fast to Cootie's hand-arrow, so rather than falling to his death he simply leaned out over the edge.

Over his shoulders, back in the tower, Tabuh nearly had a heart attack.

As soon as he could regain his balance, he did. Throwing himself against the roof, he scurried up to the ridge. Arrows still criss-crossed around them, zooming in from the outer towers to nail the shingles at their feet. No arrows came from the central tower, the one where the Dragon had gone, which meant all the two had to do was get over the ridge and then they could take a breather and regain their composure before deciding what to do next. Rushing for that reprieve, Tou didn't look to make sure Cootie was following. Though the moaning of the moron suggested he wasn't far behind. As he neared the apex, he leapt over and came down on his thighs on the otherside, sliding like a soccer player beneath the cover of the ridge.

On this side of the roof, it was not extended. There was no grand view and perilous fall at the edge but rather the wall of the central tower. Windows even lined it. Granted, they'd have to fight their way up to the floor above, but breaking in there seemed far more reasonable than

getting the guzzling goon to make the jump to the next floor. Tou turned to relay the plan only to see that his leadership had been usurped. Cootie was blazing on.

When Tou had hurdled the ridge, Cootie had clomped to a stop. In the midst of swarms of arrows, he stooped down to snatch a metal flask from his boot. He'd attempted for a second to unscrew the cap with his right hand – the one with a full arrow still protruding from his palm – but gave that up to put the lid between his teeth and twist the body of the container around until it came loose. Tipping the thing upside down, he swallowed what was left with one gargantuan gulp then shoved the flask back into his boot and took off. That's when Tou turned around and saw.

“Farak!”

Bounding to his feet, Tou shot up the slope. Just as he made it to the ridge, Cootie made his leap. In the drunk's defense, it was good form. Unfortunately, Cootie was a little too heavy and the roof was a little too far and so he was bound to fail even before he left the ground but, fortunately, his comrade was right behind him. In a physical feat that Tou was sure he could never hope to repeat, he dove up after Cootie, cradled his crooked companion's cushioned cheeks like a volley baller catching the ball mid air. Tou gave Cootie the shove he needed to reach the lip of the next roof. Cootie's hollers of horror turned to guffaws of glory as his top half slammed down onto the shingles. His right hand slapped down, using the arrow that still protruded from his paw as an anchor, and that was that. He made it.

Well, not quite. He'd been quite loud and was still stuck until Tou could rise to remove him. Cootie wasn't scooting but, though not a particularly long fellow, he was plenty long enough to be used as a ladder. Wasting no time, Tou scaled his friend and scampered to the edge of the shattered window. His hand was on his hilt as he glanced in.

He immediately let out a sigh, “Selu.”

Their commotion had gone unnoticed and he clearly saw why. The Dragon had been beheaded – not in a literal sense. The reptilian face had been removed but the being beneath the mask remained unslain. A chorus of gasps had distracted the throne room from the soon-to-be intruders outside. Tou had just missed the big reveal: The Dragon was Tenchi Kou.

Tou turned to look back at the tower from whence they'd come, up to the window where Tabuh watched over them. She was a flurry of movement. Frantically, she pointed at them. Pointing and then pulling her arm back just to re-point. Tou's head whipped back around and he saw why. A woman was sprinting across the hall towards Tenchi Kou. This woman had a dagger in her hand. There was no way Tou could get there in time to stop her, but that was why they had Tabuh posted up. It was now or never.

Tou rolled out of the way just as the first gun shot rang out.

BANG! But that shot was quickly followed. BANG! BANG! BANG!

Though Tou believed Tabuh never missed, it appeared Tabuh was not so sure. Still, neither one nor the three that followed would yet land for a fifth bang interrupted them. Unlike the gunshots, there was no pop to this bang. It echoed but not off the walls of the Stronghold, it rather seemed to echo through the mind like an invasive thought. Loud like thunder, rumbling and all encompassing, but also sharp like fingernails screeching down a chalkboard. Then as soon as it began it was over.

It was the sound of time splitting apart. The sound of a moment freezing and a magical darkness descending. A new dimension had wedged itself between seconds. This was Total Darkness, the infamous spell of the Doom Warriors that allowed them to challenge another mortal to a timeless duel. Solaris' light ceased to define objects, instead energy resonated from

within and objects depicted themselves with a glow proportional to their power. The four bullets, still warm from the barrel of Tabuh's revolver, glowed like tiny embers as they lined up just a yard from the head of the Cagirent's Queen.

Tenchi Kou, the Dragon, saw this when he turned around – but first he lit a cigarette. He recognized the darkness. He'd even expected it. It had been a part of the plan. But it still sent chills down his spine. Those chills were only the first wave, as the second surged from the nape of his neck all the way to his toes when he saw the Queen posed behind him, blade brandished and ready to slip into his flesh and wrench his life away. That surprise wasn't necessarily unexpected. He'd considered the Queen going to gut him in the realm of possibility. The four glowing bullets beside her head had not been in this realm. Taking a long drag on his stogie, he followed the slugs trajectories to the window he'd only just broken in through. His head cocked to the side as he exhaled. Identifying the culprits only made him more confused.

In Total Darkness, one can see through walls. While most inanimate structures retain a bit of energy, their glow is faint. If a figure happens to be more brilliant on the otherside, they're hardly hidden. This was the case as Tenchi stared at Tou standing beside the broken window, hiding flat against the wall outside the chamber. He could even see Cootie, still lying on the roof below Tou. These two shining silhouettes did not fit the shape of those allies that were supposed to be close behind him. In fact, their shapes didn't fit the shape of anyone he knew.

“Who're your friends?”

Tenchi whipped around so fast he nearly fell. He winced and reached up to massage his neck as he turned to address the culprit of the insidious encantation that had just saved his life. He had to squint to look at her, her glow was immense. The mystical crimson fire that engulfed her in the light of time seemed to have grown two-fold in the timeless realm. Her features were so distorted by her shine that she was hardly more than a pulsating blob of energy.

“You tell me, Einna.” Tenchi shrugged, “They're not with y'all?”

“As much as I'd love to ruin Zion Cage's day,” Einna strode away from Tenchi, putting the frozen Queen between them so that she could observe the bullets that would soon obliterate the royal's skull, “I'd no intentions of starting a world war.” Then she peered out the broken window towards the tower with the bathrooms and stopped, “I recognize that one.”

Stepping aside so that the dagger thrust of the petrified Queen would no longer land in his back when Einna's spell stopped, he joined Einna in staring out the window. Pointing to the two personoid shapes on the roof, he asked, “Which one?”

“Neither. Further-”

Einna reached out to move Tenchi's pointing hand but the mortal dove out of the way. With his cigarette pinched between his lips, he cursed through clenched teeth as he hit the ground. He skidded on his butt another two or three yards before coming to a stop, rebuking the undead as he did, “You've been a banshee for a thousand years, have you forgotten?!”

Einna snickered, “A quick touch won't kill you.”

“Yea, yea, when I get the Blade back your little jokes won't work anymore...” Tenchi growled. Picking himself up off the floor, he gestured back out the broken window but he didn't walk back over to her to look for himself. After all, in Total Darkness, he could see through the wall almost as well as he could see through the broken window. He asked, “Who is it?”

“The missing Sentry heiress – I assume. Her glow looks just like Erin's did – Erin Sentry.”

Though Einna pointed with her own hand her magnificent aura rendered her pointer finger indiscernable. It was as if she was holding a torch. Tenchi wasn't super concerned about

seeing the shape of this third person, he was more interested in what his undead savior was saying. He gave her a moment to elaborate but when she didn't he let his excitement get the best of him.

"Erin Sentry? *The* Erin Sentry?" Tenchi asked, "The ancient warrior-musician?"

"Ancient!" Einna yelled, "I'm older than her!"

Tenchi lowered his voice and clarified, "Are we talking about the Erin Sentry that fought in the Battle Grand II – alongside Selu Creh himself?"

"Yes." Einna nodded, "Some descendant of hers fired these shots."

"Wow." Tenchi murmured. He let his jaw hang loose for a moment before asking, "Is she hot?"

"Not compared to me." Einna would've winked at Tenchi and bit her lip had it not rotted away a millennia ago.

He picked his jaw back up and moved on, "We should save her when we escape, okay? Oh and, speaking of saving lives," Tenchi turned back towards the Cagirent's Queen, "can we save her?"

Einna now stepped between Tenchi and the row of bullets. Her flickering energy was so vast, he couldn't even see the slugs anymore – even the Queen had seemingly vanished behind the banshee's otherworldly inferno.

"I said I had no intentions of starting a world war." Tenchi could hear the smirk on her skull's face, "buuut...what is the ancient human phrase? Ah yes, 'Sailah-vee!'"

"If she dies," Tenchi paused. Since Einna couldn't see his face, he had to use the break to express his seriousness. Plus, the pause gave him time to take another drag. With the smoke still swirling in his lungs, he finished, "the Cagirent will go to war with the Trinity Nations."

"Not immediately." Einna countered, "Not without allies."

Exhaling, Tenchi argued back, "He'll take it out on the Clans. My people will suffer."

"They've been suffering, Kou, that's why we're here." Einna pointed past Tenchi, making him flinch as her infernal phalanges nearly grazed his chest when she raised her arm, "Go get your sword so you can defend our people."

His posture stiffened but he obeyed her order, grumbling as he turned to march towards the throne stage. As he passed the Cagirent, he mumbled over his shoulder, "Why don't we put those bullets in front of Zion's head and spare his bride? We've got time."

"Truth matters, Tenchi." Einna grunted. Her boots hadn't budged since she'd planted them between the Queen and the Dragon, "His bride was about to murder you. Survivors will know that, no matter what their King claims. The Princess isn't as fascist as her father. She will uphold the truth."

"Yea." Tenchi muttered, "And that's what makes her more dangerous."

"To both your Clans and the Cagirent." Einna agreed.

Tenchi walked up the steps of the dais to stand under the canopy that shaded the throne. For a moment, his mood was interrupted by a funny thought. For all the gold and intricate embroidery on the King's throne, in Total Darkness, the chair was just a chair. A faint ghost of a shape that existed with no greater power than any other sitting furniture. *Although, compared to Einna, I'm hardly any brighter than any other mortal.* The thought humiliated him in a way that was simultaneously enraging and humbling. Pivoting from the throne, he turned to scan the pale silhouettes of the statues mounted on half-columns between the windows. Between the statue of Zenobia Cage and Iahtro Cage (though his effigy had been toppled), stood the real Einna Yelkoa. Had it not been for the Crow's Plague, ten centuries prior, Einna Yelkoa and her barbarian

hordes would have snatched Sondor from Zenobia and Iahtro's grasp. If he were to listen to anyone about how to overthrow a regime and how to protect the sovereignty of the indigenous human clans, then it should be Einna. *Progress doesn't come without pain*, he told himself.

He ashed his cigarette on the royal seat then raised his voice to ask Einna, "So what's the new plan?"

Raising your voice was quite unnecessary in Total Darkness. The two participants could've heard each other from opposite ends of the globe. Their voices reverberated around in the black void of frozen time as if they were intrusive thoughts. Einna was able to respond from across the throne room as if they were standing next to each other, "Roughly the same as the original. Just adding in those two on the roof and the girl in the tower."

On either side of the throne were narrow spiral staircases, walled with golden bars that hardly even showed up in Total Darkness. The stairs were more for decoration than for access although they were the easiest, albeit uncomfortable especially for the six-foot-six Kou, way to reach the roof of the throne canopy – where the secondary decorative-canopy sheltered the Mystak Blade. Tenchi was stooping and clambering up one of these tight tornadoes of steps while Einna elaborated.

"I'll turn into the foxbird – the monstrous version, of course – before restarting time. I'll be sure to let the King see the bullets hit the Queen before he sees me. His rage will keep him ineffective but determined, so his guards will rush to his aid against me."

"And you'll be f..." his words trailed off into swears as he squirmed and twisted. He'd gotten stuck in the narrow column of spiral stairs.

Einna knew what he was going to say anyways, "I'll be fine. It shouldn't take long. Your brother will show up with the zoomer and scoop you up. You just have to let them know about the newcomers. The sooner you all escape, the sooner I can."

"Selu!" Tenchi exclaimed as he dove to freedom, followed by a, "Farak!" as his head smashed against the altar that bore his beloved. Rattled by his commotion or possibly tipped by the will of the universe, the magical sword popped out of its cradle and fell into the open arms of the Dragon. He hopped to his feet triumphant, pointing the Mystak Blade towards the three moons beyond the vaulted ceiling. Smoke streamed from his nostrils as his chest heaved.

"Grab the sheath." Einna barked, "Let's go."

Rather than trying to wiggle down the narrow spiral stairs, Tenchi decided to hop off the balcony, catching himself with a bent knee and his back to the throne. Rising, he began moving towards the broken window and the two strangers frozen on the roof outside. As he crossed the throne room, Einna began to transform.

In Total Darkness, Einna was hardly even the shape of a person. While a human-shaped blob did outshine the bonfire of glow that engulfed her, it was hard to look at her long enough to make it out. As she morphed, it appeared as if the flames were turning to magma. Rather than tendrils and dancing tongues, the edges of the energy softened and smoothed. They still coursed upwards, like flames, growing up and then out like a cross. The extremities of the cross fanned out and as they widened they began to look like blades of fire oncemore. Only in the light of moving time would one be able to discern that it wasn't the fire of her ethereal aura but rather the feathers of her foxbird form. Few had seen this particular rendition of the fowl, for rarely did she spare the witnesses. She stood larger than a curlhead. Her massive talons pierced the tile floor like a miner's pick as she stepped out from between the King and his Queen. Still, she loomed over the pair. Her wingspan was large enough that she could've swatted them both aside but she sought to break the Cagistan's heart before breaking any of his bones.

Tenchi gasped when he saw her new figure, "Do you think that's *too* big?"

"My frozen heart is the same size." Einna explained, "The bigger the better. Let them stab and shoot me. They'll give up and flee in fear before they realize I'm a banshee and all it would take is an arrow to the breast."

Tenchi was by the window. He peaked out between the shattered edges of glass and scrutinized the ivory silhouettes of the alien allies. Taking one last drag, he then flicked his cigarette past the two. The little light of the ember faded over the side of the roof, eventually disappearing behind the faint glow of the walls below. Without turning back to face Einna, so that he would not have to watch the bullets hit the Queen, he said, "Ready when you are."

Without a sound, time returned. The absence of a signal made the silence seem almost loud to Tenchi as color snapped back over the darkness. It was like a light had just been flung on in a dark room except his eyes needed no time to adjust. All of a sudden, there was color and, all of a sudden, people were moving.

A long haired earth elf jumped back into the window frame and nearly fell backwards when he saw Tenchi Kou standing there on the other side. Tenchi stuck out his hand to catch Tou with a handshake.

"Tenchi Kou."

"Tou Fou."

But before introductions could continue, commotion in the throne room exploded. When Tenchi caught Tou's hand, the bullets caught the Queen's skull. One after the other, each only a fraction of an inch off the shot they followed. They struck her in the upper temple and left out the otherside a little closer to her ear, clearing a tunnel through her head wide enough to see through. The bullets churned up her brain and dragged the brains and blood with them on the way out, bursting through the otherside of her skull like a geyser, gushing the contents of the cranium on the unfortunate soul that stood next to her: the princess.

It was as if a bucket of red paint had been dumped on Melaruse. The bullets that left her mother's head struck her in the shoulder, bowling her over, but she didn't care. She would feel the pain later. She couldn't feel anything in that instant. Nor could she hear. All she could do was see, smell, and taste: the sight of her mother with her head burst wide open, the smell of the charred flesh, and the taste of blood in her open mouth.

As Princess Melaruse fell backwards, Zion Cage bound forwards. Dropping to his knees, he caught his queen by her torso. Her crooked dagger clattered to the floor. His arms held her body but his hands reached up to cradle her head as it lulled back. As blood began to cover his hands and red began to fill his vision, one single sensation rang throughout his consciousness. Unlike his daughter, he could feel. He could feel the weight of his wife's head in his hands seep away. She felt like a manikin in his arms. Terrified, he dropped her. No noise was made when her body hit the ground.

A thunderous voice turned the Cagistan's attention to his left. The horrendous sound of their words was only rendered more intolerable by their jeering nature.

"Little Cage man, give me your crown!"

The creature leapt into the air, breaking tile as its talons pushed off. It spread massive scarlet wings, spraying fire from the feather tips as it did. The plumes didn't fall like fire but instead zipped across the chamber like the bolts of crossbows, barraging the congregation that had yet to recover from the sudden murder of their Queen. Whirling up towards the roof, the beast wasted no time. It sent two more waves of sharp fiery feathers down on its foes then dove back down, reptilian feet first, towards the King.

Of the twenty-plus guards in the room, only two were close enough to come to their King's aid with this first assault. They'd been standing behind Melause before. One stayed behind, dragging the Princess to the edge of the chamber, while the other charged forward with their eyes on the fiery falcon. That was their mistake: Zion didn't need help. Enraged and desperate for revenge, Zion had drawn his sword and began to rise to strike a counter blow to the beast when his own guardsman collided with him and both men tumbled to the floor.

Rolling out of the way, Zion hopped back to his feet just in time to see his foolish soldier caught in the grasp of the giant foxbird. The man screamed as the monster leapt once more to circle the room. There was a terrible crunch to go with the sound of blistering marble tile and after the crunch the trooper ceased to wail.

Zion rose ready for round two but something caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. There was action at the window to his left. Hatred burst through his rage, not to subside it but rather to redirect it.

Tenchi Kou.

There the man was. Making his escape through the very window he'd initially broken in through. And he was not alone. There was another man with him: an earth elf.

He glanced over his shoulder and lunged to his right as the dead guardsman landed where he'd previously been standing. Other than throwing the body at him, it seemed the bird was thoroughly distracted by the nineteen other guards there and so Zion turned back to the window. Two guards that had just jumped through the window to chase after the seditious Clansman and his mysterious allies but no sooner had they cleared the window sill than were they knocked right back through. One hit the floor of the throne room clutching his throat, blood spurting through his fingers, while the other clutched a stump of an arm and fell onto his rear squealing like an infant. Resisting the urge to put the two out of their misery, Zion rushed past them to look out the window.

When the Queen's head erupted, spewing blood like a volcano, Tou was too busy gasping at the sight of the giant red bird which had suddenly appeared – blocking his view of the assassination. However, Tenchi, who still held his hand, was able to maneuver him out of the way so he could join them on the roof outside the window.

Tenchi clasped him on the shoulder with his other hand, saying, "We gotta go, bud!"

Tou snapped out of it. He nodded to Tenchi then dropped to his butt to slide down the roof to Cootie. The poor drunk was no longer hanging from the roof. He had managed to pull himself up. But his hand was still pinned so once back on the roof he just gave up, lying flat on the shingles like a castaway that had washed up on some sandy shore. Rather than help Tou with Cootie, Tenchi scanned the horizon for his getaway ride then turned his attention back to the window. Sure enough, guards had seen him hop out. They were in the process of hopping out after him now.

A smile slipped across the Kou's lips. He slid the Mystak Blade from its sheath. Already, something was happening. The sword was beginning to shine. The silver blade was now glimmering gold, so much so it even gave off a bit of light. Holding it with one hand, he aimed it at the two guards who had just come through the window.

"Bang." He said.

Though there was no noise, his sword did recoil as if it were a shotgun. A small golden beam, flat like a blade but consisting of nothing but light, shot from the katana's tip and struck the first guard in the arm – cutting it clean off. Before the soldier could start to scream, the other had already begun to rush back through the window but he was too late.

“Bang.”

Tenchi fired again. This time he clipped the poor lad’s throat. Blood immediately burst from his neck as he fell through the window. His armless comrade hesitated for a moment, watching his forearm bounce off the lip of the roof before giving up and diving after his wounded peer.

Cootie, finally freed from where he’d had his hand pinned to the roof, caught the debodied-arm before it could fall further. Turning, he raised it as if toasting with Tenchi. Tenchi cocked his head to the side, about to inquire on the mental capacities of the chunky nellaf but Tou beat him to the next question with something far more pertinent to their current situation.

“Now what?” Tou asked.

Tenchi nodded and pointed north, “The escape!”

Tou and Cootie followed Tenchi’s finger to see something that at first they didn’t recognize. To be honest, their first instinct was that this object was not “the escape” but rather a stick in the spokes of said escape – considering the fact that it was hurtling like an asteroid towards the throne room. In the two or three seconds they had to observe it before it smashed into the façade of the Stronghold, they were able to recognize that this was no reverse-deus ex machina but in fact *the* deus ex machina and it was *especially* contrived. It appeared to be some sort of Space City machine, like a zoomer or a speeder, but the face of the ship had been fitted with a giant bulldozer shovel and it looked as if it planned to doze considering the fact that the crew – a bearn, a chidra, an earth elf, and a tan little man (either a Knome or a child) – were all bracing for impact. Throwing on decorative helmets, they crouched low in the vessel.

Following suit, Tou and Cootie flopped onto their bellies and clung to the shingles. Tenchi, on the otherhand, dashed down the roof towards the ship. Having sheathed his sword, he waved his arms and hooped and hollered to garner the pilot’s attention but to no avail. Luckily, he only made it about five yards from the side-wall window before the machine passed out of view and slammed into the front-wall. The entire castle shook as a third kind of boom bombarded their ears.

Stooping to use his hands to regain balance, Tenchi turned back to his new friends.

“Well,” He sighed, “we’re going back in.”

“Back in?” Tou asked, still lying flat on the roof. The shingles hadn’t stopped rattling. The entire Stronghold seemed to be shuddering. Tou continued, “That thing’ll still fly?”

“Oh yeah, sure.” Tenchi shrugged, marching back over towards the window, “We just have to fight our way to it.” Gesturing more aggressively for them to hurry, he reiterated, “Back in!”

Back inside, the fight had paused temporarily. The explosive arrival of a flying-giant, mechanical shovelasaurus had caught everyone but the banshee off guard. The Kaboomer had obliterated the stairs, the double-doors, and the stained glass that rose above the entrance. Glass, wood, and stone scattered into the throne room like the front of a sandstorm.

Most of the guards near the anterior of the chamber had already left, six had immediately gone to escort the four royals that accompanied the Queen and Princess to safety. The others (twelve of them living) were now helping the wounded Princess face off against the giant foxbird, deeper inside the chamber. They surrounded Einna and she had not been fairing so well. She’d only killed one more guard since that first assault. While she had maimed a few others and wounded more, they’d gotten more licks on her in total. Her talons were covered with lacerations. Her wings filled with bolts and arrows. Her breast peppered with punctures. Luckily, as a banshee, there was no blood to be spilled. Only a skull to be severed or a heart to be

shattered and so long as she avoided such fates she could war on. This fact about the nigh-
eternally damned was not well known but the problem was, having survived so many blows
already without any significant impacts on her capabilities, her enemies were beginning to
realize that they needed to attack more necessary bits. Princess Melaruse didn't know it was the
infamous Einna nor could she tell it was a banshee but she believed it to be an undead demon of
some sort and thus told her comrades that the only surefire way to slay it would be to cut off its
head. While that may have seemed impossible, Melaruse was one of the fiercest warriors (even
when severely wounded) and her guards (at least those surviving) were the best in the country.
They had a chance. That is, until the Clansman's backup blasted in.

A large bearn in an eagle mask was the first to land a blow. The dust hadn't even settled
before the giant archer had gotten off a shot. The bolt struck one of Melaruse's guardsmen in the
throat. It didn't kill him instantly, but it certainly took him out of the fight and halved his chances
of survival. The other half, then, was quickly accounted for. Next to the eagle-masked bearn was
a serpent-masked chidra who had withdrawn an odd item from within her coat and alley-ooped it
to their bestial leader. It wasn't quite a ball, but rather a collection of vials connected to a fuse
which was just about done burning through a wic when the monster kicked it back down to the
ground. The device smashed the floor of the throne room and exploded – knocking all twelve of
the guards off their feet and forcing Melaruse to kneel.

As the bearn and chidra reloaded, a third intruder stepped off the ship. Not only was her
face masked, with the effigy of a barren, but her entire body was hidden behind bulbous plates of
war torn armor. She bore so much weight that when she jumped off the abominable zoomer she
had to fall to one knee to catch herself. She looked up to meet the infuriated eyes of the Princess
as she rose and pointed her katana.

Melaruse rose too, drawing her massive weapon as she did. The blade was twice the size
of her opponent's Fou-style, in both width and length. With the wound in her shoulder, it was
amazing that she was able to bear its weight but her rage and adrenaline mixed together to grant
her temporary super-human strength. She held the sword hilt first, the blade tucked behind her,
as she sprinted towards her foe. Despite the barren mask, Melaruse knew who it was. The red
shoulder plate with the black spikes would've given it away if the mannerisms hadn't. She was
Tenchi Kou's best friend, Captain Wake Ragashi, someone Melaruse had wanted to kill for a
long time now, back when she didn't have as good a reason as she had now.

Two of her soldiers attempted to accompany her but were prevented. The eagle-masked
bearn stopped the first. Sticking an arrow in the man's left thigh then their right after they
refused to cease rushing onwards. Then, to be sure, he drove a third arrow into the man's collar
bone as he collapsed to the rugged throne room floor. The guard on Melaruse's right had the
snake-masked fiend to fend with. To make matters worse, he was already wounded. His hip bone
had been scraped by one of the foxbird's magic feathers, causing his run to be more of a hobble.
The snake-masked intruder didn't have traditional projectiles like her peer, but she did have
more bombs and shortly after she had sent the first she'd lit the second. Her eyes met the
troopers, like a pitcher connecting with the man at bat just before the pitch. Melaruse was
blinded by fury, she didn't notice the arrows nor the explosive, and so the veteran knew he
couldn't simply dodge the device. The explosion would hurt his Princess. He could smack it
away with his ax but that would likely cause it to explode and blast himself and his commander.
There was a third option however. He could use his shield arm, cradle the bomb, and take the
brunt of the blow to save Melaruse. A true believer in the Cagirent, that is what the man did.
Tossing his ax, he jumped up. He opened out his shield arm so that the falling explosive

wouldn't bounce off and he twisted in the air so that his back was to the Princess. The bomb fell into his now empty sword hand and he pressed it to his chest, sandwiching it between his breast and his shield before – BOOM!

The explosion nearly knocked Melaruse off her stride, but she caught herself and instead it acted as a bit of a boost. Up went her sword and down came Wake's. As their blades clanged, the fourth intruder cringed. He then peaked up. His mask was that of a human's face. The sneering face had a thin black mustache, bent up on either end, and a narrow soul patch that split their chin. He'd been cowering, as ordered, beneath the steering wheel and the seat but now he had crawled over to the edge of the vessel. He scanned the chamber. His eyes didn't pause on Melaruse, the dead queen, nor the gigantic red bird beast. In fact, his eyes scanned and rescanned the room without pause. Finally, he remarked to himself, "Where's Tenchi?"

Only two people in the room knew. The first being Einna Yelkao. She was busy distracting the remaining guards. The second being Zion Cage. He was busy guarding the broken window, preventing Tenchi Kou from re-entering. While, Tenchi plus Tou and Cootie would've been able to subdue Zion, the window frame offered the perfect protection from such a triple team. Tou and Cootie were forced to linger behind Tenchi, glancing over their shoulders in case arrows started flying once more, while the Mystak Blade parried Zion's Spur.

"I could cut your stupid sword in half." Tenchi threatened.

"Then do it, Clansman." Zion snapped.

The Cagirent yanked his blade back, wobbling it in his hands like a baseball batter, while Tenchi's blade began to turn red – emanating a glow like that of the demonic bird behind the King. As the shine solidified, Tenchi made his move. He jumped forward, raising his legs high so that his feet would land on the window sill. He sliced upwards, from left to right, hoping to force his foe to parry. Of course, Zion would not parry. He knew the power of the Mystak Blade. And he had no need after all, his blade was at least a foot longer than the Kou's. Still, he let his enemy believe it as he knew only then would Tenchi commit. He drove his sword down with both arms, like an ax swinging down to split a log, but before it could smack the Mystak Blade it disappeared. Suddenly, Zion was only holding the hilt. A mere baton. Tenchi's sword skimmed by, cutting nothing but air, then Zion pressed a button on the handle and his blade shot out once more. The tip thrust up towards Tenchi's exposed breast. There was nothing the Dragon could do but push off his feet and plummet backwards.

Tou and Cootie rushed up to catch him. Zion jumped up on the ledge after him, ready to skewer him. Sweat beaded up around his temple, drule bubbled at the edges of his lips, his eyes were wide and wild. This was it. This would-

BANG!

Zion was blown back.

"Se-farakin-lu!" Tenchi yelled.

Tou and Cootie shoved up and tossed Tenchi back into the window frame. He kicked off the sill and landed in the throne room, aiming the Mystak Blade at the Cagirent who lay on the floor, clutching his breast. Blood seeped out between the king's fingers. Tou and Cootie hopped through and landed behind Tenchi.

"Stay down." Tenchi commanded.

Zion moved to get up but his body convulsed, forcing him to remain on the floor.

"To the zoomer?" Tou asked.

Tenchi let his glower linger a moment longer before getting on with the plan. Captain Wake Ragashi was still sparring with Princess Melaruse Cage before the vehicle. Wake wasn't

going easy, it was miraculous that Melaruse, wounded as she was, was able to keep up but the adrenaline that made it possible also gave her tunnel vision. If any of the trio approaching had sought to slay her, they could've easily done so. Instead, Tou and Tenchi jumped into the Kaboomer without giving her so much as a glance. Cootie, on the other hand, did give her a little something. He hoisted up the arm he'd garnered from the unfortunate guard earlier and thwacked Melaruse hard on the back of the head. She fell face forward. Wake could've killed her then but she too resisted. Instead, she looked up at Cootie.

"The farak?"

"For Icelore!" He hollered.

Cootie then tried to jump into the Kaboomer. The lip of the ship hit him in the gut and he folded over. Sniper and Pesh dragged the drunk on in and Wake climbed in behind him. Kenchi was latched onto Tenchi's legs, his big brother had to pry him off and reattach his hands to the steering wheel. Then he made eyes with Einna. The great bird needed not a second more – she immediately shrank into a more reasonable sized foxbird and swooped low, dodging the final assaults of the remaining guards and zooming out the broken window. As those guards then turned to face the intruders, the ship began to rise. Sniper knocked an arrow and Pesh held a match near the next bomb's fuse.

"The tower." Tou clasped Tenchi on the shoulder, "The shooter. She's ours."

Tenchi nodded, grasping Kenchi's shoulder, "The shoo-"

"On it!" Kenchi exclaimed, "Brace yourselves!"

The machine was levitating. He could've turned it around and left through the hole they had made but the guards were slowly inching forward. They were doing the calculus that Kenchi had to do. Could enough of them get past the archer and the bomber before the zoomer could zoom away? Potentially. Thus, instead of pivoting, Kenchi decided to forge onwards. Pushing the thruster as far as it would go, the Kaboomer leapt forward – aiming for the broken window.

It broke through the façade beside it instead, severing the halfcolumn that rose there and toppling the statue of Zenobia Cage. The sculpture crashed down next to the wounded Cagirent, just barely missing him as the rest of the debris rained down upon him. The stoney face of his ancestor rolled over to stare at him. The statue seemed almost to scowl. Zion snarled back. Howling to the heavens with rage as Tenchi Kou, and his crew, zipped away.

Arrows were beginning to fly again outside but the bulldozer that was the Kaboomer was hardly vulnerable from underneath. The passengers kept their heads low as they flew over to the bathroom tower where their shooter awaited. Kenchi wasn't the most dexterous, smashing the side of the tower as he parallel parked alongside the window, but Tabuh wasn't complaining. She only needed to make eye contact with Tou before jumping on. He did his best to help her land in the vessel but the leap was still not the most comfortable. Once she'd caught her breath, as Kenchi pulled the machine out of the crevasse he'd carved in the tower, she faced the man they'd come to save.

"Now what?" She asked.

Tenchi looked at her, then Tou, then Cootie. The oaf reached down and pulled a flask from his boot. Chuckling, Tenchi pulled out a cigarette and lit it by pushing it into a small hole on the ship's dashboard. Turning back to Tabuh, he said, "Now we get the hell out of Cage Town."

- - -

The door opened and silver eyes scanned the dining room. Three old folks sat at a table in the middle of the room, sipping black coffee to wake them up and light beer to calm them down, two young back packers stooped over a map in the corner, plotting their next adventure with empty shot glasses as markers, but that was it for the morning crowd. The bar was so empty, the owner wasn't even there to tend it.

The customer piped up, "No matter-"

The silver eyed bouncer had to stoop to grab the patron by the shoulder, "What if Budd doesn't recognize-"

"I've known him for years!" The little man crowed, he ruffled the newspaper in his grasp as if it added credence to his claims, "It'll be fine!"

"Yes, but I didn't-"

The Knome patted the bouncer's armored shin guards, assuring him, "It'll be fiine." He squirmed out of the spirits grasp, saying, "For a guy without any flesh, you sure are a bundle of nerves!"

After a deep sigh, the armored man stopped protesting and walked back outside to watch the street. Victorious, the old Knome had a little skip in his step as he strutted over to the bar. Unfortunately, his grin was short lived. No sooner did he climb up onto a stool and unfurl his newspaper than did he curse the first higher power that popped into his mind.

He read the headline aloud, "*Queen Cagirent Dead – Zion Vows Vengeance.*" He shook his head, "Farak." Then continued to read, "*Cage Town, Sondor, June 3 – Citizens woke up to sirens this morning in the capitol of the Cagirent as ax-toting soldiers marched through the streets, spreading like the rumors of conspiracy that will soon plague all of Mystakle Planet. What is currently known to be fact is threefold:*

1. *On the evening of June 2, during the birthday banquet of Zion Cage 5, the Queen of Sondor was murdered in the Stronghold.*
2. *The King of Sondor, Zion Cage 5, claims it was an assassination and accuses the infamous Tenchi Kou.*
3. *Whether or not the wielder of the Mystak Blade was involved, the Mystak Blade was stolen from the Stronghold-*"

"No, no, no!" Each negative came with a finger wag. The stumpy old restaurateur appeared behind the bar so abruptly it was as if he had used some sort of dark magic and teleported. His finger kept wagging, "No, no," until it stopped and turned to point at the Knome, "no sitting at the bar unless you're buying!"

"You're buying." The Knome lowered his paper, his forehead furrowing.

"I'm buying?" The bar tender retorted, "*I'm buying?!*"

The Knome dropped the paper on the counter and shrugged, "Yea, Budd, you owe me."

"I owe you?" The poor human appeared to be stuck in a rhetorical loop, "*I owe you?!*"

"Yea?" The Knome glanced over his shoulder and checked to see if the other patrons were listening. They were certainly watching, although it did not appear they were listening. The old men were raising their empty steins and the vagabond boys in the back were holding up handfuls of empty shot glasses. The bar's audiences' eyes were bloodshot and their eyelids drooping asymmetrically as they stared right over the black-garbed Knome to glower at the slovenly steward that harassed him. Turning back to said slob, the Knome gestured with his eyes down to the paper he'd laid on the counter. When his aggressor's eyes followed his, he saw that a long slender sword had appeared, blacker than the ink it lay over. The Knome said, "It's me, son, I'm Grandfather."

“Farak!”

The owner slapped his hands down, clawing at the edges of the *Mystakle Times*, trying to bundle the sword up in the news to hide it from any prying eyes. Of course, by the time he was halfway rolling it up, the sword had vanished.

“Relax, Sam.” Grandfather leaned back in his stool with his hands on his hips, “Poor me a beer.” He pulled the paper off the counter and held it back before him as he had before the interrogation, “Something that goes well with brunch.”

Sam Budd nodded. He fetched a glass, pulled the tap handle, and drained the keg. When he smacked the pitcher down on the bar, there was an audible sigh from the beggars in the dining area behind but the two old friends seemed not to have noticed.

“That about Sondor?” Budd asked, pulling the top of the paper down as if he were trying to spot the headline though he kept his big brown eyes on the Knome’s face.

Grandfather didn’t meet his gaze, “Of course.”

“Think that had something to do with Cootie?” Budd continued to pull the paper down. No longer masking the fact that he was asking Grandfather and not the article.

Grandfather looked up at him, “Think it may be best I keep that to myself, Budd.”

“You may be the only Knome alive that can keep a secret.” Sam chuckled.

“Knomophobic,” Grandfather remarked before nodding along, “but true.”

“Is this the Knome?” The newcomer was a moleman – one that was finally dry. Drakken had endured the swim through the harbor, the run through the streets, and the smollet in the saloon all while drenched. After making amends with the Tadloe Guard and eating breakfast, the first thing on the boatswain’s agenda was to dry off and find some fresh robes. Unlike bears, molemen have short fur so fortunately, it didn’t take Drakken all too long. Just long enough for muscle soreness to begin to set in. He hobbled over to sit next to Grandfather at the bar as Sam Budd answered his question with a nod. Drakken then asked the Knome, “Were you able to help Sir Fou and Dame Sentry?”

“If you can call it that.” Budd snickered. He thumped the back of the newspaper where the headline was on the front before turning to grab a glass and pour another beer.

Grandfather rolled his eyes, explaining, “They were wanted by the Empire and the Mystvokar, figured they’d be safe in the Cagirent, I didn’t know that...” he sat the paper down on the table and picked up his beer, admitting before taking a swig, “I’ll go check on them after brunch.”

The front door opened and the armored spirit stepped in.

“We’ve got company.” The bouncer warned, “Icelandic – and not the friendly kind.”

Budd sat down the first flagon and started to pour the next as he responded, “Mystvokar has no jurisdiction here. If they pay then they can stay. Let em in, Zachias.”

The bouncer bowed his head and went back outside to wait, closing the door behind him.

“Here for the drunk or the dame?” Drakken asked.

“There’s an old human saying.” Sam said, “The Knome probably knows it.”

“Purkai nolose dose.” Grandfather stated, “If it’s the Ipativian boy, then they’ll be here for both.”0089

“Think they’ll recognize me?” Drakken asked.

“Icelandic folk can’t tell a mole from a mole any better than I can a Knome from a Knome.” Budd assured them. He slid his hand through the handles of three tankards and started to walk around the bar, making eyes at the impatient old men he’d been ignoring, “Can one of y’all get the boys in the back some shots? The cheap stuff.”

Grandfather and Drakken turned to one another. For a moment neither budged. Grandfather decided to go first, "I can't reach."

Drakken huffed, "It's bottom shelf." but got up from his stool nonetheless.

As Drakken went to pour pungent poison and Budd bartered with the boy-beldams, Grandfather pretended to read more of the morning's news so that all three appeared distracted when Zachias the bouncer let their two Iceloadic visitors in. They clomped in, stomping like a couple of toddlers trying to render an applause for their first couple strides. They stopped between the tables and the bar, pivoting around to ogle each individual until one deigned to reciprocate their attention.

One was an electrive elf – his race only being notable because of how short he was for his race. Five foot eight was a good eight inches taller than the human bartender but still about four inches short of the average elf. Had the table of three geriatric earth elves stood, even with their crooked posture, they would've each had a couple inches on the knight. His partner, on the other hand, would not be towered over. Bearnns were naturally tall, but this one rose taller. Standing over eight feet, almost minotaur height, this fellow brought the intimidation that his commander's stature failed to provide. But even that was not enough. Still, no one seemed to care.

"Sam Budd." The electric elf said.

There was no response. The elf turned to the bearn. The bearn reached into a pack hanging from his belt and produced a crumpled piece of paper. Flattening it against his chestplate, he then exposed the text to the room. Showing it towards the bar then towards the tables as he proclaimed, "In service of our Lord, the Mystvokar, with lahsense from the Tadloe Guard-"

Now attention was perked. The old earth elves peered over their steins at the two. The boys in the back nearly choked on their shots. Drakken and Budd turned to face them from the dining area and Grandfather spun around on his stool.

"-Commander Shaprone Ipativay is hare to spaek with Sam Budd regarding the whereabouts of a fugitive and a missing person."

"Welcome to Tadloe," Sam bowed, "what can I getchya – beer or liquor?"

The bearn turned to the elf.

Clearing his throat, Commander Shaprone produced a sheepish grin and said, "Thank you, Mr. Budd, but it isn't even noo-"

"My, my..." Budd shook his head as he marched past the two foreigners on his way back to the bar, "But if it were?"

"Apparently we should invade Iceload in the afternoon." Grandfather chimed in, "If that's all they wait for to get started."

Sam Budd concurred, "Tadloe Guard certainly doesn't drink on the clock – even *after noon*. My, my..."

A low growl began to rumble out of the bearn's maw but Shaprone stopped him with a soft hand on his upper arm. Shaprone spoke with a well regulated tone, "We just have a few questions that we believe you may have the answers to."

"Is this an answerhouse?" Grandfather asked Budd.

Back behind the bar, Budd scratched his scraggly jaw, "No, I believe this is an alehouse, not an answerhouse."

"Indeed." Grandfather agreed, turning to face the foreigners saying, "Sorry, lads, no answers here."

The low growl was now just a growl. Sharpone was beginning to lose his patience too. He now spoke through clenched teeth, “The Tadloe Guard informed us that Daernar Darkblade, a fugitive, had been-”

“Wanted criminal!” Budd exclaimed, “Where?”

“Here!” The bearn barked.

“Justin!” Shaprone yelled, clutching his deputy’s arm firmly before whirling back to the bar owner to repeat, “A wanted criminal had been-”

Now it was Budd that growled, “Where was he a wanted criminal?”

Shaprone stopped speaking. His lips apart. His tongue writhing behind his teeth as his eyes narrowed on the human.

Grandfather answered for him, “Not in the Trinity Nations.”

“And where are we?” Sam asked the Knome.

“In the Trinity Nations.” Grandfather answered.

“The Tadloe Guard also informed us,” Shaprone hissed, “that Tabuh Sentry, a missing person, had been seen here. A missing person,” releasing his deputy’s arm, Shaprone nudged him instead, “missed by who?”

“Bah Onotna Sentray,” Deputy Justin snarled, “Our Magistrate of Yelah and your Battle Admiral of the Trinitay Nation’s Navy.”

“Well then,” Sam crossed his arms, “y’all better go find her.”

Crinkling his pointy nose, Shaprone was silent for a moment. Grandfather and Budd remained silent too. Drakken hadn’t spoken throughout the entire conversation. After serving the backpackers their booze, he’d sat nearby them to watch the encounter. When Deputy Justin had walked in, Drakken first thought he’d seen a ghost. He quickly realized who it was, but that didn’t stop his mind’s eye. The entire dialogue went in one ear and out the other as he closed his eyes and brought the image of his friend to the forefront.

Jason. It hadn’t been twelve hours since he’d left his comrade’s lifeless body in the *Red Barren*. Tears beaded up between his clenched eyelids as a pit grew in his stomach. *Dresden.* The Captain was alive. They’d seen his mark on the mapwork on Crimson’s ship. Tempting as it might be to rest his weary frame in the tavern, to take a few days off, he couldn’t risk letting fate have its way with his friend. If he could protect them, then he’d be damned if he didn’t.

When he opened his eyes, Shaprone and Justin were just about to leave.

“Can ah use the bathroom baefore wae-”

“Bathroom’s for customers.” Sam stated.

Justin’s gauntlets balled into fists but the hand of his superior stopped him. His commanding officer decided to threaten the owner with words instead, saying, “One day, your Emperor will turn on the vigilante thugs you call Antipa and, when he does, everyone who ever harbored them will be held accountable. There will be justice, law and order will prevail.”

“Well the law here is you gotta order a beer if you wanna use the pissier.” Sam pointed to the door, “Welcome to Tadloe.”

With one final humph from the elf and a growl from the bearn, the two stormed out of the bar. Zachias the Bouncer opened the door from the outside before they’d even made it to the doorway. Once they left, the spirit stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

“Should I expect more trouble?” He asked.

“Yes, but not today.” Budd sighed, slumping over the bar as he no longer had to keep up his false bravado, “What do you think, old Knome?”

“Its due time for another Void War.” Grandfather said, “Someone’s gonna get justice.”

Drakken finally joined them back at the bar, “I need to go find Dresden.”

Sam straightened back up, “Now?”

Drakken nodded. The fur was still damp around his eyes.

“Selu to you,” Sam forced a bitter smile, “ya old desert rat.”

Drakken forced one back, “And to you, Master Mixologist.”

“I’d check Batloe.” Grandfather suggested.

Drakken gave the Knome an odd look. He quickly flipped a page in the newspaper and pointed to an article about the protests in the capitol of the sandy state. Still, the moleman’s eyes didn’t leave the Knome’s. But, time was ticking and a peculiar Knome wasn’t really all that peculiar to begin with, so the boatswain simply said, “Thank you, Sir Knome.” Then made his way out the tavern.

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The Rift Bridge was a cantilever bridge. This meant that you could split the overpass into the main parts. Two being mirror images of each other: either end of the bridge. The spanse that touched New Town and the spanse that touched Old Town were identical. The cantilever existed in these spanses, it was the portion that stretched out over the rift towards the middle of the bridge. While opposite the cantilever was a counter balance, the anchor arm of the bridge. One anchor arm was firmly moored in Old Town, Vare, and the other, on the other side of the bridge, was moored in New Town, Tlow-Vare. The third part of the Rift Bridge connected the two cantilever arms. It was a sort of no-man’s land between the two parts of the capitol. Unlike the other two parts, the cantilever twins, there was no anchor arm or steel arch support, instead this suspended span of bridge relied on the integrity of its neighbors. If Old Town’s cantilever failed, even if New Town’s held strong, then the middle would fall out (and the opposite, of course, was true as well), and without the middle the overpass would cease to be. One side of the bridge might be able to lift the middle itself for a while but without the end on the otherside, what was the point of the bridge to begin with?

This is how the “Layman” of Batloe felt as they marched out onto New Town’s cantilever arm. The promise of Old Town’s cantilever had failed. The purpose of the Rift Bridge had been rendered obsolete. While it still stood, it was as if it didn’t. The people of Tlow-Vare were seen as anarchists for crossing the bridge into Vare – so long as they weren’t crossing to go to work – and so it was as if the Old Town side of the bridge had come unmoored, it’s anchor no longer touched the cliff shore, the cantilever no longer supported the suspended middle span of the bridge. Only the New Town side remained open to all. Only the New Town anchor held fast, it’s cantilever extending rigidly to support the suspended middle – but for how long? Whether be it by exhaustion or frustration, the Layman could not strain forever. As if their arm of the Rift Bridge was in fact an arm, they extended out over the canyon, offering to shake hands and make peace with the otherside one last time. If the marchers were the arm, then the hand was Princess Daffeega Shelba.

She was not the only leader of the working people. There were plenty of leaders that came from the working people themselves. However, she was the only influential supporter of the movement that could go between the two sides. She was the suspended span of bridge connecting them and it was there that she stood alongside her chidran bodyguard.

Behind her, waited the Layman. They filled out the New Town side of the bridge, from railing to railing, packed in like cigarettes from the anchor to the cantilever. Amongst them, the

man the Princess had saved: Sallis. He had warned the Princess and his fellow Layman, hence why Daffeega stood as their lone representative in the stead of one of the organizers, that the Queen and the Magi were plotting against the movement. That he had been pressured into attacking Layman leaders on this very day at this specific moment – but his warnings were only half heeded. Daffeega and Layman leaders agreed that if the Princess did the talking, then they would be safe – well, that’s what the leaders claimed to her face.

Sallis was friends with one of the leaders. The man was a chidra who went only by Bru. The night before, Bru had drunkenly suggested that the “Princess Solution” would work even if they were wrong – that being wrong might even be better for them. The poor weren’t willing to kill yet, even though it seemed the rich were. The other side was ready for the war while their side remained in denial. Princess Daffeega was seen by many of the more radical organizers as the primary hindrance because there was still a reason for faith in the system so long as she was on their side – and she would never leave their side, *so long as she lived and breathed*. This bar buddy, Bru, was in the crowd with Sallis. They stood three rows back from the frontline, watching over the Princess’ shoulder as the Queen, the Arcane Sentinels, and the Royal Guards approached.

Funny how the wealthiest mole looks the unhealthiest. Sallis couldn’t help but cringe at his Queen’s appearance. Hardly a few years older than Daffeega but she looked like an undead in the making. Even with her grandiose garb, vibrant scarlet and listless violet tippets draped over a billowing black gown, and her upright posture, significant since her sister shared the same family curse and often stooped over her staff, it all appeared as such an obvious façade. One so obvious it almost had to be intentional, it quite honestly felt like she was mocking the people by having everything they ever wanted and yet neglecting her personal hygiene to such a drastic level it looked like it could lead to something life threatening. Or maybe she was just: *Taunting us*. Sallis grumbled in his head, *She’ll live one hundred years looking like that*.

Suicine approached Daffeega. The Royal Guard mirrored the Layman, both giving their representatives a solid fifteen yards of space, however the Arcane Sentinels did not match. They staggered themselves about the space like the black squares on a checker board. Their eyes scanned the ranks of the protestors, jumping from one to the next and yet somehow still seeming to look right past them.

Sallis shook his head. As the royal siblings spoke, he turned to Bru beside him but before he could make a comment he saw something that made him pause. Deeper in the crowd, towards the Layman’s New Town side, Sallis saw a familiar face. Well...part of one. The moleman woman’s head was turned down, he only recognized her by her scalp. She’d been in the same cell-block as he and Bru during his short two years in prison – but she was a lifer. Her head had been criss-crossed with scars, she cited these lacerations whenever one asked why she would never be free, and yet there was her scarred head. Slowly shifting her way through the thickest part of the crowd towards the front.

Giving Bru a “I’ll see you later” pat on the shoulder, Sallis began to twist and slip his way through the crowd towards her. Her name was Reeni. He could’ve called it out, as the Rift Bridge had gotten as quiet as a funeral what with everyone straining to hear what the two Shelban sisters were saying to each other, but Sallis wouldn’t have dared. He knew Reeni could not have been released legally – there was no way – she must’ve escaped. *How?* And if she had, *What in the crimpsin tiad is she doing here or all places?!* Finally he reached her, roughly five

rows away from the front line of the crowd. Shoving the folks around him away for a little more space, he clasped her by the shoulders.

“Reeni?” He whispered.

Reeni looked up. Her eyes, while normally purple, were abnormally purple. There was no white and no pupil, just purple and the purple even appeared to be steaming out from the eye, as if it were overflowing. He couldn’t dwell on her alien glare for long for her posture immediately changed. Sallis had spent enough time in rough and tumble places to know what an attack looked like well before it landed. He stepped back, not as far back as he’d like due to the density of the crowd around him, and his hands reached for her wrists. He caught one, but not the other and the other was the important one. It thrust up towards him, a black sliver of sharpness clenched in her fist, and all he could do was lean away and pushed off the bridge with his feet, diving backwards into the masses. As he fell onto the shoulders of his neighbors, he yanked back with the one arm he had managed to grab but he wasn’t able to stop her. Her stab may have missed him but it hit the next unfortunate fellow who had just whirled around to complain about all the commotion. All the commotion then multiplied exponentially.

Screams and cries burst forth like an explosion as panic rippled through the Layman. A circle quickly formed around Reeni and her victim, like a space forms in a school of fish when a harpoon shoots through, but then those that had been shoved back to make space shoved back and that circle closed back with a frenzy of chaos. Sallis was thrown back towards Reeni and he did not let go of her other arm. As the blade was pulled from her victim, Sallis finally caught a hold of the wrist. The two tumbled to the bridge surface and Sallis slammed her hand hard against the pavement, knocking the ebony dagger out of her grasp. Folks around him rushed to the wounded protestor’s aid and the others rushed to help him in stopping the attacker – but then they saw her purple eyes.

“Magic!” The people murmured in shock. They still helped Sallis hold Reeni down, but they refrained from delivering instantaneous mob punishment. The Layman that knew magic were few and far between – the eerie indigo glow implicated their adversary’s involvement and no sooner did their minds jump to accusing the Old Towners than did the Old Towners’ wizard guard arrive over them.

Once the disruption occurred, Suicine gave an abrupt command and a dozen of the Arcane Sentinels jumped into the sky. The dozen that remained, checkered around the space between the sisters and the sides, flipped open their tomes and began to chant. Those that literally leapt into action kept their books on their backs, grabbing instead their rods. While they weren’t armed with staffs like the Queen and the Princess, they did have small scepters. These operated like elgroons, the only deference was the aesthetic. Their scepters were blue shafted and red stoned just like their Queen’s staff, but as the wizards rose into the air and soared out over the heads of the marchers, the gem’s atop their rods shimmered and sizzled with yellow sparks of electricity.

The magic came down like lightningbolts, combining together over the crowd to strike in one column the woman lying on the ground. It pounded her like a boot smashing a bug and when it lifted her body writhed around, her jaw open and tongue flapping though no sounds could escape her maw. Sallis was still there on the ground with her, he’d pulled away to avoid the electrocution but he was still very close. So close that ever so often, when her eyes rolled back around, his eyes met hers – the purple haze was completely gone. Contorted as her face was by the muscle spasms, she was a woman that could endure pain. Somehow, she was still able to

manifest a clear expression. Fighting through the stabbing pain, her glare caught Sallis a couple times and by luck or fate he saw why just a moment before it was too late.

A small orb bounced free from her robes. Electricity cackled off the black ball as it rolled but the sparks did nothing, thankfully, after all as it rolled Sallis began to realize what it was. On one side of the sphere, there was a square protrusion. As the ball rolled between the legs of the crowd, ever so often, the blocky protrusion would strike the floor of the Rift Bridge and cause the orb to bounce a little off the floor. On one of these occasions, the square turned to face Sallis and he saw it held a screen. The screen read, “0:15.”

Chills shot through Sallis just like the electricity that had shot through Reeni. The shock rushed down his spine starting at his skull, running down to his tail bone, and then rushing back up to his head like the lights on a high striker. When it got back up there, the shock broke through into action.

“BOMB!”

He flung himself forwards, like a frog after an insect, slipping through the legs of the still panicking crowd. People were trying to get out of his way until his word registered in their ears and then they began to prioritize getting off the bridge but the Sentinels were simultaneously landing to incarcerate Reeni and, to do so, they were pushing the crowd out of their way to make a bigger circle which only increased the density on this cantilever portion of the bridge. Meanwhile, those closer to the land of New Town, were so confused and curious, they were reluctant to budge as the few lucky fleeing Layman ahead of them tried to wiggle their way off between them. Sallis found himself having to bash his shoulders into his comrade’s ankles to continue his pursuit but finally he caught up. He pounced on the thing like a cat then spun around like a breakdancer to sit on his but and look back at the screen.

“0:07.”

“OUT THE WAY!”

He bound to his feet. Folks saw the beeping ball in his hand and put up no protest. He was near enough the edge of the bridge, there was hope but there was no more time to think. Cocking back his arm, he then pitched the sphere forwards. Over the heads of his peers, over the railings, and into the rift below.

Everyone surged away from the edge, as far as they could before the crowd got too dense, then they cowered down against the floor of the bridge and braced themselves.

BOOM!

Sallis was the first to move. He scurried over to the edge of the bridge. Clinging to the banisters, he peered over. There was a cloud of smoke, descending into the rift. He craned his neck further to ogly the supports of the Rift Bridge. The structure looked fine. A sigh rose up from the deepest darkest alcoves of his gut and he turned around to sit and lean against the railing. His relief spread to those that had been around him. Rejoice would soon follow – or at least it should have. Instead, a Sentinel landed before Sallis. Separating him from his people.

Sallis held out his hands, showing them to be empty.

The Sentinel raised his staff, showing it to be sparking.

“It’s over.” Sallis stated, “Everyone’s okay.”

But as the last syllable left his tongue, he saw a small black ball fly through the sky over the wizard guard’s shoulder. Two more followed it, launched from within the anonymous masses of Layman. The obsidian orbs sored through the sky like harbinger shooting stars of doom, coursing over the New Town portion of the bridge to batter the suspended middle. All Sallis could do was close his eyes and savor the brief split second of stillness before all hell broke lose.

It is war now.

Chapter Sixteen: Dominoes Line Up

Even during the day, sunlight barely made it to the canyon floor. At night, the darkness was so pure it seemed to thicken the air like murky water beneath the Wobniar Woods of Aquaria. Only the eyes of shadowmancers and mermen could see in such darkness, albeit with one exception: Paud Gill. While he was ethnically a fishfolk, he'd lived most of his life slinking through the reefs of Mirkweed, hunting both beast and being in the shadows that burried seafloor. A part of him missed that freedom, but another part of him found solace in his new confines. There was a comfort in the dependence Paud discovered within his canyon-side prison sentence.

He sat cross legged in the back of his cell, slouched up against the cavern wall. His robes, which had been provided by the Crown, lay folded by the bars opposite him. Bars formed the rest of the enclosure as well, rising to manifest the walls to his left and right. The ceiling was bumpy and organic like a cave, but the floor was slick and smooth. Sand was in mounds against the edges. Offered, like the robes, to make the habitat more hospitable. Paud, however, had declined both. Physical comfort was not a possibility for the cursed fishfolk. Since before landlubbers began keeping track of history, Gill's had endured endless agony. Molten blood coursed through his veins. His nerve endings sent constant signals of searing pain to his brain – so much so that, in the absence of magic or medication, sleep was impossible. It wasn't the pain that destroyed most of his ancestors, it was the sleep deprivation. Three days of no sleep and one's mind begins to come untethered from reality. Fortunately, on this, Paud's third day in the dungeons of Vare, he'd done nearly nothing but meditate. The constant pain was still constant but his response was under control. He hadn't been this at peace in a while.

Aside from meditating, Paud had been up to at least a little bit of his usual no good. Undercover of darkness, he'd been bloodletting onto the sand he'd piled up against the edges of his confines. By picking at the silver scar on his chest, he'd scrape off a flake of metal scab to let new magmic blood ooze forward. Using the old sliver to collect the new droplet he'd carefully drip his blood in the molds he'd made in the mounds of desert dust. There, his cursed plasma hardened. Paud wasn't making anything complicated. His favorite weapon, the infamous Claws, had been confiscated. All he wanted was a makeshift substitute. The Claws were basically just steel gloves with three blades that could extend from his knuckles. In their absence, he abandoned the idea of reforming the gauntlets and simply resigned to recreating the blades. When the time came, he could pinch them between his fingers and slash away. He didn't want the time to come, mind you, he was enjoying his stay in prison, but he knew the time would come and, in fact, on that third night in his cell his suspicions were proven true.

Truth was approaching his cell. Truth took many forms – as Paud well knew – but he was surprised that they were brazen enough to come as they did to the dungeon. They were draped in black robes so oversized that they defeated the purpose – if that purpose were to not arise suspicion. However, if the purpose was to mask their identity, this too did not work on Paud.

He'd known of the necromancer for far too long and, now that he'd worked for them, he was well aware of Truth's true identity. Whether she knew it or not.

When she came to stand before his cell, the two stared at each other. Truth's beedy eyes peer out from the shadows of her cowl at Paud's wide, lidless eyes. Both contemplated murdering the other in that silent spell, but ultimately sided with reason. Neither would gain from the other's demise and both recognized any attempt would likely be effectively reciprocated. Their relationship had always been founded upon the solid ground of mutually assured destruction. Truth broke the quiet with a rambling recitation in the Sacred Tongue.

"Mai kaeps ot iameh ras nock canelpeop fashi gaga iam ehdie kaeps ot miamah ras." Then her voice fell to a whisper and when it did the sound left her lips and emitted directly against Paud's tympanic membranes, "Soon, you will be taken to the Pyramid Arena. There you will be armed." She gestured to the piles of sand with a slight shift of her shoulders, "Unless you'd rather utilize your ridiculous contraband?"

Her snout was hidden within her hood, but Paud caught the faint glow of bone energy swirling around her nostrils. She could smell his hidden weapons. But that wasn't what caught his attention, it was the idea of being armed that did. His posture straightened – an uncharacteristic thing for the fishfolk – and he licked his eyes, cocking his head to the side.

A sigh was huffed into his amphibious ears, "That's right, you will be reunited with your beloved Claws."

Now it was Paud that sighed, his gills flaring.

"I could care less whether you survive."

Paud felt an equal amount of concern for his safety so he didn't blink at the slight, not that he could have blinked regardless.

"You are there to kill this man."

Truth pointed to her right, Paud's left. He didn't have to look over. He knew who resided in the cell next door: no one. The necromancer had quite intentionally made sure that the cells on either side of him were kept empty. Now, it seemed, he found out why. It seemed he would soon have a neighbor.

She continued, "When he is dead, then your sister will be safe in Munkloe."

This time when Paud perked up, he shot to his feet. It took every inch of will power he possessed to not storm the bars of his inclosure. His blood, incessantly boiling, ramped up in temperature. In places, his skin appeared to ripple with the bubbles underneath. Despite the pain, he forced himself to stay aware. To listen not just to what the necromancer said but to the subtext she hidden within her words.

He spoke in a hiss of a whisper, "Where is she?"

Irritated, Truth turned sideways so that her cowl no longer faced him. She stated, "Alive."

He knew she was alive otherwise his blood wouldn't have been burning as it was. In fact, the intensity of his curse suggested that not only was his sister still alive but that she was somewhere somewhat near. He hadn't been able to be sure, after all, sometimes his curse acted up when he was about to face near-certain death, but it also reacted when in proximity to his kin.

From deep down in the Rift, as his ancestor's sins seared his insides, he'd begun to become more and more sure of where his sister was.

"She's in the Cloches."

Now Truth pivoted again, completely turning her back on the assassin as she answered, "She is out of your reach."

Paud licked his eyes as his lips curled up from his sharp toothed grin. He moved on to ask, nodding towards his future neighbor despite the fact that the necromancer couldn't see his gestures, "Who is he?"

"No one." Truth scoffed, "A fictional hero. A lie the anarchists have rallied around. He's just an unfortunately fortunate peasant."

His smirk only grew, "Then why make him a martyr?"

Truth whirled back around to face Paud, but then she shrugged, "Let them idolize a martyr." She paused to cackle, "I'll martyr them all. They're not a threat to me alive, let them think they will be when they're dead. A rebellious death cult defeats itself."

"If they're not a threat, then why bother?" Paud pressed, "Spite?"

"To remind them what country they're in." Truth snapped, "They think we need them." She scoffed, "We don't need peasants, we have magic. They're parasites and I plan to squash them as such. Only those pawns that please me will survive – do you understand?"

"Yes," Paud hid his smile by bowing his head and dropping to one knee, "my Queen."

Paud wasn't sure whether or not she'd even heard his final jab, for when he raised his head the necromancer was already disappeared. Truth's audacity made Paud shiver, which said a lot for such a warm blooded soul. Paud wasn't known for his compassion. Especially not for foreigners. Few who knew the Shayu Shua would bet that he might expend even an ounce of effort to aid a stranger and yet despite his complete disregard for his most beings – even he still had some reservations when it came to the unnecessary eradication of fellow Solarins. Teleportation was universally illegal, not because of what risks such an ability might offer, but because of how expensive such magic was. One would be hard pressed to pull off the spell without sacrificing a couple life-worth's of energy. For Truth to do so so quickly, she surely spent the energy of at least a half dozen beings' bones and for nothing more than expedience.

"The ruthless always win the crowns." Paud grumbled.

Licking his eyes, he sat back down and attempted to get back into a meditative state but he didn't get far before something distracted him. Maybe the witch's dark magic had been for more necessary than a simple shortcut. Paud could hear metal jingling and boots clomping.

The cells of the Rift Dungeon ribbed the Old Town side of the canyon. The prisoners lived in cavelike cells that faced New Town's side of the rift. The bars that kept them from the ravine opened only once – to let them in. After that, they were let into the gym or the messhall through underground tunnels that had access to the back of their cavernous enclosures. While these instances would be the highlights of their stay, there was a haunting element to it as well. The tunnels were part of the Catacombs, where the dead of the Capitol were buried, which meant that they slept in next door to the graves of their ancestors. Most would likely find

themselves amongst the dead before they'd ever left the Rift. New prisoners were marched down steep ramparts that zigzagged the cliffside in full view of all the other inmates. By virtue of this, when someone new was added to the crew, the echo of the guards escorting them could not be missed.

It was almost like it had been a day before except this time the Royal Guard was dragging him down into the dark shadows of the canyon whereas before they'd been hoisting him towards the light of Uthemarc's Cloche. There was only one Arcane Sentinel and the lad was not tasked with carrying him, that was given to two of the more physically combative Royal Guardsmen. Another difference was Sallis' level of awareness. When he'd been dragged before the Magi, his head had spun on a swivel to take in every detail of the Mosque he could manage. Now, his head lulled. It drooped from his neck like the bud of a dying flower. Too many bolts of electricity had been shot through his body – so many that he hardly remembered the interrogation at all *but* he had retained what transpired on the Bridge. The people that beat and berated him were the very people that had tried to blackmail him into committing the crime he'd tried to stop. He knew he had to protect that memory. What use it would be in the Rift Dungeon? He hadn't had a clue nor a hope, that is, until she arrived.

“Stop!”

The cry was somewhat distant and muffled by the incessant echoing of marching soldiers, but like the marching it repeated itself and it continued to reverberate throughout the canyon.

“Stop!”

Each time he heard her voice, the clouds covering his mind began to part. His eyelids fluttered. His muscles began to twitch and tremble. His snout murmured, “My Princess.”

“STOP!”

Now he was awake.

“Stop right there and let me through! We'll escort the prisoner!”

“Princess!” Sallis exclaimed, struggling against his captors' grasp to twist around and make eye contact with Daffeega, “It was a trick, your majesty! It was a trap!”

“Shut up!” A guard barked, shaking Sallis.

Another guard drove his fist into the prisoner's gut, knocking the breath out of him as they commanded, “Settle down!”

“Leave him alone!” Daffeega shrieked, pushing the soldiers aside as she waded through their ranks. She did so with a little too much gustow at first and the pair in the back of the line found themselves thrown apart, one tossed flat against the bars of another prisoner's cell and the other doubled over the railing that barely managed to prevent him from falling off the ramparts. Calming a bit with the force, the Princess still maintained the velocity, “We'll be escorting him from here on out.”

“Princess...” One of the guards holding Sallis protested, but his words trailed off as his eyes looked to his superior, “Can she?”

The Arcane Sentinel hesitated for a moment, but as Daffeega arrived alongside the prisoner he lost his nerve and conceded, bowing to the Princess as he commanded, “Give him to the Princess and let them go on ahead. We’ll follow nearby for safety.”

“Safety?” Sharp scoffed as he arrived behind Daffeega. His armored hands were soft on Sallis’ shoulders as he directed the moleman to follow the Princess forwards. He kept the guards behind them in his peripheral as they marched.

For the first couple yards, Daffeega was too busy dusting off Sallis’ rugged uniform, checking his flesh for wounds under each tear. The poor monkey on her shoulder clung to her shawl for dear life as she bobbed and weaved around the prisoner. Shackled as he was, he found it difficult to physically ward off her concern so he resorted to words.

“Your majesty, I’m fine.” He promised, “Please, I need to tell you what I saw.”

“Yes, of course,” Daffeega nodded. She clasped her hands behind her back to stifle herself then skipped a few strides ahead and turned around to back pedal so she could look into Sallis’ face as he spoke, “please, what happened on the Bridge?”

“Thank you, your majesty.” Sallis moved to bow but Sharp’s grasp on his collar wouldn’t allow it. After the awkward pause, he realized what was stopping him and gave up on the gesture. He continued, admitting, “I can’t speak on everything that happened, only what I saw.”

“What did you see?” Daffeega blurted.

“The supposed terrorist, one of them – the one I stopped, they were a friend of mine.” Sallis answered, “Reeni – I met her in prison – she was not supposed to be there.”

The lips of the Arcane Sentinel behind them parted but he didn’t get further than that. Sharp had sensed the Queen’s men would interfere so he turned the full force of his glower on the goons behind them. The carceral magician swiftly resealed their snout.

Daffeega dug in to Sallis’ statement, too intrigued to let wait for him to elaborate on his own, “What do you mean?”

“She was a lifer.” Sallis explained.

Again, Daffeega interjected too soon, “A lifer?”

“In prison for life.” Sharp whispered to her over his shoulder, keeping his glare on the guards.

“And she was on the Bridge?” Daffeega pressed.

Sallis nodded, his eyes wide, “She threw one of the bombs!”

“The one you stopped!” Daffeega gasped.

“Yes – but that’s not all!” Sallis forged onward, speaking as fast as he could in hopes he could avoid another immediate interruption. The monkey on the Princess’ shoulder pitched in to help. Quietly hoo-ing and hah-ing, he clambered around to cling to the front of her shawl with his feet. Then, with his little hands, he pushed up on her bottom jaw, clamping her mouth shut from underneath so that the prisoner might have a chance to finish his thought. Sallis propelled onwards, “When I saw her, I went over and she tried to stab me – Well...she didn’t try to stab me. It wasn’t her. She wasn’t herself. There was some kind of magic at play – her eyes were covered in, uh...they were glowing like an enertomb! Glowing purple.”

The monkey fell from his position as he realized what this meant. Daffeega caught him with both arms and cradled him against her chest. She cursed quietly to herself, “Donum...”

“Like da Shisharay...” Sharp turned from the guards behind them, checking the eyes of the man he escorted to make sure there was no hint of lies.

“Hoo hoo!” The monkey exclaimed, “Hah hah!”

“Truth.” Daffeega agreed.

“Excuse me-”

Daffeega, Sharp, and Sallis whirled around to face the Royal Guards. The monkey ran up from her embrace to stand on her shoulder and scowl at the troops. This time, the Arcane Sentinel didn’t shy away. Instead, he nodded to his left.

“-your majesty, we’ve arrived.”

They had made it to the bottom of the Rift. To their right a door of vertical bars waited ajar. The Arcane Sentinel respectfully waited for the Princess to respond but it was obvious the Royal Guard were drawing a line in the sand. It was late after all, loyal as they were to the Queen they were most loyal to their families and many had children waiting to be tucked in and spouses waiting to decompress. This wasn’t lost on the Princess nor her guard so they did their best to wrap things up.

During this interaction, the person sitting in the cell nextdoor didn’t move. They remained sitting crosslegged on the floor. Their head was oriented straight ahead. The flames of the torches held by the Royal Guard reflected off the metal scar that crossed the inmate’s chest like a sash. The bouncing light caught Sharp’s attention. As Daffeega hurried to finish the conversation with Sallis, Sharp kept his eyes on Sallis’ soon-to-be neighbor.

“Your majesty, you have to go to the Laymen.” Sallis said.

Daffeega frowned, but she did not disagree.

He continued, “Only you can lead them, Princess.”

“They have leaders.” Daffeega protested.

“They need a Queen.” Sallis countered.

The Arcane Sentinel grunted behind them.

After a quick glance at the guards and a gulp, Sallis proceeded, “You can’t be on both sides anymore. Please, your maj-”

She clasped his shackled hands and their eyes met. He moved to bow and she mirrored his gesture, even beating him to it. When they straightened back up, the Arcane Sentinel stepped into their space. Both let it happen. Sallis stepped backwards into his cell and Daffeega stepped away towards the rampart banister. As the guards marched in to remove Sallis’ cuffs and secure the chamber, Sharp stepped aside to speak with the fishfolk next door.

“Paud Gill.” Sharp said.

“Sharp Otubak.” Paud answered.

“Figured your way out yet, Civ?” Sharp asked.

“Yes.” Paud stated.

“Hope you land on da rightside.” Sharp warned.

“I always land on the right side.” Paud assured the guard before issuing an addendum, “The right side for me, at least.”

Sharp nodded towards Sallis’ cell, “You protect him, we’ll protect you.”

Had Paud had eyebrows, one would’ve raised. Instead, his silence did the raising.

“And yours.” Sharp added.

“If you win.” Paud countered.

Sharp conceded to the assassin’s point with a shrug. The bars next door clanged shut. The Arcane Sentinel and his guards silently signified that it was time to go. Daffeega and her monkey friend looked to Sharp and he gave Paud a goodbye nod. Then the whole entourage made their way up the ramparts, out of the Rift, and back into Old Town Vare.

Sallis settled in the sand that covered the floor of his cell. He looked over at Paud for a moment – the fishfolk was still sitting cross legged, looking straight ahead – but then decided better of interacting with the man. Laying flat on his back, he tried to sleep. There was nothing else he could do.

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The long metal shaft was cradled in the horns of some kind of plains beast. The worn steel was split by polished wood coverings where the shooter’s body would have to grasp the weapon. The mahogany-made flourishes started in the rear with the buttstock – it wasn’t the softest but it was better than metal when wedged up against your shoulder – then the second was the pistol grip – where the hand that pulled the trigger held – and finally the forward grip which you squeezed to keep from losing control when you fired. Aside from the timber touches, the firearm’s only other significant features were the curved box magazine that jutted out away from the shooter just past the trigger and the second steel barrel that rode ontop of the rifle to facilitate the pumping out of spent cartridges and hammer cocking for the next round. This was all explained in similarly confusing detail to an audience of two, only one of which comprehended and even still that individual was suspicious. It seemed the description was a distraction rather than an answer to her question, which she repeated.

“And that’s a thousand yaer old gun?” Tabuh scoffed.

“Almost.” Powman corrected, “Eight-hundred and forty.”

“That’s some godai taiad.” Tabuh stated.

Tou interjected, “Who was Beggy Pow?”

“The best gunman in all of Sondor!” Powman exclaimed.

Tabuh laughed, “Don’t let Einna haer that-”

“I said *gunman*.” Powman retorted.

Tabuh rolled her eyes.

Pointing for Tou to turn his gaze a little to the right of the rifle mounted on the wall, Powman directed his patron to a painting of the gunman in question: Beggy Pow. The fellow wasn’t much to look at. In fact, he looked a surprising amount like the man behind the bar that was pointing at him. Tall and wide – both in the shoulders and in the belly though he carried his

weight in a taut sort of way suggesting that quite a bit of refined muscle existed underneath and that the pudgy outer layer was there for a purpose, like blubber on a seal. The man had squinty eyes – as if he was aiming to take a shot – a bushy brow furled over his short but bulbous nose and that nose’s nostrils flared above a broad grin. The portrait was such a spitting image of Powman that both Tou and Tabuh figured it might’ve actually been a portrait of Powman and not of his great, great, great centuries-past ancestor.

“Beggy Pow,” Powman explained, “fought for the Pow Clan in the first Battle Grand – the first bloody tournament in the eye of the Iahtro Storm – where all the peoples beneath Solaris sent a hero to fight for the fate of Dogloe.”

“Wae’ve heard of the Battle Grands.” Tabuh crossed her arms and stuck up her nose even though she went on to ask, “How long did hae last?”

“Beggy lives today.” Powman threw his arms open wide, “In this bar, the last stronghold of the Pow Clan: Beggy’s Bar.”

“Last stronghold?” Tou frowned, “I’ve heard of the Pow Clan-”

“Course ya have!” Powman chirped.

“-where’d they go?” Tou asked.

“They followed Beggy’s lead and left for Dogloe long ago.” Powman answered, “My family, and a few others, stayed to maintain a home in the homeland but...well...Sondor hasn’t really gotten much more hospitable to our Clan since...or really to any clan for that matter.” He gestured towards the entrance of the tavern, “Just ask your friend.”

“Huh.” Tabuh remarked, “So you’re a Clansman like Tenchi?”

“I’d be careful about going around Sondor calling folks Clansman, pal.” Powman warned, “But to answer your question, I’m more of a Powman than a...” he hesitated, his tongue fumbling around for a more appropriate substitution, “than an all-Clans-are-good-Clans-type-man, like the Kou.”

Tou was intrigued, he leaned forward in his stool and planted his elbows on the bar, “You don’t like the other Clans?”

“Uh...” having exhausted his hesitation reserves, he resorted to distractions. Continuing to, “Uh...” he stooped below the counter and fumbled with steins until he finally said, “I’m agnostic on the issue.”

“Agnostic?” Tou and Tabuh chimed.

With a deep sigh, Powman straightened up and smacked a glass down on the bar. His eyes pivoted between Tou and Tabuh as he tried to explain, “The Eninac and the Kou and the Pow, right? We’re the human clans – or the human tribes for ya Tadloens, dynasties for ya Iceloadic – that’re in the Crystal Council of the Trinity nations. Like the Fou,” he looked to Tou, then to Tabuh, “and the Sentry.”

The two elves nodded.

“But the Pow don’t ever get brought up. Whenever you talk Sondor, it’s the Kou. Whenever you talk Dogloe, it’s the Eninac – unless it’s the gmoats.” Pow shrugged, then got back to his point, “We’re not mad about it,” he shrugged again, “we’re agnostic. They don’t help

or hurt us really. And the clans that aren't in the Council – folks like the Eson, the Meriam, the Cormac, on and on – they don't much bother us." Another shrug as he swept the mug off the counter and moved over to the tap, "Except for the Cage, of course." He began to pour a beer as he concluded, "So we side with the Trinity Nations, we're technically allies with the Kou and Eninac, we technically support folks in other clans too – you know, they have a right to be proud of their culture – but do we plan to do anything about it?" A final expository shrug, "Eh."

"But what if Zion cracks down?" Tabuh yelped.

"What if?" Powman chuckled, "He already has. You can be arrested for being Kou, Eninac, or Pow."

"And you're okay with that?!" Tabuh exclaimed.

"I'm agnostic." Powman reiterated, "Besides, they only accuse you if you're a separatist or if your vaccinated."

"You're not vaccinated?" Tou and Tabuh blurted.

Again, a shrug.

Tou's mind wandered off as he realized he had no clue whether or not he had been vaccinated. The barrens that raised him certainly didn't have access to modern magic. Tabuh, on the other hand, not only knew she was vaccinated but incidentally assumed everyone without a beef against the Empire had been given the anti-curse charm.

When Tou started to ponder, Tabuh immediately yelped, "WHAT?!"

"Lady!" Powman blushed, looking around the bar as if all his clients weren't from the same crew. Turning back, he continued in a whisper, "Ma'am. I'll get the vax when the Queen comes back but until then--"

"*Until then?!*" Tabuh squealed before she managed hush her tone and match the barman's energy, "The whole point of the vacsane is that there won't be tahn when shae comes back!"

Powman pointed back to the gun on the wall behind them, "That gun is younger than the Queen of Darkness and its never seen the Plague long as it's been around. I think I'll be fine. Why risk it--"

"Risk it? You're risking it now--"

Tou put a soft hand on her shoulder, slowly rubbing her back. This began to calm Tabuh down a bit, though she was still pretty irritated with Powman's apathy.

"If the Mystvokar was hunting down vaccinated folks, maybe some of your Iceloadic friends and family wouldn't want to get vaccinated either." Powman suggested, shrugging as if to say, "either way, agree to disagree?", he slid the beer he'd been working on over to Tou then turned back to Tabuh, "Want one?"

"It ain't aeven noon!" Tabuh hollered.

Tou took the beer (which he hadn't asked for) and said, "Yesterday was two days long and we nearly died a dozen times. For the first time in my life, I want a beer for breakfast."

Powman grinned, "You sure you aren't human, earth elf?"

Tabuh was still hung up on the first part of Tou's statement, "Two days long. What day is today?"

"June 3rd." Powman nodded towards a calendar on the wall behind him.

"*Still!*" Tabuh crowed.

"Farakin..." Powman winced. He reached up to screw his index finger into the ear nearest the electric elf, "So another beer?"

"Please, no." Tabuh sighed, "Thank you."

"Water, then." Powman asked.

"Later, thank you." Tabuh said, "Ah thank ah want some fresh air. Check on Cootie and the Clansman – sorry...and the Kou. Sae if wae got an escape plan together yet."

Tou stood with Tabuh, saying, "Want me to come-"

"No, hun." She gently grasped his forearm and manifested an honest, slight smile, "Take a break for once Mr. Woodsman, enjoy your baer."

Tabuh left the bar and marched slowly towards the door. In reality she was more physically exhausted than she was politically, but Powman's eccentric outlook was just enough to overcome her tolerance. Unfortunately, not only did this exhaustion mean she would be irritable, it meant she would be vulnerable to irrationality. Proof could be seen in the very fact that she thought going outside to talk to the Dragon and the drunkard would offer some sort of relief and not precisely the opposite.

On the bright side, outside was gorgeous. Bright blue skies stretched as far as the eye could see ending only when the prairie bushes came together to form a dark green line on the horizon. Descending from the line of scraggly shrubs, the bushes were separated and spread out by an ocean of golden fronds. The occasional acacia tree rose too, their branches spreading upwards in the same way lightning bolts spread down. They and the bushes were all that existed to remind Tabuh that the plains weren't some auriferous body of water, well...that and the two goons bobbing back and forth in rocking chairs on the porch.

When her eyes fell on Tenchi and Cootie, she immediately forgot the view. The floor boards wined and the chairs creaked. Despite the breeze ruffling the plains, the smoke from Tenchi's cigarettes somehow clung to the deck. For better or worse, it cloaked Cootie's beer-marinated must. Had there been a railing, Tabuh might've clung to it. Instead, she whirled on them with the rage of a reprimanding parent. Her hands went to her hips and her torso pitched back so that she could look down her nose at the two.

"What happened to getting the hell outa Sondor?"

"Cage Town, not Sondor. Out on the plains," Tenchi waved towards the horizon, "we're safe." He paused to flicked the ash off his cigarette. It landed on his britches but he continued undaunted, "Exhaustion can kill, Miss Sentry. Take a break."

"Tobacco kills too, Tenchi." Tabuh snapped, shaking her head then turning to Cootie, "And you! Aren't you supposed to bae done drinking?"

The nellaf's eyes rolled around in their sockets like marbles in a cup until they finally connected with Tabuh's and straightened out. Her scowl caused him to rock back in his chair, his

gaze falling to the bottle in his hand like he didn't know how it got there. But after the initial shock, as his chair rocked him back forwards, he lifted the beer to offer his accuser a toast, saying, "Ah said affer lunch."

The old nellaf took a swig.

Tabuh looked away. Again, the beautiful savannah tried to soothe her but the reality of their situation quickly interfered. That wonderful view was inseparable from the fact that it was Sondor and Sondor wanted them dead *and* she had been running for her life since they arrived on the deck of the *Red Barren*. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath.

This is what ah wanted. She reminded herself. For whatever reason, she thought back to what the Knome in the Key Library had said, "*You all wanna be Antipa don't you?*" The Knome had been right. Whether they were stopping some mysterious necromancer or saving some chainsmoking separatist, this was what she wanted. The anxiety she felt was likely never to wane so long as she pursued this lifestyle but as she thought more about it, she decided that wasn't the problem. Sure, the lifestyle would be anxiety inducing but that didn't mean there was no point in reducing said distress and the only way to do that was to act. *And all everayone haer wants to do is take a godai break!*

Tenchi saw the gears whirring in his new friend's mind and though he didn't exactly know what they were whirring about, he decided to take a quick puff on his stoge and then lend what he hoped would be an olive branch, "Thanks for your help yesterday. Considering you didn't know I had back up, y'all really went out on a limb for me."

"Juray's still out on whether or not it was worth it." Tabuh remarked.

Tenchi took the hit on the chin with a grin, "What were you expecting?"

"Ah'm sorray, that wasn't..." Tabuh sighed. She took a step to the side and leaned against one of the posts supporting the awning. Staring out on the plains she continued, "Wae didn't do it for anaythang. Wae weren't expecting a raeward. To bae honest, wae were running for our lahves and through some Knomish magic wae wound up there at the raht place and the raht tahme."

"Knomes. Makes sense." Tenchi took a long drag then asked, "What were y'all running from?"

"Wae were looking for a friend." Tabuh explained, "And hae was looking for a bone bender. One thang led to another and..."

Tenchi sat up in his rocking chair, "Y'all Rosethorn?"

Tabuh turned back to face him, "Whah ya asking?"

Tenchi wasn't concerned with her suspicion, he was more amped up at the coincidence. He spoke rapidly, "Those Golden Dagger folks – Einna, Pesh, and Sniper – they're looking for a necromancer. That's why they were helping me."

"What!" Tabuh exclaimed, "You know about Truth?"

"Truth!"

Tenchi sprung out of his chair so fast that it startled poor Cootie right out of his seat. The bloke lost control of his beer in the process and it started flipping through the air. Cootie turned

the motion that launched him out of his chair into a full body dive for the beer – snagging it right out of the sky before belly flopping onto the dusty plains of Sondor. Neither the human nor the electric elf seemed to notice.

“That’s the one!” Tenchi hollered.

“And y’all know where they are?” Tabuh pressed.

“No, no, no, uh...” Tenchi struggled, pointing back inside the bar, “My brother has this fancy mapwork he is making. Einna thinks it can tell them who Truth is somehow.” He shrugged and gestured more aggressively towards the door, “Listen, to be honest, I was hardly paying attention, but that’s what they’re in there chatting about right now.”

Without another word, Tabuh spun around and rushed back inside. Beggy’s Bar hadn’t changed much in the minute or so since she’d left. Tou had hardly taken another sip and was still chatting with Powman. Between the two and the opposite wall, two tables were occupied. One housed the grunts of the operation: Pesh, Sniper, and Wake. Peshkova, the chidran bomber, and Sniper, the bearn bowman, were hardly well acquainted considering the fact that Pesh had just joined the Golden Dagger and this was one of the first times Sniper had ever worked with others. It was quite obvious too, considering the fact that he rarely spoke. He was not the type you’d want to be forced to conversate with. Fortunately, his new companion would certainly pick up the slack for him because while he sipped on a glass of water and Wake nursed a green tea, Pesh was chopping up lines of zirra on the table with a butter knife. Having set up enough to keep her tweeking until Solaris set and rose again, she used one hand to hold back her headtails, ducked over the table, pressed one finger against a nostril then snorted the first row of perkifying-poisonous powder. She reared back with a devilish grin. Sniper was so deadpan that, though his eyes seemed to be on her, they also seemed to look past her. Thus, she turned to Wake – someone she somehow knew even less about – and asked the first thing that popped into her mind.

“Is dis legal, Civ?” She wiped her nose with the back of her wrist, specifying so fast that Wake hadn’t even had time to suggest she needed specification, “In Sondor, da Cagirent and all, is zirra legal here?”

Not necessarily a fan of encouraging unhealthy habits, but also used to existing in communities where folks had to cope with existence anyway they could, Wake found Pesh’s antics charming, “*We’re* not legal here.” She chuckled, “You’re fine.”

“Want some?” Pesh offered.

“I’m fine.” Wake turned to the bearn, “So Sniper. You a Tadloe bearn, a Munkloe bearn, or an Iceload bearn, huh?”

Wake might’ve been offended when Sniper refused to react but instead she began to wonder if his quietness might’ve been caused by something a little more excusable than personal choice. There seemed to be thoughts behind his beady eyes but Wake couldn’t be sure. Peshkova spoke up for him before Wake could press further.

“Da Golden Dagger is anonymous, Civ.”

“Well, you’re definitely a Foxloe chidra.” Wake noted.

Pesh froze up, wondering for a moment whether or not Wake might not be as friendly as she seemed. Wake squashed her doubt with a smile and waved away the comment saying, “I was just curious. It makes a difference if you grew up in the Empire or not.”

Surprising both women, Sniper nodded.

“Ah, see!” Wake exclaimed, stabbing her index finger into the air, “He’s an Iceload bearn.”

But before the two could bond over life outside the Trinity Nations, Tabuh came rushing back in from outside. Considering the fact that everyone else was relaxing (in their own way), Tabuh’s serious strides commanded the attention of all those in the tavern. She marched straight to the second occupied table – the one past Pesh, Wake, and Sniper – where Einna Yelkoa and Kenchi Kou were. Einna Yelkoa didn’t bother with her foxbird disguise in the company of Powman and the others, her cover was blown and Powman was so passive the last thing he would do was raise a fuss to a banshee’s face. While Einna was too old to care, Kenchi Kou was too young to know better. He’d decided that chairs weren’t his style and had plopped his butt down on the table top. There, cross-legged, he cradled the head of his automaton. The boy and the banshee had been strategizing to themselves before Tabuh stormed in. Glancing her way, they knew immediately where she was headed. Behind her, Tou hopped off his barstool and hurried over to join her.

“You’re looking for Truth!” Tabuh declared.

Einna bowed her skull then raised it in the world’s most cautious nod.

Tabuh jabbed Tou in the chest with her finger, “So are wae!”

Einna’s head pivoted so her companions would know that her empty eye sockets were on them. Pesh raised her hands palms up and Sniper simply remained blank. The banshee turned back to the electric elf.

“Congratulations?”

“Let us help.” Tabuh demanded.

“Help?” Einna scoffed, which was quite a grating noise coming from one of the most undeadliest undeads, “The more the worse, Sentry. Go home if you want to help.”

Tabuh’s jaw dropped and for a moment she sputtered. It was a rare occasion that she found herself at a loss for words and Tou sensed that she would very quickly find some strong ones to use so he hopped into the conversation in her defense.

“Our friend is chasing Truth, so we’re chasing Truth.” He had no luck reading Einna’s blank burning skull, but he could tell from her posture that his explanation wasn’t helping. Rolling his shoulders, he doubled down, “We don’t have to work together, but we are going to keep hunting for Truth. With or without you.”

Silence fell into place after Tou’s statement. The air in the bar became tight as a confused tension spread between all those present. Aside from Tabuh, people had been intentionally avoiding considering what came next. For Einna and Tenchi’s teams, they could simply continue doing what they were doing and go their separate ways but neither had expected the arrival of Tou, Tabuh, and Cootie. Even after their arrival, the others certainly hadn’t expected the trio to

entangle themselves in their agendas. Though it felt like minutes, the spell only lasted a moment as Powman accidentally muttered under his breath what he was thinking in his head.

“Y’all got existential awful fast.”

Had it not been for the silence, no one would’ve heard him but instead the comment made everyone realize there was yet another witness to a conversation that likely should’ve been taking place behind closed doors.

“Powman.” Tenchi snapped, walking back inside, followed by a staggering Cootie. Tenchi continued in a sharp whisper, “Act like you’re not hearing any of this.”

“Done, done, and done.” The bartender promised. Turning his back, he started polishing the glasses he only ever used when he needed something to polish, “I’m not here.”

“Guh man.” Cootie said as he collapsed on the bar, half straddling a stool.

“Y’all keep saying friend.” Tenchi rushed to put himself between the undead archer and the living sharpshooter, attempting to moderate the debate and starting by interrogating Tabuh. He asked, “Who’s the ‘friend’?”

Tabuh looked back at Tou. The earth elf frowned for a moment, then gave her a nod. Looking back to Tenchi she said, “Captain Dresdan.”

“Farak me!” Pesh yelped, hopping up from her seat, “I know him!”

“Huh?” Tou and Tabuh chimed as they turned to the chidra.

“Yea, dey got me into da whole Rosedorn ding – Golden Dagger and all too.”

Beside Pesh, Wake leaned across the table to ask Sniper, “Dresdan’s the Captain of the *Obsidian Sail*, right?”

Sniper shook his head, no.

Pesh glanced back to her table mates, “He is.”

Wake rolled her eyes at Sniper.

Pesh continued, speaking to Einna now, “Dresdan gave Skar and I da blood – Trude’s blood – da blood we gave you in Manaloe.”

Einna wasn’t looking at Pesh, she was still ogling the two elves, “Y’all don’t look like Obsidians.” Einna pointed a boney finger at Tabuh, “Especially you, Princess.”

“She doesn’t act like much of a princess.” Tenchi argued, “She did just kill Queen Cage.”

“Blew dat crow’s head to pieces, Civ.” Pesh added.

“Hey!” Tou caught himself after raising his voice and toned it down, explaining, “She did what she had to do. The Queen was about to kill Tenchi.”

“I was about to stop her.” Einna countered.

But Tenchi came to the couple’s defense again, “They didn’t know that.”

Wake joined in on their behalf, noting, “The Sentry’s as much of a princess as Tenchi is.”

“Oh, that’s right, actually.” Tenchi realized, “Both Crystal Council kids.”

“Does that mean I have to let you join us now too?” Einna snapped back at the Sondoran. She stood from the table and continued to grumble, “This isn’t some silly adventure to be hijacked by a couple on some homicidal honeymoon.”

Tou saw Tabuh's chest rise and recognized it as an inhale before an outburst. Valid as her indignation might be in response to the banshee's comment, Tou knew it wouldn't serve them well. He put a calming hand on her shoulder and she bit her tongue – but Einna wasn't finished.

“Truth isn't just *some* necromancer. She is the strongest necromancer beneath Solaris today.” Einna preached on, “Excluding Creaton Live himself, we haven't seen someone like Truth before. And she's not like Shalis Skullsummon. She's not a murderous warlord. She's not a dillusional narcissist. She's worse. Not only is she smart, she's a true believer. And what she believes is worse than what even Creaton believed. She doesn't just seek to abolish the Trinity Nations. She'll destroy the Mystvokar and the Cagirent – Vinnum Tow too. She'll use them, surely, but as soon as Saint's Empire is out of the way she'll come for them just as she did for your selfrighteous republics.”

The room fell quiet oncemore. While most folks in the bar knew who Truth was to some extent, few had a full grasp on exactly why all these separate groups were after the necromancer. Peshkova and Sniper knew it had something to do with the Batloen government. Tou and Tabuh had heard it had something to do with dangerous magic. Tenchi, Wake, and Kenchi had merely assumed the necromancer was being hunted because she was a necromancer that was bumbling about outside of the confines of the Dragon Islands' Order of Mancers. They all figured she was somehow involved in some New Pact, Disciples of Darkness scheme, but few had expected Truth represented a Void-War-level threat to civilization. As the significance of Einna's claim settled in the minds of her audience, she concluded:

“Truth is here to bring back the Queen of Darkness.”

“WHY?!”

The “why” wasn't from a singular individual, there was a chorus of “why”s blurted from most if not all the mouths gathered around the old Guardian. Einna Yelkao, Guardian of Sondor, had been alive – or well, undead – to witness the terror of the Queen with her very own eye sockets. Unable to roll her eyes at the infants surrounding her, she merely shook her head and retorted, “I don't intend to ask.”

Silence threatened to fall on the beerhall once more but Kenchi decided to prevent it. Truth's blood – that Pesh had mentioned – had been preserved on the crumbs of a dead rose stem, contained in a vile, and transported – by Pesh and another Rosethorn agent named Skar – to Manaloe where it was split between the Imperial Strategy Admiral Zaria Ein and boss of the Golden Dagger herself, Einna Yelkao. Einna brought her portion to Sondor to give to Kenchi. Kenchi was able to feed it to the Globework – literally, the orb shaped head of the robot named Atlas (the one and only) opened its mouth and ate the evidence. This enabled the bodyless machine-being to track the owner of the blood. The Globework was able to tell where people were but only if they were in areas it had previously mapped. It could also identify anyone it had met or been introduced to (like in the case of the rose stem blood). Incidentally, Kenchi had introduced his machine to Princess Daffeega Shelba on a visit to the Cloches in Batloe. Now that the automaton had the blood of Truth, it could tell whether or not the People's Princess, Daffeega

Shelba, was the true identity of the mysterious necromancer. During Einna's spiel, Atlas had given Kenchi the answer.

"We've found Truth." Kenchi stated, "She's in Vare."

All eyes, including Einna's empty sockets, turned to the young human now standing on the table. He cradled the robot head against his belly as his eyes bounced around the crowd before locking on the gaze of his big brother.

"It isn't the Princess." Kenchi gulped, "I think it is her sister...the Queen."

"Then who better to help stop her?" Tabuh challenged Einna, "You've already saen, ah'm more than capable of killing a Quaen."

"We're going to Batloe." Tou concurred, "With or without you."

Einna's jaw trembled as she prepared to speak but Tenchi beat the banshee to it.

"Farak it, we'll come too!" The Dragon declared.

"We gotta lay low anyway." Wake shrugged, "Why not leave the country for a bit?"

"AYE!" Cootie blurted from the bar.

"Looks like dey're crashing our homicidal honeymoon whedder we like it or not, Civ." Pesh snickered, nudging Sniper before plopping back down in her seat to snort another line.

Sniper grunted.

"This is literally the opposite of what I wanted." Einna growled, but she didn't fight further, instead she sat and said, "First thing's first, we need to warn the Strategy Admiral and see what news we have of Batloe." She hollered over her new comrades to the man still feigning distraction behind the bar, "Powman, you get the news out here?"

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"*Walter Walters: Queen Cagirent Dead – Zion Vows Vengeance*" The Knome folded the wood pulp pages, his nose twisted with disgust, then threw the paper down on the table, "Boooriiing."

"Boring?" Ben sputtered, his head twisting to the side like Unlucky's nose. The gmoat scooted to the edge of the booth and snatched the paper off the table, "How'd she..."

As Ben began to read the article under his breath, Unlucky reached forward and grabbed the second packet of news. Unlucky explained while he unfolded the other paper, "Some bum journalist trying to predict Void War Five. That's yesterday's news. Zion probably had her killed for sleeping with the Kou boy."

"Sleeping with the Kou boy?" Ben had hardly had time to give the article a preliminary skimming before the Knome had him captivated oncemore, but with what time he had he'd noticed, "Zion is blaming a '*Tenchi Kou*'."

"Whether he pulled the trigger or not," Unlucky shrugged, rustling his papers, "he's the reason it happened." He shooed Ben's attention away, "Yesterday's news, let's hear today's."

"Yesterd-" Fetch's jaw clapped shut as his foot missed a step and he slid on his heels down the halfstairs that led to the kitchen from the aft cabin. Once his soles hit the rickety floor of the *Unluckiest*, he cleared his throat and tried again as if nothing had happened, "Yesterday's? It might as well still be yesterday." He strode over to join the two at the table. Taking one of the

swiveling chairs across from the booth, he asked, “How long until we see land again and... Wait? How did you get that newspaper?”

Unlucky didn't look up, responding simply, “Mailmole.”

“In the ocean?” Fetch scoffed.

“Mailbat.” Unlucky corrected.

“Mhm.” Fetch folded his arms as one suspicious eyebrow ascended.

“Is that news from Batloe?” Lenga asked.

Unlike her lover, she left the aft cabin competently. Gliding down the stairs, she took the seat next to Fetch. Unlucky slapped the *Mystakle Times* onto the table and spun it around so Lenga could see as he read aloud.

“*A Hero Emerges From Refuse of Rift Bridge,*” Unlucky cleared his throat, “*Tlow-Vare, Batloe, June 4 – When working class protestors, now calling themselves ‘the Laymen’, met with their new Queen on the Rift Bridge at noon, June 3rd, they did not expect violence. Batloe’s dove of peace, Princess Daffeega Shelba, led the procession of Laymen in hopes that the royal siblings might be able to find some compromise between the proletariat of New Town, Tlow-Vare and the bourgeoisie of Old Town, Vare.*”

“Proletariat and bourgeoisie?” Fetch interrupted, “What is that?” He leaned forward, poking the title above the headline, “*The Mystakle Times?* A Sentry newspaper?! Buncha privileged, pale elf snobs.” He mimed hocking a loogie, “Since when were they Civilist?”

“Since a fascist took over thar countray.” Bold answered.

The dwarf strolled in from the maindeck with the bearn. Despite being mortal enemies hardly a week prior, the two were now capable of sharing the same room. Granted, Ben slept in the bed between them and the only alternative to the fore cabin beds was wooden floorboards, it was still an accomplishment at least tacitly appreciated in both their minds not to mention the minds of the rest of the crew.

“The Mystvokar.” Marvell gave a title to Bold’s answer.

“Aye,” Bold nodded, detailing further, “Talloome Asslore. Hae may bae a good man, but hae’s martial. Hae won’t bae Kang farevar. If the pehl elves know anythang they’ll start argonoizin loike the Civilists troide.”

“Oh no!” Lenga gasped.

Her light purple eyes seemed darker now as she read further. Bold and Marvell hurried over to the booth. Bold clambered onto the bench and Marvell stooped over Fetch and Lenga as Unlucky continued to read.

“*Relations only worsened. As negotiations began, unidentified terrorists began throwing small explosives from the Laymen side towards the Queen and her Royal Guard. 12 citizens of New Town, Tlow-Vare – or 12 Laymen as they now identify themselves – have been reported dead. Dozens more wounded. (The Queen has not released numbers of casualties on her side.) The Rift Bridge was rendered impassable from the blasts.*”

“Terrorists.” Ben’s hand quivered as he reached up to matt the hair around his horns, “Aren’t we going there to help them?”

“Tarrarists are just fraedom foitars from the otharsoide, laddae.” Bold grumbled, his eyes not on Ben but rather on the words, “*Queen and her Royal Guard*”.

“Besides,” Fetch noted, drawing attention back to the text, “sounds like one of their own tried to stop it.”

“Who knew dogs could read?!” Unlucky exclaimed before taking Fetch’s low growl as a cue to burry his head back in the news. The Knome hurriedly read on, “*The deathtoll would’ve*

certainly been worse had it not been for one amongst the workers – one who’s name is now being chanted through the streets of New Town: Sallis Drakken. According to our sources in Tlow-Vare, he was an honorable, hard working moon miner during the rush. However, sources in Vare note that he was a thief having spent time in the brutal dungeons within the infamous Rift.”

“I’ve always wanted to go there.” Marvell whispered. She had meant to simply think it but apparently her inner truth was feeling a little louder than usual. As everyone turned to her with mixed expressions that all added up to a sum total of, “What the farak?” she quickly explained, “The Gladiator Pyramid games are there.” Her cheeks were reddening beneath her fur, “They’re like a bloodier warcourt.”

“Can’t believe the Empire still allows Batloe to host such a thing.” Lenga shook her head.

“It’s no more violent than any other dungeon – God’s Island aside.” Marvell defended.

“It’s the circus of it.” Lenga continued, almost as if she hadn’t even heard the former athlete, “Imagine if wars were fought for an audience!”

“I don’t know Lenga.” Fetch interjected, scratching his scraggly chin, “That might actually help to stop wars.”

“Has Paramid stopped Paramid?” Bold asked.

“No.” Fetch admitted.

“Thar ya have it.” Bold concluded and gave Unlucky the nod to continue.

“Whatever his prior reputation, Sallis is now known for risking his life to save his fellow Batloens – regardless of which side of the Rift they hail from. He stopped the first arsonist, subduing them and discarding their bomb over the side of the bridge before it exploded. Word of his bravery spread hope amongst the Laymen of Tlow-Vare. A bitter sweet hope, for chants of his name were accompanied by a darker message, after all, the day’s hero did not walk free. Shortly after his selfless act, he was viciously subdued by the Arcane Sentinels. Witnesses describe how he complied and surrendered but was still electrocuted, even as he lay unarmed on the ground.”

This time there was no interruption. Only silent half-gaping and muffled sighs of disgust.

“The Laymen are convinced the bombers were plants – that this was some sort of secretive plot by the new Queen, Suicine Shelba, and her Magi to sabotage their previously peaceful movement. Ironically, whether or not this is true, the movement now appears to have committed to a course of violence. Reports from anonymous sources claim the consensus among the Laymen is that the time for compromise has passed. The bridge between the two sides has been broken, physically and metaphorically. Word of vague plans to storm the Cloches, the Capitol Building, have been circling. They do not appear to be concerned about keeping such an agenda quiet. In fact, they are openly requesting foreign aid – magicians, specifically healers, promised protection and pay.”

All eyes turned to the sad blue skinned Princess. She didn’t look up from the news but felt their stares all the same. She was frustrated but she still hadn’t had enough time to digest exactly what it was specifically the so infuriated her. As Princess, she was used to being seen as naïve for her pacifism, but as Headmaster of the Munkloe School of Modern Healing few made this mistake. Academics saw her pacifism as integrity. She advocated for actions that did not contradict her ideals. Of course, sometimes, that calculus wasn’t perfect. Sometimes effectiveness had to be prioritized even if it meant temporarily betraying her beliefs. This conflict was never more present than in the work of a doctor. How often did she have to cut to heal? She could handle that – she regularly did – but even those sacrifices weighed on her.

Scarring patients to save their lives still took a toll, those decisions took time to settle in her soul. These upcoming decisions made those made in the emergency room look black and white. All that said, the same animosity began to well up in the bottom of her throat. She wasn't frustrated that sometimes she had to make these decisions. She was more so frustrated that no one else seemed to be bothered by them. Effectiveness and efficiency seemed too often to be an easy excuse for throwing off one's integrity at a moment's notice. And now, as her new friends surrounded her, staring at her, seeking her approval, she realized why she was so frustrated. She didn't necessarily blame her friends, but she was bearing the burden of the guilt that they didn't feel. Somehow absolving them by her consent and yet damning herself in her own mind. Still, she agreed.

"As a humble citizen of the Trinity Nations, I serve my family, my King, and my Emperor." She said bluntly, "Saint said to go to Batloe."

Unlucky finished the article, "*If you ask the average citizen of Tlow-Vare what their plan is, then they will tell you. 'We're going to free Sallis.' Much like the falling of the Rift Bridge, this is both physical and metaphorical. Sallis was no influential individual nor was he especially well known before his act of selflessness on the Rift Bridge, that is precisely why the Laymen identify with the man. The people of New Town see themselves in Sallis and they see storming the Cloches as the only way they can have their freedom – their democracy. 'When Sallis is free,' they say, 'we will all be.'*"

Silence filled the creaking ship as best as silence could. Only the sounds of the wood, wind, and ocean existed. It was Bold that stirred first.

"Breakfast?" He asked.

"I could eat." Fetch agreed.

"It's more like lunch, I'd say." Marvell argued.

"Whatever it is, it's time to eat!" Unlucky chimed.

As the four shuffled out of the booth, Lenga sat there a moment longer. Alone with her thoughts – alone in her shame – or so she thought. Ben reached across the table. Her hands were folded in her lap, but he didn't need to physically touch her to send the friendly gesture. She looked up at the gmoat. He smiled back, sadly. He looked scared.

"I'm not a pacifist." Ben admitted, "But I'm not a warrior, either."

Lenga sighed and offered a similar smile back.

He nodded his horns towards their friends, "Warriors need friends like us, Lenga. We need your help. I need your help."

"I know." She replied, "But it could all still be wrong."

"Yea, it could." Ben agreed. Giving up the grin for a frown, his hand went back to matt the hair down around his horns, "It really could, huh..."

- - -

Galloping like a drunken horse, Cowboy rushed towards the edge of the rooftop. His rear legs thrusting faster than his front legs could stretch forward to pole vault his body onwards. The hound's loose skin and shaggy fur rippled with each bound until finally he leapt from the asphalt, twisting up into the sky like a missile rocketing towards outerspace. Opening his mouth he snapped down just as the projectile flew into his maw – he caught it!

He landed right by the rooftop wall and there he stopped to turn back and wink. The stick he clamped in his jaws was decorated on either end. On one side, beautiful red petals feathered the stem and, on the other side, there was a bulbous growth that looked like a colorful caste of an ahsoka flower. After winking, he trotted back to his companion.

Lowering the Gustbow, Lalmly knelt to receive the pouch but before the little yellow beast returned, something caught the spirit's silver eyes. Another creature, scrawnier and darker, had just shot up from behind the rooftop wall. Twisting, it glided down towards them, swooping low and stopping to tread-air with regular wing flaps right about at eye level with Lalmly. Cowboy, having arrived, dropped the red petaled arrow and stooped low in preparation for a jump – his tongue already licking his lips as he imagined chomping down – but before he could pounce, Lalmly's gauntlet palmed his forehead and he froze in downward-dog position. The bat screeched in appreciation and dropped the scroll it held in its tiny feet then fluttered off. Lalmly sat down her magic bow and caught the paper before it hit the roof. Taking her hand off Cowboy, she unrolled the message. Cowboy sniffed it as she read.

Her lips parted, but as a spirit, she didn't audibly gasp.

“Mailmole?”

The voice came from behind her. Lalmly recognized it as her partner. Not quite done with the letter, Lalmly finished reading as she pointed at the winged rodent fleeing over Tlow-Vare.

“Ah,” Zaria acknowledged, “mailbat.”

Finished with the short note, Lalmly let it roll back into scroll form as she stood and turned to face the Battle Admiral. The two women looked wide eyed at one another. They both spoke in unison, though they said slightly different things.

“Suicine is Truth.” Zaria said.

Lalmly said, “Truth is the Queen.”

Cowboy let his butt fall to the rooftop floor, emitting a whine.

“Where's Princess Daffeega?” Zaria asked.

Lalmly motioned for Zaria to follow. They walked over to the edge of the roof and looked over the parapet. About ten stories down, crowds filled the streets. People were cycling through in thick chaotic lines. The rainbow-robed Princess, the chimp on her shoulder, and her heavily armored comrade were amongst the throng, managing the tumultuous procession. Food and water was being passed out, but so too was hope – which Daffeega somehow still had. The people may not have known who Suicine was, but they knew she was the enemy. Daffeega on the other hand, she still wasn't sure that violence would be their only option – she still wasn't sure of who her sister really was.

Zaria gulped.

Lalmly spoke up quietly as if the crowd far below might overhear, “A couple of Obsidians, a few Golden Daggers, and the Kou Warriors.”

“Didn't expect that.” Zaria concurred.

“We'll need them.” Lalmly stated.

“If ‘the Laymen’,” Zaria air-quoted, “hope to win, certainly. I should write Tenchi Kou before they head this way. Make sure he knows we expect more than just him and a militia of drunken humans. A curlhead dalvary could give us a fighting chance against Batloen ground dragons. Can you tell Daffeega?”

Lalmly hesitated. A moment passed. After it became clear that Zaria wasn’t going to fill the silence, the spirit answered, “Tell Daffeega that the Obsidians, the Golden Dagger, and the Kou Warriors are coming to aid the Laymen?”

Zaria stepped away from the parapet, moving just out of Lalmly’s view to force the spirit to meet her glare if she dared. Lalmly didn’t dare, keeping her gaze averted.

“Or do you want me to tell Daffeega that her sister is Truth?” Lalmly asked.

The Admiral kept up the silent pressure so Lalmly turned away from the edge to face it.

“You want me to tell her that three foreign forces are coming to kill her sister?” Lalmly asked, “And that if she turns them down, then her Laymen will surely be slaughtered.”

Lalmly’s silver eyes broke Zaria’s mahoganies resolve. The Admiral looked away. She turned her gaze upon Vare. The rich opal facades and auburn inflections of meticulously sculpted opulence would all soon be smeared with the smog of sedition.

“What do we say? What’s the alternative?” Zaria asked, “We lie?”

“No.” Lalmly corrected, her voice cold as she pressed her point forward, “We simply don’t say.”

Zaria cursed beneath her breath, walking away from Lalmly. Cowboy trotted over to her and sat by her feet. He pawed her shin, but she didn’t respond.

“You Shisharay have a way, don’t you.” She lamented, “Betraying Daffeega, even if it is for her own good...we’ll pay for this decision. Somehow.”

Lalmly strode over to her superior, “What’s the alternative?”

“You’re not wrong.” Zaria admitted. She knelt down to stroke the needy pup then continued, “But it still isn’t right.”

Kneeling beside the earth elf, the spirit began to scratch the white tufts of fur that stuck out above Cowboy’s sternum. The two women met each other’s gaze and both nodded then they turned to stare out over the Rift at Old Town as their imagination ran rampant with the destruction that was sure to come. They’d made their choice, now all they could do was hope and pray that their decision would be the least wrong one.

PART FOUR – LAYMEN’S REVOLUTION



Chapter Seventeen: Picking up the Gauntlet

A strand of light split the façade of the horizon like a crack suddenly shooting across a glass pane and the snap of thunder quickly followed. The sound ricocheted off the thrashing waves to bounce off the puckering black clouds above, vibrating the air like the ground trembling in an earthquake. The distant wall of the storm looked like an extension of the sea, like the slope of a wave that ramped up all the way to the cumulonimbus kingdom above, as rain and hail fell just as thick as the ocean it battered. This was no normal weather phenomena, this was the Iahtro Storm.

The crew watched it, clasping the splintery bannister of the *Unluckiest* until their knuckles turned white. Only a spray of rain misted their faces at this point, but each moment they drew closer the spray increased.

“Look’s lahk wae’re stayin at sae.” Bold grumbled.

The dwarf was the only one that didn’t have to hold on for dear life. His weight was substantial enough to keep him firmly planted on the deck even as it pitched and plummeted up and down mountainous waves. His arms were crossed over his chest as tight as his scowling brow.

“We’ll head West, up the Frosted Coast.” Unlucky declared.

Though the Knome had a similarly low center of gravity, his was a bit too low. The poor fellow couldn’t even see over his own boat’s balustrade. To solve this issue, he’d thrown his arms over the railing, holding himself in place with his armpits and chin. His feet dangled, kicking back and forth like a kid on a swing.

“We should take land somewhere in Azunu – in case Iahtro follows us.” Lenga warned.

Her blue fingers were pale teal, clamped around the round rim of the railing. She’d wisely enchanted her robe before joining the crew on the deck, it was now sleek and water resistant. The hood draped over head, however, wasn’t enough to protect her face. She squinted through the rain and sea spray at the approaching typhoon.

“That’s what?” Ben asked, “Another day at sea? Or more?”

Like the Headmaster Princess, Ben too protected himself from the elements. He held fast with one hand, but his other gripped the L-shaped signature of his new magical craft - the orb of which shone blue. A thin, nearly transparent, veil of water shrouded the gmoat. It absorbed the droplets that bombarded him and added them to his shield. It was less necessary than it was practice. His anxiety rose with every day they neared the desert state, the blockade before them actually provided him some relief.

“Fetch isn’t going to like this.” Marvell stated.

While she held tight and her knuckles were white, one couldn’t tell beneath the fur. Her armor and axes were dry and safe below deck, but her undergarments and fur were damp nearing on drenched. Each bob of the ship brought a thicker mist. As her thought rolled off her tongue, it was replaced by another: *Where is Fetch?* Turning to her right, she realized the human was the only one not there with them. The others too soon turned to share her realization.

Fetch was below deck. Curled up like a coiled snake, he was back in his original form – that of a shaggy black dog. The whiskers that stuck out from his brows twitched, but his eyes remained clamped shut. He didn't make a noise aside from the faint sound of his slow, meditative breathing. The canine wasn't the sort of dog to be scared of loud noises like thunder. The average storm bothered him little. However, the churning cylinder of the Iahtro Storm brought memories back of a certain day that changed his life forever.

A column of smoke, as wide as a mountain, stretched down from the heavens like the arm of a wrathful god. They knew it wasn't smoke, but they had never seen anything like it. The clouds were nearly black, the bit of sky still left on the horizon was a sickly green hue, and on the ground was a thin line of rising dust that stretched as far as the eye could see on either side of the great wall of wind. They'd heard of weather like this, but the horror stories didn't do it justice.

The tornado had touched down and already the wind was tugging on them. Their animals were safe in caverns beneath the plains, it was only the people that were left to save. They scraped and clawed onto the porch. The rugged warped boards that peeled up at the ends gave them things to grab, but so too would these boards become willing victims of the approaching apocalypse. Up the deck the two went, scurrying like they did in their bestial forms though they were shaped as humans. Rain pelted them in waves so thick it felt as if they were being blasted by hoses, except the water that hit their backs would also curl around them with the grabbing gusts. Despite being drenched, it smelled like fire – like a match had just been struck – and a volcanic, sulfuric taste was thick and pasty on their tongues.

When they made it to the door, it flapped open of its own accord, nearly swatting them back. They bound forwards. The little girl rushing further into the home while the little boy stuck himself to the inside wall and tried to reach and shut the door without being sucked back out. He hadn't seen what the girl rushed towards. Had he, he might've forgotten the door. He was planted on the side of the door frame where the latch was. Keeping his torso against the wall, he stretched for the door but he was too young and small, there was no way. The door was already in the hands of the storm. He watched, his brown eye and crow eye wide, as the screws that held the hinges slowly pulled from their places. The bolts didn't even turn, they simply pulled out, keeping the chunks of wood pinched between their ridges. Then the hinges snapped free from the frame and the door tore off – it bounced once off the deck then ascended towards the heavens, drawing young, thirteen year old Fetch's eyes to the blackness beyond. The green skies were no longer visible. The tornado would soon be upon them.

He whirled around to his friend then saw what she had first seen: blood and body parts. Had Fetch been a stranger to the house, he wouldn't have been able to tell if the flesh belonged to one or many. Muscle, skin, bones, and limbs were scattered apart, connected only by the crimson coat of blood that seemed to encompass every surface area. There was a bit left intact. In the center of the shack, the top half of a rib cage, he collar bones, neck, and head remained. The face was left only partially lacerated so that it was still very much so recognizable. Even a stranger would be able to recognize the resemblance between the corpse and the girl that

cradled it. She was wailing but the wind prevented anyone from hearing, it was like a constant rumble of thunder – as if a freight train was barreling towards them.

“CATTY!” Fetch yelled, though she wouldn’t hear, “CATTY!”

He scurried towards her, keeping low to the ground in hopes that would keep him from being sucked away like the front door, then around her. Behind Catty, there was a trap door in the floor. While this tornado was bigger than any the continent had before seen, it was not the first of its kind. Homes – even shacks like this – had basements just in case. He crouched a little higher so that he could pry it open, then turned back to his mourning friend.

Now he noticed one thing more: a spike. The corpse’s left side was mostly vacated of flesh. His breast was naked, revealing hollow ribs, and where his heart should have been there was the long black nail. It slipped in past his right shoulder – where flesh, ripped as it was, still remained – and shot through the middle of his chest, between the back of his ribs, before boring into the floor boards beneath. While at first it looked like the spike a worker might use to obliterate a stone, at second glance, further down the obsidian shaft, spiraling threads appeared. There would be no sword-and-the-stone moment. Catty’s father would not be coming with them.

Catty will. Fetch told himself.

The porch screamed behind him as wood bent, popped, and snapped, the shack was beginning to lean back and forth like a swaggering drunk. From behind her, Fetch wrapped his arms around his friend. Immediately, she tensed and her weeping turned to shrieking. He grabbed hold of her wrists and began to pry them from her father’s remains but she was too strong.

“CATTY!” He screamed.

“NO!” She screamed.

With a deafening sound so abrupt that neither could describe it, they simply couldn’t hear any longer, the roof peeled off and flew away. The sky above was as black as the wall of darkness that seemed to be just outside their door. With the ceiling gone, the storm poured in. Water and hail dropped down like a tidal wave. It smashed down upon them. The river rushed out the door, taking the front wall with it. Household debris, from splintered furniture to miscellaneous tools, bombarded the two like shrapnel. Only the giant screw that pinned her father kept them from being dragged out into the weather. Soon, their storm shelter would be flooded, but the storm did offer Fetch one last chance. There was no way he could tear Catty from her father’s corpse, only the tornado could do that. When the weather rushed into the home, it ripped her father right out from her arms. Every piece of his body was swept clean from the house. Disappearing just as quick as the roof had. All that was left was half of the shack and the two children clinging to the spike in the floor.

“COME ON!” Fetch roared.

While Catty didn’t protest, she didn’t comply either. Still, Fetch was able to drag her to the hole and push her in. She hit the ground with a splash – the floor of the tunnel was already shin-deep with rainwater. Fetch rolled in after her but while she lingered in the puddle, Fetch bounced back to his feet.

There was no chance of closing the trap door, but they were shadowmancers. Raising his hands, shadows poured out from his eye and he directed them to fill the hole. The blackness that replaced the trap door was as dark as the blackness of the storm above and yet their shelter became somehow darker once he'd cut out the storm. Tasting blood, he went ahead and spit a wad at their new ceiling, this added a little more strength to his magic so that it might last until the tornado had passed. Then he sat down in the puddle next to Catty. She was pressed up against one of the wooden supports that kept the mud at bay. Her knees were pulled up to her chest, her arms wrapped around them.

"I'll kill him. I'll kill him." She murmured, "I'll kill him. I'll ki-"

"Catty," Fetch frowned, putting a hand on her knee, "we should just run."

"You run." Catty turned to face him, "I'm killing him."

"I'll go with you." Fetch decided.

"No." Catty snapped, "Go with your family. Let me go with mine."

And then he was awake. But instead of his hand being on his friend's knee, his friend's hand was on his knee. Well, if you consider a dog's back haunch a knee. For he was no longer in human form. He was no longer thirteen either. He wasn't in an underground storm shelter, he was below deck on the *Unluckiest*. And he wasn't sitting next to his first love, he was sitting across from his new flame: Princess Lenga Ruse.

Her big purple eyes were somehow wide and yet her brow was still furled with concern, she asked, "Fetch, are you okay?"

Fetch sat up, but stayed in his canine shape. Rather than responding verbally, he just bobbed his head. It was easier to lie when fur obscured his expressions. That wouldn't have worked on Catty. Catty actually knew him. And he'd known her. At least, before the storm came. The tornados of 1991 hadn't just dragged her father away, they'd also torn her away.

He nestled into Lenga, burrying his face in her lap, knowing that she needed the comfort of being able to comfort him, though still he thought about Catherine Meriam. Everytime he thought he was over her, she popped back up in his life. *Like a storm*. Fetch thought. Lenga began to gently stroke his head, her fingers raking through his fur down his neck and between his shoulder blades. It felt good. He closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. He should've been able to forget everything and worry for nothing but he couldn't. Lenga was the calm before the storm and the storm would be back. He gulped – not for himself, but for Lenga. *What will happen to the calm when it does?*

- - -

Agony. Every single kind of pain came at once, every which way. Like an anvil smashing his fingers, smushing his flesh and forcing it to squish away from the bone, out from under the weight only for needles to prick that bit of spreading tissue. The crushing and the stabbing never subsided but rather doubled down, then tripled down, then quadrupled down with each beat of his heart. Each wave of agony reduced his ability to sense anything else but the torturous pain.

Normal mortals would've died or at least fallen unconscious, however, Paud Gill had endured this curse for long enough that no matter how bad it got it was never enough of a burden for his brain to tap out. Instead, when the pain swelled to this extent, he slipped into a dream state. Thoughts fluttered by like debris in the waves of the ocean tide, the ocean tide being the spikes in the waves of pain. Sometimes the thoughts were a smell, sometimes a taste, and sometimes a vision but always the pain was there to keep him from completely comprehending whatever form the ideas took.

Cassandra.

There was no way of knowing whether or not he was speaking outloud. His own sense of self consisted solely of suffering – he was nothing more than his burning blood – aside from agony all else he could conceive of was his sister, prostrate on her knees.

Cassandra.

It was really her. He'd endured enough such spells of trauma to know that this was no mere hallucination – at least not completely. With what little consciousness he could control, he tried to focus. Not just on his trembling sister, but also on her surroundings. At first they were nothing but black. She was kneeling in a void of darkness.

“Shangdi.”

Cassandra's voice cut like a knife through his pain. For a moment, her surroundings lit up. She was in a room, not a cell, and a nice one at that. Marble floors. Flamboyant walls with intricate molding where the edges met the floor. The end of a bed could be seen behind her, brass legs held a mattress hidden beneath a blanket with tassled edges. Then the pain rushed back in like the spell of a banshee and once more his sister was floating in a void of darkness.

“Sidon cannot save the sea alone.”

Again, her voice sparked visuals but this time they did not surround her. This time, they blotted her out. Sidon, the masked vigilante, took her place. Unlike her, he stood strong. His feet spread apart, his chest puffed out, and his masked face glaring defiantly towards the sea surface. He drew a crooked scimitar from his robes and pointed it towards Solaris. Though in this trippy dream, Solaris wasn't there. Paud was. Paud was up high, looking down at his old friend.

“The Warrior King needs the People's Queen.”

And then his masked friend was gone. His blue skin turned to liquid and his robes twirled into a rush of wind. When the spinning gust ceased, the robes were around another fishfolk, not Sidon and not his sister. In fact, possibly not even a fishfolk. This Aquarian had tans like Paud, tans that typically signified that one was not a fishfolk but rather a merman. This woman stood strong like Sidon and she glared up towards the heavens where Paud still hovered, but her gaze was fractured by her left eye. It was made of metal. A silver sliver ran down the left side of her face, extending above and below the eye. It was not unlike the metallic scar in Paud's chest.

For a moment, Paud was distracted from his cause by the sight of this merman girl. There are no other Gill women, he thought. He wasn't wrong. The last Gill woman was the very sister he was trying to reach. Is this girl from the past or the future? But after that last question,

he caught himself. This is not the time. He would've clenched his eyes shut had his species had eyelids, instead he unfocused his vision and honed in on his thoughts – thoughts of his sister.

Cassandra! Where are you?

“The People’s Queen needs the Warrior King.”

The silver-eyed merman slipped away, her image spiraled into a ribbon and shot over the empty, dark horizon like a lion dragon as Paud’s sister returned. She was rocking back and forth on her knees. Her head was still pressed to the floor – a floor that was no longer visible, just black. Even just the vision of his kin was blinking in out of visibility as new droves of pain surged through his person. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he could sense himself writhing, but he fought to remain in the dreamlike state. No matter how torturous it was, he knew this might be the only hope he had of ever finding her. His pain wouldn’t be this potent if she wasn’t so close, but the palace complex above was massive and he was not familiar with the twists and turns. So he strained through the pain and tried to stare into the darkness that surrounded Cassandra, searching for any sort of clue that might help.

Cassandra!

“Paud!”

She reared up. Throwing her chest forward, her head flopped back and suddenly her black shark-like eyes were boring into Paud’s own.

“The People’s Queen-”

Forget Aquaria! I need-

“-needs the Warrior King.”

-to find you!

Her hand shot up and grabbed Paud by his shoulder. The grasp was firm and it felt like a bear trap clamping down. The blood of his shoulder pricked his insides. He felt as if his flesh was being torn apart, shredded from outside and within simultaneously, but still he managed to cling to a teeny-tiny bit of consciousness. Still he forced himself to see. While before it seemed he was above Cassandra looking down, now suddenly they had switched. She was behind him, but yet his vision bored through his own brain and saw out the back of his head. He saw her scowling behind him. Her lips curled, her brow furled, she hissed her next words.

“If you can’t listen to me, then you can’t find me.”

“Cassandra!”

“Aquarian!”

The blackness was whisked away for another form of darkness. Shadows crashed over Paud to replace the void. Arid heat came with the all encompassing twilight, somehow claiming space in his consciousness even as his pain had not fully subsided. He could feel the loose sand beneath his toes and the cold metal bars against his back but that wasn’t all. Just as there had been in his trance, there was a hand on his shoulder.

“Aquarian?”

Paud threw himself forward, diving into a somersault then whipping around to glare back where he had been before. There, between the bars of his cell, was still an extended arm. The

arm was furry. The furred man didn't move. Crouched by the edge of his cell, his arms still protruded through the bars into Paud's cell, though now the man's concerned expression transformed into one of fear.

"You were-"

Paud snarled, "Get your arm out of my cell."

The moleman didn't need further encouragement. This wasn't his first time in the dungeons of Vare and while it may have been his cell-neighbors first time, the moleman had a feeling that this was not the fishfolk's first time in a dungeon. Still, stuck as he was bunking up next to the fellow, he was curious. Plus he'd seen the Princess' guard speak to the man as if they were familiar, as if this foreigner might in some way shape or form be an ally. So though he stood and backed away from the cell, he didn't stop observing the Aquarian.

The Aquarian, meanwhile, was also curious. While the molten metal within his veins was still boiling too hot for him to feel any semblance of sorrow for how he'd snapped at his neighbor, the pain had diminished enough to let curiosity seep in. Truth had asked him to kill this man, Sharp Otubak had asked him to protect him. Paud licked his eyes as he stared back at the moleman. He sighed loudly through his gills then sat down, cross legged, facing the Batloen.

"Who are you?" Paud asked.

"Sallis." Sallis responded.

"And who is Sallis?" Paud pressed.

"No one." Sallis shrugged.

A weird chirpy sound emitted from between Paud's sharp teeth. Sallis had never met a fishfolk, so it took him a moment to realize that the noise was laughter. His cellmate was snickering at him. It didn't offend Sallis. To be honest, he felt the same way. There were tons of more influential people at the protests and tons of more violent ones too and yet here he was. Twice now the target of the Crown's ire. Chuckling a bit to himself, Sallis popped a squat opposite the fishfolk.

"Jokes on them." He said, "They can't lock up Princess Daffeega and she's all the people need." He muttered some more, mostly to himself rather than to Paud as the dead pan stare of the black-eye foreigner began to suggest that he was no longer a conscious audience. Sallis was wrong. Paud was listening. And his interest was peaked when he overheard Sallis murmur, "...Daffeega, the People's Princess..."

"The People's Queen needs the Warrior King."

Cassandra's words rang in Paud's tympanic membranes. Her smooth diamond shaped face, flashed before him. Her brow furled as her tongue lashed out the syllables of her prophecy. Without intending, Paud rocked back from his seating position. He snapped out of it just in time to reach back and catch himself, but still the motion was quite alarming to his neighbor.

Perking up, Sallis asked, "You okay?"

The stranger's concern was almost as unbearable as his flaring curse. Clenching his teeth, Paud fought the urge to snap. Looking away from the moleman, he took a few long breathes of the hot, desert air. *"If you can't listen to me, then you can't find me."* He turned back to the other

prisoner but remained silent. He thought as if speaking, as if he could still communicate with his sister telepathically (just in case he could). *You need me to help this man, Cassandra? Then I will help this man.* He licked his eyes then spoke.

“They need you too.”

“What?” Now it was Sallis that was almost rocking onto his back.

“The Princess can’t lead them into battle.” Paud explained, “They need a warrior.”

Sallis scoffed, “I’m not a warrior.”

A low gurgling growl emitted from Paud’s throat but he cut it off as quick as he could. Turning away for another slow breath he reminded himself that this was for his sister. He looked back and continued, “You can fight.”

“I’m not a warrior.”

Through clenched teeth, he said it again, “You can fight.”

“I’m not-”

“Tingshe ne farakin shua!” Paud snarled, “You’re a fighter!”

Though Sallis did not speak Aquarian, it didn’t take a genius to understand that he’d just been cussed out. The good will was quickly evaporating within him, along with the curiosity, but despite that and his pride he decided to play along with this strange stranger’s game a little longer before returning the energy being cast at him. Grumbling, he responded, “Farak, man...yea. I mean...I grew up in Tlow-Vare. I can fight.”

“And your Princess grew up up there.” Paud gestured towards the surface far above them, “She’s no fighter. She needs you.”

Sallis rolled his eyes, “There’s plenty of New Towners to pick from, Aquarian.” He stood up so that he could pace. He tried to act like he was musing over whether or not to continue the conversation, but in reality he was actually considering the stranger’s words more than he’d like to admit. Splitting the difference, he asked, “What do you care? What are you doing?”

Paud simply shrugged, “I believe our fates are intertwined, moleman.”

Sallis shrugged back, “Ya, yours and mine and everyone else in the Rift. We’ll share a grave for sure.”

The Aquarian fell silent for a moment. There was no need to respond to Sallis’ self indulgent misery. Paud certainly didn’t judge him for it. Few could attest to enduring more misery than a Gill, but still Paud understood that folks unaccustomed often felt the need to vocalize their complaints. Paud simply had no intention of entertaining it. Instead, he withdrew into himself and pondered his vision. *If I help Sallis, then I can find Cassandra.* He told himself. *But how can I help Sallis?*

Apparently, Sallis had just come to the same question as Paud. After grumbling to himself for a moment, he finally blurted out, “Okay so what if the people do need me, what the farak can I do about that. How are we supposed to get out of here. You got an answer for that?”

Paud did have an answer, but he also didn’t hear his neighbor’s question. His tympanic membranes had picked up on something far more peculiar. He barked at Sallis to be quiet, “Anchinga!”

“Huh?” Sallis yelled.

“Quiet!” Paud translated.

“What?” Sallis yelled again.

Paud’s hand shot to his own throat, his index and middle finger pressing hard against his windpipe. This was a universal gesture beneath Solaris, whether the sand beneath your feet was ocean floor or desert canyons: snake fangs. It was a vulgar threat.

The sudden escalation in aggression peaked with that motion. Sallis’ indignation flipped over and became perplexion. *What’s his-* Then he heard it. It was a steady thump. Far too precise to be marching guards and far too rhythmic to be rapping inmates. There was a certain hint of magic in the tempo and when words suddenly joined the metronomic drumming there was no doubt left in the young moleman’s mind.

“There once was a nation made of sand.” the voice proclaimed, *“The name of the nation: Batloen.”*

Rustling and grumbling prisoners began to fill in the gaps in the lyrics, interrupted only by the beat of the drum.

“The Workers rose and claimed the land. O rise, ye Layman, rise!”

Sallis had turned to look out the bars of his cell that faced the Rift as he listened, but now for the split second pause, he turned back to Paud. Paud met his gaze. Paud shrugged as the song continued with an enthusiastic-

“HUH!”

“Soon may the clouds roll in, wet our fur and scales again! Soon, aye, we’ll own our rent. We’ll rise, we Laymen, rise!”

Both Sallis and Paud stood and marched over to the edge of their cells. They pressed their faces between the bars, trying their best to look up the ascending ramp but with the darkness and the angle they couldn’t see very far.

“The New Queen was a cruel old hag. Betrayed both workers and her flag. Good sis insists us not get mad, but rise, ye Layman, rise! HUH!”

This time, the, “HUH!” rolled out like distant thunder as a good bunch of their fellow prisoners caught on intine to join in. It wasn’t just that either, the magical thump before was now drowned out by more organic thumping. Feet against sand, hands against bars, and even guttural chants had joined in to feed the singer the beat as the singer sang on, repeating the chorus.

“Soon may the clouds roll in, wet our fur and scales again! Soon, aye, we’ll own our rent.”

That prior boom of distant thunder reared its head oncemore but rumbled just a tad softer. It seemed the hesitation to join in had less to do with reluctance and more to do with a group of men and women that were a tad bit rusty when it came to spontaneous caroling. However, the message was touching them. There wasn’t a soul stuck in that shadowy canyon that didn’t hold some resentment for the systems that condemned them. Sallis himself couldn’t help but stomp along and mouth the words as he tried to anticipate them.

“We’ll rise, we Laymen, rise!”

While Paud was touched – his people’s plight wasn’t so different from those of Sallis’ – he wasn’t much for unsuspecting curiosity. His curiosity typically took the form of suspicion. He put a damper on Sallis’s intrigue with a simple question, “Is this some old mole song?”

“How?” Sallis shook his head, figuring Paud to simply be trying to kill the mood, “The King died what – barely a week ago?”

The next stanza interjected in the midst of their banter, *“Angry still we did yet get.”*

Paud decided to talk over it, “Could be about Donum Gesche.”

“Donum.” Sallis remarked instinctively.

“Good sis, poor sis, her heart was split.” The song continued, *“She alone shan’t lead the ship. So rise, ye Layman, rise!”*

If there had been a soul in those cells that didn’t hit the, *“HUH!”* this time, then they certainly weren’t furred or scaled. In fact, the, *“HUH!”* was so loud it drew a gasp out of the fishfolk that sounded ironically similar to the initial, quieter, *“HUH!”* The prisoners did their best to keep it up, but it’d been a while since their last karaoke so they stammered a little as they tried to accompany the chorus.

“SOON MAY THE,” they faulted on the next few syllables, *“clouds roll in.”* but picked back up as they remembered the second line, *WET OUR FUR AND SCALES AGAIN!*” only to stumble over the third and leave it mostly to the mystery singer, *“Soon, aye, we’ll own our rent.”* Then at last they chimed triumphant, *“WE’LL RISE, WE LAYMEN, RISE!”*

Almost as on cue as the inmates, Paud was on cue with his mood kill. He’d finally spotted the performer – it was someone he’d never seen before – and that only confirmed his suspicion. He said, “It’s The Bard.”

Sallis snapped out of his song-induced trance to exclaim, “Really?! You can see him?! You recognize him?!”

“A man arose from within the rift.”

Paud rolled his eyes. Fortunately, Sallis wasn’t offended considering the fact that fishfolk eyes are solidly black so the moleman couldn’t tell. Paud said, “You can’t recognize them. He always looks different. He’s a moleman today though.”

“With guts enough to eat the rich.”

“He’s getting nearer-” Sallis stopped talking and began to press his face against the bars harder than before, “He must be right-”

“With sis permish he took the ship.”

And there he was. He waltzed up to stand directly in front of Sallis then stopped, turned, and planted his feet.

“Now rise, ye Layman, rise.”

Taller than the average mole and certainly better dressed, the musician would’ve appeared to be a member of the Magi had his garb not looked so modern. The fellow looked like he’d just strolled out of one of the most popular clubs in Space City. Rather than a traditional cloak, he’d donned a sparkly sports coat. Crimson sequins shimmered up and down his physique

from toe to head – after all, they also covered his fedora. Taking said fedora, he flipped it over and held it out, as if offering it to Sallis, as he doubled over in a bow.

“HUH!” The prison roared, *“SOON MAY THE CLOUDS ROLL IN!”*

The Bard didn't straighten up from his bow. He continued to stand stooped over with his top hat extended, nearly touching the metal bars of Sallis' cell.

“WET OUR FUR AND SCALES AGAIN!”

Glancing down into the shadows of the hat, Sallis quickly realized what The Bard was up to – or at least, he had a clue. There was a small blue pendant in the hat. It looked like a gemstone medallion, but this wasn't Sallis' first stay in the dungeon of the Rift. There were no key holes in the bars of the prison cells, access was controlled by magic. There was a locket for each one of them locked up and, unless you knew magic (which few Batloen cons would), that was your only way out. Even if you got yourself to where the magic stones were stored, there was little hope in the mystically illiterate being able to find the right one. So Sallis was pretty sure that The Bard was offering him freedom, he just wasn't sure why.

“SOON, AYE, WE'LL OWN OUR RENT!”

“What do you want from me?” Sallis demanded, “Is that my key?”

Leaving the hat where it was, The Bard straightened up. His hand actually left the cap but the cap remained, levitating in reach of the inmate. The old moleman, taller than the young Sallis, smirked as he jumped back into the shanty along with the rest of the prison.

“WE'LL RISE, WE LAYMEN, RISE!”

As the rest of the prisoners fell silent, The Bard embarked on another verse.

“Yes, young mole, this is your key,” his voice carried throughout the canyon though it seemed to be as soft as any normal speaking voice in Sallis' ears. The Bard's smirk suddenly turned to a frown and he raised his index finger, wagging it at his subject as he warned, *“Third to last time I'll set you free.”*

Sallis had been about to reach for the pendant but now he hesitated. Apparently, his consent wasn't required though for as he flinched so too did the bars of his cell. They slid down into the dirt like blades into flesh, removing the barrier between he and The Bard. The Bard then snatched his hat back, popping it up to launch the medallion into the air before plopping the hat back on his head. Sallis instinctively caught the lockstone as The Bard did a twirl and wrapped up his song.

“Now go fulfill your destiny!”

“RISE, YE LAYMAN, RISE!” The prison roared once more.

Cradling his key in his hands, Sallis looked back up but The Bard was gone.

“HUH!” The Rift trembled.

As the choir of criminals returned to the chorus, Sallis turned to his former neighbor. Paud stared back. The only emotion Sallis had ever been able to read on the fishfolk during their brief interactions was anger, so the fact that the Aquarian appeared to be glaring blankly back didn't immediately alert Sallis to the man's opinion, still, he assumed Paud must be at least somewhat jealous.

“Stay alive.” Sallis said, “If we win, then you win.”

Paud laughed and quoted The Bard, “*Third to last time.*” He shook his head and strode deeper into his cell, turning his back on Sallis, “You’ll be back.”

Sallis certainly wouldn’t bet against the Aquarian’s prediction and he certainly wouldn’t hold it against him. Instead, he said, “Then stay alive to say you told me so.”

Then Sallis left his cell and headed up the ramparts.

- - -

There is a certain type of limestone rich with the mineral magnesium that dissolves centuries slower than its cousins, this makes it heavy and resilient. Astronomically more heavy and resilient than the grains of sand around it. So while wind and water slowly scrapes away the sand that cradle this special stone, the stone stays put and stays as heavy as ever. As less sand remains to bear its weight, the sand left behind is forced to bear more and more. The rock slab smushes these last grains, keeping them from being stripped away like the others. Overtime, the sand is compressed into stone, and slowly erosion, like a sculptor chipping away at marble, creates a pillar out of once was nothing more than a limestone rock in a desert valley. The end result, is called a hoodoo. The greatest of all hoodoos was found in the Vare Rift. It stood as tall as the edges of the canyon itself. Segmented like a caterpillar, it looked almost like a manmade cairn rather than a sandstone pillar. The stone snaked it’s way to the surface of the Rift and there on a magnesium-rich plate of sandstone was built a giant warehouse: the Hoodoo Airport.

You could easily spot a native versus a foreigner. The natives knew the airport sat on the hoodoo and while these great rock spires were beautiful to behold, they weren’t the most comforting places to stand. Natives rushed to the bridges that led from the geological island to New Town or Old, seeking the safety of solid ground, while foreigners wandered around the port, checking their maps, and plotting their day. Unaware that the column of dirt they’d marveled at as their ship or steed descended was worthy of anything more than novelty. Tourists always love to hike a volcano, while the volcano’s shadow haunts the locals like a guilty past.

In-between the natives and the foreigners was a new group. While they lingered like the tourists, it was less to larc and more so because they didn’t have much choice. To cross over into either side of the Capitol City, you had to have a resident vouch for you – and the resident that had committed to these poor transients had yet to arrive. To make matters worse, more poor transients were arriving every quarter of an hour like clockwork.

A clunky amalgamation of machinery smashed onto the floor and bounced back up a couple feet before remembering that it was not only heavier than the average zoomer but it was weighed down by it’s living cargo. One such member of the cargo tumbled off the ship when it crashed back down. He hit the floor of the port upside down but rolled as if he’d intentionally disembarked and hopped back to his feet a few inches before smashing into one of the Batloen Guardsmen on duty there.

“We’re here for the Princess.” The human stated.

The chidra's brow sagged into a scowl but he gave the rambunctious Sondoran the benefit of the doubt. Turning around, he scanned the port. Had Princess Daffeega Shelba been on the hoodoo, there certainly would've been a commotion around her. Instead, the most notable visitors were those behind the official, the scraggly human and his crew on their junkyard-zoomer.

When the guard turned back to them, the ship had finally skidded to a halt and the passengers were clambering off to stand alongside their leader. The guard took notice as most all of them were armed. The only unarmed individual was a little fellow who looked like a miniature twin of the human that'd claimed to know the Princess. Dark skinned, dark haired, with bushy brows and a strong jaw – which made the boy almost look like a Knome considering he seemed a bit young for such a masculine facial structure – the young child was unarmed, but the zoomer keys in the hand of a minor seemed to be more threatening than all the steel-girded adults around him. After the two humans came another humanoid folk but this man was paler in comparison, aside from the black stripes that zigzagged across his flesh. He lumbered along with the others as if he were wading through rough waters. One might initially assume his staggering stride was due to the heavy blade strapped to his back, but once he got close the smell of the liquor on his breath would inform one otherwise. Behind the drunk came a pair of elves. On the right was a young man, darker skinned than the humans but lighter skinned than the nellaf's stripes. He was dressed in what was once a dapper suit but now was stretched at some seams and torn at others, smeared with grease here and blood there. Similarly was his pale-elf partner. She had a smith's apron and blue tunic beneath that appeared to have been through both a few work days and a few battles. There was a golden gun holstered at her hip, the same shiny color as her glaring eyes. The couple weren't the only elves. There was another earth elf. This one armored to excess. Her metal plates were mismatched and, from their war-torn condition it appeared that it was less a fashion choice and more a move of necessity. Only one piece of equipment appeared to be there for something more than practicality. Her left shoulder plate was a dull crimson, as if painted by blood, and was studded with spikes as black as her close cropped hair. Another woman lingered behind the suit of armor, her body also covered from almost head to toe but instead of with metal she was draped in robes. Granted, there was plenty of metal underneath that cloak. She came strapped with explosives but, luckily, few could tell. She looked to be the most normal of the crew, as her scarlet scales meant she was either Batloen or Foxloen. However, if she were to open her mouth, her factory accent would give away that she was not from the sands of the desert country. Certainly not from the desert country was the giant behind her – a bearn. He stood a good foot higher than the others. The breeze he'd enjoyed on the zoomer ride had been replaced with the hot stagnant air of the airport and the poor furred fool was more worried about getting out of his leather outfit than he was worried about escaping the hoodoo. The cold talons of the red falcon on his shoulder did offer some relief, but it was an unholy chill that wasn't as comforting as one would hope. All in all there were nine, counting the bird, and none looked like the kind that immigration officials would be willing to look the other way for. If they weren't outlaws, then they surely were on their way to becoming ones and, considering the fact

that you've read this far, you likely know the answer is a bit of both. Tenchi, Kenchi, Cootie, Tou, Tabuh, Wake, Pesh, Sniper, and Einna. Whether you were a patriotic citizen of the Cagirent or loyal to the Empire of the Trinity Nations, there wasn't a person in that list that could be reasonably considered innocent. The security official couldn't know that for sure, but he absolutely suspected it. In response to Tenchi Kou's claim, "*We're here for the Princess.*" he simply said:

"Well she isn't here for you." He gestured for Tenchi to turn around and take in the rest of the room. The expansive airport, which was essentially one massive chamber, with high vaulted roofs and no walls aside from those that lifted the ceiling. Garage doors were all up and docks extended out between the arched openings, receiving both machines like Kenchi's Kaboomer and beasts – specifically curlhead dragons. The reptiles were roughly as long as the zoomers. Their wing span, however, dwarfed the width of the machines in order to match the strength of their mechanical-competitors' engines. Curlheads could lift three to five adults and, in this case, many even carried six. Their electronic rivals could certainly carry more, but jet fuel did cost more than dragon gruel. The zoomers were hardly fresh models yet they weren't antiques either. Instead they were a mis-matched combination of old and new, decades old abandoned pieces were connected to brand new stolen ones. Their crew looked just as hodge podgey. Most were human, but humans came in all shapes and sizes. Sondor had as much diversity as the planet Earth and the Kou Warriors on the Hoodoo Airport exemplified that. Still, to a Batloen, they all just looked human and humans weren't that common in the desert country so the airport official figured it very likely that all the round-eared, savannah-folk were there with the bushy-browed bachelor before him. The official asked, "Y'all *all* here for the Princess?"

Turning around, Tenchi did a 360 degree scan of the area. He finished his survey and looked back at the guard with a blank expression, "Yup."

The Batloen gulped, "Are there more coming?"

Tenchi gave a tooth-gritting grin as he nodded.

The Batloen's hand rose to rub his temple as he looked down at his feet. This went way beyond his level of authority and yet somehow he had a feeling the he would take the fall for it all – whatever it all wound up being. The poor chidra took a deep breath then met the foreigners gain once more, "We can't let you off the hoodoo until we get confirmation from the Princess and, until then, I'm going to have to ask y'all to wait here while I go get my super-"

Before he could retrieve his supervisor, the superior of his super's supervisor strolled into the port. At first, neither the guard nor those he was guarding knew for sure who was heading their way but judging from the commotion that surrounded the individual it was immediately obvious that they wouldn't have to wait long for answers. The newcomer didn't stop to give the chaotic procession their time of day until the crowd was so backed up they were forced to slow within yards of the Sondorons. Peering through the droves of excited airporters, Tenchi and his crew managed to pry out a few clues. The first hint was short brown fur, the second was that some of the fur was greying. The culprit was certainly a mole, but too old to be the Princess. The

third clue didn't help the Sondoran's much, but the guard identified the character when he spotted it: she wore robes of gold and white.

"Donum." The chidra gulped.

"Who is it?" Tenchi pressed.

"The Magus." The officer whispered.

"Then what's the deal?" Tenchi looked to his comrades but they were just as clueless, "Isn't that good for you? They're on your side?"

"The Magi aren't on anyone's side." The chidra hissed through clenched teeth, as if the approaching politician might be able to read his lips, "You and your clansmen have royally faraked me."

By this point, the old mole was close enough that the crew could make out a few of the expletives being hurled at the unlucky advisors that were hustling to keep up with her violent strides. Along with her entourage of interns and assistants, she brought a squad of soldiers. A dozen members of the Batloe Guard and even a pair of Arcane Sentinels. The security detail likely would've been a bit much had the Magus' not been so rowdy. With every vulgar gesture and flippant slur, the Kou Warriors she passed were beginning to take offense. Tenchi and his guard both rushed forward to meet her. Tenchi raising his hands to calm his troops while the guard pressed his hands together in humble prayer that his Lord might show mercy.

Frothing at the snout, Magus Larahga Selter snarled at the sight of Tenchi Kou, "That's the Mystak Blade! You're Tenchi Kou!"

Tenchi forced the grin that had wooed many a man and maiden then began to bow but his back stopped cooperating as the mole woman ranted on.

"A wanted man! And not just any wanted man--"

The assistants around her echoed her words in murmurs, "Wanted! Wanted!" they said at first, squawking like parrots, "Not just any! No!"

"-a regicidal maniac!"

"Regicidal?!" Tenchi's spine snapped back into place as he reared out of his half bow to gasp, "Now hold on!"

"Regicidal?" Her cronies chimed, "Regicidal!"

"You killed the Queen of Sondor!" The Magus was finally close enough for her to jab the sharp nail of her index finger into Tenchi's breast, "You're a Queen killer!"

"I did not!" Tenchi exclaimed.

The accusation struck another's nerves too. The electric elf behind Tenchi had very quickly began to sweat. When the politician's claw stabbed the human, Tabuh Sentry leapt forward, "Allegedly!"

Her partner was equally concerned, saying simultaneously, "There's no proof!"

Unfortunately, their third wheel also chose that moment to pipe up and, due to his inebriated state, he wasn't exactly the most helpful. Staggering up to the plate, Cootie clasped Tenchi on the shoulder and nodded with Tou and Tabuh as he declared, "Yea!" then clasped Tabuh, "It was her!"

“A drunken nellaf?” The Magus spat on the ground before Cootie’s blistering boots then she turned to the pale elf, “And a yellow eyed electric elf?” She turned back to her goons, “A suspicious duo.” Her pivot only continued. As she pried her eyes off her comrades they came to a stop back on Tenchi Kou, “Almost as suspicious as you!” She jabbed a finger into the air, “Extradition!”

“Extradition?!” Tou and Tabuh exclaimed.

Behind the main four, the back four shifted uncomfortably. The robed chidra asked the armored earth elf, “Extradition?”

“Kick us out.” The earth elf explained.

“Farak.” The chidra lamented.

Back up front, Tenchi yelled, “Extradition?! To who?! To where?!”

Rolling her beady eyes, Magus Larahga responded, “Back to Sondor you raceless buffoon.”

“Sondor?!” Tenchi protested louder, “Sondor is an enemy of the Empire! The Cagirent is a racist, anti-democratic... You can’t-”

The finger she stabbed in the air did a little flourish as she interjected, “I can!”

“Can what?”

Unlike the Magus, this imposing individual somehow slipped through the crowd that had gathered around the nine travelers without being noticed – despite the fact that she was far more recognizable than the Magus. Even those from foreign lands like Sondor, Tadloe, and Iceload knew instantly who she must be. Her partner helped folks identify her too. The comrade’s armor was flamboyantly flowery, every lip and ledge was circled to accentuate the patterns engraved upon them. Her scowl was subduing, but also entrancing. Many a man did lament that she was a spirit and not a more fleshy folk, for her glower was the most gorgeous beneath Solaris. Beside the beautiful body guard, the one leading the way, was an equally attractive and equally intimidating individual. The Strategy Admiral of the Trinity Nations’ Navy: Zaria Ein.

Magus Larahga Selter twitched at the intervention. The Imperial Navy was a relatively new creation and, like most policies in a republic, not all of the citizens of the Empire were fans of the organization. It was voted in as an anti-piracy force, but it seemed that with every batch of buccaneers they booted off the deep blue seas, they became more concerned with the land lubbing robber barons and less concerned with sea-faring smugglers. Zaria Ein especially seemed to have twisted the organization but, of course, that was only one way of looking at it. To Zaria and Lalmly, it was less that they were re-aiming and more that they were finally honing in on the root of the problem. When the rich wanted things done for them in the dark, they went to those that worked in the shadows. So even as Miss Selter told herself that Zaria was stepping out of her jurisdiction, she also knew better. Deep down, she knew her animosity against Zaria was rooted in the fact that Zaria was on her tail and she, like all the Magi, had skeletons in her closet.

The small yellow dog between Zaria and Lalmly yipped to strike the politician out of their pondering.

“Extradite them. I am sending them back to where they came from!” Larahga proclaimed.

“They’re citizens of the Trinity Nations, they have rights.” Lalmly stated.

“And we have rules!” Larahga barked before turning back to the visitors and inquiring, “Do you even have gold for the entrance fees?”

Tenchi snickered, “Gold?”

Admiral Zaria stepped in, “Put it on Saint’s tab.”

“Saint’s tab?!” The Magus crowed, “Credit?”

“Yea.” Zaria snapped, her nose crinkling as she did her best to threaten with her tone, “Credit.”

“We don’t take credit.” The mole woman folded her arms and stuck up her snout, “Only gold. Real gold.”

Zaria scoffed and turned her back on the official, passing the baton to Lalmly but saying first, “Yet you use it plenty...”

Lalmly gladly explained for the others, acting as if she was explaining to the Magus, “Since they stopped the Moon Mining Contracts, Batloe’s been borrowing heavily from the Empire. The reparations the rich,” she gestured to the Magus, “got for ending the exploitation of moon miners came from the King of God’s Island’s coffers.”

Had Larahga not been a furred folk, she would’ve been sweating out her anxiety. Instead, she stewed. But as the spirit explained the nations lack of leverage against the authority of the Emperor, her thoughts stumbled upon a solution. Unfortunately, she foolishly flashed this answer before her foes.

“Fine!” She declared, “Let them free. Send them into Tlow-Vare. Have fun finding them board. An army of pay for blades – half their leaders wanted for assassinations – I’m sure there will be room in the inn.” She whirled on Tenchi Kou, winking as her lip curled up her snout, “If not, we’ll have the whole lot arrested for loitering.”

“ASS!”

Everyone stopped. In fact, the entire airport stopped. The one syllable swear rang out through the chamber like the tolling of a bell. The poor lad that had belted it stood red faced between the three parties of the debate: the Batloen Guard, the Imperial Navy, and the Kou Warriors. He was but a boy. And he hadn’t meant to say “ass”, he simply couldn’t remember the rest of the word. Tugging on his big brother’s sleeve, Kenchi asked, “What is it? Ass...”

“Ass?” Tenchi frowned, completely clueless, “Kenchi, you know what asses are-”

Then, from behind the two, the typically quiet bearn spoke up, “Asylum.”

“Yes!” Kenchi cried.

“Oh!” Tenchi’s frown turned upside down, “Asylum! We seek asylum!”

Wake jumped in, her armor doing as much to menace the guard as their newfound solution, “We’re Sondoran refugees, fleeing the fascist Cagirent regime.”

Magus Larahga sputtered and her cronies echoed her. It sounded like a zoomer engine struggling to start.

“As Strategy Admiral, I’m commandeering the use of the airport to process and board these asylum seekers.” Zaria clasped the Magus on the shoulder, “No worries, Larahga, I’ll

handle their protection. No foreign forces will get past my troops. And all costs will be taken care of the by the King of God's Island." She leaned in as if to whisper but spoke loud enough to embarrass the Batloen, "If you're nice, we'll take it out of what you owe."

Larahga recoiled, throwing Zaria's hand off her with such violence that Lalmly actually reached for her bow. The Magus snarled, "Suicine will end your career. Even Saint won't be able to save you."

Zaria continued unperturbed, "We're going to need all the port staff to head out." She directed Lalmly towards the chidran guard that had originally stopped Tenchi, "Lalmly, go with this man to speak with the director. Magus, go ahead and tell the Queen the Hoodoo Airport is temporarily closed. All scheduled arrivals should be rerouted so that we can continue to receive the rest of the refugees."

"The monarchs and the atriarchs will all side with our Queen".

"Ah yes, we should alert them." Zaria agreed, "I'll send a mailmole the Emperor that we should schedule a meeting of the councils as soon as possible – could you check with the Queen if she might be available in, say..."

Zaria looked to Lalmly for help.

"Typically takes two weeks or more to get folks together." Lalmly offered.

"Two weeks, wow," Zaria sighed, "what a relief, so soon!"

Steam was now pouring from the little mole ears of the politician.

"Trust me, Magus Selter, when the Crystal and Diamond Council meet in two weeks, I'll wipe the egg of my face in front of all of Batloe just for you. Until then?" The Admiral gave the Magus a wink, "This hoodoo is under my command."

- - -

First there was a sputter so abrupt and brief that those who noticed didn't lose hope just yet, but they did hold their breath. The stream lasted for another moment or two, then it spat again and the flow began to thin. In a matter of seconds, the tap had reduced to a trickle. This was the fourth and final faucet at the well square. There were other wells in New Town, but if this one was cut off then it seemed likely the others would be too. Still, on a hot desert day in June, all one could do was pray it was but a fluke. The initial shrieks of dismay were suppressed by the crowd. The few leaders amongst them hushed the panic, they couldn't afford a stampede. Especially not if the worst came to be true and all the water in Tlow-Vare was cut off.

"Don't run!" Bru commanded. He was a tall chidra with lighter scales than normal, his color was almost as yellow as the desert sand that dusted the streets and, like the streets, his scales were cracked like cobble stone from years in the dungeons of the Rift. Gesturing to the crowd, he justified his order, "If there is no water, then we can't exhaust ourselves."

A mole piped up, "Kisso Well was running this morning!"

"Aye," another chimed in, "I saw Mylou's too!"

Bru parted the crowd with his hands, "Go to Kisso's." He ordered one side, "Go to Mylou's." Then he said to both, "If dry, return here and bring those there with you." He turned back to the faucet station. It rose from the ground like a fire hydrant, the four pipes split off like bamboo shoots. They bent over at about five feet and reached back down another six inches and

there was where their spickets opened up. The trickle was now just a weak drip-drip. But beneath the hydrant, was a platform. There was access to the water pipes beneath through a manhole with a heavy metal lid. He nodded at it, "I'm going below to see if there is anything we can do."

"It's Suicine!" Someone shouted.

"Her and the Magi with their magic!" Another concurred.

Although Bru was on the same page, he was about to open his mouth and convince his friends otherwise for the sake of maintaining hope. However, those words never rolled off his tongue. Two figures were arriving, strolling through the pathway made by the group that Bru had just split in two. When the crowd noticed, they didn't know whether to rejoice or complain.

"Princess!" A chidran woman rushed forward. Tripping over others in the crowd, she nearly tackled Daffeega but Sharp rushed forward to catch her, like a parent might a stumbling child. Sharp lifted her to her feet as she explained, "The water's cut off!"

"What?" Daffeega gasped.

"Can you help us?" The woman asked.

"Of course!" Her eyes turned to Bru, who stood between her and the faucets. She cocked her head to the side, "What is your name?"

"Dat's Bru." Sharp said.

"Bru...?" Daffeega asked.

"Bru." Bru answered.

"Bru. Mr. Bru," Daffeega moved on, "have you checked bel-"

"It's not plumbing." Bru crossed his arms. His determination to keeping his people calm had completely dissolved in the face of the woman he considered to be part of the problem, "It's magic."

People began to grumble around them. Now it was the Princess' black scaled body guard that stepped up to maintain order. Raising his hands and fanning them down, he pleaded with the people by meeting their gaze. He affirmed their concern with stern nods, silently promising that he and the Princess would resolve the issue – they just needed some time. Daffeega stepped up to the well platform, stopping right before Bru. The little monkey on her shoulder cowered in the face of the yellow-scaled chidra. Daffeega responded to the stare too. Her brow was contorted in a scowl just like the Layman's, but it was not due to his abraisiveness. It was due to her own guilt. She may not have been Queen, but her blood ran through the veins of the woman responsible if the Crown had in fact turned off water to New Town.

"If I undo it," Daffeega thought outloud, "they'll just redo it. Are the other wells running?"

Bru shrugged, "We were just about to check, but..."

Daffeega nodded, "If they cut one, they'd cut the others."

"Aye." Bru stated.

"Donum." Daffeega cursed, but then a light went of in her mind. Perking up, she looked back to Bru, "Do you know magic, sir?"

"No?" The chidra chuckled.

She whirled around to face the crowd, "Any of y'all know magic?"

There was an assortment of "no"s and one or two very unconfident "a little"s. Daffeega shrugged it off, it would be fine. Striking the Staff of Uthemarc on the well platform, she continued with excitement, "No matter, I'll teach you."

"Teach us!" Someone scoffed, "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Right!" Another exclaimed, "We can't learn magic in a day!"

“You can with my help!” Daffeega countered, tapping her staff on the stone stage once again, “You’ve all been fed, yes?” She knew, cause she’d been serving the food to Laymen at the lunchlines herself, still, she asked, “Have you all been well rested?”

“We’re on strike!” A Layman laughed, “I slept in for the first time since I was a baby!”

The consensus seemed to be similar.

Sharp was concerned however, “Daffeega, one night’s rest is not da same as meditation.”

“If you take their energy for water, then we won’t have any left for war.” Bru concurred.

Even the monkey on her shoulder agreed. Overcoming his fear of the Layman leader, the monkey had clambered back onto her shoulder to murmur apprehensive, “Hoo”s and, “Ha”s.

“We’ll use my energy then – or rather, my staff’s. The Staff of Uthemarc will act as our enertomb. These pipes,” she gestured to the metal grills in the platform behind her, “don’t just transport water, they leach it from the ground.”

Bru stepped forward, his scaled brow still furled. The solution sounded too easy, “What if we take too much?”

“Worry more that we won’t take enough.” Daffeega warned, “The spells were crafted meticulously by experts from Space City. We take just enough for the regular supply to replenish itself naturally. New Town was build on ground already accustomed to the rate of water we took, ground much dryer than it was before but not too dry. However, if we cease to take, then the ground water won’t just replenish, it will overflow. It would seep up through the streets of Tlow-Vare and turn the city into mud. By the time we would die of dehydration, our bodies would simply sink into the muk.”

The crowd was suddenly uneasy once more. Looking down between their sandals, they wondered how long they would have before their homes would melt into the Rift and take them along with it. Their anxiety encouraged them to cling to every word Daffeega said – especially as magic began to unfurl out from her staff. The staff was twiggy, looking almost like the fallen branch of an steelwood tree that one might’ve picked up off the ground, but was topped with a bulbous, indigo orb. The stone began to shine and the color began to seep out of it like a fog though it moved fast, like water rolling down hill. The purple haze spread over the group to quickly envelope every member. This too made the townfolk uncomfortable, but it was Daffeega, the People’s Princess, and they were thirsty.

“Have your buckets by your feet and point into it with your dominant hand.” She commanded, “Now, you’ll repeat after me line by line and you’ll see the spell start to weave as we do. Don’t be afraid, just keep following my instructions. Before you know it your buckets will be full of fresh, cool water, filtered by the rocks and minerals far below us – so long as you say it right.”

This received a multitude of blank stares. Fortunately, one of the dumbfounded Laymen spoke up, “Um...Princess? How do we say it right? Do we just speak it?”

Daffeega nodded, “Say it like you know it!”

That didn’t quite help much. Daffeega turned to her bodyguard but Sharp could only offer a shrug.

“Say it like you’re sure!” Daffeega tried again, “Like you’re saying your name?”

That acquired a few weak nods of acknowledgement.

Daffeega sighed.

“Just give it a go.” Sharp suggested, “Dey’ll catch on.”

Daffeega went with his advice, “Should we just give it a go?”

The nods and shrugs now formed a majority. Bru was the only one that seemed unenthusiastic. His hands weren't aimed at his bucket, his arms were folded across his chest. His violet eyes violently glowering at the Princess. She either didn't notice or didn't care, cause on she went.

"Repeat after me," she began, "Neme ah et kolp-"

"NEME AH ET KOLP-" They repeated.

"-oh et Ydnul..."

"-OH ET YDNUL..."

"That means: 'by the laws of the universe'." Daffeega explained, "Some call upon their God, but as an agnostic, I choose to simply call upon the natural powers of our physical world." Seeing emptiness begin to creep back into the people's expressions, she continued, "So that was 'Neme ah et kolp oh et Ydnul', again."

"NEME AH ET KOLP OH ET YDNUL!"

"Now, 'lift the water from under the ground' is what we'll be saying next." Daffeega explained the language on the front end this time, now, repeat, "Meered et sula von-"

"MEERED ET SULA VON-"

"-kor kormai et kraddon."

Water shot up from between the metal plates of the well platform, rushing towards Daffeega like snakes striking. The Laymen gasped, many staggering back and away from the Princess but she quickly gestured for them to stay with a wave of her hands and a fire in her eyes. Moving her hand in a gathering motion, the people snapped out of it and repeated after the magician.

"-KOR KORMAI ET KRADDON."

"Ere et sula ball iameh reig-"

The cerulean stream that had coiled above Daffeega then descended, latching onto her arm it swirled around it like a hurricane. This time, her audience only flinched before following. They stepped back up to their buckets, pointed their fingers, and recited.

"ERE ET SULA BALL IAMEH REIG-"

Down came all the separate rivers, slipping back into the purple fog that hung over the people and curling around their specific caster's arm.

"-nock eronim nikkrai-"

"-NOCK ERONIM NIKKRAI-"

"-miameh sulapashara-"

"-MIAMEH SULAPASHARA-"

The liquid churning up and down the arms of the chidras and molemen surged oncemore, flowing down their arms, the water tightened and jumped off their index fingers like as though an invisible hose nozzle rested on the their fingernail. Fresh water began to splash into their buckets and pails. Smiles began to threaten the Tlow-Varen's diction as they continued and more than a few lost control of the spell, but many more continued. Their eyes once more glued to the Princess.

"-shaanzeruga mai-"

"-SHAAANZERUGA MAI-"

"-shaanzeru ba-"

"-SHAAANZERU BA-"

"-nock ba-"

"-NOCK BA-"

“-nock ba-”

“-NOCK BA-”

“And nock ba, nock ba, nock ba, until your vessel floweth over!” Daffeega proclaimed, throwing her hands into the air and incidentally shooting her water high above her head like a fountain before the spell ceased to draw in more water. She giggled as she watched her new students revel in their victorious casting. Many quite literally keeping the magic going well after their containers were full. A few even turned their streams on one another, dousing their friends in cool, crisp water with devious smirks strapped across their snouts. It seemed, for a moment, folks had forgotten the clouds of conflict that lingered over the twin cities of the Capitol. Many in fact had, but not all. Specifically, Bru, who still stood next to the Princess. Her little fountain trick had incidentally landed on him. Daffeega didn’t notice, but the monkey on her shoulder had. Cringing, he gently pinched her on the neck. She flinched and turned then flinched again when she saw Bru sopping wet, “Oh, I’m sor-”

Sharp moved forward to stand between them but Daffeega stopped him with a hand on his chestplate. She asked, “What’s wrong?”

He shook off some of the water before his lip curled back for him to answer, “All this time you could’ve been teaching us magic.” He gestured to the dry pipes behind the Princess, “Instead, we’ve relied on the King and the Magi and now the Queen – the Queen that wants us dead.”

Daffeega bowed her head, her shoulders slumping. Sharp put a hand on her shoulder but she knew Bru wasn’t wrong. Her excuse had always been legitimate, before her sister took over. Things were changing. Batloe was becoming a fairer place – and then it stopped. Democracy had been right around the corner, but they took the wrong turn. She’d put all her chips on the Crown doing the right thing. Of course she would, the crown was her father, but because of that she was blinded to the fact that the Crown had already done the wrong thing by putting off the right thing. How much better off would Tlow-Vare be had she spent her time powering the Laymen’s spells, fulfilling everyday needs, instead of lobbying in Vare, begging for basic rights.

Before she could respond, a new commotion stormed the stage.

A moleman arrived running, “The Hoodoo is closed!”

Folks forgot the water and turned to listen, murmuring what they thought they’d heard as the messenger rushed towards the well stage.

“The Hoodoo Airport is closed!” The man exclaimed once more, “A foreign army-”

“Foreign army!” Now the murmurs in the crowd became rumblings.

“-is being housed there! Mercenaries from Sondor!”

“Sondor!” Continued the clamor of the congregation, “Sondorans!”

“They’re not letting flights in or out!” The concerned citizen concluded.

Bru stepped up to receive the moleman. His chest was heaving and his nostrils flaring. He spoke like a lion roars, “First the water now the port? Are the roads closed to?” He whirled around to face Daffeega, “They’re going to slaughter us. What good will water do us when the Arcane Sentinels come in with electricity?”

“You can’t fight without nutrients, Bru.” Sharp growled.

Bru held up his hands. His scales were cracked and callused, “You can’t fight without weapons, either, brother.”

“I’ll arm you then.” Daffeega stated. Stepping between the two as Sharp had tried to do before. She looked first Bru then Sharp in the face before turning to the frightened moleman messenger. She continued, “There are enertombs, now untapped, in the waterworks beneath my

feet. Not enough for everyone, but enough for many of you. Now that you know how to make water rise, I'll teach you to lift stone."

Stone may not sound like the best weapon in most cases, but the people of Tlow-Vare were all too used to the barbaric ways the wizard guards of Vare liked to put them down. Just as most men and women have been stung by a bee in their life, most New Towners had been shocked by the electricity of an Arcane Sentinel. Stone, then, was a very attractive weapon and the crowd liked this. They looked around at each other with wide eyes. The Sacred Tongue had always been something so far away, like the city of Vare, they could only ever hope to observe it from the otherside of the Rift unless they were lucky enough to be employed in Old Town. Even then, though, spells were whispered like secrets and, if they overheard one and repeated it – without the proper meditation or resources – then their already exhausted souls would quickly shrivel up and leave them a crumpled corpse on the floor, as if the universe was punishing them for their audacity. And yet now they learned and used a spell in a matter of minutes. Not only that, they'd learned that the key to continuing to cast spells lie just beneath their feet. There was no need for meditation when you had an enertomb to draw from.

"Sharp," Daffeega ordered, "lead a team to begin collecting the enertombs in the waterworks."

"Yes, Princess." Sharp bowed.

"Wait, Princess." Bru said, "That is not enough."

"Civ." Sharp hissed, saying no more he let his eyes do the daring.

Bru ignored the black scaled chidra. He gestured to the Laymen still watching as if the well platform were a theatric stage, saying, "Princess, we are grateful for your water." He turned to Sharp, "And we will be grateful for your weapons." Then back to Daffeega, "But we need a leader, not just a provider. We need someone who can lead us into battle against your sister, Princess. You know this." He closed the distance between them and clasped his hands around hers, they clutched her staff together, "And you know that isn't you."

She bowed her head. Sharp was mad. Not because Bru was wrong – Bru was right – but because the truth stung his beloved friend and there was no solution he could offer. Frustrated, he said, "Who is it den, Mr. Bru? You?"

Bru shook his head sadly, "No, Foxloen. Not I."

"Sallis!" Someone hollered from the crowd.

"Yes, Sallis!" Another chimed.

"Free Sallis!" Shouted a third.

"FREE SALLIS!" A few crowed in unison.

Daffeega didn't dodge Bru's stare, she said earnestly, "I wish I could, but you know there's no way. I may not be a Layman, but they'll lock me up all the same if I return to Vare. I can't just-

Fortunately, she didn't have to. Not only was Sallis free, he was already there. For the third time, the group parted to allow passage to a newcomer. The moleman strolled up to the platform that Bru, Daffeega, and Sharp stood upon then he fell to his knees and bowed his head.

Daffeega gasped. The kneel was so fast she couldn't be sure if it was intentional or not. Grabbing a nearby pail of water, she rushed to his side but when she arrived he looked up to meet her eyes with a smile – a sad smile.

"My Princess," he said, "I apologize."

"Apologize?" Daffeega muttered, "For what?!"

"I know you want peace," He stated, "but I'm here to bring war."

“Here.” Daffeega lifted the water bucket to his snout.

He shook his head and pushed it away, “We won’t have peace until you are elected Queen and we won’t have an election without war.”

Daffeega set down the pail. Sallis took her free hand, her other hand clenched her staff for support. He helped her stand as he stood and together they faced the crowd.

He raised his voice, “We’ve been petitioning in the streets of Tlow-Vare and so they blew up the bridge.” He turned to nod at Bru. The yellow chidra’s arms were still folded but he couldn’t help but smile at the sight of his friend’s return. He nodded back. Sallis continued, turning back to his people, “Well, tomorrow, I say we take our petition to Vare and then from there I say we take our petition to the Cloches!”

Assorted cheers emitted separately at first, but after the first sprinkle of affirmation, a second wave of cheers came. A cacophony of excitement filled the square. Sallis finished his short speech with a violent promise.

“We will have a vote – whether it be with ballots or with blood!”

An uproar of approval fill the town square. Having had their thirst quenched, their minds had wondered on to desires of democracy and Sallis’ return seemed to satisfy that thirst as well. Though it was easy to celebrate before the battle and those leading the people understood that clearly. The Laymen’s enthusiasm didn’t do much to diminish their leader’s anxiety. Plans still had to be made. As ordered before, Sharp took upon the task of gathering the enertombs from the waterworks. He assembled a team of ex-moon miners and they took to the sewers. Daffeega did a tour of the other well stations, spreading word both Sacred and seditious. Sallis and Bru followed hot on the Princess’ trail, continuing such seditious thoughts with words Daffeega couldn’t dare. Where better to spread the word than where the whole of New Town got their water? Unfortunately, there were still those of New Town that missed the message. Not that they didn’t hear it, but rather that they wouldn’t. Not everyone in the working class was willing to risk it all for a single vote.

Across the Rift from the barred patrons of the Emendation Enterprise of Batloe, tunneled into the façade of the cliff that lifted New Town, spiderwebbed an elaborate iron mine. The Rift Miners had been blaringly quiet over the years when it came to the conversation of economic injustice. Their eyes’ either glared or rolled whenever it came up and that was enough to submit their opinion: it was a joke. Was there inequality? Sure! The iron mines left most miners spending their retirement in the hospitals of Space City, but their children weren’t left high and dry. The next generation had an inheritance. No it wasn’t money or capital – not the physical kind at least – they inherited the job. That was enough for the miners. They didn’t have to be rich like the snooty folks across the Rift. Those that wanted to were welcome to leave the stability of the mining industry and take the gamble above ground but everyone in the casino can’t win. Look at what happened to the Moon Miners! Was that society’s fault or was that just the way Solaris was? There could only be one alpha in a murder of dragons. Everyone couldn’t be rich. And if you spent every waking minute complaining that it was society’s fault only to find out you were wrong, then you’d have wasted a lifetime for nothing. No, the Rift Miners wanted no part in that bet, they were content to work and drink. At least, until they couldn’t.

When the water was shut off, it didn’t just stop the wells. It stopped their work. Within mere hours, the ground began to soften. In days, all that would be left would be mud. Mines that their grandparents’ grandparents had carved would collapse and fill the Rift with iron-rich quicksand. Now the Laymen’s lamentations were interfering with their lives and the Queen’s message was clear: it didn’t matter if you were an anarchist to the Queen. If you let the

anarchists plot against her, then you might as well have been one of them. The Rift Miners knew what they had to do to turn the water back on. Their picks and shovels left the rock and their gaze turned upwards. No one even had to say it outloud, they all simply understood the job: They would kill the Laymen.

While the Laymen ran about rallying surface dwellers to their anarchist cause, looting the wells with no regard to those of their neighbors opposed, the Rift Miners sharpened their tools and waited for night to fall. As they did though, doubt began to seep in. Their minds began to question what had once seemed clear and obvious. They didn't like the Laymen, but they didn't like the rich elites of Vare either. Still, they felt no need to interfere with either group's way of life and, in the past, neither group had felt the need to interfere with theirs and yet now, something had changed. It wasn't the anarchists of New Town coming down and demanding they join the cause. It was the elites of Old Town, shutting off their water and forcing the Rift Miners to stop the Laymen for them.

"Why can't they deal with the anarchists themselves?"

The thought was first articulated by a young chidran miner named Blade Oturan. She wasn't even two decades old but she'd already spent over a decade hacking away at the ore below Tlow-Vare. Her ancestors had invested centuries. Those ancestors had died before she'd grown old enough to remember them, but she felt like she knew them all the same. She struck the same stones that her siblings had and she swung the same pickax that her parents had. The tunnels she toiled in told the story of her family – and now that story was being held hostage.

"What good is our loyalty to the Crown when they sacrifice *our* mines to solve *their* problems?" Blade asked. She was standing on her wheelbarrow. It was half full of the ore she'd collected before they'd noticed the dampening dirt, "If we could kill the Laymen in a night, then surely they could too. They're just..."

She plopped down to straddle the wheelbarrow. Propping her chin up on the head of her pickax as she searched for the right word.

"Lazy!" A fellow miner hollered.

"Yes!" Blade jumped back up.

But another miner added, "Just like the anarchists..."

Blade frowned, thinking for a moment. Then, lifting her pick towards New Town far over their heads, she said, "Except – the Laymen aren't threatening our mines!"

"We're stuck between a rock and a hard place." Another comrade commented.

"We are." Blade agreed, "We have to pick."

And, just as they had all come to the same conclusion before, so too did they then. The lesser evil was clear. Though they might change their minds completely in a few hours – as they just had – in that moment, at least, the Rift Miners decided to help the Laymen.

The Laymen didn't know that yet and, that evening, a meeting was being held in a basement near the Rift. A basement wide enough for a dozen or so leaders to debate and an audience to observe. Transparency was key if they wanted all the neighborhoods on board – and they had a feeling they'd need everyone they had. Aside from the Batloen's, there were strangers there – allies though they were: Strategy Admiral Zaria Ein, her guardswoman Lalmly Shisharay, and their stumpy yellow dog Cowboy. The Imperial presence was both comforting and disconcerting. Batloe was a member state of the Empire and yet the Empire had done nothing to force the supposed mandatory democracy it proclaimed to uphold. That said, the Laymen were not under any delusions that alone they could overthrow the throne. Foreign aid was necessary.

Daffeega, Sharp, Sallis, and Bru were finishing their discussion of the plan when the Strategy Admiral and her team arrived. The quiet clamor going on in the audience ceased when the three strode in. The silence quickly spread to the four at the front of the room. There, on the wall behind them, was a map. It showed the Rift and the twin cities that sprawled out north and south of it. The main bridge had been crossed out. Only five bridges remained, the Minor Bridges: two within the rift, two above, and one being barely more than a crosswalk between two star pillars – these five were to be utilized tomorrow.

“Princess Daffeega.” Zaria and Lalmly bowed simultaneously.

“Admiral.” Daffeega curtsied.

“I assume you’ve all heard of the high jinks on the Hoodoo?” Zaria asked.

“The Sondoran mercenaries.” Daffeega nodded.

“Kou Warriors.” Lalmly concurred.

“Our mercenaries.” Zaria winked.

“What?” Bru yelled.

“Our mercenaries?” Sallis chimed.

The congregation behind them were on the same page as the rebel leaders. Part of the doom and gloom of the second half of the day was the idea that some Cagirent barbarians were waiting in the airport to eradicate whatever fools crossed the Minor Bridges in the morning.

“Tenchi Kou of the Kou Clan of the Crystal Council of,” Zaria smirked, “the Trinity Nations is seeking asylum. They landed here and now are in limbo.”

“Limbo under the current Queen.” Lalmly specified.

“Are you assuming they’ll aid us or do we know for sure?” Daffeega pressed.

“Are you asking if I’m here to help stage a coup?” Zaria cocked her head to the side.

“We would never stage coup, Princess!” Lalmly assured Daffeega but her head also began to tilt to the side as she did.

Daffeega could read the subtext in what they were saying but the problem was that it was that very subtext that disturbed her. The Empire *shouldn’t* be staging coups. *Sure, in this case, it is popular and needed*, she thought, *but that is not a excuse to break ethical norms!* Stammering to come up with words of protest, she looked to her guard. Sharp caught her arm gently. His indigo eyes turned to the men behind him still standing at the city map. Bru and Sallis looked at each other.

Daffeega finally said, “If they’re here to...to fight for us, then...then helpful as that may be...We cannot take foreign aid into this fight!”

Sallis caught the Daffeega’s other arm, “I’m sorry, Princess, but we can. Not only can we, we must.” She turned to him as he continued, “That is what we’re here for.”

Daffeega stuttered on, “B-b-but the precedent-”

“I don’t care about what this means to the Empire, Princess.” Sallis spoke sternly, but softly, “If this saves Tlow-Varen lives then this is what we need.”

“The Kou Warriors could save us months of guerrilla warfare.” Bru added, “We could take Vare tomorrow.”

“I should hope so.” Zaria’s grin mirrored Bru’s, “They brought their dragons.”

“A dalvary!” Sharp exclaimed, his grasp hopping off Daffeega’s arm to clasp her on the back, “Dink we gotta turn a blind eye on dis one, Princess.”

Daffeega frowned but didn’t protest further.

“What is the plan tomorrow?” Lalmly asked, gesturing at the map on the wall, “To take Vare?”

“We march across the five remaining bridges into Vare, the Minor Bridges, and meet at Uthemarc Square, around the statue.” Sallis pointed the place out on the map, “Once the leaders of the five columns are there, we’ll surely have the Queen’s attention. A delegate will have arrived from the Cloches if not a Magus himself, certainly their troops will be there. We’ll express our desire for an election and if they refuse-”

“When they refuse.” Bru corrected.

“-then we’ll march to the Cloches.” His finger slid north. Vare wrapped around the circular palace compound. A wall separated the two but the domes of the Cloches looked over it. Sallis continued, “We’ll occupy the palace until an election is held. Simple as that.”

“Armed?” Lalmly asked.

“Aye.” Bru nodded.

“This march...” Zaria hesitated, seeking the right wording, “you’ll be armed, sure, that’s fine, but will it be nonviolent?”

Sallis nodded, “We won’t swing the first sword.”

“Why not?!” Someone hollered from the audience.

“What we gonna ask for?” Another echoed, “They already gave us our answer!”

“Aye, then don’t worry!” Bru yelled back, “You’ll get your war! Trust. We’ll get our war.”

That shut the people up. Because while it was war they wanted, it was also war they feared. It was necessary. The only way. But banking on the last resort is not a fun place to be. They knew many of them would die. Very likely, their homes and neighborhoods could be reduced to rubble. This next chapter, even if it led to a victorious conclusion, it would be painful and devastating. *You’ll get your war!* Seemed to reverberate within the minds of those all gathered there. Sallis clasped Bru on his back and the two bowed their heads with the rest of those gathered in the chamber.

Under her breath, Daffeega lamented, “If we lose, the consequences...”

Leaving Bru, Sallis walked over to Daffeega, took her hand and squeezed it. He whispered, “If we win, think of the possibilities, my Queen!”

There was nothing more to say but even if there were, the meeting was adjourned by outside forces. The faint noise of a commotion on the street outside filtered down into the basement meeting. Those in the back of the small hall stood and a few moved towards the stairs to see what all the fuss was about but a messenger from outside beat them. Scurrying down the stairs, a wide eyed mole addressed the room.

“Rift Miners.” She said.

“Stay here.” Bru and Sallis ordered to one another. This led for the two to simultaneously try and leave then stop to stop the other, which resulted in them getting tangled up in one another as they again chimed in unison, “I’ll go!”

“I’ll go.” Daffeega declared, she turned to Sharp.

“On it, Princess.” He nodded, turning to the struggling Laymen leaders, “Calm down, Civi.”

Unfortunately, this caused the opposite. Now with a common enemy, Bru and Sallis united.

“Don’t let her go out there!” Sallis exclaimed.

“They’re here to kill us.” Bru agreed, barking to the nervous congregation, “Seems the war has already started!”

Daffeega hadn't made it far, standing in the midst of the group below. The clamor outside was growing louder, but so too was the chaos within the chamber. Daffeega paused, turning to join Sharp's efforts.

"We won't swing the first sword, right Sallis?" Daffeega asked.

Bru exhaled loudly through his nostrils.

"We're coming with you." Sallis stated.

Daffeega shrugged, then turned, and continued her slow strides towards the stairs as Sallis and Bru rushed to join her. Sharp moved to follow as well but an invisium glove caught his arm to stop him. Turning, his eyes met the silver eyes of the archer spirit. Her grasp sent chills across Sharp's black scales. He wrote it off as a shiver due to her cold touch but, even as he told himself that it was nothing more, a goofy grin slid across his face. Only for a moment, though, for her stern expression snapped him out of it.

"Should we be concerned?" Lalmly asked.

"Nah, Mrs. Shisharay," Sharp chuckled, "da moon miners and iron miners never liked each other, but dey've never..." he paused. His expression shifting to something a little more like Lalmly's, "We should go."

Zaria brushed past the two without another word and Sharp, Lalmly, and Cowboy followed hot on her tail. Up the stairs and outside, the trouble had taken a pause when the People's Princess stepped out onto the porch. The invading Rift Miners snapped to attention at her sight. The Laymen that surrounded their subterranean neighbors seemed about to carry on their harassment but Bru and Sallis quickly appeared alongside Daffeega and that cooled them off quickly – at least until their leaders set the tone of whatever was about to go down.

However, before one of their leaders could, the leader of the delegation of tunnel dwellers piped up. The young, red scaled Blade Oturan spoke as she approached the porch steps.

"I represent the Rift Miners." She said simply. Then, at the foot of the stairs, she fell to one knee and bowed her head. A line of three dozen miners had come with her. The crowd of Laymen outside the meeting hall had been so rowdy, however, that the line which had once surrounded her for protection had been stretched out almost single-file. They fell like dominoes behind Blade, kneeling as if it had been rehearsed. By the time the knee of the twelfth in line had hit the packed-dirt road, Daffeega had made it off the porch and stooped to cradle Blade's chin. Allowing the Princess to lift her face, Blade spoke as their eyes met, "Your sister has forced us to pick between your Laymen and her richmen." Daffeega didn't stop with merely raising her head. Her free hand then went to Blade's shoulder, tugging on her tunnel-tarnished tunic. Again, Blade complied, saying as she stood, "We've decided to throw our lot in with you."

"Finally tired of licking boot, aye?" Bru remarked.

Sallis drove an elbow into his comrade's gut.

The miners behind Blade jumped to their feet but froze as Blade spoke. Her eyes not leaving Daffeega's as she said, "Someone's got to teach these handout hoarders a work ethic."

Sallis whirled on Blade with a vicious glare. The rib-wounded Bru actually had the sense to hold Sallis back this time. However, the crowd of Laymen around the line of Rift Miners didn't seem to share that mindset.

"Hey!" Daffeega seemingly cast a spell with how effective the syllable was at causing both sides to freeze. She hurried on to her point, "This is what democracy is supposed to look like!" She turned around and marched back up the stairs, dragging Blade onto the porch with her. Standing there between Bru and Sallis, both sides of the crowd now fell quiet. Daffeega continued, "Did y'all think that the right to vote would mean we'd all suddenly like each other?"

She laughed. A few in the crowd even chuckled along with her, “After tomorrow, you’ll be political enemies, but until then? You are allies. This young lady,” Daffeega turned to the Rift Miner who then whispered her name in Daffeega’s ear, “Blade Oturan, realized that. They,” Daffeega pointed towards the Rift and the glimmering city of Vare beyond, “want you to fight each other today, so you can’t fight them tomorrow. Now, that doesn’t mean we have to settle all our differences today. After all, once we win,” Daffeega smiled, giving the crowd a wink, “you all will have earned the right to fight each other everyday thereafter!”

“That’s a pretty good point.” Bru admitted.

Sallis turned to Blade and extended his hand. Blade extended hers but then withdrew it. Sallis cocked his head to the side. Bringing it back, Blade spat into her palm and then stuck the hand back out. Sallis’s snout crinkled but he followed suit, drawing back his hand he spat in it then clasped hers and they shook.

“Here’s to everyday thereafter.” Sallis declared.

“Aye,” Blade snickered, “and after and after.”

Pulling their hands back, they wiped them on their trousers.

Blade then asked, “So what’s the plan?”

“You’re right on time.” Bru told her.

“Get a handful of your folks and come on inside.” Daffeega told her, “We were just about to wrap up.”

- - -

Caleros Icelore craned his neck to appreciate the vaulting aperture of Uthemarc’s Cloche. The hollow glass pillar rose towards the night sky, letting silver starlight slip in to paint the platform below in black and white. As an Icelore, Caleros was as tall as the Mystvokar of Iceload – six foot six to be exact. This meant that the better half of his body rose higher than the brim of the bulging window. As he lowered his gaze, he could almost look down on the roof of the palace from where he stood and, had his audience been standing, he still would’ve been able to look down upon them.

Like the night sky, his complexion was a conflict of stark contrasts. Most of his skin was as pale as moonlight, but that ivory tone was split with spiraling tendrils of darkness that twisted around his body like vines. This was natural, as he was a nellaf, but that didn’t detract from its intimidating effect. Refusing to cease towering over the Magi, he didn’t kneel or bow but merely dropped his head in a half nod before raising his eyes to meet those of the Queen seated between her advisors.

“Master Caleros Icelore,” Magus Larahga Selter said, drawing the foreigner’s attention away from the crown for a moment, “my apologies for the disruption on the Hoodoo.”

Caleros shrugged, “We Icelore are dragon riders. Landing on a dock is no different to us than landing on a spire.”

“And as an Icelore,” Magus Malas Oturan leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs and interlocking his fingers over his lap, “do you come here on behalf of Oreh Island where you Master or in the name of your brother, the Mystvokar of Iceload?”

“Neither you mention but on behalf of my brother all the same – my twin,” his eyes shifted back to the Queen, “Sorelac Icelore. I seek an Imperial pardon.”

“Pardon’s aren’t free.” Queen Suicine stated. Her voice cold and opaque.

“Neither is the Mystvokar’s aid.” Caleros smiled.

“As generous an offer as that may be,” Magus Malas Oturan sat forward in his chair, “we cannot have the forces of the Mystvokar defending our new Queen against the Batloen people!”

“Yet you have the forces of the Cagistan sitting in your airport ready to assault the throne?” Caleros queried.

“Kou forces.” Larahga Selter corrected.

“Clan forces.” Malas Oturan added.

“Antipa forces.” Queen Suicine cut back in. She stood from her seat. Her body was not imposing, leaning heavily on her staff, but she smacked it’s wooden end down hard on the platform as she turned to face her magical advisors, “Foreign enemies linger in the Rift, drooling at the thought of killing another Queen, and we’re worried about maintaining a positive public image? When the Laymen attack, prevailing will be all that matters. Will you die so that our neighbors don’t think us too kind to old enemies?”

Both Malas and Larahga exchanged anxious glances, the other Magi did as well.

“Thank you, my Queen.” Caleros finally stooped to actually bow. When he rose, he added, “And I am not my older brother – I am not Iceload. I am Oreh and Oreh is a member of the Trinity Nations. I am bound as a brother in this union to defend a fellow leader.”

Queen Suicine turned from the Magi to acknowledge Caleros’ show of respect, “And I, as Queen of Batloe, and dear friend of your twin brother Sorelac, have no choice but to pardon the great mage. If such charity from my people then inspires you to come to our aid at our time of need, then who in their right mind would refuse you?”

“You are a wise queen, Queen Shelba.” Caleros said, rising from his bow.

“And you, a generous brother, Master Icelore.” Suicine returned.

“As a generous brother,” Caleros waved to the Magi that fanned out on either side Suicine, “I offer you a more comfortable narrative. Magus Larahga Selter, there are Iceloadic among the mercenaries on the Hoodoo, yes?”

“Yes, Master Icelore.” Larahga nodded, a bit confused but nevertheless she provided the answer that she assumed the foreigner sought, “Do you speak of Tabuh Sentry?”

“She is amongst them, yes,” Caleros nodded, “however, I speak of a nellaf. Did you happen to notice?”

Still perplexed, with her snout slightly agape to show it, Larahga gently shook her head.

Caleros turned to another Magi, “Magus Malas Oturan, you are master of the Emendation Enterprise in the Rift, yes?”

“Indeed.” Malas said.

“There is a man wanted for the murder of Lizara Icelore, my father’s sister, and he is being protected by these...Laymen.” Caleros stated.

The advisors gasped, but their Queen smiled.

“I apply for his extradition.” Caleros said.

Malas slammed his fist down on his hand rest, “Granted!”

“I request allowance to utilize any means necessary – as this is a dangerous man.”

Caleros continued.

“By all means – any means necessary!” Malas concurred. Then he turned to Suicine, quickly asking, “My Queen, this is acceptable to you, of course?”

“Thank you Magus,” Suicine seemingly cooed, “a wise decision on your part. Master Caleros, do what you must. Take him alive or dead. How soon can your forces arrive?”

“Hold the Laymen back for a day,” Caleros said, “then we will be ready.”

Chapter Eighteen: Will of the Queen

Streams of snowmelt gushed down the cobblestreets of Uran well above schedule, even for June. The trees of Azuwood shed their fluffy white fur. The creeks had been transformed into rivers by Iahtro as warm wind and rain continued to bombard the forest town. All poured into the Uran River, already overflowing by early morning as it was unable to dump fast enough into the sea – a futile gesture, for what was released was quickly swept right back up by the hurricane that churned just off the Frosted Coast. The Iahtro Storm loomed over them, blotting out the horizon as it spun in place. Aside from its churning, the monsoon hadn't moved so much as a selim in hours. This left those on the shore wondering whether or not the weather was considering joining them on land – and if so, what would become of Uran?

“Has he ever gone on land?” Fetch asked.

“Aye,” Bold nodded, “twice.”

“When he first was turned into the storm by the Queen of Darkness, he carved the Crowned Coast of Sondor. That's why it looks all,” with a finger, Lenga traced the zig-zaggy way the northern end of the human continent looked, “lumpy. Thus, he learned early on that if he were to make landfall, that land would fall into the sea – hence why the Queen cursed him so. His love for the land kept him from interfering with her plans.”

“Ooooh!”

The holler came from behind the group. They were standing by the banister of tavern's second floor deck. The third floor shielded them from storm above while a magical veil shielded them from the horizontal rain that flew just as thickly in from the sea. The mystical membrane was mostly transparent, just a bit shimmery, so they were able to watch Iahtro from their vantage. Turning from the view of the storm, they faced this new soul. While he may have been new to them, he certainly wasn't new to Solaris. The man looked as old as Iahtro or older. The six hadn't seen many fishfolk in their time and they had certainly never seen one so wrinkled. The ancient Aquarian looked like one's fingertips after being left in the tub for too long. Only his black eyes remained smooth, though his brow sagged over them so that he almost appeared to have eyelids unlike the rest of his kind. He used a faded, purple umbrella as a cane as he staggered towards them, stooping over the tarnished U-shaped handle. A colorful robe was draped over his shoulders, unbuttoned to reveal a surprisingly muscular torso juxtaposed against the scrawny legs that stuck out like sticks from a pair of short yellow swim trunk. He looked ready for the beach, not for the cold shores of Azunu. Before any could ask, he followed up his “Ooooh!” to initiate in the conversation.

“Iahtro hated the sea almost as much as he hated him!” He pointed a shaky finger at the Knome in their crew.

“You know this guy?” Marvell began to ask but when she turned to see the Knome's response, she frowned, “Wait, are you the same Knome?”

“Don't be Knomophobic, Mar-” Fetch cut himself off as he too found himself bewildered.

The Knome certainly looked the same – or did he? Neither Marvell, Fetch, nor the others could honestly recall if the Knome before them looked any different than the Knome prior. This one was dressed in all black. That seemed unfamiliar but had they been paying attention to his outfit before? It must've been the same Knome. Fetch was likely right, they were just being

Knemophobic. So without acknowledging it, the five decided to just brush that little bit of embarrassment under the rug and turn the subject back to the odd, elder fishfolk.

The most moral amongst them led the charge. Indulging, despite fullwell knowing the history of the hurricane. She asked, "Iahtro hated the sea?"

Under his breath, Grandfather muttered, "*Am I the same Knome.*" Crossed his arms and rolled his eyes, "Buncha gops..." but he allowed the distraction.

"Ooooh!" the old man crooned, "Did he! As a young tot, he was found by the humans of Koustan as a lone survivor in a boat full of his people – all dead and dying of disease."

"Farak me," Fetch gulped, "how long was he?"

"Floated all the weh from Dogloe, lad." Bold bowed his head.

"Donum." Marvell remarked.

"Ooooh! Donum indeed!" The old man concluded, "When the Queen's cursed kicked in, Iahtro lost too loves – Ooooh! – that of the land and that of his lady."

"Farakin crow." Marvell muttered.

"But," Fetch turned to Bold, "you said he made landfall," Fetch paused to raise to fingers and mimic the dwarf's accent, "'twice'?"

"Unless it was just legend, the second time was during the gmoat's fight for independence, right?" Ben asked.

"Aye," Bold said, "In the Loightnang War, hae sevarred the tehl of Dogloe, splittin Graize from Tiptown to swallow up uh battle twaen the Ipativaian, the Hellbrutes, and the Eninac – hae did this to farce the rulars of the warld to send thar greatest warriars to foight to the death in the farst Battle Grand."

"That's the one where the Eninac teamed up with the gmoats!" Ben exclaimed.

"Is that why Dogloe is all gmoats and humans now?" Fetch asked.

"You mean gmoats and dogs." Marvell snickered.

Fetch elbowed the bearn and she pulled back a punch with a menacing grin. Fetch flinched and Marvell dropped the fist with a wink. The old fishfolk began to walk towards the six once more, forcing them to part and give him a place at the window.

"Excuse me, good sir, but what is your name?" Lenga asked.

He reached out a hand and the Princess clasped it. Smiling with his shark-like fangs, he said, "Eisop Shell. Ooooh!" He licked his eyes without releasing her hand. It was a bit uncomfortable but Lenga maintained earnest eye contact. He let go of her hand then and bowed his head, "Pleasure to meet you Headmaster Ruse."

Lenga looked up to see Fetch with his head slightly cocked. She certainly wasn't unknown nor unrecognizeable around the world, still it caught them all a bit off guard.

As if confirming the suspicious quality of the character, he then turned to Fetch and nodded his head, "And ooooh! Fetch Eninac."

Fetch took a step back. Eisop turned to the others. His black eyes slid past Marvell and Ben but landed on Bold and perked up. His smile returned, "Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth! Ooooh!"

"Farth." Bold corrected, but he bowed nonetheless, "Moy honar."

Then back to Marvell and Ben.

"I'm Marvell of the Ax." Marvell said.

"Ooooh, axes!" Eisop remarked.

"And Benjamin Fasthoof." Ben said.

“Ooooh!” He smiled and pointed a twitchy finger at the gmoat, “You remind me off Heterice.”

Ben’s brown eyes grew wide and his tail fluttered.

The fishfolk turned back to the window then, saying, “The storm is distracted now.”

“Figure it does get boring spinning in circles all day.” Fetch shrugged.

Eisop shook his head, “There is another monster below the waves – ooooh! – see?”

Everyone turned back to the magical window. They squinted past the blurry magic pane, only made blurrier by the incessant bombardment of rain. When lightning flashed, cracking like a whip down the façade of the storm, shadows would appear within the weather wall but only briefly and it was impossible to tell if the shadows were anything other than more rain and waves. Only Fetch had the advantage, what with his crow eye, of seeing more. There was great energy already on the horizon, in the form of Iahtro’s tornado-like pillar. But below the sea, so too. It rose up like Iahtro’s electricity, in thick squirming columns – almost like tentacles.

“Farak!” Fetch yelled, jumping back from the edge of the deck.

“What?” The others exclaimed.

“I..” Fetch looked to Eisop, “What is that thing?”

“The Leviken.” Eisop answered.

“That’s myth!” Lenga countered.

“That,” Fetch’s finger pointed back out at sea, trembling like Eisop’s, “is real.”

“What’s the Leviken?” Ben asked.

“Imagine a ground dragon and a giant octopus had a kid.” Grandfather said.

“This is whoy dwarves don’t sail.” Bold grunted, “Oi’m not gettin bock on thot broken boat of yars.”

“It’s not broken.” Grandfather snapped.

“Yea. All for flying?” Marvell raised her hand.

All five rose their hands – their shortest member declined.

“No one’s flying or sailing to Batloe until that storm moves off the coast.” Grandfather stated.

“Ooooh!” Eisop butted back in, “I beg to differ! Due to our sea monster friend, there is just enough space for a ship to slip by-”

“Farak that!” Marvell and Bold declared.

“-as bait. Ooooh! Drag the Storm in the other direction so the land lubbers can rent a dragon and fly the other way.”

“Who’s going to volunteer for that!” Ben scoffed.

All eyes slowly shifted back to the black garbed Knome.

“The fishfolk said it himself.” Fetch said, “Nothing Iahtro hates more – who better to use as bait?”

“First you forget who I am then you ask me to risk my life?” Grandfather growled, “Knome respect.” But he rolled his shoulders and brushed them off, “I’ll do it – but you all have to get your asses to Southpoint somehow or another so as soon as Iahtro moves west you can hitch a ride to Batloe.”

“It’ll take all day to find someone to fly in this weather!” Fetch complained.

“Then take all day!” Grandfather barked back.

“The Knome’s roight,” Bold agreed, “wae’ll miss the faraking revolution if wae don’t harry.”

“Revolution, ooooh!” Eisop chimed, “May have already missed it, friends.”

“You’ve got news from Batloe?” Lenga yelled.

“The airport in the capitol is already closed.” Eisop nodded, “Ooooh! But I can help.”

“You can help?” Marvell raised a bushy brow, “A fishfolk with connections in the deserts of Batloe?”

“Sand is sand, ooooh!” Eisop smiled.

He straightened up, taking his weight off his umbrella. Leaning back, he lifted the parasol towards the roof. The canopy popped open and no sooner did it expand than it began to glow. Holding his other hand out, he ceased to tremble. An object began to come to life above his open palm. It swirled around like a ball of coursing water, like the storm outside but contained in a tight orb, then it extended out to form a tubular rod. The blue and white hardened into crystal. It then bounced from his hand and into Lenga’s grasp. She gasped and almost dropped it.

“It’s ice!” She exclaimed.

“It’s a flute!” Eisop corrected.

“An ice flute?” Ben remarked, then his eyes widened as they looked back at the umbrella, “That’s an elgroon!”

Eisop let the shade fold back, flipping the umbrella around again and leaning over it as he had before.

“You know we’re going to Batloe in June?” Marvell asked.

“Yea,” Fetch chuckled, “a minute in Batloe and it’ll be a water flute.”

“It won’t melt.” Eisop promised, “Ooooh!”

“Trust the old Aquarian.” Grandfather urged.

“Fly to the western outskirts of Katirjaramoh.” Eisop commanded.

“Where?” Fetch blurted.

“A citay naer the capitol.” Bold explained.

“Closest place we could fly to what with the airport closed in Vare.” Lenga added.

“Ooooh! On the western outskirts of Katirjaramoh, play my flute. Ooooh! A mighty magician will answer the call. Tell him an old – old – Ooooh! – *old* friend gave you this flute and he will know.” Eisop nodded along with his instructions, “He will guide you into the Cloches.”

“Cloches?” Ben whispered to Lenga.

“The palace.” She answered quietly.

“The palace!” Ben yelled.

“A little direct, yea?” Fetch asked.

“You’re planning to walk into a city at war.” Eisop responded, “There will be no other way in.”

“When an old man gives you a magic flute, lads and lasses, you listen to them.” Bold warned. Taking the flute from Lenga, he said to Eisop, “Thank you, good sir.”

He clasped Bold on the shoulder, “Ooooh, good sir, I fear we may not meet again. Good luck.”

The others exchanged anxious glances. It would seem likely that a man so old wouldn’t see them again, but it didn’t really seem like he thought it would be because of his rather timely demise. Bold himself felt the tone and gulped.

“Well,” he said, “maybae ya don’t listen to everay thang they say.”

“Ooooh!” Eisop laughed, “Selu too you, funny dwarf!”

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The cerulean copper icon of Batloe's patron saint was an awkward effigy despite being the most famous structure on the continent aside from the Cloches. His staff was hoisted towards Solaris but said staff was also used as a support. Due to his cursed genes, Uthemarc's legs were weak were as weak as the legs of the woman who held his staff in modern day. Without the support of a cane or the arcane, the mage could hardly stand. Thus, his pose was one of a person falling forwards or, depending on the perspective, he was surging forwards – thrusting his staff towards the heavens like a dragon slayer launching their lance into the mouth of the beast.

The statue faced Vare and the Cloches beyond, his back was turned on Tlow-Vare. The New Towners felt as if they were sneaking up on their ancient champion. Queen Suicine's entourage approached Uthemarc head on. The wealthy citizens of Vare watched out of their luxurious apartment windows. These Old Towners couldn't help but feel that the statue's stance had taken on a defensive posture that morning. A silent superstition spread that the old Guardian might come to life and smite the coldhearted Queen as soon as she entered his square but this did not take place. Suicine stopped ten yard from the feet of her bronze predecessor. The red and purple Royal Guard led by the Arcane Sentinels fanned out around her to fill up the northern half of the square. Then they waited. It didn't take long before faint singing interrupted the silence.

"There once was a nation made of sand."

As if inspired by the words, the lyrics seemed to rise up from the sands that dusted the stone courtyard. The palm trees that shaded the edges of the park rustled like soft snares rattling. The Queen's entourage shifted their weight from boot to boot. The chanting was coming from the Rift. Much like the Varens, most Tlow-Varens didn't know this song – not yet – this song came from the dungeons, the Emendation Enterprise, that stretched up and down the façade of the Old Town's side of the canyon. That is where the tune originated on this particular morning as well, although there was one Layman that recognized it. The second line of which slipped almost unintentionally off the end of his tongue as his former cellmates sang along.

"The name of the nation: Batloen."

This put a bit of pep in the rebel leader's step. While good for morale, this was not good for the plan. Sallis' and his group (or column as they were calling them) was supposed to embark across the Rift last. After the Rift Bridge collapsed, only five bridges remained to cross the canyon from Tlow-Vare into Vare – and the use of the term "bridge" was a bit generous. Only two were topside bridges: Leftbove and Rightbove (named such because, unlike the others, they were above ground *and* because of their orientation in reference to the late great Rift Bridge). Leftbove crossed the Rift to the west and Rightbove to the east. These two were the quickest ways to access Old Town from New, and they let out mere blocks from Uthemarc Square. Thus, to have them arrive when the others arrived, they were supposed to start marching last. Just as the sound of the anthem had possessed his vocal cords, they'd also taken hold of Sallis' muscles. Despite the plan, Sallis began to strut out across Rightbove. Seeing this from far down the Rift on Leftbove, Bru clumsily called his column in order and followed suite.

"The Workers rose and claimed the land."

Above Sallis, an already anxious Sharp Otubak got an extra dose of anticipation when he heard the humming and looked down to see that the Laymen were already commencing their crossing of the Rift. Sharp had gotten stuck with the most dangerous passage: the Overpass. It stretched between two sky pillars, one hundred feet above the lip of the crevasse, and though many Laymen had worked on the moon, few willingly walked the crosswalk due to the stomach wrenching view below. Not only was it frightening, it was exhausting. Like the waterworks, Suicine had cut off the elevators. This meant that Sharp and his column had to climb ten stories

to their bridge only to cross it and have to go down ten more – and Sharp was doing it entirely armored. Still, while he may have had the hardest hike, his was not the longest.

“O rise, ye Layman, rise! HUH!”

The “HUH!” nearly knocked the monkey clean off Daffeega’s shoulders. Deep within the rift, the prisoners’ chanting was nearly deafening. The final two passages, Leftlow and Rightlow, were wedged between the iron mines of Tlow-Vare and the Emendation Enterprise of Vare. While those on the ‘low bridges could see both diggers and detainees, the two passages didn’t actually offer direct access to either. These lower crosswalks slipped between the tangled tunnels of subterranean Old Town and curved up to breach the surface not far from where the ‘bove bridges connected. Though a longer walk to Uthemarc Square, due to the descent and then the climb, once above ground there wasn’t much of a difference. For this reason, those on the ‘low bridges – led by Blade and Daffeega – started first and were just beginning to ascend when the chanting began. However, the prisoners’ singing had no problem echoing its way up the tunnel to the two columns. By the time they returned to the light of Solaris, they knew the chorus all too well.

“Soon may the clouds roll in, wet our fur and scales again! Soon, aye, we’ll own our rent. We’ll rise, we Laymen, rise!”

Between the Minor Bridges – with Rightlow by its right ankle, Rightbove by its left hip, and the Overpass at its right shoulder – the Hoodoo Airport swayed in the breeze as if rocking to the shanty of the desert folk. It had been all but cleared out of Batloens, the only that remained were members of the Royal Guard – specifically, the members that had drawn the short straw. Their job was to watch the asylum seeking army of Antipan mercenaries that were conveniently stuck in a bureaucratic limbo. It was mostly a symbolic gesture. The Crown had left them there as little more than a speedbump. It was well known among the Queen and her Magi that once sparks popped off the the Kou Warriors would be on the scene in moments.

The Strategy Admiral and her spirit bodyguard along with their stumpy pooch were also stationed on the Hoodoo. They were the representatives of the bureaucracy that permitted the thorn to reside in the side of the Batloen Crown. Their eyes were glued to the glass windows that looked west, through the panes they could hear the tune as well.

“The New Queen was a cruel old hag.”

Zaria whirled around to ask Lalmly, “Did they just say-”

“I believe they did.” Lalmly grimaced.

Cowboy let out a lamentation that sounded surprisingly like, “Donum.”

“Betrayed both workers and her flag.”

The Dragon snuck up behind the two ladies and their canine. Speaking softly, as if that would do anything to stifle the inevitable jolt, he said, “So...should we go.”

The Admiral and her guard flinched at the surprise, then scowled at the human out of the corner of their eyes. He raised his empty hands up to his torso in protest.

“What? They’re talking tiad about the Queen – it’s gonna pop off!”

“We told you, Tenchi.” Lalmly reminded the Dragon, “They said they won’t swing the first sword.”

“Good sis insists us not get mad.”

“Yea,” Zaria thumbed in the direction of Uthemarc’s Square, “listen to the lyrics. They said cool it.”

But by this point, Tenchi had already gotten the hang of the anthem. He was able to mouth along with the fourth line of the stanza to mock Zaria’s point:

“But rise, ye Layman, rise!”

“HUH!” He hollered.

Cowboy barked.

As the two women turned on Tenchi, realizing their side-eyes were not quite enough to extinguish the human’s eagerness, a third woman arrived on the scene and this one took Tenchi’s side. Tabuh Sentry, the electric elf runaway from Iceload, was also anxious to embark. Her aurelian eyes saw something plain and clear on the two ‘bove Bridges and it did nothing to calm her nerves. She asked, “Ah thought the Princess was gonna have them armed?”

“They’re not armed?” Tou (aka Mr. Woodsman) gasped. The earth elf joined his comrade behind Tenchi. Gazing out the window, he saw that the Laymen did appear to be armed. Granted, more than a few bore table legs or cast iron skilletts, but they certainly weren’t what you would qualify as unarmed. Tabuh had been exaggerating a bit but her point still stood: the people on the bridges weren’t *sufficiently* armed.

“Majk.” Cootie stated. He slapped Tou square in the small of his back, launching the wind right out of the poor boy, only to slap him again as if that might somehow knock it back in. Repeating, “Majk.”

“Correct.” Zaria nodded, though her glare had now turned to the nellaf drunk. The Admiral let her disdain linger for a moment before turning back to the anxious elves and explaining, “We had hoped Princess Daffeega would’ve had more enertombs ready but,” she gestured out the window, “there are still a good bit of Laymen with elgroons out there.”

Lalmly added, “Not all elgroons are L shaped.” Shifting Tou’s shoulder with one hand, she pointed with the other. Though they were too far away for the motion to do much good, Tou did notice that one of the frying-pans in a peasant’s hands appeared to have something shinny embedded in the middle. She continued, “They had to make do.”

“Selu!” Little Kenchi blurted, spotting another unlikely elgroon, “A farakin magic spatula!”

“Language!” Tenchi howled.

“Sorry...” The Dragon’s younger brother muttered. The boy was beside Cowboy the Vallhund (the dog was busy sniffing him out, realizing that Kenchi was the perfect size to ride him into battle like he were a war machine and, though the pooch would never admit it, he was certainly considering the option). Kenchi hung from the windowsill, his arms locked in a completed pull-up so that he could peer over the brim of the sill and watch the progress of the Laymen. Like a Knome, no one had seen him slip into the conversation, but his little explicit outburst drew everyone’s attention to the issue Tabuh had initially harped on. Sure, a magic spatula was cool to a kid, but would it be effective in a battle? Especially with amateur elementalists?

“They’re going to get slaughtered.” Wake stated.

Grabbing Kenchi by his shirt collar like a wolf snatching a pup by its scruff, the woman hoisted him up and sat him on her shoulder – her right shoulder. Her left shoulder was off limits for sitting considering the large black spikes than ran down it’s spine. Kenchi peered around his babysitters head to get a closer look at the scarlet finish of the left shoulder plate. He never could tell if it was paint or blood but always made sure to check whenever Captain Wake Ragashi gave him a ride.

“That’s good for *your* cause.” Einna reminded Wake. It wasn’t lost on those there that Einna had emphasized “your” in her assertion. The undead ring leader had only been recently convinced not to join in the skirmish of the day – nor the battles of the days to come. Though it

wasn't necessarily illegal to be a banshee, it certainly wasn't a good look. Her only saving grace was that she was a Guardian, however, that didn't play too well either considering the fact that she'd been working from the shadows for the last ten centuries and folks might find it a little too late to show up now. She continued, "If Suicine massacres them, then even the rich pricks of Vare will turn on her."

"What if she doesn't?" Sniper asked.

"Woh!" Pesh hollered, "Big man's gotta point!"

The big man, or Sniper, rarely spoke. The only thing folks knew about him was that he was a bearn, he was from Iceload, and he was as good a shot with a bow as Tabuh Sentry was with a gun. Bearn's weren't known to be bowmen either, it only furthered the mysteriousness of his character. On the other hand, his chidran comrade, Peshkova Fang, couldn't keep her mouth shut. Despite being a member of the very same, supposedly anonymous, Golden Dagger organization, Pesh was a bit of a blabber mouth. Her regular use of illicit stimulants was partially to blame for this, though there was a bit of a chicken-or-the-egg conundrum around the issue. Did her personality draw her to zirra or did zirra mold her personality?

That was not the question those on the Hoodoo were asking now, however. Instead, they were asking Sniper's question. What would it mean if Queen Suicine did not attack the Laymen?

"Well, we'll find out soon." Zaria sighed, "Sallis is just about to arrive in the Square."

"In the meantime..." Einna turned to the little Kenchi. The boy still on Wakes armored shoulder, his eyes glued to the procession before them. She had to speak again to get his attention, "Little Kou?"

"Mrs. Banshee!" He gasped. Wake tightened her grasp on the child as he squirmed about. When his body finally settled, his heart still thumped at a thousand beats a minute. Who could blame a kid for being uncomfortable around one of the worlds most powerful undead?

Ignoring her new nickname, Einna nodded to the boy's back.

"Ah!" He nodded. Twisting around – and again forcing Wake to white knuckle his little thighs – he slipped his knapsack off one shoulder and swung it around to his lap. Unlatching it, he flipped off the cover, then slid the pouch down rather than removing the contents. He called its name as he revealed it, "Atlas!"

"The one and only." Despite its robotic tone, it seemed almost to sigh as it repeated the reflexive response – its large round eyes flickering like fluorescents as if it were fluttering its eyelids to display its disdain for the tick that had to have been intentionally implement by its creator. Still, it didn't complain further. Maybe it was just booting back up? Either way, it then addressed Einna, "Mrs. Yelk-"

The automaton stopped itself. Recalling their master's words prior, it continued, "Mrs. Banshee."

Now it was Einna that seemed to somehow emote despite lacking the flesh on her face to do so. Her flames flickered a bit then she proceeded, "You can identify Truth, yes?"

"Yes, Mrs. Banshee." Atlas answered.

"You told us he already had." Lalmly Shisharay interjected.

"Atlas-" Kenchi started.

"The one and only." Atlas stated.

"-did!" Kenchi exclaimed, "In Sondor!"

Zaria jumped in, joining her Shisharay in brow furled concern, "How could Atlas-"

"The one and only."

"-tell all the way from Sondor?!" The Admiral finished.

“Atlas-” Kenchi began.

“The one and only.”

“-is the worlds first Globework!”

“Da one and only, Civ.” Peshkova Fang injected with a snicker.

“Cool your dragons!” Tenchi came to his brothers defense, “We’re here now and can confirm it for all to see. Princess Daffeega’s still down on the ‘low bridges, Queen Suicine is standing right there in the square – you can see her from here.” He turned to the animatron but made sure not to use its name, “Now, is that there both the Queen Suicine Shelba and the one you’ve identified as Truth?”

Kenchi position the robot head to gaze out the wide window before them and Wake turned so her shoulders were oriented right. It didn’t take Atlas long to conclude.

“Yes, Mr. General, Truth is none other than Queen Suicine Shelba, standing among the Royal Guard, before the Statue of the Uthemarc.”

Zaria and Lalmly sighed halfway before they choked on it. This wasn’t good news, merely confirmation of the bad. Einna and her assassins, Peshkova and Sniper, turned from their bickering comrades to watch as Sallis’ column reached the courtyard. Tenchi, Wake, Kenchi, and Atlas hushed too – oncemore captivated. Tabuh reached down to hold Tou’s hand – they had seen what Truth was capable of back onboard the *Obsidian Sail*. Though Cootie, who stood alongside them, had not. The old drunk knew that if this vast team of elite warriors were all gathered to kill a mancer that now wore the crown of Batloe, then things were not good for those half-hazardly equipped protestors challenging her.

“Selu to the Laymen.” Cootie stated with surprising diction.

“Aye.” Sniper concurred.

“Soon may the clouds roll in, wet our fur and scales again!”

While Sallis had stopped singing, those around him in the procession had not. With the chorus roaring behind him, he approached the rostrum upon which the giant effigy of Uthemarc posed. Silently, he ascended the steps. His gait wasn’t slow, but steady. He didn’t swagger like a soldier, but he didn’t slink along like a cat either. As neutral as he could, he slipped between the legs of the stumbling statue and faced the Queen and her defenders. Once on the otherside of Uthemarc he raised his hand and the Laymen stopped. The front line of their column was inline with the feet of the monument. Bru’s column had arrived moments after Sallis’ and Bru had quickly made his way to the middle of the courtyard as well. He stood in Sallis’ shadow, by the foot of Uthemarc. Sallis stood just a yard beyond him. Nine yards from where the Royal Guard and Arcane Sentinels stood.

Queen Suicine had been surrounded by her guards, but now she waded through their midst to mirror Sallis – at least, mirror him geographically. Physically, her posture was far different. The Queen hobbled. Leaning heavily on her staff, she limped forward. Each step forwards she brought her staff down abruptly, as if driving a stake into the ground. The motion was so violent it was almost as if she was taking out some sort of resentment on the courtyard stone and it displayed a surprising amount of strength despite the hunched over way she stood. If it wasn’t well known that the Shelban family was cursed, one might’ve even thought the Queen was faking.

“Soon, aye, we’ll own our rent. We’ll rise, we Laymen, rise!”

The two stood across from each other. Silence spread in the wake of the Laymen’s Anthem. The desert breeze hushed and the heat of Solaris immediately filled every bit of empty space, pressing upon the flesh of those gathered their like an iron. With the unadulterated heat

came the tarry smell of creosote, as if the atmosphere itself was filling with flammable gas. The tension was unbearable for the Laymen – Sallis especially.

He had bowed to her sister, but his back would not bend for Suicine. *Will this hubris help the cause or hurt it?* He wondered. The young mole had just about decided to concede when, to his surprise, Suicine gave in first.

“Prisoner 10642.” She took another step forwards and said simply, “We meet again.”

There was a quiet murmur of discontent from the crowd, but Sallis cut in quick to keep it from growing into anything more. He took a step towards the edge of the rostrum and said, “Queen Suicine, I represent those gathered here.”

“The anarchists?” The Queen snarled.

The crowd’s reaction started well above a murmur this time, though the Queen didn’t receive the anarchy she hoped for. Sallis turned to quell the rage but Bru was already on it. Despite how hot her snarky comment made him, the yellow scaled chidra knew now was not the time to play their hand. The Queen had to strike first, a slur wouldn’t cut it. Hollering above the rising rage, Bru reminded the people with a simple question, “Are we anarchists?”

“NO!” The response came in an uproar.

Now it was the Royal Guard that was shifting in their shoes.

“Do we want anarchy?” Bru asked.

“NO!” The people cried again, “NO!”

“What do we want?!” Bru demanded.

“VOTE!” They chanted, “VOTE!”

Sallis had turned to stand alongside his comrade. After clasping Bru on the shoulder, he raised a balled fist into the air. The people continued to chant, louder even with Sallis’ display. Then Sallis brought the fist down and the people fell quiet. Swirling back to face the Queen, Sallis approached the lip of the rostrum once more. Looking down at Suicine, he clarified.

“I represent the Laymen.” Sallis declared.

“I represent the People of Batloe,” Suicine snapped, a bit of spit flew from her balding snout. It dried immediately on the sand that dusted the square, “not just a couple peasants from New Town.”

“You represent our past,” Sallis shrugged, then started down the steps of the stage. He spoke coolly despite Suicine’s insults. As he arrived on the same level as the Queen, he finished, “but maybe not our future.”

Her head twisted to the side slowly, as if she were resisting the motion. She asked, “Is that a threat, prisoner?” The guards behind her shifted – all those that had been slacking on their posture straightened up quickly. She continued, “Should I be afraid?”

Sallis held back a gulp. He could feel the power of the silence of the Laymen behind him. The tension in the air was as thick as the heat. His eyes stung, his fur stood erect. He answered her question with one of his own, “Are you afraid of the will of the people?”

“Will of the people?” Suicine hissed, “But you,” she raised her wrinkled hand, pointing a crooked finger first at Sallis, “you aren’t the people!” then her finger moved to all those gathered behind him, “You’re just a couple hundred handout hoarders from over the Rift. I am not just the Queen of Vare and Tlow-Vare, I’m the Queen of the Fire Mountains, of Fire Lake, and the Three Part Desert! I am the Queen of the southern Foot Isles. Queen of the Hills of Shame to the West and the Great Rift to the East. The Queen of Space City and the Queen of the first-hatched moon, Korrukk. I am the voice of the people, you are just the voice of a few.” She cackled to the heavens, “I am not afraid of the will of the people but you...” she finally lowered her finger,

striding forwards to speak her final threat a mere foot from Sallis' face, "you should fear the will of your Queen."

For the first time since the confrontation began, a breeze rolled through the square. The wind whistled a gentle tune as it passed, like a distant owl's call. It rustled the palm trees that loomed around the perimeter and seemingly rustled the two separate congregations as well. Neither the Laymen nor the Royal Guard knew what the Queen's will was, but they both certainly feared it.

Sallis' mouth was dry. He licked his lips and that only seemed to waste more moisture. His mind was racing and his heart was pumping. After a gulp, he asked, "What is your will, Queen Suicine?"

Without hesitation, she replied, "To have a vote."

The gust that had swept through was suddenly jerked back into the square as the Tlow-Varens behind Sallis took in great gulps of air in order to let them out in the next breath with long, cathartic sighs but no sooner did their shoulders sag in relief than did their spines prickle as suspicion crept in to corrupt their comfort. After all this, Suicine would just concede? The Laymen exchanged glances with those around them, recognizing the same cautious scowls contorting the faces of their neighbors as those that twisted their own. Then their leers looked to the Queen as she elaborated.

"It will take time to organize." Suicine stated, "We must communicate with all the masters of Batloe. Then there is the counting. We should expect a week before there is a conclusive result."

"And we will wait here," Sallis nodded towards the ground, "until the vote is counted."

Suicine turned sideways so that she could look over at her troops before looking back towards the Laymen. A faint smirk could be seen where her snout met her head. She shrugged and said, "They may wait, but you, Prisoner 10642, you're under arrest."

Instead of gasps, this time came grumbles and outbursts.

"It's a trap!" People hollered, "A trick!"

"He's a hero!" Others shouted, "You're the traitor!"

Sallis turned to his people, ready to try and calm them, when help finally arrived. Sharp Otubak's column had been filing into place behind Sallis and Bru's but now Daffeega and Blade's columns joined too. Daffeega and Blade were quickly ushered through the midst of the masses towards the statue of Uthemarc. Seeing the Queen's sister stifled the urge to panic at the twist of events, instead the goal became to update Daffeega on what was going on. By the time the two women reached the rostrum where the patron saint posed, they were well aware of what Suicine was up to.

Bursting out from between the legs of Uthemarc's effigy, Daffeega hustled down to where Sallis stood. Her staff shimmered, giving her legs the strength so that she could walk upright and with a healthy gait. Unlike her sister, who stood hunched over like a witch right out of Brothers Grimm, Daffeega kept her curse at bay. Blade stayed on the platform with Bru, watching over the People's Princess and their chosen leader.

"Prisoner 10642 is due back to serve out his sentence by the Emendation Enterprise of Batloe." Suicine turned to the guards behind her, "Arrest him."

Daffeega yelped, "Wait-"

"Wait." Sallis raised his hands. Not towards the Queen, but towards the Princess. He then turned to face her and put his hands behind his back for the soldiers to cuff. He explained, "Princess Daffeega, I must go."

“Sallis,” Daffeega pleaded, “This is ridiculous, this-”

“This is the rule of law.” Suicine snarled, commanding their attention once more, “Something I am bound to protect, sister.”

Daffeega bowed her head, curtsying, “Yes, my Queen, but-”

“But are you above the law?” Suicine interrupted.

“I-”

“Daffeega.” Sallis pleaded. He would’ve put a comforting hand on her shoulder but the Royal Guard had already shackled his wrists. Instead, Sharp, who had arrived on the platform, stepped in to comfort her as Sallis continued, “This is what you wanted: a peaceful revolution.”

There was nothing Daffeega could say. Everyone knew without words being required. The Queen had called their bluff. This was not going to end well. But they could not draw first blood. Certainly not in broad daylight. Relying on one last grain of hope, Daffeega looked past Sallis and locked eyes with Suicine once more.

“Sis-”

She couldn’t even finish the word before Suicine interjected, “*Queen.*”

Daffeega just bowed her head in silence.

The guards began to turn Sallis but he resisted for one moment. Hollering over his shoulder he called out, “Bru!”

“Brother!” Bru yelled back.

“You’re in charge now!” Sallis declared.

Bru had figured as much but still hearing it out loud punched him in the gut. Blade slapped him on the back a couple times, an act that was likely as helpful as it was intended to be. Brushing off her faux-gesture, he turned to the rest of the Laymen.

“Let’s send him off right, y’all!” Bru ordered.

And just as the day had started, they ended it, singing what would one day be known as the Layman’s Anthem but, on that day, was known only as a prison shanty. A hopeful chant that felt a bit ominous in the hot noontime sunlight.

*“Soon may the clouds roll in,
wet our fur and scales again!
Soon, aye, we’ll own our rent.
We’ll rise, we Laymen, rise!”*

- - -

“Well this was a farakin waste of time.” Tenchi growled, slinging his backpack up to land on the saddle. Taking the growl to be directed at herself, the dragon ducked and swished her hips away. The bag hit the floor and the curlhead snaked it’s head around to leer at the human, growling herself. Tenchi grimaced. He sucked in his gut and unpuffed his chest, giving the reptile dominance before reaching up to stroke the scales of her girthy neck. He murmured, “Not you, Love, not you.”

“It wasn’t a waste, Tenchi!” Kenchi chimed in. The little boy was beaming from ear to ear. Cradled against his chest was his robotic friend and most ingenious creation yet: the Globework (let’s not mention it by name). He’d been planning on finishing the animatronic person – not just completing its globe, but actually completing its body! However, the two tasks had to be done together. He intended to stow the hardware of the head in the body that would hold it. Now that Atlas had been of use to the Empire, it seemed he might score the funding that

his big brother had been reluctant to supply (Despite the fact that Kenchi had calculated Tenchi's tobacco spending could've paid for a Globework everytime Mystakle Planet circled Solaris). As a kid, all these thoughts raced through the little Sondoran's mind quicker than he could blink and once he blinked he remembered what he'd been about say. Looking back at the Golden Dagger assassins they'd brought with them, Kenchi reminded Tenchi of the silver lining, "Atlas proved the Queen is Truth."

"Maybe we take our asylum to Space City." Captain Wake Ragashi suggested. While other Kou Warriors were dismantling their armor and packing up, Wake stayed strapped. Few had seen the earth elf without her iconic metal shell and she planned to keep it that way. Partially because it was now her aesthetic but mostly because she'd been stabbed in the back on more than one occasion and would rather sweat a bit and weigh a tad more than get caught unawares. She rustled the young Kou boys greasy hair, "You won't even need funding there, the nerds in the big city would kill to pick your brain."

"You'd have better luck soothing a sumarii." Admiral Zaria Ein said. Though the idiom wasn't the softest, she did at least sport a sympathetic frown. Cowboy, her little yellow hound, even dashed over to Kenchi. He shoved his fluffy butt against the boy's legs, demanding scratches that would provide both petter and pettee comforting endorphins. Zaria pointed at all the Kou Warriors packing up their armor and weapons before explaining her counter proposal, "You've got to take your militia with you and Space City won't have that – Factory Town, Foxloe, however, they'd jump like a three-horned shamoo at the opportunity."

"Ain't dat right, Civ!" The Golden Dagger joined the conversation – or at least, Peshkova Fang had. Souped up on Zira, her teeth ground together in a snarky smirk that pushed her edgy humor just over the line, "Dey never miss an opportunity to work a child."

Before anyone could protest the joke, the stoic Sniper grunted. The giant bearn loomed over the conversation much like the truth in the chidra's quip: Foxloe forced children to work. Pesh's accent in and of itself suggested she had witnessed it first hand. Foxloe certainly wasn't the only culprit, but absolutely the best known for it.

Zaria's best defense and quite honestly one of the Empire's greatest defenders stepped up to deflect attention away from the Trinity Nation's flaws. She crouched by little Kenchi to pet Cowboy with him, suggestsing, "Dogloe's always got space."

"I could be a dogherder!" Kenchi exclaimed.

"I'd rather you go to work with the lil Civs." Tenchi muttered.

"Look!" Again Lalmly changed the subject. The perfect excuse had just arrived. Before they could begin to figure where the asylum seekers would go in the absence of a revolution, they had to figure out what a servant of Iceload's Mystvokar was doing flying into the Hoodoo that was closed for business.

A bright green dragon, almost chartreuse you could say, spread its wings to skid to a halt in the sky as it drifted through a garage roughly three gates down. A curlhead, like those of the Kou Warriors, but of a color rarely seen. Certainly neither Tenchi, Kenchi, nor Wake new of a like colored steed. The gaggle of leaders around the Sondoran General hadn't seen what Lalmly's silver eyes had seen but they did when the beast landed. The dragon rider had blonde hair and blue eyes and his passenger was a brown furred bearn.

The beast's hind legs hit the ground hard and it nearly fell flat against the airport floor. The cause was soon scene to be the passenger. When he hopped off the steed, the whole Hoodoo wobbled. Bearn were typically giants but this one even towered over others, standing a whole half foot (and an inch more) taller than the silent Sniper. On the other hand, his pilot was

positioned on the opposite end of the extreme. Electric elves weren't known to be especially short and this gentleman wasn't short for the average Solarin, but at 5 foot 8 inches, he was short for the average Iceloadic. He made up for it with a gaudy mustache, meticulously twirled, and – likely more effective than the facial hair – his broad shoulders. Any opponent he faced off against may have had the high ground, but he certainly appeared to have compensated for fighting the uphill battle with good old fashioned brawn.

While most could see that the two were certainly Iceloadic, only a few recognized the two gentlemen. Tou Fou and Tabuh Sentry recognized the bearn first – his figure demanded their undivided attention as their hearts stopped for a moment. Their eyes widened. Their guts dropped. One name was shouted from the back of their minds and it echoed back and forth within the confines of their skulls: *JASON!* But no. It couldn't be. They had seen Jason die. Still, they recognized the giant bearn before them. Not only because he was Jason's twin, but because he'd been there when the elves had first met in the rough and tumble harbor of Yelah, Iceload. They hadn't known his name, only that he was Sheriff. And together the two had all but killed the oaf.

Tou didn't recognize the electric elf but Tabuh did: Commander Shaprone Ipativy. The man chosen to quell the conflict in Sentrakle between those loyal to her Father and the Empire and those loyal to Iceload and the Mystvokar. Why Shaprone? Well, because he had once dated the Princess of Sentrakle and – at one point – had seemed on track to take her hand in marriage. As fate would have it, returning the “supposedly” kidnapped Sentry to Sentrakle would do great to soothe the tension in that northern region, thus such a quest conveniently fit into his job discription. Tabuh could only assume that Shaprone was there for her, but she was wrong.

There was another Iceloadic on the Hoodoo that recognized the commander. Though his vision was blurry, the shape of the Ipativian gave it away. Cootie knew this day would come, but how unfortunate the circumstances he couldn't have imagined. Before his fate could be revealed, the representatives of the Imperial Navy stepped up to interfere.

Zaria Ein, Lalmly Shisharay, and Cowboy the Vallhund strode up to the arriving Iceloadic. They stopped so close to the two that it became obvious the foreigners weren't to take another step until further notice well before Zaria addressed them. Cowboy's nose crinkled and his lip curled up as he emitted a silent growl.

“As Strategy Admiral of the Imperial Navy, I represent the Emperor and maintain complete authority over this airport. This is now a holding facility for Sondoran asylum seekers, all other traffic is barred.” She paused to let her glower linger before adding, “Whatever business you have with the Sentry sharpshooter must be taken up after this refugee process is sorted.”

“Indeed it will.” Shaprone conceded, “I've already reckoned with that.”

Zaria's glower turned into a suspicious squint, “Then why are you here?”

“I've had to postpone my pursuit of Magistrate Battle Admiral Ootna Sentry's daughter.” Shaprone's eyes went to Tabuh Sentry, but then they moved over to Cootie, “I'm pursuing someone else now.”

Again Zaria's expression switched. Her glare relented for the first time as she rolled her eyes. Then she asked the question he was obviously baiting, “Who?”

“Before I say, let me explain.” Shaprone cleared his throat and returned his gaze to his interrogator, “I'm here to help – or at least to warn. I may not be able to take Tabuh back to her father today, but I may be able to save her life tomorrow.”

Lalmly had noticed where the electric elf had been looking. Turning back to their crew, she found herself observing the drunken nellaf. A sinking suspicion began to arise within her.

This man's face seemed suddenly familiar. Not as if she knew him but familiar in the sense that she thought she knew *of* him. And this him she thought she knew was not named "Cootie". However, Shaprone's next revelation completely tore her away from that train of thought.

"A Battalion of the Mystvokaran Dalvary will arrive tomorrow."

Immediate uproar spread across the hoodoo in waves, rattling the vertical peninsula of rock to its core. The Mystvokaran Justin reached for the hilt of his claymore but his Commander stopped him without turning, his hand simply gently tapping the bearns gauntlet so that he would know to freeze. It was wise he did because the clamor that spread from Shaprone's statement was followed quickly with the sound of unsheathing swords and straining bowstrings. Tenchi Kou and Wake Ragashi had to hop about hollering to keep their mercenaries from advancing as outrage got the better of them.

"This is the man warning us, we'll hear him out!" Tenchi commanded, then he added a tad quieter, "If we don't like him in a few minutes, we'll kill him then!"

Having been convinced that the Ipativian didn't plan on kidnapping her, Tabuh waded her way over to stand by Zaria, Lalmlly, and Cowboy. Tou followed right behind her. She asked, "Who's Battalaion? How manay?"

"I can't say for sure, but I'd approximate a thousand..." Shaprone gulped, his sapphire eyes darting away from her golden glare, "It isn't being led by a commander..."

"What?" Tabuh snapped.

Shaprone met her eyes, "Caleros Icelore."

"Caleros Icelore." Tabuh murmured.

"Master of Oreh Island." Zaria mumbled.

"He's Trinity Nations though, right?" Tenchi asked.

"But also the brother of the Mystvokar." Lalmlly added.

"Farakin hell has he got to do with Batloe?" Wake scoffed.

"Master Caleros Icelore and Mystvokar Talloome Icelore have another brother."

Shaprone explained, "Sorelac Icelore. When the Imperial Navy destroyed the Sea Lord armada, they took Sorelac prisoner. He was held in the dungeons of God's Island."

"Pff, dey call dose dungeons?" Pesh scoffed in the background.

Einna quelled any other urge to quip with her cold undead grasp. As she clenched the chidra's shoulder she flared her crimson flames to demand attention. It didn't take much for a banshee to get the mic. Releasing Peshkova, who then fell to the floor trembling, Einna Yelkao stepped aside so her skull had a direct line of sight with Shaprone.

"What do you mean, 'was'?" She asked.

"You tell me." Shaprone countered, "He's now in Batloe."

"Impossible." Lalmlly declared.

"Is it?" Zaria whispered to her partner.

"A mapwork puts him here." Shaprone shrugged, "And, either way, Suicine – as a Queen in the Trinity Nations – has agreed to pardon Sorelac in exchange for the Mystvokar's aid in staving off this coup."

"Staving off a coup to start a Fifth Void War?" Captain Wake asked, "The rest of the Empire will see this as Iceload interfering in a popular uprising – I can't imagine the Trinity Nations struggling to pass a vote to declare war on your Mystvokar."

"I agree." Shaprone nodded, "Which is in part why I'm here."

Zaria took the bait, "In part?"

Shaprone began, "The Mystvokar wouldn't simply send dragons to free his brother, he--"

“Wouldn’t hae?” Tabuh interrupted.

Tou gently grasped her arm and she bit her lip.

Shaprone continued, “Suicine won’t pardon Sorelac until after this charade. Under the disguise of a show of force, the Mystvokar’s dragons will descend on Tlow-Vare to capture a wanted man – one among the mercenaries the Batloen rebels are allegedly in cahoots with.”

Tabuh and Tenchi looked at each other as their comrades looked between the two as well. Both were wanted by the powers that ruled outside the Empire, but Tabuh had already gotten a pass from Shaprone and Tenchi had nothing to do with the icy crown of Iceload. None amongst them, except Lalmly Shisharay, had figured out where this was going. She turned her silver eyes on the nellaf. He’d already hung his head. His shoulders were slumped. He stood as if he was already shackled.

Shaprone finished, “Daernar Darkblade.”

Another shockwave of noise coursed through Hoodoo Airport, though this one was not of outrage but rather of realization. For most, the story of Daernar Darkblade was known. A hero of the people who had descended over centuries into the vice of the bottle, a vice that eventually, one way or another, took the life of his wife. This would’ve been bad enough, but his wife was not just any old nellaf. Her name was Lizara Icelore, she was Razil Icelore’s sister. Razil was the First Mystvokar. His son, Talloome Icelore, was now the Second. This meant that Daernar had caused death of the Mystvokar’s aunt – and then he’d disappeared.

For a nellaf to disappear is quite impressive. Few lived off of Icelore or out of Vinnum Tow. With their curlicue black stripes, they stood out in a crowd. In fact, there was only one nellaf on the whole Hoodoo. And everyone turned to look at him.

“Cootae is Daernar Darkblade.” Tabuh realized aloud.

“Captain Kakal,” Shaprone ordered, “arrest him.”

The bearn hesitated at first, but then Zaria and Lalmly stepped aside. Even Cowboy backed away. Tenchi and Wake split to provide a path towards the drunk. Tou and Tabuh moved as well. Einna, Peshkova, and Sniper were out of the way, but they didn’t budge to block the bearn from approaching the nellaf. It seemed only Daernar might defend himself, but as the Captain neared, he continued not to move. Justin removed handcuffs from his belt and walked around to stand behind Daernar but before he could begin, Einna did speak up.

“If we relinquish the bastard, then you’ll call off Caleros?” She asked Shaprone.

Justin paused, looking to his Commander. His Commander frowned.

Einna nodded, knowing she was right, “You can’t promise turning him in will stop the dragons.”

“I cannot.” Shaprone admitted, bowing his head.

“And is this not treasonous of you? If the plan is to use his presence as a pretense to invade on Suicine’s behalf?” Suicine asked.

“I recognize my decision may have consequences.” Shaprone ceased to bow, sticking his nose in the air defiantly now.

“So you risk life and liberty for what?” Einna hissed, “How can we be sure this isn’t part of the ruse? Your Mystvokar wants his chicken and to eat it too?”

Shaprone gave Justin a nod and the bearn went ahead and cuffed the nellaf as his Commander explained, “Personally, I don’t care much about the cause here. I don’t care much about the Batloen people, I don’t know many if any. But I empathize. Iceload is not much different. They may know the desert while we know the tundra, but mountains are mountains and just a year ago we cast out our rulers and crowned the people’s leader.”

This made sense and satisfied much of the crowd's suspicion. Though most weren't Iceloadic, when the story of Lizara Icelore hit the news, popular consensus wasn't kind on Daernar Darkblade. He had abandoned the body of his wife, the mother of his child, and in doing so had admitted guilt in the court of public opinion. Yet, it was even worse than that. He'd tacitly declared himself a coward. Every day that he didn't turn himself in, he dug his grave deeper. No matter what one thought of the Mystvokar as a state, no one would defend Daernar Darkblade. Still, if they were to be slaughtered tomorrow, did they want to hand their enemy their defeat on a decorative silver platter? Shaprone sensed he had more convincing to do and so he continued.

"What good would a war with the Empire do Iceload? I don't want that and you don't want that. Even the Mystvokar, with how much he hates your Emperor, does not want that."

Silence resounded in the chamber. Shaprone still had not convinced them. Reluctantly, he divulged the truth he'd hinted at when he first started the conversation.

"You want to know how you can trust me?" The Commander asked. He scanned the room, as if he expected answers, then his gaze came to a stop on Tabuh Sentry. He said, "If I didn't try and stop Caleros and something happened to you, then I could never forgive myself."

As pitiful as the proof was, it certainly convinced the Hoodoo.

Tabuh shook her head, "You should've stopped at world paece."

The only person unconvinced in the airport was Tou. He now was sure that this was the man that Tabuh had mentioned way back when on the *Obsidian Sail*. The one her father had wanted her to marry, the one that had flipped the switch and turned her against a life as a cultural princess. It was a toxic discomfort that descended upon Tou, but it was real nonetheless. He did not like this Iceloadic knight stepping in to save his girl. Suddenly, he became the only one there that legitimately wanted to defend the drunken murderer shackled behind him. That said, he was still sane enough to know better. Or at least sane enough not to say anything outloud. He just watched the Commander for any sudden move, anything that could justify reaching for *Future*. He stuck by Tabuh's side, scrutinizing the Ipativian as they all transitioned into planning mode. It was a tad ironic. Justin Kakal had been the one that had brought Tou and Tabuh together and now he had returned with Shaprone Ipativy. Would he now be responsible for wrenching them apart? While everyone else plotted what to do in the battle sure to come tomorrow, Tou dwelled on what threats may or not be hiding in the heart of their unlikely savior.

Chapter Nineteen: Voting Day

The moons seemed to sit on the horizon, as if you could sail right up to Korruk and step off Mystakle Planet and onto the lunar surface. The moonlight split the midnight sea with a cerulean blade that was so bright a blue it appeared like a sandbar stretching east from the frosty tip of Iceload towards the arid shores of Batloe. On either side of the blade, the ocean mirrored the starry night. The water almost appeared still. The sky cloudless.

Westward was another story. The night could only be darker if a banshee had cast their infernal spell. The distant crashes of thunder could still be heard as the only light came from flashes of lightning hidden behind a fog of distant rain. The Iahtro Storm was pulling away. Following the Frosted Coast northwest, finally the Ursine Mountains were allowed to drain.

Southpoint and Fort Zannon shared the Ursine Mountains, though it was an unequal relationship. Before the Second Mystvokar ascended to the throne, the two settlements had essentially been roommates. Iceload had no official military under the Vokarburrockoff (the government that existed inbetween the reigns of the First and Second Mystvokar), Iceload had maintained order and defense with a confederated militia called the Honor Knights. Talloome Icelore, the Second Mystvokar, had united those militias, ousted the politicians of the Vokarburrockoff, and turned the Honor Knights into an official military, the Knights of the Mystvokar – also known as the Mystvokarans. Thus, Fort Zannon became off limits to regular civilians. Certainly to foreigners like Ben, Fetch, Marvell, Bold, and Lenga.

Unfortunately, the only pilot they'd been able to convince to soar to Southpoint in the storm had been a soldier, one that was certainly on some sort of substance. They only found this out later, of course, but by then it was too late. As they were beginning to land, they realized that he had taken them into Fort Zannon rather than the neighboring Southpoint. They couldn't tell whether he understood their protestations or if he simply didn't care and so they gave up, preferring to let their pilot land in peace.

He either missed the landing strip or decided he knew better (again, his passengers couldn't tell) but that worked to their best interest because all five had tacitly agreed to stick to the shadows and get off the base as quick as possible. Second only to an actual airport, the Mystvokaran directed his sky dragon down in the center of a Warcourt arena. The bewildered beast tore a good few chunks of ground from the once well kept field, but their arrival appeared to be virtually unnoticed. Hopping off the steed, they scanned the surrounding stands and saw no signs of life.

“Um, sir-”

Lenga cut herself off as Fetch tugged at her sleeve. He shook his head, then nodded towards the stands. His better half frowned, shaking her head instead. Under her breath she said, “We have to check on him.”

“Check on him?” Fetch whispered sharply, “He doesn't even know we are here!”

“Which is exactly what we need.” Marvell inserted, quietly but urgently.

“I'm late. Late. Late. Late.” The pilot grumbled, sliding off his steed. His feet hit the soft earth but his knees buckled and he fell down onto his butt. Looking up, he saw Marvell first. His back and legs straightened – though he stayed put on the floor – and his right hand slapped over his heart. He yelped, “Captain!”

“Hush!” All four crowed, all four but Lenga.

As the three scanned the stands again, Lenga knelt down to get on the soldier's level. Her healer tendencies were getting the best of her. She asked, "Are you okay, sir? Do you need help? I'm a healer."

"Thor Medull." The elf replied, taking his hand off his heart and offering her to shake it.

Fighting the urge to look exhausted by his antics, Lenga shook it. Introductions had taken place before they'd left Uran but apparently Thor had left more than just Uran. Lenga asked again, "Do you need help, Thor?"

"Nah," he waved off her offer then let out a deep breath and said, "I'm just high."

"We can tell." Ben muttered.

Benjamin was done with scanning the stadium. His gmoat eyes didn't do much to penetrate the darkened stands but the fact that the only light they could see came from the stars and moons comforted him. Now the only threat appeared to be the inebriated elf. Bold was on the same page.

"Off whot, lad?" Bold asked.

"Aquan-" Thor paused to yawn, then, "-nabis."

"Lard." Bold groaned, his head rolling with his eyes as he turned away.

"Aquannabis?" Ben asked.

"A hallucinogenic." Lenga explained.

Ben's jaw dropped, "*And he flew us?!*"

"Hush!" Marvell shoved Ben unintentionally hard and knocked the poor gmoat right off his hooves.

"It hadn't kicked in yet." Thor stated, "Almost forgot I'd lathered up."

"Do you want me to sober you up?" Lenga offered.

"Sober him up?!" Fetch crowed.

"Hush!" Marvell slammed into Fetch even harder than she had Ben. This sent Fetch toppling over Ben just as he was managing to get back on his hooves.

"The dog's roight, Lil Lenga." Bold bowed his head, "Wae've gotta get out this fart. If hae warn't hoigh, oi'd thank this uh trap."

"Where y'all headed next?" Thor asked. If this was a trap, the electric elf should've gone into acting rather than the military. Despite the question being incredibly suspect, his casual tone really sold it as nothing more than semi-conscious drug-fueled conversationalism.

Ignoring the Mystvokaran, Lenga responded to Bold but kept her voice low, "They'll lock him up if they find him like this!"

"They'll lock him up anyways far tearin up this faeld!" Bold countered – his whisper sharp but still within the range of volume that Marvell found acceptable. Which was good, because if Marvell shoved the dwarf, he'd likely not take it as well as his comrades had.

Ignoring the two arguing over him, Thor kept rambling, "I'm in between waves, if we take off now maybe-"

"One offense is better than two, Bold!" Lenga continued.

"And naithar are ar responsibilitay, lass." Bold concluded.

"-we can time it to where I land in between the waves again." Thor continued.

While the dwarf and water elf debated, Ben and Fetch untangled themselves from one another on the grass. In the process, Fetch's crow eye caught movement on the perimeter. Still behind the walls of the stadium bleachers, but getting closer: Fetch saw four figures approaching. He froze, which annoyed Ben who figured the canine was messing with him. A grumble began to form in the gmoat's throat but Fetch stopped him short with a whisper.

“People are coming.”

“Farak.” Ben cursed.

Marvell had heard Fetch too.

Thor concluded, “Once we get up there, Falkor does all the work anyways. He isn’t high.”

Marvell tapped Lenga on the shoulder, “Can you sober him up in mid air?”

“Huh?” Lenga and Bold chimed.

“We’ve got company.” Fetch stated.

“Tow.” Bold cursed, “How manay?”

“Four.” Fetch counted.

Lenga winced, “I really don’t think I should sober him up in mid air.”

Marvell reached for her axes, “Then we’ll be back-”

“Wait!” Lenga slapped a hand over her mouth, cutting herself off until she could switch back to a whisper. Removing the hand, she said, “Don’t hurt them.”

“How about, ‘don’t kill them?’” Fetch offered.

Lenga scowled, “At least.”

“Can y’all handle it?” Bold asked, “Can’t laeve Lil Lenga alone with this lad.”

Marvell turned to Fetch, “Can we?”

The shadowmancer smirked, “Of course.”

“Without killing them?” Ben pressed.

Fetch’s smirk turned to a frown as he weighed the probability, “Eh...yea, I think so.”

“No choice, lads.” Bold said, adding, “and lass.”

“We should hurry though.” Fetch said, “Surprise them in the shadows.”

The three moved towards the sidelines, but Ben stopped when he felt Lenga snatch his tail. Her eyes sent the message before she could say it out loud. Ben clasped her hands and nodded.

“We’ll be gentle.” He promised.

“Thanks.” Lenga bowed her head, then turned to Bold, “Let me get my book.”

As the dwarf turned to let her in his backpack, Fetch, Ben, and Marvell made their way to the edge of the court. By the time they got to the sideline, Ben and Marvell could see the light of the investigators – not their life force like Fetch could see, but rather the light of their torches flickering like fireflies everytime the trio caught an unobstructed glance. The stands weren’t solid but rather made almost like scaffolding. One could peer between rows of benches. The rows rose so that the further you were from the court the higher you sat, that also allowed the path created below the elevated seating to act as a covered passage. While it might’ve stopped rain, it was still possible to slip between the pews and fall down to the path below – perfect for a surprise attack. As Ben, Fetch, and Marvell climbed the stands, they watched the guards enter beneath them. They four Mystvokarans put their torches out in the dirt and approached an entrance to the field quietly while the three got into position above them. The trio drafted a rough plan and then, just before their prey got out from underneath them, Marvell dropped down to land behind.

“Hello there!”

A cacophony of steel scraping out of rusty scabbards combined with a chorus of half-cocked hollers of alarm:

“Hey what the-”

“Wait is that-”

“Crimpsin ti-”

“The axes, she’s-”

But before their brains could come to their conclusions and before their bodies could manifest their first move, the two other intruders dropped down to land on the new-behind-them. Ben raised his elgroom high, the orb glowing brown to hint at the power it then relinquished: stone. Rock burst through the gravel path. Four igneous arms manifested and struck like snakes at the ankles of their enemies. The rupturing earth keyed their prey in to the threat and the four whirled to see the attack. The first two had no shot, they were too close and bewildered, but the two beyond them could at least act on their reflexes. They danced about, hiking their legs up and stepping high as if the floor had suddenly grown hot to the feet. The sloppy technique worked. While the first two Mystvokarans were snared, the second batch kicked and stomped the rocky tentacles’ initial assault away. By the time the stones surged for their shins again, they were able wack the attack away with their blades. Unfortunately for them, Benjamin Fasthoof was not alone.

An iridescent paw punched first into one of the hapless duo that had been initially snared by Ben. As the shadows lingered around the foe’s face, searing the curly tips of the bearn’s fur, the fist’s owner twirled past. Having advanced past the first two, Fetch now faced the second round of goons – they still were bouncing around the squirming arms of rock that Ben controlled. Rushing forwards, Fetch caught the first opponent unawares. A shadow coated uppercut to the chin sent him soaring up and over onto his back. Ben’s earthen appendages then easily captured him. The second of the pair adapted fast. She saw what happened to her comrades and expected the worst. When Fetch moved from the uppercut to swirl into a hard backhanded knuckle wrap against her melon, she ducked under it and drove her sword up towards Fetch’s throat.

CLANG!

Pride – Marvell’s one bladed, scarlet ax – collided with the Mystvokaran’s blade and rattled it out of the lady’s hands. As she flailed, Fetch turned his open hand into a fist and brought it down hard right where her neck met her spine. WHAM! She hit the ground like a sack of potatoes. A moment later and she was shackled by stone.

While Fetch and Ben huffed and puffed, Marvell went to go retrieve her ax. Meanwhile, the first to Mystvokaran’s filled the void left in the wake of violence with their voices.

“Zviepact!” The bearn with the burnt fur around his face proclaimed, “Zviepact!”

“Wait...” the electric elf beside him, a bloke that had been left nearly completely unscathed aside from the somewhat uncomfortable cobble confines around his ankles, commented, “Are they on our sahd or...”

His bearn friend was perplexed. The poor bloke that Fetch had clocked in the chin, another bearn, managed to add his two cents even as he worked on realigning his jaw, “Pacters certainly aren’t...” he winced then finished, “...on their side.”

“Yea, the TN ain’t about mancers.” The bearn from before agreed.

The electric elf took that to be a good sign. Craning his neck to look back at the ax wielding woman who had first spooked them, he said, “If Marvell of the Ax is on their sahd, ah’d bae on their sahd.”

“Shut up.” Fetch barked.

Ben wasn’t a fan of Fetch’s aggression but he was certainly happy for their captives to keep quiet. Looking past them to Marvell, he asked, “What are they talking about? Do you know these guys?”

“Look around.” Fetch nudged Ben, “Look where we are.”

Marvell rolled her shoulders and winked at the two.

“Do you not know?” The electric elf whirled back around to face Ben, “Shae’s a huge Warcourter!”

“Was.” Marvell specified.

“Wae still play!” The elf yelped, “Sondor too!”

“Shut the farak up, Portnoy.” The burnt bearn growled.

The other bearn, the one with the busted snout, offered, “She was on the Crystal Clobberers.”

“I’ve kicked every Iceloadic Warcourter’s ass at least twice.” Marvell boasted, grinning ridiculously as she puffed out her chest.

Stirring for the first time since Fetch had clocked her in the back of the neck, the electric elven woman soldier propped herself up off the ground to scowl at her peers, “Only a piss elf or stuffed animal would take the likes of Marvell of the Ax on their team.”

“Yea,” the scorched soldier concurred, “like the Mountaineers.”

While the three soldiers continued to banter, the woman on the ground turned her eyes back on their captors. The foreigners seemed to be preoccupied with her comrades. Watching them closely, she began to squirm ever so slightly. She moved her ankles back and forth, not even by an inch at a time, trying to see if she could wiggle free of the rocks.

“Hey!” The less cynical elf, the one with the Sentrakle accent, complained, “This is our yaer!”

“You knocked Donny Warcourt out of the sport, didn’t you?” The swollen snout bearn asked rhetorically, “Heard he can’t even shovel snow now!”

“Yea, that was her.” His fellow bearn certified as he looked Marvell up and down, then gulped, “Broken pelvis.”

While Ben and Fetch were tied between being tired of the sports-banter and also enthralled with the lore they’d neglected to learn of their friend, the electric elf bound to the ground was less interested – and she’d noticed that Marvell shared her opinion. The ax toting bearn’s attention was back on her. The elf quickly re-engaged with the conversation, hoping that might cover for the fact that one of her ankles could now slip completely free of her concrete confines. She did her best to perform an exasperated sigh. The display snapped her comrades out of their rambling.

“What’s the deal, Marvell of the Ax?” She asked, “You played for the Trinity Nations and now you’re playing for the...” she gestured at Fetch with a nod, “...the what? The Disciples of Darkness? You a sellout?”

“I’m none of your business.” Marvell growled.

“We’re just passing through.” Ben stepped in with an olive branch, “We’re on our way to Batloe.”

“Batloe!” The other soldiers gasped.

The electric elf they’d called Portnoy added, “You and everayone else in Fort Zannon.”

“PORTNOY!” The three others roared.

Ben, Fetch, and Marvell shared a curious glance.

Fetch asked, “Everyone else?”

“Why are Mystvokarans going to Batloe?” Marvell pressed.

The soldiers all turned to the floored elf to answer. She said, “Even if they told us, we wouldn’t tell you.”

“Can’t be good.” Ben stated.

“TOIME TO GO, LADS!” Bold hollered from far behind them.

“Was that a dwarf?” One of the bearns murmured.

“Saelu...” Portnoy gasped.

Turning back to their prisoners, Marvell started to say goodbye, “Well, we’ll see y’all-”

“Woh!” Fetch jumped in front of Ben and Marvell, shadows balling up around his fists.

The Mystvokaran’s electric elven leader was on her feet, untethered by the terra. Her sword was back in her hand, the tip pointing at Fetch’s chest. The sudden moment of tension was shattered almost as soon as it had manifested as Marvell chuckled behind the shadowmancer. Grabbing him by his collar, she pulled him back so that she faced off with the blade wielding soldier.

“The court’s right over there.” Marvell smirked, “Want the Donny Warcourt treatment?”

Ben wasn’t concerned that this single soldier would hurt Marvell or Fetch. He was far more concerned of the exact opposite. Thus, he pushed Marvell back in line just as she had pushed Fetch. Stepping in front of his two friends, he was now so close to the elf that her sword almost touched his tunic.

“We’re not here to cause trouble, we’re just passing through.” Ben reiterated, “The Iahtro Storm got in the way and so we got stuck in Uran. We’ve just been making our way east since.”

The elf still didn’t lower her sword.

“Captain, come on.” One of the bearns pleaded.

“Shae’s farakin Marvell of the Ax.” The other elf added.

“Even if it were four on three...” Her third compatriot said, “I don’t like shoveling snow as much as the next guy but I think I’d miss it if I couldn’t.”

The elf took a deep breath, then stepped back and lowered her sword.

“Thank you.” Ben said.

Marvell and Fetch stormed off, just as grumpy as the Mystvokaran they left behind. As they made their way back across the Warcourt field, Lenga came over to meet them. She walked right past the two disappointed warriors and began to walk alongside Ben.

“They didn’t hurt them, did they?” Lenga asked.

“Just their feelings.” Ben assured her.

“Well I can’t heal those.” Lenga smiled.

And with that, they got back aboard their sky dragon and headed east towards Batloe.

- - -

“This is pointless.” Bru slammed an amber fist down on the table. The map his hand pinned was certainly pointless towards the discussion, but that wasn’t what Bru was frustrated about. The chidra was frustrated with the discussion itself. He hung his head and cursed under his breath, “Donum.”

“Mr. Bru’s right.” The two chidras looked like polar opposites. Sharp Otubak had pitch black scales compared to Bru’s warm yellow color. More than that, they often presented opposing personalities. While both were “get-the-job-done” types, Sharp behaved more like a Varen while Bru didn’t hold back his Tlow-Varenities. Both had hard working class roots, having spent their entire lives fighting tooth and nail just to survive, but they’d ended on opposite sides of the Rift. That said, on this day, they were on the same page. Sharp continued, “We’re dancing in circles around da trude. Da question isn’t when or how to tell dem, da question is do we now strike first?”

“We can’t hit first.” The third chidra at the table spoke up. She had a more common color than the other reptilians: a crisp, brick red. Like her complexion, she had a more conventional occupation. Vare had been made capital, over a millenia ago, as an ore mining town. The Rift split city had not just been built on top of its mines, it had been built by its miners. Like her occupation, she had a more traditional outlook. If there was a spectrum that had full-on anarchists on the left end and boot-licking patriots on the right, Blade certainly landed further towards right than did Bru and Sharp. All she and her fellow Rift Miners wanted was to keep mining the Rift. A favorable Queen would help achieve that goal, however a failed revolution would completely condemn any hope of preserving their status quo. This made her far more wary than her new topside associates, “I joined the fight willing to die for our mines because I knew if we died we’d win the war. They’d have to give our brothers and sisters – those that stayed home and didn’t fight with us – what we fought or else every single soul this-side of the Rift would rise up.” She slumped back in her seat with a sigh, “At least, that was the thought. Win or lose, we’d still win.” She shook her head, “But if we hit first, then win or lose, we lose. If we hit first, all the crimson tied lies the Varens are spreading look true. We were just a bunch of unruly thugs. We deserved to be slaughtered. And our demands?” She exhaled sharply out of her nostrils, throwing a hand up as if she were tossing away an idea, “Just as vulgar and unnecessary as our violent means. We never really wanted a vote.”

Bru rolled his eyes, “Then take your people back to the mines.”

Blade’s glare hit Bru with a shocking sharpness that almost made him flinch, “If this vote was real then we would.”

“And if Daffeega was Queen, then none of us would be here!” Sharp lamented, “We must strike now – before the Mystvokarans arrive!”

Finally, the fourth person in the room butted in. She was the only mole left in the leadership of the Laymen now that Sallis had been taken back to prison. She was the very one the folks outside were ready to die to vote for: the People’s Princess. She interrupted the chidra’s argument simply by moving. Having stood still for so long, they all turned to see what she had to say. She wasn’t quite ready to speak yet. She was scanning the rest of the room. They were in a basement, much like the basement they had been in when the Rift Miners first came to join them. That basement had been across the Rift and it had been full of far more than just these four. There was no audience this time. Despite the heated debate, the leaders had already formed their battle plans.

Barricades had been constructed around the remaining bridges, all centered around Uthemarc Square. Since the confrontation with the Queen, the Varens had left their homes. The Old Towners had been allowed to seek refuge within the walls of the Cloches. Others had left town completely. The departure of the elites felt oddly organic – as if there was no conflict, they’d simply gone away for a long weekend and left working folk behind as stewards. It hardly felt like looting when the Laymen and Miners set about dismantling their property of the rich – tearing doors off hinges and disassembling cabinets and shelving – to repurpose into alley-way palisades. If the revolutionaries won, the Varen’s would claim their stolen property had been donations to the cause. If they lost? Well, the folks of Old Town had fled for their lives. Just look what the New Town folk’s did to their homes! Not even the most-loyal patriots believed the Queen would allow an election. Whatever was to happen in Vare, most Varens had no intentions of being there for it.

One of the few Varens that remained, Daffeega Shelba, finally spoke up to answer the silence of the Tlow-Varens gathered round her.

“I’m sorry, Sharp.” Daffeega apologized, “Bru. But Blade is right. We cannot strike first.”

“I understand, Princess.” Bru sighed, bowing his hand, “We cannot, but we will.”

And, before any could doubt the Layman, a clamor on the streets outside interrupted – just as it had the last time they plotted in the basement. Just like last time, a messenger quickly arrived to deliver whatever dreaded news that was to blame. Instead of the messenger being a person, it was a bat. The mailbat fluttered in and went right up to Daffeega, landing on her shoulder – opposite where her monkey had been snoozing. The bat only let out a single cheep but it was enough to wake Daffeega’s little primeape. The thing jumped like a spooked cat, flipped around in mid air to sore over the Princess’ head, and landed as if the whole maneuver had been a pounce. The poor bat now cheeped loudly.

Daffeega snatched the creature from the startled simian, shooting him a sharp-eyed glare before turning to soothe the sable messenger. Tickling her little furry belly, the bat’s big black eyes shifted from the monkey to the mole. A little curl of a smile even touched the edges of the chiroptera’s lips. With her other hand, Daffeega retrieved the note from the bat and handed it to the monkey. He unfurled it and held it out for her to read.

“In celebration of Batloe’s first election-”

Daffeega paused to gasp. This infuriated her already impatient guests. The commotion outside the basement had not stalled. It hadn’t quite gotten worse yet, but still neither Blade nor Bru wanted to wait around until it did. Sharp had to make a little grunt to urge the moleman along. She nodded to tell the monkey he could lower the note and released the bat after a quick smooch on the forehead. Turning to the four, she explained with one word.

“Pyramid.”

“Sallis!” The four blurted.

Sharp’s jaw dropped, “Dey’re going to kill him.”

“*They’re*,” Bru and Blade realized, their eyes wide as if they could bore through the upper corner of the room and see the chaos unfolding on the streets, “going to kill *them!*”

The gang took off for the stairs.

Though the Laymen and Rift Miners had assumed a few Varen’s stayed behind, none had expected nor known it had been quite a few few. They might’ve never realized either, but the bat that flew to Daffeega had been part of an entire colony of chiroptera – each assigned to fly to folks with season tickets to Batloe’s beloved battle-to-the-death. No one on the otherside of the Rift could afford to watch their imprisoned neighbors slaughter one another for a chance at freedom and none of them wanted to either. Pyramid was a cursed past time in the mind of the Laymen, their fans among the worst examples of their society’s perversion. Thus, when the people of the barricades saw bats darting in and out of the star pillars of Vare, entering windows with notes clenched in their tiny feet only to exit moments later empty handed, they realized that not only had some Varen’s evaded their searches, these remaining Varen’s were the worst of the worst. All it took was a few mailbats to get captured by Laymen before the word spread. Bands of enraged moles and chidras bound over their barricades and rushed up the star pillars, drooling at the prospect of dragging some bigwig out into the streets to face the justice of their fellow countrymen.

That would take a while, but in the meantime, they Varen-stragglers weren’t the only enemies amongst the people of Uthemarc Square when the news dropped. Election officials had been slowly making their way through the masses since Solaris peaked up over the horizon. These were the young and upcoming Varens, those that would inherit the wealth of their parents.

They weren't necessarily a part of the generations that could be blamed for the state of the status quo, but they still spent those generations' money without uttering a peep of protest. While many a billionaire would find themselves in a cell of the Emendation Enterprise if a Layman was elected king or queen, their kids would be spared the revolution's ire. At least, in theory. In reality, their kids were the only living, breathing symbols of the enemy available as the news of Pyramid diffused amongst the masses. While the billionaires hid in their penthouse bunkers, their children were down in the townsquare, trapped in the midst of the mob.

Daffeega, Sharp, Bru, and Blade emerged from their basement meeting at the edge of the Square, the building entrance releasing them onto a side street that fed the concrete courtyard. They could see Uthemarc's awkward statue from the doorway. Despite his height, they could even see one of the young election officials, a moleman that couldn't have been a day past his teens, spinning on his heels between the bronze legs of the effigy. The poor pollster waved his clipboard about like it were a magic tome, threatening the grumbling crowd that surrounded the statue stage. While it wasn't very useful as a weapon, it wasn't very useful for its original purpose either – not anymore. The packet pinned to the clipboard was soaked through, much like the poor mole that wielded it.

Like firemen putting out a housefire, the Laymen blasted him with water. Six or seven of those in the front line of the circle that surrounded the statue had enertombs that had been harvested from the waterworks. Using the magic Daffeega had taught them, they were dousing the poor boy everytime he turned his back – toying with him like a cat does a mouse.

The four rushed to the crowd but as they fought their way to the statue stage, something happened. It stopped the mob's frenzy. It even froze their victim. And it allowed the four to join the lad underneath Uthemarc, turning with the crowd to catch a glimpse before it ended.

What had drawn them to the occurrence was the sound: a scream that cut off abruptly. Then there was a moment of silence as their eyes all turned to see. A man was falling far above the street that left the Square to the north. The rest of his scream had been stolen as the wind ripped by him, yanking him towards the ground at a speed that was somehow faster than seemed normal but also way too dreadfully long. His body flailed like his vocal chords. Then it stopped. Only those on the outskirts of the mob saw that part, but the rest heard it. A wet slap. A brief scarlet haze could be seen by those in the back. High above where the man fell, people could be seen leaning out the window – people in red phrygian caps.

Later, it would be revealed that the man had jumped from his penthouse window of his own accord but at the time, to both the Laymen and the pollster alike, everyone assumed he'd been thrown.

All eyes turned back to the young Varen standing beneath the legs of Uthemarc.

Daffeega and Sharp had made it to his side, Bru and Blade stayed back with the crowd, keeping them at bay, but the boy had lost it. He was hollering.

“You people are crazy! Murderers! Traitors!” His mouth was gushing like the water had been from the enertombs of the Laymen, “You anarchist traitors! Murderers! You should be ashamed – disgusted!”

Had they all not just seen a man die, the insults would've likely sparked a violent response from the Laymen. Instead, they felt bad. They watched in silence, taking his curses like a parent might endure a punished child lashing out. Surely, he'd calm down soon and then they could remind him how to behave appropriately, right?

Wrong. Suddenly, the pollster bound past Daffeega and Sharp. He rushed down the steps of the statue stage and jumped on the nearest Layman. Bru and Blade were too busy trying to

make sure the crowd stayed calm, they had their backs turned when it happened. They only saw as the man the pollster tackled began to fall backwards. As the two fell, the young Varen reached for the Layman's scabbard. The Layman reacted, grabbing his hilt before the boy could and yanking the sword free so that he could hold it away from his attacker. Unfortunately, this motion malfunctioned because he was falling. When he tried to jerk the sword away, his elbow hit the pavement. His forearm jerked forward. His dagger unsheathed, the blade now pointed at the belly of the boy that was falling on top of him. Bru and Blade grabbed the boy, but they were too late. His blood sprayed them in the face as the blade shot out his back.

His raving continued, but it was unintelligible now. All he could do was gargle.

The man beneath him dropped the sword and would've thrown the pollster to the side, simply out of shock, but with Bru and Blade holding the Varen the man with the sword was able to scramble away while they lowered the election worker onto his side. As blood pooled out onto the stone, Daffeega and Sharp arrived too. She began to rummage through her mind for a spell. Though she wasn't a healer, she could potentially do something to stop the bleeding and preserve his life until a healer did arrive, but it was already too late. She could tell as well as everyone else there – even the boy. He'd stopped trying to speak, but the gargling noise continued nonetheless. His eyes rolled in their sockets, stopping briefly as they met the Princess', then they rolled back into his skull, his eyelids closed, and his body went limp. His head slumped to the ground.

The square fell silent. The only noises were the soft sound of sand shifting with the tide-like breeze across the concrete court, the clamor of distant barricades, and the heart beats that echoed in the ears of those surrounding the body of the dead election official. Solaris bore down on them hard, either attempting to make them sweat for what they'd just participated in or striving to dry the blood as quick as possible so that it might be scraped away by the dust as if it had never been spilled. The sooner it dried, the sooner the smell would evaporate – although it was mostly in their minds. The plaza smelled of rusty iron. Whether or not it was imagined, it was a scent that would soon truly engulf Vare.

Trumpets broke the spell that had settled in among the mob. The horn blasts were something the people had never heard before. They were only familiar from stories they'd heard as kids, passed down by elders that had only ever heard of the sirens from their elders. But as they stood there in the square, exchanging glances with one another to make sure that they hadn't just jumped to an unjustified conclusion, the Laymen knew exactly what the trumpets meant: War.

The ground began to tremble.

"Bru, Blade!" Daffeega exclaimed.

The two were already departing.

Bru had darted north, towards the frontier. The furthestmost barricades were about halfway through Vare. Extending all the way to the walls of the palace had been considered too bold – especially when those willing to fight only numbered a little more than a couple thousand – thus a line had been drawn in the middle of Old Town and barricades had been built in between the star pillars there.

Blade was sprinting south. Her miners kept camp in the tunnels that received the 'low bridges. This was essentially the rear, but considering they had steeds at their disposal, they could be at the front lines in minutes if need be. Battledillos could fight under Solaris, but there was no point in exhausting them with sunlight before the battle began.

The two shot Daffeega acknowledging glances but kept running.

“To your barricades!” Daffeega commanded. The crowd was still hesitating. She smacked the Staff of Uthemarc down on the blood soaked pavement, “NOW!”

That got the people moving. Soon it would be just Sharp and Daffeega in the Square. As the Laymen dispersed, she turned to her partner. The trembling had grown more fierce. While it could have been anything at first, both the Princess and the Guard now knew exactly what it was.

“Ground dragons.” They said simultaneously.

“She’ll destroy Vare.” Daffeega stated.

“If we lose, dey’ll say we already destroyed it.” Sharp nodded.

Daffeega started walking south, circumnavigating the stage of the statue. Sharp hesitated for a moment, looking down at the body of the young moleman. It didn’t seem right leaving the lad, but now certainly wasn’t the time to pay respect to the enemy’s fallen. Especially not if the city would soon bury the body for him. He turned and marched after the Princess.

“Dey’ll stop when dey see dey’re attacking deir own people, won’t dey?” Sharp asked.

Daffeega didn’t respond at first. She was rushing. With her weak legs, it took quite an effort to hurry. She leaned hard on her staff. Normally, she’d use magic and glide about as if she had the legs of an athlete but because she knew not what the day held in store for her, she was reluctant to start exhausting her energy reserves.

“Civ?” Sharp was getting flustered, he had to correct himself, “Princess?”

“The ground dragons attacked their own once...” Daffeega answered.

“Donum?” Sharp asked.

“Indeed.” Daffeega sighed, “Back when moles and chidras fought over magic, Donum turned the ground dragons against the chidran nations using the highly illegal technique known as corruption.”

“Corruption.” Sharp murmured, “Like da Shisharay dat had been sent to kill your fadder...but da world would know if she did. No one else could corrupt a murder of ground dragons but Suicine or-”

“Me.” Daffeega stated.

They came to a stop. They were at the edge of the Rift. A banister separated them from a fall to their death. The railing was vibrating such that if one tried to hold on it would rattle their teeth. The ground was bouncing beneath them – for safety they stood two or three yards from the actual lip of the Rift. The burrowing beasts would soon burst forth from the earth – for a moment, they thought the process had already begun. The sounds of wailing prisoners had at first sounded like wrenching metal. The prisoners were still trapped in the wall of the Rift, the Rift that would soon explode as the giant beasts emerged. There was little the two could do but wait.

“If we lose, they’ll call me Truth.” Daffeega said, “The Laymen looted Vare and the Princess covered it up with dark magic, corrupting the Batloen dalvary and obliterating Old Town.”

“No one will believe dat, Princess.” Sharp assured her.

“It won’t matter what the people believe if we lose.” Daffeega said.

She wasn’t wrong. Sharp knew that. But her tone wasn’t right either. The war had all but begun. Speaking of losing after the whistle blows is just about the most useless thing one could do. Rolling his shoulders and puffing out his chest, Sharp clasped his friend on the shoulder.

“Den don’t lose, Civ.”

Daffeega smiled.

“Hoo hoo, hah hah!” The monkey chirped, clasping Sharp’s armored hand.

“He gonna be okay?” Sharp asked.

Daffeega shrugged, twisting to meet the chimps wide eyes, “Hold on tight, Alfred.”

“Alfred?” Sharp asked, the simian seemingly shared his confusion, “Hoo?”

“Decided I should give him a name. You know, in case he dies today.” Daffeega explained.

“So dat’s not his actual name, right?” Sharp asked, “Like his name before you turned him into a monkey?”

“Could be.” Daffeega countered with another shrug, “Better than no name though.”

“Hah.” Alfred conceded.

A great rumbling thundering sound, like a hundred freight trains were barreling by just beneath their feet, suddenly stole all other noise from their ears. When the sound hit, the quaking earth jolted. The concrete beneath them bulged like a liquid, lifting them off their feet for a brief moment, then it shattered and disintegrated. Giant slabs of stone remained intact as other sections turned almost immediately to sand. The writhing terrain rushed forward like the rolling crest of a wave, tossing the mole, monkey, and chidra towards the Rift. Before they even began to fall, they spotted the culprits.

Spread out along the Rift, five ground dragons burst forth from the façade – one fifty yards beneath the trio. The head of the reptile looked almost like a battleship, some sort of camouflaged vessel covered in spikes big enough to split a man from groin to head. Their giant cranium was connected to a girthy throat, as thick as a train, but then came the shoulders. When the shoulders hit the wall of the Rift, they obliterated what was left of the canyon’s structural integrity. Buildings along the surface pitched like toppled timber, tumbling into the crevasse. The prisoners that hadn’t been dragged off to the Pyramid Arena were either smothered in their cells by the destruction or launched into a brief and bloody stint of freedom.

Then the dragons spread their wings. 400 hundred feet from wingtip to wingtip – studded with spikes just like the rest of their scaly hide. Many of those convicted that had been thrown to the canyon floor were caught in the treacherous nets of the dragon wings – some impaled on the spikes, some maimed by the fall, and a small minority survived to hang on for dear life as the beasts curved upwards. The dragons, five of them, shot towards the heavens before smashing into the New Town side of the Rift. Before they turned back towards Old Town, the Rift would be half-filled in with the debris as the buildings of those at the top buried the bodies of those from the bottom.

The life threatening nature of their situation saved them from the disgusting nature of their reality. Over the torrential tumult, Daffeega belted ballads of the Sacred Tongue. The Staff of Uthemarc shone bright like Solaris, then turned to a dark and sparkly purple. This indigo veil surrounded the three, the Princess, the Guard, and the monkey, in a sphere of color. Stone and shrapnel couldn’t penetrate the orb as it lifted them through the destruction. As the dragons reared back and shot towards the sky, the trio glided through the chaos out over the collapsing canyon to connect with one of the gigantic monsters

They landed between the back haunches of the behemoth. Their violet shroud dissolving around them as did the shield of their foes: thirty yards up, stationed between the winged shoulder blades of the serpent, a dozen guardsmen waited – one of which dressed in the opulent garb of the Arcane. His guards were too busy cowering as they clung to the spikes of the steed to notice the arrival of the Princess and her comrades, but the wizard spotted them immediately. As Daffeega and Sharp got used to the terrain, the mage barked over the clamor for his knights to descend the dragon’s spine and attack.

“Don’t dey recognize you?” Sharp cried, furious.

“I’m worried they do!” Daffeega hollered back.

Sharp drew his blade and bound to the next spike up the spine, “Permission to show no mercy, Princess?”

“Offer surrender first!” Daffeega commanded. Her staff lit up again, but rather than engulfing her entire self, she just covered her monkey and her feet. The mystical purple goo attached the monkey to her collar and stuck her slippers to the scales of the dragon. This way she could follow Sharp without having to cling to the giant barbs. Their battlefield had turned completely perpendicular to the city streets below them. Daffeega continued, “*Then* consider them traitors!”

Their foes had the high ground, though the ground was so high it was hardly beneficial. The ground, for all practical purposes, was now the spikes. The fight was about to take place on a plinko board of murderous consequences. Nine of the Royal Guard had descended to meet the Princess and her escort, two had stayed back with the Sentinel on the front-shoulders, but the soldier and Daffeega, Alfred, and Sharp weren’t the only folks on the dragon’s back. Some of those prisoners that had been flung from their cells had landed on the reptilian war machine – and some of those had survived. While their comrades fell to their deaths or bled out, impaled on the ground dragon spines, others held on for dear life and watched as the servants of the Queen set out to kill the Princess of the People.

While the Guards hopped from spike to spike on their way down the dragon’s back, Sharp didn’t have to. Drawing his red-hilted sword, he flipped it around in his grasp so that he held the blade down then reared back in order to drive the weapon into the back of the beast and create his own spike-

He was about to do that when he stopped. A hand on his side informed him that he would have to hop from spike to spike. As Daffeega passed him, the indigo aura around her feet allowing her to waltz up the façade of scales as if she were walking on flat land, she explained, “We don’t need to hurt the beast.”

Sharp rolled his eyes, thinking: *Easy for you to say*. Still, he knew why. She was planning on uncorrupting the dragon and turning the creature to their side. He asked, “You need to get to da head?”

Daffeega paused and nodded.

“Go ahead den. I’ll handle dese goons.” Sharp nodded back.

The Princess took a deep breath then she stooped low, held tight to the monkey on her shoulder with one hand, and thrust the Staff of Uthemarc into the air with the other. Violent violets shot out in all directions around her like tongues of flame leaping from the end of a jet engine. As the ground dragon was still shooting towards Solaris, not only did Daffeega have to fly, she had to fly faster than the dragon. That would’ve taken an extensive sentence in the Sacred Tongue, had she not had her staff. Like elgroons, staffs allow wizards to encant with imagination alone. One has to be careful however to not over embellish as staffs – also like elgroons – run out of juice over time. If that happens, the spell then leaches one’s own energy (and if too powerful, such sapping could be fatal) or simply stops abruptly (which if you were flying with magic like Daffeega, that could also be fatal). Of all the staffs ever crafted under Solaris, the strongest two were the Staff of Seas and the very staff in Daffeega’s grasp. The Staff of Uthemarc didn’t use sunlight to charge, nor running water or burning fuel, it simply used time. This was a blessing and a curse, but one Daffeega was more than accustomed dealing with.

WHAM! She landed just past the dragon’s shoulder blades. Indigo energy again engulfed her feet, keeping them flat on the dragon hide. This put her perpendicular to her opponents, who

stood on spikes and stared up at her. The Arcane Sentinel had an elgroon, the enertomb in it's crook was glowing yellow like lightning. His comrades, two Royal Guardsmen, were armed with short swords, a spear, and crossbows – the crossbows were in their hands, locked and loaded. Apparently they had not planned on Daffeega to bound from the stern of the dragon to the bow. However, it was unapparent what they planned to do with the bolts lodged in their bows now that they had to look the Princess in the eye.

She gave both guard a glare then met the gaze of the Sentinel.

“Donum.” She cursed.

While molemen typically have purple eyes, the Sentinel's eyes were something different. They radiated like the mystical haze that surrounded Daffeega's feet. It seemed not only was the dragon corrupted, but so too were the Sentinels. There would be no reasoning with the mage and therefore no reason for the soldiers to think surrendering was an option. No doubt terrified by their possessed superior, Daffeega's mercy was out of the question so long as the Sentinel remained a part of the equation.

How does Suicine have the power to corrupt this many-

“FIRE!” The Sentinel commanded.

Daffeega's curiosity would have to wait. Smacking the staff down on the spine of the soaring serpent, magic unfurled from its orb and caught the bolts like wind catching falling leaves. The arrows jumped out of their trajectory and whirled around to stop between the eyes of the quivering guards that had fired them. It would've only taken a single thought more to end both their lives, but the soldiers were a part of the people for which she was called the People's Princess. She'd couldn't do it.

There was no sentimentality in the Sentinel even as Daffeega spared their pawns. Lightning burst from the wizard's L-shaped staff. Daffeega let it catch her. The electricity wrapped around her and Alfred like a whip and it should've disappeared into her flesh but it didn't. Fighting back the seizures, she took hold of the bolt and, smacking the Staff of Uthemarc down again, she made it hers. The thread was still connected to the enertomb in the elgroon of the Sentinel. Now that she was in control of it, she had it jump off the staff and wrap around her foe just as it unwrapped herself.

As the Sentinel cried out in pain, his comrades ascended. Their crossbows had been traded out for spears – spears and sidewise glances at their cooking commander. Was he disarmed enough for them to desert? They cleared their heads of such thoughts, focusing their eyes on the Princess and forcing frowns. They could not afford to gamble, following orders was their best bet. They split up. One pounced left and the other right, grabbing hold of the next spikes up. Daffeega stood a mere five yards from them as they scrambled to transition from jumping for their lives to attempting to threaten hers.

She was glad for their sloppiness because she had her own reservations about attacking them and needed time to commit. The problem was less their threat to her life and more their threat to the energy in her staff. She certainly had enough magic in the old rod to take the violet vale from the eyes of the ground dragon, but what about the other four beasts? Could she afford to waste so much time incapacitating these footsoldiers when she could throw them off the back of the beast with a simple flick of the wrist? As she toiled with these thoughts, maintaining the electrification of the corrupted warlock, she saw past the dragon's front haunches to the flapping wings. There were bodies. Men and women, chidra and mole, dangling from the spikes of the dragon's wings like fish left on the shore of a rocky beach after a tidal wave. Tenants of the Emendation Enterprise who had been found guilty of this or that and were simply serving their

time – no longer were they offenders. In prison, they were law abiding citizens. They were on the road to absolution until a careless Queen cast them into the Rift because she was too scared to lose the Cloches to a vote.

Daffeega did not have to force her frown. The guards were up, their spears at the ready, but they never got to thrust them forward. Two tails of lightning burst out from the Staff of Uthemarc. The beams of energy blasted the soldiers. It lifted their contorting bodies off their feet and threw them off the steed. The Sentinel was left, but she sent him to the same fate. Wondering briefly if he might have some consciousness underneath his corruption or if his mind would now never think again.

“Donum.” Daffeega murmured. Then she turned her attention back up the dragon. It was time to stop the beast – and the time could not come sooner. The dragon was pitching. It had hurdled the clouds over the desert and was now turning back towards Vare.

Further down the barbed beast, Sharp Otubak did not have the luxury of electrifying his foes off the back of the beast. While Daffeega had soared up to face the Sentinel, he sheathed his sword and climbed up to face the nine soldiers sent after him. Had he not been the greatest guard “benead Solaris”, he might’ve resented the fact that his comrade with the magic had left him to take on the nine alone. Instead, he licked his lips and grinned in the face of the challenge. Three lingered back roughly twenty yards up, reaching for their crossbows. Three more stopped ten yards up with one hand on their hilt and the other holding on, seeing if they could jump in at the opportune time depending on how the first three did. These bold three drew their spears and dared Sharp to keep climbing, stopping on spikes three yards above the chidra. Between he and the semi-circle of spearmen, there was one spike.

Keeping that spike between him and those above him, he hollered up, “Surrender!”

Unfortunately, those above him simultaneously hollered down, “Surrender!”

“Welp.” Sharp muttered, “Selu to me!”

Lunging upwards, Sharp made it look as if he were attempting grab hold of the spike and climb up onto it in order to get within sword swinging distance of the guards. This was a dream come true for the soldiers as they began to jab at the air wildly with their spears in hopes of skewering him the moment he got topside of the spike. Sharp wasn’t as dumb as the guards. He didn’t do what they wanted him to do – but they did what he wanted them to. No sooner did his armored hands grasp the boney bar of the ground dragon, than did he heave himself up and throw himself off it. Rather than heaving up to climb onto the topside of the spike, he just heaved himself towards the stabbing spears of his foes. Dodging the pointy tips, he grabbed one javelin by the shaft. There was split second pause in the universe where all noise ceased and the ensuing void was filled with a quiet, abrupt, “Uh oh.”

The guard let go of his weapon as fast as he could but that wasn’t fast enough. He tumbled from his perch. As he fell, he knocked his comrades stabs out of the way. This was good, because having yanked the lad down, Sharp had lost his anchor. He barely caught the spike he’d grabbed hold of before. The bloke he’d bullied caught it too. It hit him in the gut and he doubled over it. This made a convenient shield for Sharp but it also shielded his enemies – and the shield wasn’t dead yet. Soon as the soldier caught his breath he’d be reaching for his sword. Sharp decided not to let that happen. Hanging from the spike with one hand, Sharp grabbed hold of the guardsman’s throat. Frantic, the guard stopped scrambling to hold on to the spike as he reached for his weapons. *Perfect*. Sharp yanked the man’s neck just as he had the man’s spear and down went the moleman, bouncing off the sides of the spikes below before diving towards the Rift.

Now the other two weren't looking to follow the first's example. They leaned away to leave the vertical avenue open for the crossbowmen further above. Sharp had snatched the sword from the sheath of the guard he'd dragged off the spike and he slipped it into his belt alongside his daggers. He thought of trading fire with the crossbowmen, but hanging from a spike on the back of a dragon hundreds of feet in the air convinced him to play it safe and retreat.

As bolts flew, he flung himself to the right. The archers weren't terrible, he felt one of their arrows get caught in one of the tails of his chainmail skirt as it curled in the wind. As he grabbed hold of the next spike, down and to the right, he made a mental note not to expect to get lucky again. He needed to get the rangers out of the equation. How many spikes could he put between them before risking the soldiers losing interest and turning on the Princess?

He swung himself down again, down to the right. Now he was ten yards from the two spearmen, but at a diagonal angle that also started to curve around to the side of the ground dragon. This would force two of the three sharpshooters to rearrange and Sharp wasn't done. He kept moving. Up and to the right now. He could hear them shouting over the rushing wind, they knew he planned to flank them. Whether it worked or not, it surely was going to keep them from going after Daffeega. Up and to the right again. Now he was certainly on the side of the dragon's body but almost level with the spearmen. Peering around the bend of the beast's back, he made eye contact with one of the Royal Guards. Sharp sat on a spike and leaned on the scaly hide of the beast as he withdrew one of his throwing knives. The guard saw it and pressed his body flat against the dragon but his poor comrade had not been so lucky. The guard hopped over to a spike just above the cowering spearman, this put him equally in view of Sharp but completely unable to evade. The moleman nearly slipped off the spike he clung to when he saw the Princess' protector with dagger in hand. It might've been better for him if he had because a moment later that shiv was shoved inside his ribs. He flopped backwards, nearly knocking the third spearmen off his spike, as the stuck trooper fell towards the desert city below – shock likely to take his life before the dagger or the dirt.

The easy kill came with a price: a bolt to the bicep. He was struck just between a gap in two armor plates. Sharp took the hit with a snarl but kept moving. He slid off the spike and went to the next. He was still moving up the beast, vertically, but down the monster's side horizontally. His foes' with crossbows offered a blessing and a curse – the bolts flew fast but they also flew infrequent. The one that hit his arm had been accompanied with two others that missed, this meant to Sharp that he had a dozen seconds or so before he had to worry about another bolt.

Climbing spikes with a splinter in the arm would be treacherous and fate was turning in his opponents' favor – the dragon was tilting. Soon the beast would be flying parallel to the city far below. Now that Sharp was on the side, he'd still be forced to hang from the spikes. The Royal Guard would maintain not only the high ground, but the flat ground. He'd have to scare them off the spine before they got settled – and his best bet was to do so before the rangers had another bolt ready to fire.

Sharp charged. This was easier said than done and far slower than it might sound. He was running up a steep embankment, having to lean so far forward that his chest was as close to the dragon's hide as were his knees. The crossbowmen were reloading and seeing his charge made them more fumbly, giving him a bit more time. On the other hand, it summoned those three guardsman that had been holding back to rush forward.

Drawing the short sword he'd snagged before, he flung it at the nearest of the three. The weapon caught the poor chidra in the chest, sinking into her sternum as if it were made of puddy.

Her life was wrenched almost immediately from her and she fell back on a comrade, who struggled to catch her and himself. This stopped two of those counter charging Sharp, leaving one final. This moleman was rushing to cut him off before he could get to the bowmen. Rather than racing the soldier, Sharp decided to incorporate the brave fool into his plan. This change was impart encouraged by the fact that he was realizing he would not get to the rangers before they were locked and ready to fire. Rather than fighting off this third guard while hiding from the bolts of the bowmen, he turned and ran right into the man.

“Wuh?” The guard didn’t even have time to draw his weapon as Sharp collided with him. They slammed together into a spike and would’ve tumbled to their deaths had the ground dragon not finally finished leveling out. On the spine of the beast, Sharp and his moleman captive were standing upright. Quickly, Sharp whirled the bloke about so that the soldier now stood between him and the crossbowmen – the crossbowmen that had just fired. The guard gasped, “NO!”

THWUNK, THWUNK, THWUNK!

The Royal Guard took three bolts: one to the belly, one to the shoulder, and a third grazed his neck, continuing on to bounce off Sharp’s shoulder plate behind him. The poor man wasn’t dead yet but he was no longer useful as a meat shield while the bowmen were reloading. Sharp threw the man back down the spine. The moleman fell onto the very same chidran guard that had caught the poor girl Sharp had stuck with the shortsword – stopping him from interfering for another few. Sharp took off for the crossbowmen but again they proved to be smarter than their partners. Throwing her crossbow, the middle archer retrieved her spear and stepped forward to defend while her compatriots finished drawing back their strings.

“Farak.” Sharp cursed.

THWACK! A bolt struck him in the back of the head. His helmet deflect the shot, but the impact still nearly sent him tumbling. It also sent his mind racing. *Who?* He almost instantly realized. *The third spearman.* Left back towards the haunches, the third man of the team that had first faced him must’ve hunkered down and grabbed their bow. Now he had bowmen before him and behind him – not to mention the fact that he was still falling forwards from the impact, falling towards a woman with a spear. He hit the scaled-battlefield and rolled to his right. He’d intended to keep rolling, but the arrow in his left arm caught on the dragon’s back and jammed in deeper, scraping his bone, and the pain made him lose control for a moment. The cringe saved his life. The moleman had stabbed for where she’d expected him to be, not where he was. Her spear stuck into the flesh of the dragon, splitting a scale mere inches from Sharp’s head.

She drew her sword. He gave in to his grounded position, rolling back to lay flat on his back, and retrieved a dagger. Even if he blocked her next attack, he knew the bowmen behind her would soon pin him to the beast but he had to have faith that the circumstances would change. As he whipped his arm up to deflect the guardswoman’s sword with his dagger, circumstances did. Their horizontal arena was starting to turn back into a vertical one. Rather than soaring back towards the heavens, they were now diving back towards hell.

The change threw everyone off balance – everyone except Sharp who was very happily laying on the dragon’s spine. With gravity switching, he took advantage. Jerking his hips over his head and twisting midair, he faced the moleman that was staggering backwards to catch herself. She never did get the chance, catching something else instead: Sharp’s dagger. It caught her right in the throat. Her knees buckled. As she lowered, the crossbows behind her raised.

“Farak.”

He dove towards them. The dragon still turning downwards gave his leap extra oomf. Still, it was a miracle that the bowmen missed him, but quite possibly that last miracle Sharp

could afford. No sooner did the two bolts before him fly past his face than did a bolt stick him in the shoulder from behind. It slipped in just between his plates on the right side, just like the bolt had between the plates of his left arm.

This time, he hit the ground rolling forward rather than sideways. It drove the arrow in his back in deeper, snapping the shaft as the head plunged deeper, but with the downward pitch of their enormous steed even a paralyzing flinch wouldn't stop his forward motion. A large, osseous stump would, however. He embraced the spike as he hit it, holding on as his world completed its transition into a vertical plane.

All the guards were behind him now (or above him, rather). The two bowmen, the spearman that had now taken the bow, and the fourth guard that he'd thrown the two bodies at. The bright side was that Sharp was now between them and the Princess. He could now content himself with getting the guards to chase him around this side of the dragon or that, knowing they couldn't get disinterested and decide to go after Daffeega without passing him.

Crouching on his spike, he looked up. The chidra he'd thrown the two bodies at was descending, sliding down the scales of the dragon, bouncing from spike to spike. While he advanced, the other three Royal Guards reloading. It was at that moment that Sharp noticed a bright side: he had allies. Creeping up from the sides of the beast, there were two formerly incarcerated comrades. Sharp couldn't be sure, but it seemed they didn't see the guardsman that was all the way above the others, otherwise they would've realized they were exposing themselves to his crossbow. Still, in a matter of moments, they'd be on the two other guardsmen with crossbows. Taking those archers out could very likely save Sharp's life, but it would also likely come at the cost of one of the ex-cons as one would certainly be shot from behind by the very bloke that had just shot Sharp in the back.

I've gotta save da Civs. He thought, as if his own life wasn't very much so in peril: a guard was now only a spike away from him with their spear out. It was very much so like this all had started. Sharp looking up while a member of the Royal Guard stabbed down at him.

He stood up quickly, balancing on the spike, and reached for the shaft of the spear but this moleman was smarter than the first he'd encountered. They jerked it out of reach without much trouble. As they continued to stab, Sharp could tell they were as much trying to get him to over extend and lose his balance as they were trying to prevent him from climbing up. There was no rush, no need to actually stab Sharp. In the spearman's mind, three guardsmen were loading crossbows behind him. Little did he know that two of those crossbowmen would soon be snatched up by the climbing convicts, but still that didn't solve Sharp's problem. If he couldn't get past the spearman, then one of those former-fugitives would get the bolt of the third crossbowman.

The spearman tapped his spear on the spike that stuck out between he and Sharp, taunting him. Sharp had another dagger he could throw, but with two spikes between them (the one the spearman was tapping and the one the spearman stood on) it would be next to impossible to get a fatal shot. However, there was no way to get past him otherwise-

"Farak."

Sharp's eyes grew wide as he realized another way. The dragon was descending. Sharp stood near the front haunches of the beast, a bit further down the spine than where the wings branched out. Said wings had flapped a good few times, meaning the dragon wasn't simply falling in the air, it was flying towards the ground. It was moving *faster* than falling. If Sharp were to jump off it, he'd seemingly float up. Even if his jump was weak, he wouldn't fall as fast as the dragon was flying. He could float right past his foe.

The man and woman from the Rift dungeons were almost on the crossbowmen and all three crossbowmen were almost locked and loaded. The spearman tapped the spear on the spike between them one last time.

Selu to me!

Sharp took a deep breath then pushed off the dragons spine and jumped.

The falling sensation disoriented him as the battlefield was seemingly swept out from under him. Sharp was pouncing like a cat on his pray. The spearman realized what was going on just a little too late. He got his spear up but before Sharp got in stabbing range, Sharp had gotten in throwing-dagger range. His knife hit the chidra between the eyes. Now his foe was floating up with him and he was just as wise as the deadman as to how they could stop floating. Sharp wrenched the spear from his late-foe's limp grasp as they passed the two crossbowmen. The liberated prisoners pounced on the archers, almost half heartedly as they were just as distracted as the guards by the floating Sharp Otubak. He would pass the third crossbowman next – this fellow had his bolt knocked.

He raised his crossbow but Sharp already had his spear cocked back.

“Sorry, Princess.”

He'd skewered the archer but impaled the dragon too.

Hurting the dragon was the least of his worries now though, soon he would be floating past the gargantuan beast's tail. He'd have a good minute or so of falling to watch the dragon zoom off over Vare before he'd splatter amongst the collapsed canyon. At least he wouldn't die alone. He had the dead guard still falling with him.

“Selu!”

Sharp howled it. The dead guard! He yanked the sash off the lad. Drawing his sword, he wrapped the sash around the bulky, cross shaped hilt. Then, kicking off the guardsman, he lobbed the sword at the ground dragon. He'd already stabbed the poor war machine once, what would twice hurt?

The sword struck and stuck in deep, just off the spine a bit above the monster's left leg. The jolt when the sash-rope he'd hastily concocted went tight nearly ripped Sharp's arms out of socket but he held on tight and the trick worked fine. As he pulled himself back towards the shakey safety of the dragon's back, something caught his attention: shade.

His heart sank. The battle was far from over.

The Mystvokar's dalvary had finally arrived.

And the Laymen had only just begun to escape the rubble below.

Before the ground dragons tore the Old Town side of the Rift down, the miners knew it was coming. They were too intune with the rumblings of the subterranean to not know that the time had come to rush into the light of Solaris. Back when beasts controlled the sachaloes, ground dragons were the battledillos' only predator. If the miners had any doubts, the handlers of the great round steeds satiated them– but the battledillos could only take two to three miners each. The shelled steeds' rolling didn't permit riders, rather the critters carried their guests in their arms when they balled up. With some five hundred miners and barely one hundred dillos, half of those in the tunnels had no better option than to run for their lives.

While they fled north, towards the surface, Blade was fleeing southwest from the square to join them. There were others running around her. Some running in the same direction, others running this way or that. Some thought they could make it back across the Rift, others thought rushing deeper into Old Town was their only hope. The streets were like an agitated ant pile. She hadn't been but five minutes from Uthemarc Square before realizing that she wouldn't make it to

the mouth of the nearest tunnel before the ground dragons did what they were going to do. She, like the rest of the Laymen and miners, couldn't help but imagine the worst: the Cloches' dalvary would obliterate Old Town. It was a good thing they were so pessimistic, because they were completely right.

A block of residential buildings separated Blade from the Rift. Four blocks before her was the mouth of a tunnel. The rumbling had gotten to a point where it was hard to run without jamming her leg or being bounced forward as if the earth were as flimsy as a trampoline – that was when she saw the first battledillos burst forth from the mouth of the distant caverns like cannonballs. She saw that and then debris covered up the next four blocks like a settling fog. The buildings to her left split and peeled like bananas as the ground disintegrated beneath them. Gravity reached up like the hand of some giant ghost, grabbed ahold of Blade, and yanked her off her feet. It was like a violent riptide. A gaseous plume of obliterated city and then they were all torn into the Rift.

Head over heels she plunged. Splintered boards and shattered bolders rained down on her as the stone and soil beneath her dissolved to swallow her, protecting her from the destruction above by smothering her in the destruction below. All she could do was squirm and scramble for the surface but she quickly lost sight of which way was up. She'd been flipped over and over until she was dizzy, battered in the head with rubble until her consciousness flipped on and off like a strobe light. And while the chaos never really ended, the pace did slow. The clamor didn't cut off, but her brain stopped reporting on it. Then, somehow she was bursting forth from a pile of rubbish like a zombie on the day of Revelation – and she was not alone.

She took a deep breath and coughed it back up. Doubling over to hack, she craned her neck to look around. Everyone was choking. Riffraff hung in the air like a low lying cloud. Still, suffocating in the sunlight was better than asphyxiating underground.

To her left, south, she watched as five ground dragons rocketed towards the atmosphere. Three hundred feet long weapons of mass destruction. They'd once been symbols of national security, but today they haunted the people like dark storm clouds. How long until those clouds opened up and rained down upon them again?

A battledillo flopped open and skidded to a halt before her. Their cargo landed likewise, launched from their organic cradle to come to a stop on their heels before the still stunned Blade. She couldn't quite hear what they were saying to her, her ear drums still roared with the soundtrack of the avalanche, but she recognized their gestures to be urging her into the battledillo.

“No!” She yelled – or at least, she thought she yelled. She couldn't even hear herself, “Go!”

She swatted at their gestures but they kept beckoning.

“Get others then!” She ordered.

This command they obeyed. As the dust began to settle – as the ground dragons curved their ascent and took aim for round two – Blade, the Miners, and the battledillos began the process of excavating the collapsed canyon side. The battle had only just begun, but there were no biological enemies within reach to strike. Until the ground dragons landed, their opponents were made of earth and debris.

While Blade had made it to the southern front, Bru hadn't quite made it to the northern. There truly wasn't much to do at the northern front. Opposing barricades had been constructed by the Royal Guard, but with no shots fired there had been no skirmishes. When the ground dragons blew out the back of the Layman's occupied territory, the volunteers at the barricades

turned and ran south to aid in whatever way they could. Bru stopped in the street as those he was running towards rushed past him, into the cloud of destruction that rushed through the streets like river water that had just burst through a damn. Turning, he saw the ground dragons jut up from the Rift and ascend. He could only imagine what terrible carnage they had wrought on the southern edge of Old Town, but as he tried to fathom he heard the marching orders being given from those barricades that mirrored his Laymen's.

They were ceding ground – even worse, they were ceding ground in exchange for ground that was actively disintegrating.

“LAYMEN!” He roared.

It was effective. Relatively. Those on his street stopped and turned. The problem was, there were a dozen more barricades that were nowhere close to earshot of Bru and if even one fell then that could mean the end of their frontline. If they were to survive the day, they could not afford to be pushed back towards the Rift.

“BARRICADES!” Bru roared again.

The first group to switch gears was a gaggle of chidran kids not far from him. They saluted and rushed back north – or well, they would've had Bru not stopped up the tallest one by snatching one of her head tails.

“Tell the other barricades.” Bru commanded, “We can't let them push us back!”

She nodded then whirled around to face her peers. They nodded just like she had. As the little girl started to divvy up orders, Bru turned back to rush the way he had been rushing when he first left Uthemarc Square. He couldn't be everywhere at once, all he could do was hope that his comrades and allies would protect the other blockades as well as he was about to protect his. Having not seen what had happened in the Rift, Bru still had hope, but that hope was bled from him when a shadow slipped over him.

He looked up and froze.

The Mystvokar's dalvary had finally arrived.

And the Kou Warrior dalvary rose to meet them – albeit, half hazardly. When the five ground dragons tore the southern half of Vare into the ravine then cut abruptly towards the heavens before smashing into the northern half of Tlow-Vare – the fifth ground dragon ran into a little bit of trouble. That trouble being the Hoodoo. The verb “ran” was not a figure of speech. The dragon failed to pivot towards Solaris as it smashed into the column of rock and dirt that held the airport. It burst through the pillar. Cutting it in half like the blade of an executioner. And as the dragon tumbled through the air into the New Town side of the Rift, the Hoodoo Airport jumped off its rock and flipped head over heels after its beheader. As if it were a hornets nest knocked from its roost, it started buzzing and humming with such ferocity it almost seemed to take a shuddering stop in midair before splattering against Tlow-Vare as a hundred dragons burst out of every window and orifice to avoid being smashed along with it. This all seemed to happen in an instant, but for those inside it felt like a never ending fever dream until it was over.

It all started with the one and only, Atlas, announcing, “It must be ground dragons.”

“No way,” Pesh scoffed, “Trud ain't dat vile.”

“It is either ground dragons or machines as large, destructive, and effective as ground dragons.” Atlas didn't have teeth to clench, instead it merely elaborated on its previous assertion. Unlike organic beings, it didn't have the ability to reveal how it felt, “For all practical purposes, it is ground dragons.”

“The hoodoo will collapse.” Lalmly gasped.

“The whole Rift will collapse.” Zaria yes-and-ed.

Cowboy barked. The Strategy Admiral, her bodyguard, and their dog were not alone in their alarm. The right hand of Tenchi Kou, Wake Ragashi, had eyes about as wide as the hole a ground dragon was about to burst out of in the wall of the Old Town side of the Rift.

“We’re not ready!” She exclaimed.

“Early worm gets the bird!” Tenchi proclaimed. He turned to Tou and punched him square in the chest, “Dirt elf and the Clansman.” He threw his cigarette at Tabuh’s feet and said to Wake, “Pale elves with you, Captain.” Nodding to Shaprone and the counterfeit Justin, “Y’all getta move on.” Finally his eyes came to a rest on the nellaf formerly known as Cootie.

Daernar Darkblade staggered towards the lime green dragon of the Iceloadic commander without protest. The dirt elf – Tou Fou – and one of the pale elf’s – Tabuh Sentry – were not so complicit.

“I’m going with Tabuh!” Tou declared while Tabuh declared, “Ah’m not going with them!”

As Tabuh and Tou turned to one another, Tenchi jumped between them. He moved to poke Tabuh in the shoulder but quickly thought better of it and instead patted her on the shoulder, “Tou’s wanted for kidnapping you.” He turned to Tou to explain, “The patriots over in Iceload don’t like you much.” Then back to Tabuh, “They still like you though. And – correct me if I’m wrong,” he glanced back at Shaprone Ipativy, “not all Iceloadics like Ipativians.”

“Together is our best bet to convince Caleros to turn the battalion around.” Shaprone concurred, even as he scowled at the human.

“Then it’s settled!” Zaria Ein butted back in, her eyes as wide as Wake’s had been before, “*Let’s go!*”

BOOM!

There were mere seconds from the time the ground dragon burst from the façade of the Vare-side of the canyon to when it smashed into the Tlow-Vare side and within that tiny timespan was the time in which the reptile obliterated the hoodoo. The cacophony of commotion rendered hearing a completely useless sense within that tight time frame. First, the floor flung everyone off their feet then slammed them to the floor, but the first jolt was followed by a continual shifting. The northern side was rising, the south side falling. This sent dragons and people staggering and stumbling to oneside of the airport which only added further to the dilemma like a see-saw tilting.

One character didn’t stagger or stumble. He stood still and stoic as he seemed to do almost incessantly. And as the second tallest person in the room, Sniper was able to peer over his peers and spot a steed that had yet to be claimed. While there had been no spare dragons to be had, there were now. The airport wasn’t just descending into the Rift, the roof was caving in upon itself. A good dozen Sondoran mercenaries had been maimed or worse by falling debris. This particular dragon was mourning the loss of her rider. It nudged the body of a human. The upper half of the person was hidden beneath a thick column of broken rafter. Sniper didn’t waste another second, he rushed over to the dragon. He wasn’t alone, a female comrade followed. While she couldn’t see the free ride, she could see the big brown oaf saw one. Peshkova, the healer with bombs, rushed after her assassin ally.

“Sniper!” She hollered.

The bearn couldn’t hear her over the clamor but he saw her mouth moving as she passed him.

“I’ll drive!” She declared, “You shoot!”

Again, he couldn't hear her but she motioned with her hands to signify his bow and arrow and he got the picture. The dragon saw them coming and howled in protest, but it had to cut itself off to scramble out of the way as another chunk of roof fell from the rafters to completely bury her fallen master. She could die with her rider or take on two more. Rustling her neck as if she were shaking dust from her scales, the dragon turned towards the window and lowered her back for the two to hop on as they arrived.

Sniper and Peshkova were the first two of the leadership to make it out, the second two would be the Admiral, her Shisharay guard, and their little yellow dog. They'd been granted use of the Kou's augmented zoomer: the Kaboomer. Despite the floor rocking forward beneath it like a rearing tidal wave, the mechanical steed stood fast in place where they left it. Cowboy made it there first – panting wildly, his big brown eyes as wide as dinner plates. His female compatriots looked just as crazed behind him. The dog had the button mashed and the throttle lever down before they joined him in the boat-like vessel. The zoomer's engine had perked up, swiveling around in its mount to point away from the passengers. Flames flickered around the cannon shaped mouth of the engine, like a pilot light on a stove, almost as if it were as excited to blast off to safety as its passengers. They hopped in and burst out through a collapsing section of wall, rocketing like a missile out over the crumbling canyon before slowing to idly in the air.

Zaria turned the machine as they treaded air. They gazed back at the destruction of the hoodoo. Zoomers and dragons still darted out in all directions. The commotion within the imploding Rift made it impossible to discern where the new floor of the canyon was even as the crumpling structure disappeared into the murk of the destruction. The Admiral brought the ship to a complete stop as they waited. The fate of the day depended on the sight they sought: two specific curlheads, Shaprone Ipativy's bright green and Tenchi Kou's dark red, escaping. There were numerous other variables that could flip their future upside down post-fact but all hope would be nipped in the bud if both beasts didn't bolt out of the obliterated roost. Both two women and their dog thought separately in unison: *What is taking them so long?!*

The two dragon riders were holding themselves up as they were too busy barking orders at women.

“TABUH!” Shaprone commanded, “WE HAVE TO GO!”

But Tabuh was distracted by what the other man was yelling.

“EINNA!” Tenchi bellowed, “TAKE KENCHI!”

They all had to get off the hoodoo – if you could even still call them on it – and Tabuh wasn't particularly concerned about anyone else underneath what was left of the airport roof, Tou aside, but the thought of Tenchi's little kid brother being left behind did cause her to put aside her own safety to step in.

“Just take him with y'all!” Tabuh exclaimed.

“Into battle?!” Tenchi turned on her with fire in his eyes.

In a normal situation, Tabuh would've snapped back but Tenchi's wild expression and the tilting of the floor underneath her caused her to stumble backwards perplexed. Tou jumped in in her stead, saying, “We can fly him away then fly back-”

“We can?” Tenchi snarled, “If we're lucky! The Mystvokarans could be here any minute!” Whirling back around to face the infernal undead, he jabbed his index finger in her direction, “She can whisk Kenchi away in a split second with her banshee magic!”

The furious human had a point.

“Tabuh...” Shaprone changed tactics, utilizing a softer tone, but the Mystvokaran was ignored. Just as he ignored his deputy. The twin of the late Jason was getting worried. The bearn

shifted his weight as he held the reigns of their organic escape vehicle in one hand and the leash that shackled Cootie in the other. He found himself pleading like his boss, “Commander...”

Beside the two Iceloadic stood Captain Wake Ragashi. She too clenched the reigns of their dragon, uneasy and impatient. She could lead the men just as well as her General and he could surely escape the fray with his little brother but she knew why he resisted such a plan. Tenchi relished the fight. He yearned for the thrill of battle. Had he not been a supposed freedom fighter, he surely would’ve wound up a wanted man for waging far less honorable wars. Wake knew that Tenchi feared their plan would be too successful – the fight would last only a few seconds before Cootie would be handed over and the Mystvokarans would take the deal and fly away. Tenchi was so scared to miss out that he was putting all their lives at risk – not to mention his own kid brother’s.

Speaking of which, Kenchi tugged on Tenchi’s hand, “Tenchi, I don’t I want to go with her.”

“You have to!” Tenchi shoved the boy back towards the banshee.

“We have to go.” Shaprone whined behind them.

“I’ll take him,” Einna finally responded. But she no longer looked like Einna – the skeletal ranger, loaded from head to toe with weapons – she was morphing into her flying form: the foxbird. Her arms spread out, the leather pads turning the color of her flames and unfurling into feathers. Her noseless skull smushed down into a cone like head with a curved beak, yet her voice still continued, “but you’ll have to trust me.”

“Trust you? The f-”

Tenchi stopped both because he realized what was going on and because Tabuh had yanked him by the straps of his shoulderblades as a large chandelier came smashing down. It splattered on the floor like water, spraying Tenchi with glass that would’ve also hit Kenchi but when Tabuh saved Tenchi, Tou had rushed to Kenchi. Sheilding the boy, he staggered further towards the banshee. The banshee that was now a giant red bird.

Recovering from the surprise, Tenchi bound forward, “Don’t you da-”

But he was too late. The century year old murderer, disguised as a scarlet bird of prey, had snatched up his little brother. With one beat of her wings, she was out of reach. Well, she was for the moment. Clutching Atlas’ globe-shaped head to his belly, Kenchi squirmed and squealed in Einna’s talons and as Einna turned towards the shattered windows on the toppling northside of the airport, Tenchi turned – his face as pale as an Ipativian’s – and his wild eyes met Tou’s.

“LET’S GO!”

Tenchi didn’t waste another moment. Joining Wake by her dragon, he took the reigns of his dragon and climbed on. Tou turned to Tabuh. More debris was smashing down around them. They were essentially standing sideways, leaning so hard they would soon be lying flat on the floor. Neither elf liked the idea of entering a potential battle separately, but both recognized their fate had been decided by outside parties and they didn’t have the time to come up with a better solution. Thus, they turned, and rushed after their Sondoran comrades. Tabuh boarded Wake’s dragon, a hotrod red steed named Tarik. Tou clambered on Tenchi’s Love, the dragon already getting ready to launch as he joined.

Wake let Tenchi take off first, marveling at the irony as Tenchi directed Love to fly north after Einna. Flying away from the confrontation with the Mystvokarans that would certainly be flying in from the west. *All that and he’s still going to miss it.* Little did Wake know, while she was right that Tenchi had been an idiot, she was wrong that he was going to miss it. Tenchi

wasn't the only one being an idiot, jeopardizing the lives of their allies and the plan itself – Einna Yelkao was also up to no good.

While Tarik flew Wake and Tabuh, escorting Shaprone and Justin aboard their dragon, Aurora, to hand Cootie – also known as Daernar Darkblade – over to the soon-to-be invading Mystvokarans led by Caleros Icelore, Tenchi and Tou rode Love after the kidnapping banshee towards the Cloches. Tou watched from behind Tenchi, straddling the human like one might on a motorcycle as he hadn't had time to strap in to the saddle and to be honest wasn't very experienced as a dragon rider. Fortunately, to distract him from the full-speed-ahead style of their flight, Tou considered all the possibilities of Einna's agenda. Were they in fact heading to the palace? Was Einna going to turn Kenchi in to the Queen – force Tenchi to call back his troops? That would be not only a drastic betrayal but a betrayal of any sort of values she might have as she would be totally ruining the Laymen's chances of winning their right to vote. It seem this wasn't the case though for the foxbird began to descend. They were on the outskirts of Vare, landing on a building that overlooked the glass domes of the Cloches – about to ruin the tiles of some penthouse deck. Tou braced himself. Again, finding comfort in the fact that drawing swords against a banshee was such a terrifying prospect that it completely distracted him from the wildly abrupt landing he was about to endure.

Love dug in her heels, creating a trail of shattered marble for each claw. Before she'd even managed to skid to a halt, Tenchi had dismounted – dragging Tou with him. They hit the ground marching. Kenchi had been released and he had tried to run to them but instead he tripped on his own feet and tumbled head over tail. The cold grasp of a banshee hadn't killed him, fortunately, but it certainly had effected him.

Tenchi went first to his brother, leaving Tou to march on ahead. He drew *Future* then stopped maybe five yards from the phoenix.

She rolled her head and clucked her beak, “Calm down, he's fine.”

“I ca-ca-ca-can't feel m-m-my legs!” Kenchi wailed.

Had the boy not been tethering him to his kneeling stance on the rooftop, Tenchi would've ended the distance between he and Einna in a moment. One of the two Sondorans would've died and his enraged glare assured Tou of that.

“He's fine!” Einna protested. Then she admitted, “I just need to work on suppressing my power – but he'll be fine.”

“You're a banshee.” Tou said, his sword still raised and pointed at her, “Your touch is fatal.”

“It doesn't have to be.” Einna shrugged. Rolling her shoulders she fluffed her feathers, saying, “Creaton ran people all the way up and down the Blue Ridged coast of Iceload in his bestial form and they didn't even catch a shiver.”

Tou was still confused, “Why'd you do it?”

“Because I wanted to get the boy to safety!” Einna crowed.

“And you couldn't have used Total Darkness? Teleported him all the way to Saint's godi God's Island tent?!” Tenchi screamed.

“I needed to save the spell.” Einna explained.

Again, this didn't cause Tou to lower his weapon, “Why?”

“I'll show you.” A twinkle in the foxbird's eye gave off the vibe of a smirk, then she was gone.

An other worldly pound of thunder left both man and child's heads turning on a swivel wondering where under Solaris she could have possibly gone. They wouldn't have figured out for another minute or more, but fortunately, Kenchi hadn't dropped Atlas during his kidnapping.

"Atlas." Kenchi said.

"The one and only." Atlas acknowledged.

"W-where is sh-she?" He asked.

"The Pyramid Arena." Atlas stated, "She took Daernar Darkblade."

The three had been looking north, towards the Cloches and the Pyramid Arena, but now they turned around to look south towards the Rift. As the ground dragons plummeted back down to Vare, the Mystvokaran dalvary soared in from the west. The Kou Warrior airforce – barely amounting to one third the size of the Iceloadic battalion approaching – had gotten into formation after escaping the Hoodoo. Like a flock of geese, they flew in a V led by the two steeds of the prison exchange – the apple-red curlhead, Tarik, bore Wake and Tabuh while the lime-green, Aurora, escorted Shaprone and Justin. Tarik flew at the tip of the V, Aurora a good distance ahead – far enough that there was a chance Caleros would call off the charge before any flames filled the sky – but that dream was surely dashed. From their distance, Tou and Tenchi couldn't quite tell that Cootie was no longer on the green dragon, but from the chaos unfolding at the front line it became apparent. Aurora skidded to a halt in midair as if they'd discovered they'd been flying the wrong way, but the V of the Kou Warrior dalvary rush onward. The battle would begin in seconds.

"Kenchi, stay here with Atlas." Tenchi commanded.

"The one and only." Atlas said.

Tou was watching Tabuh. He could only make her out from their distance because he knew she was at the front. Once the fight began, there was no way he'd be able to tell her from any of the other combatants on dragonback.

Tenchi called to his new partner, "Tou, ready?"

Just as Kenchi blurted, "I love you brother!"

For a moment, the sound of the distraught child shattered Tou's focus. *We can't leave him here.* Was his first thought, but the counter argument quickly pushed that truth to the back of his mind: *Tabuh's in danger!* Protecting Kenchi wasn't his duty, protecting Tabuh was. He bowed his head but didn't turn to face the boy, instead replying to his pilot, "Ready."

A bit of Tou's hesitation rubbed off on Tenchi. He paused for a moment, turning from his dragon to meet his brother's eyes, "I love you too, brother." Then he offered a wild eyed grin and ruffled the little boy's hair, "Just think of it as Warcraft." He nodded to the rooftop beneath their feet, "And you've got a box seat!"

While Tenchi tore his eyes from his little brother in north Vare, over the crumbling Rift, Tabuh and Shaprone made eye contact. It was brief, as Shaprone's Aurora was still tredding air. The Kou pilots would soon rush past them. The Mystvokaran Commander was still grappling with what had just happened and what it meant. *Had she been in on it?* No. He could tell in her golden glare, she had no part in the betrayal. Still her stare clearly displayed her indifference on the matter. She'd been betrayed in a sense as well, but that fact didn't change which side she stood on. Did it change which side for him?

Aurora thrust them up just as the V of airborne mercenaries began to pass. *No.* Shaprone thought. *I tried to help her – I tried to help them – but I will not betray the Mystvokar.* Turning his gaze from what was now the back of Tabuh's head, his eyes met the Master of Oreh, the Mystvokar's brother, honorary-Commander Caleros. A hundred yards away, Caleros had

recognized his uncle, Daernar Darkblade, the murderer of his aunt. He'd seen what Shaprone had tried to accomplish. *The boy tried to save lives today.* Caleros gave Shaprone a slight nod. Then his scowl fell upon Tabuh. *But they chose violence.* He drew his first javeline.

"Commander!" Justin queried.

Aurora was stalling in the air once more.

Shaprone looked to his deputy, "We'll fly around and circle back to join the Mystvokaran ranks."

The viridescent serpent took off as the battle began below with a crack of gun powder propelling a bullet to drive out of the short barrel of Tabuh Sentry's trusty seven shooter. The projectile whisked so close to the opposing Commander Caleros' helmet that it took a dozen strands of stray black loch with it. Shot from the smith that never missed, the message was clear.

Caleros responded in kind. His saddle had been customized for battle. Behind the soft seat, where he straddled the steed, was a brief hard platform that jutted up so that it was flat rather than following the curve of the curlhead's spine. This was for standing upon – if you were crazy enough to do so – but it was also where his weapons were harbored. This platform made a triangle behind him, the top sticking out like a reclining backrest and the bottom stooping down to meet the ridges of his ride. The point of his triangle, in-line with his hips, was trimmed with literal elgroons and the enertombs in the crook of these tools shone with a snow-like pearly white. A large quiver was attached near the elgroon that was by his right hip. Rather than arrows, it held a single shaft made of ice – a frozen javeline – and as Caleros pulled it from its place, another manifested in its stead.

The crystal lance soared so close to Tabuh that she could feel the searing cold as it smeared against her cheek. She turned her head away from him as the shock caused her to momentarily lose control. She didn't have to give the order, Wake presumed it: *Run!*

"THINK OF YOUR FATHER!"

The Icelore bellowed as Tarik ducked into a dive and they shot beneath him. Caleros and his rider directed their dragon to follow. Tabuh could think of little more. Sure, she'd fled her home and family to forge her own legacy but she had no intention of damaging the legacy of those that had raised her. Now there seemed to be no way forward if she didn't. *I can't kill him.* She holstered her weapon. Caleros Icelore was the master of a major city in the Trinity Nations. Growing up, she'd met him on more than one occasion. They'd eaten together. She considered him a family friend. At least, she had. Even if they were no longer friends, she couldn't kill him. Could he kill her? *No*, Tabuh told herself. She knew him well enough to know that he was a good man. *He's just as trapped as I am*, she realized. Straining in her saddle, she turned to look back at their pursuer.

"THINK OF SENTRAKLE!"

Caleros roared, sending another sleet-spear shooting towards her. This one would've never touched her, had she not reached out and grabbed it from the sky. Her gunhand, gloved all the way to the elbow, could still feel the icy cold creeping up her grasp like the touch of a banshee. Tabuh didn't have to hold onto it for long. Rearing, she lobbed it back at her opponent, crying, "THANK OF BATLOE!"

She couldn't kill Caleros – to be honest, she wasn't even sure if she could bring herself to hurt him – but she could wound his rider and that she did. The spear stuck fast in his shoulder, immediately knocking the poor lad out. He was less there to drive the beast than he was to be a co-rider with Caleros in case one or the other was wounded, so this typically wouldn't hamper their flight but because of the close proximity and unexpectedness of the attack, the

Commander's steed hadn't realized the rider had stopped directing and kept with the prior direction to swoop down fast upon the enemy reptile.

Tabuh only had enough time to warn Wake.

"BRACE YOURSELF!" She yelled.

WHAM! The dragons collided. For a moment, the people on both beasts' backs were mere bystanders, clinging on for dear life. Tarik was smaller than Caleros' creature – Zile, a beast dark blue like the snow capped peaks of Icelore under overcast skies – but this didn't immediately benefit the bigger. Tarik got the first point – swirling around as the larger Zile enveloped him, Tarik reared up his hind legs and scraped away at his opponent's underbelly. With his front legs, Tarik cut lacerations into Zile's breast – snagging a bit of the front saddle and shredding the leather straps. Then the larger dragon got the upperhand. Grasping the sides of Tarik, Zile dug his talons in and pressed Tarik against himself until he could no longer reach to scratch his foe but had to latch onto his sides and mimic Zile. Tarik's talons didn't dig as deep and Tarik's hold was not nearly as tight or suffocating. They were climbing up in the sky together but Tarik's wing beats were becoming weaker and weaker as the breath was slowly squeezed out of him.

As rangers, Caleros and Tabuh had taken the second seat along their dragon's spine but now, with their steeds tethered together, things became close combat.

As soon as their brains adjusted to their new trajectory, Wake and Tabuh proclaimed in unison, "SWITCH!"

While not something that anyone who loved or cared about Tabuh would have approved of, there were few capable of such maneuvers other than an Iceloadic native that had been born and raised riding dragons. And for Wake, having worked for Tenchi for over five years, this sort of move was something she'd done just for fun. However, the complication of a javeline throwing enemy pilot a couple yards away did complicate things. Or it would have. But while Tabuh and Wake unstrapped and clambered around the thrashing Tarik to switch saddles, Caleros was struggling to keep his unconscious comrade from slipping out of theirs.

When Zile and Tarik clashed, the most significant damage done had been done to the saddle of the lanced-Mystvokaran. One leg strap had come completely undone, leaving him dangling from the other as they flew up towards Solaris. The second would've held, but the damage it received loosened it just enough that his slackened leg slipped partially out. The rim of his boot, by his calf, snagged on the thigh strap and stopped him momentarily but that moment would very soon pass. Caleros couldn't reach his compatriot while strapped in himself. He hastily unlatched his straps and scrambled up the spine to meet the soldier just as that strap popped off the boot and the poor boy began to free fall. Caleros dove up and reached out – but the dragons were beginning to spiral, turning him away from his ally. All he was left able to do was to grab hold of the now empty front saddle and watch to see the poor soul fall to the battle below.

A leather glove, wet from melted ice, caught hold of the limp lieutenant's forearm and Tabuh Sentry leaned over to make eye contact with Caleros. Wake Ragashi was in Tabuh's saddle, but Tabuh herself had abandoned the switch in order to scramble down and save the very man she'd just wounded – at least for now. Without Wake, Tabuh would've been dragged down by the weight of the electric elf. Instead, all that happened was that Wake's arm was nearly ripped off, but the mercenary Captain would have to wait until after the battle for an apology.

Tabuh hadn't done it for free, she demanded, "END THIS BATTLE!"

"DROP HIM," Caleros warned back, "AND YOU'LL START A WAR!"

Caleros had to hope his threat was enough to keep his comrade safe, because he could no longer crane his neck and lean over the side of Zile – he had to get strapped in. And the saddle he was clinging to was not armed with a magic-ice-spear-making quiver.

“SWITCH!” Wake hollered.

Even though she had just gotten situated in Tabuh’s saddle, Wake unlatched her straps and switched places with Tabuh. Though their saddle was not made out of enertombs like Caleros’, it had a similar triangular back. Flying directly upwards, Wake was able to straddle the back platform, hold onto the side with one arm, and take hold of the Mystvokaran soldier with the other while Tabuh got herself back in second saddle.

Once she was safe and secure, Wake handed the limp lieutenant’s arm back to Tabuh and drew near her ear, “We gotta get that dragon off Tarik!”

Tabuh nodded – there was much she could do, but she her nod signified that she consented to whatever Wake planned to do. While Tabuh had strapped in, Wake had grabbed a spare rein from the storage in the crook of the triangle platform she’d been straddling. Tying it to one of the supports of the platform, she then wrapped it around her torso. While not as safe as a saddle, it was certainly better than nothing. Perching on the platform, Wake got the soldier situated so that most his weight was on it – making Tabuh’s job much easier. Then, Wake placed a boot on the boy’s breast and yanked the frozen javelin free. Now, Tabuh understood the plan. Switching to hold their captive with her ungloved hand, Tabuh grabbed her gun.

While there was no clear shot at the enemy beast, there was a clear shot at the beast’s limbs. The two dragons were tangled in a tight embrace. Zile throttling the life out of Tarik. So, Wake thrust her spear in between the finger-like toes of one of Zile’s massive paws, driving it as deep as she could into the reptile’s right foot. At the same time, Tabuh shot a slug between the toes of the left foot.

Zile shrieked. Both feet’s talons retracted. Tarik gasped for air at the same time he got his feet back to clawing. Like a cat, grabbing hold with its front legs and kicking its prey with its bottom, Tarik tore long and painful lacerations in Zile’s scaly belly. Finally, Zile let go of Tarik. With one last, two footed kick, Tarik was free. Zooming off.

Throughout this whole process, however, both women were surprised that Caleros had not devised some clever way to combat their plans. As they ran away, descending back towards Vare to regain their composure and ditch their prisoner, they saw Caleros had been distracted. His helmet was gone and his face was bluddied as if he had been bludgeoned. Though zoomers and dragons zipped in and around him and Zile, ally and enemy, none seemed to be currently engaged with him. Tabuh and Wake watched as the Icelore ducked and swatted at an amber light. It zipped past him like a lazer and continued on to hit a Mystvokaran’s steed. It entered the curlhead’s cranium like a spear then disappeared as blood began spurting out. The dragon thrashed then plummeted towards the ground.

“TENCHI!” Wake explained, halfway to the first saddle, pointing for Tabuh to see.

Tou and Tenchi were rushing back into battle from northern Vare. Still far off, Tabuh could only make them out because they were the only dragon in the air space – and because the sword in the grasp of the man in the first saddle glowed so golden it looked almost like a lightning bolt. Behind the first saddle was her Mr. Woodsman. With her free hand, Tabuh beckoned to Tou but was unsure if he could see. Aiming her revolver in their direction, she shot off a round as a message. She saw the two jolt. Then the glowing sword ceased to shine. Whether or not Tenchi had understood, Tou surely had and had managed to convince the cavalier Clansman: *Don’t kill Caleros.*

Apparently, he wasn't the only one off limits. As Tarik took them towards the nearest Varen rooftops, they flew uncontested between many a murder of Iceloadic curlheads. It could have been thanks to a sign from the Commander – either Caleros or Shaprone – but it seemed more it was a conscious choice on the part of the Mystvokarans. Looking around, Wake and Tabuh found sympathy amongst the perplexion in the stares from the Iceloadic soldiers. They recognized Tabuh – an electric elf wasn't common among the rest of the mercenary dalvary, certainly not one with golden eyes and a similarly aurelian pistol – and they also recognized that she was taking their wounded comrade out of harm's way. It didn't garner them enough good will to end the battle, but it gave Tabuh and Wake the break they needed to drop off the soldier and get back to the fray. The rest of the Kou airforce weren't so lucky.

Outnumbered, most were finding it hard to do more than flee as two or three Iceloadic dragon riders were able to team up on every one Sondoran squad. Their presence in the sky above Vare offered the Laymen below little more than a distraction which, while essential to the battle beneath, would not last. One by one, they would be picked off and then, even if the Laymen managed to maintain their barricades against the ground dragons and Royal Guards, they'd be sitting ducks for the fire of the foreign beasts. But one dragon rider squad amongst the Kou Warriors was doing quite a bit to even the odds: Peshkova Fang and Sniper.

Their dragon was such a deep dark indigo that she almost appeared like a shadow if not for the streaks of iridescence striping her in the glaring light of Solaris. Larger than most curlheads too, they stood out and yet they were unpursued because Sniper had already shot dead or incapacitated six Mystvokarans riders and six Mystvokaran dragons. After killing their tail, they zipped around the crowd like a hornet in a swarm of bees. Peshkova directed their steed while Sniper knocked one arrow after the other. Unfortunately, their success meant it wasn't long before their tail grew back – and at twice the size.

“I DINK DEY'RE ON TO US!” Pesh hollered.

Sniper was in the second saddle, twisted in his seat to look over his shoulder at the half dozen curlheads now soaring after them. He ducked as a pillar of fire unfurled from the closest of their foes that was hardly ten yards behind them. Peshkova squealed, feeling the heat tickle her head tails.

“HOLD ON, CIV!” She warned.

The bearn already had his bow clipped back onto a clasp on his hip so that he could lean over his saddle and dig his fingers under the edge of the armor plating – pressing himself as close to the dragon as he could without impaling himself on the saddlehorn. If you'd ask, an embarrassed man might argue it was to not hamper the aerodynamics, but in reality it was because Sniper was a seven foot seven hunk of muscle that was not super secure in the fact that his little human saddle could hold him.

Directing their dragon down, Pesh tugged this way and that. They barrel rolled right. Then they spread their wings to make an abrupt jump up, as if kicking off a cloud, before zooming off in a different direction. Their entourage tried to follow without any of the fancy maneuvers but wide turns meant that with each little trick Pesh and her steed pulled, Pesh put a little more distance between them and their foes. The only problem was, they were still in the swarm. Even if they lost the six serpents, they'd pick up six more in a heartbeat. They needed to pull their tail away from the action where they could pick them off one by one.

Arrows flew around them. A couple pricked their ride. One cut a hole in Pesh's robe but missed her flesh altogether. Cursing, she directed their beast back towards Vare – continuing her acrobatic antics as they made their way. They spiraled and zig-zagged. The dragon would tuck in

its wings, causing them to reach eye-watering speeds, then it'd throw on the breaks, turn, and do it again in a new direction.

While the pilot drove like a mad woman, Sniper, remaining pressed flat to the back of the beast, craned his neck so that he could look over his shoulder. Their tail had already increased. He counted ten Mystvokaran steeds following them. They'd stopped firing for the time being, recognizing what a waste it would be to shoot at such an unpredictable target. The only problem with that was Sniper had stopped shooting for the very same reason. Soon they would be among the columns of the concrete jungle of Old Town. Weaving in and out of star pillars would give them the cover needed for Peshkova to calm down a bit and allow him to take aim, but it would also give their pursuers the same advantage. He needed something more than a bow. His eyes turned to the cubby in the nook behind his saddle. The original rider (God rest their soul) had left them some supplies. Spotting the glint of metal and a splintered surface of wood, Sniper found a potential lifeline.

They were slowing on approach to Vare, coming in not far from the Rift and a little too close for comfort to one of the ground dragons still wreaking havoc. The leviathan was gnawing on a star pillar like a coyote on a carcass. Occasionally, it reached up with one massive paw and smashed through the side of the building, sending a shockwave through the structure. The only thing holding the tower up was the giant beast. Pesh appeared to be planning to fly right alongside it, swooping low towards the street and near to one of the monster's spikey haunches.

The predators saw the prey's plan. Half slowed down, deciding they'd rather go around and catch back up outside of the reach of the gaudy beast. The other half, however, sped up. Not wanting to be the last to pass after their opponent caught the monster's attention. Sniper saw this but not his pilot's plan, as he was braving the task of retrieving the shield he'd spotted in the trunk of his saddle.

Having refused to unstrap his legs, the marksman was having a difficult time pulling the round shield out as it was crammed in underneath a couple bags of who-knew-what and he was having to lean backwards and twist to even reach the thing. His eyes darted from the shield to the enemies – they were getting closer. The closest was maybe twenty-five yards away, closing that gap by a yard every ten seconds. Sniper roared with frustration. He let go of the shield, grabbed one of the bags that was weighing it down, and yanked it out of the nook. The sack tore, releasing an extensive camping survival kit into the air: a pot, a pan, tent poles, a tarp, packages of dried food, and a few glass jars of water. It subdued some of Sniper's annoyance to see one masson jar smash into the head of the front dragon's pilot. Thanks to the helmet, it didn't knock the Mystvokaran out, but it must've hurt. More beneficial than that was the tarp, which hit the dragon square in the face and folded over its snout like a surgical mask. It actually made Sniper smile. That and the fact that now he had the shield.

He straightened back up and turned forward then screamed as he saw they were careening past the giant spiked ball of the ground dragon's wagging tail. Pesh even looked back to confirm that the scream came from Sniper and that little Kenchi hadn't somehow snuck on board. Sniper was too scared to be embarrassed. He was stooped over, clinging to the back of their steed again. Looking at him allowed Pesh to see that the dragon with the tarp over its face would be the first victim of her brave plan. The enemy riders had removed the tarp, but a moment too late. The giant ball of bone that Sniper and Pesh just dodged, crushed the curlhead's face in. The dragon pitched, flipping forward, and landed with its back on the barbed tail – squishing its riders if it hadn't skewered them.

One down, Pesh thought as they passed by the monstrous hindlegs and into the cloud of debris that hung around the crumbling sky pillar, *nine to go*. And now, thanks to the dead enemy and the scream of her comrade, the ground dragon had something to distract it from destruction – something it could actually eat and, as it turned out, this particular ground dragon liked its food deep fried.

As they passed by the dragon's thigh, Sniper and Pesh looked up. The reptile had pulled its head out of the innards of the building it had been chewing on. The giant's head, from nose to crest, was roughly fifty feet. Its jaws – large enough to chomp through Pesh, Sniper, and their lavender liaison – were spreading wide. They didn't see its fleshy pink tongue, they saw a vibrant red tongue of fire.

Now it was Pesh who screamed. She tugged hard on the reins and they jumped into another barrel roll. They were between two apartment buildings, flying roughly three stories above a crumbled street. The barrel roll stopped abruptly as their ride hit the building opposite the one the ground dragon had been romping through. For what would be one of a hundred times that day, the universe smiled upon the two and their dragon. If the curlhead's back had hit the building, they would've been splattered. Instead, the barrel roll ended splendidly with all four feet landing on the concrete façade of the structure. Propelling herself with her wings, the dragon took off running across the side of the building as the fireblast from the leviathan emitted absolute obliteration behind them – taking a second Mystvokaran steed with it.

As the ground dragon stooped down to scoop up the seared soldiers from the now molten city streets, it left the fifteen-or-so floor building it had been brutalizing unsupported. There was nothing holding the thing up, its infrastructure had been replaced by the arms and legs of the monster that now abandoned it. Almost immediately, it collapsed. A couple chunks of stories at a time broke free and rained down to the street below – crashing on the indifferent ground dragon and clobbering one more Mystvokaran dragon – flattened by a flat.

Three of their ten pursuers had been wiped out, but the whole endeavor had slowed Pesh and Sniper down. The fancy sideways run on the star pillar was cool, but not quick. It allowed two of the five Mystvokarans that had taken the dive with them past the ground dragon to nearly catch up. As their dragon jumped from the building and started flying again, swooping low above the streets of Vare, two Iceloadic curlheads dropped in-line behind them – thirty yards away.

“TWO MADE IT THROUGH!” Sniper roared.

“DO NOT LET DAT FIRE PAST YA, CIV!” Pesh begged.

Sniper had just latched his shield to the saddle and drawn his bow. He was about to knock an arrow but Pesh's useless advice struck a nerve. *What? She think I'm just going to allow her to get roasted?* He turned back to scowl at the back of her head but was humbled to see she was explaining herself. While still looking forward and piloting, Pesh had lifted her robe up over her waist to reveal her bare back – or what one would've expected to be bare back but was instead a back bound with belts, belts loaded with small round capsules, capsules with little skulls drawn on them. *Bombs!* Sniper realized. A little shiver of joy surged through the bearn as an idea popped into his head, that joy was then almost immediately subdued as he remembered that to manifest said idea he had to first “not let dat fire past”.

Whirling around, he saw that the gap between them and the other dragons had halved to fifteen yards. He'd just caught the separate pilots communicating something with hand motions, but he only saw the tail end and was unable to take a crack at what that something might be. His

eyes narrowed to a glare. He snapped his bow back into its clamp on his thigh and untethered the shield.

“TAKING A LEFT!” Pesh warned.

Sniper raised the shield. It was a round shield. Hardly big enough to protect Sniper’s torso, but large enough to protect his skinny pilot. As their dragon veered to the left, one of their foes leaned to turn with them, but the other kept barreling onwards. Sniper now saw the strategy. Going straight while Pesh and Sniper curved allowed the Mystvokaran to cut their distance for a split second before losing distance as they continued forwards.

“LEAN RIGHT!” Sniper ordered.

Pesh obeyed just as their enemy let out a burst of fire. In the middle of the turn, their dragon had them tilted so that their left side was tilted towards the street. Their foe was firing diagonally, so when both Sniper and Pesh leaned right, Pesh was completely hidden behind the bulky bear. He held the shield up and did his best to hide behind it, leaning into the fireblast like a football player blocking. The inferno hit like a football player too. He’d have some seared leather and fur to show for it, but most was deflected and beat away as their steed continued to zoom west and their foe flew on north. Still, one last of the five that had followed them remained – and they were gaining on them too.

The shield, patches of which were still burning, was once again strapped down at his side.

“BOMB!” Sniper barked.

“YEA?” Pesh asked.

“YEA!” Sniper answered.

Ditching the reins for a moment, Pesh unhooked one of her bombs. The explosive was about the size of a baseball. One end had a wick and the other end had a couple links of chain, which was how she kept them on her belt. Twisting in the saddle, she tossed it to the bear.

“NEED A LIGHT?” Pesh asked.

Sniper shook his head. He held the wick up to one of the flames still clinging to life on the shield at his side. Catching, the wick began to spit. Turning, he faced the dragon and their two riders – only ten yards away.

They saw the grenade in his hand, their dragon reared back, but they were too late. Sniper lobbed the black sphere to collide with their new upward trajectory. It landed in the lap of the front rider as the wick reached the end of its brief rope.

BOOM!

The explosion surely obliterated the poor pilot but his co-rider likely survived – the dragon too, though severely wounded. The blast had riddled its wings with holes and appeared to have even broken one wing. As they crashed into the side of a building a tumbled to the floor, the curlheads that had been on them before descended upon them again. Five plus one as the curlhead that had peeled off joined back in the chase.

“SIX ON OUR SIX!” Sniper warned, grabbing his bow.

“WHAT?!” Pesh gasped, looking back to confirm, “Farak...”

A terrible thunder made half by destruction and half by the guttural roar of a ground dragon that had only just had its appetite teased stole the attention from their rear and brought it back to their front. Two buildings were toppling over to bury the street, like two sides of a draw bridge lowering to connect except they wouldn’t quite make it as the mechanism that dropped them was not a machine but rather a monster. Before the buildings collided, the ground dragon burst through them. A tidal wave of masonry and metal rushed the street, forcing the curlheads to curve for the sky though the beast behind the explosion would’ve forced them to do so in the

next instant. Galloping a few more strides, the ground dragon then leapt and beat its wings as all seven curlheads – both friend and foe – clawed desperately for the heavens, desperately seeking the chaos of the swarm like stray minnows fleeing back to the school before being caught by the shark.

Like a shark, the ground dragon wasn't alone. Not only did it have its own remora, there were parasites too. Although, which were which depended on which side of the barricades you stood. For now, as the creature was still corrupted, it viewed those trying to undo the spell as the enemy: Princess Daffeega, Sharp the Guard, and Alfred the Monkey.

They'd liberated two seige dragons from their mental bondage, this was their third attempt and the servants of the Queen onboard appeared far more capable than the last groups had. The ground dragon wasn't just romping through southern Vare, it was keeping Daffeega and Sharp from picking off the Royal Guard and Arcane Sentinels that defended the beast's imprisoned brain. Every building it bashed through forced the two to take cover. While it forced the defenders of the Cloches to cower as well, they weren't the ones having to fight their way to the head of the beast.

Running into the squad of curlheads for a second time caught the Arcane Sentinels off guard. For a minute, they lost control of their puppet as it leapt into the air chasing after its smaller doppelgangers. It had chased the curlheads nearly all the way to the swarm before the Sentinels wrestled control back from the reptilian impulse to hunt. It wasn't so surprising that the beast put up such resistance as it was the largest of the five wreaking havoc – and it had an attitude to match its size. The reptile required three mages to maintain the corruption while the others only demanded one or two. As the Sentinels directed the dragon back down towards the ground, even the Royal Guard on board paled at the prospect of this plummet.

Sharp and Daffeega and the monkey on her shoulder braced for impact. They only got a glance before everything beneath them was filled with fire, thrust from the maw of the monster like magma from the mouth of a mountainous volcano. That glance suggested the Sentinels were driving the dragon to dive directly down through the roof of Vare's largest star pillar, at least twice the length of the ground dragon and the beast itself was 350 feet long. What this meant to the trio was that there would be multiple jolts as they crashed through floor after floor and, likely, two significant jolts: when the dragon first hit the roof and when the dragon finally hit the floor (whether that be the ground floor or the last floor to stop the dragon's dive). The two realized this simultaneously and made eye contact, their third member – the simian – simply closed his eyes and buried himself in Daffeega's collar.

Only magic could overcome such a shock. Raising her furred brow, Daffeega offered arcane aid. Sharp rolled his shoulders and shook his head. He could manage and he couldn't risk wasting an ounce of the Staff of Uthemarc's energy on himself when there were still two corrupted ground dragons thrashing Vare to smithereens (not including their current project). The Princess didn't like her guard's wrecklessness but she also recognized the reasonable altruism in it and so she didn't press the matter. As she surrounded Alfreda and herself in a shiny purple shroud, the guardsman buckled down, straddling a spike along the dragons spine with both arms and legs. Then the beast hit.

The first jolt wrenched Sharp loose immediately. His arms and legs were not only yanked free of the spike, they were yanked so hard they almost clasped in embrace behind him. Then came the debris. It hit like the wall of a hurricane, except hot and slicing. The fire blast had eviscerated the center of the building, but still chunks of stone, molten metal fragments, and glowing charcoals remained on the edges of the hole the creature had created. This refuse was

churned up by the dive and it washed over the passengers on the plummeting dragon like scalding hot water being blasted from a hose. No sooner did Sharp lose hold than was he blown backwards, down the spine of the dragon.

Unlike Sharp, Daffeega's magic held strong though her staff emitted a staticky buzz as if it contemplated breaking the spell. While she didn't budge, her foes further along the spine were not so lucky. Two Royal Guards and an Arcane Sentinel found themselves tumbling past her – well, the two soldiers did, the wizard smashed right into her purple orb of protection. Daffeega shared a brief moment of eye contact with the mage before the Sentinel pulled himself away and staggered over to use a spike for support. *So some of my sister's forces are complicit*, she noted.

The enemy moleman began to conjure. Daffeega figured any Sentinel would know that whatever they came up with couldn't break a spell cast by one of the royal daughters, so she knew exactly what was up before she saw it. Looking up the dragons spine, the two guards that had barreled past her had regained their composure. Rather than useless stabbing at her violet vale, they'd turned to run up and attack her guardsman – who was facing off against four guards already. If she wanted to stop them, then she'd have to drop her shield and the Sentinel ensorcering beside her was there to capitalize on her dilemma.

Daffeega scoffed, *I thought we trained them better*. She didn't lower or dissolve her shield, instead, she reformed it. As if it were a sheet she were yanking off a bed, she tore it away from her and launched it at the Sentinel like a net. It caught the mage and whatever magic he had been crafting. With a flash of light, the purple was gone and the sage was left seared, but essentially unharmed. Daffeega was about to take back her prior thought, now impressed with her opponent, but then she was hit in the head with a large chunk of sediment. Without her shield to protect from debris and from gravity, the blow not only made her see stars but it made her flop in to the air and be fly up towards the no longer existing ceiling.

As she bounced like a pinball between the ground dragon's spikes, Alfred screaming like a bullet from inside her blouse, Sharp fought both the destruction and the four deviants assaulting him, desperately trying to defeat them before the next two arrived. His chest was pressed up against a spike, using it as both anchor and shield. His foes were spread around him like the points of a compass rose. Two had their spears in hand, while the other two were working to load their crossbows. He was dancing around his spike with a dagger clenched in his teeth, his hands being too valuable to let go of the dragon bone until absolutely necessary. He saw Daffeega get clobbered with a chunk of concrete and his heart sank but he couldn't do anything to help her, not yet, cause more sediment was bouncing off the dragon back and coming his way at high speeds. He ducked low to the dragon, making himself vulnerable to all his foes but protecting him from the impending asteroid shower. Three of the guards got the deal and resisted attacking, knowing that they be taken out too if they didn't get low, but the fourth was a fool. Stepping out from cover and only leaning on his spike, he took the crossbow in both hands and-

WHAM!

A slab of stone the size of a rock dwarf hit the fool in the square of the back – but his finger was already in the process of contracting when he was hit. His aim was severely budged by the blow. Rather than Sharp taking his third bolt of the day, one of his foes got lucky and took the bolt to the thigh.

The crossbowman was gone, unconscious and bouncing off the dragon's back to be lost with the rest of the refuse. The ally he shot was recoiling, clutching her thigh. Though more debris was surging past them, Sharp took the moment. Still lying flat, with one arm wrapped as

far around the base of a spike as he could manage, he removed the dagger from his mouth and lobbed it at the poor moleman woman that had just flinched enough for her head to be in view. THWACK. Sharp hit her just below the ear. She rolled over with the impact and seemingly floated away.

DAFFEEGA!

The second jolt couldn't be far away – and neither was Daffeega. Sharp was just north of the dragon's hips, Daffeega was doubled over a spike just south of the wings. The spike's façade was holding her in place for now but once the dragon hit the ground, she'd go flying. And if she didn't, there were two Royal Guards that had just noticed the unconscious, unguarded Princess. Ignoring the two Royal Guards left guarding him, Sharp got up on all fours – just beneath the barrage of bits of stone and steel – and bound down the dragon's spine like a bear. He was a dozen yards away when he started the charge and, when he started the charge, the two guardsmen had posted up on spikes in view of Daffeega, reaching for their crossbows and bolts. By the time they had them knocked, he'd be there.

Dis is gonna hurt.

Sharp rose to his feet for the last bout of his mad dash, just for a second so that he could then slide feet first down the dragon. He grabbed hold of the spike Daffeega was curled around and then flipped over to shield her from the bowman just as the bolts flew – WHACK! WHACK! – taking two to the back. Ignoring the consequences, Sharp bet on physics. Pulling out two daggers, he wrapped his arms around the spike and drove them into the dragon's hide. Then physics came to the rescue: the second jolt.

The two guards before them and the two guards behind them were launched off the dragon like water droplets from a shaking dog. Up and down was seemingly switching directions with left and right, over and over and every which way as inertia and gravity tugged at them this way and that. Had he not had his head down, Sharp would've been no better off with his eyes open. The tornado of destruction was thicker than ever before, the roar of cracking stone and bending metal combining into a cacophony that would've been hard to imagine had it not been for what seemed like the hundredth time that day.

Then the light of Solaris. Albeit, filtered through the rubble still raining down around them. Vare's greatest star pillar had been gutted and now what little was left of it was crumbling down piece by piece like a time lapse of a hoodoo being carved over centuries of erosion. The ground dragon was back on the streets.

Yanking his daggers free, Sharp got up. His eyes went to the sky immediately, as the chunks of sediment wouldn't hurt the ground dragon, they could surely squash him and the Princess – the Princess which had begun to awaken from her concussion. While Sharp checked the heavens, she blinked her vision back into focus and saw that the Arcane Sentinel from before had survived as well. This clever conjurer had also crept up after them. A lightning-bolt-bent rod levitated before the wizard. The rebar was aimed at Sharp who was preoccupied with the hailstorm of stone above and around them. Daffeega could read the words being mouthed by the mage. Her dreary eyes grew wide, she clenched the Staff of Uthemarc, its orb began to shine, but then she eased up.

A flower dressed arrow suddenly appeared sticking out of the heart of the Sentinel.

Getting up to her knees, Daffeega turned to see an aircraft flying towards them. Strategy Admiral Zaria Ein was at the wheel, it was her guardwoman that had fired. Lalmly Shisharay, armed head to toe with practical but also immaculately sculpted armor, Gustbow in her arms and

aimed at any other foe that might approach them. Even Cowboy poked his head up over the lip of the Kaboomer to yowl at the Princess. Daffeega issued a sigh of relief but stopped mid-exhale.

She wasn't the only one that had noticed the ship, so too had the ground dragon. Rearing its ugly head, the serpent snarled. The zoomer was slowing on its approach towards the reptile's back. The murderous maelstrom of crashing construction kept Zaria from zooming straight in. They were so fixated on falling wreckage, they had no clue that the great beast had opened its gargantuan jaws behind them. Fire would soon gush forth from the seige-beast and engulf the Shisharay and the oblivious Admiral. Though, the Admiral thought the Princess was the oblivious one. A giant chunk of sky scraper was scraping the sky on its way down to flatten Daffeega and Sharp.

"THE DRAGON!" Daffeega exclaimed.

"THE BUILDING!" Zaria exclaimed.

Sharp saw the rubble and scooped Daffeega up like she were his child, her weight hardly hampering his strides towards safety. So smooth was the save, it didn't stop Daffeega from weaving her witchery. The purple stone wrapped in the gnarled end of the Staff of Uthemarc shone like a distant star, emitting violet light in a sphere around them. A ribbon of that lilac haze left them with the speed of a striking snake. It shot towards the zoomer above – just as Zaria hit the throttle. Having no time to look back to see if the dragon was indeed about to immolate them like a banshee, she'd just mashed the gas. Naturally, the machine wouldn't have been able to outpace the explosive breath of a dragon but, as the jet engine roared to full speed, Daffeega's purple ribbon of magic stabbed into the center of the cannon shaped propulser – if it was zoomer before, it was zoomest now.

The Kaboomer reared like a whinnying horse then blast off as flames burst forth from the throat of the ground dragon. With the added oomf of magic, the zoomer arched upwards until it ran perpendicular to the flames still writhing in the air below. Zaria was able to hold on as she was already white knuckling the wheel and throttle. Cowboy was safe too. He'd lost balance and rolled down until he slipped under the backseat. Lalmly, however, was not okay. She still had her bow in hand, her fingers pulling back the invisible string as she charged up her infamous specialized arrow. When the ship reared up underneath her, she had nothing holding her to the vessel but the flat bottom of her boots. The action tossed her like a trebuchet.

Daffeega was cradled in Sharp's arms, the layer-cake of living-rooms having shattered into crumbs on the dragon's spine behind them, now they simply stared upwards and waited for the fire to clear so they could see if their comrades had evaded being cooked. As the fire evaporated, Lalmly's body burst through like a beam of light breaking through an overcast sky. Unfortunately, said beam of light would not make landfall on the beast's back, the spirit's trajectory would plop her down in the pile of rubble collecting around the monster's feet.

Past Lalmly, they could see Zaria, desperately trying to regain control of the zoomer to turn back for her guard but both Daffeega and Sharp knew this would not be a real option. The dragon was still fixated on the zoomer. Daffeega could try and send out another stream of magic – as she had to push the Admiral's ship to safety – but extending another arm of energy would be expensive – and she still had three ground dragons to uncorrupt. Every second she hesitated, Lalmly fell further.

"Donum..." Daffeega murmured.

"Wing me, Civ!" Sharp exclaimed.

He sat her down on her feet and rolled is arrow riddled shoulderblades.

"Huh?" Daffeega blurted.

“Wing me!” Sharp repeated, “Remember da Moon Mine Melee!”

“Oh!” Daffeega yelped.

This was not the pair’s first time in combat, nor their first rescue mission. While the tale of the Moon Mine Melee would have to wait for another day, the wings were coming right up. Casting a spell on the man standing right next to her would spend far less energy – and it was quicker. Her tongue started flopping around as the mystical language spun lilac lace into the air. Wings sprouted from Sharp’s back, mounted from his armor plates. They appeared feathered, but a closer look would notice it was just aesthetic, something unintentionally included in Daffeega’s imagination as she insorceled. That said, they worked. Or, at least, Sharp believed that they would. For Daffeega hadn’t even finished the final sentence before he took off down the sloping side of the ground dragon and jumped off, head first, diving towards the churned up city street underneath.

Meanwhile, Lalmly hadn’t yet given up saving herself. The Gustbow was one of the six Elemental Weapons, the only of the six known to have a third power. The true user – designated by the weapon’s mysterious consciousness – could launch sharp winds. Few living mortals were capable of such, it was a skill often considered to only be masterable by the deadliest undead: banshees. Even of banshees, none were known to be able to launch the destructive gusts with a bow and arrow. Sharp winds carve through stone and metal in a forward rushing linear beam. As Lalmly fell, she swung the bow and launched a series of these sharp winds in an effort to carve the already torn up turf below into some kind of flat, slanted plane that might let her land with a roll rather than a kersplat. That was her plan until she heard:

“LADY GUARD!”

There wasn’t much time to waste, the ground was fast approaching, yet still she trusted the voice. Rolling in her freefall, she looked up.

“Sir Guard!” She gasped.

There was even less time to adjust to this sudden change of plans. Sir Guard was upon her. It was a bit of a sloppy rescue but far neater than the potential alternative (the kersplat). With his arms out, Sharp shot between her legs but his head smacked her groin. This could’ve been as painful as it was awkward had her crotch not been covered in armor as strong as his helmet, still, it was a hell of a save. He’d caught her piggy-back style – reverse piggy-back style at that. Though her flesh was translucent, her armor was opaque. This left Sharp flying blind.

As his indigo wings spread to slow them, she patted his arms so that he’d loosen his grasp and allow her to swing around. With her groin now behind his head, her legs hooked around his armpits, he grabbed hold of her by her calves. Now they were in the correct piggy-back formation and Sharp could see that the ground was essentially there.

WHAM! He landed, falling to one knee. His armor and wings cushioned the blow, but he knew he would be dragging his right leg along by the end of the battle. Still, he and his fellow guardsman had survived – for the moment. Rubble was still raining down all around them.

And to make matters worse, curlheads were now swooping down upon them. It seemed that after two ground dragons had turned to join the Layman’s cause, Commander Caleros had seen that some of his battalion could be better utilized stopping any further uncorruptions. Three Mystvokaran curlheads, with two riders each, were on the bodyguard-duo’s trail now.

“HOLD ON, LADY GUARD!” Sharp ordered.

“WATCH OUT, SIR GUARD!” Lalmly commanded.

There was no time to dismount. As Lalmly’s fingers took hold of the invisible bowstring, Sharp’s legs started pumping. Lalmly weighed little more than air, but her armor was no joke.

The wings on his shoulder were key in helping him run full speed while carrying her. It wasn't an easy run. The street was in shambles. Sheets of concrete jutted up at steep angles with abrupt stops where the cragged street continued six feet below. And he had to keep his eyes trained above too as more refuse smashed down, incessantly increasing the difficulty of the obstacle course before him.

Lalmly's job wasn't much easier. Jerked this way and that by Sharp's parkour, she had to struggle to maintain her aim on targets that were moving just as much as her comrade-steed. After missing her first two shots at the dragon flying before her, she took two from behind. A bullet in the hip and one in the wrist. Though this meant she'd have to take her armor to the repair shop, she was for-all-practical-purposes unharmed. A spirit's only vulnerability was their chestplate, but once struck through the breast there was no chance of survival. Those being her foes first shots, she could only imagine the next round would be closer to the mark. The threat made her tremble but not with fear, with a frustration-fueled rage. Twisting in her seat, she launched a sharp wind at the two dragons behind her before her silver eyes could even take aim.

She hit the mark a little more brutally than she'd intended: the slicing gust caught one of the curlheads by its extended neck, severing it immediately. The now noseless dragon's body nosedived, taking its riders with it. The neighboring dragon pitched up immediately as both it and its passengers panicked. This gave Lalmly time to turn back to the dragon ahead of them, but she was already too late.

Though the foe didn't have a rifle, they did have a javelin, and while Lalmly had turned to slaughter their friends, they had lobbed one of their spears at her heart. Fortunately, Sharp had her back – or, in this case, her front. Jumping from a broken segment of curled up road, he flapped his purple wings for extra air. No longer was the lance aimed at Lalmly's heart, but now Sharp's head. When he jumped, Sharp released his hold on one of her legs and drew his sword. With a sweeping motion from the scabbard side of his body to the other, he deflected the javeline.

Flapping his wings to soften his landing, he sheathed his sword and returned his grasp to Lalmly's armored calf. Seeing his throw had failed, their foe reached for another rod and there his hand was pinned by a flower dressed arrow launched from the Gustbow. The spearman fought through the pain to keep his eyes open as he knew another arrow would soon follow. Sure enough, Lalmly had already fired. He leaned out of the way – saving himself, but damning his driver. The second bolt struck the pilot square in the back. This didn't stop the curlhead from flying – but the giant bolder of building that flattened the beast and its wounded riders surely did.

This left one final curlhead, the one that had ran when the other had been beheaded. Sharp skidded to a halt and they both perused the heavens. They didn't see the foe but they made eye contact with their former partners. Zaria was on the head of the ground dragon standing next to Daffeega with her terrified Alfred on her shoulder – not a cronie of the Cloches in sight! The Kaboomer hovered nearby, magical ropes tethering it to the massive creature. Zaria waved to Lalmly, a motion that Lalmly understood as releasing her from guard duty. Daffeega would've done the same, but she was already in the process of uncorrupting.

“Looks like we're on our own, Ci-” Sharp choked on his words, correcting himself, “Lady Guard.”

Despite the carnage around them, Lalmly couldn't help but blush. Her chest flames roared silently, causing a rosy pink to christen her teal cheeks. Unfortunately, Sharp couldn't see. As her lower cheeks were still planted on his shoulders. The moment passed almost as soon as it came, though, as Lalmly's silver eyes saw movement turning onto what was left of their street.

“Look!”

Five battledillos barreled down the shattered street towards them, about fifty yards away. Between them and the armored rodents, a red scaled chidra rushed out to flag down the roll (which is actually the appropriate word for a group of armadillos on Earth too, not just battledillos on Solaris).

“Blade!” Sharp recognized the Rift Miner. Then, despite still carrying Lalmly thus not leaving her much choice, he said, “Come on!”

Dodging apartment-asteroids, Sharp toted Lalmly over to the building where Blade waited. Blade’s head was spinning like an owl’s, considering the fact that the entire city of Vare was being tossed around like salad in a spinner, she never knew which direction – up, down, left, right – demise might be surging towards her in. Still, she certainly didn’t expect to see the Princess’ guardsman running her way, sporting purple angel wings and piggy-backing the Imperial Admiral’s guardswoman.

“Sharp?” Blade blurted.

“Blade!” Sharp bowed.

This threw Lalmly forward a bit so she went ahead and bowed with her totter then lifted her torso up to meet eyes with the miner and acknowledge her by name, “Blade.”

Snapping out of her surprise, Blade turned back to scanning her surroundings for danger while waiting on the battledillos and explaining the situation to her new found reinforcements, “We were trying to help in the Rift – or what’s left of it – but were catching more casualties than we were saving so we gave up – donum.”

Sharp clasped her shoulder. She shook it off, but her chest rose a bit as she continued, “We will go back for them.”

“We will.” Lalmly assured her.

“But now, Middle Vare?” Sharp asked.

Blade nodded before beckoning them inside. Lalmly pushed off and Sharp stooped so they could follow. Behind them, a stalactite shaped fragment of building stabbed the ground like the steel spike of a stone miner drilling into a rock. A spray of dust rushed in the building through the long-gone door and since-shattered windows. As the sand settled, Sharp and Lalmly saw that Blade wasn’t alone. There were almost three dozen Batloens – men, women, children, moles and chidras alike – sitting amongst the debris on the floor of what had once been a spacious lobby. The kids had been posted up beneath doorframes but there only so many of those to go around. The parents – or those who fate had chosen to be the youngsters guardians for the day – waited wherever they thought best. They watched the windows and the ceilings, hoping their spot was the lucky spot like a number on a roulette table.

“We can get those that got this far out without losing who we have left.” Blade explained as she headed back out the door.

“Out to where?” Lalmly asked.

After one try to squeeze past the bolder now blocking the door, Blade opted for the nearest window as she answered, “The barricades.”

“How are dey holding up?” Sharp asked.

“The barricades?” Blade asked though she went on with the answer, hollering from outside the window, “Way better than the rest of Vare!”

Outside, the battledillos arrived. They flung themselves open and landed on all fours. Each had a single rider – which was important cause battledillos could only carry a few full grown adults – and said rider was launched forward but, as they’d grown up Rift Miners, they

were more than used to landing a roll stop. They hit the ground running. Mole and chidra alike, rushing through the windows, past Blade. Blade stayed by the windows, barking orders.

“We got twelve kids left! Twelve kids!”

One of the riders was beckoning to gather up all five that had holed up in a broom closet doorway.

“You can’t take five!” Blade snapped.

“I can!” The mole snapped back.

She started to clamber back in through the window, “Don’t make me-”

“You got it, you got it!” The rollman gave her no more trouble.

“We gotta think like miners, y’all, not like heroes!” Blade reminded the others, “No different than a mine accident. Kids then parents. Parents-”

All but maybe two or three of the adults stood and those two or three quickly followed after seeing the others.

“Single parents!” Blade clarified, “Single parents or parents who’s other ain’t here!” Blade glowered at the adults as some seemed to be debating whether or not they could play the role and get a golden ticket, “If I recognize any couples when we get through-”

Two plopped down immediately, bowing their heads.

The rest were mostly out of luck. After twelve kids had been sorted into battledillos, only two were left and that meant only four skinny single parents were getting out this go around. More than half of those that had made it that far would have to wait for the next wave. As the dillos balled up, Blade hopped back through the window. Despite her little sermon about not needing heroes, her strut couldn’t hide how proud she was of herself. But Sharp and Lalmly certainly weren’t going to get on to her for it, quite the contrary.

“Civ,” Sharp said, his face scrunched up by absolute earnesty, “how can we help?”

Dragons screeched outside. A rush of shadows darkened the street as a murder passed by. Blade gestured to it and before she could even label the request, Lalmly and Sharp were on it.

“Distract them.” Blade turned, her hubris momentarily stifled as respect slipped in. Not that she wasn’t proud of herself, but that she was proud to see she wasn’t alone. Pride can do a lot but it can’t stop that incessant ounce of self doubt that always lingers in the back of your head, waiting to flare up at the first sight of a mistake. To tackle that sort of doubt, one often needs a little help from a friend. Blade practically yelped after them, “Selu to you!”

The two had paused to peak out the window before exposing the bunker to the dragons. They glanced back. They too needed the affirmation. For their self doubt was a little more grounded. While Blade was worried she might fail her people. Lalmly and Sharp were both beginning to fear that not only would they fail, they would deserve the blame for having encouraged the Laymen and Miners to try in the first place. Her appreciation only worsened their anxiety. But there was no time to dwell and battle would save them from such rabbit holes of despair. They slapped on fake smiles and nodded, “Selu to you!”

They started running as soon as they got outside – not wanting any Mystvokarans or Ground Dragons watching to become suspicious of the makeshift bunker. Sharp flapped his wings and picked off the ground a little bit.

“Dey still fly!” He shooked his head, “Daffeega did too much.”

“Might as well make use of them, yea?” Lalmly asked, adding to get them back in the right mindset, “Sir Guard.”

“Ha!” Slowing his pace a bit, Sharp stooped forward like a chicken, “Hop on!”

And about that time a new murder of curlheads descended upon the rugged road. There were six this time. The beast leading the way was foaming at the mouth with fiery rage, blurring its own riders' vision with smog. While Sharp knew no better, Lalmly recognized it as the reptile that fled when she beheaded its peer.

"We can definitely distract this murder." Lalmly stated.

"Hold on!" Flapping wildly, Sharp literally spun around on one heel, then took off, "I have an idea!"

Waiting for said idea to make itself known, Lalmly launched a barrage of sharp winds. Had her opponents not already been irrevocably offended, they might've taken her mercy as a gesture of good faith but that certainly was out of the question. Still, each sharp wind she shot could've eviscerated the entire murder. Dragons were certainly helpless to block such mystical violence, they could only hope to evade. Even most of their riders didn't have sturdy enough blades or armor onboard to defend with. However, rather than ripping them apart like a pitiless Doom Warrior, she used her sharp winds to sweep their slings and arrows to the side. Slicing through the air with her Gustbow, crossing Xs before her, she cut through the slugs and spears lobbed after her. It was a strategy that would only work for a short while before – even in their rage – they'd realize she was holding back and would push the envelope, but before that moment came to pass, Sharp's plan took over.

"Hold on!"

Switching from heels to toes this time Sharp pirouetted a full three-hundred and sixty degrees before his wings brought him to a stop at a hard ninety degree angle from where he'd originally been facing. This revealed the plan: a side street! As bullets and bolts barraged the air where they'd once been, Sharp bound away into a perpendicular boulevard.

As far as streets go, it certainly wasn't narrow enough to qualify as an alley, but when running from curlheads with an average wingspan of fifty-feet it sufficed. From one side to the other, it might not have even made it to fifty. The murder was forced to line up single file or stack up one over the other. Even with their growing bravery in the face of their sharp wind flinging foe, the inability to effectively dodge certainly strained their courage. But before the first in line dared to pop over the top, Lalmly had effectively maimed the line leader: picking off the pilot's pointer fingers with her first two shots, shots which went on to stick into the shoulders of the second saddle, she then stuck one in the eye of the curlhead itself. It was a gentle shot – she could've sent it to the brain – but "you're not going to die immediately" doesn't tend to help someone that just lost their eye see the bright side. Recoiling in pain, the curlhead reared up to flee the side street.

This almost caused a collision with their comrade: the bold blokes that had driven there dragon over the top. Instead, the pilot and rider held on for dear life as their beast twisted to let the other go. This put the soldiers out of reach for Lalmly, but it opened their poor steeds stomach up to her scrupulous aim. She didn't like hurting animals – as a spirit, she didn't even eat them – but she liked killing worse. There was a way to hurt a beast that ensured they would never test you again – especially male beasts. With mammals, this place was more obvious, but with reptiles it still existed. On the underside of the dragon, just before the base of the tail, wedged between the kidneys – that's where dragons hid their treasure and that's where Lalmly struck.

The dragon thrashed so hard, it nearly killed its riders. Slamming against the side of a building, it certainly wounded them. Then it took off for the sky. Three remained in the alley –
wait, three?

Lalmly's realized it at the same moment Sharp saw it. The fourth had jumped the alley all together. Having reached the otherside, it began to rush in to cut them off. And, to make matters worse, mercy might not work on this calvaryman. Lalmly recognized them immediately as the riders' scorned, still torn up over the fact that she'd slaughtered their friends and their dragon.

With three still behind them, Sharp couldn't stop.

"Lalmly," he said, his voice even but firm, "we've got to kill them."

She knew that already. Her left arm was cocked back, holding the Gustbow low by her hip. It was such a dainty weapon despite the carnage it had rought throughout its lifetime. Looking almost as if it was crafted from a couple thin limbs, widdled smooth, and bound together. Flowerbuds clung to the shaft, sporting small blooms that should've long since lost their petals to the rough and tumble nature of war. Lalmly yanked the bow through the air, drawing across her torso until she was raising it above her head. The sound of a blade tearing through the air shot from the bow, it carved a line in the street as it careened towards the vengeful foe. There was no dodging it – not in the alley – and so the curlhead didn't even try. The riders reached for their saddle straps but there was no time. They three were hit head on. The sharp wind split the dragon down the middle, making it as far as the beast's hips and dissecting its passengers too. As the two halves pealed apart to fall to separate sides of the street, Sharp and Lalmly turned to face the remaining three but those three had tucked tail and ran.

"You just saved deir lives." Sharp stated as he headed back towards the main street they'd turned off.

"Maybe." Lalmly shrugged, admitting, "I hate killing soldiers."

"I know what you mean, Civ." Sharp sighed, "Dey're just a buncha kids."

"What would you do if you weren't a guard?" Lalmly asked.

"Hmm." Sharp thought for a moment, "Before I was a guard, I was a Factory Orphan. Guess I'd go back to Foxloe and try and help da old Civilist friends. What would you do if you weren't a Shisharay?"

"I've only ever been a Shisharay." Lalmly stated. Her voice wasn't sad, but the rest of her answer left Sharp wondering why it wasn't. She said, "I think if I wasn't a Shisharay, I'd be a saint."

"A saint – not like da Saint?" Sharp clarified.

"Haha no." Lalmly chuckled, "I mean, I wouldn't sin. I'd be nonviolent."

Sharp scoffed at that before he could stop himself, "I don't dink you can just roll back da clock on that one, Civ. Once you get as far down da pad as we've–"

"Hey!" Lalmly protested, "You said 'what if?!'"

"Dat's true," Sharp conceded, "my apologies, Lady Guard."

By this point, they'd made it back to the mainstreet. So lost were the two in their conversation, they'd temporarily forgotten not only their job – to distract patrolling curlheads – but also their peril: Middle Vare was very much so a warzone. The debris falling from the sky had slowed drastically as no ground dragon was in the vicinity, but there were still threats lurking in the rubble.

The first dragon Lalmly sharp winded to death, the one she had beheaded, was long dead. So too was one of its riders, but not both. The second rider, the rifleman, was wounded but alive. He'd crawled up a sloping crag of broken street with his rifle. He saw the two piggy-backing bastards emerge from the alley and start moseying back down the street towards him. He didn't know if he would live or die – in fact, had a sinking feeling he wouldn't make it but a few more hours – and thus the fact that revenge would seal his fate seemed less like a threat and more like

a welcomed assurance. He loaded his rifle and took aim – but then a curlhead shot across the intersection that criss-crossed the sniper like he was the gold on a treasure map. The dragon’s scales were a radiant red. On board the beast was the earth elf Captain of the Kou Warriors, Wake Ragashi, and the electric elf daughter of the top Imperial Admiral, Tabuh Sentry, rushing back to the messy dogfight in the sky over the Rift. The rush of the dragon – and obvious non-Mystvokaran pilot – caused the rifleman to roll over and aim up as he expected fire to come scorching down. But it never did. Wake’s Tarik nor its riders had noticed him. Still, he got off his shot. The slug spiralled through the air after the departing curlhead, skimming the creature’s tail, passing the second rider, and smashing through the war scarred armor of the pilot’s right shoulder plate. The impact and searing pain knocked Wake out for a moment. Tarik recoiled in the air as if he himself had been hit, fearing for his master. Tabuh whirled around in her saddle to stare daggers at the shooter in the street. Her golden gun was raised and aimed so quick it felt almost as if she’d started turning before the sniper had even gotten the shot off. It was almost mechanical, she fired without thinking and, as always, she didn’t miss.

The Mystvokaran fell limp on the slab of concrete.

Sharp and Lalmlly flinched, then got back into battle mode. Tabuh gave them a bitter sweet smile and nod, then turned back to tend to her pilot. Wake was conscious again, citing every curse known to woman.

“Wae gotta get you to a haeler!” Tabuh exclaimed.

“Farak that!” Wake roared, “I’ll survive.”

“Survahval’s fahn, but wae naed you round to faht tomorrow too!” Tabuh countered.

“Won’t be no fight tomorrow if the General has his way!” Wake retorted, raising her left arm to point at the swarm of melee up ahead.

Tabuh saw what Wake was talking about. Zile, Commander Caleros Icelore’s large blue curlhead, and Love, General Tenchi Kou’s dark red curlhead, were weaving in and out of one another with such speed and ferocity that they seemingly left a double helix of streaks in the sky, navy and maroon, while their riders sparred. Unknown to Tabuh and Wake, the combatants were sparring with more than just weapons, words were also being flung.

“SO YOU’RE THE PIRATE SHE RAN OFF WITH!” Caleros snarled.

The two dragons criss-crossed, drawing their wings in so that they could near close enough for their riders to strike at one another. Caleros had ditched the throwing spears, now his enertomb-studded saddle was spawning longer rods – great big, icy halberds. He was fortunate that he had an unlimited supply, as Tou’s blade cut right through the frozen poles.

“THIS ISN’T ABOUT US!” Tou roared back.

While the dragons put distance between each other again, spreading their wings as they headed towards the crests of their downward corkscrewing wave line, Tenchi rolled his eyes. He’d resisted the urge to try and kill the enemy commander and was now stuck letting his partner and prosecutor dance around each other while they hashed out some inconsequential drama. As Tenchi’s eyes stopped spinning in their sockets, they fixated on the shaft of an arrow that just narrowly missed his nose. With a yelp, Tenchi looked over his shoulder. They were being pursued. The mercenary general cocked his head to the side. *We haven’t been targeted by a single Mystvokaran since engaging the old man, who is this guy?*

This guy was a tad unique. The man was a bearn – a race that was tall enough, but this bearn made Sniper look average, the pilot must’ve been over eight feet tall. Likely due to such height, he had no passenger. It was just the bearn on board the dragon. Another notable feature of the man was his fur. The only bearns Tenchi had ever seen had been this or that shade of brown

but this bearn was jet black. Finally, Tenchi noted the crossbow in the bearn's hands. It already had a new bolt loaded in.

"Farak!"

Tenchi tried to bob and weave as best he could while sitting down and was saved only by the brim of his saddle.

"Farak this!"

Off came his straps as he flipped around in his seat to flop down belly first on the platform behind the seat. Holding the Mystak Blade in both hands as if it were a rifle, the blade began to glow golden. From the tip of the sword, a yellow beam of light shot through the air to nearly pierce their pursuing rider but it was blocked. At first, Tenchi thought a clump of flesh had hopped off the bearn to take the bladeshot, but as he saw the glob evaporate into black steam he realized what it had been: shadows. *He's a shadowmancer!* Tenchi realized.

While Tenchi shot past Tou at their pursuer, Tou talked past Tenchi to the dragon rider they pursued, "STOP THIS SLAUGHTER!"

Caleros was infuriated. *Who does he think he is, he's some nobody here white knighting for a people who's struggle he knows nothing about!* But Caleros was also a good man. That thought ran through his mind simultaneously with another: *What am I doing here?* He couldn't help but notice the absolute destruction being levied on Vare below. And for what? He knew for what. To preserve a rule that no one wanted. His brother, Talloome Icelore, the Mystvokar of Iceload, had taken power in a coup so bloody that it had forced him to look away. And yet, it was popular. The only lives lost had been those that refused the demands of the people. This was the absolute opposite of that. Queen Suicine Shelba was obliterating her own capitol, destroying her own people, in an attempt to terrify them into compliance. And here he was again, looking the other way. In Iceload, he could justify it. His brother killed corrupt officials. In Batloe... He couldn't look down. The earth elf may not have belonged in this fight, but at least he was on the right side. Meanwhile, he had sold his soul for what? To catch a criminal and pardon his criminal brother at the expense of a popular uprising. Finally, Caleros looked down.

Vare was in ruins. The Rift was no more. Half of Vare had filled in the Rift. The casualties of such destruction were not Sondoran mercenaries, they were Batloen peasants. Peasants who were only there in order to vote. The nellaf nearly gagged. Paler than a pale elf, he looked up as the dragons criss-crossed oncemore. Tou had *Future* raised, ready to slice and sever another frost-biting bayonet, but Caleros lowered it.

Tou's blade swung where the spear had been but unperturbed it continued – towards Caleros' neck. At the last second, Tou yanked his arm back, nearly throwing it out of socket to spare the nellaf's life. The two's eyes locked and there was a moment of understanding. Then the dragons pulled away to continue their parallel corkscrews.

"GOT HIM!" Tenchi exclaimed.

Finally, after at least a dozen blade shots, Tenchi had landed one on the raven-furred bearn. The wound wasn't likely fatal but it was enough to get the brute off their back, forcing the solo jockey to retreat. Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one getting off of a back. Tenchi was still unstrapped, laying across his saddle's back platform, and that was not unnoticed. The other Commander, the one that had tried to prevent the battle, had decided to put an end to the threat the red curlhead was to his fellow officer. While all other Mystvokarans had backed off the dispute, Shaprone Ipativy interfered. Swooping close over Love, Shaprone directed his dragon, Aurora, to snatch the Sondoran mercenary general right off his steed like an eagle plucking a salmon from a river rapid.

Love, the red curlhead, flipped out. Tou, her only remaining rider, did as well. Sheathing *Future*, Tou grabbed hold of his saddle and leaned in as Love rocketed after her stolen master. But Aurora, Shaprone's steed, was quicker. While Love was more war ready, having near constant experience due to Tenchi's incessant separatist exploits in Sondor, she was perpetually exhausted. Iceload had peace under their authoritarian ruler. Aurora was fresh and thriving in battle and Shaprone was no amateur. Without Tenchi to help Love, Love and Tou were helpless to do anything more than pursue Shaprone's emerald steed and watch themselves slowly lose ground.

Tenchi was clasped in Aurora's talons, he could hear nothing but whipping wind. Still, Shaprone had to make a statement, even if it was only witnessed by his copilot and the rushing air.

"Rot in hell, Queen killer." Shaprone smirked.

He hardly had to give the order as Aurora and he ran on such a similar wavelength. The curlhead relished the small victory as much as her master. She jostled the human a bit first, then released him.

Wind battered Tenchi as he plummeted, smearing his face. Clenching the hilt of the *Mystak Blade* he said a silent prayer to the sword. Of all its magical powers, only one could not be controlled – at least not by Tenchi. The weapon would occasionally turn purple and shield him from harm. While it would do so occasionally, it certainly didn't always. There were other powers he could use that might save him. When it turned green, the sword worked as an elgroon – somewhat. Unlike your typical elgroon, which stores the energy of Solaris to be used for later, when the *Mystak Blade* glowed green its elemental magic only worked while in direct sunlight. Thus, while falling from the sky beneath a swarm of dogfighting dalvaries, the magic would be incessantly cut on and off by the shadows of the combatants. Instead of playing it safe and at least trying to save himself before the last absolute second, Tenchi pulled out a cigarette.

"Kenchi's gonna kill me."

Rolling onto his back, he was able to shield the stoge from the strongest of gusts. Catching a ray of Solaris between criss-crossing calvaryman, he was able to quickly turn the sword green and spark enough fire to light the smoke. As he puffed, he watched the war in the heavens above. Caleros still sored around, Zile and Love trapped in a skirmish that now had new purpose: the foreign commander was keeping Tou and Love from coming to Tenchi's rescue. Exhaling through his nose, Tenchi's lip curled in a snarl.

"Stuck up hellbrute."

Pinching the cigarette between his lips, he took the *Mystak Blade* in both hands again. The blade that had been green now began to glow yellow. Turning his snarl into a squint, he aimed the tip of the sword at Caleros far above. He lowered the tip a little, estimating where his foe would be when the shot landed, then he-

"I OUGHTA KILL YOU!"

The roar came from the General's trusty Captain, Wake Ragashi. The talons of Tarik snatched Tenchi from freefall, jerking the mercenary so abruptly he dropped his cigarette and nearly his sword – but he didn't. The shot still went off, just a tad off kilter.

The aurelian arrow struck Caleros in the gut. The brutalizing beam of light slid right through his chest plate, only stopping when it hit the inside of the back plate. Wracked with pain, Caleros doubled over. His steed, Zile, hadn't seen the shot but immediately recognized the damage and peeled off in a different direction so that if Tenchi shot again then he'd have to shoot through Zile to get to the Commander. Tenchi would not shoot again, though, for the dragon that

had him clenched in its talons also peeled off – not wanting the General to have the chance at another shot.

On board Tarik, Wake continued to lambast her superior while her co-pilot desperately squinted through the chaos of the dogfight above. She saw Tenchi shoot Caleros, but she didn't see the result. Squinting, she finally managed to spot the great big, navy blue dragon. Caleros was still clutching his stomach, but he was more upright now. His dark eyes actually met Tabuh's. His glare was strained but not just by pain, by rage. Before she could analyze anymore from her observation, her view was obscured.

Tarik had already been pulling away from the fight but now they scrambled, flapping wildly, to get distance. One of the ground dragons was climbing towards Solaris, plunging into the swarm of curlhead and zoomers like a pooch startling a heard of pigeons. Combatants shot out in all directions, desperately rushing to escape the jaws, claws, and spikes of the giant monster that interrupted their battle. Tabuh and Wake momentarily forgot all about Caleros as their attention became devoted to the behemoth now in the middle of the battle – they only barely noticed the answer to their questions before it was ushered out of view: a zoomer with two passengers, Daffeega and Zaria (and a third, Cowboy, technically though they couldn't see the poor cowering hound much like the fourth, Alfred, who was completely disassociated). As they continued to soar out away from the fight in the sky, their eyes then turned to the other ground dragons.

The last four were in North Vare. Two were slowly backing towards the walls of the Cloches while the other two were challenging them. With barred teeth and bursts of fire, the uncorrupted ground dragons were forcing the corrupted ground dragons to retreat, back pedalling past the barricades of the Laymen.

At first, the Laymen nearly panicked as the thundering footsteps caused their cheap palisades to rattle and crumble. Then came the shadows of the beasts as their belly's passed over. The day was suddenly dark as if there were a solar eclipse. The Laymen had been skirmishing with the Royal Guards. It hadn't been all out battle as it was in the sky over the Rift, but both sides had taken their fair share of assaults. It became apparent the Royal Guard had expected to rout the enemy without raising a spear or levying a spell as they seemed woefully unprepared for the resistance they faced at the front.

Bru dashed between defenses, maintaining morale at each bulwark as they bludgeoned the Queen's brutes back. The Royal Guards weren't willing to slaughter and the Laymen weren't willing to give an inch. Their bossmen, the Arcane Sentinels, would try and force their pawns to press forward but hesitated to join them and give the extra oomph needed as they were too busy utilizing their magical powers to help protect the fleeing Varens that had foolishly refused to evacuate the day before. Plus, the Laymen had magic on their side now too. Every blockade had a couple amateur elementalists. Their home-made elgroons beat back the magic the Sentinels did try to send south.

Throughout the affair, Bru was able to keep spirits high amongst his comrades but failed miserably to do so for himself. He perceived his enemies' reluctance to bite the bullet and rush their rugged ramparts as a bad omen. He figured they must've known of some deus ex machina coming, that they merely had to wait and victory would be delivered. What Bru didn't know, was it was actually the opposite. The Laymen simply had to wait. With three out of five ground dragon's uncorrupted and Commander Caleros badly wounded, the Mystvokarans began to flee. The Royal Guards in North Vare had marched on the barricades expecting the Laymen to surrender, for the New Towners to flee into their arms and seek the safety that hid behind the

walls of the Cloches. But the Laymen hadn't. The Laymen bunkered down. And that was all it took to win the day.

When the corrupted ground dragons were pushed back against the walls of the Cloches, when their bulky shapes blotted out Solaris, the battle in North Vare paused. Both Laymen (and Rift Miners now) and Royal Guards stopped fighting, sprinting for cover instead. Hiding in storefronts and apartment lobbies, the bravest on both sides poked their heads out broken windows and watched the massive monsters pass. It was only then that Bru realized they had won.

Bru started to hoop and holler. None of his noises were words, but somehow his shouting made sense – it still got across his message and it caught on. Those that heard it rushed out into the open with the yellow-scaled Layman. They ran up onto the barricade, clambering over the top and down onto the street previously defended by Royal Guards. As the shadow of the retreating ground dragons passed and the light of Solaris returned, more Laymen joined them on the otherside of the blockade. The first line stared down the servants of the Queen as they crawled out of hiding, but they didn't have to raise their weapons. The Sentinels were calling them back. Shoulders slumped like dogs with tail tucked between their legs, they scurried back towards the palace.

Had Bru been yelling before, he was now bellowing, but this time intelligibly.

“THERE ONCE WAS A NATION MADE OF SAND...”

As the Layman's Anthem proceeded, the Layman began to disassemble the barricades. Not because the war was over, but because there was a new line to draw. They were marching right up to the walls of the Cloches. He sent a few comrades to go find the election officials they'd captured and instructed them to escort them through out the frontline to finish collecting the vote. The day was young, the polls were not closed yet. And as Bru went back to helping move the barricades, he remember how the day had begun. How the battle had started.

Today they had won. They held Vare. They would soon all have cast their votes. But tomorrow? Tomorrow, was Pyramid. Tomorrow, Sallis and hundreds of others of their unfortunate comrades would be thrown into a dusty arena and forced to fight to the death.

Chapter Twenty: Polls Close

The sunset had melted into the clouds of dust that hung around the city. Ambers and chalky brick-red covered most of the day's destruction, but there were brief windows where the murk frayed enough for the gods above to peer through. Flow-Vare stood strong, looking over the shallow basin South Vare had been churned into. Middle Vare rose from the wreckage of the Rift, checkered by destruction. The culprits still nested in the refuse. Three un-Corrupted ground dragons remained in Vare, the other two had fled the scene. There would be no second attempt to overthrow the Laymen, but that certainly didn't mean the Laymen had won just yet.

To an outside observer, it didn't appear that the Laymen were even winning. To Benjamin Fasthoof, Fetch Eninac, Marvell of the Ax, Boldarian Drahkor, and Lenga Ruse, it looked as if Vare had been obliterated. The evisceration suggested that the Queen was willing to burn the house down before she would hand it over. Whether or not she won the vote, she was certainly no longer qualified to keep the Crown. The only thing that gave the group an inkling that the Revolution was still ongoing was the sight of the barricades. The black smoke of fires penetrated the sunset colored smog, creating a line of pillars before the walls of the Cloches, like the bars of a prison cell. They wanted to descend then and their – even Lenga could hardly wait, knowing the help her healing could bring to the palisades of the proletariat – but they stuck to the plan. With the frozen flute tucked safely away in Boldarian's backpack, they flew onwards to Katirjaramoh.

The dust followed them there. Wind swept it east but the mountains rose above the breeze and caught the debris in the same cradle in which the city of Katirjaramoh sat. The silt settled along the streets, making the roads match the auburn roofs of the houses. Most buildings were low to the ground, few over six stories, but there was one large star pillar in the town. It wore the refuse like a kilt, its lower twelve stories air brushed with the ashes of Vare while its top half remained naked, taking on the colors of the setting sun as it peered over the Rift Mountains. It was atop said tower that the pilot – who had been sobered up by the sight of the Batloen capitol – dropped the team off.

Small for an airport, it was still packed to the gills. Everyone was coming or going considering what had just happened in Vare. Locals were fleeing the town, foreigners were flocking in, hoping to find asylum in the arid alps if revolution spread further from the Rift. Pilots were hesitant to take off as rumors of Iceloadic battalions roaming Batloen skies continued to circulate. It was certainly not the sort of scene in which one could get away with playing a magical flute, thus the gang went first to the elevator, hardly speaking a word to one another from the moment they tipped their driver til when they found themselves a couple blocks from the base of the sky scraper.

“Alright so...” Fetch muttered, “who's gonna blow it?”

“We're still going?!” Lenga exclaimed.

Ben was on her side, “Is the revolution even still...revolutioning?”

“Aftar whot thot Quaen did to har citay, the Laymen will foight to the death!” Bold stated as he rummaged through his bag to find the frigid flute.

“Which is exactly why we should still go.” Marvell said, “They need reinforcements.”

“They need five reinforcements?” Ben scoffed, “They need five hundred!”

“We aren’t going to the front line.” Fetch reminded them all, “That was never the plan. We are going to the palace – what’s it called?”

“The Cloches, lad.” Bold said, finally victorious in finding the recorder, he raised it above his head like it were a trophy. Then his demeanor changed back. His brow furled and his face fell into a frown, “And oi don’t know whot you saw, but whot oi saw, the Cloches looked loike the godai front loine, mate.”

“You’re trying to wimp out now too!” Fetch recoiled, snatching the flute from the dwarf, “You of all people should-”

“Aye, lad!” Bold grabbed the instrument back, glowering, “Oi’m goin with ya.” Then he gestured to the others, “But they don’t have to. Oi’m marly mehkin you reckon with the fact that they meh not wanna. None of y’all have saen a revolt go wrong. Oi have.” He shared his glare with the rest of the group, “Evaryone doies. It is kill or bae killed.”

“Oh,” Fetch rolled his eyes, “I thought it was all fun and ga-”

Bold whacked the humanoid dog in the back of the head, having to jump up off the ground to get a good angle on it. As Fetch, doubled over, Marvell surprisingly stepped into defend the young hound.

“We may not have been through what you have,” she said, “but we have a good idea of what we’re getting ourselves into. The bottom line is, if we don’t stop that Queen, then that revolt will go wrong...or wronger. If we stop her, then there is a chance...a chance for something somewhat better.”

“Aye.” Bold agreed, but then he pointed the flute at Ben and Lenga, “Are y’all readay to tehk thot chance? Oi want you oll to bae readay far anaythang.”

Lenga gulped.

“I don’t know what to tell you.” Ben admitted, scratching the hair around his horns, “I know I’m not ready, but I’m ready as I can be.” He shrugged, “I’ll do my best.”

Bold gave Ben the flute and slapped him hard on the back, “Thot’s the best ya con do.”

All eyes turned to Lenga, she asked, “Are you sure I won’t be in the way?”

“No.” Marvell blurted.

Fetch nudged her in the gut but the move hurt his elbow more than it hurt her.

“Lil Lenga,” Bold said, “shar you’ll bae in the weh...until one of us is hart.”

“We’ll protect you.” Fetch assured her.

“And you’ll protect us.” Bold concluded.

“So then,” Ben raised the flute close to his lips, “shall I?”

“Do you know how to play that?” Marvell asked.

Ben lowered it, “Huh, I guess not...do you?”

Marvell shook her head and looked around but only found more heads shaking.

“Do we have to know how to play it or do we just play it?” Lenga asked.

“If it’s magic,” Fetch hypothesized, “then I’m sure you just play it.”

“Give it a blow, lad.” Bold suggested.

Ben shrugged then went ahead and gave it a short, but sharp toot.

“Terrible.”

The review came in a rhythmic tone, as if someone were preparing to embark on a verse of spoken word poetry. Turning around, the five found that this seemed like exactly what was about to happen. The person was human. Like a better looking twin of Fetch. First off, there was no crow eye. His eyes were a soothing dark brown, twinkling a bit even as he looked down at the group, his eyes half closed by how high his cheeks rose to fit the grin beneath. The human was taller than Fetch and brighter too. Rather than wearing dark browns and blacks, he sported bright reds, oranges, and yellows. Colors aside, the clothes weren’t something any of the five were used to. Loose where normal garments were tight and tight where normal garments were loose, untorn, unworn, and unwrinkled – in Batloe, such types were to be expected considering Space City, but the man’s humanity made it odd. That, plus the fact that his hip hop cadence didn’t seem like the cadence of a cyberpunk yuppy.

“Terrible, terrible, terrible,” the man continued, “absolutely unbearable.” He swiped the frozen flute right out of Ben’s grasp, “Like a parable without its moral! Like an ocean without its coral! The notion that such oral summons summons me?” He stabbed himself in his chest with the froot, feigning like he might fall backwards unconscious before breaking out of the spell and spitting more bars, “Deplorable! To whom is it with which I must quarrel?”

Ben looked back at his friends, but each person he made eye contact turned to the next. The unfortunate final person was Bold, with all eyes on him he cleared his throat and spoke.

“Um...his nehm was Eisop?” Bold said.

“Eisop Shell.” Lenga specified.

Suddenly the human’s insidious smile turned into a welcoming laugh. He thumped his chest with a fist and then spread his arms wide, “The pleasure’s all mine! What a treasure to find – no better a kind than a Shell! He never reminds that debtor am I, thus please tell me how I may help!”

A collective sigh escaped the five.

“Mr. Shell said you could get us into the Cloches.” Ben explained.

“The Cloches, the Cloches?” His open arms folded back in as he crossed them over his chest, “Would it be precocious to suspect your intentions atrocious?”

Now the five wished they could have their sighs back as they exchanged awkward glances holding their breathes. They figured the weirdo an ally after their conversation with Eisop Shell in Iceload, but the eccentric nature was beginning to plant the seed of doubt in their minds. Especially when he was loudly rapping out their business – business that certainly not everyone in Batloe would be fond of. Even if he wasn’t the threat, his foolishness might threaten their safety in and of itself. Thus, lying seemed the best option. Fortunately, there was one amongst them that was very capable acting like something he wasn’t.

Fetch simply said, “Yea.”

“Well, well, well, a liar I can tell like a fire I can smell, such dire sin would surely condemn one to hell!”

Everyone resisted the urge to slug Fetch despite having all silently embraced his solution themselves a moment before. New strategies ran through their heads as they wondered what consequences might be coming their way but just before any could step on the gas, the strange man continued.

“But as friends of Sir Shell, I sense no scent of sins to dispel and thus we shan’t dwell on accusations so savage.” The man bowed low to the ground, then straightened up and spun around, “Follow me, my most honest associates, to the passage!”

As the character began to march down the street, the five exchanged wild eyed glances. They certainly didn’t trust their guide, however, they had little alternate options. Had they not just convinced themselves to go ahead with the plan before blowing the flute, they might’ve turned around and walked the other way but instead they staggered forwards like zombies. They’d come too far to give in to their gut. Despite their immense doubt in the prophecy the Emperor had shown to them on God’s Island, they now clung to the thought of it for security.

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Stone draped over the network of rafters that had survived the battle, providing a ceiling for the wounded beneath. The sedimentary ceiling was an upgrade, as the church had long since fallen into disrepair. Christianity was a forgotten tradition in most of Batloe. This specific chapel had been repurposed by Civilists centuries ago. Yet Civilism was a forgotten tradition in Batloe too. There had been more hope for democracy back then. Establishing a “Temple of the Republic” had been an attempt to manifest that optimism into a physical movement but as decades passed, the dream slipped away – until now. In the skeleton of the forgotten shrine, civilist-esque soldiers sought sanctuary.

Rift Miners and Laymen lay side by side, stretched out on blankets and sheets, while their blue-collar comrades did their best to tend to their wounds. Others amongst them, those that had been entrusted with enertombs stolen from the waterworks, managed the ceiling. Their stone solution to the lack of shelter had been half-hazardly constructed and required constant modification. The Batloen’s weren’t alone, there were Sondorans amongst them – casualties and corpsmen – and even a few Mystvokarans that would soon be prisoners of war but for now were in the same boat as their foes.

Dust hung in the air, some stirred up from the debris littered floor and some sprinkling down from the rock roof. It filled the room with a thick musty smell, complementing the musty smell of sweat and overpowering the steally scent of blood. The chamber reverberated with hurried shouts as one nurse hollered over another. Lamentations rose towards the heavens like the songs of wailing monks carrying on in the background, unnoticed. Most medics were already on a mission. All of their senses closed off to hone in on one objective: find gauze, find water, find the stitch kit, find a healer, find Kenchi.

“Farak, farak, farak!” Tenchi swore beneath his breath, not that anyone would notice nor care about an obscenity surrounded by such obscenity, “Kenchi’s gonna kill me.”

“I OUGHTA KILL YOU!”

An icy shock ran down his spine as his eyes whipped around to land on the furious glare of his Captain but that chill was almost immediately vanquished as his gaze dropped to see his little brother by her side. The boy screamed with joy, flying from Wake's grasp to rush towards his big brother as his big brother bolted towards him. Hurdling the wounded and brushing past corpsmen, the two Kou's finally met. Tenchi slid to his knees into a tight hug with little Kenchi and for a brief moment, all was right in the two Sondoran's world.

Then Wake caught up to the two. Despite the fact that the woman wasn't in her armor for once, the Captain looked more ferocious than ever. The burgundy shoulder plate she wore on her left shoulder had been swapped for a bloody shoulder wrap on her right. As her chest heaved up and down from both rage and exercise, the blood splatter continued to spread slowly from the bullet wound. Soon it would no doubt engulf the entire bandage. Wake should not have been standing there, let alone hunting down her boss' kid brother, but it was hard enough to tell the earth elf what to do under normal conditions – there was no chance of reasoning with her while enraged. Though there was little room for her to be indignant about the weight of her position's burden, Kenchi wasn't just her boss' kid brother, he was her honorary nephew. She couldn't be mad as the Captain, but she could be mad as their friend.

As Tenchi and Kenchi looked up from their embrace to watch as Wake's mind raced through hundreds of possible responses, Tou and Tabuh strolled up. The two were painfully unaware of what was going on – Tabuh had come over when she spotted Wake up and about. Having been on the same dragon where Wake had been shot, Tabuh knew the earth elf should not be. Tou, on the other hand, was beginning to put the puzzle pieces of the situation together but Wake snapped out of her temper trance before he could be sure.

WHACK! Wake slapped Tenchi so hard that his arms were instantly torn off his brother as he flopped flat onto his back. His head hitting the dusty concrete added injury to insult. THUNK!

Unfortunately, Wake had used her dominant hand and her dominant hand belonged to her right shoulder. No sooner did the Captain lay into the General than did the Captain double over in pain. Tou rushed forward to the flopped human, Kenchi joined him at the Dragon's side. Tabuh stayed on her feet and tended to Wake – Tabuh being the only one that wasn't aware of what the dispute was about. But Wake quickly cleared up the confusion.

“They ditched Kenchi on a rooftop in North Vare.”

“They did what?!” Her golden eyes grew as wide as the blood blot on Wake's shoulder as she turned from her dragon-squad-partner to glower at the two men on the floor – specifically, to glower at Tou, “*They?*”

Tou looked to the two Sondorans for help. They simply looked away. Tenchi was glad to be out of the hotseat and Kenchi, too young to know he should be mad at his older brother, was glad to be out of the spotlight as well. Tou gulped.

“What were y'all thankin’!” Tabuh shrieked – completely just meaning “you” when she said “y'all”, considering the fact that her glare hadn't glanced away from her Mr. Woodsman.

The Tadloen cleared his throat then told the truth despite knowing it would only further encourage her outrage, “I was worried about you. I wanted to get back to the battle.”

“*Worraed about mae?!*” Tabuh hollered.

“And they say the misogyny is dead.” Wake shook her head.

“Ah don't naed to bae protected, Tou!” Tabuh hissed, her eyes now shrinking as she squinted at him, “Ah'm not a chahld.” Tabuh pointed to Kenchi, “*Hae* is a chahld. Hae naeds to bae protected.”

Tou hung his head and nodded in silence. There wasn't much else to say. She wasn't wrong. He'd known he was wrong the moment he conceded to leave Kenchi there in North Vare. But would he do it again? Probably. And that was the problem. And they both knew that.

Now Tenchi was in the same boat as Kenchi. While older in years, he was essentially the same age as Kenchi emotionally and being in the middle of another couple's conflict sent his consciousness spiraling in search of a distraction. Fortunately, a distraction was passing by. Sniper and Pesh had wandered over to say, "hey" to their comrades. The lumbering beam with a bow and the scrawny chidra with bombs on her belt were all happy and smiles on their way over but they quickly noticed that this was not a good time. Their realization came a moment after Tenchi caught sight of them and as they turned to sneak off as if they were never there, the human called them out.

"Hey!" He interrupted Tou's interrogation and pointed at Sniper and Pesh, "You two!" The two froze midturn as Wake, Tabuh, Tou, and Kenchi's eyes all fell on them.

"That's who we should be berating right now!" Tenchi got up to a sitting position for the first time since the slap, "They came with Einna – Einna who betrayed y'all, us, and the Laymen!"

"The Dragon's got a point." Wake agreed.

"This ain't over." Despite the comment, Tabuh switched gears with the rest of them.

Tou got to his feet, just in case another betrayal was in the cards.

"We're just Golden Dagger!" Pesh raised her hands, looking to the stoic Sniper for support but he was paralyzed and slack jawed. Turning back she continued, "We're hired hands, pay-for-blades, had no clue Cootie was Daernar a day ago just like y'all, Civs!"

"Did Einna hire you to defend him from us?" Tenchi pressed.

"Did shae tell you what shae was gonna do?" Tabuh added.

"No, nudding!" Pesh protested, turning to Sniper again but this time nudging him, "Help me out here, Civ!"

Shaking his head like a wet dog, Sniper snapped out of whatever trance he was in.

"The mission began way back in Manaloe." Sniper explained, "We were to travel to Sondor to gain use of the Globework." He nodded to Kenchi, "That led us to working with the Kou Warriors – before the Darkblade was involved." He looked back to Tabuh, "Einna never told us she had any plans for the Darkblade." Sniper shrugged, "We were told to obey orders of the Captain and the General."

"Dat we did, too." Pesh noted, "Ask da troops, we slayed."

Wake grumbled, "We heard..."

Tenchi crossed his arms, staying put on the floor but sitting cross legged next to his brother.

Tabuh asked, "Do wae know where shae took Cootae? Y'all chased her down, raht?"

"We know." Tou sighed.

Tenchi nudged Kenchi, who said with a smile before realizing it was bad news, "Pyramid." He frowned, "Atlas can track him."

Someone somewhere was suddenly startled by the animatronic head coming alive to say, "The one and only." but Atlas was not amongst them at the moment so there was no interruption for once.

"Farak me." Wake gasped, "He'll get absolved."

"That'll start a war." Tabuh stated, "Assload will--"

"Start a war?" Tenchi scoffed, "Where were you today? We should start a war!"

Tabuh raised her hands in defense, “Ah’m not Assload-”

“Then stop acting like it!” Tenchi barked.

Tabuh’s hands dropped. Defense was over, now came offense. Tou stepped between them, but his stern gaze was cast on Tenchi. Tenchi stopped attacking Tabuh but kept rambling a raving, getting to his feet as he continued.

“Caleros will have hell to pay for this.” This time he gestured to the heavens instead of at Tabuh, “The Empire doesn’t care about Sondoran lives – even when they’re in an allied Clan – they care only about the subjects of their kings and queens.” He spat on the dusty stone then pulled a cigarette out of his pocket. Pinching it in his mouth, he turned back to his audience, “The Mystvokarans weren’t just killing our curlheads and crashing our zoomers – they were killing Batloens. Killing a lot of them. A lot more than one.” He struck a match and lit his stoge, “That Cootie-cat killed one Iceloadic.” He shrugged, “Caleros just helped kill thousands.” Exhaling smoke, Tenchi concluded, “I don’t care who Cootie killed and I don’t care if that nellaf’s brother ever sees the otherside of the Cathedral walls – Caleros will pay or Iceload will.”

“Not my favorite take,” Wake scowled at Tenchi before lightening up, “but he’s got a point. The Empire will be furious.”

“What’ll happen?” Tou asked.

Everyone chuckled a bit, admitting to be just as clueless as Tou.

“Whatever’ll happen, it’ll happen after the dust settles.” Tabuh stated, “It’ll happen after tomorrow.”

“Selu to Daernar, I say.” Tenchi crossed his arms again.

“Saelu to the Laymen.” Tabuh countered.

And though Tou didn’t say it out loud, he thought instead: *Selu to us*. For they might not live to see “what’ll happen” if tomorrow wound up being anything like the current day had been. But before anyone could continue trying to surmise the future and dwell on imagined fates – Wake keeled over. The drama would have to wait. The wounded needed attendance. Blame and shame was a waste of time midwar.

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“Told you so.”

“Can all fishfolk see the future?”

Sallis sat down opposite his neighbor. The two mirrored each other’s posture: criss-crossed legs, hands on their knees with their palms up. Sallis’ violet eyes met Paud’s dark blacks. The fishfolk licked his eyes then answered.

“Only my sister.”

“Are you a Gill?”

As if the first lick had been unsuccessful, Paud responded by licking his eyes again.

“You’re not a Gill.” Sallis concluded, “The Gills were all killed.” Despite his claim, he still implored with his eyes and finally contradicted with his voice after his neighbor refused to say otherwise, “That scar across your chest, is it metal?”

Had Paud possessed eyelids, they would’ve lowered with boredom, instead he simply bowed his head to break eye contact, symbolically bowing out of the conversation. But prisoners

have such little sovereignty they don't even retain rights between one another. With only bars of steel to separate them, Paud would have to listen to the moleman in the cell next to him.

"Crimpsin tiad," Sallis cursed, looking away as well. He rocked onto his back and uncrossed his legs. Looking up at the ceiling of his cell as he lamented, "I figure it would help you out as much as I if I knew whether or not my pyramid partner had blood of steel before said blood is drawn tomorrow in the arena."

They were no longer in the cells they'd first met in. The vertical dungeon on the northern side of the Rift had been effectively eradicated. Pyramid ultimately being the plan, the compliant prisoners had been relocated before he ground dragons burst through the facades of prison cells. Their holding cells were located beneath the arena. Sallis winding up in the cell next to Paud eliminated all doubt of coincidence for the Layman. They were putting him next to the fishfolk for a reason. Their – with they being the corrupted Crown – reasons tended to be detrimental towards Sallis but Paud had, at least before, seemed to warm up to him. Sallis suspected the fishfolk might have been employed to betray him, but had seen that the fishfolk had also been encouraged to protect him and he desperately sought to discern which option the Aquarian was leaning towards.

Paud could sense that was what Sallis was fishing for. He'd been reluctant at first, holding out to see if he did want to throw his lot in with the Layman in the middle of the match if things were going well. If Sallis and who ever else he joined leagues with died in the first minute, Paud would've preferred the opportunity to have alternatives available. However, his sister had sent him a vision quite clear. Somehow saving Sallis was wrapped up in saving Cassandra. His reluctance was eroding, but the veteran Gill was a lot more of a water trader than a leap of faith.

"The Princess wants me to protect you." Paud stated, "The Queen wants me to kill you."

Sallis was surprised, not by his confirmation but by the fact that Paud was actually divulging. He asked, "And you will?"

Paud subverted, "How do you play Pyramid?"

"You ever seen, listen, or read?" Sallis asked.

Paud licked his eyes.

"Selu to us." Sallis muttered. He sat back up and met his neighbor's gaze. After a deep breath, he explained, "There are pillagers and builders. At the beginning, builders form a line-"

"How do we pick teams?" Paud asked.

"They pick themselves in Batloe." Sallis quickly replied before continuing, "In the middle there is a pile of slabs. The line of builders pass the slabs down the line and start building-"

"Anywhere?"

"Yea, anywhere." Sallis rolled his eyes, "Listen, Gill, I don't know how they do it in other countries but in Batloe it is hectic. It is less about the game and more about murdering each other."

"So why don't we just murder the others?" Paud asked.

“Because we still have to build our pyramid to win!” Sallis snapped.

Paud licked his eyes.

Sallis took a deep breath then continued, “The biggest pyramid wins. Once everyone but one team is dead, it is over. Biggest pyramid wins. If everyone that helped build or defend the biggest pyramid is dead, no one wins. If everyone that helped build or defend the biggest pyramid starts fighting amongst themselves, the game isn’t over.”

“What do pillagers do?”

“What do you think?”

Paud pulled back his lips to snarl, “You want me on your team or not?”

“They pillage.” Sallis begrudgingly continued, “They try and interfere with the assembly lines at first – sparring with other pillagers – then they try and interfere with other pyramids. Stealing slabs or just killing builders. It’s pretty simple.”

“You build.” Paud said, “I pillage.”

“Yea,” Sallis gave a half chuckle, “I figured.”

“How big of a team do we need?” Paud asked.

“A lot bigger than you and I. Most of us won’t make it.” Sallis said.

“Most folks die?” Paud asked.

“Yea. Plus, you have to be standing at the end. If you can’t stand, it doesn’t count. Back to the dungeons for you.” Sallis said.

“I’m not concerned with being beaten.” Paud scoffed.

“It isn’t all up to skill, Aquarian.” Sallis warned, “There are monsters and maelstroms too.”

Paud’s scoff didn’t stop, “In the desert?”

“Not literal maelstroms.” Sallis groaned, “Tornadoes, hail, earthquakes – the Arcane Sentinels pick a crazy obstacle and fling it at us. It could be anything.”

“And the monsters?” Paud asked.

“Whatever they have in storage.” Sallis shrugged, “Dragons, barrens, whatever. One year they even threw cubers at the prisoners.”

“This country is ridiculous.” Paud said.

“Says the Aquarian.” Sallis countered.

“Fair enough...my name is Paud.”

“Paud...”

“Gill.”

“Sallis.”

“Sallis...”

“Sallis Drakken.”

“Sallis Drakken,” Paud began, “do you think your Laymen will beat the Queen?”

“Paud Gill,” Sallis replied, “I think the Laymen have as much chance as us tomorrow.”

“Well then,” Paud licked his eyes then extended a hand through the bars of his cell, “selu to the new regime!”

Sallis shook it.

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With one slap, Zaria started the amber lid spinning. It unscrewed itself and hopped off the nozzle and into her other hand. Tipping the bottle over, she poured it into a tin cannister filled with ice. Jerking the bottle back upright and screwing on the lid, she turned to the next: lo triple. It was an odd name for a common orange liqueur that, when mixed with alcohol made from the spikey succulent plant and a little bit of lemon juice, could combine to create an uthemarcrita. She cut one lemon in half and squeezed out each half, one at a time, into the cannister then did it again. Pausing, she stared at the shaker. Then she cut one more lemon and squeezed both halves in. Satisfied, she popped the other half of the canister on top, smacked it to secure it with its bottom half, then lifted it over her shoulder and shook until both tins were nice and frosty. Lowering the shaker, she thwacked it with the palm of her hand to jostle the top cannister loose then took it off. Four round bottomed glasses awaited her concoction. She filled each equally.

Cowboy started whining as soon as he heard the thwack of the shaker being opened. The Admiral stooped down to deliver the first drink to the first mate. Without so much as a thanks, Cowboy shoved his snout into the glass and began to lap up the cocktail. With two hands she took the other three out to the balcony.

As she distributed them, there were no cheers. Just quiet sips as they stared out at the glass cupolas of the Cloches. The nine domes created an X with the center being Uthemarc's Cloche. The tallest glass dome, it loomed over the Mosque of the Magis – maybe only two hundred yards from where they stood now if they left the deck in a zoomer and crashed through the glass façade. Their balcony leaned over the street – Wall Street – that circled the wall of the Cloches. Even the barricades below were just a notch further from the Cloches than the three on the balcony, stationed in the intersection of the streets perpendicular to Wall. They were so close, Princess Daffeega considered all the magical options available with which she might be able to reach out to her sister – how she might be able to broker peace with the Sacred Tongue – but, after another sip of sweetened tequila, she forbid such thoughts for another moment or too. This was not her peace to broker.

“The Sondoran mercenaries still have one hundred men and women ready to fly.” Lalmly – the only one without an alcoholic beverage, the only one left plotting, “Not to mention the three uncorrupted ground dragons-”

“Who combined with the two ground dragons still on the side of the Cloches equals five ground dragons now refusing to fight any further.” Zaria reminded her partner.

“Better off widdout da ground dragons anyways, Civ.” Sharp stated, “We can't destroy da Cloches.”

Lalmly accepted that defeat but forged onwards, “We posture with the Kou Warriors – make it look as if they plan to stop Pyramid. Meanwhile, we flood the Catacombs with Laymen

and Miners – the Princess knows all the pathways. We can take the palace while the palace plays tag with the humans’ zoomers and curlheads.”

Again, the bar tender butted in to put down the plan, “Pyramid is popular in Batloe.”

“Not today it ain’t.” Sharp protested.

“Not for the Laymen of Tlow-Vare, but for the rest of Batloe?” Zaria asked.

Sharp conceded and sipped his drink.

“The Queen plans to paint Pyramid as an olive branch to preserve the peace while the vote is counted.” Zaria sighed as she added an asterisk, “Supposedly counted.” The earth elf shook her head, “The people need to heal anyways.”

“They won’t wait.”

That was the first they’d heard from the Princess on the issue. The three others turned to recognize the leader of their little troop. After all, even if she hadn’t been the Queen’s sister, she was the only true Batloen there. Certainly the only one the people of Tlow-Vare felt any loyalty to that stood on the balcony. The leaders of the Laymen and the Miners had declined their invitation.

“There is a reason Bru and Blade aren’t here.” Daffeega stated.

“Then what are we doing up here?!” Lalmly yelled.

Daffeega raised her hand. In it, her cocktail – or what had been her cocktail, she’d already drained the glass – clinked, “We can’t lead this one. You saw what happened today. Our interference may have saved lives. May have saved the movement. *However*, it also justified foreign invasion and the absolute eradication of Vare – and I don’t mean that in the sense that it *actually* justified calling in a Mystvokaran battalion and setting corrupted Ground Dragons upon the civilians, but to foreign powers or even to the folks that live outside of the capitol, it gives folks enough reasonable doubt to believe whatever narrative Suicine concocts if the people fail.”

Sitting down her glass, Daffeega turned from her friends. She grasped the bannister and looked out at the Cloches. Beyond the Cloches, one could faintly make out the edges of the Pyramid Arena. Clouds were unfurling above it. Slowly they spread like a carpet unrolling towards the palace. It seemed they would soon shade the barricades of the Laymen and Miners.

“Let Bru and Blade lead the storming. We can’t control it.” She said, “It is up to fate.”

“Must we just sit and watch?” Lalmly asked.

“No. Once they start, we’ll join.” Daffeega assured Lalmly, “I want to be there when they reach my sister...but we’ll let them take the lead.”

“Fair enough, Princess.” Zaria agreed.

“Donum.” Sharp muttered.

He didn’t have to explain his curse. The others noticed too. Those clouds weren’t natural clouds. They carried with them the sound of music. It was a strange tune, similar to that of the Laymen’s Anthem but without the words and with loud abraisive drums in its place. Rather than darkening like the sea or fluffing bright and white like clouds on a sunny day, the clouds began to change to the color of the sands of the desert – for they then began to depict the sands of the desert. Not just any desert, however, but the desert sands that filled out the court of the Pyramid

Arena. They could even hear the audience in the stands, their roar echoing down from the heavens like some sort of haunting chant ushering in the endtimes. That excited uproar was met with outraged clamor in the barricades of Vare.

Never before had the poor of Tlow-Vare been able to watch Pyramid. It had never been broadcasted like this in the past. And none could do anything but crane their necks and watch in horror as they waited to see the cells rise and their fellow comrade be forced to fight for his life amongst their brothers and sisters that had been trapped alongside him in dungeons of the Rift. Pyramid had begun.

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Unscrewing the lid wasn't easy. The old flask nossle was half rusted and half gunked from a dozen or more liquors that had more sugar in them than they let on. Aside from the physical hindrance, there was an emotional one aswell. It had been years since he'd unfastened the lid of the flask and not emptied its contents down his gullet. Instead, once he got it open, Cootie turned it upside down and let the poison pour to the dusty arena floor.

Daernar was alone. Einna had left him there – hidden under the stones that would be used to build pyramids in the morrow. Slabs of squared rock formed a sort of igloo around him, imprisoning him in the middle. He sat on a makeshift throne of stone, pouring booze to paint the pale step stone beneath his feet. It hadn't been his choice to burn the olive branch. He'd been ready to surrender to Iceloadic justice, but Einna hadn't allowed it. She didn't really explain herself to Daernar either and he was left wondering that if he were to turn himself in once the light of Solaris began to peak through the cracks in his rock castle, would she stop him again?

Tossing the empty flask to the ground, he pulled another one out of his right boot. He unfastened the lid and began to pour it out. His eyes watched a puddle form in the now liquor-logged dust. From the puddle, a dark shape began to rise. It looked almost like the magic of a shadowmancer, but Daernar recognized it for what it was immediately. The darkness cradled a face, danced across shoulder blades, and bound down the back of the figure of a woman. She rose from the booze and stretched as if having just escaped some confined space. She was dressed formally. A dress as dark as her long flowing hair, as black as the twirling vines of nellaf stripes that lacerated her skin. The gown clung to her body, revealing the shapes beneath despite covering as much skin as possible – the sleeves stretched to her wrists, the hem piled up in the puddle where it seemingly melted in with the alcohol, and the collar rose up to tickle her chin which she pointed defiantly in the air.

Looking up to try and meet her gaze, she avoided his eyes. Staring over him as she shook her head, "You haven't changed."

Daernar sunk deeper into his slouch. He tossed the current flask, then pulled a new one out that had been wedged between his back and his belt. As he unscrewed the top, the woman turned away from him. Her voice echoed as if the little igneous igloo were a cave.

"You're still the man that killed me, not the man I married."

Her words hit him like a physical blow. His hands went numb and the flask fell from his grasp. Trembling, he fumbled with a pouch on his hip. Once he finally unclasped it, he pulled out another flat container of liquor. Lizara was looking at him now, though his eyes no longer sought to meet hers.

“I’m sorry,” she sighed, “I’m still mad.”

Her mercy was far more painful than any fury she could muster. Again, Daernar lost control and dropped the flask. It clanged off the other and splashed into the pool. The two containers drained quietly.

Daernar clenched his eyes shut and blurted, “Forgive me, La-”

“HA!” She couldn’t help but be overcome by anger oncemore as the belligerent bastard before her bumbled about, “Forgiveness is for the dead.” She whirled away, kicking one of the metal flasks though her foot simply passed through it with no effect. She remarked, “A lot of good it does us...Atonement.” She turned back to her husband, pointing her finger at him. The gesture hit as if she’d lobbed a spear. He was yanked from his slouch, his back pinned to his jagged throne. She continued, “Atonement is what you need and no one can give you that but yourself.”

He nodded. His eyes meeting hers for the first time, desperately seeking some sort of absolution through her rage. He groveled, “I should surrender to-”

“BY THE GUARDIANS, DAER!” Lizara crowed, “For what? Your as good to me on a bar stool as you are in a prison cell! You-”

“-Adnare.” The name slipped off his lips as a whisper.

Adnare Darkblade was their son.

Though she acted as if she couldn’t believe his suggestion, Lizara was not in the least bit surprised. This was exactly what she was talking about in the first place. She rolled her eyes and turned away from the man, “Killing your father did you a world of good. Go ahead and subject our son to the same trauma – it is a family tradition after all.”

Rising from his seat, Daernar drew his sword. Lizara didn’t flinch nor turn to face him. Kneeling in the puddle he’d poured, he jammed the pommel of the blade into the dirt so that the tip of the blade stood upright – near his throat.

Staring at her back, he suggested, “I can end it right now. Save our son from my fate.”

Her shoulders sagged, “I didn’t marry a coward.” Though such words could seem cruel, she meant them earnestly. She was mourning, “The man I married still exists – at least in some part of you, Daer. Otherwise, you would’ve joined me two years ago.”

Daernar bowed his head. His jaw was so close to the blade, he could vaguely feel its point on his cheek. Lizara turned around. She knelt before him and stooped just low enough that she could catch his fallen gaze. Grabbing hold of his eyes, she straightened back up and he mirrored her posture.

“Surrender to Solaris.” Lizara said, “Give your life to Mystakle Planet. Put my avengers’ rage out of your head, revenge is as worthless to me as forgiveness is to you. Justice is a cheap redemption, Daer, it would hardly cover a fraction of what you must atone for.”

He stared at her. She looked so real. And he was sober – how was it that she only came to him when he was sober? His head pounded for a moment and he flinched. When he opened his eyes again, she was still there. Knocking the claymore aside, the widower reached out to his wife.

She recoiled from his advance. Jerking back and then disappearing altogether. All that was left in her place was an echoing whisper.

“Atone.”

Chapter Twenty-One: Pyramid

Ben lit the tunnel. Holding the elgroom over his head, fire danced along the top as if it were soaked in oil. They'd been following their sing-songy guide for a while but hadn't seen much anything of difference. There had been nothing but darkness and the damp smell of clay to distract them from the incessant singing of the human in the flamboyant suit. The songs were dreary too, as they reiterated to his followers that the tunnels they traversed were an elaborate network of crypts. The hymns had the five starting to become jealous of the dead. There was only so many times someone could rhyme tomb with Catacomb before it began to alleviate any sense of self preservation. Had they passed an open grave, there would be a mad scramble to claim it.

The only one able to find any sort of distraction was the shadowmancer. Fetch couldn't keep his eyes off the walls. Beyond the walls there were more walls. Rather than consisting of one piece, like the sides of the cavernous tunnel, these were segmented like the walls of a log cabin. Yet there in lied the mystery because Fetch knew there weren't enough trees in Batloe to reinforce the cave walls with logs but the oblong blocks glowed in his crow eye like old wood. The shine was faint, even a notch fainter than a still growing plant. The light emitted from the amorphous shapes was like that of a dead body after it had been stripped of its bone and shadows.

"...The poor aren't allowed anymore – for they can't afford." Their guide chimed, "They say goodbye over there in Tlow-Vare then leave their dead in the Crown's care."

"Farak me!" Fetch yelled, nearly jumping out of his shoes, "Those are the graves? Those aren't graves!"

"The shadow slinger's scared of a graveyard?" Marvell snickered.

"No look!" He clasped the bearn and pointed to the wall that she could not see through then jerked his hand away and shook it like he'd burnt it on a stove, "I mean..." he looked around at the others but knew they couldn't see either so he finally turned towards their guide, "Come on, you've got to know. They're piled in their like trash."

The Bard simply shrugged.

"What do you mean? They must be marked in some fashion." Lenga pressed.

"Listen, you'd have better luck finding a pin in high grass than your dead relatives in that mess." Fetch shook his head.

"Mass grehves." Bold grimaced, "No better than Vinnum Tow."

"Really?" Ben gasped, looking from the dwarf to the pseudo-human, "There's no way! The Empire would never let them get away with that."

"The Empire in all its glory can not abolish all our worry." The rapper rattled off, "If the truth indeed is gory, there still must be someone to tell its story."

His song went completely ignored.

Fetch pressed his face up against the cold stone façade to get his crow eye as close to the otherside as he could, "godi..."

"What?" Ben and Lenga chimed.

"They've been harvested." Fetch said.

"Harvested?" Marvell nearly gagged.

"Mansars." Bold stated.

“Not a scent of bone nor a sight of shadow.” Fetch elaborated, turning back to his comrades, “Someone has a city’s worth of bone and shadows up there.”

“There’s no way the Empire would let-”

Fetch cut Lenga off, “You better hope it’s the Laymen cause if it’s the Queen...”

Bold disagreed, “Whichevar soide raises the dead, the Empahr will come far them.”

“After the bloodshed.” Marvell countered.

“Aye,” Bold sighed, “Tow...”

“I feel like this means we should be walking faster, not standing around and talking. Yea?” Ben asked, his hooves click-clacking as he shifted in place.

“Right.” Fetch nodded, “So...”

The Bard was gone.

“Farak us.” Marvell cursed.

“Language!”

The five jumped so high they nearly smashed their heads. Marvell’s horned helmet got stuck in the ceiling, leaving her snatching for it while also trying to spot the mysterious interrupter. He was quite quickly spotted by Bold, considering the fact that Bold was only a foot taller than the little lad. Bold grabbed him by the shoulders reflexively. He nearly released the man reflexively as well, embarrassed with his aggressive response, but then it set in that this man must’ve been wandering behind them for quite a while and was very likely up to no good. This assumption only became more convincing when Ben’s elgroom shone across a limp, cone of a hat and long, curly beard.

“Knome!” Bold bellowed.

“Excuse me!” The Knome snapped, wiggling out of Bold’s grasp as his face contorted into a snarl. He retrieved the wheelbarrow he’d dropped. The trough was big enough to fit five Knomes, but considering the size and shapes of the bundles within, it appeared that it held two Batloens instead.

Bold backed up but Fetch stepped in, “How’d you do that – sneaking up on us!”

“And why!” Marvell chimed, cradling her helmet.

“Thought you’d be happy to see me.” The Knome lamented.

Turning away from the five he started to walk down the dark hall with his wheelbarrow. The others exchanged glances. Ben and Lenga were the most sympathetic to Knomes so they were the most concerned. They knew they didn’t know the Knome – they would’ve recognized Unlucky – so the Knome must’ve meant something else they should be happy about. After realizing that, they quickly realized that in the sudden absence of their guide, this sneaky tunnel traveler could be their only ticket out of the darkness of the Catacombs.

“Do you know your way around here?” Lenga asked, her tone softer than an angel’s wings.

“I know my way around anywhere,” the Knome scoffed without changing his pace, not even leaning over to send his voice back. His voice echoed on down the hall away from the five. He continued, “I’m the Undertaker.”

Lenga looked over her comrades and everyone got the clue. They hustled after the Knome.

“They trusted a Knome to manage the crypts?” Fetch whispered, “No wonder the mancens got to it.”

“Well they do live under ground, right?” Ben whispered back, “They’re probably the only ones that could stand living in this darkness.”

“Can you lead us out?” Lenga asked.

“Out where?” The Knome hollered back.

“We’re looking for the Cloches.” Lenga answered.

But Marvell answered simultaneously, “We’re looking for the Queen.”

“Ah, I can take you there!” the Knome declared, though there was a hint of a chuckle underneath his excitement.

Bold spreads his arms wide enough for his fingertips to touch both walls and everyone halted, “Whar? Wae’ve no weh of knowin hae’ll tehk us to whar wae wanna go.”

The Undertaker stopped. He craned his head over his shoulder and smirked, “You’re in the Catacombs now, dwarf, you’re only going where I want you to go. With or without me.”

“I say without him.” Marvell shrugged.

“Think the point is we don’t have a choice.” Ben said.

“Not a fan but the Knome is roight.” Bold sighed.

“We’ve trusted a Knome before.” Lenga pointed out.

“The bodies in his wheelbarrow still have shadows.” Fetch noted, “That’s a good sign.”

“Ah, so you’ve noticed.” The Undertaker said, starting back down the dark tunnel,

“Sorry, these aren’t up for grabs.”

“Who takes them?” Ben asked, “Who takes the bone and shadows?”

The Knome shuddered, but didn’t slow, “I’m taking you to her.”

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Golden light blast them against the back bars of their separate enclosures. After the shock from the suddenness sank in, the next detail of note was one that came from that little voice in the back of one’s head. It was something noticed but not quite expressible: this was not the light of Solaris. Rather than light, in fact, it felt like the atmosphere had simply taken on a shining yellow hue as if they were in the midst of some kind of aurelian fog. The roof had disappeared, replaced by shimmering clouds far above and the floor was rising. While the aesthetics might suggest it, none of those present considered for a second the possibility that they were in heaven. If anything, they’d just entered hell.

As their floors rose, the bars of their cages were left behind. Their cells had become elevators and the platform they were approaching was already in view. A long flat, desert plain. In the center of the sandy court there was a half-hazard pile of rock. The bulbous pyramid of rectangular cubes represented what they would all soon strive to replicate. Between their clinking lifts and the stone mound were a few low lying stages. They were hardly discernable from the dusy field, but the racks that accompanied commanded attention. Weapons decorated these structures, the diversity only neglected one genre: ranged. While the audience would’ve loved to see the prisoners blast one another with blunderbusses, they couldn’t afford to risk said rifles being turned their way. For after the light, the pyramid, and then the weapons, the crowd was the next object of the rising combatants’ attention. The walls that circled the arena rose twenty feet before stopping to form the banisters for the stadium’s front row of patrons. Staggered rows of benches and chairs rose beyond those. Each seat was full and some standing room was claimed as well. Despite the size of the audience, the crowd was a bit quiet for Pyramid. Though many there had season passes, they’d not been able to parade to the show as usual for this match. Instead, they’d fled to the Cloches and been pushed into the colloseum. For once, the Vareans were as afraid of the combatants as the combatants were of themselves.

The only person present not on edge was the individual dancing in the clouds far above. There were so many peculiarities surrounding this man that few witness knew exactly where to start and preferred to look away and chalk him up to be some sort of stress-born hallucination. First off, the man was seated at some sort of organ-zoomer, levitating amongst the clouds that seemingly caged in the strange amber light. Considering the situation, clarification might be necessary – this was a pipe organ, not a biological organ, cradled by a platform that had been armed with both zoomer-esque jet engines and enough pipes to fill the clouded heavens with sound. Beyond that bizarritiy of the machine, the pilot himself was a rare sight as well: a little green man. Many of those fresh out of the Emendation Enterprise had never seen a goblin nor known they still existed, they certainly didn't expect to see one playing dirges over their final hour. The little emerald pianist was dressed in the finest bedazzled three piece suit one could buy, all in separate shades of scarlet. Though the goblin looked nothing like the figure they'd encountered before, both Paud and Sallis turned to one another and said:

“The Bard.”

Their platform shuddered to a stop level with the floor of the Pyramid arena. The floor stopping sent a shockwave up their calves, through their hips, past their ribs, and stopping at their neck where it whipped their heads away from one another as they scanned their peers. There were over a few hundred other inmates. Everyone was doing the same – frozen in place, eyeing their neighbors. Though the Bard still played, those on the field heard nothing but earsplitting silence.

Paud broke it, “Run.”

Once the fishfolk budged, so too did everyone else within the stadium walls. As the convicts charged the weapons racks, the crowd erupted in applause – momentarily forgetting their crisis, they accepted their role as audience just as the combatants accepted their roles of violence. No longer would the Varens think of the uprising outside the stadium and no longer would the prisoners think of the Varens. Pyramid was all that mattered now.

Despite his fishfolk stature, Paud was the first to an armory stand. While molemen – like Sallis – averaged around the same height as the Aquarian, their chidran counterparts were usually at least a foot taller. Thus, shortly after Paud skidded to a halt and hopped onto the platform, seven chidras followed. Before turning to face these potential foes, Paud's dark eyes locked onto a set of gauntlets resting on a shelf that jutted out from the middle of the weapons rack. These were those that had been promised him. His Claws. But they were in exchange for a raw deal. A gift of the despicable Queen. Licking his eyes, he put such thoughts on the back burner and turned to face the arrivals.

They paused too, standing on the edge of the stage like divers debating whether or not to take the plunge a split second before the point of no return. Fishfolk were not common in the deserts of Batloe and Paud was also a more terrifying example of his kind. The silver scar that slashed across his chest shone like magic in the mysterious yellow light of the arena. He snarled with sharp teeth. The chidras exchanged glances. They weren't necessarily comrades themselves – but they could be. The plan was presented and passed tacitly: let's team up with the scary Aquarian. The chidras bowed their heads.

Paud then turned to take his Claws and stepped away from the rack to let his new goons arm themselves. Five molemen had just arrived – one of them Sallis. They hesitated as the chidras had and the chidras, one by one, noticed their new presence. They turned from their shopping spree but didn't move much more than that. Paud stood between the seven and the five. He nodded to Sallis. Sallis nodded to him. Then the molemen joined the chidras at the rack. It

wasn't a good strategy to be picky about your allies in the first minute of Pyramid. All they could do was hope that thirteen was at least the average size, but they certainly couldn't dwell on it. Now armed, they had to rush on to the next stage: forming the line.

Sprinting towards the center of the field, Paud noticed a new obstacle. As Sallis had warned him, there were going to be two great impediments – one in the form of monsters and one in the form of unnatural disasters – and so at first he assumed this was what he was seeing but the closer he got to the pile of cinderblocks the better he was able to make it out. While not a monster, this opponent was a monstrosity. A tall chidra could near seven foot tall, this bloke nearly reached eight. His size alone didn't make him stand out, his color was rare for a chidra and one reason why Paud hadn't immediately recognized the bloke as a being. He was blue. A dark navy, nearly black blue. And he beat Paud to the pyramid.

The two were the first there by a few yards. The big blue behemoth scowled down at the little sapphiric sapien from the sea floor, then he snatched a stone off the stack with one hand. Rearing back, he chucked it at Paud. Paud caught it like one might try and catch a barrel – the stone was bigger around than his rib cage – but he caught it nonetheless. It drove his heels into the sand and slid him back, but did not bowl him over. Pivoting, he tossed the rock to Sallis who was just now arriving behind him.

Others were arriving now too. A dozen or so teams were beginning to form lines around the pile. A few had started to clash, but none had interfered with the two blue bastards eye balling one another – not yet. Sabotage started a little later in the process, most were preoccupied with getting some stones back to their little corner of the court. That and the fact that most were more than happy to let the mysterious Aquarian distract the terrifying giant. Most but not all.

“Join us, giant!” Sallis hollered over the mound.

Instead the giant leapt into the air, clearing the height of the stockpile of stone by so much so that when he landed on the peak, the entire structure shifted.

“Pyramid is for Batloens.” The behemoth growled.

The man bound towards Solaris once more, aiming to smash both Paud and Sallis beneath his boots. The two rushed back – along with everyone nearby – but Paud stopped mid-rush. He saw something: an arm had burst from the pile. The arm was not alone, a body followed. It wasn't as intimidating a figure as the eight foot oaf, but it had managed to grab ahold of the ogre's ankle. Like a cat caught by its tail, the big man's bound was stopped short and he came flopping down on the other side of the stack of stone to land flat on his belly.

Paud licked his eyes and observed their new ally. A fellow foreigner, though not from the sea floor, the man was a nellaf. He was far better dressed for battle than any of the other prisoners. He had a chest plate, a chainmail skirt, armored boots, and was strapped with weapons – including a claymore on his hip – but his shoulder sheath was noticeably empty. Despite lacking his namesake, Paud had a hankering that he knew who this foreigner from the frozen lands was. Daernar Darkblade was a wanted man (albeit off limits to those in the Golden Dagger) and had been on the lam for over a year. Who would have guessed he'd been hiding in Batloe under a bunch of Pyramid bricks toting a Sondoran sword?

The dark eyed fugitive briefly recognized Paud's stare but settled more importantly on Sallis'. He pounded his chest then drew his sword, pointing it towards The Bard high above, proclaiming, “For the Laymen!”

Paud turned back to Sallis. Sallis shrugged. The two turned back and rose their fists, “For the Laymen!”

Then the behemoth stirred. Pitching his legs over his head, the chidra flipped off the pile and onto his feet. With Paud and Sallis behind him and Daernar standing atop the pile before him, he had to pick his fight. He would have picked Paud but their new comrade stopped him again. Daernar had sheathed his sword and heaved a large cobble slab at the giant, conking him in the back of the head. The behemoth turned to snarl at Daernar atop the mound. When he did, Paud shifted to rush forwards and attack him from behind but Sallis stopped the fishfolk.

“Let the nellaf handle the giant,” Sallis pleaded, gesturing to their makeshift assembly line, “we need to win!”

The moleman had a fair point. Already there was disruption. There were twelve loosely defined teams but only ten firmly defined platforms – that left the last two teams to either be absorbed or to attack. This conflict had yet to reach the supply pile, but it was popping off back at the pyramid platforms. Teamless participants saw the big blue behemoth attacking their team and figured that if they were going to be saboteurs, then Paud and Sallis’ team was an ideal sabotee. Eight of the friends they’d met at the weapons rack were transporting the stone, three were defending their burgeoning pyramid against a swarm of looting moles. Their saving grace was the looting team was also busy raiding the neighboring team – so their numbers were split – but still five hooligans were challenging the three defenders of their platform. Outnumbered, the supply chain began to fall apart as the transporters rushed back to defend their allies.

“I’ll defend the line,” Sallis said, “but you’re faster than me. Go back and defend the pyramid!”

Paud had no protestations with this plan and didn’t even stop to confirm. Off he went. Not a moment too soon. As his right foot first hit the sand to propel his body back towards their base, blood spurted out across their platform. He wasn’t close enough to do anything but lick his eyes and watch as a moleman drove a spear through the gut of one of Paud’s chidran comrades. The poor reptilian wasn’t dead yet and his body still defended the cause, refusing to relinquish the weapon that impaled him even as the moleman put a foot on his chest and yanked. This caused the chidra to scream and stopped a fellow builder. The builder tossed his stone into the center of the platform and charged the attacker. Abandoning the spear, the attacker snatched the scimitar his victim had lost and raised it just in time to clang against the scepter of the builder.

Still, Paud was not quite there. This fact infuriated Paud as he saw the fifth member of those aggressing their platform join the fray against the builder. Another spear was driven through the body of another comrade and then both adversaries went back to stomping on their victim’s body’s in ridiculous attempts to retrieve their weapons. By this point, the end of the supply chain near the pyramid platform was abandoning the cause of construction. Seeing two friends having fallen, the three closest dropped their blocks and rushed the saboteurs but Paud beat them to it.

The Shayu Shua soared past his allies just as he used to glide under the sea. Lunging like a frog at his foes, his fists thrust forward with the claws of the Claws extended. They’d gotten their spears out of their victims but they hadn’t gotten them up anywhere near in time to stop the three metal blades extending from the foreigner’s knuckles from penetrating their chest cavities. His perforated opponents gaped and their last breathes burst out of them as Paud’s feet returned to the floor of the court. Yanking the Claws free, the two molemen fell to the ground. He turned to face the three comrades that had ditched their place in line. Their eyes were as wide as the eyelidless fishfolk’s. He didn’t have to say it, they understood. And as they rushed back to grab the stones they had discarded, Paud turned to defend the other members of their makeshift team.

There were three more saboteurs assaulting the two remaining defenders around Paud's platform. In the far right corner, an allied chidra was sparing saber verse saber with an invading mole. Across from this sword fight, in the far left corner of their pyramid stage, an allied chidra was ducking and diving from a mace toting mole and a dual wielding mole blademaker – it appeared this swordsman might've picked up the poor reptilian's weapon for the defender was unarmed.

Stooping, Paud snatched one of the javelins from the cold dead grasp of one of his prior foes and launched it at the enemy. His target saw the toss and dodged it enough to spare his life but not his flesh, the lance struck him just beneath the collar bone, knocked him off his feet and knocked the club from his clutch. This startled the mole with the two swords and gave the chidra time to snatch the mace then turn and face his foe. It appeared this time could've been used more wisely, though, for as the mole turned back and the chidra parried his first blade with the bat, the mole's second blade slid into his belly. Tearing his weapon free of its victim, the moleman turned to receive Paud.

The Batloen brought his brand down as the Aquarian thrust his fist up – the blade slipped between the blades of Paud's Claws but stopped fast against the armored knuckles. With a flick of his wrist, Paud yanked the weapon from the wielder. The wielder took the loss on the chin, already stabbing with his second weapon but just as his victim had failed to take the chance to run, so too did he. The fishfolk assassin didn't even have to deflect the second attack. The left fist in the air, after wrenching the first sword free, came down fast. Like a lion's paw slicing down to dig into the flesh of a gazelle's haunch, his bladed gauntlet came down on his opponents face, splitting his flesh and fracturing his skull before beginning to lacerate his brain. His second sword fell from his grasp before it could collide with the victor.

Paud caught the sword in his right hand before it hit the ground. He tore his left hand from the head of his foe and let the body crumple to the ground. Behind the corpse, the man he'd impaled before had gotten up and was charging – still a few yards away. He would only get a yard closer before being bowled back again. Lobbing the sword at the man, Paud struck him below his other shoulder. This time as he flipped backwards, head over heels, both his arms had been rendered useless.

A cry to his right commanded Paud's attention. Turning, he took a deep breath and sighed. His chidran comrade had bested his foe. It seemed Paud wasn't the only one with some competency defending their platform. The five saboteurs had been repelled (technically, the man Paud had just impaled twice was still alive but he was either unconscious or determined to pretend to be as he remained prone after being struck for the second time). As his chidran ally rushed to check on their three casualties, still bleeding on the floor of their base, Paud looked left where the saboteurs had initially come from.

He took another deep breath but this time his gills did not flare with relief. While five raiders had come to attack their pyramid, they'd been a team of ten or so. The other five had attacked the next pyramid team over. Apparently, that attack had dissolved and there had been a change of plans for now those five moles were marching over from the opposing pyramid platform looking ready to take on the platform with only two defenders. Paud then turned to look to his right. The next team over was seemingly carrying on unperturbed. So much so, they had hands to spare and, after taking a look around, the pyramid platform littered with the dead and dying and seemingly defended only by two blokes seemed like an ideal target. Three chidran combatants were slowly skipping towards Paud and his fellow defender. Paud nudged the man,

interrupting him in the process of giving their fallen their last rights. Looking up, he followed the fishfolks black eyes to see their encroaching demise.

“Donum.” The chidra stated.

Paud nodded.

They then both turned to look towards their supply chain. There were eight still transporting blocks from the pile to the platform, though they too had begun to stop. Like ants suddenly encountering an incoming thumb thirsty to smush, the line began to pile up. Paud licked his eyes, giving himself another split second before barking out some commands – but an earsplitting screech interrupted.

Everyone froze. Both builders and brutes paused. It was the sound of rusty metal gears grinding against old metal chains and corroded gates scraping their way up against the walls of the stadium. The tunnels were opening up. The next clamor that filled the golden haze of the Pyramid arena was not mechanical, it was bestial. Suddenly, the odds of their foes looked as good as the odds of their friends.

Speaking of which, Paud looked back down the line for Sallis – more specifically, for the giant blue bastard and the bizarre black haired fugitive that had decided to take him on. And on he had. After Paud rushed back to defend the platform, Daernar Darkblade taunted the behemoth into a dual on top of the pile of pyramid stones.

Back atop the mound, the giant chidra stooped to snatch two large slabs of stone. The fact that he could lift one in either hand should’ve encouraged Daernar to back off, but it seemed sobriety did not help him make wiser decisions. Having been already knocked off the heap once, he charged it again. With a grunt, the oaf heaved the bolders at the blademaster – one after the other. Daernar skipped to his left. When his boot landed on the rock, the rock shifted. The first bolder soared past him as he stumbled forward, collapsing onto the mountain of blocks. Before he fell flat, he caught himself with one hand and bound back to his right. As he hopped, he could feel the second bolder’s jagged edge comb his hair.

Scrambling onwards on all fours, Daernar looked for the shadow of the savage so that he could keep his eyes on the stones and still keep an eye on his foe. Unfortunately, the shadow didn’t show in the odd, enchanted of light of the arena. He only realized that after looking up – for the shadow surely should’ve been beneath him as the giant eclipsed Solaris above. The big blue bastard had come down the slope to meet him. When he looked up, his face slammed into his opponent’s palm, like a baseball to a mit. Grabbing Daernar’s head as if it were one of the stones, the chidra hurled the nellaf to the bottom of the mound.

The wind was knocked right out of him. He flopped over onto his back gasping for air. Above him, the giant was picking his next two projectiles. Meanwhile, Daernar’s attention was drawn to his right and left. Two molemen had taken an interest to the weakened foreigner. Potentially attempting to garner favor with the obvious champion of the day, they decided to help the big blue man out and finish Daernar off themselves.

Daernar couldn’t help but smirk. His dark eyes switched back to his azul adversary. The chidra had his two heavy stones in hand, moments from throwing, but Daernar threw first. He snatched a dagger from his belt, one in each hand, and flung them at the charging molemen.

THUNK! THUNK!

The knives hit the two in their breasts. It didn’t kill them instantly nor completely stop them in their tracks. Instead, the two continued to lumber forward, their bodies twisting in the air as their extremities went limp but inertia pushed them onward. Their dying trajectory was perfect. Daernar didn’t even have to dodge the slabs slung his way – his two victims deflected

them. The stone knocking their final breathes free and finally rendering them still. As they collapsed, Daernar rose to grin at his foe.

The behemoth spat. The bead of saliva arched through the air, landing on the body of the dead moleman to Daernar's right. The chidra snarled, "I'm going to be the one to kill you, hellbrute."

"Sorry," Daernar grumbled as he retrieved his daggers, "that's my son's right."

"Ha!" The behemoth barked, "What sort of foreign perversion is that tradition?"

"Not a tradition." Daernar shoved the blades back in his belt. "A curse."

His left foot swept dirt out behind him as he bound forwards to rush the slope for another bout with the blue bastard. This time, he drew his sword. Scaling the mound of stones, he didn't bother to watch his feet. He kept his eyes locked on his opponent. The man stooped down to pick up two more stones, but this time he didn't lift them over his shoulder to toss them. Instead, he held them in his fists and waited for the nellaf to join him at the top of the hill.

"How'd you kill your father?" He asked.

Huffing and puffing, Daernar's answer was hardly heard, "I'll show you."

Thrusting his blade forward at the feet of the behemoth, he forced the giant to jump. He jumped high, raising the stones over his head and clapping them together then bringing them down with his body like a Knome jumping to hammer steel on an anvil. Daernar raised his sword to block the bolders but the block only lasted for a split second before the blade gave way and shattered. The giant's two stones smashed the rock step before Daernar. Daernar staggered backwards. The behemoth didn't move.

Beaming at Daernar with a victorious twinkle in his eyes, he asked, "Why did you kill your father?"

Daernar drew two knives from his belt, still bloody from the moles they'd slain, and answered, "To save the Mystvokar."

For the first time since conking the block in the back of the head, Daernar had stunned the chidra. Taking a step back, he realized out loud, "Your father was Raeranad Darkblade."

Hoping to keep the element of surprise alive, Daernar faked as if he were about to throw the dart in his left hand with a forward lunge. The big blue behemoth took another hasty step back. This one didn't immediately find a stone, causing him to lose his balance as Daernar let lose of the dagger in his right hand. The blade caught the man in the thigh, but hardly elicited a flinch.

"You're Daernar Darkblade." The giant remarked.

"So you've heard of me." Daernar reached for another dagger at his hip, "Will you join me?"

It was as if he hadn't even offered. The sapphire scaled colossal continued to simply state facts about his foe as they seemingly slipped into his skull, "You killed your wife."

Daernar took the comment as an answer. With the bully on the otherside of the mound, Daernar took the top. He hardly had the high ground though, now he was simply at eye level with the oaf. Again, he faked a throw – this time starting with his right hand – but the behemoth didn't budge. Daernar faked another throw with his left hand, narrowing the distance between them to arms length when he stepped with the feigned toss. He sliced with both knives at the man's breast, but the man lifted both bolders to stop the blades.

Staring at Daernar over the top of the rocks, words continued to spill out of him as if he were slowly recalling details about his relationship with some old friend, "You killed your wife *and* your father!"

This was beginning to perturb the nellaf. Clenching his teeth as his knives still bore down on the stones of his foe, Daernar forced himself to overcome his frustration at least in words, “I deserve your scorn.”

“Not at all!” The big man bellowed, “I killed my wife and father too!”

“Huh?”

Surprised, Daernar’s arms slackened just enough of a tad that he was forced to dive out of the way as the stones came crashing down. Hopping back another yard, he reappraised his foe. The navy blue bastard beamed back. There was mockery in the creases of the grin, but not a trace of dishonesty. Everyone in the arena had been convicted of some crime. Even under a corrupt regime, sometimes justice slips through the cracks and true evil gets punished. Daernar had gotten away with his sins, but the behemoth before him would not.

The chidra scoffed at the nellaf’s scowl, “What? Are you ashamed of yourself?”

“I am.” Daernar hissed.

“Then lay down your shivs.” The giant raised his two stones, “I’ll exonerate you, hellbrute, here and now.”

“You don’t have that power.” Daernar stated.

“Don’t I?” The Behemoth asked.

Daernar charged. There had been a reason for mercy when he’d seen the man as a potential ally. A giant warrior, rippling with muscles, would’ve been such a waste to slay in a pick-your-own-team death match. However, that potentiality had dried up and died the moment that the large lapis-lazuli lizard turned into a reflection of himself. Now he could transfer the harm he wished upon himself onto the vile vessel before him. He couldn’t help but lick his lips as he engaged his opponent for the last time.

The man brought one boulder down like a scythe slicing at stalks of grain, aiming to clobbered Daernar in his hips and send him flying off the mound. Daernar ducked under the stone as he skidded to a halt and turned his back on the bastard. In that moment, he stood between the behemoth and his boulder. Had the colossal not clutched one in his other hand, he could’ve instantly grabbed Daernar but Daernar was now too close for him to hit with the other rock. It didn’t matter either way, cause Daernar hadn’t stopped moving. As he spun to turn his back on his enemy, he raised his daggers. Holding his right blade out, facing down and his left blade in, facing up, he yanked the right towards his body and extended the left, slicing through his opponents arm like a pair of scizzors. He couldn’t quite carve through the bone, but the weight of the stone snapped what was left of the wrist and disconnected the hand. Daernar continued to slide backwards towards the blue devil. To stop himself and prepare for his finale, he reared forward and mule kicked backward – delivering the sole of his boot into the groin of his foe. As the behemoth flopped onto his back, Daernar discarded his knives and caught the boulder – the severed hand still clinging to it.

Completing his three-sixty twirl, Daernar was facing his fallen foe before the man had landed on his back. The jailbird’s jaws opened to scream as he raised his severed nub before his eyes but before the howl left his jowls, Daernar intervened. Straddling his fellow sinner, Daernar hoisted the stone high over his head.

“For your father.”

WHAM! He brought the boulder down on the blue man’s gaping mouth. He yanked it free from its new cradle then lifted it once more.

“For your wife!”

WHAM! Again he smashed the chidra in the face, squishing the man's skull between Daernar's skull and the stone pillow beneath the victim's head. Up again went the slab and down again it came.

"For my father!"

WHAM! Blood spurted from the mush of a face, squirting up in a spout as if from the nozzle of a fountain. It splattered against the stone as Daernar raised it for a fourth time.

"For my wife!"

WHAM! This time, Daernar left the rock buried in the behemoth's face. The man's severed hand, having remained grasping the boulder, finally fell free. It plopped flat on the rock beside the giant, still twitching and gurgling on the top of the mound of slabs.

Using the back of his wrists, Daernar wiped off the blood that coated his face. Unfortunately, there was already blood on the back of his wrists so he just smeared it around, potentially adding blood where there hadn't been. Nonetheless, he'd gotten it out of his eyes and this was good because there was something he needed to see. In his rage, he hadn't heard the gates rise nor had he heard the bellows of the beasts now joining them in the arena. But now, from atop the pile of pebbles, he saw them.

Their heads hung about as high as the behemoth's had, though their haunches rose higher behind them as their shoulderblades shifted like giant gears turning some machine appendage. Perhaps the monsters heads sagged below their swaggering shoulders because of their gargantuan nature. Unlike most furred beasts, there was hardly any separation from nose to noggin. Their head was the shape of a beer keg, only five times larger – meaning their jaws could likely crunch a steel keg into smithereens. At the corners of their mouths, their beady eyes squirmed around. Their tongues lolled out of their mouths like serpents checking the air as their nostrils flaired to confirm their findings.

"Donum." Daernar cursed, counting, "Ten godi blunt faced bears."

There were ten gates as well, displaced equally around the walls of the arena. This meant that, with any luck, the ten or so makeshift teams of competitors would hold their own and each group would only have to fend off one. Had Daernar not been on a newfound quest for salvation, he might've simply sat tight next to his dying foe and watched from the middle of the stadium as the beasts reeked havoc but alas. Somebody had decided to do the right thing for once. Funny how doing the right thing for once winds up forcing one to do the right thing again – or so at least that's what Daernar thought was funny as he turned to respond to a beckoning moleman.

"Nellaf!" Sallis hollered from the foot of the pile. The poor moleman was practically dancing on his tippie-toes, clutching a slab to his chest as his head spun on a swivel at the sight of the arriving bears. His eyes shot back to Daernar, "If you still stand with the Laymen, then we need you now!"

The poor moleman didn't even know how right he was. From the ground, with help from his short stature, he only had half a clue of how bad it was going back at their platform. Daernar saw the full picture as he scurried down the gravel mound to join Sallis. Five molemen had attacked their left flank – or what was left of it. After threatening the three moles defending that side, two quite eagerly surrendered when they saw a blunt faced bear lumbering out of the nearest gate. As the third protested, the invaders demanded the traitors pay a membership fee and, to the loyalist's dismay, they did so by tearing one slab each from the side of their pyramid. As the two deserters cowered behind their new teammates, their new teammates sent two more molemen to steal stones while the remaining three kept the defender from interfering.

The right flank wasn't fairing much better – one might argue even worse. The team of three chidras defending the right had completely dissolved. Even the team of three offending had abandoned the cause, taking two deserters with them as the third defender was scooped up in the muzzle of the monstrous mammoth the moment it made it to the platform. The fleeing chidras were too scared to even return to a team, instead they ran towards the center of the arena – towards Daernar and Sallis.

Daernar had one more dagger on his hip and he reached for it as they ran towards their platform but Sallis reached out and slowed his hand. With his other hand, he pointed to the blunt faced bear. It was finishing swallowing their former comrade while two other current comrades approached it: Paud Gill and the chidran prisoner that had found the two sabers and defended the platform with the fishfolk earlier. Sallis then pointed at himself and at their last remaining moleman ally, who was still somehow fending off three moles as they covered the retreat of their looting minions.

“Kill that bear!” Sallis commanded.

Daernar gave the deserting chidras one last glare, cursing them with the vulgar gesture of two fingertips jabbing his throat like the fangs of a viper, before turning to his Layman leader and nodding, “Selu to you.”

As the two split to sprint towards their separate agendas, Paud and the chidra faced their own. Though, the two didn't start immediately. They had time while the bear chewed – its head, cocked sideways, watched them with one beady eye.

“What's your name?” The chidra asked.

“Shayu Shua.” Paud replied.

“That's not your real name.” The chidra stated.

“How do you know?” Paud snapped.

The chidra looked down at the two swords in his hand, “My name's Saber.”

“Good name.” Paud remarked.

The blunt faced bear rose its snout towards The Bard bumbling above and swallowed.

“You take left, I take right?” Paud asked.

Saber nodded, “Selu to you, Shayu.”

As their mashed up comrade slid down the gullet of the gargantuan beast, it lowered its maw and the two warriors charged. The beast did not. It held still as if it didn't even see the two hunters skirting it. While the charade didn't convince the two, they didn't abandon the plan. Having flanked their foe, they now cut in with their blades up and ready. That's when the beast budged. Its head went left and its leg went right and its attackers experienced the reverse. Saber, who ran to the left, caught the bear's paw. It hit him like the log of a battering ram. Flipping his shoulders to turn his body so that the pads of its paw could push flat against his chest, Saber was launched through the air back towards their pockmarked pyramid. Paud, who ran to the right, was forced to jump backwards to avoid being snatched between the bloody fangs. Still the snout caught him, but he kept his body away from the gnashing of teeth by firmly planting his feet between the lips and the gums of the bottom jaw while grasping the upper incisors with his armored hands.

It only actually took one hand for Paud to keep the maw from closing, specifically because with his other hand, he continually struck the soft nose tissue that met the upper lip – and his metallic fists weren't just plated, they were bladed. Over and over he struck the bear, eviscerating the poor animal's nostril as he hacked and sliced away at whatever flesh his Claw could find until the monster made its next move: Slamming the Shayu Shua into the sand.

Despite the desire to roar and writhe, the blunt faced bear closed its mouth, turned its head towards the dusty arena floor, then slammed its snout down nose first – crushing Paud against the ground. Paud’s cursed Gill blood made his body more resilient to the pressure but the monstrous weight and muscle arraigned against him meant that it was only a matter of time. He kept stabbing as best he could but it was rapidly becoming harder and harder to breath and the more damage he cause the more determined the bear appeared to be to crush him.

Paud was not alone. Saber had recovered. Charging back into the fray, the brave chidra rushed up to the bear’s side and slid his saber through the gaudy neck of the thing. While such a blow would’ve been a finisher for most, the bear was a giant. The inch-thick blade didn’t even intersect the bear’s windpipe nor esophogus and hardly made the creature flinch – but it did flinch. It flinched enough to bother to batter the poor Batloen away. Raising its right paw again, it palmed his breast and sent him flying backtowards their ramshackled pile of rocks.

However, this time, Saber was not caught off guard – at least not as bad. He managed to still get off another attack. A better aimed and more purposeful attack at that. As he flew through the air, he threw his second saber and it struck fast in the teeny tiny eye of the blunt faced bear.

This time, Saber’s saber rendered a massive response. The beast recoiled in utter agony – releasing the half-crushed Aquarian. Paud rose from the soil as if his ribs hadn’t endured multiple fractures and continued to stab as he had since he first was picked up by the furry snout of the fiend. He sliced and diced the bottom jaw of the wailing ursinae – splintering bone and lacerating flesh – until the creature was able to look past the pain of the sword in its eye as a more excruciating pain was now emanating from what was left of the its bottom jaw. Again, it reared back with its bulbous head and this time, when it slammed down, it didn’t slam down nose first, it slammed down with its top jaw. With little left of a bottom jaw, the large top half of its snout was like an upside down boat and the fangs made it like a jail cell – enclosing the Aquarian and preventing him from accessing any vital organs. The fishfolk could – and did – stab away at the roof of the monster’s mouth, but that wasn’t going to kill it.

What was going to kill it was the spear soaring through the air. The spear struck the beast right in the temple. It chipped the monsters skull but certainly wouldn’t have penetrated the brain had it not been for the weight of the man that had originally thrown it. A second after it penetrated the beasts brow, the sober saint from the pile of slabs arrived. Leaping through the air, despite his seemingly unathletic bodily disposition, he followed the javelin and met its handle mere moments after it struck the victim. With his muscle and mass, he gave it the extra hmph it needed to break through the skull and slip into the brain of the beast. Spinning the shaft, he churned what was left of the creature’s consciousness into mush.

“Help!” Saber hollered.

Daernar relinquished the spear and hopped off the head of the beast. He took one side and the chidra took the other. Crouching low, they lifted with their legs and gripped between the fangs of the giant jaw. Once they got it up, a slimy Shayu Shua rolled out. Covered from head to toe in a thick film of blood and saliva. Paud licked his eyes clean, forcing Daernar too look away.

“That’s the Shayu Shua.” Saber said to Daernar, “I’m Saber.”

“Coot-” Daernar choked on the old nickname, then extended his hand to Saber, “Daernar.”

“Sallis!” Sallis said, joining the trio. He was accompanied by their last remaining comrade, a moleman. Sallis introduced the fifth member, “This Layol.”

The looters had been either slain or scared off by Sallis and Layol, leaving just the five with their pyramid platform. Turning to appraise their project, they sighed in unison. The blocks stolen by their raiding neighbors had finally caused the top of their small mound to tumble. What little amount of slabs they did have left didn't even appear to be worth counting.

Turning, the group scanned the arena to see how they compared to the competition. Ten platforms hosted pyramids. Three of the stages looked no better off than their own, busy battling to the death with their bear. Two were even worse off as the bears had completely conquered the project and were busy gorging on the members of the members scattered around the stones. Three others were bigger than theirs, including the pyramid where the looters had run back too, but only two stood close enough to compete for victory with one another. One of which wasn't too far away. If the Laymen Team stood at midnight on an analog clock, then this larger pyramid rose at three o'clock. Granted, this pyramid seemed to be in the midst of losing its lead on the other. Two bears had descended upon the three o'clock team and – while they were still able to fend the fiends off, they'd had to delay all future building.

The Laymen Team saw the obvious strategy. If they could save the three o'clock team from the bears, then they could team up. There was no salvaging their platform. They needed to join a winning team. But before they could embark on any new plans, a new factor began to fall from the heavens: fire.

Great balls of fire began to fall from the clouds above. Some were as small as the slabs of stone they built their pyramids with and others were closer to the size of the blunt faced bears. They crashed to the desert plain like asteroids. Dust and smoke exploded on impact, spraying glass shards of molten sand. Each impact sounded like a bomb, the thunderous noise shook the stadium. An aroma of sulfur and burning tar filled the golden haze as if they were on some primordial wasteland and not some well manicured sport court. The crowd loved it. The cheers that erupted were so loud that the Laymen Team could no longer hear the jamming of The Bard above them. Though their eyes were now trained on the heavens, they couldn't help but spare split seconds to scowl at the audience.

Then, one of the largest fireballs yet, struck the team at three o'clock's pyramid. The fire obliterated the top stone then seemingly slipped within the triangular structure. The stones rattled and the builders jumped ship as the pyramid exploded. Stone slabs shot out in all directions, pelting players and pillagers alike. While most of the foundation remained, their pyramid had been leveled almost back to square one – still though, the rocks that had been rocketed free did not fall too far to retrieve.

Sallis was still staring at the crowing audience. He growled, "Farak Pyramid. Let's build a ramp."

"A ramp?" The other moleman, Layol, asked.

"To the stands?" Saber asked.

"Aye." Sallis confirmed, then he turned back to point at the eviscerated pyramid at three o'clock, "Let's kill their bears, command their team, and build a ramp into the stands."

Daernar and Paud exchanged dark eyed glances and shrugged.

"Grab a stone and let's go!" Sallis ordered.

As they rushed over, the three o'clock team continued to battle their bears. The team had twelve able-bodied members still up and at it. Two teams of two were busy recovering slabs that had been launched from their pyramid in the explosion, while two teams of four were distracting the two bears. They may have described their actions as fighting or, at the very least, fending off, but they essentially were trading places being brutalized by the beasts.

Paud and Saber arrived first (the fishfolk being the fastest and the chidra being the tallest of the five fighting for the Laymen) and they immediately jumped onto one of the bears – well, they tried to. The beast had a mole in its mouth. The poor lad had been caught head first. The monstrous gnashing teeth were busy trying to split the abdomen in two but, in the meantime, it had been using the dangling lower half of the body as a flailing mace. Swinging its head back and forth, the bear kept the comrades back by threatening to hit them with their dead (or dying) comrade’s legs. This had worked to keep two at bay but a third had braved an attack only to be squashed beneath one of the bear’s heavy legs, their bottom half completely buried beneath the column like appendage. This was what was going on when Paud and Saber arrived and when they jumped to slip their blades into the furry flank of the fiend, the fiend turned. The legs dangling out of its mouth clobbered Paud and Saber. It worked on Saber (this was what? The third time he’d been thrown through the air by a blunt faced bear?) but not on Paud. He dug his claws in to the monster’s snout and held on as the creature continued to thrash.

As an excellent hunter, Paud was a natural at slaying monsters five times his size. Unfortunately, those around him didn’t have as much faith in the little blue man – particularly those of the team they’d just rushed up to. Members of said team weren’t sure whether or not these new comers came in peace but, whether or not they did, their priority was killing the bear. Thus, with the bear distracted while trying to dislodge the Aquarian, the two pyramiders that had been skirmishing with the beast before jumped back into the fray – running up to slice at the face of the creature.

Both idiots missed the bear completely. One got their sword tangled up in the legs of their friend stuck in the monsters maw and the other got their’s stuck in Paud’s thigh. The pain made the fishfolk go completely limp for a split second. Had his Claws not been lodged in the snout of the bear, he would’ve fallen to the ground. Instead he was able to hold fast, even as the idiot yanked his sword free from his flesh.

Blood sprayed from his thigh. This was no normal blood – this was Gill blood. It was a mystical fluid, most similar to molten steel. And so while his wound carterized itself, his blood burned through the fur and flesh of the foe Paud clung to. The monster reared back on its hind legs, shrieking and releasing both the victim in its mouth and the one it had crushed beneath its paw. Then the other three of team Laymen arrived.

Daernar had brought a spear, as had Sallis. The two dropped their stones, grabbed their spears with both hands, and rushed under the beast to stab into its belly. They pushed, hoping to flip the bear over, but there was no budge. Abandoning their weapons, they sprinted in opposite directions as the beast collapsed onto its belly. Layol, the other moleman, had brought two stones and no weapon. He wasn’t very tall or strong so there was no hope for throwing, but that said, he could still smash. As the monster came down, he tossed one stone to Daernar and the two rushed the beast’s head. Sallis joined with a mace he’d fastened to his belt. As they bashed in the bear’s brain, Paud staggered back from the head to take a look at his thigh. Saber had rejoined at this point, eager to also take stock of how bad off his new friend was.

“Shayu-”

“I’ll live.” Paud assured the chidra. His blood was still oozing out. Silver and steaming. Drying on top of itself and searing the edges of the wound. He certainly would be limping until they found a healer if not for the rest of his life. He gestured for Saber to back off and get back to work with a flippant wave of one armored hand, “I’ll live if *we* live.”

Daernar, Sallis, and Layol were still bludgeoning the beast when Saber and Paud turned from the scene to face the Three-O’clockers that had been fending off the monster to begin with.

The one that had been in the bear's mouth was clearly dead – his body nearly split in two. The one that had been under his paw was doomed for sure. There would be no getting up for him, just a slow painful death. As for the other two, they were more scared of Paud and Saber than anything else. One, a chidra, pointed at the other, a mole, to make sure Paud knew who had stabbed him. That said, the molten steel hardening around the chidra's blade suggested otherwise.

Paud limped towards them as Saber said, "We're here to team u-"

Paud punched his three knuckle blades through the head of the chidra. The Claws shot through the back of the head as if the skull had been made of paper and not bone. His thrust was so strong it picked the reptile off his feet then Paud slammed him to the ground. His blades slid into the sand before he was able to wrench them free of his victims head. The mole beside the man fell onto his own ass in shock.

"Now," Paud growled, "we are here to team up."

Clenching his jaw so as not to critique his comrade, Saber stepped between Paud and the fallen mole and offered him a hand, "Get back to building, we got the last bear."

The mole took the hand and got to his feet though as he slowly stumbled towards the stones that had been blasted from their pyramid, he kept Paud in his peripherals.

Daernar, Sallis, and Layol had finished obliterating the cranium of the carnivore. Daernar joined Paud and Saber in charging the second bear, while Sallis and Layol turned to the rest of the Three O'clockers, many of which had paused in their process to figure out whether or not they'd gotten rid of one fiend only to face far more formidable foes.

"We are the Laymen!" Sallis proclaimed before proposing, "Stand with us!"

The chidra organizing the pyramid rebuild rolled his eyes as he adjusted a newly delivered slab then folded his arms and addressed Sallis, "Or die?"

Sallis nodded but didn't gesture to his weapons. Instead, he gestured to the fire falling from the heavens, the bear his comrades were combatting, and the remaining contestants around the arena. He said, "Or we all die."

The chidra beckoned to his comrades to keep building and responded, "Then let's win."

Now Sallis rolled his eyes, "Forget Pyramid. We need to build a ramp into the stands--"

"Forget Pyramid?!" The chidra crowed.

"The Laymen have taken Vare, the Cloches is next. We'll be slaughtered like cattle if we're still here when the Queen realizes she's lost!" Sallis explained, approaching the foot of the pyramid.

The chidra scampered down a few blocks. Two builders joined him, brandishing their weapons. Sallis stopped in his tracks. His shoulders sagged with exasperation.

"We have to escape!" He pled.

"We'll be slaughtered like cattle either way." The chidra retorted, "We have to win."

"Th-" Sallis stopped.

Not only was the chidra no longer listening, he was no longer listening to himself. A new noise had captivated all those within the pyramid. A noise that made the murderous meteor shower seem little more than salt on the wound. A noise that made the bellowing of the bears seem like an after thought. There was not supposed to be a third surprise in Pyramid – but there was also not supposed to be an assault on the capitol. The day was ripe with surprises and here came yet another. Though none present had ever heard such screeches, they all knew what sort of monsters were responsible: brooks.

In the center of the arena, the pile of spare stones had disappeared. Apparently, the mound had been on a platform – much like those platforms that initially lifted the competitors into the competition – and while no one was watching, it had descended beneath the court grounds. Rather than rising, it remained lowered. It was from that hole in the ground that the sounds of the serpents rose. By the time the Laymen and the Three O’clockers caught wind of the wailing, the reptiles had already reached the top of the mound and begun to leap out of the pit and onto the level ground of the Pyramid Arena. Brooks were longer than the average blunt faced bear, stretching thirty feet from head to tail, but they stood lower to the ground, crouching with their elbows up like alligators. Their scales were a toxic green in the golden haze of the arena. Their bodies twisted and bound like cats. There were ten in all. They prowled around the circular hole, taking in the view of the remaining bears and prisoners, hissing and spitting at The Bard above as they paced. While Pyramid wasn’t necessarily fair to begin with, it certainly wasn’t fair now. Brook scales were harder than most metals. Impenetrable to most blades. There was nothing on the weapon racks that could pierce them. In the arena, as in nature, the brooks were apex predators.

The Three O’Clocker chidra hopped down the slope to clasp Sallis on the shoulder, yanking the Layman’s attention away from the monsters now prowling about. He said, “Tell us what to do.”

Sallis clasped the man back, “We need to build a ramp.”

Meanwhile, Daernar, Paud, and Saber had just finished slaying the other blunt faced bear when the roars of the next round rocked the arena. Rather than turning and seeing the lethal lizards leaping up from the hold in the center of the court, their eyes were first drawn to a shifting gate. The bears had all come from the gates that were staggered around the façade of the stadium wall, but only one of those gates was rising now and it was not where the screams of the scaled serpents was coming from though there was something coming from the now open tunnel.

Their eyes were first drawn to the bearn – the tallest of the five emerging. Decked out in armor from head to toe, she was topped off with a two horned helmet. She wasn’t the only horned one either, though the other’s horns were more ram-like. They curled back towards his ears. Also, unlike his giant comrade, he was almost completely unarmored. The gmoat was dressed like a peasant, the only non-pauper thing about him was the magic staff in his hand: an elgroom. It was about the same size as his metal plated companion’s two weapons, though hers had blades instead of enertombs. She toted a red battle ax and double-bladed black ax. Despite magicians being prone to under selling their threat level, Daernar, Paud, and Saber would’ve still chosen to attack the elemental gmoat first before facing off against the ax woman.

The next two were closer in size to the gmoat but neither held arms. One was a dark cloaked human, dressed so drearily that one had to immediately presume he utilized some similarly colored arts. The other, a shorter bloke, was dressed like a Layman. Brown britches and a tan shirt with a massive backpack clinging to his enormous shoulder muscles. It was hard to tell if his belly bulged with fat or muscle, it certainly looked like it was at least the former if not both.

Then there was the fifth. She stood out just as much as the bearn had. Dressed in shades of white that glistened aurealian in the golden haze of the arena, she held herself quite different than the others. There was not a hint of peasantry about her, nor a hint of warrior. The violence before her was not her way but it also didn’t appear to scare her. Concern her, yes. Even from a far, they could make out her contorted expression, but it was not the look of someone about to stop and flee. It was the look of someone who could hardly find a place to start. Paud’s eyes

lingered on her, for he immediately fingered her as a healer and his right leg was now nearly useless.

Daernar and Saber tore the Aquarian's attention away from the new arrivals, pointing out the other new arrivals – those that would soon be feasting upon them and their friends. There would be no healing if they were dead. And so they rushed to help Sallis and their new teammates in dismembering their pyramid so as to start building a ramp over by the wall.

Leaving said wall, Marvell, Ben, Fetch, Bold, and Lenga scanned the scene. After a quick glance, the lot all had to fight the urge to take a quick step back into the shade of the tunnel but none did. Not even Lenga, for as Paud had observed, she may have been the most eager to go to work. Almost half the prisoners in the Pyramid Arena had already died and a third was on their way there. As the Headmaster of the Munkloe School of Modern Healing, she'd spent so long rushing towards the wounded she'd nearly eradicated the instinct to fear battle without even knowing it. Princess Lenga was more scared of violence in theory when discussed on the *Unluckiest* than she was in the face of it. There was no time for debate in the midst of war, only time to act.

Lenga bolted for the nearest group of competitors. Fetch snatched her by the arm and nearly yanked it out of socket. Surprise flashed like rage across her bright purple eyes as she turned to face him.

Fetch sputtered for an explanation. Not cause he didn't know why he'd stopped her but because he didn't want to admit why. So instead, he found another reason, "This is not the Cloches."

"But thot," Bold incidentally intervened. He wasn't inserting himself between them to save Fetch from scorn. He was clueless to that fact because he was so startled by another: the fact that, "is the Quaen."

It was the Queen. Queen Suicine Shelba was still sitting in a throne in the stands high above the gold shrowded arena. Surrounded by the Royal Guard, Arcane Sentinels, and Magi, she glowered down at the competition with beady eyes. It was too far away to tell but it certainly felt like she was staring right at them and it sent a chill down Boldarian's spine. Just as this realization captivated him, other observations captivated his companions and sent similar shivers.

"Are those blunt faced bears?" Ben gulped.

"Farak the bears." Marvell gently grabbed Ben by his horns, turning his head to watch one of the giant lizards gobble down a moleman, "Those are brooks." Releasing the gmoat, she turned to the healer and the hound, "This is *not* the Cloches. We should turn around."

"Turn around?" Lenga asked her wide eyed comrades, "We came here to help the Laymen and kill the Queen." She gestured to the stands then to the men and women fighting and dying, "That's the Queen and these people look like laymen to me."

"Do they?" Fetch countered, pointing towards members of the nearest team, "A nellaf and a fishfolk don't look like Batloen rebels to me. Who knows what crimes-"

"That's Daernar Darkblade." Marvell gasped, pointing at the nellaf, "He killed his wife."

"Exactly!" Fetch exclaimed, "Not the sort of guy-"

"Hae was on the list." Bold stated.

"*What?*" Fetch crowed.

"He was." Ben nodded, "I remember seeing the name."

"A wife killer on the list?" Fetch scoffed, "You sure there isn't another Daernar Dar-"

“That’s Paud Gill!” Lenga exclaimed, pointing at the fishfolk, “The metallic scarring!” She jumped up and down, smacking Fetch in the shoulders as she gave in to her excitement, “We studied the Gills’ curse, their blood is molten steal. It causes excruciating pain but does no physical harm while within their flesh, the Gill-”

“The Gill was on the list too.” Bold said.

“So those two are supposed to be Samurai?” Fetch asked, “Even the wife killer?”

“You’re a shadowmancer.” Marvell shrugged.

“And you’re a slave hunter!” Fetch snapped.

“The nellaf nevar had uh troial.” Bold noted, “Bickaring bout it hare and now sartainlay won’t convict him. Lil Lenga’s roight. It’s toime far Paramid.”

“Then where are they going?” Ben asked.

The group they’d been watching – the one with the Icelore fugitive and the cursed Aquarian – appeared to be looting their own pyramid. Scooping their blocks up off their platform, the Pyramiders started running towards them. As one of the moleman neared, Bold called out to the man.

“Whar are y’all goin, lad?” Bold bellowed.

“We’re building a ramp outa here.” The man explained, his purple eyes scanning over the peculiar squad, “Are y’all with the Antipa lot?”

“Aye.” Bold nodded, “Yar with the Laymen?”

The moleman nodded, “The name’s Sallis.”

“Sallis,” Fetch stepped up to stand alongside Bold, “if you’re looking for a way out, then just take the tunn-”

Having turned to gesture towards the tunnel, he saw that the gate had dropped behind them. It seemed they were just as trapped in the arena as anyone else now. Sallis had obviously already noticed the gate had fallen back into place but still he resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Instead, he lingered a moment longer to say, “If y’all want to help, keep the brooks off our backs then join us at the ramp.”

“Great.” Ben muttered, “We get the-”

Marvell slapped him a little too hard on the back and finished his sentence as he gasped for air, “-fun job!”

As Sallis jogged off with his boulder to join his team at the wall of the arena, Lenga beckoned to the fishfolk. The poor man was hobbling with the wound in his thigh and the weight of the rock cradled to his chest. At first, his black eyes seemed not to notice the water elf but when Bold rushed forwards with her and slipped a large tome from his backpack, the Aquarian turned their way.

“You’re Paud Gill!” Lenga stated, kneeling before the book as Paud approached.

Paud hesitated. Skidding to a halt, he cocked his head to the side and licked his eyes. On either side of Lenga, both Fetch and Bold braced for a fight. Bold barred his fists and Fetch summoned shadows to surround his.

“I’m Lenga Ruse.” Lenga explained, “The Princ-”

“Headmaster of Modern Healing.” Paud interjected. Plopping back onto his butt, he stretched his legs out before him. Planting his gauntlets palm down on the ground, he left his bare chest vulnerable to the water elf’s two guards without another moment of hesitation.

“Oi’ll steh and gard ya, Lil Lenga,” Bold declared, his brow stern as he continued to eyeball the Aquarian, “thar’s-”

“Nope!” Fetch yelped.

The shadowmancer flung himself between the healer and the wounded man then thrust his hands into the air. The shadows that swirled around his fists spread with his fingers to combine and flatten out into a vast plane – an iridescent awning that extended over all four of their heads. No sooner did the dark disk form than did a giant glob of fire splatter against it. Flame spewed out in all directions, extinguishing in the sand around them and leaving the ground blackened with shards of obsidian. Keeping the black barrier above them, Fetch turned back to Bold.

“I’ll guard Lenga and the Aquarian,” Fetch stated, “you go help the others with the lizards.”

Bold didn’t like it but the shadowmancer certainly wasn’t wrong. As he left to join the others at the now barren pyramid stage, he looked up to the heavens. The organist in the clouds was looking down at him. A smirk stretched across the goblin’s green lips.

That crimpsin taiad musician, Bold realized, must bae some faraking warlocking. He couldn’t explain why, but he was sure the goblin in the jet-propelled piano was the same as the rhyming musician that had gotten them lost in the tunnels. He took a mental note to hunt the fool down once this was all over then turned his attention back to his allies, both old and new.

Their team wasn’t much. As Bold hustled over, he took count of his comrades. Of the Laymen’s team that wasn’t hard at work building the ramp or being healed by Lenga, they had three: the nellaf Daernar Darkblade, the chidra with two sabers (Saber), and a moleman (Layol) who had found himself a hammer. The original members of the platform they now defended, the “Three O’Clockers” included four: two molemen and two chidras – one of which chidras being the one that seemingly led their squad. These four all held spears. Then there was Bold’s companions (minus Fetch and Lenga): Ben and Marvell. All together, they had ten. This would’ve been promising, if it weren’t for the fact that two brooks were prowling their way.

The reptiles ran like snakes, their elongated bodies squirming as their shoulder blades pumped like pistons and their wide, clawed paws dug in and propelled them forward. Marvell roared commands as the monsters neared. As a former warcourter, she knew someone had to grasp the reigns of the ragtag band if they hoped to survive the skirmish. Listening to the ax woman, the ten circled up. Their circumference had just completed when the beasts arrived. The predators split, one rushing clockwise and the other counter, but they didn’t make it to meeting at six o’clock before breaching the perimeter.

With no warning, one of the serpents stiffened their arms, halting their forward motion and pole vaulting with their back haunches. Rather than letting its hind legs flop over its head, it pivoted its hips then planted its back paws and pounced into the circle. Maw open wide, from jaw to jaw the spanse was nearly six feet – more than enough to scoop up a moleman and that it did. Then, like a catapult, it flipped the poor prisoner into the sky before snatching them out of the air with a crunch.

The circle dissolved immediately. Two halves formed on either side of where the first lizard had split their sphere – but there was another split. On the opposite side of the circle from the break, two Pyramiders took off running. They were the closest to the second brook. Having seen what happened to their comrade, they both figured one of them would be next. They weren’t wrong.

The second brook pounced. It caught the chidra of the pair. When its fangs closed down around the man, it nearly split him in two. One half of the team rushed after this second brook, hoping to protect the other coward that had broken ranks, while the other half took after the first brook.

Two furry, sandaled feet were still sticking out of the brook's blood emblazoned snout when Daernar Darkblade drew his sword against it. His new claymore, which he'd claimed from some unfortunate corpse, was sharp and heavy enough to cleave a man's head clean off with little effort but when he raised it up over his head and brought it down on the face of the monster the hilt nearly rattled right out of his hands. It was as if he'd struck a stone. As Daernar danced backwards to the sound of reverberating metal, the fiend's eyes flicked over to him. It slurped the last bit of the moleman down its gullet then opened its unmarred mouth for the hearty treat that would have been the heavy-set nellaf had fate not beat the beast to it. A giant ball of fire smashed into Daernar, hitting him in the back and engulfing him in flame as it slammed him to the desert floor. The air was knocked out of him and replaced with a rush of lung-searing heat. As he thrashed on the floor, others tried their luck with the lizard.

Saber came at the salamander from the other side – meaning he did not see Daernar try and fail to break through the beast's scaly hide. He rushed in with the a similar battle plan as the nellaf though he did have a comrade at his side. Layol came with a hammer, found amongst the discarded weapons of dead or deserted teammates, charging the creature on Saber's left. Layol saw what happened to Daernar and would've warned Saber had he not his own problems to deal with. A large paw equipped with even larger talons was sweeping through the air towards him. Layol whacked it away with his bludgeon but, while effective, the force of the parry pushed him backwards. His heels left tracks in the ground. When he finally came to a stop, he didn't have the time to twist back with his hammer and stop the second paw. Claws the size of forearms raked across Layol's body, tore him off the sand, and sent him barrel-rolling through the air. Saber hadn't fared much better. Rushing up with both swords, he raised the blades up and tried to slice an X into the side of the brook only for his blades to bounce off. The recoil sent him staggering back into the swinging tail of the reptile. WHAM! As he had been by the bears before, Saber was once again launched through the air with the sound of his ribs crunching echoing in his ears as he gritted his teeth and waited for impact.

Their burning brother wasn't obliterated yet. Daernar did his best to stop, drop, and roll but when wearing flammable padding and metal plates, it is easier said than done. A mere day prior, the forsaken knight would've needed help to robe or disrobe but in his suddenly sober state, he was able to unclasp, unlatch, unbutton, and unsnap all the necessary bits as he writhed around on the ground, wrenching his upper body free from the garments that scorched him. His back got the worst of it – his nellaf markings blotted out as they were burnt to the same bubbling red as his paler base pigment – but he could still raise his weapon and raise it he did. He'd tried to pierce the skull, but had not yet gone for – what he hoped would be – the soft, white underbelly.

Setting himself in the ground like a pike in a seige, the blade was simply an extension of his body wedged between the ground and the gut of the gargantuan beast. As the belly came down and the blade hit the scaly tummy, the steel screeched and it skittered off. The abdomen didn't abate, it continued to come down. Having sensed the attempt at its innerds, the brook decided to simply crush the offender beneath it. Daernar was flattened. The molten flesh down his spine smeared with sand, he screamed but his shrieks were muffled by the belly of the beast.

Daernar would've died bare-chested and crushed beneath the brook had not the very fire that had blazed his back suddenly blasted the brook. The reptile recoiled, flailing like a worm plucked from the dirt, it flopped off of Daernar and squirmed in the sand. This allowed time for some of the others to get back on their feet – though not Daernar, he needed another moment – and allowed one amongst them to levy the first significant blow.

Having avoided the brook thus far, he'd watched his compatriots try and fail. As the brook got back on all fours, he aimed for the only place his allies hadn't. The reptile opened its mouth to scream in rage and that is where the chidra aimed. Rearing back with one arm, the leader of the Three O'Clockers lobbed one of his spears directly into the chompers of the monster.

The thrashing didn't stop, only this time it couldn't quite gnash its teeth. The rod of the javelin jutted out at an angle. The spearhead was buried in the inside of the jaw, pinning its tongue down, though as the tongue undulated the spear was slowly being jostled free. Saber was busy helping Daernar to his feet. The spearman chidra was left with Layol to face the beast. After his partner landed the first successful blow, Layol felt it was his turn. Rushing the brook head on, he leapt into the air with his hammer held high over his head. Bringing it down, he pounded the end of the spear pole, thrusting the head of the spike down between the jaw muscles to burst out through the scales of the lizard's chin.

His courage came at a high cost. The spear now submerged deep enough to allow the brook to interlock its teeth, the brook's head shot forward and its jaws snapped down around Layol before his feet returned to the dusty floor of the arena. Layol shrieked as the fangs penetrated him, stabbing him in the back and the belly, but he didn't completely lose focus. The rod of the spear kept the brook from completely splitting his body in two, it forced the reptile to open its jaws once more in an attempt to clamp down with more force. In that moment, Layol thrust his hammer into the maw that mutilated him. He propped it up next to the spear and prevented the fangs from closing down around him again, then rolled out of the monster's mouth to fall to the floor of the court.

Having just got Daernar up and at it, Saber then rushed to Layol. He dragged the moleman away from the brook. Blood turned the sand black in his wake. Daernar took Layol's place, surging past the chidran spearman. Burnt, bare chested, and brazen, drove his claymore up into the roof of the beast's gaping jaws.

Saber had only gotten Layol ten yards away when the moleman hollered out. At first, it was an unintelligible cry of pain. Being dragged by his collar, the wounds along his gut felt as if they were widening and leaving his lower half behind. His second call was quieter and more articulate.

"Stop!" He exclaimed, "Stop!" Reaching behind his head, he grabbed Saber's wrists, "Stop."

"Layol—"

"Leave me. Help them." Layol said, "You have to kill the brook."

Saber tried to argue, "Layol—"

But didn't get far. Before Layol could verbally interrupt, his tightening grip cut Saber off. Saber let the moleman lay flat. Leaning over him, he met Layol's eyes. While Saber had been dragging him, Layol had been watching the spearman and Daernar square off with the beast. Though they'd wedged the monster's mouth open, the two were getting sliced up and down by the claws of the creature. There was no guarantee the two would be able to overcome the brook themselves and Layol had seen that. Not only had he seen that, he'd seen his own vision begin to fade. He was able to see Saber's eyes before everything went black. But he wasn't dead yet.

Layol said, "Tell my kids I died for the Laymen."

"You aren't..." Saber stopped himself short. False promises would get in the way of the promise he planned to keep, "What's your name? What're their names?"

"Sariah and Hairas," Layol said, "Selter."

“They’ll be proud.” Saber assured him, nodding up towards The Bard above, “They’ll have seen for themselves.”

Layol chuckled and a bit of blood spit up from his snout, “Go. Kill the brook.”

“For Sariah and Hairas!” Saber bowed his head then turned back to the brook.

Somehow, Daernar and the spearman were still keeping the ferocious fangs at bay. The same could not be said for the terrible talons. The red scaled chidra now had dark stripes of burgundy twirling around his scales much like the black stripes that curled across his nellaf comrade’s chest. Daernar’s stripes were also interrupted by red ribbons of blood (not to mention that those on his back had been essentially burned clean off). Though the brook could not get the spear and sword out of its mouth, it would still soon shred it’s opponents to pieces – had some outside force not rejoined the fray.

Saber rushed in with his slender blade and thrust it up through the inside of the upper jaw, through the skull, and into the green giant’s tiny reptilian brain. Finally, the monster fell limp. Tearing his sword free, he turned to look back at Layol.

The moleman’s body was hidden beneath a blaze of fire. He was little more than a black silhouette within the flickering inferno that had fallen from the sky. For all Saber knew, his fellow inmate may have died before the flame even fell – regardless, he certainly was dead now.

“Sorry.” The chidran spearman next to Saber, the defacto leader of the Three O’Clockers, said. He extended his hand and introduced himself, “Redael.”

Saber shook, “Saber.”

“Daernar.” Daernar said.

“And who are they?” Redael asked, pointing towards the five facing off against the other brook, “Selu...”

Before Redael said that, the more accurate reaction might’ve been, “Donum” or, in Bold’s case, “Tow” for the other half of their team started off in a similar manner as had Daernar, Saber, Redael, and the late Layol. They started by losing a comrade in the clutches of the serpent’s jaws. As Marvell, Bold, and Ben rushed after the brook, it threw its head up in the air and clamped down again on the body of the chidra. The poor prisoner came apart at the hips. His legs hit the ground as the lizard swallowed the head and torso hole.

The man who had broke ranks to run alongside the now-dead-dude had managed to glance over his shoulder just in time to see the separation and this jumpstarted his feet. Unfortunately, it jumpstarted his feet right into a stone slab, launching him head over heels into the sand, and, though the lizard had a perfectly fine pair of legs to munch on, it saw another torso up for grabs.

“Benji, give mae strangth, lad!”

Without waiting to see if the lad had, Boldarian dove on the scampering serpent’s tail and grabbed ahold of the end of it. The weight of the dwarf slowed the brook down a bit but not for long. Digging his heels into the dirt, he leaned back. The monster surged forward, sending a ripple down its spine all the way to the tip of its tail. This flicked Bold up off the ground as if he weighed as much as the scrawny gmoat behind him – the scrawny gmoat that now anchored him.

The elgroon’s stone in Benjamin’s hand shone with a brilliant amber-brown and the same color stones had shot up from the earth like the arms of a sculpture. The rock formation wrapped around Bold’s calves, tethering him to the floor of the arena. Much like the boulder’s grasp, Bold didn’t let go of the brook and so when it pounced for the moleman it stopped short and came crashing back down to the ground. WHAM!

“I got him!” Marvell hollered.

The giant ax woman flew threw the air as if she were propelled by elemental magic. She landed on the scaly spine of the creature and brought both her axes down moments after her feet hit the brook's back. CLANG-CLANG! The reptile's tough hide deflected both blades as if they were mere butter knives. She was so expecting to cut in that her balance was thrown off and she fell forwards to straddle the creature and unfortunately this was just as it was rising from being snagged by Bold. With a long snake-like neck, it looked over its shoulder at the seven and a half foot bearn and her tasty torso.

Twisting around and lifting off the ground, the body of the beast followed the head as it stood up on its hind legs. Even though Bold still yank on its tail, he was helpless to stop its chest from rising. As it went vertical, Marvell was thrown off its back to fall backwards towards the dirt while the creature's head reared back her. She'd never squared off with a brook, but she'd certainly faced her fair share of snakes and she recognized the arched neck and head cocked back for what it was: the brook was about to strike.

As she landed in the sand, she got her axes up above her – between her and the beast – before it's jaws snapped down around her. The blades of her axes dug into the ridges of the inside of the reptile's mouth. It's tongue lolled out, slapping Marvell and lathering her in putrid saliva. The tips of its snout dug ruts in the dirt on either side of her. Still, despite the strength and size of her foe, it couldn't overpower Marvell. She kept those jaws from closing. This only saved her for the moment for the reptile was more than capable of tearing her in half with its claws if its teeth weren't going to cut it.

“Farget the tail!” Bold bellowed, “Farget stone!”

Bold wrenched his feet free of the stone holds and jumped down from the little platform they had formed, running under the tail as it began to writhe oncemore. Dodging the thrashing appendage, Bold balled his fists and ran towards the creature's groin.

“FOIR!” Bold yelled, “FISTS OF FOIR!”

Ben had tried to guess the dwarf's desires before receiving the command, figuring – correctly – that there would be limited time to act. He didn't know exactly what Bold expected but he got some magic up and ready to jump into action nonetheless. Instead of fire, however, he'd assumed the rock dwarf would be in the mood for something a little more shocking. Ben's elgroom stone glistened a neon gold and electricity crackled from the crook all the way over to the dwarf as he came skidding to a halt just behind the brook's back haunches.

It seemed that not only was Ben in the mood for something shocking, but Bold also had quite the surprise in store for the predator. Just as Marvell's axes were able to scar up the inside of the brook's mouth, so too did other orifices offer vulnerabilities, namely: the cloaca. Ben's lightning bolt wrapped around Bold's fist as he drew it back and plunged it into the rearend of the brook. A shockwave of electricity surged through the body of the beast, sizzling and spazzing nerve endings and muscles as it traveled all the way to the head of the snake in a matter of seconds – the head that was still trying to clamp down around Marvell, the head that was attached to the tongue that was licking the bearn beneath it. The electricity hopped from the predator to pray then back again.

As the brook convulsed, so too did Marvell. Her muscles twitched and contracted and she was only partially in control of her mind and body – just enough to realize that she could no longer keep the clamping jaws at bay and that she'd be bitten in two if she didn't get out from under her similarly-electrified opponent. On the other hand, the brook wasn't able to keep her from escaping as its jaw slackened and clenched over and over again uncontrollably. Fate had its hands on the wheels as the electricity continued to wrest control of their movements away from

them. Rattling on the sand like an angry cicada, she waited for a slight pause in the pain then, at the first hint of control, she dropped her arms and threw her shoulders and rolled as the beast's mouth bounced up and down in the spasms. The brook got control of itself a mere moment after Marvell, it's jaws snapping shut behind her as she rose. Regardless, she had escaped. Whirling around, she rose Pride – her radiant red ax – above her head and-

Pride was gone.

So too was her right arm.

The brook's head loomed before her. The eyes on the either side of its triangular skull leered at her as it opened its mouth and dropped her bloodied arm and ax. Shock and rage overcame any pain – at least for now – and she jumped back a pace then raised Joy to defend her. Cursing the creature, she swung with a ferocity that knocked the biting beast back. The ax's edges might not pierce the green hide but they could strike the snout away as if they were the blunt pommel of a hammer. And each time she whacked the reptiles face, as it's head was driven back and her body pivoted with the swing, the stump of her right arm sprayed its demonic face with another blast of blood. Her fury could only last so long for though she had unlimited reserves of rage, she had a finite supply of blood.

Boldarian still had his arm up the beast's butt and Ben had only just switched the electricity to fire. The enertomb in his elgroom shimmered scarlet as flames coursed from it to Bold, wrapping around him like a sash before following his fist into the animal's ass. They were cooking it from the inside and starting at the rear. The excruciating pain the creature endured still couldn't stop its advance on Marvell, but Marvell held fast. Battering it over and over again until she herself began to fall into a sort of mindless trance. It seemed anyone's ball game: would she bleed out before the beast burnt up?

Those watching Pyramid in the clouds would never get the answer for at that moment Paud Gill returned to the fray. Compared to Marvell, the fishfolk was a Knome. Standing at only a little over five feet tall, he clambered up the bearn without her even knowing. When he leapt from her shoulder blades on the beast and his shadow fell over her, she thought it was Death finally coming to claim her blood-parched body. Even the beast was caught unaware. Too preoccupied with the pain in its pelvis and the ax-weilding threat before it, the brook didn't raise its head to fend the fishfolk off. Paud landed on the brooks temple and drove his left fist into the serpent's eye socket. His armored hand crashed through the cornea and plunged into the pupil, then he extended his Claws and tore his hand free. No sooner did threads of shreaded eye fly into the sky than did he drive his fist right back into the hole he'd drilled in the reptile's head. The assault was so violent and rapid, the brook didn't even have time to scream out before it collapsed. A plume of smoke puffed from its nostrils.

Paud rolled down the monsters snout and jumped to land on his feet as Marvell fell off hers. She collapsed flat on her back. Paud rushed to her aid. Fetch and Lenga had beat him to it. As the healer tied a tourniquet and Fetch set up his shadow-shelter, Paud tore a cloth from one of his fabric belts and used it to clamp down on the stump of her upper arm. Marvell convulsed once in pain. With Joy still in her grasp, the black edge of the ax found itself resting against the nape of the Aquarian's neck.

“Marvell!” Lenga yelled.

Paud's hands had moved instantly from applying first aid to raising the blades on his knuckles for his new acquaintance to witness. A brief moment of sense broke through the shock and the pain that was slowly replacing it, allowing Marvell to see that the black-eyed assassin was an ally but her pride still prevented her from admitting any fault. Instead, she deflected.

“My ax,” she barked, “under the brook!”
“Marvell!” Lenga complained, “You’ll die-”
“I’d rather!” Marvell snapped.

Paud shrugged and went to look for her weapon.

Marvell lied back flat and Lenga ignored her offense at the warrior’s ridiculousness and started flipping through the pages of her tome. What Lenga didn’t know, was that finding the perfect healing spell in the middle of one of the most extreme Pyramid matches to ever take place beneath Solaris was just as – if not moreso – ridiculous as using your final wish to be reunited with your weapon.

All Pyramid projects had ceased. There were well less than a hundred competitors alive and only a fraction of that number looking liable to out-survive the seven remaining brooks. There were still two bears romping around, chewing on the dead and dying while looking idly around the arena as if they themselves weren’t now on the menu. One pyramid stood above the rest – albeit in terrible shape. It looked more like a mound than anything else and was in the process of slowly being stripped as its builders scrambled around it to avoid the fangs and talons of a pair of blood-thirsty brooks.

Only one project was still under construction but it could not be considered a competitor with the mound – if anything it would render its builders immediately disqualified. That said, unlike those on the mound, it looked to be the only way that anyone from the Emendation Enterprise would survive the competition. From the edge of the arena, Sallis was calling for them to join. As Ben and Bold rushed over to Marvell, they saw the Layman’s call.

“Wae gotta get outa haer, Lil Lenga!” Bold exclaimed.

Lenga brushed the dwarf off with a flick of her wrist, beginning encantations instead. Flustered, the dwarf looked back towards the edge of the arena and the ramp. The moleman that had broken the circle with the chidra (the one that had been chomped in half) was making a mad dash for the block-slope but not only were the beasts still badgering around, the balls of fire continued to rain from the heavens. One such ball smashed the mole. It seemingly obliterated him as either guts of fire burst out in all directions from the collision. What was left of his figured crumpled to the sand engulfed in flames.

“Lil-”

“Lenga,” Ben interjected, “we have to go!”

While Bold had lamented, Ben had gotten creative. Underneath the shadow-protection of Fetch, he’d closed his eyes and slipped away into his imagination. The elgroon shown with the same mahogany brown of his own eyes and stone rose from the dirt around them. The levitating gravel swirled around itself, forming a cloud and then solidifying into a solid and smashing back down to Mystakle Planet in a shape similar to that black shield above them. It looked almost like a see-saw, but wide. The surface was dented in like a trough, though not very deep. Beneath the sheet of stone, it was propped off the earth by a long blade-like spike. One end leaned on the ground while the other jutted up towards The Bard above, that upright end had two rod-like endes on either side like the handles of a wheelbarrow.

“I’d seen my mother make a plow.” Ben shrugged.

“It’ll do.” Bold proclaimed.

Lenga cursed and tore out the page she’d just started burning through. The disruption was too much to keep on with the spell and though her comrades were right – they needed to *move* – she couldn’t help but be frustrated that blood was still spurting from her patient’s stump. As Ben,

Bold, and Paud went about lifting the giantess onto the plow-barrow, Fetch began to encounter a struggle of his own.

It started abruptly with a sharp pain in the temple – just behind his crow eye. The suddenness and acute stab of agony dropped the canine to a faux-human knee. Clutching his left eye with his right hand, he kept his left hand raised above him. The shadow-shrowd shuddered, flickering for a moment, but it returned to a steady darkness quickly. Just in time too, as fire continued to rain down on them. Fetch cursed and those that knew him realized what was happening: he was running out of shadows. A shadowmancer without shadows not only lost their primary weapon, they also lost their primary source of energy. In other words, without more shadows, he wouldn't just be useless, he'd be dead. He had no choice but to drop the shield.

“Ben!” Fetch jumped onto his friend's back, clinging to his breast with one arm and his head with the other, “Cover Lenga, I gotta – farak! – I gotta get shadows.”

Ben began to concede while simultaneously protesting, “You can't go alo-”

“I'll watch his back.” Paud stated, “Get to the ramp.”

Ben didn't know the fishfolk nor did he particularly trust the man but considering the fact that Lenga had just healed his thigh, Ben hoped that the fishfolk's generosity could be trusted. He owed Lenga and Fetch for saving him and now Fetch needed saving. Ben's doubt was blatant, his big brown eyes quivering as they sought a second opinion. His gaze found Bold and Bold, though no more sure of Paud than anyone else, was more concerned with protecting Lenga so he signed on to the plan and assured Benjamin with a nod.

His elgroom maintained the same brown shine, drawing more stone from the terrain around them to form a barrier above them. Bold moved to the handles of the plow, ready to start the journey but after getting the platform to level out he realized that he would need a hand. In the absence of a wheel and with the added weight of the healer and the hacker (mostly the hacker), dragging the sedimentary sled would be no easy feat. Fortunately, the three that survived the other brook had just joined them on their way to the ramp themselves. While not Boldarian's first pick for help, Daernar offered to take the other handle with a shrugging gesture. The two chidras, Saber and Redael, took up positions at the back end to push.

“I'm fine.” Fetch scoffed, shoving Paud away as the fishfolk attempted to help him walk, “I'm in between waves.” He shook his head as if he were still a dog, then stood up straight and looked around. Murmuring, “Shadows...”

There were plenty to pick from. He rushed first to the two charred corpses of molemen, still burning like bonfires. One of which was Layol though he and Fetch had never met. Next, he came to the mangled pair of legs. There were some shadows to be had below the hips but the main energy source came in the torso and head. With his crow eye, he quickly found the missing half. It was simmering in stomach acid inside the brook. The brook offered some shadows as well, though the shadows of beasts were practically condiments. They'd make a man insane if it wasn't supplement with a primary diet of the shadows of more sophisticated beings. With three souls and one reptile's shadows, Fetch was already feeling better. The pain in his temple had been replaced with a rush of endorphins. He felt as if he'd just railed a line of zirra and – similarly – he wanted more.

At least, one more. He thought as he scanned the closest dead. His eyes fell on the other brook and his crow eye showed him the other body being broken down in the beast's belly. Had Fetch been a fishfolk, he would've licked his eyes. The fishfolk beside him, however, did not share his hunger. Grabbing Fetch by his shoulder blades he yanked the humanoid canine off his feet and threw Fetch and himself to the ground.

A great ball of fire smashed the sand where Fetch had been standing.

“We’ve got to go.” Paud said.

“One more!” Fetch demanded.

Yanking free from the fishfolk, he sprinted for the dead reptile. He skidded to a halt, kicking up a cloud of dust, then placed his hands on the scaly green hide. The creature was still warm from life. The shadows that seaped from the flesh were even warmer. Black as night but thick like milk, the shadows rose from the corpse like steam. It coiled around Fetch’s arms on its way to his cursed eye. His body trembled as the last bit was slurped in. After a deep sigh, he was ready to go. He opened his eyes.

A giant figure rose in the middle of the field. Before anything else happened, that alone gave Fetch pause. This person was standing on the mound of stones that were piled on the submerged platform – the same submerged platform that the brooks had climbed out of. How could this figure have survived? That question was almost immediately answered.

The flesh peeled off the man’s skeleton like the skin of a rotten fruit. It happened so fast, Fetch hardly had time to notice the brilliant blue shade of the chidra’s scales nor the fact that the man’s face had been a bloody, concave pulp. Now his skull, which was only half intact, was bare but for traces of blood that still clung to the bone. As a mancer, Fetch knew what he was looking at. This was no normal undead. This was a boneguard. That meant that not only was the undead a necromancer in life, but that he had now dedicated his second life to another necromancer. Fetch’s gaze rose from the giant puppet. He looked past the other failed pyramids and into the stands. Far above the regular seats, amongst the row of fancy box seats was one far more fanciful than the rest. It was decorated with the symbols of the Batloen Royal Family – complete even with a crystal cloche of its own. Beneath said cloche, was the necromancer Fetch was looking for and she wore the crown.

Suicine Shelba stared back at Fetch, a wry smirk twisting her snout. Then she turned and walked out of view. With his crow eye, however, he could see her energy outlined beyond the walls. Her guards were escorting her down a hallway. One that, if Fetch had to guess, would take the Queen all the way back to the palace.

“Mancer!” Paud yelled.

Fetch dropped his gaze back to the giant boneguard in the middle of the arena. The skeleton was no longer alone. Undead rose all around him. Like hornets in a rattled nest, they were swarming up and out, leaping to the edge of the arena floor just as the brooks had. The bodies that littered the stadium grounds were rising to. Those prisoners who had given their lives to entertain the rich, now rose out of their flesh to take the lives of the lucky survivors. But Paud wasn’t just trying to draw Fetch’s attention to the army of the dead, he was trying to draw his attention to the two brooks that were now galloping towards them. Grabbing Fetch by the head, he turned his attention manually to the threats.

“Get down!” Fetch yelled.

Paud happily obeyed and Fetch covered them in a quick shield of shadows. The pair of brooks seemed to notice the wall of darkness rise but didn’t seem to mind. They split and gave Fetch and Paud a wide girth as they continued their mad dash. Paud and Fetch’s heart sank as they turned – sure that the brooks had decided against them in favor of munching on the much heartier meal of their friends climbing up the rugged ridge of stones into the stands. The two got up to run after the reptiles, futile as that would be to their cause, but when the brooks got to the ramp they didn’t bother their comrades. Though scatter brained animals, they still saw that the

team of Pyramiders weren't the easiest prey – not when there was plenty of other prey to be had: the unarmed audience still sat stupidly in their seats.

The crowd went wild. Cheers and laughter turned to cries and screams as they were subjected to the terror and violence they'd been all too happy to observe. They trampled one another, showing as much restraint as the predators that pursued them. The clamor of the stampede caught the attention of the other brooks still hunting on the Pyramid grounds. One by one, they stopped hunting the inmates. Cocking their heads, they watched the two brooks slurping up civilian after civilian. Licking their lips and chomping their jaws, the other brooks didn't require much convincing. Like a rush of wind, they made their way for the Laymen's ramp.

"Farak me..." Fetch muttered, "They'll eat them all."

"Good riddance." Paud shrugged.

Together, Fetch and Paud hustled after the brooks. The fire had stopped falling and The Bard had stopped playing. The organist in the sky was nowhere to be seen. The golden haze was dissipating. The show was over and yet it had only just begun. The viewers in Vare would be robbed of the finale. If Fetch and Paud were following the brooks, the undead were following them. Led by the formerly-blue-scaled behemoth, the skeletons clustered and marched for the ramp into the stands.

The sled with Marvell and Lenga on it had only just made it into the first row of bleachers when Fetch and Paud returned. The initial area was cleared of the audience – at least the living ones. The benches were bent and bloodied, bodies and their bits and pieces were scattered around like trash (though they were treasure to the shadow slinging Fetch). There was thirteen of them from the arena. Sallis and three other inmates that had helped him build the ramp had survived. Saber from the first team of pyramiders and Redael from the last had persevered. Then there were the foreigners: Paud, Daernar, Ben, Fetch, Bold, Lenga, and Marvell. Marvell had made it. So too had her axes. But her arm had not. It remained buried beneath the brook that had bit it off.

"There goes my Warcraft career." Was Marvell's way of thanking Lenga. In the bearn's defense, she was still delusional from blood loss and shock. She looked over to Ben, "We'll have to pick up a good prosthetic in Space City after all this."

"After all this..." Ben gulped, his eyes jumping from one brook to another as the creatures continued to romp through the stands, "How do we get out of this?"

"Follow the crowd." Bold suggested.

"Then we'll never get out." Redael stated.

The exits were feeding grounds. People plugged the narrow alleys like damp sand blocking the hole in an hour glass. It seemed your fate was a toss up between being smothered by the stampede or being devoured by the brooks. Hiding under the bleachers may have not been much of a better option – especially with the army of undead approaching – but it seemed escape had worse odds than the lottery. One audience member had apparently recognized this reality. Submitting to his fate, the moleman walked up to the Pyramiders. Stopping in front of Sallis, he said simply.

"Get it over with," spreading his arms wide, the moleman said, "kill me."

The thirteen didn't move. The moleman waited a moment but his patience waned before the Layman's did. Stepping towards Sallis, he reached for the scimitar in his hand. Sallis jumped back and his allies stepped forward only to lower their weapons as they fumbled for a strategy. How do you threaten a suicidal man?

“We’ve got no beef with you.” Sallis shrugged, “Come with us.”

“Ha!” The mole scoffed, “And die tomorrow? You people have taken over.”

“You people?” Sallis asked.

“The Laymen!” The mole crowed, “They’ve taken Vare and now they’ve stormed the Cloches.” He gestured behind him, further up the stands, “I had a high seat, I could see it all. They broke in the moment Pyramid began and how long ago was that?” He shrugged, “It was all over the moment Vare fell. You’ve won.”

“What are you talking about?” Sallis demanded.

The man groaned but answered anyways, “There was a vote – yesterday – but the Queen won’t have it counted.” He pointed at Daernar, “Your godi king and his dragons even came in to help her stop it.” He shook his head, “Then came our ground dragons. What’s left of Vare belongs to the Laymen now. They’ll kill me tomorrow if I don’t die today and I’d rather that sword than those teeth.” He gestured to the lizards slaughtering those trapped at the exits

“They voted...” Sallis murmured.

He looked back at the others who had joined him. They shifted their feet uneasily. It wasn’t clear whether this was good news or not and it certainly wasn’t clear if it mattered either way as their chance of surviving the day wasn’t high regardless. The undead were nearing the edge of the arena and the brooks would soon run out of bait. As far as Sallis and his comrades new, there was no way out other than the ones plugged with people – that is, except for Paud and Fetch.

“There is another way out.” Fetch said, nudging Paud, “The Queen has an exit from her box seat.”

Paud pointed. Arcane Sentinels and Royal Guardsman still held their ground by the stairs that led up to the balcony vantage, but after facing blunt-faced bears and brooks a few Batloen’s with spells and steel certainly weren’t going to stop them.

The desperate moleman before Sallis saw they were distracted by the new plan unfolding in their minds and decided to try and take advantage of it. Though they might not kill him, he could still kill himself. He reached for Sallis’ sword but the Layman snapped back to reality in time. He threw his sword aside and grabbed the moleman.

“I’m a Varen!” The mole complained, “You know you want to kill me!”

“There’s only one Varen left for us to kill.” Sallis snarled. He shoved the man to the ground and turned his gaze back to the royal box seats across the stadium. He said, “And that’s the one that won’t count the vote.”

Chapter Twenty-Two: Counting the Vote

The Royal Guards hid in the shadows of the Exterior Arches that held up the Cloches' walls. The front line stood shoulder to shoulder with long shields and short swords, behind them the second line aimed crossbows and spears over the front line's shoulders. A cacophonous rattle echoed out from underneath the arches as they stood there. Their armor rattled and their weapons tapped one another as they trembled. It was the sound of incessant jostling emitted by two different kinds of fear. Fear for one's own life but also fear of what they might have to do to preserve it. For while the Laymen and Miners that approached them did not get to live on their side of the Rift, they were still Batloen. Not brothers and sisters, but certainly cousins.

And their cousins trembled too, though not with any kind of fear. They'd gotten over most of that the day prior. As the golden cloud of Pyramid settled over the Cloches and the remains of Vare, the rebels encroached upon the shade of the Exterior Arches. They were armed with all sorts of weapons. Most held the tools of their labor: hammers, picks, butcher knives, and frying pans. Some had found blades and spears in the wreckage of the previous battle and with less hands to arm, there were more weapons to go around. Then there were the makeshift elgroons, raised high amongst the legions of Laymen like banners.

Two chidras led the blue collar battalion: the yellow scaled Layman named Bru and the red scaled Miner named Blade. They marched right up to the guards. Two large knives hung from Bru's belt. Before the election, these had been household utensils. One had been a machete for clearing desert brush and the other a large cleaver for splitting meat and bone. Now that both blades had seen the blood of a being, they had been retired from domestic use. The two knives were now two daggers. Still, they stayed stowed on Bru's hip. Even as he got close enough to the Royals to smell the anxiety on their breath.

Similarly, Blade's weapon was once but a tool. The first pick she had used in the mines had shattered years ago, the double sided spikes had been lobbed off leaving just the rod and a blunt piece of steel both jagged and blunt with its uneven edges. She'd kept it for nostalgic reasons, having a bit of pride in working through her first ax, but when the Queen turned her back and the Miners joined the Laymen, she'd picked the pick back up. While others turned cast iron skillets and brooms into elgroons, she'd turned her old ax into a magical mace with an enertomb from the waterworks. Having charged in the light of Solaris, it glowed as they strolled into the shadows of the Exterior Arches, but Blade didn't reach for it as she marched up to stand before the Royal Guard. Instead of raising weapons, they raised their voices.

"COUNT THE VOTE!" Was the chant, "COUNT THE VOTE!"

The chant echoed through the cavernous first floor of the Cloches. The southern entrance rarely looked so subterranean, it was normally lit not only with torches but by the light of Solaris. The terrace above the southern arches was known as the Glassyard. Thick paned windows acted as both the ceiling of the Exterior Arches's Southern Veranda and the floor of the Glassyard above but, on this day, the view of the heavens was blotted out by the boots of the Batloen police – until it wasn't.

Scarlet light exploded across the lip of the arches as flames unfurled across the Glassyard. The formation of the Royal Guards folded over on top of itself as the front three lines scurried to get out of the way of the fire. The back lines heldfast, rebuking the front lines and

throwing them off the ramparts as the blaze evaporated to reveal the culprits: the Sondoran, Kou Warriors' dalvary.

The dragons didn't follow up with a second round of searing, it seemed that they'd gotten what they'd wanted with the first – that being room to land on the Glassyard. The light that had been availed those in below was vanquished once more but this time by the defenders of Flow-Vare and their allies. Amongst the curlheads had been a machine. One of the young Kou's contraptions, the Kaboomer, had crossed the threshold of the Cloches and landed on the Glassyard with the rest of the uprising. The old Kou piloted the ship and he was accompanied by those that had saved him from the clutches of the Cagirent, Tou Fou and Tabuh Sentry. They, with the rest of the Kou Warriors and the Laymen that joined them, quickly spread out to create their own front line opposite the Royal Guards much like the Laymen and Miners beneath them and, much like those below, neither side was ready to strike first. The guards held their ground and the Sondoran mercenaries and Batloen civilians were too wary to challenge them for it – at least for now. For while Tenchi Kou kept his men and women pawing the ground like bulls and barring their teeth like bulldogs, Tou Fou and Tabuh Sentry set up ramps behind them.

Made from the same material as the barricades that surrounded the Cloches, the ramps were amalgamations of Vare. Antique doors from bourgeois apartment buildings were attached to the box springs of luxurious bedframes. China cabinets had been flipped over, their fancy glass facades facing the cobble stone as their plain, flat backs offered lucrative slopes. Credenzas with intricate trims and curly, floral flourishes were stacked on top of long, gaudy dining room tables. Leather office chairs, creaky wooden dinner chairs, and barstools were tangled together in great hodgepodge heaps – taking up whatever shape require to stretch from the streets that circled the Exterior Arches to the palisade walls that barred the balcony of the Glassyard above. And yet, before any Laymen or Miners ascended the makeshift ramps, a Royal Guard descended one.

“What the...” Tou muttered when the soldier shoved past him, he muttered it again as the moleman began to scurry down the cupboard he'd just tied to the bannister before him, “What the...”

Beside him, Tabuh shared his confusion. She turned to look north, back towards the front line of the Kou Warriors, only to see another handful of Royal Guards clambering over one another to escape their ranks and infiltrated the mercenaries. It seemed both the Royals and the Kous were equally confused. Tenchi's men recoiled when the guards broke through their line, drawing their weapons, but before they could bring their weapons down the guardsmen had already passed. They rushed from the Cloches like traumatized dogs fleeing the streets after hearing a vehicle backfire. Their eyes were dialated with fear. Their demeanor was so obviously unthreatening it instantly befuddled those that had been prepared to strike them down.

Tenchi spun around in circles. All he could think to do was mutter, “What the...” Turning back, his eyes fell on Tou and Tabuh but their eyes were directed down. Beneath their feet, Tou and Tabuh could see through the glass. The Laymen and Miners pushing forward, gaining ground in the Southern Veranda as the rear end of the Royal Guard was trickling up the stairs to the Glassyard and then retreating south, past the Kou Warriors and away from the Cloches.

Suddenly, a new mystery replaced the first. Tou and Tabuh looked up. Their eyes met Tenchi's and Tenchi's eyes looked down. There, before his two elven friends, rising from the cradle of the Kaboomer like a weed in a flowerbed, was Kenchi Kou. One of the jerry-rigged zoomer's passenger booths hid a secret compartment beneath the cushions where one could stow

anything from luggage to tools to children – apparently – and that is exactly where Kenchi Kou had stowed away so as not to be left behind. He didn't come completely alone, however, he brought his trusty body-less automaton, Atlas (the one and only). It was actually the robot's fault that Kenchi revealed himself. Kenchi was still focused on the initial mystery: what were the Royal Guards running from? The robot had begun to register new arrivals to the standoff. Thanks to Kenchi's snooping around the Cloches days before the Laymen's Revolution, Atlas had a good understanding of the facility. While the Globework couldn't say who these strange intruders were, it could tell where they were coming from. The glorified-mapwork told Kenchi this as they hid beneath the cushions of the Kaboomer booth while Kenchi peeped his brother's face out a crack in the hull. When he saw Tenchi bewildered and heard Atlas' intel, he couldn't pass up the opportunity to prove himself useful. Bursting forth from under the seat of the ship, he hollered over to Tou and Tabuh and exclaimed:

“Reinforcements coming up from the tunnels!”

“The Catacombs.” Atlas concurred.

The poor elves didn't know what to be more startled by. The stow-away-child or the mystery recruits coming from the crypt. They turned from the kid to one another.

“The Catacombs?” Tou repeated.

“Who could bae comin from down there?” Tabuh murmured.

Then they caught Tenchi's gaze. The couple remembered the scorn the Dragon had garnered after the last battle when he left his little brother in the middle of a warzone. Tou particularly recalled the scorn as Tabuh herself had been none-to-pleased with his complicity. Now, as the flint and steel were just about to start smacking together, here was the little human child once more. Tou and Tenchi both rushed the Kaboomer like as though they were jumping on a grenade. The two met in the middle, one on either side of the vessel.

“Take him.” Tou said.

“Take them.” Tenchi said.

Tou's lips parted to agree before he'd even heard the words from his comrades mouth. “*Take them.*” Tenchi had gestured with a nod over his shoulder, back towards the majority of the Kou Warriors. “*Take them.*” Tou took a step back.

“Your troops?”

“And the Tlow-Varens with them.” Tenchi nodded, clambering onto the zoomer.

Wake was out wounded. Other ranking members of the Kou Warriors had lost their officer status when they breathed their last breathes taking Vare. In Tenchi's mind, Captaining today's skirmish was an easy job. The enemy was reluctant and would likely surrender. Especially now that the Laymen had surprise saviors on their way. All Tou had to do was keep the folks in the front line cool. After the earth elf's performance on Voting Day, Tenchi was sure his men would be happy to follow Tou's example. Tou couldn't have disagreed more. *This is a terrible idea.* Mr. Woodsman thought. He'd only met Tadloen humans before he met Tenchi (and even those he'd only met in passing). He assumed the rowdy ruffians of the Dragon's pay-for-blades would be none-too-happy with an earth elf barking orders. Not to mention the curlheads that were chomping at the bit for some revenge from the battle prior. *Then again,* he glanced over his shoulder at his golden eyed companion, *teaming up with Tabuh had seemed like a terrible idea once too.* Most importantly, he concluded: *Do I really have a choice?* Whipping his head back around to Tenchi, he nodded.

Tenchi was hardly paying attention, he was half smothering Kenchi and half fooling with the throttle on the kaboomer. Tou was forced to run away as the engine flared to life. Tabuh was

right beside him. As the ship rocketed off and they weaseled their way to the front of the ranks, Tabuh reminded Tou of the mystery he'd forgotten.

"Those folks comin up from undernaeth." Tabuh began.

"Yea." Tou followed.

"What if they aren't on oursahd?" Tabuh asked.

"Huh?" Tou blurted.

"Just enemays of our enemays," Tabuh explained, "but not our friends aither."

"The Catacombs!" Tou gasped, "Truth!"

Just as the two elves were realizing, so too was another comrade. She didn't have the benefit of the Kou boy's wonder machine, but she did have her own wonder machine: her nose. Granted, it was more like a set of nostrils than it was a nose considering the fact that her face was quite flat and reptilian. And, even then, her nose was one of the weaker on the planet. This wasn't due to her race. This was all nurture, no nature. With a long lizard like claw, she scooped a clump of zirra out of a tiny glass vial and then shoved the fingernail into her nose to take an abrupt but powerful snort.

"Seeeelu!" Pesh exclaimed.

Reveling in the surge of endorphins, she nearly let go of Sniper. The two were linked up. Initially as fellow combatants, but after Pesh had been thoroughly warned off the use of explosives she came as a medic. Clinging to her giant bearn archer like a cape, she was just along for the ride. It was a pity she couldn't utilize her third skill. She'd kept it a secret from her comrades in the Golden Dagger and her stint with the Battle Admiral and the Kou Warriors – unsure whether or not it would be a disqualifying feature. She figured she'd have to come out eventually, Pesh just hoped to ingratiate herself first. Whether or not she had, she would soon find out for today that revelation came due. Her nose wasn't miraculous by virtue of genetics or training. No, her nose was miraculous by virtue of the very same black magic that led the new Queen to betray her people. Pesh was a necromancer and Pesh smelled bone.

Despite the powder in her sinuses, she could smell it clearly. It didn't smell like the untapped bone, waiting to be yanked from the corpse. This bone was activated and it was not unclaimed and, the most significant factor: it was getting closer. She unclasped her arms and put her hands on Sniper's collar bones, lifting herself up to look over the lines of Laymen before them. It didn't appear that their comrades had spotted anything spooky yet. The ranks of the Royal Guard kettling them seemed unaware aswell, but beyond the first few waves of palace police, Pesh thought she saw stirring within the phalanx.

Pesh and Sniper stood about fifty yards past the mouth of the Southern Veranda, what was called the Exterior Arches. Fifty yards further into the Cloches, ramps ascended to the Glassyard and descended to the Catacombs. It was there Pesh noticed disruption. Guards were shifting about, pushing and shoving one another as they argued about something. The necromancer didn't have magical ears, so she couldn't hear their conversation nor the clamoring and clattering as they drew arms against each other. She couldn't hear anything over the loudness of the Laymen who had now begun to bellow their anthem – "*There once was a nation made of sand.*" – but she could smell the undead and she knew it must be coming from the tunnels of the Catacombs.

"Dere's more dead under da Cloches dan dere are living defending it above." Pesh murmured, slumping back down to hang from Sniper's shoulders, "Farak. Dere's more dead dan bode dose defending it and dose of us invading it."

"*The name of the nation: Batloen.*"

“Hm?” Sniper asked.

Sniper stood like a tree in the midst of a storm. While the rebels rocked back and forth, waving their weapons and singing their song, Sniper stood stoic and still. His sedimentary stance masked the impatience underneath. He hadn't joined the ranks of the Laymen and the Miners to protest peacefully. The bow and quiver strapped to his side were there for a reason.

“The workers rose and claimed the land.”

Pesh pointed past Sniper's head, her arm extending level with his eyes so that her index finger stabbed at the exact spot she sought, “We gotta get drough dere, Civ.”

As she pointed, Pesh saw a couple of guards scurry up a ramp towards the Glassyard, their comrades snatching after them like they were stray varmints. The next group of defectors that appeared on the slope to the roof right after the first were stopped. It was hard for Pesh to make out over the heads of the army between them, but it looked as if these deserters had come from the Catacombs. While they'd been stopped from escaping upwards, they refused to give in. The guards turned and ran into their own ranks – running towards the Laymen side of the standoff. They were pushing and shoving through the tight phalanx of police, leaving a little path of surprised soldiers in their wake before finally bursting through the front line and into the crowd of Laymen right in front of Pesh and Sniper.

“O rise, ye Layman, rise! HUH?!”

The Laymen recoiled, giving the guards space as everyone tried to decide how to respond.

“HOLD! HOLD!” Bru hollered as he tried to get over to the scene.

“EASY! EASY!” Blade echoed, rushing to do the same.

But before anyone could break their hold or lose their cool, the guardsmen had gotten back on their feet and continued to flee towards the entrance of the Exterior Arches – through the Laymen. Then came more – bursting through their own formation to scurry into their supposed foes. The commotion in the back of the troop of Royal Guards had escalated to a level of chaos where neither Pesh nor Sniper could make out what was going on and that discord had now spread to the frontline of the Laymen.

“NOW!” Pesh exclaimed.

Sniper had already started moving. Jumping into the thin passage carved by the cowardly Cloches defenders, Sniper plunged into the dissolving lines of the Royals. The anarchy was such that the guards didn't even attempt to stop the two – it helped that Sniper stood a lumbering seven foot seven and half the guards were molemen that rarely reached more than five foot six and even the other half, the chidras, only occasionally stood taller than six feet – until they got closer to the back of the company. Yet, as they stepped forward to block their path, a new squad of a dozen or so guards came fleeing up one of the ramparts that led down to the Catacombs. The guards in the back had to deal with their own members, but those before Sniper and Pesh held fast albeit a bit distracted.

Drawing his bow, Sniper let his first arrow fly.

The guards holding them yelped, drawing their weapons before glancing back first to check and see where the arrow landed. The arrow protruded from the eye socket of a skull. A column of unburied surged up from the ramp. They smashed into the guards squabbling with one another, stabbing with blades made of the very bone that built their bodies. All those who saw did one of two things: turned and ran or turned and fought and those that did the latter were more than happy to have the giant bowman alongside them.

Pesh hopped off the back of the bearn, pausing behind him to check the armaments along her hip. Her hands stopped on a football sized object. It was a favorite of hers and the largest of the kind she kept on her. As a fuseless grenade, it was activated by a key. This one was designed for demolition, not for mutilation. Cradling the bomb to her breast, she held the key by its teeth, and slinked forward. She slipped between the soldiers struggling to hack back the undead attack and made her way to the front. There, the dead took aim at her. She whacked them away with the key. It had grown in her grasp. Opaque ivory had formed around the handle, extending from it until it was the size of the short swords in the hands of the Royal Guards – although it looked more like the bone-made blades in the hands of their enemies. Sniper helped her advance, shooting the heads off the dead that got past her frantic swings. She didn't have to go too far before she could do what she came to do.

“GET BACK!” She screamed as she switched her grasp on her sword to hold it by the bone then plunged the toothed-end into the football. Twisting the key, she leaned back and threw the bulbous looking spear. It soared over the heads of the dead and then arched down into the depths from whence they'd come as she yelled one more time, “GET BACK!”

BOOM!

Pesh herself was thrown off her feet. The blast filled the belly of the tunnel and shot out like a tornado of fire, most of it rocketing through the ramp opposite it that led to the Glassyard. The dirt, bone, and smoke exploded, pelting everyone before settling back down to burry the mouth of the tunnel. Sniper and the guardsmen rushed in with the sediment to finish those undead that hadn't been smothered in the wreckage. There were still some pulling themselves up from the debris, but what had been a gushing faucet before had been reduced to a sputtering spicket.

Laying flat on her back while the meleers did their part, Pesh found herself staring up at the Glassyard. She gulped. A white lightning bolt line was busy squiggling its way across the glass pane. The snake of a crack then split like a hydra, birthing new necks and stretching out in all directions. Sitting up, her nostrils flared. More bad news. Her bomb had dealt with the unburied for now, but the Catacombs were still alive and there were dozens of other tunnels leading up to not just the Southern Veranda but those to the North, East, and West. Continuing with the analogy of water, Pesh hadn't stopped the leak. She'd just stuck her finger in one of many holes.

She hopped to her feet and yanked Sniper's arm. The bearn had been busy whacking undead with his bow, but he stopped to turn to Pesh. As he did his eyes caught by the crack spreading in the Glassyard above.

“We gotta move!” Pesh exclaimed, gesturing to the dismembered skeletons around their feet, “Dere's more coming!” She tugged him towards the freshly scorched ramp to the Glassyard, “Come on!”

Sniper planted his feet. His eyes wide and still trained on the fissures in the glass over their heads. Pesh jerked his arm again, “I know, Civ, anodder reason why we've got to go! We've got to get everyone in da Cloches!”

Turning from Pesh and the ramp, Sniper looked back towards the entrance to the Southern Veranda. The peaceful protest had finally turned into a battle. The invading unburied and deserting guardsmen had allowed the Laymen to infiltrate. The violence hadn't broken out until the explosion, however, for so long as the undead were there the men of Cloches could care less about the orders of their captains. As the smoke cleared, however, the Royal Guard

remembered their duty. The guards they'd been fighting the unburied alongside saw this now too. And they stood between Sniper and Pesh and the ramp to the Glassyard.

"Come da farak on!" Pesh lamented, gesturing to the darkness deeper in the chamber beyond them, "Dere's more coming!"

"She's a necromancer!" One of the guards warned, "I saw her use bone!"

"The unburied are working for the Laymen!" Another exclaimed.

"What?" Pesh turned to Sniper for support. He simply knocked an arrow in his bow with a grunt. Pesh groaned, "If dey were working for us den I wouldn't have blown dem to bits!"

The guards tightened their line and adjusted their grip on their weapons.

Bru appeared alongside them, grabbing Pesh by the scruff of her robe and turning her to face him as he snarled, "That bomb of yours is going to kill us all!"

Blade arrived there to tear Bru's hand off Pesh, barking at him, "Only after it saved us all!"

"Dere's more undead." Pesh warned them.

"We got to get to the Interior Arches then." Blade stated.

"Before the Glassyard shatters." Bru added, still glaring at Pesh.

The four turned back to the ash covered line of Royal Guards defending the ramp.

"Rise, ye Laymen, rise." Sniper sang under his breath.

"What?" The three chidras yelped, turning to the typically quiet oaf.

The bearn shrugged, "Stuck in my head." Then he let loose an arrow to stick in the head of an enemy.

- - -

"Droves!" The moleman screamed, "Droves!"

"Droves of what?" Zaria barked back.

Lalmly was silently tying his wrists together behind his back. His shield lay on top of his crossbow and Cowboy was perched on top of that. The soldier kept jerking his head to glance back at the Cloches but hardly could with the armored spirit holding him tight. Though they doubted he was a trap, they certainly wouldn't trust in the good will of a deserter. The Royal Guardsman had tumbled down the makeshift ramps to the Glassyard and gotten as far as the barricades before being stopped by the defensive line of the Laymen forces and their allies.

"Dead!" The man yelped.

Lalmly froze, as did Zaria. Her silver eyes met Zaria's dark brown. Then their attention was pulled away as more deserters arrived. Frantic and flailing, they threw themselves upon the barricade. Happily surrendering, they consented to whatever insults and abuses the Laymen offered them. Neither the spirit nor the earth elf could see beyond the Exterior Arches, the Southern Veranda was all shadows and commotion, but they were sure the Cloches' men hadn't fled *from* the rebels *towards* the rebels. There was certainly a third party involved that was flanking the rear of the Royals, a third party that was apparently scarier than themselves.

"The Catacombs have come alive!" The moleman continued.

"BORK!" Cowboy exclaimed.

Ditching the interrogation, the vallhund rushed past Zaria and Lalmly to jump and nip playfully at the hips of the Princess. Daffeega stooped to pet the pouncing pup before continuing onwards to meet with his masters. More guards were defecting. Laymen and Miners were stopping them at the barricades but soon it seemed they would be outnumbered and – in the

meantime – no one knew quite what to do with them. Daffeega’s arrival on the war-side of the barricades brought a wave of relief.

She came along with her beloved simian, Alfred, now a war veteran, and Sharp. Sharp wasn’t back to one hundred percent since Voting Day. His right knee forced him to limp and his left arm required a bit of extra effort to fully extend. There’d been healers available to him and he had gotten some treatment, but he’d prioritized his Princess’ subjects over himself and when it finally had been his turn, he quickly lost patience thinking of Daffeega wandering around unprotected. Once he could run and pick up his sword, he was done with the doctor. Unfortunately, that meant his stride now matched his crippled comrade’s, except he hadn’t learned the way to hide his new weakness behind a confident gait.

Lalmly and Zaria noted his limp as he approached, sharing a glance with one another to confirm before getting on with it.

“The Catacombs.” Zaria stated.

“Mancers.” Daffeega nodded, “Truth can’t control the entire Catacombs.”

“But could she control enough?” Lalmly asked.

The monkey on Daffeega’s shoulders slipped behind her head and ducked down to just barely peak over, watching the Exterior Arches beyond which shadowy shapes waged war. From afar, it was impossible to tell who was fighting who, but for now it was only the Crown’s men and women who were fleeing. For better or worse, the Laymen and Miners kept pushing deeper.

“Admiral,” Daffeega commanded, “continue to take the deserters as prisoners. There may be trades to be made after today.”

“Solaris willing.” Sharp inserted.

“We could use you both in the Cloches, but I need a foreigner to oversee the treatment of the Royal Guards.” She glanced down the line of the barricades and concurred with her guard, “Solaris willing, they’ll be civilians tomorrow with the rest of us.”

“BORK!”

Cowboy announced the arrival of the next comrades: the Kous. Zooming in on their modified zoomer, Tenchi and Kenchi hit the sand dusted pavement between the barricades and the Exterior Arches. The Kaboomer spun, drifting like a street racer, in a full circle before skidding to a halt before Daffeega, Sharp, Lalmly, and Zaria. It hadn’t come to a full rest before the younger Kou leapt from the side of the ship. He tumbled to the ground and rolled to his feet as if the landing had gone exactly as planned. Behind him, his big brother flailed about in a desperate hurry to cut off the engine and rush after the little Kou.

“There’s a whole army coming up from the tunnels!” The human child exclaimed, holding his mechanized map out for them all to see. The gold eyed robot rattled – which was as good it could do to nod considering it lacked a neck – then said, “Forces are rising from the Catacombs and pushing the Royal Guards back.”

“We must go now.” Daffeega stated.

Tenchi had just jumped off the Kaboomer to take his brother’s side when Daffeega struck out in stride passing him, making a beeline for the Arches. He back pedaled to keep up with her, asking, “Wait – are they allies?”

“They once were.” Daffeega did not stop to explain.

Sharp did, “Undead, Civ. Da Catacombs.”

“There’s gotta be thousands.” Tenchi gasped.

“At least.” Sharp agreed.

“Wait, Princess!” Tenchi hollered after her. He spun around and jogged up alongside her, “Let’s take the ship. You can’t just march through the middle of the battle. The undead will be at the barricades before you get to the Catacombs.”

Finally, she stopped. The human had a point.

“That’s one of your brother’s inventions?” Daffeega asked.

“Yes, ma’am!” Kenchi exclaimed. He tucked Atlas under his arm like a basketball and rushed up to stand between his brother and the Princess, “It can blast through castle walls easy – we tested it out in Sondor.”

“Oh we’ve heard, little Civ.” Sharp chuckled through gritted teeth, “But da Cloches is-”

“There will be less guards under the Mosaicyard.” Daffeega remarked.

“*Da Mosaicyard?*” Sharp gritted harder.

“If you get to the tunnels, then you can get to the necromancers.” Lalmly suggested. The spirit had moved so quickly to join the four that Zaria hadn’t even noticed her leave her side. Lalmly glanced back at Zaria. Their eyes again shifted to Sharp’s knee and bicep then back to one another. She said, “I’ll accompany them.”

“Selu!” Kenchi exclaimed, “A Shisharay! You’re coming with?”

“With?” Tenchi crowed, “With us.” He pushed Kenchi back with an index finger to the sternum, “You’re staying with…” Tenchi’s eyes wandered over to Zaria, “…with the Admiral!”

“With me?” Zaria yelped, stabbing her own chest with her index finger, “What part of Strategy Admiral sounds like baby sitter to you?”

“He’s an asylum seeker, remember?” Tenchi smirked.

“He can look after Alfred while I’m away.” Daffeega offered.

Still staring into the shadows of the Southern Veranda, the simian was thrilled to hear his new host. The little ape bound from the back of the mole Princess and landed on the scruffy head of the human refugee. Kenchi, too, was ecstatic with the pairing. The other animal amongst them, however, was none too happy. Cowboy prowled in a figure eight in and around Zaria’s legs, growling under his breath as he eyed the monkey on Kenchi’s head.

“If Cowboy eats them, that’s not on me.” Zaria warned.

“I’ll probably die anyways,” Tenchi shrugged, before winking at the Admiral, “but Wake won’t.”

Zaria glowered. His snide remark served its purpose but it also startled Kenchi. He’d been satiated with the responsibility of monkey-keeper but the realization that his brother was, again, running into battle unsettled him.

“Tenchi!” He cried, “Take Atlas!”

“The one and only.” The robot chimed.

Sharp and Lalmly had begun to help Daffeega up onto the ship, but their pilot had yet to join them. Kneeling down, he’d been going to say good bye to his little brother when the miniature inventor handed him the Globework.

“He knows the Cloches,” Kenchi assured Tenchi, “and Truth!”

“That’ll come in handy, Kenchi, thanks.” He shooed the monkey off his brother’s scalp and ruffled Kenchi’s hair saying, “First the Kaboomer, now Atlas-”

“The one and only.” The robot chimed again.

“-you’ll be the hero of the day, little man.” Tenchi declared before rising back upright, “I love you, brother.”

“I love you, brother!” Kenchi proclaimed.

With a bow of his head, Tenchi turned from his kin and jump into the ship. Daffeega, Sharp, and Lalmly were all in their places. He tossed Sharp the Globework and then took a seat behind the control panel. He pulled a lever to swivel the jet engine, then thrust the throttle. Flames burst from the propulsion cannon, turning the sand on the street between the barricades and the Exterior Arches to glass as it lifted the Kaboomer up off the ground. A couple of deserting Royal Guardsmen dove onto their bellies behind the ship as the heat flared and launched the ship arching into the sky.

Soaring over the Glassyard, they saw the unfolding battle below. The citizens and the soldiers had finally clashed. Smoke rose from the ramps that led below, and cracks in the glass could be seen stretching all the way to the edge of the Exterior Arches.

“Da Glassyard!” Sharp exclaimed.

“Won’t be the only courtyard destroyed today.” Daffeega sighed.

Northwest of the Glassyard, was the Mosaicyard. Pixelated pictures of the beasts of Batloe were spread out across the tiled terrace. Black speckles bordered the creature collage, ominously circling above the Catacombs far below. The dark smudges were meant to depict bushards – which were technically vegan, but visually similar to the queens of carrion (buzzards) – but because they were formed by colored glass chunks, their identity wasn’t immediately identifiable to the foreigners approaching. Nor were the flannel cammels. They were certainly larger in the mosaic, but still shown on desert dunes. Their shapes were shifted by heat. In the center of the horizontal mural there was quite the clear portrayal. One that used to instill pride in the citizens of the sandy state but would forever more haunt the people. A murder of three ground dragons, a father, mother, and child, nested in the center of the mosaic. The father breathed a column of fire out towards the horizon, the mother curled in around the rim of the nest, and the child stood upright, with wings spread, screaming towards the heavens.

“You sure about this, Princess?” Tenchi checked.

Daffeega nodded, “No other way.”

“Are you sure this machine can break through?” Lalmly checked.

The ship flattened out, a good hundred yards above the patio. Tenchi turned the wheel to have them circling then drew the Mystak Blade.

He winked at the spirit, “Just for you.”

The slender sword suddenly shone green like an emerald in the light of Solaris. He pointed the tip out over the edge of the ship and a ball of ice began to manifest just an inch from the blade. Chunks formed out of the vapor in the air, freezing and molding together with the rest before finally taking on more of a spade-shape.

“Da Mystak Blade,” Sharp murmured, “selu...”

Lalmly rolled her eyes.

“Want me to aim anywhere in particular, Princess?” Tenchi asked.

“Strike there.” Daffeega pointed to the head of the little dragon, “We’ll have to slip in at an angle, if we slip in going east towards the center of the Cloches, then there will be extra room as there’s a large tunnel dipping down towards the Catacombs there.”

“Understood.” Tenchi said, “We ready?”

“Ready, Civ.” Sharp said.

Lalmly nodded.

“Alright, hold on!” Tenchi warned.

Swinging his sword flung the ice bludgeon hurtling towards the Mosaicyard. Tenchi then sheathed his sword and took the wheel once more, tilting the Kaboomer down to chase after the

frozen battering ram. The ice exploded on impact but so too did the tiles, shards of crystal ice and broken terracotta burst out in all directions like a blooming flower, then their ship struck. They slipped in at an angle and Tenchi immediately directed the jet engine to flip over, blasting the opposite direction to bring them to an abrupt halt. His passengers jolted forwards but held fast. Sharp and Lalmly had the grip of warriors and Daffeega had fastened her body down into the belly of the Kaboomer with magic. Dust and debris settled around them, but they'd made it through – into the Eastern Veranda. Guards would be coming. Undead likely too. But that's what they came for, that and the tunnel that sprawled out before them.

- - -

A giant block of glass crashed to the dusty pavement of the Southern Veranda. Those directly underneath were crushed, their souls thrust from their bodies without a final breath. Their fate may have been better than those on the edges. Some of the calved glass split like chunks off a glacier, smashing ankles and bashing heads. Other parts splintered to stab and slice through the flesh of the chidras and molemen that stood between them and the turf. Then tumbled in the people. Most had felt the jolt and knew the fall was coming, they managed to escape to the edges, but not all got off the iceberg. Falling three stories, they only escaped injury by injuring the poor soul they landed on. The only silverlining of the situation was that it brought the conflict between the Laymen, Miners, and the Royal Guard to an immediate stop. As Solaris' light poored into the Southern Veranda, a frantic peace followed and Batloens from both sides of the Rift rushed together to tend to those that had fallen and been fallen on. A similar armistice was manifesting fifty yards away at the front line – but less immediately.

Sniper strode forward and swung his bow as if it were a baseball bat. It knocked the helmet clear off the guard which simultaneously saved his life. As the mole dove to the side, Sniper strode past and caught the undead that had been about to run the Varen through. His fingers slipped through the squealing skull and held the creature far enough away that its ivory blade couldn't reach the bearn, at least not before the bearn brought his bow-bat back down to behead the boogeyman.

As the skeleton crumpled into a pile of bones, three more ghouls took its place. They jumped towards Sniper with javelins made of deformed femurs. Sniper battered two of the spears away but the third drove onwards and would've skewered him had a fourth spear not swept down to drive the third into the ground.

Glancing to his side, his eyes met with the owner of the fourth spear: a female guardswoman. Then one of those eyes broke contact as an arrow plunged into it. The bolt was made of bone, a tiny phalange widdled down. Had it been any longer, it likely would've slipped on into the brain but the molewoman's life wasn't taken yet. Sniper grabbed her by her cape and yanked her behind him, hollering over his shoulder.

“PESH!”

“On it!”

Saving the soldier wasn't free. Though two of the unburied before him, those he had parried, had turned to aim their spears at her and thus stabbed the thin air where she had been, the other one stabbed oncemore at Sniper. Sniper saw in time to move. He brought his bow down to block, but the skeleton was that of a moleman – quite shorter than Sniper – and it had stabbed low. By the time his bow collided with the spear, it was already imbedded in his left thigh.

Stooped over, he straightened back up abruptly, stabbing his bow vertically up through the ribs of the undead until it popped off its head.

He then whirled on the two unburied at his side only to stop short as blast of fire rushed past his groin so close that his balls clenched. Fortunately, the fire came from a friend. It blasted through the two undead spearman beside him and sent them clattering into the darkness in pieces. The light of the blaze flew further into the abyss and illuminated the skeleton archer in the shadows just as another bolt was let lose. This one struck Sniper in the right shoulder. While large enough to ruin a molewoman's eye, the tiny thing was essentially a needle to the gargantuan bearn. He couldn't help but smirk as he knocked an arrow and let it fly. The distant fireball had gone out, but he heard his foe collapse like a bunch of sticks after his arrow hit the bull's eye.

That was the last of the ghouls for now. This gave time for Sniper to turn and thank his savior. Blade was already waving it off. Her elgroom-pickax still glowed red. Beside her, Bru had just finished bashing his bonemies with the blunt side of his butcher knife and the dented blade of his machete. He gave a nod to Sniper, noting the bone sticking out of the bearn's thigh.

Looking past Bru, Sniper was amazed to see the conflict had stalled. In the face of the collapsing ceiling, the back ranks had ditched stabbing each other for the moment and, with another army of undead soon to be upon them, the front ranks had come to a similar spontaneous truce. The only question was: would their captains let it last? Apparently, the nearest officer happened to be the moleman that Sniper had clobbered (albeit in a successful attempt to save his life).

Having recovered his helmet, he stepped past Sniper towards Blade and Bru but stopped at the squirming body of the guardswoman that had been shot in the eye. Pesh knelt beside the soldier and felt the officer's presence but didn't stop her healing. She was actually using the bone energy of a dead guardsman beside her – one Sniper had killed before the undead had returned. An off white fog rose from the dead guard, it curled around Peshkova and then it flowed over her shoulder and jumped off her hand to be absorbed into the bloody clump of her patient's eye. The officer's grimace kept his lips from curling at the sight of a necromancer.

"If we keep fighting each other," Blade stated, "we'll all die."

"Surrender." Bru demanded, "And we'll let you pass to the barricades."

"And there?" The servant of the Crown pressed.

"You'll be taken prisoner." Bru answered.

"Peacefully." Blade stated.

The Captain frowned as he lamented the decision. If he surrendered, then he'd better pray the Laymen won the day because his Queen would not forgive him. That said, he'd probably die either way. And what had the Queen ever done for him other than lend him a subpar flat on the nice-side of the Rift? The sounds of unburied scurrying in the distance somehow reached his ears despite the commotion above and below, their rattling bones was like the ticking of an analog watch. It had only been a couple seconds, though it felt like hours, when he dropped his helmet.

"As a Captain of the Royal Guard, I, Onx Shelba-"

His audience gasped.

"No relation!" He exclaimed before concluding, "I surrender to the Laymen. Follow me to the barricades if you'll do the same."

"Or stay," Blade offered, "and join us!"

Not everyone was a fan of this option, including Bru. He nudged her a bit harder than he intended to with his elbow, “Join us?”

Even many of the guard seemed they preferred the prior deal as a few stopped in their tracks. Laymen and Miners both seemed to bristle as they stepped back into the pathways they’d made for the surrendering guardsmen. They’d just finished trying to kill each other, now they were supposed to work together? Peace was one thing, joining forces was another.

“The unburied won’t stop once we get in the Cloches.” Blade explained, speaking loudly so that not just Bru could hear, “We need every man and woman with a weapon we can get until this thing is over.”

“What’s in it for us if we stay?” Captain Onx asked.

Bru could read what Blade wanted to offer in her fierce glare. Their political differences were rising to the forefront once more. *Boot-licking patriots*. Bru growled in his head. Meanwhile, Blade was rolling her eyes thinking: *Hypocritical handout hoarders*. But, in the end, Bru knew Blade was right and the undead were getting closer.

“Absolution.” Bru sighed.

“Absolution?” Onx gasped.

“Absolution!” Blade declared, “Drop your helmet to show you stand with us and Onx.”

“Captain Onx...” the mole muttered.

“Then-”

“Then guard the ramp base.” Bru interrupted, “The Laymen and Miners go first.”

Blade sighed but accepted the stipulation. Onx’s smile faded however.

“Go to the barricades or follow *after* us.” Bru specified.

Captain Onx’s lip wanted to curl again but before his snout could reveal how he really felt, his mind was changed by the another calving of the glacial ceiling. This time, a larger chunk burst from its place above and smashed those below – a mere twenty-yards from the ramp. Kou soldiers spilled in as wounded rebels and guards crawled away. That sealed the deal for Onx. With the Glassyard soon to collapse, surrendering back at the barricades – a hundred yards away – was not ones best bet either. The best bet was up the ramp and the ramp was held by the Laymen.

“Deal.” Onx was so eager to shake Bru’s hand, he did it while the machete was still in the chidra’s grasp, simply clasping the closed fist as if he didn’t notice. Then he turned from the Layman and hollered to his men and women, “If you’re sticking around, lets get back in formation. Facing north!”

As the guards moved, Blade turned back to Bru.

“I’m going to take a few of us with elgroons and put up a wall behind the guards, running north and south.” Blade said, “East and West too if there’s time.”

“Are you sure?” Bru asked, “We’ll need you in the Interior Arches.”

“And I’ll be there,” She clasped him on the shoulder, “after we build our wall.”

Bru sighed through flared nostrils but accepted the plan. As he rushed to man the ascention, Blade called a few of the nearby Miners she knew by name. While obviously reluctant to lose their place in line, they consented. There were just six in all, including Blade. Starting at the edge of the recently-turned Royal Guard phalanx, they began their project.

Raising her elgroon above her head, Blade led the way. The stone embedded in the shaft of her broken pick shown with a sandy, amber glow. Fissures emerged in the pavement six feet in front of her. Dust began to filter in like water through a crack in a glass as the cracks grew and

the rock peeled back from the earth it had covered. Stepping back as if she were tugging a rope, the slab of stone rose towards the ceiling. Her comrades followed suit to the south of her.

The guards in the back of the formation flinched when they noticed but then they realized what the Miners were up to. The idea of a wall on their flank gave them a bit of comfort – though that comfort didn't go far. Sniper was watching them. He stood behind their lines, guarding Peshkova as she continued to treat the guardswoman with the bone in her eye, but he could see the soldiers glancing over their shoulders. They weren't looking for the unburied, they were looking at the rebels clamoring up the ramp to safety.

Sniper knocked an arrow in his bow.

Then shouts came from the south. Shouts had been coming from the south to begin with – that was where most of the glass chunks had been falling. People were crying in fear when a new fissure appeared above them and others were crying in pain as they died or endured their wounds. These cries were different. They were like those that came when the glass would fall. Garbled. Unfinished. Muffled. These were a voice's final vocalization and Sniper was familiar with such sounds. Turning, he saw confirmation. The undead had gone around the Royal Guards, around Blades' wall, and attacked the Laymen and Miners as they lined up for the ramp.

Immediately, the orderly ascention turned into a stampede. The rush was so chaotic, Sniper couldn't get a bead on any of the enemy in the commotion until they broke through the ranks of the rebels and came running towards him and Pesh. They were in what had been a bit of a triangular clearing. One side made by the guards, one side by the wall, and the other by the line of Laymen and Miners but now that safe little corner had been broken. And not just by unburied surging north, by guards surging south.

When the dead attacked the Laymen, they also attacked the guardsmen. The guards had already been beginning to complain as they trembled, staring into the abyss. What point was surrendering if they were going to be hung out to dry? Left behind as meatshields. Forsaken to die as martyrs for their foe's cause did not sound like the deal they'd accepted when they'd taken off their helmets. Having already broken one sacred vow by betraying their loyalty to the Queen and her Magi, what was breaking one more? What it was, was far more convincing than hanging around to be slaughtered by the undead and collapsing glass. Thus, when the shadows began to shift and pale fleshless faces burst forth from the blackness, all their order dissolved.

As undead rushed past Sniper and Pesh from the south, Royal Guards rushed past them from the north. Discarding the arrow in the empty head of one of the damned, he resorted back to using his bow as a bat. Luckily, the skeletons capitalized on the frantic rather than targeting the stoic bear. Many of the Royal Guards hardly put up a fight, rushing instead for the ramp rather than mounting any defense only to find the avenue clogged by the equally frenzied Laymen.

"Done!" Pesh proclaimed, finally looking up from her spell crafting. When she saw them in the middle of a battle between the living and the dead, she flopped over onto her back like a startled insect, "FARAKIN-"

"Get up." Sniper stated calmly bashing a bonemy back with his bow, "Get to the ramp."

The bearn was practically standing over the two. Pesh's patient was still conscious as well. Her eye had been patched up, the bone removed, but certainly not healed. Pesh was a healer compared to someone who wasn't a healer, but compared to someone like Lenga Ruse, Pesh wasn't-

"TIAD!" The molewoman blurted. Her one good eye being enough to see they were in trouble. Especially when she turned and saw the cluster at the ramp. The Batloen's at the base of the ramp looked doomed to die by being crushed by their comrades if they weren't carved up by

the unburied first. Then, for whatever reason, the one-eyed ex-guard looked to her left (which was east) and saw the wall-makers just as swarmed as everyone else but they were making their way over to join them in the middle of the former triangle. And therein lied an idea. The wounded molewoman exclaimed, “Your bombs!”

“HA!” Pesh scoffed. She jumped to her feet. A bone-made club in her hands, she swung it at their foes clumsily. She responded, “I’m not ready to suicide yet.”

“Your bombs!” Blade unwittingly reiterated.

“Blade?” Pesh gasped, “Crimpsin tiad, I dought you’d-”

Blade and her comrades – only three of which were left – had begun peeling up stone on either side of themselves. One such sedimentary shield nearly blocked the Captain of the Guard from joining him. His phalanx had fully fallen and it seemed his resolve wasn’t much better than his subordinates. Jumping into the little circle of defense the gang had made, Captain Onx had apparently come to the same conclusion.

“Your bombs!” The mole barked.

“I godi get it, Civs.” Pesh grumbled, “Ready reddy?”

“Reddy? Farakin...”

Blade, the red scaled chidra, had to cut her complaints off, even in her thoughts, after all it was imagination that powered the elgroom in her hands. She and the three other elementalists were almost done. Sniper and Onx and the one-eyed-guardswoman were busy stabbing through the cracks even as they disappeared around them. Soon they would be encased in an egg of stone. One that could hopefully withstand one of Peshkova’s explosions but also blast back the undead enough to give them time to get to the ramp. The bomb she’d picked out was larger than the last one. Everyone that got an eye on it gulped but kept their concern quiet. If it was too small, they’d die anyways. Hopefully the necromancer was more of a demolitions expert than a healer.

“Sniper,” Pesh said, pulling some kind of rod out of the explosive orb. It began to flicker in her hands, “dah honors?”

Sniper, being the tallest, took the explosive. The elementalists were just sealing them in, having left only the small hole that the bearn had been shooting through. It was perfectly sized for the bomb. He pushed it through and then everyone ducked as Blade sealed the orifice. Complete darkness engulfed them. They held their breathes knowing it may be their last. The sound of the battle around them was distorted as if they were under water and then there was no noise at all.

- - -

Another Royal Guard dashed into the midst of the Kou Warriors, squirming wildly to slip into their ranks. The mercenaries were still flustered by the deserters and the Batloen’s that joined them were just as perplexed. While determined not to budge where their line met the enemy, what were they to do about the steady trickle of surrendering foes? One amongst them had an idea.

Tabuh snatched one guard by his cape and yanked him like a dog on a leash. The poor moleman would’ve flopped onto his back had she not held him upright. She flashed her revolver past his eyes before she spun him around to face away from her. With one hand, she had him by the collar and with the other she shoved the barrel of the gun into the nape of his neck. She nudged Tou with her elbow.

Tou had been bickering with a Captain of the Guard as tensions began to flare. The fractured glass beneath their feet had flipped the situation on its head. Before, the guards on the Glassyard looked just as ready to surrender as their men continued to flee from the Southern Veranda below. The Kou Warriors had been content to wait until the entire army of the Crown dissolved before them but now they were clamoring to get off the glass before the floor fell out from under them. If it weren't for Tou and Tabuh running up and down the frontlines, the Kou Warriors would've already attacked just to surge through. Though it seemed it would still come to that.

"Tou, let's go." Tabuh growled.

"Farak..." Tou cursed but complied, waving to the men and women behind him to follow. He hollered to the Warriors and Laymen though his eyes didn't leave the Captain, "We're moving!"

The guards got out of Tabuh's way as she pushed her hostage into their midst. For a moment, it seemed like her simple stunt was all they needed but then the Captain drew his sword. Tou whipped out his blade, prepared to slice the official in two if he advanced on Tabuh but he didn't.

The Captain ran his own man through. He drove his blade through the man's gut, piercing the young guard's chainmail and plunging all the way until the tip poked through to the other side of his vest.

"This man deserted." He snarled at the two elves, "Penalty for which is what I see fit." Turning to look around and scan the rest of his men, he ordered, "We will *not* let them pass!"

Tabuh let go of the wounded guard and let him fall to the ground at the Captain's feet. She turned to Tou but before they could confer on if this meant it was time for war, the universe commanded it for them.

It sounded almost like the clap of a banshee's spell. A terrible wrenching shriek that was quickly followed by high pitched screams of shock and then deep cutteral roars of fear. Plumes of fire burst into the sky along the edge of the Glassyard, where the steeds of the dalvary remained perched. Banned from entering the holy Cloches, they waited loyaly for their riders. Riders that they now could no longer rush in and whisk away. The glass was beginning to fall. Tou and Tabuh couldn't see to what degree from where they stood on the front line – in reality was only just a chunk at first – but neither could any of the mercenaries and rebels there with them. Everyone assumed it was all coming down at once and everyone charged.

BLAM!

The starting pistol was fired by Tabuh, directly into the face of the merciless captain. His brain broke through the back of his skull, bounced off the inside of his helmet, and ricocheted out his snout. When the officer collapsed and Tabuh stepped forward, his soldiers saw a blood painted pale elf with a golden gun looking to blast another. The closest began to flee, but those behind them weren't having it. They pushed the cowards back into the fray, back at Tabuh, and likely would've bowled her over had not Tou stepped forward to defend.

He twirled around backwards and lobbed himself into the midst. Holding *Future* by his waist as his body went horizontal in the air, he stabbed through the gut of the unfortunate soul behind him. The others were too confused by the bizarre attack to immediately know what to do. This allowed Tabuh to get off another headshot.

BLAM!

The red scales turned to red slush and the chidra went down. Now those guards behind the first line – those that had so patriotically pushed their comrades back into the fray – found

themselves losing their resolve. It wasn't just Tou and Tabuh, the entire army of the Kou Warriors and Tlow-Varens they'd brought along rushed forward, fueled by fear and fervor. These Royal Guards may not have wanted to put down a popular uprising, but they could've quit after the first battle. Now that they stood between the people and survival, the people had no mercy. Then, as many of them turned to flee back towards the Cloches propper, the Laymen began to rise from the ramps of the Southern Veranda below.

As abruptly as the giant plane of glass had fallen, the Royal Guards fell into utter chaos. Mercenaries from Sondor assaulted them from the south and their siblings and cousins battered them to the east. Those few that held their ground, did not expect to survive. That said, the Kou Warriors and Laymen were in an equally precarious situation. Though those in the Glassyard didn't know it, there would soon be a new threat on the horizon even if they made it off the fracturing floor: the unburied.

After stabbing a guard and toppling those beside him, Tou rolled to his feet and jerked his blade free. The two guards on the ground had dropped their weapons. Their hands were up by their shoulders, their arms bent like an otter backstroking across a river. Tabuh stepped over them to join Tou. The chidra she'd just slain collapsed and behind them there was a thinning resistance but a resistance none the less.

Tabuh raised her gun.

"No." Tou put his hand on the barrel – searing his glove – and gave his grasp weight, encouraging but not forcing her to lower it, "Save your ammo and reload."

Tabuh frowned, but didn't protest. The two both knew the undead would soon be their true enemy and there might not be time to stop and reload if the entire population of the Catacombs was rising from their graves. Even then, if it was the entire population, did she even have enough bullets to beat them?

What she saw next assured her that she did not. They were only twenty yards from the mouth of the Interior Arches. The entrance looked like a smaller version of the thirty foot arches that made up the face of the Exterior Arches, the main difference was that they were not open air. A series of massive double doors sealed off the chamber behind the archways or, at least, they once did. For now those doors had just opened. The quickly dissolving guardsmen on the Glassyard were just the front line. Reinforcements marched out of the Interior Arches and lined up on the paved patio that stretched out to meet the glass.

"Donum." Tou and Tabuh cursed simultaneously.

They turned to one another.

"We need to get some of them back to the dragons." Tou said.

Tabuh had been about to say the same, instead she continued his line of thinking, "You take them or I?"

Tou's stomach sank down into his groin. It was a reasonable question. Tenchi had left them in charge of the army and now they needed to split their force in half. However, the trouble had only just begun. It was equally reasonable to assume the danger would only multiply. Separation terrified Tou, but he couldn't let his fear get the best of him again. He had to prove to Tabuh that they could be more than lovers – that they could be partners.

"I'll go." He said, "Get the other half off the glass."

Then he grabbed her by her vest, pulled her close, and pressed his lips firmly against hers before peeling away and turning south to run further from safety. Once his mind stopped dwelling on the touch of her lips, he realized he didn't quite know how to command their troops in any real sense. Tou and Tabuh had just been barking at the whole lot simple orders. "Stay

cool!” and “Charge!” but now he had to divide them in half and he couldn’t simply say, “Hey, anyone who wants to get off this glass faster, come with me.” That’d leave Tabuh high and dry.

Farak Tenchi! Could’ve given us some pointers! He snatched a Sondoran amongst the last two lines of men. In the rear of the company, there was little fighting and mostly just shoving. Trying to force those in front of you forward so that you could get one step closer to solid ground. Grabbing a random soldier did not have the desired affect of commanding attention. As Tou yelled in his face, the human kept his eyes on the glass beneath their feet.

“Soldier!”

“Warrior.” The man corrected him.

Tou winced but snapped back to command-mode, “Warrior! The General put me in charge and we need to get about half of you off the glass.”

Now the Warrior perked up. So too did a few of his friends. They instantly abandoned the effort of fighting their way through the crowd at the faint scent of a more lucrative option.

“What’s a group of y’all called?” Tou continued, hardly stopping for breath.

The man pointed to himself and the two on either side, “This is my band!”

“Bigger!” Tou exclaimed.

“A bunch of bands is a gang!” A woman on his right yelled.

“Bigger!” Tou demanded.

“After that, we’re in clans!” The man on the first fellow’s left said.

“How many clans are here?” Tou pressed.

“Two!” The woman chirped.

The other man said, jerking his thumb towards those near the front, “They’re Ridgeback.”

“We’re Shovel.” Said the man Tou had grabbed.

“Get Shovel out of here. Take a Layman if they’ll go. Report to the Admiral.” Tou said, “And you better fly your godi asses back here after the glass breaks.” He let go of the human and slapped him on the back, “Let’s go!”

Though the humans didn’t need any encouragement, encouragement came nonetheless. Ten yards north, closer to the front line, another chunk of glass fell into the darkness. This spurred Tou and his new disciples to get out their message with ever more urgency just as it spurred Tabuh to get her mercenaries and rebels to deliver theirs. The fear from the second shatter caused a tidal wave of energy. The stampede obliterated what was left of that first regiment of Royal Guards and got both Sondorans and Tlow-Varens to first reach the porch of the Cloches.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! Tabuh eviscerated the first row of the Queen’s pawns to make space for her invading troops. BLAM! BLAM! But then she had to reload. It only took a matter of seconds but it was still enough of a pause for a little voice to slip in her ear – a voice she kept suppressed while pointing her firearm but always managed to rear its whiny whisper when she took her eyes off the target. *Those guards have families.* She shook her head as if she could launch the idea out of her ears then inserted the seventh bullet into the cylinder and looked up to take aim again. As she did, she saw a Miner swing her pickax into the face of a guard. The guard was a dark red scaled chidra, the same color as the Miner that’d slain them. *They could be family.* Tabuh thought.

She turned back to look at the rebels rising from the ramp. The ramp was made of the same pale pavement that floored the Southern Veranda. It jutted up into the Glassyard from the east, then curved north to carve its way through the window-panes like an overpass stretching out over thin air. Rushing up and down the ramp with the Laymen and Miners was a familiar figure:

the yellow scaled, knife warrior named Bru. Rather than using his blades in battle, he was busy brandishing them to threaten what at first Tabuh figured to be foes but then she realized they must've been new found friends.

Dressed like Royal Guards, there was a group of molemen and chidras attempting to force their way up the ramp alongside the Laymen and Miners. All that separated them from their enemy was that they were missing their helmets. Still, from what Tabuh could tell, they weren't foes. Bru wasn't attacking them, he was rebuking them. She watched as a few got past the ferocious rebel. They plunged into battle alongside the Laymen, Miners, and Kou against the helmeted-guards in the doorways.

"Bru!" Tabuh hollered, weaseling her way over to the ramp to yell closer and twice as loud, "BRU!"

"Faraking godi crimpsin tiad-" Bru cut himself short as he turned to Tabuh – incidentally allowing another drove of unhelmeted-guardsmen up the slope when he turned his back, "They joined us!"

"Then what's the iss-"

"They were supposed to wait in line!" Bru roared before turning his rage back to the guards.

Tabuh pushed onward, slamming into a guard-turned-Layman who then bumped into two more that then got entangled and tumbled to trip over the three behind them before all six were trampled by the next half dozen desperately fleeing from the ramp. Finally she got close enough to clasp Bru on the back.

"Bru! Are there-"

"Undead?" Bru snarled over his shoulder, "Yup."

"Donum." Tabuh murmured. Then louder she said, "Well come on, wae've got to get insahd."

"I'm waiting here for Blade." Bru shook off her grasp.

Tabuh understood. She was waiting for someone too. Glancing south, she saw Tou was still hard at work ushering Laymen and Warriors. Turning back towards the Interior Arches, she trudged back in.

The cluster that had grown towards the bottom of the ramp had changed in character. It had been frantic sense the second shard fell but the level of chaos exhibited now far surpassed any examples prior. People had begun to climb over one another, trampling even their own comrades if it came to that. Bru knew why immediately. While the furred molemen and scaled chidras couldn't turn pale, their faces had turned gaunt as if devoid of their vitality – much like the ghouls that pursued them. And Bru did not see Blade amongst them.

Cursing, he sheathed his knives and pushed his way down the ramp. He could see the line of combat once he got within ten yards of the knot of people. Those on the other side of the blockage were forced by necessity to turn away from salvation and fight for their lives. Undead had taken the Southern Veranda. The only thing that made matters worse was that he still saw no Blade. Not only that, he didn't see the giant bearn or the bomb-happy chidra. Nor even the converted Captain of the Guard. Bru forged onward, cursing.

He grabbed a lady Layman by the scruff of her neck and dragged her out from under the pile of people, shoving her along up the ramp. He took the collar of a guardsman who had a Miner climbing on his shoulders and whisked the Varen ahead of him before snatching the Miner off his back. Without a word and just a snarl he rebuked the Miner then set him lose. One by one

he helped untangle the mess, but he was hardly getting any closer to the front line fighting the unburied. It was slow progress.

Finally he saw them. At first he wasn't sure what it was he saw. It was an odd glow like the gold cloud upon which Pyramid played far overhead – a magical shine, not quite yellow and not quite brown. *An elgroom!* He couldn't make out the owner. They stood at least twenty yards away. Over the clump of people and in the midst of the river of the dead, they were just silhouettes incased in that mystical glow. *Wait – what?* Not just incased in light, but stone? An egg of stone was closing around the strange figures, all that was left was the top but then something popped out of it.

“GET DOWN!”

BOOM!

Bru didn't hear it though the sound certainly entered his reptilian ear holes. He didn't feel the heat of the explosion but rather the force. It was as if he'd fallen from a building and landed flat onto pavement, as if the entire front of his body – every inch and every centimeter – had been struck by a fist at the exact same moment. The force lifted him up into the air with a column of smoke. Though he didn't see the smoke. All he saw was white light – which he mistook for Solaris whereas in reality it was just temporary blindness. The only senses that seemed to work were the olfactory. He could smell sulfur and charcoal. He could even taste it. That was the only thought he had before the second impact. This impact was softer though it was hard enough for the other participant in the collision.

Tou heard the boom. It was the sound he had dreaded. The sound of the entirety of the Glassyard shattering and collapsing. While that wasn't what the sound was, it would cause the same effect nonetheless. The explosion shot out of the ramp like the fire from a zoomer's jet engine. With the smoke and flame came bodies. Molemen and chidras were flung from below like a bulb of dandelion seeds. One such body came soaring through the air towards Tou. He couldn't do much else but position himself to catch the poor soul.

WHAM!

Bru flattened Tou against the pane beneath them. While Tou had been Bru's second impact, the Glassyard was Tou's. As the flat of his back slapped the fractured glass, it gave way and dropped the two into the dark tunnels of the Veranda below.

- - -

A flash of golden light zoomed through the tunnel like a bolt of lightning stabbing through a storm cloud. The beam of illumination was as slender as a spear but even sharper. It slipped through the eye socket of a skull, pierced the inside of the cranium, and broke free to drive through the head of the next dead soldier. The undead were lined up shoulder to shoulder, filling the tunnel like a single organism. Their forward motion was not impacted by the luminous lance, but that didn't stop the lancer from launching another.

Pointing the Mystak Blade, Tenchi shot a second aurelian arrow into the army before them. Beside him, Sharp hacked away with his unenchanted blade. He swung his sword like a wiper swats at raindrops on a windshield, chopped left then right, left then right, over and over. Bones broke and split and exploded under his gaudy weapon, piling up on either side of him to such an extent that he had to take pause ever so often to sweep the osseous matter back – to the displeasure of those behind him.

Behind him, Lalmly appeared to be intune with her blademaster. She moved like a harpist repetitively strumming her instrument although hers had no strings. While it had no strings, it had no end to the supply of arrows. When Sharp swung right, Lalmly shot left. When Sharp swung left, Lalmly shot right. So rhythmic was the process, her mind was able to drift off into thought. As she watched her petal-feathered arrows bring a brief illusion of life to the dead before they crumbled, she began to draft a poem in her head about the juxtaposition.

While she imagined flowery language, her partner rattled off ancient lyrics like a rapper in an underground cypher. Her microphone was the Staff of Uthemarc for as Daffeega opined the rod in her grasp amplified her message. An indigo aura flowed from the gemstone on top of the staff, it stretched out over Tenchi's shoulders and it lashed out at the undead like a snake striking. She didn't just have the staff, she also held the lantern.

Atlas, the one and only, lit the tunnel with its big owl like eyes. While the robot head let its biological comrades see what was in front of them, Atlas kept its attention to all that which was around them. The skeletons weren't the only ones roaming the Catacombs. He was able to sense multiple unidentified beings about.

They hadn't immediately ran into the infantry of the unburied, but it hadn't taken long. After bashing through the Mosaicyard with the Kaboomer, the team had first expected to encounter members of the Royal Guard. Though the majority were oriented to defend the Southern Veranda and the Glassyard, the protectors of the Cloches were sprinkled throughout the other verandas and yards. However, according to their Globework, it seemed that the closer their crew got to an entrance to the Catacombs, the slower the Royal Guardsmen approached. Once they descended into the dark layer of the dead, the soldiers completely quit. Their first ten or fifteen minutes in the dusky depths of the ancient graveyard had been without conflict but once the conflict began it certainly compensated for the moment of peace. The four battled with the bones for another ten or fifteen minutes before silence surrounded them oncemore. They must've put half an entire generation back to rest.

"We made it through!" Tenchi exclaimed.

Leaving the desecration behind them, the gang found themselves at an intersection. It was a three pronged fork. Extinguished torches mounted to the walls that separated each option still gave off thin streams of smoke. Tenchi, Sharp, and Daffeega had been panting – only Lalmly and Atlas had no need for heavy breathing – so they hadn't been able to hear over their own exasperation at first but shortly after Tenchi's declaration they could. Creaking and rattling was coming from all three passages before them and even behind them from the hall they'd just fought their way through. Undead were clambering out of the crypts that lined the corridors.

"You sure, Civ?" Sharp asked, "Atlas?"

"The one and only," Atlas began, "this pause seems to be by design."

"I believe we are surrounded." Lalmly said.

Daffeega strolled forward and handed the Globework to Sharp. Sheathing his sword, he held the Globework out like a lantern and turned its head so that its eyes illuminated the different halls before them. Fifteen yards back into the shadows, another line of undead waited, filling each new tunnel. The rustling behind them suggested the hall they'd just fought through would soon be full again as well. Those in the three passages in front of them began to inch forwards.

"Last time was a breeze," Tenchi shrugged, "we could use a little more of a challenge."

"This time there is more than just the dead." Atlas warned.

"Is dat so?" Sharp remarked, "A necromancer?"

"I can only tell that they aren't yet dead." Atlas replied, "And that they aren't Truth."

“Aren’t yet dead but just hanging out with the dead?” Tenchi analyzed aloud, “That’s a necromancer.”

“We kill the mancer,” Daffeega said, “their minions deanimate-”

“If I get em first, y’all gotta buy my drinks tonight.” Tenchi swiveled his sword around in his hands as if it were a baseball bat.

“Same, Civ.” Sharp handed Daffeega back the Globework and drew his sword.

“And Lalmly,” Tenchi said, “we’ll go in on a keg of brackleberry fizzle if you win.”

Lalmly’s silver eyes widened. She reached over to tap Daffeega’s wrist, the one holding Atlas, but Sharp touched her armored forearm before she could ask, saying, “No cheating, Civ.”

“If we die, we’re going to feel very foolish.” Lalmly lamented, though she did not remove herself from the competition. Instead, she moved to take the eastern most passage. The undead had just marched their way to the edge of the intersection. There they halted. Lalmly cocked her head to the side and glanced back at Daffeega.

“I don’t think they’re in a hurry.” Daffeega explained, “The longer we dilly dally down here, the longer their forces haunt the Laymen up above.”

Tenchi took the middle, northern most path, and Sharp took the western most. All three warriors turned to Daffeega, seeing as apparently their enemies were waiting for them to start. The approaching dead in the hall behind them were still a good distance from the intersection, but Daffeega still hobbled over to stand before it. She placed Atlas on the floor, facing their tunnels then explaining, “I’ll block the path behind us while you capture the necromancer.”

“Capture?” Tenchi yelped.

Daffeega nodded, “If they cooperate and deanimate their forces, then they deserve a trial before any sort of permanent punishment. Plus, I’ve got some questions for them.”

“Den let’s get you some answers!” Sharp exclaimed.

He charged his hall first, swinging his Otusacha-style blade up into the unarmored and unfleshed ribs of the first unfortunate foe and onwards into the chin of the former-bloke beside them. Then he drove down, cleaving the next dead in the collar bone, splitting their abdomen in half, and striking their neighbor to sever them at the hip. With one simple zig-zag he’d toppled the frontline. *Dey really are just trying to stall us.* Sharp marveled.

An arrow wizzed past his head and he nearly fell out of his boots.

Nevermind! Dey’re trying a little bit!

Sharp’s flinch had put him at risk of actually allowed an undead to land a blow. His sore arm and knee caused his reaction time to suffer as well. The next line of unburied tried to capitalize. Two had swords and two had spears, all four had shields. A swordsman and spearman stabbed while the other two sliced. Sharp blocked the stabs with an upward swipe, but was too slow to shift his blade and stop the slices. Instead he had to twist away. He dodged one ivory blade but simply braced his shoulder to stop the spear. His armor heldfast and deflect the attack, but while it rattled it allowed a brief sliver of vulnerability, a brief sliver that was capitalized on by the marksman in the shadows.

A second arrow struck him between his two shoulder plates on his left side, the same arm he’d been shot in the bicep in the prior battle.

“Farak!” Sharp swore.

The pain kept him from straightening back up, so he attacked from below. With one sweep, he cut the legs out from under the second line of undead. This didn’t defeat them, their skulls had to be separated from the rest of their skeletons for that. With his next step, he did just that to the spearman that had almost gotten him. Crushing the unconscious creature’s head with

one stomp. His blade cut through the spinal vertebrae of the middle two. The fourth was rearing up, raising his sword it managed to block Sharp's blade before it could sever its neck too, but then Sharp took another stride forward and crushed his head as he had the first.

He expected the third arrow this time. Moving as if to step up and attack the next row, he suddenly stuck his foot and pivoted, like a football player juking a tackle. It worked so well that not only did the arrow fly past his face, two of the next line of undead stumbled forward expecting him to meet their attacks. Instead, he met their backs. Whacking them as they fell with a backhanded swing to behead them both. Allthwhile, his eyes hadn't left the darkness where the arrow had flown from. Dark as it was, he'd still been able to make out the boney hand that had held the osseous bow as it passed a stray beam of light from Atlas' spotlight gaze.

"Crimpsin tiad." He cursed.

If the archer had been a necromancer, it was an already dead one. He'd picked the wrong hall. It was still possible the bone bender was lingering in the shadows beyond, but Sharp doubted the mage would be sitting on their hands while the army defending them continued to crumble. *Oh well*, he thought, *da fight must go on!*

But by then, Tenchi was already wrapping up his fight. There were a dozen lines of unburied but, eager to win his free night out, Tenchi decided to unleash the full power of the Mystak Blade. The blade still glowed gold, so he let lose a few javelins of holy light. The beams left the blade and cut through four or five sets of Catacomb residents before evaporating. From gold, the sword darkened into a fiery crimson as he collided with what was left of the front line. His sword slid through the bones like butter. He carved a figure eight out of the two still standing then marched onward. From red, the blade shifted back towards yellow but kept transitioning until it stopped with a sapphiric sheen. The blade that had just been able to split solids as if they were made of gas had now become so feircedly blunt that when he drug the blade across the second line of undead they were flung backwards as if repelled. Tangled up with their allies behind them, Tenchi pointed the Mystak Blade at the knot of bones. Once more the saber shone as yellow as the light from Atlas' eyes. As he shot the third line down, the fourth and fifth line hustled into the fray. They'd been eviscerated by the first onslaught of his extraordinary arrows, meaning both lines only amounted to one line: four. Bluing his blade, he stepped to the side to take on the furthest to his right first. With his sword drawn back like a batter, he swung for a home run and knocked his foes skull clear off their spine. It smashed into the next skull so hard that the skull popped off and clobbered the next skull after that like a bowling pin. This left only the fourth which he quickly ran through the temple – his sword now scorching red as if he'd just pulled it from the furnace.

Had his opponents been sentient, they likely would've turned tail after this display. Unfortunately, they were not. The first five lines of minions had been obliterated, but there were more to spare. Five more rows of four, in fact, but they hadn't been advancing with their uncanny comrades. The first row of this second half was kneeling, bone-made bows in their hands. The second stood behind them, also armed with bows. Past them, a third line pointed their bows between the shoulders of those in front of them.

"Farak." Tenchi looked down at the sword in his hand, "You gonna help me out here?"

A mere moment before the bows set loose their volley, the blade turned a vibrant shade of purple. That same lavender hue immediately engulfed Tenchi. It was as if someone had taken a bucket of iridescent purple paint and dumped it on his head. In a half instant, the Dragon of Warcourt was indigo and, in the following half instant, the slew of arrows launched at him peppered his purple shield only to fall to the floor. Of all the Mystak Blade's powers, this was

the one the weilder could not control. He'd been taught many times before never to count on the weapon to save him, but Tenchi had been taught a lot of things and even fans of the mercenary wouldn't claim he was the best at retaining lessons.

Despite his luck, as the violet veil fell, his blade turned scarlet and he charged in to finish off his foes, he couldn't help but be a tad bit disappointed. For amongst the last twenty or so monsters he had left to massacre, it did not appear their master was amongst them. That left only Lalmlly.

She could almost taste the brickleberry already. She may not have had the most powerful weapon underneath Solaris, but she did have the one and only legendary bow. Pulling back its invisible string, a slender bolt appeared on the arrow rest above her grip. Just like the bow which summoned it, the bolt was decorated with flowers as if it weren't just enchanted but actually animate. Lotus blossoms adorned the arrow head like a lion's mane. The flower opened towards the archer, as if acknowledging her, before being released to burry itself in the unburried.

The first foe fell and she turned to the next. She moved like a well oiled machine. Her arm pumped like pistons. The boney bastards hadn't even budged before she'd shot down the first row, but then they charged. Lalmlly was still undaunted. The bow had three main powers: the lotus arrows, the ashoka arrows, and – its ultimate – the sharp winds. This was a power reserved for only the most powerful. Many believed only banshees could perform such a feat. Few knew if it was magic or skill, but it certainly was magic in Lalmlly's case. Only the true owner of the Gustbow – divined by the object itself – could utilize the ability and Lalmlly utilized away.

Stepping forward, she took the grip in both hands, swiped her bow across her body, and sent a diagonal beam of blade-like energy down the hall before her. The blast burst bones apart and even carved up the corners of the chamber as it scraped past. Twisting her grip, she cut another gash in the air, crossing her prior slice to make an X. Whether it was their momentum or their mancer-master, the undead didn't stop their charge. Even as they were split into four pieces, they scattered forwards and skittered to a halt as still, dry bones by Lalmlly's armored boots.

Now that she'd made some space, she took her left hand off the grip and hooked her fingers around the invisible string once more. This time she strolled forwards as she fired. The unburried before the first few eviscerated lines charged, but they weren't faster than the ranger. Each petalled projectile downed another damned until none were left. But there was one left standing.

Lalmlly began to smile but she took over the reflex and turned it into a snarl, "Surrend-"

She froze. The necromancer, a moleman, was dressed like an Arcane Sentinel. This would've been shocking in and of itself but what had actually caused the spirit to stutter was the Varen's eyes. Purple wasn't a rare eye color amongst Batloens, mole or chidra, but there were no whites and no pupils in this citizen's gaze. His eyes were glazed over with the same mystical indigo color that streamed from Daffeega's staff and that had engulfed Tenchi to protect him.

"What came first?" Pulling back the invisible string, a lotus arrow appeared but Lalmlly kept the string held back, "Your conversion or your Corruption?"

Undead emerged from the shadows behind the Sentinel but they did not advance beyond him. Reaching backwards, he twisted his wrists so that his palms faced upward. Even though Lalmlly was not a fleshy being, the contortion of the mole's action still made her cringe. The skeletal warriors behind him began to melt. It was slow at first and then almost immediate. They turned into swirling orbs of osseus material.

The arrow Lalmly had waiting in the nook above her grip had morphed from a lotus into an ashoka flower. The bloom had swallowed the arrow head and hardened. This wouldn't kill the necromancer but there was an off chance it might knock the spell out of his head. As she let it loose, the necromancer launched his spheres. The spheres morphed into long javelins of ivory, a dozen at least, there was no way she could block them all or dodge them all safely without using the sharpwind and so unfortunately that is what she did. Launching a sharpwind down the hall, she then jumped to one side to let the rest of the spears clatter to the ground behind her. The sharpwind went on to slice the Sentinel across the breast. His armor held somewhat – it kept him from being split in half – but blood still spurted out of his abdomen and he toppled over, landing flat on his back beside the ashoka arrow.

Rushing to his side, she saw that either the arrow or the sharp wind had worked. The purple had left his eyes. She knocked an arrow and tried once more to gain some intel, knowing that necromancer wouldn't be alive much longer.

“Who corrupted you!” Lalmly cried, knocking another lotus petal.

The Sentinel strained to raise his head so that he could glower at her as he growled, “I'd rather die than rat on him.”

“Him?” Lalmly gasped.

A burst of blood squirted from the wound that crossed his chest and the moleman fell flat once more. Hearing comrades behind her, Lalmly turned from the dying man and saw Tenchi rushing her way with Daffeega trailing behind him.

“Crimpsin tiad,” he cursed, “you won.”

“I killed him.” Lalmly sighed.

“Oh right,” Tenchi grimaced, “guess we all lose.” He glanced over his shoulder to holler at Daffeega, “She killed him! No one wins!”

Looking back to Lalmly, the human's eyes grew wide. He reached out to grab Lalmly by the shoulder and shove her aside as he strode forward and drove the Mystak Blade into the spinal column of the unburied now standing behind her. The being was still dripping with blood as its skull toppled off its mount and landed in the deflated shell of its former body. The rest of the bones quickly followed.

With the wildness still in his eyes and his sword still fully extended, Tenchi turned to Lalmly, “I thought you killed it!”

“Boneguard.” Daffeega explained, finally arriving behind the two warriors. Passing Tenchi, she let go of her Staff to lower Tenchi's arm. Her other hand cradled Atlas who illuminated the empty corpse and crumpled skeleton on top. She shook her head, “Necromancers can sacrifice themselves to another necromancer before they die, keeping their minions alive and preserving some of their former consciousness – meaning, had you reacted with a little more restraint, Mr. Kou, then I could've dragged some answers out of them posthumously.”

Reclaiming her staff, she thwacked the human gently on his shin.

“Ow.” Tenchi muttered, backing up so that Lalmly could join Daffeega by the corpse.

“A Sentinel.” Daffeega remarked.

“Before I killed him, he refused to surrender.” Lalmly told the Princess, “He said he'd, ‘rather die than rat on *him*.’”

“Him.” Daffeega noted.

“Your sister's a chick, right?” Tenchi asked.

Daffeega utilized the restraint that Tenchi lacked to not thwack him in the shin again. To Lalmly, Daffeega said, “A woman, yes.”

“The mancer testing. After the corrupted Shisharay attempted to assassinate your father, you said you had mancer testing done on the Royal Guards. Did you over see it?” Lalmly asked.

“Honey.” Daffeega rolled her eyes, “I over see the water quality testing but that doesn’t mean I check every pipe, nook, and cranny!”

“I’m not accusing-”

“I oversaw as much as I could.” Daffeega continued, “But even if I had the time, the Magi of Justice, Magus El and Malas Oturan, were determined to keep me out of it.”

“You think a Magus is a necromancer!” Tenchi exclaimed.

“Not much of a stretch if da Queen is.” Sharp grumbled. He’d finally joined the team. The poor knight was in a state of disrepair. Getting through his column of undead had added three more boney barbs to the one he’d already gotten in the shoulder. One in his left fore arm and two in his right thigh near his previously wounded knee. Hobbling up next to the other two, he asked Lalmly, “Did he have purple eyes?”

Lalmly nodded.

“Corruption isn’t beyond the abilities of the Magi of Justice.” Daffeega stated.

“So we’re thinking the Queen and the Magi are in on it now?” Tenchi asked.

“Could be, Civ.” Sharp sighed.

“Might as well just blow the whole palace up and be done with it then.” Tenchi suggested.

“The more you talk, the more I consider ending the pending process of your asylum application.” Daffeega said coolly.

Tenchi raised his hand to his mouth, pinched his index finger and thumb together, then zipped his lips closed.

“Please excuse the interruption,” Atlas chimed, causing the three to jump, “but there are two beings approaching.”

“Just two?” Sharp checked.

“Yes.” Atlas confirmed, “Two.”

“If they’re mancers, then they’d be able to see or smell that their comrade failed here.” Lalmly warned, “If they’re mancers, then they’d be able to see or smell us.”

“If dey’re mancers, den dey must be pretty bold ones to come at us widdout minions.” Sharp added.

Tired of the speculation, Daffeega started to march down the tunnel. Atlas’ eyes illuminated the hall before them. In the distant darkness, there were barely distinguishable shadows shifting. Lalmly, Sharp, and Tenchi followed quickly, forming a sort of semi-circle on either side of Daffeega so as to be ahead of her but not block her light. Once the silhouettes began to take shape, the Princess addressed them.

“Who goes there!”

The two figures stopped. A voice rang out, “A mancer hunter.”

The three stopped their advance, exchanging glances. Daffeega, Sharp, and Tenchi didn’t recognize the voice. Although Atlas hadn’t been able to pick the two strangers out before, they turned to the animatronic head in the Princess’ arms but even it was at a loss. Unable to shake its head without a neck, it opened its mouth to admit defeat but was beaten by the armored spirit. Lalmly stepped forward, looking back at her allies with wide silver eyes.

“I know that voice.” She stated.

Daffeega and Sharp gulped, figuring the lack of an answer despite her claim to be a bad omen. Tenchi, on the other hand, was oblivious.

“Well?” Tenchi asked.

Turning from the Batloen’s, she explained to the Sondoran, “Captain Dresdan Otubak of the *Obsidian Sail*.”

“Dresdan...*Obsidian Sail*...I’ve heard of them...” now it was Tenchi who was looking back and forth between friends. Scratching his head he pondered, *Where was it that I heard of them?* His mind wandered back to the day Tou, Tabuh, and Daernar “Cootie” Darkblade saved his life in Sondor. The day after, they’d made their escape to Batloe with the help of, “Rosethorn! Dresdan and his crew are Antipa, right? They’re on our side – they’re after Truth.” But from the looks of his comrades it appeared that this was not the case. Looking back down the corridor, it suddenly struck Tenchi as odd. Regardless of which side the fellow was on, what were they doing in the Catacombs? *What if they already got to Truth?* Tenchi gasped. *What if, “They’re dead.”*

“What?” Lalmly scoffed.

“Not dead yet, Civ.” Sharp growled. The chidra’s hand moved towards his hilt.

Daffeega’s hand beat him there, leaving her staff to lean on her guard’s grasp, “Now’s not the time.”

Tenchi was back to bewilderment, “So are they bad guys or not?”

The two figures, one of which apparently being Captain Dresdan, began walking down the hall towards them oncemore. It took only a few strides before the individuals became more visible than darkened shapes. In the light of Atlas, Tenchi began to get the picture. First off, there was a foreigner alongside the Obsidian: a nellaf. The nellaf was dressed in the robes of a mage, leading Tenchi to assume this Iceloadic lad was likely in Batloe for schooling. Why was he with an infamous pirate? Tenchi was able to deduce that as well, considering the fact that the wizard’s hands were bound. Second, Tenchi was able to surmise what the big deal was. It wasn’t that Dresdan was corrupted or otherwise controlled by their enemies. In fact, if Tenchi’s guess was right, it appeared not to do with anything that had been going on sense Tenchi first brought his Warriors to the desert country.

Dresdan had black scales and the only other chidra Tenchi had ever met with black scales happened to be standing right next to him, reaching for his sword.

“Sharp, honey,” Daffeega continued, her voice firm, “now is not the time.”

Sharp didn’t move. It hardly looked like he was even breathing.

Lalmly stepped in to help the Princess, “Dresdan’s a good man-”

Daffeega shoved Atlas into Lalmly’s gut so hard that the poor Globework nearly dented her armor. The spirit got the picture and said no more.

“Dresdan’s a bastard, but *now it not the time.*” Daffeega repeated.

“I’m here for Truth.” Dresdan hollered, only twenty yards away now, “And I will pass.”

“Daffeega.” Sharp said.

Only his mouth moved. His hand still rested on his hilt with Daffeega’s clasped over it. His eyes bored down the tunnel. Dresdan must’ve felt the rage emanating from the gaze. Lalmly and Tenchi could feel it just from being in its peripherals. Daffeega wasn’t going to plead with Sharp. She never had before but also never before had he been insubordinate. *Never before has he met his father, either.* Daffeega thought. *In the middle of a revolution, with a limp and a gimp arm, Sharp’s going to fight his father.* She certainly wasn’t wrong. It was not the time. But it was time regardless.

She took her hand off Sharp’s and turned to their comrades, “Take Atlas-”

“The one and only.” Atlas muttered.

“-to the Pillar Lift. Head back to the intersection. Tenchi, the hall you picked was the right one. Atlas-”

“The one and only.” The robot repeated.

“-will show you the rest of the way.” Daffeega finished.

“Sure.” Tenchi shrugged, turning to head back the way they came.

Lalmly wasn’t so ready yet, “Princess-”

Daffeega nodded, “It is what it is. I won’t be far behind you.”

Lalmly nodded back and headed off after Tenchi.

That left the two intruders approaching the two defenders. The pirate and his prisoner against the Princess and her Guard. The foreigners had stopped to wait ten yards away, allowing them a moment more to sort themselves out.

Sharp began, “Daffeega, you should-”

“Oh, you’re giving orders now?” Daffeega scoffed, “I’ll leave you to your heart-to-heart when its just the two of you.” She gestured at the robed nellaf tied at the wrists, “I’m taking Sorelac Icelore with me. After that stunt pulled by the Golden Dagger, saving the Darkblade-drunk, we’ll need an olive branch to give Iceload when this is all said and done.”

“Dank you, Daffeega.” Sharp said.

Dresdan’s patience had finally worn out, “I see that you won’t be letting me pass.”

“Me?” Daffeega retorted, “I’m just here for your wizard.” She pointed to Sharp, “He’s the one you need to talk to.”

Dresdan slowly turned his head to face Sharp. They were spitting images of each other, separated only by age and apparel. Dresdan was a good twenty years older than Sharp, his scales a bit more cracked and faded. There was a darkness in the indigo irises of the Captain’s eyes, a darkness that had started to encroach on Sharp’s own gaze but had yet to completely smother the bright shine of youthfulness. Their garb gave off opposite vibes. Dresdan had the flippant style of a sailor: baggy pants and a bare chest. He’d once worn a large brimmed, witch hat but the accessory had already been taken as a casualty of this, his final quest.

Juxtaposed to the Obsidian’s bohemian outfit, was Sharp’s very serious one. Armored from head to toe, shingled with metal and leather, and adorned with daggers like a Christmas tree with ornaments. Despite their differences, their similarities still stood out. Both men had identical stances. They stood with their shoulders rolled back, their chests puffed out, and their right hands on their hilts. Both wielded gaudy two-handed claymores. Sharp’s handle was slender and silver. It was the same sword of the guard that he’d step in to replace when he took the job as Daffeega’s personal defender. Dresdan’s handle was bulky and burgundy. He’d stolen it from someone long ago and had claimed it was his ever since. The hilt had become infamous for it’s cross-like shape, the top of which extended further down the blade, sacrificing some utility for the aesthetic. The weapon could afford such an exchange when it was held by the likes of Dresdan Otubak.

“I once asked a soothsayer to tell me how to find peace of mind. She said I’d find it in Batloe.” Dresdan kept eye contact with Sharp, but he reached over with his left hand to untie the ribbons that bound Sorelac’s wrists as he continued, “I thought, in order to right my wrongs, I ought to stop the evil I’d elevated – Truth being the worst of them all – but it seems the whole world has been cleaning up the messes I’ve made while under my black sails. It was the messes I made on land that I should’ve been attending to.”

“Dose messes have been doing just fine cleaning up demselves, Civ.” Sharp replied through gritted teeth, “Dat all you got to say?”

“I’m sorry, son.” Dresdan stated.

“My mudder woulda liked to hear dat.” Sharp growled.

“What would you like to hear?” Dresdan asked.

“Your dead rattle.” Sharp hissed.

During the reunion, Daffeega had directed her attention towards the other plus-one: Sorelac. The Icelore illusionist had been unshackled by his captor, what then would he do? He had been acting as a guide, thus fleeing was an option as he was familiar with the Catacombs. He had been close friends with Suicine, thus rushing after Tenchi and Lalmly in an attempt to stop them would make sense. However, he also harbored resentment for his captor as any captive would. Dresdan may have kidnapped him from the prison, but what kind of reprieve was it to transfer from one of the most humane incarcerations into the hands of a man that was hunting down your best friend? Sure enough, Sorelac chose not to flee nor rush forward, instead he chose to fight – not Daffeega or Sharp, but the man that had just untied his bindings.

Sorelac’s lips began to move and a stream of smoke rose from within the fold of his outer robe. An avid lip reader, the Princess knew in which direction his language was leading. The spell was a more complicated version of an ancient one. More complicated meant less energy but more words, which gave Daffeega time to beat him to the punch.

“Neme ah et kolp oh et Ydnul,” Daffeega exclaimed, “crailas et vuizcim law von miameh sodpaz gulevadur shaavahnt et ot elpeop!”

“Neme ah Barro, meered et sula von ka nock ere et sula ball miameh reig.” Sorelac murmured, “Neme ah Canaan, retnar et sula nikkrai et rebas oh Barro.”

Daffeega cast a shimmering sheet of purple from the stone of her staff. The façade shot between the captive and the captor just as the captive completed his encantation. As her violet veil surged forwards, Sorelac turned on Dresdan with an uppercut. Scrawny as the sorcerer was, that wouldn’t have been alarming, but his fist was suddenly engulfed as water vapor rushed to swirl around his fist. It coalesced into a sharp point like a spear, one that would’ve easily impaled the pirate, had it not splattered against Daffeega’s wall.

She nearly let her wall fall but Dresdan then drew on Sorelac. Needing the magician alive, she kept her mystical plane standing between the two. As the chidra’s sword sliced upward, the blade bounced off the violet.

“Sharp!” Daffeega cried.

“On it!” Sharp acknowledged.

Striding forward, Sharp’s sword was there to parry Dresdan’s down swing. With the two chidras distracted, Daffeega turned back to the mage.

“Neme ah Sari-”

Smoke was rising from his robes once more. *He must’ve written an entire essay on the inside of his cloak!* Daffeega lamented. With her wall still standing, she jerked her staff to the side. The wall followed the motion, slamming into Sorelac and throwing him against the side of the tunnel. Whether her magic was stronger than she expected or her foe was heavier than he looked, the impact against the wall was enough for him to burst through.

“Farak!” Daffeega gasped.

Leaving the family feud behind her, Daffeega rushed through the hole she’d made. Crypts lay between the walls of the corridors. Most of which had already been opened, their contents being summoned towards the Cloches above, but apparently not all. Some of the grave vaults were more sealed than other. The one Sorelac fell into had nearly a dozen dead, staggering around aimlessly in the dark.

“Call them off!” Daffeega commanded, the Staff of Uthemarc illuminating the narrow chamber.

“They’re not mine!” Sorelac shrieked, “I’m not a mancer!”

“Farak!” She cursed again.

The unburied turned on the two wizards – Sorelac being the one in front. His spell had been interrupted when Daffeega hit him with her shield, but he hurriedly finished it.

“-ballah mia tim kakal ere kir miameh melpeop!”

Wind rose up around Sorelac, fluttering his robes as it spun around him before being released in all directions. Half the skeletons were bowled over, but another half dug in their heels and stood fast, brandishing their ivory weapons as they waited for the gale to pass. Daffeega would’ve stepped in to subdue those that persevered but unfortunately the spell worked on her too. “Melpeop” meant enemy and, as Sorelac was using magic he’d written before the encounter, there was no room for changing the language. The spell launched Daffeega right back out the hole she’d jumped through.

Slamming against the opposite wall – which did not collapse – of the original corridor, Daffeega stopped from falling to the floor with her staff. She glanced down the hall to see Sharp and Dresdan were still at it then pulled herself to stand fully upright.

“Ballah mia tim kakal...” the Princess muttered, “I’ll show you kakal.”

The spell had taken a lot out of Sorelac. Having been interrupted by falling through a wall, the enchantation took even more of his energy than he had expected. As Daffeega reapproached the orifice, she saw that he’d collapsed after casting. The six skeletons that had heldfast against the magical gust were now looming over him ready to thrust the weapons made of their long lost kin into the intruder. He was murmuring gibberish on his knees, his mind clouded from exhaustion and anxiety. As the undead drove their weapons towards him, he passed out and fell forward.

Right in time too.

“Neme ah et kolp oh et Ydnul,” Daffeega shouted from the jagged entrance, “KAKAL!”

A column of force surged forwards. While Sorelac’s wind had twisted, tugged, then shoved, Daffeega’s blasted. Like a freight train plowing onwards no matter what stood in its way, the gust barreled over the castrate caster and burst the bonemen to bits, skattering their appendages as if they’d never even been attached, before slamming against the opposite side of the crypt and carving out a new hole. Stone bricks tumbled through into the hall that Sharp had cleared of undead before.

It was a bit more than Daffeega had intended but she’d been in a hurry. The purple orb atop her staff shone brilliantl then dimmed, as if proud of its job but now ready for a break.

“Not yet, honey.”

Daffeega stabbed the rod into the ground and clambered through the hole back into the tomb. The undead that hadn’t been disassembled had decided to play dead in the shadows. The Princess didn’t have time to hunt them down. The crypt stretched as long as the halls it split. Only demarcations separated the plots. There could’ve been a hundred minions trapped in the dark chamber, but they weren’t threats to her. The threats had been neutralized. Now she had to get her neutralized hostage out of the Catacombs. As she went about casting a spell to levitate the limp Icelore, the fight between father and son continued to rage behind her.

“It seems our wizards have left us in the dark.” Dresdan noted.

Sharp lowered his weapon, letting the tip tickle the dust coated floor. Wounded and exhausted from two days of fighting, he took the pause to regulate his breathing. He’d waited for

this moment. Even if he had been missing an arm, he wouldn't have let it pass him by. The unburied were stirring in the crypt Daffeega had departed through and he could hear scurrying in the shadows before and behind them. Without their wizards, those shadows rushed in to swallow the two men. It might've made more sense to keep fighting if he had been missing an arm than it now made to battle blind.

Dresdan continued, "I still intend to pass."

"I still intend to kill you." Sharp replied.

"Swear to me you will stop her if you win." Dresdan said it as if he were asking though he worded it otherwise.

"Sure," Sharp barked, "I swear on my fadder's grave."

Sharp made a jump at Dresdan. Though it was pitch black in the Catacombs, Dresdan could sense the motion from the sound of Sharp's breath and the jingling of his armor. The pirate flinched away, turning his head to listen for the whizzing of his son's sword slicing through the air. He realized it had been a fake as Sharp jumped again but this time for real. Dresdan yanked his blade up to parry and their weapons collided by his head. Dresdan leaned into it, rushing forward and weighing Sharp's sword down to his side. This forced Sharp to take a step back. Dresdan brought his sword down again and again tried to drag Sharp's weapon away from his body – this time managing to angle his sword inward enough to scratch the armor plates of Sharp's upper arm before the chidra hopped back.

Sparks sprinkled the ground between them, momentarily illuminating their expressions. The sadness in Dresdan's eyes only further infuriated Sharp.

Sharp attacked again, heaving his sword up and over his head and bringing it down as he lunged forward. His right leg gave out underneath the pressure. Dresdan's sword deflected his and then the pirate cut in for Sharp's gut as the guard keeled to the side. Letting himself fall, Sharp was able to drag his sword back across his body with a backswing to deflect his father's blow. The impact of the parry threw him against the wall of the corridor. The entire tunnel seemed to tremble.

Whether Dresdan would've ended it there or not, Sharp would never know. A group of ghouls had crept up to the edge of the crypt and when Dresdan turned his back to throw Sharp against the opposite wall, they pounced on him. All this Sharp had to infer from the sounds of rattling and clicking and then ultimately clattering as inanimate bones returned to the earth.

Sharp was back on his feet.

"You're wounded." Dresdan stated.

"So den it's a fair fight." Sharp replied.

"I have matches." Dresdan offered.

"Do you need dem?" Sharp asked.

There was a thwump sound. Sharp swung his sword and it collided with whatever had thwumped. It flew to the side, bounced off the wall, then rolled over to his boots. Dresdan had kicked a skull at him. Then, the pirate rushed through the hole Daffeega had made. *He's running!* Sharp realized. Following the sounds as best he could remember, he gave chase. Clambering through the mishappenly carved entry to the crypt, he could sense Dresdan's movement was still in the chamber. Raising his weapon, it clanged against Dresdan's. Sharp slid his sword down Dresdan's blade and pushed it across his opponents torso to spin the pirate around, then – before the man could reposition himself – Sharp kicked the captain in the side and sent him tumbling further into the sarcophagus. As Dresdan stumbled, Sharp staggered – his

right leg acting up and his left shoulder sending flashing lights to his brain as pain surged up and down his arm like electricity on a wire.

Undead attacked and both men roared as they rallied to defend themselves. They hacked left and right, smashing their heavy long swords down on the skeletons then jerking their blades up to lop off the undead heads. Even blinded by the darkness, the minions of the mancers were no match for the two living and breathing blademasters, but they were effectively stalling the two and when their blades stopped bashing they had no way of knowing if more foes were simply lingering out of reach, staying still in quiet, or if they had in fact cleared the catacomb.

“We need to finish this.” Dresdan said.

“Aye, Civ.” Sharp sighed.

Using his sword like a blind man’s cane, Sharp waded through the bones over to the wall of the crypt. Feeling about, he found the wooden shaft of a torch and pulled it from its holster. Dresdan sensed what Sharp was up to and retrieved his match box from his trousers. Striking the match, they saw each other’s faces. Three times now they’d made eye contact, all in the span of minutes. Sharp was thirty years old and these were the first and only times he’d ever seen his father. The fury this instilled in Sharp was beginning to subside, giving ground to sadness. He extended the torch out to Dresdan and Dresdan lit it.

Sharp waved the torch around them to be sure the undead had settled back into their graves. They had. Sharp went back to the wall and returned the torch to the holster then turned back to Dresdan. *If I wait any longer, I might begin to actually consider forgiving him.* Sharp realized. Behind Dresdan was the hole that Daffeega had taken Sorelac through. The pirate could turn and run at any moment. With Sharp’s limp, he’d likely escape. But he didn’t.

Dresdan gave Sharp a nod.

The duel recommenced. It happened quick – in a matter of two seconds. Sharp had his sword resting on his right shoulder. He led with his left foot. He swung high, the flat of his blade parallel to the ground. Dresdan stepped in and brought his sword up over his head then down to parry. Despite the pangs of pain in Sharp’s arm, blinding him just as bad as the darkness had, Sharp pushed into his opponent’s block before the blades even collided. Bracing himself for another blast of pain, he then gave up pressure – allowing Dresdan’s sword to overpower his and push his blade back over his left shoulder – and stepped closer to Dresdan with his wounded right leg. Bouncing back onto his left foot before the leg could give out on him, he twirled his weapon out from under Dresdan’s and swung again for Dresdan’s head with the flat of his blade once more parallel to the floor. Dresdan did a stutter step back and garnered just enough time and space to move his sword to block, holding his weapon perpendicular to the ground. Sharp’s blade pushed Dresdan’s blade away, drawing Dresdan’s arms up as they followed his hilt. Sharp kept pushing until the tip of Dresdan’s blade was pointing down, then he slid in. With one last flourish, Dresdan attempted to twist his sword out of the angle Sharp had forced him into to brush his son’s sword away but he was too late. The edge of Sharp’s blade slid against the left side of Dresdan’s neck. It split scales and flesh below, lacerating the jugular vein. Scarlet blood burst forth.

Both men dropped their weapons.

Dresdan cupped his neck with both hands and fell backwards. Sharp dove beneath him before he hit the ground, catching his father and cradling him in his lap as they landed. There was light in the Obsidian’s eyes, Sharp must’ve missed the man’s artery, but blood still poured out from between his fingers. As the blood flowed, so too did tears. Sharp hadn’t expected it but he’d completely lost control. He shook his head, flinging the tears away, so that he could look

into his dad's eyes. They stared at each other in silence. The only sound was the flickering flame and the faint oozing of blood leaving Dresdan's body. Everything smelled of metal and dirt.

Dresdan took a deep breath, nodded to his son, then he died.

Sharp sighed then bowed his head and sat.

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Tou trudged down the hall. The debris from the Glassyard made it such that there was no going back for the young earth elf. To make matters worse, he wasn't alone. A severely handicapped Bru was wrapped around his shoulders like a backpack. The poor Layman had taken quite a hit from Peshkova's explosion. To go with the burns, bruises, and fractures, the chidra had yet to regain his hearing. Had the yellow scaled seditionist been left to his own devices, he would've been doomed. The Southern Veranda had been reduced to rubble, leaving the two men wandering blind. All they – or more specifically, all Tou – had were their ears to go on. Tou followed the noise and that led him down into the Catacombs.

Bones littered the path like twigs and branches in an autumn wood. The Woodsman shuffled his feet to avoid tripping on a tibia or fumbling over a femur. The commotion ahead had moved on by the time he reached some sort of intersection. He was only able to tell it was an intersection because of a distant flicker of light down one of the optional avenues.

Jostling Bru awake, the chidra clambered off Tou's back. He was able to stand now, but walking required that he kept his left arm securely wrapped across Tou's shoulder blades. Deaf as he was, he made eye contact with Tou before they embarked down the hall with the light. Neither knew what to expect.

They hadn't gotten far before the light began to move. For a moment it disappeared, then it returned brighter than before and finally it disappeared for good. A fiery torch hovered to one side of the hall, a dark appendage extended from some kind of orifice to hold it. The two men stopped to watch. A full body followed the arm, entering the hall from the hole. Despite the light, the figure was still quite dark. However, the fire did reflect off the metal that adorned the silhouette and a liquid that painted the fellow nearly head to toe. In the hand opposite the torch, the person held a sword.

"Who goes dere?" The person called.

"What side are you on?" Tou shot back.

"I'm Sharp Otubak." The man answered, "Princess Daffeega's personal guard."

Tou let out a sigh of relief, "Its Tou Fou, the earth elf with the Kou Warriors. I've got Bru. He's hurt."

Tou met Bru's eyes and gave him a reassuring nod, then they started down the hall towards their comrade. Sharp headed their way as well. As they got closer, Tou began to make out more of Sharp. The liquid was certainly blood. Sharp was limping, so it could've been his own, but there was so much of it that Tou hoped it wasn't. He didn't spend much time hoping, however, as he noticed the weapon in Sharp's hand. He wouldn't have recognized Sharp's sword, but he recognized the one Sharp had now. The hilt was large, shaped like a cross, and red as the blood that covered the swordsman.

Tou stopped in his tracks.

Sharp followed suit.

"Where'd you get that sword?" Tou asked.

"You know dis sword?" Sharp asked.

“How’d you get that sword?” Tou asked again, louder.

Bru squirmed. He looked from Tou to Sharp then back again. He couldn’t hear the volume increase but he could feel the elevated tension in Tou as he leaned on the elf.

Sharp raised his hands, as if to show he meant no harm, but his hands were full.

“How?!” Tou demanded.

Bru pushed himself off Tou and staggered over to the side of the corridor.

Sharp began, “Mr. Fou-”

“Sir Otubak!” Tou yelled, “Is that your blood?”

Bru hobbled down the hall, leaning on the wall, towards Sharp. Tou began to move too, keeping pace with Bru to allow the Layman to remain just ahead of him. Sharp still hadn’t budged.

“Who was he to you?” Sharp asked.

Tou hesitated, both in stride and in thought. Stammering, he said, “A...a friend.”

“A friend?!” Sharp scoffed.

The derision imboldened Tou, he took another step, “A teacher!” Then despair threw water back on the flames of his outrage. He lowered his voice, admitting to both himself and this man he hardly knew, “I thought he might could become something like a father to me.”

“A fadder to *you*?” Sharp shook his head and spat on the ground, “He was a fadder to no one, not even to his kids.”

Bru had now made it an equal distance between the two. Throwing himself off the wall, he fell to his knees in the middle of the hall. Looking from one man to the other, he kept his hands up and palms out. They were still five yards away from him on either side. He couldn’t stop them if they tried, but his presence did serve a purpose. The two men held their ground.

Had Tou more worldly experience, he would’ve realized it sooner but he had no way of knowing how rare black scales were among chidras. It had never crossed his mind that Dresdan and Sharp had anything more in common than race. They spoke different, they acted different, and they came from two different types of world – as far as Tou knew. But he was now close enough to see the pain in Sharp’s eyes. Sharp could see the pain in Tou’s too. For a brief second, as the torch flickered and they watched each other’s expressions, they felt as if they were looking in a mirror.

Slowly, Sharp sheathed his father’s sword and beckoned for Tou to follow him. Tou did. He stopped by Bru to help the man back up and together they hobbled over to the hole Sharp had come from. Sharp took them inside the crypt and went over to stand by the body of Dresdan. The old pirate was lying on his back. His arms were folded over his chest. Sharp’s sword rested on his breast under his arms. Gesturing to Bru, Sharp took the wounded rebel’s weight and let Tou go to the body of the Obsidian. Kneeling beside Dresdan, Tou began to cry.

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A plume of flame unfurled over the expanse before them, revealing the abyss that had hid amongst the darkness. Beneath the burst of fire bounced a bridge made of wood and rope. Frayed twine cords descended from the braided banisters to bare the wooden boards that footed the crossing. Below those planks, the darkness filled back in. As far as the gang could tell, the ravine cut all the way down to the Under. If it did, then there must’ve been another bridge before hand as there were stairs skirting both cliffsides, opposite one another. As the flare evaporated and the darkness returned, the only light was the amber flicker in the enertomb on the crook of

Benjamin's elgroom. However, for the humanoid canine beside him, there was another source of light.

With his crow eye, Fetch could already make out the Cloches. It was dim. Separated from them by a league of interconnected corridors and crypts, the mass of the domes of the palace appeared to Fetch like a silhouette behind a pane of heavily tented glass but it was unmistakable. Once they crossed the bridge, they'd be underneath the Capitol.

Fetch could make out a few minions wandering those tunnels ahead of them, but nothing like the mass behind them. The droves of the dead that had been unleashed during Pyramid were still pursuing them. Even those without crow eyes knew that. The undeads' wordless clamor echoed through the chambers behind them like the screech of cicadas.

"The Cloches is right up there." Fetch pointed across the bridge, then rose his index finger until it aimed at the black façade of rock above, "And that moleman in the stands was right about the rebellion, otherwise I doubt I'd be able to see it. There must be a city's worth of people up there."

There were thirteen of them on the cliffside. Fetch and Ben led the way with their magic. Behind them was another wizard: Lenga. Her book was tucked back under her arm as anymore healing would have to wait. She couldn't grow Marvell's arm back, she hadn't even been able to heal it as well as she would wanted, but the wound was sealed and the bearn was up and walking. Beside Marvell, was Bold.

"That bridge won't hold us oll." Bold claimed.

"That bridge won't hold *us* at all..." Marvell nudged Bold with her left arm then raised what was left of her right, "Even with me one arm lighter."

"It could hold us," Fetch gestured to Lenga, Ben, and himself then turned to the others, "and..."

Fetch scanned those they'd picked up that day. There were six locals and two fellow tourists. Both foreign men were barechested. One of which hadn't started that way. Daernar Darkblade had lost his armor in the arena after being struck from one of the fireballs that had been raining from the heavens. His back still radiated that heat, the cracked and blistered skin was still settling into place. The poor man's chest wasn't looking much better. Long lacerations left by the reptilian monsters hid the bruised ribs beneath. Lenga grimaced at the sight but there was no time for anymore healing. She'd been able to get to the other shirtless fellow, the fishfolk, Paud Gill. Though his chest was scarred from a wound won long ago.

Fetch pointed at Paud but the assassin shook his head before the shadowmancer could suggest it. Tapping the metallic scar that cut across his chest, he said, "I weigh as much as an anvil."

"We can cross." Sallis said, checking with the eyes of his fellow Batloens.

The responses were mixed. Sallis, as a moleman, was shorter in stature than his chidran counter parts. That said, them all being natives of Tlow-Vare before they found themselves in the prison cells along the Rift, none of the six had much more than skin and bones to them. Saber and Redael – the two chidra's amongst the six – looked to weigh a little more than Sallis but certainly not as much as Paud, Daernar, Bold, or Marvell. Despite having reason to be wary, both men accepted Sallis' challenge with nods. Ironically, it was the three molemen that stepped back. Wary of looking the Layman leader in the face, the molemen instead turned their gaze towards the stairs.

"Wae shouldn't waste anay mar toime." Bold interjected, saving the scared moles from scorn, "Let thase thrae start down the stairs."

“You want to talk about wasting time, then we better get in line behind them!” Marvell crowed, wiggling her stub arm towards the heavens, “Even if the skinny Batloens and the dog, the dogherder, and the doglover can scuttle across that flimsy bridge, you know farakin well that I, you, the wife-slaying nellaf, and the Aquarian-anchor over there won’t be following them.”

“Ben and I can fly y’all across while the lighter folks take the bridge.” Fetch suggested.

“Ben has to save his magic!” Lenga warned.

A quiet groan spread through the group. The healer was right. Ben’s elgroom had been in constant use since they left the arena. Without it, they would’ve been wandering in the dark. While Lenga drew her energy from written scripture and spoken spells, Ben’s elgroom was charged by the light of Solaris and there was no telling when they’d see sunlight again.

“The undead are getting closer.” Daernar warned. Despite his wounds, he stood in the mouth of the tunnel they’d come from with his claymore out at the ready. He’d been listening more to the monsters behind them than the debate before him.

“We need to get started.” Sallis stated. He marched up to the start of the bridge.

“Wait!” Ben yelled, “We still don’t know if *anyone* can take the bridge.”

“We’ll test it.” Fetch offered. Joining Sallis by the edge, he said, “If it falls, I’ve got the shadows to save us. If it doesn’t, then another two can cross while Ben and I start flying folks. Yea?”

“And whoile y’all cross, Marvell and the thrae moles should take the stars.” Bold asserted.

“Why me?” Marvell blurted, “We got no clue if the stairs even go anywhere!”

Bold scoffed, “You raellay wanna bae flown instead?”

“Ah,” Marvell realized, “Yea, no.”

“Naithar do oi.” Bold admitted, “But Oi’ve got two arms-”

“True.” Marvell agreed.

“-and Oi’m not laeving lil Lenga.” Bold concluded.

“Then it’s settled.” Marvell declared.

“Bettar get started then.” Bold nudged Marvell in the hip with an elbow, “Awful lotta stars and wae won’t bae waitin far ye on the othar soide.”

Marvell raised her right nub in a ghost salute and then gestured to the molemen with her left arm before leading the way down the cliffside stairs. While the dwarf and bearn bantered, Paud pulled the discussion back to the two test-crossers. His black eyes bored into the lead-Layman’s gaze.

“Sallis.” Paud said, “If you make it across, then you’ll be alone to defend yourself until the shadowmancer and elementalists return with the dwarf, the nellaf, or I.”

“Aye,” Sallis patted the pommel of the sword that hung from his belt and turned to Fetch, “still empty on the otherside?”

“For now.” Fetch replied with a gulp.

“Then lets hurry.” Sallis said.

The two men took deep breathes, then started. Sallis led the way and Fetch followed close behind him. The bridge began to bounce. A fog of dust was rattled up into the air. The twine groaned and the wood creaked, but for the moment everything held. Meanwhile, back on the cliffside, their comrades held their breathes.

Ben couldn’t watch. Instead, he turned and began to wall up the tunnel behind them. Raising his staff, the stone in the crook turned an amber brown. Lenga had to look away from the bridge as well and when she saw what Ben was about to do she grabbed his arms. This stopped

the gmoat from starting but in the quiet that took the place of his action, both him and the healer could hear the growing commotion coming down the corridor. The dead would certainly make it to the canyon before they would be able to cross.

“I just need to narrow the passage.” Ben assured Lenga, “I’ll still have enough magic left to get us across.”

“And then what?” Lenga lamented, “We’re on our way to a war!”

Ben grimaced in response and Lenga relented. They were on the same page. There was no good option, certainly no sure fire one. Nodding, she let go of Ben and he went back to it.

“Which of ya goes farst once they get across?” Bold asked the two chidras.

Redael and Saber looked at one another and then at the rest. Of those left on the ledge, only Ben and Lenga were of a size that seemed safe for the bridge. The dwarf, the fishfolk, and the nellaf would certainly need to be flown.

“We should send the healer first.” Redael suggested.

“Which maens one of y’all has to go with to protect har?” Bold scowled at the two, “What war you both in far, huh?”

Redael sealed his lips and shook his head.

Saber smiled and scratched his head tails but answered, “Stealing food.”

“Oi’ll cook ya dinnar if ya kaep har safe.” Bold offered, extending a hand.

Taking the deal, Saber shook on it with a gulp.

Lenga had been listening to the exchange. Her big lilac eyes were wide, as if trying to fit all the different emotions that were coursing through her in the moment into her pale, purple gaze. Bold met her stare with a stern smile.

“Oi’ll bae roight baehoind ya two.”

There were seven of them left on the ledge. Ben was still walling while Daernar and Paud stood behind him with their weapons at the ready. Redael joined the two with his spear. Saber and Lenga took up positions by the banisters of the bridge and Bold waited their with them. Fetch and Sallis were just about across the pass.

“Uh oh.” Fetch hadn’t turned to say it, but with the aucustics of the vast underground canyon chamber, everyone heard it. Hearing murmurs kick off before his parapraxis could even start to echo, Fetch hurriedly fumbled to explain, “Someone’s coming – *something*, I mean...it could be a thing – *things* actually...”

Sallis, walking ahead of Fetch, didn’t stop. If anything, the revelation encouraged him to move faster. The folks on the other side of the rift had to bite their tongues to resist rapidly interrogating the shadowmancer as he continued to flounder with his words.

“Coming down from the Cloches!” Fetch clarified, “Two living things!”

“How high up is the Cloches?” Sallis demanded, keeping his hands on the railings even as his palms itched for his hilt, “How long do we have?”

“It’s high up but we don’t have long.” Fetch warned, “They’re coming fast – like they’re falling.”

“The Pillar Lift.” Paud stated from across the crevasse.

“The whot?” Bold asked.

“There’s an elevator into the Cloches from the Catacombs.” Paud clarified.

“How would you know that?” Redael scoffed.

“I’m an assassin.” Paud turned to the chidra and said with a level of emotionlessness achievable only by someone in his line of work, “This isn’t my first time in the Cloches.”

“Could it be an elevator?” Lenga hollered across the expanse.

“I was hoping for bottomless pit, but yes.” Fetch yelled back, “And it appears they’ve stopped on our floor.”

Sallis put his first foot down on the otherside of the canyon and Fetch nearly bowled him over to follow suit. Staring into the darkness of the tunnel that waited before them, Sallis waited with his sword drawn.

Fetch patted the Layman on the back and offered a swift, “Selu to you!” Then let shadows pour out from his crow eye. The darkness wrapped around his ankles and then lifted him up off the cliffside. Levitating, he began to fly back across to the others.

“Oi don’t care whot you did anaymar,” Bold growled to Redael, “you and Sabar go farst.” With a gentle shove in the direction of the canyon, the two ex-cons obeyed the dwarf. Bold then turned to Ben who had already stopped his stone-crafting on the tunnel entrance. Ben moved towards Bold to offer but Bold shook his head, pointing instead to Paud.

Even Paud was surprised. Taking a step back and licking his eyes.

“Wae naed a warriar ovar thar,” Bold said, “and Oi’ve hard of you, Shayu Shua.”

Bowing, Paud accepted the acknowledgement then approached the gmoat.

“Any preference?” Ben asked.

“Water.” Paud answered.

Ben nodded. The enertomb in the crook of his elgroom lit the chamber with a sapphiric hue and water began to uncurl from the stone as if it had just tapped into a natural spring. Swirling first around Benjamin, it then sent out a tendril of fluid towards the Aquarian. The water wound around them like string on a spool but with each orbit the water accelerated. In a couple of seconds, the slow pour from Ben’s staff had turned into two hurricanes. Ben raised the rod and both men lifted off the ledge. Closing his eyes and focusing on the mental image of their reality, the waterspouts began to tote them across the crevasse. They passed Redael and Saber on the bridge and then Fetch in midair.

“Protect the mole.” Fetch barked.

“Sallis.” Paud corrected.

Across the crevasse, Sallis was getting ready for whatever was coming. Between the cliff and the tunnel there was about forty feet with the platform spanning about twenty-five feet wide. It was widest right up against the façade which arched over the tunnel, the mouth of which was about ten feet wide. A bearn wouldn’t have been able to plug the hall, a moleman certainly had no chance. While Sallis felt he had a chance against two swordsmen, as he wasn’t half bad himself, he had a feeling the two descending from the Cloches had more in their arsenal than melee. Thus he stationed himself to the leftside of the tunnel, pressed flat against the façade, and waited. His only hope was that good guys would arrive before the bad one.

While his bad guys were still on their way, the bad guys on the otherside of the cliff had arrived. Daernar drove forward to face them. With each swing of his claymore, he obliterated a skeleton. The half hazardly resurrected were no match for well trained soldiers, they had only numbers in their favor and their numbers still hadn’t quite arrived. The nellaf bashed through half a dozen and then caught his breath. The horde was on its way. Backing up, he positioned himself in the tight hall Ben had formed for him. While Sallis would have to defend a ten foot corridor, Daernar would have to watch his swing in his five foot alley.

Behind the blademaster, Fetch had arrived. Only Daernar, Lenga, and Bold remained.

“Alright, Bold.” Fetch said.

“Oi’m not laeving Lenga.” Bold stated.

“Then I’ll take the bridge while you take Bold.” Lenga suggested.

“That’s the only way.” Fetch said.

“Once the chidra’s get across then.” Bold agreed.

And so the three turned to watch and wait.

Sallis no longer stood alone on the otherside. Pressed up against the edge of the corridor, he saw pale phalanges burst forth from the terrain just a yard from where he stood. Three pairs of mostly-intact sets were pulling themselves up out of the earth. Sallis’s mind was rushing through the mental calculus of whether or not he should wait for back up before revealing himself or nip the bones in the bud. Once their skulls popped out of the ground, he gave in to his anxiety and stepped up to the plate.

He flipped his scimitar upside down and took the hilt like a golfer grasps their club then reared back and swung, slamming the flat of the blade into the first skull. It popped off and the bones went limp. Using the moment of his swing, he stepped towards the next unburrying foe and kicked the skull clean off the spine. This was a miscalculation. While it did disconnect and deanimate his foe, it sent tremors of sharp pain from his toes to his foot and then surging up his shin. He lost his stride a bit and that was enough for the third undead, having pulled itself halfway out of the ground, to lean over and grab hold of his ankles. Hastily, he brought the scimitar down – with the sharp edge first this time – and cracked his foes cranium in two but not before the necromancer in the tunnel got off an attack.

A slender strand of lashed out of the darkness of the corridor. It slapped Sallis on the side of the neck and wrapped around as he struggle to get free of the once again lifeless bones by his feet. As soon as the bone band cinched his throat, the necromancer on the other end of the rope yanked. Like a dog torn out of a jump by their master’s leash, Sallis flew threw the air and hit the ground halfway between where he had been standing and where the necromancer now stood.

He'd only caught a glimpse of the foe before being bested. Two things stood out to him. First, most Batloens had purple eyes but this chidra’s eyes glowed unnaturally – especially in the dark shade of the corridor – and, second, the chidra was dressed in the robes of an Arcane Sentinel. The next thing he saw was a flash of light when his head hit the rock, then he saw his friends.

The stone pillow his brain had bludgeoned bent his head away from the bonebender before him, leaving him looking back the way he’d came. Past the unanimated bones of the three skeletons he’d scattered, Saber and Redael were rushing across the rope bridge. The entire structure was rippling like a sine wave beneath them but they took the bouncing as boosts. A mini-maelstorm was flying over the crevasses beside them. Help was on its way, but so too were more foes. Just as they had before, boney bits were rising from the stone platform ready to receive the newcomers. Sallis was still on his own.

Jumping up into a pushup position, he leaned away to tighten his leash and chopped at the cartiligious cord. The scimitar chipped a good chunk out of the bone (receiving a chip in the edge of the blade for it too) but still the whip held and the holder whipped again. This time, Sallis was jolted up off his feet and slammed against the wall.

Rather than resisting the rope, this time Sallis ran with it. *Can’t yank me when there’s slack in the line!* Raising his scimitar and yelling like a mad man, he charged the necromancer. To his surprise, the bonebender rushed back. Sallis skidded to a halt, the leash pulled taught, and he chopped at it again. The bone-made rope snapped.

The victory was shortlived, however, as dead were unburrying themselves on either side of him. The necromancer had stopped when his whip had been cut. Giving up the leash, he

turned what was left of it in his grasp to a sword to match Sallis'. Sallis took a step back and raised his weapon.

His arms only rose halfway. Sallis looked down at his hands but nothing was holding them. However, in the darkness, between his feet, he saw something shimmer in the darkness – a milky liquid. As a Layman, Sallis had little experience with necromancers. None, if he were completely honest, but he realized what had happened quickly. There were supposed to be two necromancers, he'd yet only seen one.

The puddle by his feet was rising, like a crocodile emerging from the muddy surface of a swamp. Horizontal at first, it turned more vertical as it rose. It wasn't long before it was obvious that the bone was becoming a being, specifically a moleman at that. As it formed, it kept physical contact with Sallis. Where the puddle had been touching his toes, now its right hand clasped his left forearm. The faint white shade Sallis had detected had darkened into something colorful. Finally, the colors settled and Sallis wasn't surprised. Dark purple and bright red, the colors of the country, the colors that decorated the Royal Guard. *Another Arcane Sentinel*. And just like the one he'd been fighting with before, once this figure solidified, Sallis couldn't help but notice her glowing purple gaze.

"We found the Anarchists leader?"

The moleman's voice was as odd as their eyes. Not only because it sounded like a man's voice, but because it didn't sound like the moleman was stating this to his comrade. It certainly didn't sound like a victorious exclamation. It sounded like a report.

Behind the moleman woman, the chidran Sentinel spoke up. His voice sounded like that of a woman's. They said, "Leave him to bleed out." Sallis thought he could recognize the voice, but he couldn't put a name to it as it was distorted by the speaker it did not belong too. They finished, "It would be nice if he lives just long enough for me to visit after this is all over."

The moleman woman stepped aside, keeping her hand on Sallis' wrist, and the chidran man strode forward. Sallis still couldn't move. He could simply think and watch as the necromancer lowered their bone made blade and aimed it at his gut, just below his navel. The chidra smirked in his face then drove the sword into his belly until their face was right up next to his so that they could whisper.

"Bow-

Ripping the blade free, the chidra stepped back. The moleman released Sallis and he fell to his knees.

"-to your Quee-"

A block of ice hurtled over Sallis' head and smashed into the dome shaped face of the Arcane Sentinel that had stabbed him. The mancer fell flat on their back, their face cratered like the surface of an unhatched moon. The other Sentinel dissolved back into bone while the undead around them turned and charged down the corridor to stop the Layman's saviors.

"Get Sallis!" Ben exclaimed, "I'll cover you!"

Paud was already on it. Storming forward, Paud rustled his arms and the blades extended from his gauntlets. They were only five unburied between him and his target. *Why are they still standing?* Paud wondered. Ben had downed the necromancer. *Where is the second necromancer?* Paud licked his eyes. *Did Sallis already defeat them?* Then he saw it: a faint glimmer of light reflecting off a pale strand of fluid stretching along the corner of the corridor. The illumination didn't last long – just as long as it took for Ben's fireball to pass over his shoulder and pummel the sternum of the closest charging corpse – but it was long enough for Paud to realize that the second necromancer was up to something.

The first undead hit the ground as a pile of bones, Paud pulled in a middle claw and pegged the eyeholes of the next foe. Wrenching the skeleton's skull free, he twirled forward and used the fleshless head to bash the next one off its shoulders. He kept running. His eyes darted from Sallis, to the bonebent baddies still between him and Sallis, to the sliver of bone-energy he'd spotted stretching between the wall and the floor but before anything more could develop with the stripe a development commandeered his focus.

The skeleton of the chidra necromancer was climbing up from their corpse. Dented as bad as a skull could be before shattering, the undead looked unhappy even despite being forced to bear an eternal lipless grin. *Boneguards*. Paud realized. That explained how the unburied were still upright, their masters weren't quite dead yet.

Another fire ball blasted the beak off the foe to his right and Paud hooked the skull of the foe to his left with his Claws once more. Twirling as he had before, he lobbed it over Sallis' head just as Ben had with his iceball.

WHAM!

Without a physical brain, the bonebender wouldn't get concussed this time but it was still enough to badger the bastard back and give Paud enough time to get in the way before they could do any more damage to Sallis. Paud's foot hit the ground just a couple inches from where Sallis knelt, his next foot would land just past the Layman, but his leg stopped. A chill surged up from his foot, soothing his scorching blood but striking terror into his heart.

"Chilled marrow." He murmured before his jaw was locked by the spell.

Far behind Paud, Ben had just found himself under the same spell. The moleman necromancer had stretched as thin as they could, extending along the edge of the hall until their liquid state could reach both the fishfolk and the gmoat. The longer the strand, the thinner and harder to see. While Paud had gotten wind something was up, Ben hadn't had the slightest clue. Preparing to launch another fireball, he'd been stopped cold by a cold string of bone slipping across his hoof.

The deformed face of the chidran necromancer snarled at Paud.

"Your sister will pay for your betrayal." A voice from within the skull promised.

Paud's blood boiled. The curse that tortured his family always burned, but it could flare up even worse when provoked. In fact, the fact that it was bearable right now was alarming to Paud. If his sister was still in the Cloches above, then he'd be struggling to carry on. The closer a Gill got to their kin, the worse the pain was. If his sister wasn't, then Truth could've sent her anywhere. Still, he trusted what she had told him when he was Sallis' cellmate. He certainly had more faith in his instincts than he did in deals with someone with the audacity to call themselves "Truth". So though the boneguard couldn't tell and nor could the necromancer that puppeted them, deep down inside, Paud was scoffing at his foe.

"And your sister will be Queen!"

The claim came from the Layman. Sallis was bleeding out on the floor but he hadn't bled out yet. He still had his sword and he was no longer tethered to the nequified foe that had captured Paud and Ben. Rolling over, he brought the scimitar up and down on the strand of osseus energy that extended from the corner towards Paud's foot.

An excruciating scream filled the chamber as the string of off-white energy writhed like an uncovered worm. Sallis' sword had cut right through it, severing its hold on Paud and releasing Ben as it squirmed. It began to shrink and thicken and bubble, reforming somewhere in the hall between Paud and Ben, but the bit split off by Paud and Sallis stayed behind, taking the shape of a pair of bloody feet.

Freed, Paud surged forward. His claws sliding up through the chidran beonguards's jaw and bursting out the top of their misshapen skull. Now the necromancer's undead clattered to the ground.

Behind them, Ben had advanced on the foe still floundering on the floor. Pulling a slab of stone from the ceiling, he brought it down on the main mass of the being.

SPLAT.

"Look out!" Paud warned, "They'll come back!"

Ben raised his elgroom. The brownish amber hue shining down on the boulder as it lifted. Sure enough, the puddle of bone-colored gae was bubbling back to life, already starting to reach out for his hooves.

SPLAT.

He dropped the stone again and extinguished the necromancer's chances at experiencing a second life as a boneguard.

Then the light in his staff went off. Darkness immediately engulfed them.

"I'm out of magic." Ben stated.

The only source of light now came from the mouth of the chamber, back towards the crevasse. The only noises came from there too. Ben, Paud, and Sallis looked desperately back and waited to see if the rest of their friends had made it.

Redael and Saber had made it across the bridge and survived the small army of undead. Whether they deanimated the skeletons before Ben, Paud, and Sallis slayed their reanimators, it was hard to tell, but there were no foes left on their side of the ravine. The same could not be said for the otherside.

The horde had arrived. One might say Daernar faced them single-handedly, had his claymore not taken two hands to wield. With one swing, he obliterated two skeletons that had thrown themselves at the nellaf. His blade smashed them to bits before implanting in the wall of the narrow pass. Only two foes could fit at a time, but they fit as soon as they could. No sooner did the first two crumble than did the next two rush in. Jerking his sword from where it had wedged itself in the wall, Daernar blasted through the next two and got his sword stuck in the otherside of the hall. It seemed that Ben's elemental aid had only complicated things. Groaning, Daernar pulled his sword free and surged into the surging scourge.

The unburied were cheap. Resurrected from their crypts and flippantly ordered to fight anything with flesh. There was no effort on the part of their mancercs to instill any skill in their assaults and so when faced with a fighter like Daernar – a man that had been in battles for almost three hundred years – they disintegrated like the sand beneath their phalanges. Thus, when Daernar escaped the confines of the narrow pass and plunged into the midst of the mancerc-minions, they were blown back like the nellaf was a fierce wind. He swept his sword left then right, slicing in a figure eight motion to maintain as much momentum as possible. Daernar was so formidable, the undead stopped trying to harm him. Instead, they simply tried to get past him. And a few, using the whirlwind rush of his attack, managed to sneak by. In the midst of a cloud of broken bones, Daernar didn't even notice.

"DARKBLADE!"

The thick accent of the dwarf was coated in fury. Daernar's attention was wrenched back towards the ravine. Beyond the narrow pass, he could make out the distant figures on the bridge. Fetch and Lenga were crossing now, Bold levitating not far behind them. Between the trio and Daernar, however, a handful of undead were just about to set out on the bridge after them. The nellaf didn't think much about it, he simply reacted. Had he thought longer, he likely would've

realized that the dwarf and shadowmancer could've handled the complication of a few brainless bonemies, that Boldarian was simply lashing out from initial astonishment, but there are no take-backs in battle and so Daernar's first instinct became his reaction: he threw his claymore.

Spiraling through the sky like the blade of a windmill, the sword struck the bunch of foes just as they stepped on the bridge. Those that weren't split in two were tumbled over the side of the railings, falling to the bottom of the ravine with Daernar's only weapon.

"DARKBLADE!"

Now Bold's tone translated concern, not for himself but for the bladeless blademaster.

The horde had not halted. In fact, when Daernar had turned his back to throw his sword, he was swarmed. Three skeletons bound onto his back, piercing him over and over with their slender osseous shivs. His back was already blackened like a Cajun cooked fish. The bone splinters split open the craggy flesh, painting his back in blood like the lacerations across his chest. Reaching back to grab one unburied by the eye sockets, he whirled around and hurled the enemy back into their crowd. This kept the rest of the horde at bay for a moment but did nothing to stop the other two still stabbing him in the back.

Daernar let them keep stabbing. Stepping forward, he grabbed the closed undead with both hands. His left hand hooked the eye sockets and his right the jaw. Pulling the skull apart, he held on to the two pieces. Using them like one might wield a brick in street fight, he uppercut the next nearest reanimation's head off and then overhanded the next one's head down to the dirt. But even as he proceeded, the pain from the jabs in the back kept yanking his focus away. As he approached the next wave, his entire mind went blank. His senses stopped. There was nothing but nothing for a brief moment and then-

"Atone."

He saw his wife. *Lizara*. She stood amidst the undead. Her chin jutted up to the chamber ceiling, her eyes looked down her nose at him. Suddenly he felt like a schoolboy caught falling asleep before finishing the assignment.

"Atone."

His senses came back, but he hardly needed them. In the dark, musty hall, his warrior-reflexes did all the work. All he had to do was manage the pain. Spinning, he smashed through the next wave of goons then he threw the skull and jaw at the wave after that and reached back to pull the stabbers off his shoulders. Slinging them by their necks into the third wave, he stomped over the bones to the next batch then paused.

The horde had stopped. Their skulls had turned to look back down the tunnel. A new noise replaced the clickety clacking off the undead mob, one that sounded familiar. It was more like Daernar than the dead. There was huffing and puffing alongside the crunching and crashing. He squinted through the ranks of former enemies before him for a moment before deciding better. Whether friend or foe, he was in no state to place a bet.

His back had been diced up. It felt as if it were folding over his chest, not that his chest was doing much better. Pyramid had left his ribs fractured and his breast sliced apart. Yet somehow his legs still hoisted him up. He lumbered back through the narrow pass and over to the rope bridge. His comrades were nearly across. He had to hold out just a little longer. Looking around his feet, he retrieved a shattered femur left behind by a former foe. This would have to substitute for his claymore. Then he turned back to the narrow pass.

The huffing and puffing was louder, as was the crushing and crashing and something else. There was a bellow. A low guttural bestial roar. That of a blunt faced bear.

“Farak.” Daernar said, then he took a deep breath and hollered over his sagging shoulders, “I HAVE TO CUT THE BRIDGE!”

“NO!” Fetch and Bold barked.

But they hadn’t looked back yet to see why.

“Oh my god.” Lenga murmured.

BOOM!

The bear hit the narrow passage that Ben had constructed. It’s bulbous head wedged through the crevasse, but its shoulders held it fast – for the moment. The columns of stone on either side shifted, spurting clouds of dust as fissures stretched across them like cracks in a pane of glass.

The creature snarled. The narrow pass was just wide enough for the monstrous melon of a head. Shaped like a keg of beer, the end of its snout had the same circumference as the back of its head with a mouth that stretched from ear to ear. The beast’s eyes and ears were on the sides of its head, thus it couldn’t see Daernar standing before it on the ledge. But the flaring nostrils assured Daernar that the bear was aware of his presence.

There was one option left before cutting the bridge: killing the bear. In the midst of its struggling, the beast decided to open its maw wide and release another guttural roar. Daernar rushed forward with the bone he’d picked up. He thrust the jagged edge of the femur into the bear’s jaws, stabbing for the roof of the behemoth’s mouth.

WHAM!

The jaws slammed shut. He’d yanked his arm out at the last second – so last was the second that the skin of his knuckles had been shaved off. The bone was still in his grasp but he decided not to try again. A plume of dust spewed from the walls of the narrow pass, a spray of gravel with it this time. Daernar turned back to check on his friends on the bridge.

Once the bear hit the pass, Fetch, Bold, and Lenga realized that the nellaf was likely right. Running the rest of the way seemed dangerous, the bridge bounced enough from their hurried stride already. Bold was levitating happily in the grasp of Fetch’s shadows. His journey across the ravine could be expedited. Fetch’s crow eye remained dead and glossy, but his good eye gave off the flicker of an idea and Bold was able to infer the suggestion.

“Fet-”

Bold’s words were lost in a scream. The shadows that had been toting him flared like the fire bursting from the engine of a zoomer and it propelled the dwarf through the air like a cannon ball. As the dwarf hurtled over the ravine, Fetch pulled more shadows from his crow eye. They flowed out from the stone like the shadow of a vine unfurling at first but as he wrapped them around himself and Lenga, the stream swelled to the size of thick, mooring lines. There was no time to conserve energy, he released as much shadows as he could reasonably control and let the darkness enclose them like a thick blanket.

As he concocted their cocoon, Lenga said, “The Darkblade won’t survive if he cuts the bridge, his wounds...”

Fetch sighed as he lifted them off the bouncing wood of the bridge.

“Throw me to Bold,” Lenga said, “and save him.”

At the other end, Daernar stepped onto a plank. He held tight to the rope with one hand and brandished his broken-bone-blade with the other. It certainly wasn’t as sharp as the claymore he’d lost over the lip of the cliff but it’d have to do. With the blunt faced bear grumbling and the entire façade rumbling behind him, he brought the bone down hard on the rope railing.

It worked! Cutting through quite cleanly. But then the bear broke through.

Giant chunks of stone – stone that had been molded by Ben and his elgroon – exploded out onto the ledge, launching as far as the bridge itself. Daernar had to lunge further down the bridge to dodge the debris. He landed awkwardly, with one knee down on a plank and his arms wrapped around the ropes – one of which was now disconnected. The bridge tilted hard to his left, attempting to spill him out, but he kept his right arm wrapped around the right bannister. However he was just as concerned about falling as he was about the bear. Tearing his eyes from the abyss below, he jerked his head around to peer over his shoulder.

Rustling its shoulders and turning its head, the bear oggled Daernar with one eye. A cloud of dust and a dozen feet of bridge stood between them. Daernar took the femur into his left hand and further twisted his right arm into the rope railing, then snarled back at the beast.

“Do it, you ugly fuck!”

The bear jumped. It cleared the ten feet, its shadow falling on Daernar before its weight. Its mouth was open wide – wide enough to close around Daernar’s torso, capable of clamping him from shoulder to shoulder, and that is what it intended to do. Coming down with its mouth around Daernar’s breast, Daernar didn’t scurry. With his right arm wrapped in the bridge’s rope, he leaned into the bear’s bite, thrusting his left arm into the creature’s throat as he once again stabbed for the roof of the monster’s mouth. The broken femur stuck fast and he gave it every ounce of strength to keep driving it before the jaws closed around him, feeling blood gush out to join the gallons of musty saliva.

Then the weight of the bear fell on Daernar and the bridge. The ropes he’d failed to cut snapped and the bridge completely broke free. There was immediate reprieve from the weight of the monster as both became weightless and gravity wrapped their quick hands around the two.

Lenga and Bold watched with the others – Saber, Redael, Paud, Ben, and Sallis – on the safe side of the ravine. Ben had lost the ability to provide light with his elgroon but Lenga had a simple fire spell in her medical book and so they were able to light one of the torches that lined the corridor beyond. Ben held the torch while they peered over the edge.

Fetch had obeyed his girlfriend’s orders and launched her into the arms of the dwarf before turning to see what happened to the Darkblade. When the bear tackled Daernar, the bridge held for a second then fell – though it still remained tethered to the safe side of the ravine. Daernar and the bear plummeted diagonally, still somehow connected to the bridge as it swung to slam flat against the stone façade.

Diving head first, Fetch shot after them. With shadows wrapped around his legs, blasting him forwards, he could fly faster than the two could fall but would he beat them to the ground? *Is the nellaf even still alive?* His answer came before he caught up to them. As the bridge pulled them out of the horizontal trajectory, dragging them vertical, the bear fell off Daernar and continued to tumble. Daernar, drenched in the fluids of the fiend, was no longer falling. Wrapped up in the reins of the bridge like Fetch was in his own shadows, the Darkblade had survived. Fetch could hardly believe it. Still, surviving the bear didn’t mean he’d survive slamming into the cliffside.

Zooming in, he embraced the nellaf and pushed his foot-cannons to slow them as they finished swinging. Daernar flinched at the sudden arrival of his savior. Then Fetch flinched as he caught a whiff of the blood and spit that he now shared with the nellaf.

The bridge came to a stop dangling beside the stairs that wound up the façade. Marvell and her moleman comrades, those that had avoided all the trouble by simply trudging down and now up the stairs, found themselves on eye level with the shadowmancer and swordsman. The molemen yelped, but Marvell seemed unimpressed.

“I knew that bridge wouldn’t hold.” She stated.

Fetch and Daernar were speechless.

The molemen helped Daernar get untangled, then Marvell was tasked with helping him make it up the rest of the stairs. By the time the six joined the seven topside, they all smelled like the inside of a blunt faced bear.

Lenga was busy tending to Sallis. She’d resisted the urge to set about completely healing the rebel leader’s gut wound. She was already exhausted from the healing she’d done thus far (from Paud’s gaping wounds and interior bleeding to saving what was left of Marvell’s missing right arm) but she was also worried that Daernar might be in dire need of extreme medical attention and, even if that weren’t the case, one could only assume there was worse to come in the near future. She needed to preserve her energy and literature for life or death situations. She healed Sallis enough to keep him alive, but not enough for him to be much help on the battlefield. By the time she was done with that, Marvell had arrived up top and dropped Daernar off for Lenga to look at.

His back was still badly burnt, his chest thoroughly lacerated, and most of his ribs had received at least a few minor fractures from Pyramid but now he had an assortment of stab wounds from his shoulder blades to his ass cheeks and bloody rope burns on his right arm. Despite that, the warrior was in remarkable shape for the day he’d had so far. As Lenga sat next to him and began flipping through the pages of her tome, he got back on his feet.

“Save it.” Daernar told her, “I’ll make it to the Cloches.”

Lenga gasped, “Mr. Darkblade, you-”

Bold clasped her on the shoulder, reinforcing his god daughter’s concern but – as a widower, he came from a more practical angle, “Ya shar, lad? Wae naed ya foighting.”

Daernar nodded then turned to look down the hall ahead of them. His face went blank, as if he had misheard something someone said then his eyebrows raised as if he were double checking. Bold and Lenga did a double take, looking around his hips then back at each other before checking one last time to be sure he wasn’t conferring with some dark magician they’d somehow missed. Before they could ask, he turned back to Bold and Lenga with a sigh, “Can’t die yet.”

Fetch piped up to get the ball back rolling, “I figure we should go towards the elevator, right...” Fetch looked to Paud both asking for confirmation and for the Aquarian to remind him of his name.

Paud gave Fetch half that, “Can you lead the way?”

Fetch nodded but then gulped, “There’s more people there now.”

“Well we’re not going back.” Marvell stated, “Y’all may think we had it easy but those stairs are no joke.”

“They’re going up the Lift.” Fetch ignored the bearn, interjecting before she’d finished, “And another group is going towards it. All with glows as bright as ours.”

“Least they’re in retreat?” Ben suggested, “That’s a good thing.”

“Or,” Sallis paused to wince before continuing, “they’ve already won.”

The other Batloens all seemed to share his dower perspective, but the one-armed axwoman was right (Not about the stairs, of course, but in reference to everything they’d been through already). They certainly weren’t going to turn around now.

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“Neme ah et kolp oh et Ydnul, crailere et vuizcim law von miameh sodpaz gulevadur!”

An indigo bolt shot from the stone atop the Staff of Uthemarc, spreading rays of violet light as it hurtled down the hall and burst through the frontal bone of a rushing undead. As the skeleton tumbled forward into a dismembered heap, its comrades kept the charge.

“Neme ah et kolp oh et Ydnul, crailere et vuizcim law von miameh sodpaz gulevadur!”

Daffeega shot another purple bullet, defeating the next.

“Neme ah et kolp oh et Ydnul, crailere et vuizcim law von miameh sodpaz gulevadur!”

And a third defeating the last. She could make out the necromancer now. Their figure was slightly intelligible, standing just on the edge of where the light of her staff reached. A similar purple glow emanated from the being’s eyes, signifying they were just as corrupted as every other Arcane Sentinel she’d come across thus far.

Behind her, Sorelac levitated. Her spell continued to tote him as if he were laying in a medical bed with wheels. The Icelore was still asleep, recovering from his prior over exertion. Whether he’d be friend or foe when he woke up, Daffeega couldn’t be sure but she certainly hoped to defeat the Corrupted Sentinel before finding out. Proceeding a few more paces down the corridor, the lilac light of her staff illuminated the figure’s face.

“Larahga?” Daffeega gasped.

The last time she’d seen Larahga, had been in the Mosque of the Magi, arguing over the fate of Sallis the Layman. A Magus couldn’t be corrupted by any old magician. The Arcane Sentinels were ants in comparison to the magical giants that made up the Magi. In fact, there might’ve only been one other wizard Daffeega would credit with the ability to control the minds of a Magi.

“Tim hormakora-”

The voice was not Larahga’s, though the encantation came from the mole woman’s mouth. Daffeega recognized the voice – she knew it quite well as it was one of the first voices she’d ever heard. *Suicine*. Daffeega had never heard her sister utter such words. In the Sacred Tongue, the word “hormakora” came from the names of two Delian gods: Hormah, the Lord of Death, and Kora, the Deity of Stone. When combined, “hormakora” meant bone. If a magician started a spell with “tim hormakora”, then they were sourcing their magic with energy only available to necromancers.

“-crailere et vuizcim law von miameh sodpaz gulevadur.”

A bullet of off-white material materialized by Larahga’s snout and hurtled towards Daffeega. The Princess spun out of the way, throwing herself against the wall of the chamber. The projectile skated over Sorelac’s body, tearing at his robes but only skimming his flesh. Her foe didn’t stop, the Magus continued to repeat herself. Jumping back into the center of the hallway, between the corrupted politician and the comatose mage, Daffeega grasped the purple orb at the top of the Staff of Uthemarc. Though the rod wrapped around the stone, they were separate pieces. As her hand closed around it, the rod unfurled and allowed her to pull the sphere off. It didn’t come alone, below it came a slender hilt and the skinny blade of a saber.

Mages typically fought behind warriors, but when one on one they had to have some melee abilities to fend off foes while casting spells. With her staff in one hand and her sword in the other, she glowered at her sister through Larahga’s eyes. The Magus had created their own sword of bone to match. They called upon their opposing power sources.

“Tim hormakora...”

“Neme ah et kolp oh et Ydnul...”

Daffeega charged. The staff and stone still maintained their arcane responsibilities. Fueling Daffeega's magic but also continuing to ensorcel her crippled legs, otherwise she would not have been able to run. The Staff of Uthemarc was ancient and, unlike Ben's elgroom, had no risk of running out of energy. It was Daffeega who would be exhausted first. Thus, she had to carefully pick her spells. Especially because it seemed her foe might've had all the energy of the Catacombs at their disposal.

Larahga's body continued to chant, "...crailere etnezod vuizcim

Daffeega continued as well, "...crailas law von miameh

A dozen slender splinters of bone formed in the air before the Magus while a translucent screen of violet energy began to spread before the Princess, floating before her like a cloud as she ran.

"-law von miameh sodpaz gulevadur!" Both proclaimed in unison.

The bone bolts launched but couldn't beat Daffeega's final lyrics, "Shaavahnt et ot law!"

She skidded to a halt as her indigo pane fully materialized, hardening to an almost opaque surface and extending from one side of the chamber to the other. The necromancer's darts struck the mystical membrane and clattered to the ground.

"You've gone too far!" Daffeega declared.

"Indeed." Suicine's voice remarked.

Staring through the mirky façade of her shield, Daffeega saw that Larahga's sword had become something quite wider. Rather than a bat or a mace, Suicine had her puppet necrocrafter an actual battering ram of bone. Daffeega braced herself as the blunt log of necromagic slammed into her purple palisade. The bludgeon burst the barricade and shoved further.

Suicine cackled, "And there's no going back."

Daffeega stabbed the Staff of Uthemarc into the ground and held her stance. The purple stone at the pommel of her saber shimmered especially bright, as if bracing itself. When the bone struck the blue rod of the staff, the staff didn't budge. Nor did Daffeega. Instead the bone dissolved into a strange offwhite fluid. The gunk evaporated into the air as it dripped to the floor, never touching the ground of the Catacomb – the energy expended.

In a similar fashion, Larahga began to melt to the floor but she didn't evaporate into the air as her ram had. She stayed in a liquid state and pooled on the cool stone. It wasn't immediate however, thus it gave time for Daffeega to make the next move.

"Stalling cause you know I won't kill you?" Stepping forward, Daffeega struck at her on the floor, forcing the fluid back like shadows running from the light. Daffeega warned, "Her body isn't my sister."

While she continued to pester the morphing mancer, she started to cast her counter magic, "Neme ah et kolp oh et Ydnul..." and debated whether or not she would kill the Magus. Larahga Selter was the Mole Magi of the Moon. While Daffeega had a grudge against each and every one of the supposed advisors, Larahga and Daffeega had harbored a personal vendetta against one another. While Daffeega had lobbied for her father to reform the moon mining system, Larahga had been a thorn in her side every step of the way. The Princess wondered why Suicine would've sent Larahga to stall her when Suicine should've known that of all the Magi, Larahga was one of the ones Daffeega would be most willing to kill. *Unless Larahga came of her own accord.* The thought suddenly struck her: *My sister isn't corrupting Larahga to control her, she is corrupting Larahga to protect her.* Daffeega smirked as she finished her spell, "...taeh et kora kraddon, retnar wrate nikkrai eziosulaura!"

Larahga had finished her transformation right as Daffeega finished her spell. As a blob of goo, the Magus lunged at the Princess. Her shape taking on that of a hundred spikes as they jumped towards Daffeega, but they kept their base grounded. That was a big mistake. Suicine must've been having a secret discussion within the privacy of Larahga's mind, for neither had listened to the words of Daffeega's spell. "Eziosulaura" meant "lava".

The floor of the chamber immediately bubbled and then burst, exploding into droplets of scarlet light. A heat like nothing else beneath Solaris hit Larahga and she recoiled before ever reaching Daffeega. Instead, the Magus-turned-gunk shot up to splatter the ceiling. Clinging to the cavernous roof, her form shifted back to solid. This was not by choice. Each bit turned solid was seared and steaming. The left side of her face returned first. Her fur was totally gone, as was much of her skin. Her nose had been reduced to a clumped up flesh. Enough remained to keep most of her necro-abilities but it was questionable whether she could smell energy anymore. As for damage done to Suicine? Larahga's eye was either swollen shut or melted through. It wasn't until the otherside of her face returned to its original state that Daffeega was able to see the purple glow had left. Suicine was gone. All that was remained was Larahga – at least, what was left of Larahga.

"Seems your Queen has abandoned you?" Daffeega scoffed.

"Abandoned me?" Larahga snarled – or did she? Half her lip had been scorched away, locking her snout in a perpetual grimace, "Or abandoned you?"

"Neme ah et kolp oh et Ydnul..." Daffeega began.

Still clinging to the ceiling, Larahga began to summon more bone. Her only remaining eye was as wide as it could get, watching the magma gurgling beneath her. Now she was paying attention to Daffeega's words.

"...meered eziosulaura, ere tim miameh hanna!"

Daffeega raised her staff and the lava leapt towards the ceiling. Larahga created a large plate of bone to protect her but still she trembled as droplets of molten stone splattered the ceiling around her. The lava continued to follow Daffeega's motions as she waved the rod but she didn't challenge Larahga too hard, instead using it as a means to keep her occupied while she pried her.

"How many of the Magi are like y-"

"All of them!" Larahga snapped.

Hearing a shuffling behind her, Daffeega whirled around to see three undead pulling themselves up from the ground between her and where Sorelac rested. With one last pump of her fiery floor at the Magus, Daffeega turned the column of fire away from Larahga and launched it at the rising dead. It was a clever move on the Magus' part. It gave her time to get off the ceiling and back on dry land. By the time Daffeega had dealt with the dead, her lava lake had been extinguished. Once again, only the indigo light on the hilt of Daffeega's saber lit the chamber.

"What else would you like to know, Princess?" Larahga asked, seemingly leaning into her now forced smirk.

"Why?" Daffeega asked, "Why would you all turn against Batloe? Against the Empire?"

"Against Batloe?" Larahga crowed. Once again a bone-sword began to materialize in her grasp. Blood trickled down it as cauterized wounds cracked to let her fist close around the hilt. She continued, "Against the Empire? Maybe. But Batloe? While you were protecting the poor, we were protecting Batloe. We found a better way. A way without conceding to your anarchists."

Larahga took a step back and raised three more undead, this time between Daffeega and herself and this time they didn't climb up from a grave, they burst out of a crypt. Beside where

the magma once boiled, the wall of a tomb collapsed and a group of the unburied scurried out. Striding forward, Daffeega easily lopped off one's head with her staff and impaled another through the nose with her saber – the blade didn't pierce the skull but it popped it off the spine which worked just as well. The third stepped up to the plate only to get smacked down to the ground when she brought her staff back to the floor. Hearing more skeletons stirring in the crypt, Daffeega sighed.

“I'll be right back.”

As if taking nothing more serious than a bathroom break, Daffeega strolled into the tomb to put the others back to rest. While she did, Larahga decided to turn back into a liquid state (after all, that worked out so well the last time). As she transformed, she hollered after Daffeega. Continuing to brag about their grand plan.

“No longer will we be bound to the Bastard Emperor and his herd of councils. With their pesky bribes meant to limit Batloe. Bribing us to neglect our resources, bribing us to neglect our power, bribing us-”

From within the crypt, Daffeega called out, “Bribes? You mean aid. Without their aid-”

“Without their *aid* we will prosper!” Larahga exclaimed.

“And without the Laymen and Miners?” Daffeega pressed.

“We will prosper!” Larahga shrieked.

“How?!”

Daffeega had returned from the pit. The undead had been put back to rest, despite their screeching summoner. However, once Daffeega poked her head back into the hallway, she almost didn't know where Larahga had gone. It took a split second to notice. Not only had Larahga liquified herself, she'd kept going. From solid to liquid to gas. Larahga was now a mist.

This was something Daffeega had not seen before, but she had a trick up her sleeve as well. Leaving the chamber of dismembered dead, she took her place back in the hallway and began murmuring a tricky spell of her own. Both wizards were playing chess with one another, both thinking the stalling was to their advantage.

“The dead will rise and work for the living.”

Larahga was able to keep talking despite being relatively invisible. Her voice echoed throughout the chamber ominously. It seemed she was all around the Princess.

“And when we run out of dead? We'll take the dead from other nations.”

Not only was Larahga all around the Princess, it now seemed like she was within Daffeega. Her voice vibrated the magician's very bones, sent ripples through her stomach fluids, and reverberated in her lungs. If Larahga had indeed turned into a gas, had Daffeega inhaled her?

“And after that we'll take the dead from other worlds! We'll-”

Larahga shrieked. Daffeega's jaw dropped and Larahga poured out. The milk-like bone fluid was bubbling as it shot forth from the Princess' snout like a fountain. It splattered on the stone where it continued to steam while it solidified. Meanwhile, Daffeega herself began to dissolve. Rather than turning into the offwhite liquid, she turned back into the fiery goo that had gotten Larahga before. Standing for a little longer as a column of fire before oozing down into a pool of molten rock. What little was left of Larahga began to solidify. Entire pieces of her body were missing and what remained was misplaced and smoldering.

“Nooow I'm back.”

Daffeega poked her head back out the hole of the crypt. Carefully side stepping the little lake of lava, she approached the mutilated Magus. There was only enough life left in her foe for one last scheme. One that Daffeega certainly knew to expect considering the day they'd had.

Sure enough, as the Princess arrived by her side, her skeleton began to peel free. Even her bones were deformed and mismatched. They tumbled helplessly out of the clump of flesh and collapsed on the floor before Daffeega.

Daffeega shook her head, “You’d rather enslave the dead than free your people.”

Despite her state, as little more than a skull, she was able to speak. Though her consciousness seemed to be as contorted as her body. All that came out was sputtering syllables. However, as a boneguard, she had a master. Thus, that familiar voice returned. Daffeega was once again speaking with her sister.

“Those anarchists are not our people.” Suicine said.

Daffeega sighed, “Then you are not my people.”

She slid the sword back into the Staff of Uthemarc, raised the rod above what appeared to be Larahga’s skull, then drove it down. Larahga was gone and Suicine was back in the Cloches.

Hearing something stir behind her, Daffeega whipped around.

Sorelac was up. He was leaning against the wall of the chamber on the other side of the pool of lava.

“You’re in on this?” Daffeega asked.

Sorelac winced, “Sort of...”

Daffeega reached for the orb of her staff. Sorelac took a step back and raised his hands, explaining, “Your sister thought they might need allies outside the Trinity Nations!”

Daffeega cocked her head to the side, “Your Mystvokar’s down with mancy?”

“Not yet.” Sorelac admitted, “But my brother’s already more accepting of mancy than the Trinity Nations...plus Iceload could use the resources.”

“Ah...” Daffeega nodded back. She lowered her staff.

“What happens to me?” He asked.

“If we win, we send you back to Iceload,” Daffeega growled, “or God’s Island.”

“Fair.” Sorelac pressed his palms together and bowed as if the Princess was Queen.

“Think you can convince my sister to stop?” Daffeega asked.

Straightening back up, he frowned, “No.”

“Well you’re going to try.” Daffeega stated.

“If she kills me, then my brother won’t be happy.” Sorelac warned.

The two mages stared hard into each other’s eyes. Sorelac had been Suicine’s friend for a long time. Likely longer than anyone else that might call Suicine a friend – If there was anyone else. The only person who had been cordial with Suicine for longer was Daffeega herself. *Would she kill me?* Daffeega already knew the answer. *But how else can we stop her?* She knew that answer too. Sorelac had been honest with her, so she was honest back.

“It’s the only way.” She said.

Daffeega muttered some magic to do away with the magma and beckoned for Sorelac to follow her down the hall. He was still exhausted, so his pace was slow, but they were already close to the Pillar Lift. That said, they hadn’t quite made it there when the tunnel came to an intersection. Having roamed the Catacombs since she was a kid, this didn’t throw Daffeega for a loop, but the noises coming from the northern avenue did. It wasn’t the scuffling of another gang of unburied, there were voices among the sounds of footsteps and while she couldn’t immediately tell what they were saying, she could tell that they were aware of her and Sorelac. They were lit only by a torch, thirty yards away, and it hadn’t budged since they’d stepped out into the nexus.

“I am Princess Daffeega Shelba.” Daffeega warned, “Identify yourselves.”

Before they had time to respond, she raised her staff and cast a spell of illumination. Not only would her foes be revealed but she and her associate would as well.

“My Queen!”

It was the Layman himself. He would’ve ran to embrace the Princess but he was being hoisted by two of his fellow molemen. While they also were excited to see Daffeega, having never met the legendary noblewoman, they were suddenly quite nervous, having never met the legendary noblewoman. While Sallis’ legs quivered from pain, his hoisters’ legs began to quiver from anxiety. Nonetheless, Sallis pushed forwards and forced his comrades to join him.

Behind Sallis, there were the other Batloens. Another moleman from the prisons in the Rift and two chidras: Saber and Redael. These three were as anxious as those that carried Sallis, but they followed the rebel forwards with a bit of excitement as well. It was an odd time to feel the thrill of meeting a celebrity, but it was a nice reprieve from the reality of their situation.

Then there were the foreigners. Most of them were strangers to Daffeega. There was a gmoat with a dull-stoned elgroom, a one armed armored bearn with an ax in her hand and one on her back, a scraggly, crow-eyed human, and a fishfolk with a flashy silver scar crossing his bare chest. A questionable quartet to say the least, the presence of the Batloen’s beside them helped Daffeega not jump to conclusions from their appearances. The four other foreigners she recognized helped a bit too – though that was also complicated.

Daffeega recognized three: the freedom fighter, the healer, and the wife killer. Having never met Boldarian Drahkcor the Fourth, she likely would’ve figured any rock dwarf to be the infamous freedman. Fortunately, her assumption was correct. Lenga, she’d met in person. As the Headmaster of the Munkloe School of Modern Healing and a fellow princess of the Diamond Council, they’d met at more than one convention. The pirate attack on Sereibis and kidnapping of the healer had not gone unnoticed by the folks of the Cloches. She’d met Daernar only recently, when he was still the mysterious Cootie. However, Daffeega’s associate had known Daernar for quite a while. They’d even been family for a century or two.

Sorelac Icelore’s aunt was Lizara Icelore before she married Daernar and became a Darkblade. No sooner did his eyes land on his former uncle than did his robe start to simmer. Daffeega slapped a hand across his mouth and stopped his magic. She quickly called out a spell to send indigo bindings around his wrists and around his mouth.

The newcomers stopped advancing as well – except for the dwarf and human. It appeared the two were as surprised at each other as everyone else was. Having stepped in front of Daernar to defend him, they first turned to one another.

“Really?” Fetch said as Bold said, “Raellay?”

Lenga cleared her throat and they turned back to the wizards at the end of the hall.

“Daernar will sae justice.” Bold stated.

“But not today.” Fetch added, “And not here.”

Sallis piped up as well, “He’s saved our lives multiple times today.”

“Forget that nellaf,” another surprise, the fishfolk stepped in. He aimed an armored hand down the corridor, his fist clenched but one blade extending to point at Sorelac, “what’s he doing here?”

Daffeega looked at Sorelac then back at the fishfolk.

“To be honest,” Daffeega said, “you wouldn’t believe me if I told you, honey, but just like with Daernar: not today and not here.”

Sallis urged his carriers forward again, interrupting the tension, “We need to get to the Cloches.”

“Indeed.” Daffeega nodded, “We’re not far. The Pillar Lift is just at the end of this hall. It’ll take us directly to the Mosque of the Magi. We even sent a few scouts ahead of us. Tenchi Kou and Lalmly Shisharay.”

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Considering that Batloens were known for their magical and scientific ingenuity, there were numerous secret passages throughout the palace. The Pillar Lift was a vertical short cut that went from the bottom of the Catacombs to the top of the Cloches – straight into the Mosque of the Magi. The last time Lalmly had been in the ceremonial chamber, she’d met Tenchi’s little brother and the animatronic globe she now had tucked under her arm. Now, returning with the Big Kou, she was the intruder.

“The Mosque is full.” Atlas warned.

“Friends or foes?” Lalmly asked.

“Judging by the Laymen I’ve met and the Sondoran mercenaries I’ve seen, it appears your allies are still trying to storm the entrance and,” Atlas elaborated, “there are currently no allies present.”

“Can you tell if they’re alive or undead?” Tenchi asked.

“It appears to possess a mixture.” Atlas replied.

“And Truth?” Lalmly pressed.

“Present.” Atlas said, “But there stands an army between you and her.”

“Farakin...” Tenchi murmured.

The elevator jerked to a halt, lifting Tenchi an inch off his feet and Lalmly another couple. The human and spirit exchanged anxious glances and then turned to face their fate. The door opened.

There was such a mass of undead that as the door slid open the boney bastards immediately began to tumble into the lift. Lalmly hopped back against the wall, threw Atlas to the side, then started strumming the invisible string of the Gustbow like as though she were playing the Fastest Harp Song in the South. As she strummed like there was no tomorrow, Tenchi mashed the button on the control panel then snatched the door and began to pull it closed. He had to kicked and shoulder skeletons as he did. Lalmly’s arrows kept him from being stuck like a pin cushion while he tugged. Almost as soon as the lift had opened, it was closed again.

Tenchi stomped on the skull of half a skeleton that had made it in and was crawling towards his ankles. He turned to Lalmly as the Pillar Lift began to drop.

“We’re gonna need back up.” He stated.

“Back up is on its way.” Atlas assured them.

Tenchi whirled on the animatronic head, “Then why didn’t we just wait back in the Catacombs?!”

“They weren’t on their way yet.” Atlas responded.

“Who is it?” Lalmly asked, “Daffeega and Sharp?”

“And then some.” Atlas said, “Among them, Daernar Darkblade.”

“Cootie!” Tenchi exclaimed. Satisfied with the robots intel, he stooped over and picked it back up.

“Are we sure he is still on our side?” Lalmly asked.

“Your side?” Tenchi shrugged, “I can’t say. But he and I go way back.”

“I thought y’all just met?” Lalmly said.

“Yea, but its been like a week.” Tenchi told her. He pulled out a cigarette and packed it by tapping the end on the metallic skull of the Globework.

Lalmly rolled her similiarly metallic-colored eyes, “Not in the Lift.”

Tenchi had gotten the stoge halfway up to his lips, he didn’t stop but he did start moving in slow motion.

“We’re about to be joined by the Princess.” Lalmly pled.

Tenchi sighed, “Fine…” and tucked the cigarette back in his breast pocket.

The elevator was dropping faster now. Tenchi could feel his guts rising while Lalmly’s fire flickered a bit more than usual within her armor. The chamber was large. About as large as it could be so as to still fit within the confines of the column above. Like the column, it was circular too. There were no corners.

The lift came to a jolting stop and the door slid open.

“Selu!” Tenchi remarked, “You weren’t kidding about backup!”

Princess Daffeega had arrived with her entourage – all fourteen of them. The three molemen from the prison plus Sallis Drakken. The two chidras, Saber and Redael, that had joined the moles in Pyramid. Then the two foreignors, Paud Gill and Daernar Darkblade, that had also made the Pyramid team. The five from the jungles of Munkloe (Benjamin Fasthoof, Fetch Eninac, Marvell of the Ax, Boldarian Drahkcor, and Lenga Ruse). And finally Sorelac Icelore, Daffeega’s bargaining chip. All together, they were fifteen total. Plus Tenchi and Lalmly? Seventeen.

“We’re not going to fit.” Tenchi stated.

That wasn’t even all of them. Three more appeared down the corridor, just now stepping into the light provided from Daffeega’s staff. Sharp Otubak, Bru Oturan, and Tou Fou. Unless his wounds were hidden under a thick layer of dust and ash, Tou appeared to be the only one relatively unharmed. Bru and Sharp were both limping. Ironically, Sharp’s biggest impediment was the damage done in the previous battle. The bolts of bone that pricked him in the Catacombs were mostly inconsequential. Bru, on the other hand, was suffering from fresh pain.

“Tou!” Tenchi exclaimed, “How’d ya get down here?” Tenchi grabbed hold of the elevator door and used it to support his weight as he got up on tippy toes and craned his neck to see over the newcomers’ shoulders, “Where’s your girlfriend?”

His attention was drawn back to Tou’s face. The elf’s frown was so extensive it looked liable to dip below his rigid jawline. Tenchi gasped.

“It’s not dat.” Sharp interjected, though then he hesitated and turned to Tou for confirmation, “Least, I don’t dink it is dat?”

“No. Far as I know,” he gestured to the ceiling with his head, his arms busy helping Bru walk, “she’s with the Laymen above.”

“Selu to that.” Tenchi sighed in relief.

“How is it up there?” Daffeega tapped her staff on the ground to turn attention back up the tunnel.

“Swarmed.” Lalmly stated, “According to Atlas-”

“The one and only.”

“Truth is in the Mosque but we couldn’t stay long enough to see for ourselves.” Lalmly explained.

“With back up, we could.” Tenchi assured Daffeega.

Daffeega nodded at Tenchi then looked down to address the Globework wedged between his arm and chest like a basketball. She asked, “And with Truth, other mancers?”

“There are living beings with Truth,” Atlas replied, “but I don’t have the ability to identify the individuals.”

“That just means it hasn’t met them.” Tenchi explained.

“I figure Suicine is holed up on the rostrum?” Daffeega asked, “Northern end of the room, under Uthemarc’s Cloche?”

“Indeed.” Atlas said.

“And where are the Laymen?”

“The Laymen are about to breach the Mosque. They’ve reached the deck.” Atlas alerted them. The gold eyes shifted to stare past Daffeega and into the crowd. Thanks to its abilities, it could perceive space almost as if it were seeing through things like a shadowmancer. Thus, though Tou couldn’t see from where he stood, it was essentially making eye contact with the earth elf when it said, “Tabuh Sentry is with them.”

Daffeega tapped her staff. This time doing so to shift her own gears. She addressed the twenty of them, “Alright, listen up! Here’s the deal. Laymen?” The moles and chidras perked up as she continued, “You’re all staying here.” She turned to Lenga, “With the Princess.” Looking around the Princess, she ordered, “The foreigners? We’re going up. You’re getting me to my sister and we’re ending this. Sound good?”

“Perfect.” Tou and Sharp accidentally chimed. They’d arrived by the elevator, having safely left Bru with the healer. The two looked at each other but repressed the sudden flash of anger. Their beef – like all the other beefs clashing in the corridor – would have to wait. They entered the elevator and took their spot on either side of the entrance.

“We’ll be safe.” Fetch assured Lenga, kissing her goodbye as he and his comrades moved towards the lift.

Ben hesitated on the threshold, “Can you charge my elgroon?”

“I can.” Daffeega said but her attention was then torn away as Marvell stepped up, “Oh, honey-”

“I can fight.” Marvell growled, wiggling her nub.

“Half as good.” Bold remarked.

Marvell shoved the dwarf into the elevator but helped him back up as she followed him.

Paud Gill strolled in next. His eyes met Sharp’s.

“Found your way out, huh, Civ?” Sharp asked.

Paud just grunted and licked his eyes.

Daernar moseyed in last. The man’s movement was almost identical to how he had lumbered when he was drunk. While technically sober, his wounds produced a similar level of deliriousness.

“Um...” Daffeega reached out to stop the barechested brute.

Sorelac grabbed her arm, pleading, “Let him go.”

Her eyes caught hold of Lalmly’s. The spirit shrugged, “It would save the Trinity Nations from making a difficult diplomatic decision.”

Daffeega sighed, but relented.

“Least give him a sword.” Tenchi grumbled. No fan of the two women’s reasoning, he was a fan of fighting alongside the old drunk oncemore. Leaving the elevator for a moment, he approached the Laymen. Sallis stepped up to meet him. Sallis, and his fellow Laymen, were far less concerned with the Darkblades past than the rest of the citizens of the Trinity Nations. They didn’t pay much attention to international news, all that mattered to them was that the nellaf had nearly died saving their hide numerous times from the dusty court of Pyramid to the dark canyon

in the Catacombs. Holding his scimitar by the blade, Sallis offered Tenchi the sword. Tenchi clasped the mole on the shoulder. The gesture was a little too strong though. Sallis almost doubled over in pain. Quickly stooping to catch the mole, Tenchi accidentally dropped Atlas. While the Globework rolled away, Tenchi helped Sallis to sit against the wall. Taking the scimitar, Tenchi thanked him, “Sallis, we’re going to win this thing for you.” He turned to the other Laymen, “For all of you!”

Lenga had come over. She offered him Atlas. Tenchi shook his head.

“Y’all keep the Globework.” He said, “So you can follow the action.”

“Tenchi.” Daffeega tapped her staff again.

Tenchi saluted the Laymen with a hand on his heart and then turned back to join the others in the Pillar Lift. He took his spot between Daernar and Tou, whispering in Tou’s ear, “Let’s go get your girlfriend.” As Sharp pulled the elevator door shut before them.

- - -

It was like fighting with the tide. The unburied would surge forward, pushing them back like a wave, then the Laymen would respond. Thrusting up in the trough only for the next wave to peak and topple over them once again. But unlike the ocean, the undead weren’t made of water. They stabbed and they sliced, scraping past the rebels instead of splashing and, unlike water, they couldn’t split to flow past the Laymen. When the dead collided with the living, only one remained standing – and the living had a lot more to stand for. For every two steps the Laymen forged forward, the unburied only manage to push them one step back. Slowly, the Tlow-Varens were forcing their way towards the doors of the Mosque of the Magi.

One frontline of the battle was on the Southern Mezzanine – a terraced wedged between two looming cloches to the east and west, stretching to the foot of the Mosque to the north, and stopping abruptly in the south to overlook the city of Vare and Tlow-Vare beyond. Stairs from the ballroom below skirted the sides of the terrace, hiding in the shadow of the Cloche of the Chidra and the Cloche of the Molemen. The soldiers of the Laymen, the Miners, and the Kou Warriors filled the stairwell. They were surrounded on both ends. The unburied had finally all filed out of the Catacombs, now they filled the chambers of the palace. Thus there were two fronts: One in the ballroom below and one on the terrace above.

Five large double doors offered access from the Southern Mezzanine to the Mosque of the Magi. There had been no attempt to barricade the doors from the inside. It seemed the Crown didn’t expect them to make it this far. Sprawling open to allow the unburied to pour through, the doors also allowed the insurrectionists to catch glimpses inside – especially the taller ones.

“I see the mancer.” Sniper stated.

“Another Sentinel?” Blade asked.

Fighting in front of the giant bearn, Blade Oturan, the red scaled chidran leader of the Miners, had begun to lean heavily on the Iceloadic assassin. His arrows picked up the slack when her mace got stuck in the skull of some poor unburied Batloen. She’d started the day with an elgroon full of magic but now the enertomb was dull and the broken pickax was reduced back to exactly that – a broken pickax. This had happened to the other Laymen and Miners with make-shift elgroons as well. The brightside to being on the Mezzanine was Solaris got a brief chance to refill their enertombs. The sunlight had made it hard for Sniper to scout ahead momentarily but now in the shadow of the Mosque he could peer over the heads of the undead oncemore.

“Don’t think so.” Sniper replied, “Like one, but no purple and red.”

“Uniforms proly still in da wash from Voting Day.” Pesh shrugged.

While Sniper shot, Pesh scrounged around behind him. Her bombs had been useful escaping the Veranda, but they’d also blown up the Glassyard. Similarly, her healing had been useful in saving the lives of many of their comrades, but they required her to use dark magic which – in the midst of a battle against dark magicians – rubbed her comrades the wrong way. In an attempt to keep from destroying the Cloches or destroying the trust of those around her, she’d kept her necromancy discreet. Sniper had long since spent his last arrow, Pesh was collecting the bones of the fallen unburied and – hiding in the shadow of the oafish archer – necrocrafting them into arrows for his bow.

“What colors?” A molewoman asked.

This woman was no stranger to Blade, Sniper, and Pesh. Her name was Amadar El and she was one of the Royal Guard that had taken off their helmets and joined the Laymen against the onslaught of the undead. Not only that, she was the molewoman that had taken an arrow to the eye. Peshkova had been able to save her life, but the eye had to be left behind. That didn’t stop her from slashing away at the skeletons with her state-issued scimitar.

“Got an eye for fashion, aye, Civ?” Pesh snickered.

The other guard amongst them kicked at Peshkova for the joke. He fought alongside Amadar on the frontline with Blade and he had been responsible for taking Blade’s deal for absolution: Captain Onx Shelba. He also recognized the significance of the colors that Sniper reported.

“Silver and gold.”

“That’s a Magi.” Captain Onx gasped, “Magi of Resources.”

“Godi bastards’ over the mines.” Blade cursed, “Mole?”

“Chidra.” Sniper said.

Blade jumped up and brought her mace down hard, then swept it to her left. The extra force sent a shockwave through the frontline as the unburied fell like dominos. She then took a step back and let the ex-guards take her place while she hollered to the rest of their men and women on the Mezzanine.

“THE MANCER IS A MAGI!”

There seemed almost to be a moment of silence. The clashing and crunching continued, but the rebels held their breathes for a moment.

“THE MINE MAGI BENDS BONE!” Blade’s words were still sinking in, “TALIST OTUBAK IS IN THERE BENDING BONE!”

Now the words hit. The held breathes were released. The idle grunts and groans of the battle turned back into the energetic roars they’d bellowed this morning when the fight first broke out. They were almost in the Mosque, the fight was almost won, and it seemed they may have backed the ones to blame into a corner. Not only would they have their votes counted, they might yet get some actual justice as well.

The revitalized push was enough to get Sniper a step closer to the double doors – a step closer to the Magus hiding behind the ranks of the undead. Their luxurious robes were untarnished. Despite all the destruction of the day, the Magus had pulled his puppet strings from the safety of the Mosque. Despite all the blood on his hands, his scales glistened like polished marble. Sniper’s rage at the royal was only stifled by a brief moment of curiosity when he saw the individual’s indigo eyes. Their eyes were glowing. They wouldn’t be glowing for long, though.

Peshkova hopped up and handed Sniper a bone-made bolt over his shoulder. He knocked it in his bow and sent it flying through the double doors. It arched over the heads of the undead and came down to strike the necromancer in the breast. The impact knocked the Magus off his feet and he disappeared behind the lines of his minions.

“Ya miss?” Pesh pressed.

The unburied didn’t fall. Not a single one seemed to be connected to the mancer. Jumping up again, this time Pesh grabbed ahold of his shoulders and took a look for herself. As she did, the mancer remerged. Well, some of him did. He’d discarded the robes and flesh. He now looked no different than his pawns – except for the arrow still stuck in his ribs.

“Farak!” Pesh exclaimed. Instinctively she reached for one of her explosives, “Bomb it!”

“No!” Blade commanded, “No bombs in the Mosque!”

Letting go, Pesh slid off Sniper’s back and approached Blade. Blade was busy battling, but Pesh was able to get behind her and yell to her, “Da Magus went boneguard! Dat’s why deir dead are still fighting!”

“Then kill it again!” Blade barked back.

“If we blow up deir heads,” Blade argued, “we only have to kill dem once!”

“No bombs in the Mosque!” Blade growled.

Pesh rolled her eyes but conceded. Rushing back into position behind Sniper, she found an ulna and radius and quickly crafted two new arrows. Handing the first over to her comrade, he shot again. This time, he got the Magus in the skull. Now the undead fell.

Three rows of the unburied crumpled to the floor of the Mezzanine. The skeletons in the five double doorways fell apart too. Those in the ranks behind them rushed to fill the gap but so too did the rebels and the rebels beat them to it. Finally, they’d forced their way into the Mosque.

In the scramble, Tabuh Sentry found herself up alongside the odd group of leaders. She’d seen Peshkova making Sniper arrows and wondered if the necromancer could help her. While the bone bender couldn’t make gun powder out of bone – at least, not on the fly – Tabuh was experienced with most other types of ranged weapons.

“Bomber!” Tabuh called.

“Bomber?” Pesh recoiled, “Okay, Gunner!”

Tabuh brushed off the response, grabbing hold of Pesh and asking “Can you make mae a ranged weapon?”

“A ranged weapon?” Pesh scoffed, “Outa bone-”

Tabuh nodded, holding up her gun, “Ah’ve got one bullet left.”

“A ranged weapon outa bone dough, I don’t...” Pesh’s eyes lit up, “I gotchya, Civ!”

“Pesh!” Sniper called, “Got another Magus!”

“Here’s da deal, Civ,” Pesh said to Tabuh, “you climb up on Sniper and put dat bullet to good use den I’ll have ya somedin when you climb back down.”

“Dael.” Tabuh signed off with a nod. Clambering up onto the shoulders of the bearn, she whispered into his ears, “Where’s the Magus?”

She pinched his ribs with her thighs, held on with one arm, and extended her gun arm using his shoulder for support. Sniper aimed her hand at the Magus he’d spotted. Like the former one, the mancer had glowing purple eyes. Their robes matched their ensorcelled stare, aside from the strip of electric yellow fabric that hung from their collar.

In front of the two rangers, Blade looked back, over her shoulder to ask, “What colors?”

“Purple and yellow.” Sniper told her.

Captain Onx interjected, “The other Magus of Resources.”

“Sregdor.” Amadar noted. The Magus was named after Sregdor – the first Shelban King of Batloe. He was the one first cursed with weak legs, but that didn’t stop him from joining his troops on front lines and going on to win battles. A common turn of phrase developed in the centuries since. Amadar chuckled, “Remember Sregdor!”

BANG!

Sregdor certainly wasn’t going to remember anything, Tabuh had left a hole in a head as big around as his molish snout. Another few lines of undead instantly crumbled. Laymen, Miners, and Kou Warriors bound forward another five yards – nearing the first row of columns that lined the Mosque.

Tabuh was about to slide off Sniper’s shoulders but feeling a tug on her boots, she found Pesh was ready for her. In Pesh’s hand was a strange strip of bone. The piece was flat, like a blade, but bent, like an elgroom. Taking the object from Pesh, Tabuh cocked her head to the side to ask the question.

“A boomerang, Civ.” Pesh laughed.

“Boomerangsiv?” Tabuh blurted.

Peshkova rolled her eyes, “Just draw it.”

Turning from the mancer, she raised the boomerang like a throwing knife and let loose. The bone spiraled through the air, flying between Blade and Captain Onx to clap against the cranium of an undead soldier. It knocked the skeleton backwards but then clattered to the floor with the foe – well out of Tabuh’s reach.

“Tiad.” Pesh muttered, “Guess dey don’t work if you hit someding.”

Tabuh sighed, “Just make me a sword.”

“I’ll make you a sword.” Pesh agreed.

Before sliding off her furry steed, Tabuh glanced back forwards. It seemed their honeymoon with sniping the Magi was coming to an end. Gliding down from the rostrum at the other end of the Mosque, she counted seven figures in fancy cloaks. It was time for the final showdown and these Magi didn’t look like the kind to stand back and puppeteer. The Laymen, Miners, and Kou had been doing good, but they didn’t have the means to take on arch mages – not seven at once. *Wae naed backup*, Tabuh lamented.

Backup arrived. The Magi hadn’t even made it to the floor of the Mosque when one of the pillars opened up. What had looked identical to the riveted facades of the other columns suddenly slid to one side. From their distance and angle, Tabuh couldn’t see the chamber within but the those within quickly spilled out to reveal themselves. She recognized a few in this new crew, but one in particular stood out.

He'd lost his green cap, but his long black dreads and dark chocolate skin were unique among the forces gathered in the Mosque. His tunic’s green was blotted out by dirt and soot, but she still recognized the shape of his armor plates and cut of his vest. Then there was the slender katana in his hand – one she had forged herself.

She murmured his name, “Tou.”

Tou was the first one off the platform, practically cannonballing into the unburied. His brazen attack might’ve been foolhearty had he not been in concert with ten other brazen individuals. A gust of wind from Daffeega’s staff pushed the unburied back five yards. Following suit, Ben raised his recharged elgroom and add five more yards of leeway for the melee team. While Tou, Tenchi, Daernar, Paud, Sharp, Marvell, and Bold charged, Lalmly and Fetch hung back with the magicians and pelted the skeletal soldiers with lotus arrows and shadow balls. As the swordsmen, Claw-man, axwoman, and boxer collided with the minions of

the mancens, the mancens arrived. Forgetting the front line of the insurrectionists, the Magi descended to face off with the Antipan rogues fresh off the elevator.

The first Magus to touch the floor honed in on Daernar Darkblade. Though the Magus' eyes were covered by violet magic and their mind was fully possessed, somewhere deep down in their consciousness pulled them to the fugitive. After all, it was this Magus that had approved Daernar's extradition to Iceload "any means necessary". The black and white robes the chidra wore identified him as Malas Oturan, owner of the Capitol's prison (also known as the Emendation Interprise).

Daernar was completely unaware of this connection. In his current state he wasn't aware of much to begin with. His eyelids sagged like his shoulders. Beyond the Magus, he saw his wife. She waited with her arms folded. Beneath the folds of her dress that piled on the ground, her foot tapped. Despite the battle surrounding him, he could hear his wife's tapping like the second hand of a clock ticking in his ears.

"Lizara..." He murmured.

"*Atone.*" She commanded.

Raising Sallis' scimitar over his head, Daernar charged. His back was scorched, cracked, and perforated. His chest sliced open and his ribs fractured. The muscles of his right arm had been torn to shreds, his dominant hand dangled at the end of the limb like a ball at the end of a chain. Though, having been a warrior since the late 1600s, Daernar was more than capable of using his left hand. He smashed this way and that like the sword were a scythe and the unburied were nothing more than the brittle stems of dying wheat fronds in a drought – until his sword stopped.

The bone he hit was not that of an unburied Batloen, this was necrocrafted bone. It rose like a stalk of bamboo and it didn't rise alone. Vertical bars shot up around the swordsman, encircling him. Had he another chance to chop, he could've broken through the beams but they rose too tight, confining him but allowing his enemies to stab and slice.

There would have been no more atoning had it not been for Tou. Leaping into action on behalf of his friend, Tou danced around Daernar, beating the unburied back towards their bone bender. Malas didn't budge, but their magic was still fast at work. More rods of bone began to rise from the marble, this time attempting to surround Tou. Having seen what happened to Daernar, Tou was ready for this. As the first pole protruded from the ground, he stepped on it, riding it towards the roof and continuing onwards to step on the next – all the while getting closer to the Magus.

Meanwhile, Daernar had begun to break out of his cell. Throwing his shoulders against the bone bars, he felt give. Unburied had begun to return to him as Tou climbed out of reach. Fortunately, back by the Pillar Lift, Lalmly had turned her silver eyes to the two. Pulling the invisible string of the Gustbow, she launched arrow after arrow into the skulls that dared to turn towards Daernar. With Lalmly's cover, Daernar was able to keep attacking his confines until finally the ossein rods snapped, tumbling him out of the cell. As Lalmly turned her attention to other comrades, Daernar ran to the aid of the elf that had saved him only moments before.

Tou was close to Malas – albeit at a different elevation. Daernar could tell the elf was about to jump onto the Magus but so could the Magus. Rather than trying to trap the two in another cell, he created a rod in his hand and this rod had a sharp end. Tou's momentum wouldn't allow him to change course. He would have to commit to his initial plan and pray he could deflect the necromancer's spear on his way down. That is – if Daernar couldn't help.

Raising his sword, he flung it at the foe. As his sword – or Sallis’ rather – pinwheeled through the air, Tou’s feet left the rods and he plunged into his dive at the arch mage.

Daernar missed. He’d been aiming for Malas himself. Fortunately, he still hit something: the spear. The crescent curved blade hit the pole, hooked it, and yanked it just a few inches out of position before the scimitar continued to fly across the room. Tou, coming down fast, ran *Future* down the rod of the spear to support him as he turned the tip of the blade towards the bone bender’s breast. When his feet hit the ground, he’d ran Malas through.

Tearing *Future* from the necromancer’s chest, Tou turned to thank Daernar. The nellaf had rushed off to retrieve his scimitar. Both men had expected at least some of the unburied around them to crumble, but they hadn’t. Daernar was halfway to the sword when he realized. Spinning on a dime, he hollered, “Behind you!”

Tou whipped around, flinging blood off his blade. The blood splattered against pale bone. Malas’ body remained on the floor of the Mosque, but his bones were on their feet. His rib cage had been caved in by Tou’s blow, but an undead needed only a skull to survive. Raising his boney hands, more bone bars were rising around the two swordsmen.

Letting out a deep sigh, Tou backed up and got ready for round two.

Ironically, while the chidran Magi of Justice was in the process of punishing a former punishee, the Batloen was Magi was doing the same. Paud Gill had never met Tull El but Paud knew who Tull was. Nicknamed the “Magus of the Pyramid”, Tull El was the most well known Magus worldwide and he did not make the Magi look good. He exploited state sanctioned violence as a hobby. His participation in Pyramid over the years while being an acting Magi essentially made him an executioner – especially because he was so good at it. Of all the Magi in the Mosque, Tull was not only the most evil but likely the most lethal.

His eyes weren’t glazed over with magic, Tull was fully conscious. Truth needed no sway over his consciousness to get him to cooperate and wanted to ensure her ego did not get in the way of the Magus’ murderous methods.

Tull smirked at the intruders, “Wish we could’ve done this with an audience.”

Paud licked his eyes.

Sharp stepped up to help the fishfolk respond. He gestured to the unburied around them, “Looks like an audience to me.” He snickered, “Heard dere’ll be a meet-n-greet for ya after too.”

Uninterested in a quip off, Paud started the fight. Dashing forwards, he extended the Claws. There was only fifteen or so yards between them, that said twenty or so undead filled that space. He would have to tear his way through the Magus’ minions before he’d be able to get a lick in.

Tull took a step back and continued to threaten the two, only this time he used the Sacred Tongue, “Tim hormakora, convahnt iegrack nock-”

Being a necromancer, Tull could’ve simply necrocraftered like Malas had, but Tull had a favorite spell he liked to cast. When in Pyramid, he had to keep his mancy secret, thus he wasn’t as used to incorporating necromancy in combat – but this time he could openly power it with energy he’d stolen from the Catacombs.

“-canegrack got et hannax-”

Sharp knew instantly what Tull was up to. He could hardly hear the wizard and couldn’t read the old man’s snout, but he had seen Tull in battle before and so he had a good guess. As Tull continued, Sharp did his best to rush after Paud. With his wounds, there was no way he could get in front of the fishfolk, however, he could keep up as the unburied slowed the assassin’s pace.

“-oh soadpaez nikk miameh nah-”

Electricity sparked up in the palm of the moleman’s hands. It bounced between his fingers, like hornets eager to escape a jar. This was what Sharp was afraid of. Hobbling along after Paud, he cried out.

“Civ!” He yelped, “Lightning!”

Whether Paud could hear or not, the fishfolk was completely undaunted. As was their enemy, rather than retreating from the progressing duo, he held his ground. His lips pulling back from his gnarled teeth to spread his ominous smirk as he casted.

“-crainnax von miameh regnifs-”

The electricity flickering in Tull’s palms suddenly shot towards the vaulted ceiling of the Mosque.

“-shaanzeruga prezarta shaanzeruga mai shaanzeru-”

Each strand of lightning found its place underneath a claw, anchoring themselves to his fingertips as they squirmed towards the heavens. As he began to repeat the last two words of the spell, he turned his fingers towards the fishfolk.

“-ba nock ba, nock ba, nock ba...”

Sharp lunged and brought his sword – or rather his late-father’s sword – down to stop the end of the electrical threads. The turquoise strands of energy grabbed hold of the blade, spiraling up it to bound over the hilt and jump into the armor that covered the blademaster. Immediately he stiffened then fell like a board to the marble floor.

There was only one more unburied between Paud and the necromancer. Grabbing the undead by the collar bones, he threw it into the lightning. As the bones began to crackle, filling the air with a putrid stench, Sharp was saved from his electrocution. Now Paud stepped between the chidra and the mole. His Claws were now within range of Tull but Tull hadn’t stopped casting – though his words almost got tangled from his beaming grin. His electricity was seemingly stuck to the skeleton like a spiderweb might be to a bug, yet dragging his hands away yanked the threads of energy and unleashed them on his foes again. This time, there was no one to protect Paud. Tull drilled the lightning directly into the metal scar that crossed his chest.

Nothing happened.

“But your metal?” Sharp remarked from the floor.

Paud smiled, “*Molten* metal.”

Paud drove one set of Claws into Tull’s face then, as the moleman fell to his knees, he sliced at the Magus’ throat with the other. The magic stopped though sparks still spat from Paud’s chest, even after Tull’s severed head bounced to a stop on the marble floor of the Mosque. With only a stump of a bottom snout left atop his neck, there was no boneguard-round-two for Tull. For the first time, Tull El took the L.

Before Paud and Sharp could celebrate, a new Magus stepped in to take Tull’s place.

Helping Sharp to his feet, Paud smirked, “Your turn.”

While Paud had made short work of the supposed most-dangerous Magi, Fetch was busy getting bamboozled by the chidran Magi of Magic, Nate Otubak. Seeing their comrades pair off, Fetch quickly realized that there were more Magi than there were pairs of close quarters combatants. Especially as Daffeega and Tenchi made a bee-line for the rostrum, their swordsmen

(plus the assassin, axwoman, and boxer) would quickly be surrounded. Thus, he took the initiative. Leaving his ranged allies at the gate of the Pillar Lift, he plunged head first into the mix.

Casting as he ran, Fetch was suddenly joined by another Fetch. They ran in sync, dipping and dodging the undead as they rushed the landing Magi. Every four strides, Fetch popped out another Fetch. They exploded into a existence with little bursts of shadow, almost like wisps of smoke, staggering a bit to get into the right pace and then off they went. The Magus landed twenty or so yards down the right side of the Mosque, near the gargantuan columns that lined up with the pillar of the Pillar Lift. Four Fetch's ran alongside Fetch as he closed in on the wizard. A fifth popped onto the scene just as they got their shadowy daggers drawn back to stab. They thrust their blades forward together and-

Poof! Magus Otubak had disappeared in a foggy gray haze, smelling oddly of corn. *Bone!* Fetch cursed. Whirling around, the Fetches scanned their surroundings. At first, they just saw the ever-present unburied, struggling to catch up with them, but then they saw the Magus. All ten of them. Waltzing out from behind a column, Magus Nate had taken a cue from his foe and decided to clone himself – only as a highly educated archmage, the chidra was a bit more efficient.

“Farak.” Fetch muttered.

One Fetch clasped the original Fetch on the shoulder, “It’s okay, bro.”

“Charge?” Another suggested.

“CHARGE!” The sixth concurred.

The ten Magi removed the swords from their staffs and stepped into the fray. The first to fall was a Magus. A Fetch ran him through and the mage went up in a cloud of pale gas. However, it was an equal exchange. As the two Magi on either side of the Fetch then ran him through. The Fetch's shadowy remains intertwined with the evaporating bone mist. The next Fetch tried to take advantage of the two-on-one attack but was wacked by a flanking Magi and annihilated. Beside the two burst-Fetches was the original. He struck fast with his shadow sword and claimed a Nate but as he did his mate on his right got poofed. A bead of sweat burgeoned on Fetch's brow, but before it could be mimicked on his clones and fourth one had been felled. Slicing wildly, Fetch cut through the face of another fake Magi and then turned to run. No sooner did he turn around than did he skid to a halt. There were seven remaining Nates and four of the seven now stood behind him. He was completely surrounded. Before his heels could stop sliding and the pads of his feet could touch the floor once more, even before he'd spun, one of these Nates had started swinging their sword. As a chidra, Nate was a bit taller than Fetch. Thus his slice which had been meant for Fetch's throat was now aimed at eye level. Fetch couldn't stop, there was nothing he could do but lean back and watch as the blade cut through the air in a long arching swipe for his face.

But there was one clone left. It grabbed its creator by his collar and yanked him back, pulling him out of the way just as the blade collided with his crow eye. The tip of the blade carved a path across the hard surface of the cursed eye. Fetch shrieked in pain as he threw himself onto the floor, clutching his face. His final clone stepped over his wounded comrade while the scar slid across their own eye to match. Shadows leaked from the eye like black steam. Had that blade carved any deeper, Fetch would've been a black stain on the alabaster floor.

The Nates ran the final clone through and were prepared to finish the helpless mancer that had survived but interference arrived. Not long after Fetch charged in to take on a Magi by himself, Ben had gotten cold hooves. Staying back and aiding from afar seemed a little risky

considering the amount of trouble he was accustomed to seeing Fetch find himself in. He turned to Lalmly, “Can I-”

“Go!” She nodded.

He took off. He watched as Fetch defeated the first clone of the Magus, from his angle he was even able to see the ten manifesting behind the column before they revealed themselves to Fetch. Thus, he’d been able to spot the real Nate – only to lose him when the two teams of clones collided.

He’d made it to the pillar in time to watch as Fetch sliced the face of a Nate then whirled around to see himself surrounded. What was odd was that the Nate he’d slashed didn’t disappear. Even odder, moments later, the same scar slid down the faces of the other Nates. Ben had found the real Nate once more. Raising his elgroom, the stone glowed amber-brown. With a jerk of his staff, he tore a wad of marble free from the column above the Nate’s head. As the Magi strode forward to finish the final Fetch, Ben dropped the stone on the real Magus.

Poof! The others disappeared.

Jumping over the stone and squashed Magi, Ben slid to his knees beside his fallen friend. “Fetch!”

Fetch flopped over and then pounced into a crouching position.

Ben grabbed him by the shoulders, “The Magi’s gone.”

“No he’s not!” Fetch exclaimed.

Fetch’s crow eye, though damaged, still worked. He could see right through the hand he had clamped over it. Behind them, underneath the chunk of column, he saw Nate’s energy hadn’t faded. It simply shifted. The top half of a skeleton had clawed its way over the side of the boulder, a saber of bone in its hand. Ben turned to block just as an arrow smashed into the skull. The reptilian fell limp, embracing the stone in surrender.

Twenty yards away, Lalmly gave the boys a wink then turned her bow to cover the next bunch of boys in need – instead she found a bunch half boy and half girl. A surprising duo, the bounty hunter and the freedom fighter had teamed up nonetheless. Their Magus of choice was Moasch Gelder. A new-rich, moleman from the Foot Islands, he made up for his height with his bank account. While his gold couldn’t help him now, the indigo glaze across his eyes surely did. Becoming a necromancer had not made Moasch a warrior, but his puppeteer was prepared to compensate for that. After one look at their opponents, his corrupter picked their angle.

Drawing the ceremonial saber from the hilt on his side, Moasch slit his palm wide open. The blood floated upwards before diffusing into the air, then the bone magic kicked in. Two arms sprouted from the back of the little moleman while a spare set of legs began to protrude from his hips. While this was essentially the same sort of magic that Fetch and Nate had utilized, adding blood to the concoction meant that these extremities wouldn’t simply poof into wisps of smoke. There would need to be some actual effort to get rid of them. And by the time Marvell got close enough to start the fight, Moasch had a spider’s worth of new limbs.

Marvell had to hesitate for a moment to remark, wiggling her nub, “Seriously?” She shook her head and shrugged it off, “Well jokes on you...”

Retrieving Joy, her double-sided, black bladed battleax with her left hand, Marvell engaged. The Magus jumped back onto their new hind legs – much bigger than their originals – and prepared to kick like a kangaroo bouncing on their tail. Marvell twirled to the left, dodging the two-footed kick. That said, she ran right into an uppercut. Moasch’s secondary arms were far larger than the primary, their punches far stronger. The fist hit Marvell’s chin with such force it lifted the bearn off her feet and launched her back into the range of the two-foot kick – WHAM!

Marvell flew into a crew of unburied. A few were scattered from the collision but a few remained intact enough to keep operating. With her brain still reeling and her lungs still flattened, Marvell managed to roll her self over and swing Joy in the way of the undead now swarming her but there wouldn't be much she could do from the ground – not without a second to collect herself. Fortunately, that second was granted.

Storming in like a bowling ball, Boldarian blasted onto the scene. He may have been short but his arms were long and thick and his knuckles broke whatever bone they managed to bash. His onslaught gave Marvell enough time to catch her breath and hop back up. Lalmly had come to their aid aswell, pelting Moasch's arms and legs with from afar to slow his strange strut.

With the unburied around them handled, Marvell and Bold nodded at one another then charged together. Moasch had added weapons to his repertoire, two long, bone-made claymores in the artificial hands and two skinny spears in the organic. The Magus stabbed at both foes with both spears, while simultaneously slashing with their broadswords where they figured their enemy's would dodge. But both opponents got the better of him.

Bold bound forward onto his belly, sliding under the stabbing spear. As the blade meant for him struck the marble to his right, he rolled over his head and kicked up from the floor delivering his feet directly into the groin of the Magus. Moasch must've felt the pain but their puppeteer was unsympathetic. Bold finished his roll and stood back up without having achieved much else other than a clever evasive maneuver.

Marvell, on the other hand, had claimed her revenge. She didn't dodge. She battered the spear to her right which would have left herself open to the claymore coming in towards her left side had she not planned ahead. Just as Moasch could've predicted her first move, Marvell could predict his second. She leaned into the crossbody swing that had parried the polearm. Throwing herself into a jumping barrel roll. Parallel to the floor, she spun in the air as the two-handed sword slid right under her. Then she landed on the other side of the Magus' sword arm. Her body was already positioned for the plot. Planting her feet she swung with Joy and chopped the mancer's gargantuan arm off just above the elbow.

Just like with his genitals, the pain of losing an arm wasn't necessarily pertinent to a Corrupted combatant, however, his left arm had been all that had been keeping Lalmly from lodging a lotus tipped arrow directly in the magician's brain. No sooner did the arm go down than did Lalmly let an arrow fly. It whirled through the air towards the Magus' head but before it could land, his original hand dropped the spear and reached up to shield his face. The arrow hit his hand and went as far as the flower fletchings before stopping, only barely combing the fur on the moleman's head.

The Magus didn't skip a beat. As his artificial forearm slapped the floor and the lotus arrow hit his right hand, he turned his left limbs on Marvell – swinging his second claymore. Mulling over her next move, Marvell settled to simply parry the attack and let her partner lead the next phase. Bold had struck out ball busting, but he stuck with the playground playbook. As Moasch put his weight on his left side, Bold strolled up from behind him and slugged him in the back of the knee. Moasch still managed to finish his swing, but Marvell was ready to block it with ease. When Marvell deflected the claymore, the blade slapped against the spear in Moasch's left hand, leaving his body open. Yanking her ax back towards the Magus, she caught him in the gut and sliced right with little to no resistance. The edge of Joy's blade went so deep so as to scrape the inside of Moasch's spine.

He'd fallen to one knee due to Bold, now he fell flat on his face thanks to Marvell.

“Alright, lass!” Bold exclaimed, hopping over the limp legs of the necromancer and raising a left hand to high five, “Oh...”

“I can still farakin high five, Bold.” Marvell snapped her ax back into its hip holder and raised her left hand, as Bold jumped for it she raised her hand higher with a wink, “Up high.”

“Okay, well, farak you too, lass.” Bold growled.

“Down low?” Marvell asked.

Bold glared but accepted the offer.

An arrow wizzed past the two and they quickly jumped away, turning their ire on Lalmly, all the way back at the mouth of the Pillar Lift. Ignoring their annoyance, she continued to shoot. This jolted them into realizing that maybe – just *maybe* – Lalmly wasn’t joking around like they were and was actually shooting at something. Turning, they saw this was precisely the case. Ol Moasch had gotten back up. Just like all the other Magi that had managed to keep their heads, Moasch had gone boneguard and, not only that, he’d gotten his arm back – albeit without the flesh.

With Bold and Marvell, Daernar and Tou still tussling with their first Magus and Fetch and Ben, Paud and Sharp moving on to take on their second, that left one Magus to stand in the way of Tenchi, Daffeega, and Sorelac as they rushed for the rostrum. His name was Timond Fang. The only Magus not from Batloe, Fang was the chidran Magus of Economics – specializing in imports. Being from Foxloe, he was a mastermind when it came to getting cheap machines to Space City. Just as Batloe depended on the cheap labor of miners, Foxloe depended on the cheap labor of minors. Thus, like with Tull El, Truth’s solution was tantalizing enough to get Timond on board even without Corruption, and, like with El, Timond had his own unique way of fighting.

“If only Kenchi were here to see this.” Tenchi murmured.

The feet looked like that of a camel’s with two massive bifurcated toes, except there were eight toes, two per cardinal direction, and rather than being a hoof they were metal. Steel beams rose from the ankle joints to make shins, pistons pushing into hydraulic cylinders replaced the calf muscles. The thighs looked much the same as the lower leg, except they ran from a knee hinge to a hip axle that bore the weight of the torso. The torso bore little resemblance to a being, instead it housed the being in an upright cockpit of sorts. Timond was strapped in with his hands and feet on pedals. When he wiggled, his machine wiggled. Two belts rose on either side of Timond, metal bars stretched horizontally across them, the belts were running like the tracks of a bulldozer so that the bars were constantly shifting (Tenchi figured the Magus had decided that beat regular old glass protection like you might see in the windshield of a zoomer but he’d have to see what Kenchi thought about that). Above the cockpit, two pistons hoisted massive shoulder blades. They stretched out to either side like cranes, dropping lanky, orangutan like arms that – instead of having the hands of a simian – ended in weapons. The right hand was a long, cleaver that was about as wide as Tenchi. The left ended earlier than the right and was blunt. It looked like a cannon only the barrel was not hollow. Instead, it was stoppered with a large enertomb, the inside of which looked like a thunderstorm trapped in a snow globe.

“Selu Kenchi isn’t here, honey.” Daffeega remarked.

“Tendi Kou.” Timond stated. Despite being a normal sized chidra, his voice matched that of the size of his machine.

Come to think of it, his scales do to. Tenchi had never seen a silver chidra. His curiosity on the matter shifted back as he realized, “Wait, it’s Tenchi Kou not Tenth Kou.”

“I said Tendi Kou.” Timond responded.

Tenchi was perplexed, “Daffeega, I thought it’s the ‘th’s that get them not the-”
Daffeega was already casting, “Neme ah et kolp oh et Ydnul...”
“Farak!”

Tenchi jumped to the side as a javelin of electricity shot past him. It splattered against the ribs of the nearest unburied and the skeleton crumpled forward, charred. Hurriedly, Tenchi raised the Mystak Blade. They were close enough to the rostrum that the giant glass dome above, Uthemarc’s Cloche, let sunlight shoot down on them. The light of Solaris hit the sword and it began to shine a brilliant emerald green. At the same time, a chunk of stone wrenched free from a column to their left.

Timond laughed, “The Mystak Blade.”

“Wait,” Tenchi turned back to Daffeega, “he can say ‘the’?”

Daffeega was still casting, though now she had drawn her sword, “...crailas et vuizcim law von miameh sodpaz gulevadur...”

Stepping forward, Timond’s looming shoulders cut off the sun beam. As a shadow fell over Tenchi, his sword stopped glowing. While he lost control of the stone he’d been moving, that didn’t stop it from continuing to hurtle. It’s trajectory had not yet been aimed correctly at his opponent. Instead, the boulder soared towards the one that had summoned it.

“Farak!”

Lighting his blade up like an iron in the fire, Tenchi activated another ability, then turned away from the Magus to face the asteroid head on.

Behind him, Daffeega was under attack. Raising his gaudy cleaver, Timond brought it down on Daffeega like a butcher on a wad of meat.

“...shaavahnt et ot law!”

WAM! His blade came down only to bounce right back up after smashing into a pane of purple magic. While Sorelac trembled behind Daffeega, Tenchi had just sliced through the comet he’d made. His red blazing sword capable of slicing through even the hardest marble. Although, once again, this didn’t stop the boulder from hurtling, now it just hurtled in two pieces. One of which was bouncing off the ground and skittering towards Daffeega. Her forcefield shielded her front from Timond, but not her flank from flying rocks. Fortunately, Sorelac saw it coming. Reaching up, he grabbed Daffeega by her robes and yanked her backwards. It shattered her composure and her shield with it, but it saved her life as she watched the giant chunk of pillar roll past her. That said, it left both her and Sorelac sitting on their rears in the shadow of the giant robotic menace.

Down came the cleaver once more. All Daffeega had the time to do was raise her blade. She’d thought of casting an expensive last minute spell but knew not what threat lay ahead and the Staff of Uthemarc was already growing weary. As was she herself.

CLANG! Timond’s cleaver collided with Daffeega’s. Had it not been for the magic, her sword would’ve shattered. Had it not been for the magic, her arm would’ve given over the mammoth blade’s weight and the strength of the chop. Even still, she couldn’t hold it for long. Luckily, Tenchi was there to redeem himself for nearly killing her before.

Rushing in close to Timond, he sliced the cleaver near the base of the blade. The Mystak Blade slid through it like it were an illusion. He had to keep running to escape from the blade falling on him. Luckily, the weight of the blade kept it from falling on Daffeega, the base hit the floor first and allowed the two wizards to roll clear of the falling slab of metal.

Timond didn’t appear to be hurt by the loss, in fact, the chidra grinned wildly. Just because he was a gear head, didn’t mean he didn’t have a special affinity for the gadgets of the

old ways. Turning after the running swordsman, he aimed – not his enertomb – but his broken cleaver. Tenchi turned to see it and was a bit puzzled but the answer came nigh immediately. The hilt and jagged foot of broken blade suddenly flipped up to sit on the mechanical wrist like a sharkfin. In it's place Tenchi saw a barrel. This barrel was not stoppered.

BANG!

As the cannon ball burst from the nozzle of the Magus' wrist, Tenchi fired off his own shot. After slicing through the cleaver, he'd turned the Mystak Blade gold. The aurelean glow beamed and birthed a bolt of light that zoomed towards the Magus while the Magus' missile zoomed towards the swordsman.

BOOM!

The projectile hit Tenchi and exploded in a cloud of smoke and fire while the ray of light slid between the beams of Timond's cockpit shield and struck him in the right shoulder.

"Tenchi!" Daffeega exclaimed.

"I'm fine!" Tenchi shrugged, emerging from the smog while lighting a cigarette on the fading embers. The indigo glow was still leaving his blade. He took a puff and said, "Seems fate's siding with us today."

"Good. Then cover for me." Daffeega said, "I'm going to Corrupt him."

"Corrupt me!" Timond exclaimed. There was a moment of time, as he held off attacking to reload his rocket launcher – a moment elongated by the agony his new wound cost him.

"Yea," Tenchi bellowed, mocking Timond's deep voice, "what is she, Truth?"

Daffeega didn't laugh. Instead she started casting while Tenchi took his place back between her and the giant robotic monstrosity.

"You've shown me what your magic can do, Tendi-"

"Tendi?" Tenchi looked back at Daffeega. She was very notably avoiding his eyesight so he shifted to Sorelac, "You hearing this?"

"-let me show you what my machine can do." Timond finished.

"Machine!" Tenchi yelled, "He said *machine!*"

While Timond and Tenchi got back into it, Sorelac peeped back up. Rising from behind Daffeega, he almost whispered his input, "Corruption is an expensive spell."

"Uthemarc can handle it." Daffeega brushed him off.

"And then can it handle Suicine?" Sorelac continued.

"I'll be able to." Daffeega assured him.

Sorelac gulped, "And if not."

"If I go down, she goes down." She stated.

"Self-destruction?" He asked.

"Mutually assured destruction." Daffeega corrected, finally turning to Sorelac, her eyes confirmed that their discussion was over, "If she won't stop, then I won't and, in that case, we'll need a contributor left to face justice." Turning from her hostage, she began to recite the ancient spell.

"Tenchi!" Tenchi cried as he scrapped with the machine-armored chidra, "TenCHI!"

"Oh poor, Tendi." Timond snickered.

BOOM!

Having grown wary of his sword's willingness to shield him when his own abilities failed, Tenchi had tried to block this missile. Turning the Mystak Blade blue, he wacked the incoming bomb. While it did bounce the projectile back a bit, the projectile still exploded. This blasted Tenchi backwards. No longer did he stand between the Magus and the Princess.

Though burnt and bruised, Tenchi knew there was no time to lick his wounds. He bound back into action. Rushing forwards, his saving grace was Timond reloading. Unfortunately, that grace did not extend to Timond's right hand: the lightning cannon. The blademaker saw it coming, but was too frazzled to react effectively. He attempted to bat it away with his blue blazing blade but the lightning bundled around the sword and swarmed up around his shoulders to then wrap around him. As electricity surged through his muscles, he went stiff as a board and flopped to the floor. The beam of electricity didn't stop, it continued to flow from Timond's cannon like a rope and, like a rope, he was able to pull Tenchi in. Forgetting about Daffeega, the Magus drooled at the prospect of capturing the world's most miraculous weapon.

As Tenchi twitched and flailed, so too did the thoughts flickering through his brain. He was hardly able to cling on to any sort of plan of a counter. As soon as an idea popped into his head a flash of electricity sent shockwaves of pain up and down his spine and the thought shot off into the ether. All he knew was that Timond was dragging him close and that Timond would soon have another explosive ready to deliver – potentially at point blank range. He could hear Timond mock him.

“Poor Tendi.” The Magus thundered, “Magic swords are obsolete. Machines rule the future.”

Then Tenchi felt the light of Solaris. The Magus had dragged Tenchi right up under him and a sliver of sunlight peaked in through the hole he had shot in Timond's shoulder earlier. With the sun beam, a clear thought anchored itself in Tenchi's mind. Even as his teeth clattered, a quivering smirk slid across his lips. The Mystak Blade turned green. The electricity bouncing around him suddenly slipped inside him. The thread extending from Timond's arm shot back to his arm with the speed of a returning measuring tape. Now Tenchi controlled electricity, but he didn't want it. More specifically, he didn't need it. As soon as he overcame the electrocution, his blade's green shifted to a silver sheen. When it glowed green, it was an elementalists' elgroom. When it glowed silver, it became the spell stopper.

From the floor, he pivoted. It was a quick flick of an action. So quick that Timond couldn't even move his blaster arm in time. A simple tap of the Mystak Blade to the camel-like hoof of the machine stopped the whole thing in its tracks. Timond was trapped.

Careful to keep his sword on his foes' foot, Tenchi rose. He paused only after spotting the cigarette he'd dropped earlier, simmering on the floor. Lifting it to his lips, he straightened up and looked right in Timond's face.

“Funny thing about modern day machines,” Tenchi dragged on the stoge then spoke full of smoke so that his voice was as deep as his enemy's, “they're magic.”

Rage was about to fill the Magus' eyes but Daffeega had beat him to it. A purple glaze fell over his stare. Tenchi removed his sword and stepped aside. Timond and his machine fell forward.

“Crimpsin t-” Tenchi jumped, turning to Daffeega, “Is he?”

“No, honey,” Daffeega rolled her eyes, “he's taking a nap.”

“Oh...” Tenchi tilted his head to one side, “should I ki-”

“Farakin...” Daffeega smeared her face into her palm, “No! A survivor may serve us well. Now, guard my back. We're going up the rostrum to talk with my sister.”

The rostrum was essentially a column in its own right, though it stopped halfway towards the glass top of Uthemarc's Cloche. Stairs circled the rostrum, spiraling from the floor of the Mosque to the platform above. Typically, that was where the Magi and the Queen sat. However, on this occasion, all but four of the Magi had descended from their stage. Daffeega led the way,

Sorelac following behind her, and Tenchi behind him, walking backwards to keep an eye on the unburied whom – in the wake of Timond’s collapse – once again seemed interested in approaching.

As they scaled the stairs, orbiting the platform, Sorelac noted, “You rushed the Cor-”

“We’re in a rush.” Daffeega snapped.

“Daffeega,” Sorelac hesitated for a moment, but as their heads began to peak over the lip of the rostrum, he spat it out, “Suicine has the power of half the souls in the Catacombs.”

“And she wasted it corrupting the Magi and their Sentinels.” Daffeega shot back.

“That can only account for a fraction of-”

Daffeega whirled on the nellaf, snatching him up by the collar of his cloak. Tenchi, walking backwards, bumped into Sorelac. He glanced over his shoulder, took one look at Daffeega’s face, then hurriedly looked away to distract himself by sniping the encroaching dead with his magic sword.

“You aren’t getting out of this.” Daffeega stated. She jerked her head towards the floor of the platform – it was just above eye level for her, “She won’t be getting out of this.” She took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh, “I’m stopping this. If that means I don’t get out of it, then so be it. Let’s get it over with, shall we?”

Not letting go of the Icelore, Daffeega turned and marched up the last few steps to arrive on the rostrum. There was the Queen. Suicine once looked so much like her sister, folks thought them twins. That was no longer the case. The Princess dressed herself in layers and layers of different colored fabrics, her color palette rivaling that of a prism in the light of Solaris. The Queen dressed only in darkness. Daffeega was plump, her snout perky and her fur fluffed. Suicine was wrinkled, her snout curled and her fur matted. The two now appeared polar opposites. Only the fury in each other’s eyes indicated any sort of resemblance.

Fourteen chairs lined the rostrum, forming a semicircle opposite where the stairs met the platform. Only four seats were filled. Two chidran Magi and two mole, but all four had eyes of pure indigo and their mouths were jabbering away in the Sacred Tongue. Standing a couple yards before them, another couple yards away from the center of the rostrum, Suicine stood alone with her staff. Daffeega had long since known of Suicine’s staff. She’d been offered the Staff of Uthemarc – the most powerful staff beneath Solaris – but had refused. She’d told their father that she would forge her own. Which she had. And it was a grand staff. Though Daffeega hadn’t seen it in recent years, in years prior it still couldn’t compare to that of the staff that had been crafted by Batloe’s patron saint himself.

Her staff was rigid. It’s sides were round but smooth rather than knobby and gnarled like the Staff of Uthemarc. It appeared almost like a metal trumpet, albeit an incredibly slender one, that only fanned out to cup the magic stone at the very last second. The stone was the color of blood – as it had been before – but at that moment it was fizzling.

Daffeega’s ears twitched as she tried to hone in on the ensorcelling Magi behind Suicine but when their spells weren’t immediately clear, she shook her head and tore her attention back towards her sister. *Whatever she’s planning, she will not win. This ends today. In peace or not.* Daffeega smacked the Staff of Uthemarc on the platform and accosted her sister.

“It’s over.”

“It appears so.” Suicine admitted.

“Saint’s justice is merciful.” Daffeega shoved Sorelac forwards.

Sorelac began to plead, “Suicine, please-”

“What? Surrender?” The Queen rolled her eyes, “I’ve lost this battle, but not the war.” She stuck her nose up at Sorelac, “Batloe isn’t the only nation ripe for revolution.”

Sorelac gulped and took a step towards the arch mage, nearly whispering, “Then let’s go!”

Her snout was already tilted towards Uthemarc’s Cloche but now she threw her head completely back to cackle in the face of Solaris.

Daffeega was impatient, “Sister.”

“You’re here to save me!” Suicine crowed, “Hah!”

“If it stops you sooner,” Daffeega shrugged, “then go.”

Suicine dropped her gaze to glower at Daffeega over Sorelac’s shoulder.

“I will never stop.” She stated, “And I’m not done yet here.”

The Queen’s wrinkled hands released her staff. It remained upright, balancing center stage, as Suicine seemingly sunk into her robes. While her legs were as cursed as Daffeega’s, Suicine hadn’t fallen without the support of her staff rather she’d begun to change shape. Her sable cloak began to grey and pool on the floor at first as a fabric but as it continued to whiten it began to liquify. Just as she had done through Larahga, Suicine had transformed herself into the life force she’d stolen from the Catacombs below.

Sorelac looked back at Daffeega, his dark eyes wide, asking to flee.

Daffeega shook her head and began to cast, “Neme ah et kolp oh et Ydnul...”

The puddle of the Queen was spreading and not how liquid on flat plane typically does. Suicine was stretching out towards the two of them.

“S-S-Suicine...” Sorelac stammered, “my brother would take us in.”

When she spoke, her voice resounded throughout the glass vault around them. It sounded like Suicine but there was an extra element to it, a shriek-like scratch that was hard to identify but still made one wince. She said, “Then take me there.”

“...got et canmia vor nia toocrai mai...” Daffeega continued.

Most of Suicine’s mass stayed in the center of the rostrum, slowly expanding her circumference at equal rate, the part of her that had been extending towards them had now thinned down to a stream of only a foot or so. It squirmed forwards like a flat worm. Sorelac could’ve ran, he wasn’t paralyzed with fear, but he was indecisive. He knew not where to place his bets. With the Empire’s justice or with Truth’s? Instead, he put his faith in his brother’s rage. He knew Suicine would be wary of the consequences that came with catching the ire of the Mystvokar. Thus, he straightened his back, rolled his shoulders, and closed his eyes. The ivory tentacle encircled his feet and then closed in, running over his boots and wrapping around his ankles. When he opened his eyes again, they shimmered a vibrant indigo.

“...shaanzerik for shaanzeruga prezarta shaanzeruga...”

Unfurling from Sorelac’s feet, Suicine’s tendril snaked around the captivated Icelore and began to pursue her sister. Sorelac began to chant, with Suicine’s voice, while Suicine simultaneously began to speak again.

“So this is good bye?” Suicine asked.

“...miameh hanna shann elba ot.” Daffeega concluded. She took a large stride to her left yet in her place remained a Daffeega. When she took another step, another Daffeega remained. It was as if she was stepping out of herself and leaving a three dimensional, fully colored silhouette behind. As she strolled, she responded, “You won’t get away with this any better outside the Empire – not for long.” Daffeega warned, “The only places that tolerate mancercs do it out of spite for the Empire.”

Suicine's ivory arm abandoned the first faux-Daffeega and began to follow her around the circular platform. Her staff still stood in the center of the rostrum. It's bloody diamond top continued to emanate a rusty haze, only now the haze had spread far further and become far denser. A crimson cloud now hung in the center of the chamber and it was being fed by slender threads of red departing from the mouths of the four possessed Magi seated in the semi-circle at the north end of the rostrum. Right where Daffeega was currently passing by.

"Spite's a great place to start." Suicine's leer came out in the tone of her disembodied voice, her syllables dragged on and on, "Look at this world. All the suffering and despair – do you know who's fault that is?"

Daffeega glanced back at Sorelac, saying, "Let me guess, the Empire's?"

"Our father's!" Suicine proclaimed. The glass of the giant cloche around them seemed to shudder, "And his father's. And his mother's. And their father's and their mother's! Our ancestors, Daffeega, our ancestors made every system we suffer from today – they owe us. They selfishly buried their bones and left us to deal with their mistakes."

"And is that why you want to be Queen?" Daffeega asked, "To carry on in their footsteps?"

"To finally put an end to it." Suicine hissed.

"We are putting an end to it!" Daffeega snapped, gesturing back at the battle behind them. She stopped in her tracks. She'd finally circled the entire rostrum. Twenty or more twins of her all turned to glower at the puddle of power that was her sister. She drew her sword from the end of her staff and held both before her.

"Democracy. Monarchy. They're all the same to me." The tentacle stopped just out of reach of the tip of Daffeega's blade, "All unnatural. There is only one true hierarchy in this world."

"And what is that?" Daffeega asked.

"Power." Suicine answered, "Power should rule."

"Then let it!" Daffeega demanded.

Daffeega bound forward and drove her saber towards the tendril. With a quick twisting flick, it wiggled out of the way and instead coiled around the blade then constricted, locking her sword in place. Before Suicine could capitalize on the maneuver, Daffeega's clones divided the Queen's attention. When Daffeega stabbed, her clones moved as well. Not towards the center of the rostrum where the pond of bone swelled, but rather towards the outside – specifically, the northern rim. Staff swords raised, they charged the four brainwashed Magi.

Part distraction and part ploy, both sisters had to split their focus. Spikes shot from the pool of bone, remaining intact with the rest of the body much like the tendril but far thinner and sharpened like spears. The lion's share of these phalanges sprouted from the northern shore, shooting through the air like striking snakes. She immediately impaled the five Daffeega's nearest the Magi, they poofed out of existence upon puncture, but the other fifteen were still in the running and Suicine only risked five tentacles to skewer with.

Her conservation was in thanks to the real Daffeega. Though Suicine had hold of Daffeega's sword, the purple gem that was now the pommel of the Princess' hilt continued to flash with each step she took. Each time her foot hit the floor of the rostrum, a new Daffeega burst free from her creator – sword and staff in hand – forcing Suicine to form new tendrils to face the new Daffeegas as they materialized south of her.

The clones jumped in, slicing at the tendril. Suicine harpooned one after the other, quickly losing the actual Daffeega in a purple mist of evaporated mirror images. Still, Suicine

didn't release the true Daffeega's saber – the object powering her sister's magic. If Daffeega let go, the spell would end and the clones with it. Both sisters knew that. Both sisters also knew that the Staff of Uthemarc was growing wary. Daffeega knew cause it was her fault. Suicine knew because, as a necromancer, she could smell energy and she knew the scent of the staff when fully charged. Suicine simply had to hold out and keep the clones from killing her Magi.

But her little sister caught her offguard.

“Neme ah miameh sodpaz, kakal!”

The butt of her sword did not flare with light with this spell. Instead, the vibrant puple sheen came from Daffeega's own eyes. The light shown through the haze of past clones, over Suicine's tangled tentacles, and then unfurled into a gust like a tidal wave. The gale brushed past Suicine's staff to gently, but firmly cradle Daffeega's remaining five northward-clones, lift them off their feet, and launch them at the Magi.

Suicine recoiled, relinquishing her tight hold on the true-Daffeega's sword as she sapped energy from her southern flank to thrust herself into her northern tendrils. The tentacles thrashed back as the energy pumped through them then they struck like vipers. The clones were still in the air, arching in their fall soon to collide with their prey. Suicine impaled one, two, and three – all but the last two. One of them had flipped around. The clone criss-crossed their staff and sword before them and faced the final stabbing tendrils, protecting the final fake Daffeega. As Suicine pierced the fourth, the fifth stabbed her Magus.

A terrible screech filled the chamber. The Magus' head rocked back. The scarlet energy escaping their mouth thickened into a bloodlike fluid. The flow accelerated. Now it poured forth, rushing to Suicine's staff in the center of the rostrum. With each ounce that shot forth, the body of the Magus began to crumple. Their arms and legs snapped to bend where they shouldn't as their body folded in upon itself, turning into the mirky maroon substance until nothing else of them was left. The red swirled around the staff with the rest of the gas, seemingly feeding off the crimson cloud. The other three Magi, trapped in their chairs by Suicines magic, began to lean forward, as if tugged on by some magnetic force. The gas escaping their gaping maws was also thickening, droplets of liquid were beginning to replace streams of smokey substance.

Suicine recoiled, relinquishing her tight hold on the true Daffeega's sword in a desperate attempt to stop the fake ones. Points jumped from the other side of the puddle. Stretching like spears after the clones, skewering them. All but one. This Daffeega whipped around to bat away the bone harpoon, then turned back to run her sword through the gut of a purple eyed Magi before dissolving into purple mist.

Another scream emanated from the rostrum. The distraction of giving the last five clones a little push had exhausted Daffeega, but it had also weakened Suicine's resistance. Throwing her weight behind her sword, she slid her sword through the grasp of the tendril and pushed the blade into the ossein pool. The puddle recoiled, shrinking in circumference by three feet immediately. Then it shrunk again, this time all the way back to the staff in the center of the rostrum. There it began to solidify, piling over and over itself to reform the shape of her sister – her sister plus a saber sticking out of her gut.

Daffeega herself was doubled over. She still held the hollow sheath of a staff, which offered little more than support without the stone. Both women were stooped over. Suicine managed to look up just enough to see Daffeega from under her cowl.

“Well then, it is settled.” Suicine stated, “The Cloches is yours.”

After the first shriek, Tenchi had abandoned defending the stairs. He saw the swirling tornado of what appeared to be blood, twisting in the vaulted glass dome of the cloche above.

Rushing back up to the rostrum top, he saw first the remaining Magi. The three were twisted and contorted – what was left of them at least. Their top halves were half melted into what was flowing into the maelstrom. Then his eyes were drawn to Daffeega and Suicine. The wounded Queen and the exhausted Princess. Finally, he saw Sorelac standing off to the side. He was muttering in the Sacred Tongue.

Or he had been. He had just stopped.

“PRINCESS!”

Tenchi rushed forward keeping the Mystak Blade in his grasp at his side. The last three Magi finished their transformation and the swirling red rocketed down into the orb of Suicine’s staff. At that same moment, a fire burst forth. It was so abrupt and immediately massive, Tenchi couldn’t tell where exactly it came from, he just knew it was all around them. He could hear nothing but the roar of the explosion. Smell nothing but the iron of burnt blood and sulfuric stench of explosives. But rather than feeling the brunt of the blast, he felt only Daffeega as he tackled her to the floor.

When he opened his eyes, he saw purple. He got up into a pushup position and looked down at the Princess. She too was covered in the lilac veil. As the purple began to fade, he sheathed the Mystak Blade. Getting up, he offered Daffeega a hand.

The rostrum was pitch black. Uthemarc’s Cloche, the mighty glass dome above, had been vaporized. Warm, desert wind rushed in to clear the smoke away. The Magi were gone. So too were Suicine and Sorelac. There wasn’t a trace of any of them left. Not even the top half of Daffeega’s staff.

Turning around, they gazed out over the Mosque of the Magi. The unburied lay scattered about the chamber. Their Magi lying still amongst them. The Laymen, Miners, Kou, and the unhelmed guards stood staring up at the rostrum.

Tenchi looked over at Daffeega and gave her a nudge.

Nodding, she took a deep breath. Then she lifted one little furry fist.

Cheers erupted.

Tenchi gestured to the stairs, “Your majesty?”

While the two made their way down from the rostrum, the people left in the Mosque continued to celebrate. Bold and Marvell sat down and then laid flat on their backs to rest. Ben sat down beside them too. Fetch, who with his still leaking crow eye, had been forced to turn back into a dog, curled up in Ben’s lap to receive victory ear scratches from a distracted former herder. Sharp and Paud shook hands. Lalmly joined them and they marched over to escort the Princess from the rostrum. Tou and Daernar wandered towards the south end of the chamber. The Mosque was filling up with the rebels from the Mezzanine that hadn’t made it in before. They wanted to see for themselves that it was over, rather than listen to the echoes. The two found Tabuh. She rushed up to hug Tou and he held her tight. Peshkova and Sniper turned around and went back out to the Mezzanine to take in the view of the smoldering capitol. Blade was escorted by the two royal guards, Captain Onx and Amadar towards the rostrum but they stopped halfway there.

The Pillar Lift was opening. Sallis and Bru stepped out first, helping each other walk. Lenga was right behind them but she had stopped trying to help (upon request) and instead took the job of carrying Atlas and seeking out her boyfriend. It was like a second bomb had gone off when Sallis and Bru arrived. The Mosque quickly fell silent oncemore.

The two men looked around until they caught sight of Daffeega. Then their eyes were drawn to the shattered cloche behind her. Finally they noticed the dead Magi scattered amongst

the broken remains of the unburied. As Daffeega neared, both men didn't appear to know what to do. Simultaneously, they decided the right thing would be to bow. Daffeega hurriedly stuck out a hand, gently touching Sallis on the side so that the pair would halt.

Sallis couldn't straighten back up but Bru helped him. Back on eye level with the Princess, he asked, "My Queen?"

Daffeega smiled. It was a sad smile. There was a happiness in it, but mostly sadness. For as the adrenaline would soon drain from her body, she knew the road ahead would not be happy. Better? Hopefully. But happy? Not for a long, long while. Still, there would be a lot more hope to go around in the new Batloe.

A bit of cheer warmed her grin as she said, "Not until we count the votes!"

Epilogue



The Mosque of the Magi loomed over Vare like the blistered mouth of a volcano. Once, under the glass of Uthemarc's Cloche, the plots of politicians had boiled within the corridor like magma within the belly of a mountain but the threatening substance within had been expelled and the people of the Capitol had survived the eruption. The Cloches' finest dome had been destroyed, opening the congressional chamber to not only the arid winds of Batloe but to every soul that born of it. Old Towners and New Towners assembled together among the pillars of the Mosque. They filled the Messanines outside and crowded amongst the shards of the Glassyard in the Southern Veranda below. Beyond the Exterior Arches, more Batloens clustered. Scholars stood next to stewards, miners next to magicians, and molemen alongside chidras as residents of the Capitol and pilgrims from all over the desert continent gathered to hear the results of the vote.

As they waited, a new melody wafter over their heads. The tune rolled out amber clouds just as music had days prior during the state's last sanctioned game of Pyramid. Again an odd musician manned the helm of a hovering pipe organ. The goblin had been replaced with a fire elf, but their uniform remained the same: a fleshy red suit as scarlet as the elf's alien red hair. While the song was new to most, it was not new to the Laymen nor was it new to their enemies. Those that had survived what would come to be known as the Battle of the Unburied, the veterans of the Layman's Revolution, sang along with their anthem.

Bru sang along, though he couldn't hear The Bard's instruments. His ears had been lost with the shattering of the Glassyard. After he and Tou fell to be buried in the Catacombs with the dead, he had managed to escape but had left his hearing behind. He could hardly care now though. Standing tall in the Mosque of the Magi, gazing up towards the rostrum where the new Crown would soon stand, a newfound sense of pride seemed to replace his lost sense. His voice had been heard and he could feel the voices of his comrades rumbling through the Cloches.

A last minute addition to their coalition stood beside the golden scaled chidra. She hadn't sacrificed as much as Bru but one could argue she'd offered close to half as much. Amadar El, one of the first of whom would come to be revered as the "Unhelmed", wore an eye patch over her right eye. She'd grown up amongst the Laymen across the Rift in Tlow-Vare but sought relief as a Royal Guard only to wind up at the right place and the right time to switch sides before it was too late. There were plenty of others like her there for the inauguration, most notably her former superior.

Onx Shelba stood awkwardly in the hall. He'd been a Captain under the former regime and despite likely having to start over from the ground up, his future looked more promising now. Tlow-Varen guards could only graduate as high as Captain. There was no chance the Magi would've considered teaching a New-Towner the magic necessary for a promotion to Arcane Sentinel. Still, being a Captain in the Royal Guard had been the best a Layman could ask for – back when they were an asking country, now that they were a voting country the possibilities seemed endless.

On the otherside of the to Unhelmed, another late-comrade of the cause joined them. The defacto leader of the Miners puffed out her chest beside them, her broken pick turned elgroom still clenched in her chidran hands. Blade Otubak had nearly stood by and allowed Tlow-Vare to consume itself before Voting Day, but they'd smelled the stinkdamp in the tension between the "handout hoarders" and her own "bootlickers". She'd led the Miners to bet on their topside brothers and sisters and the gamble paid off. The Miner couldn't help but shake her head in awe as she glanced over at the moleman that stood to her right.

History would describe him as the leader of the Laymen despite the fact that he had stumbled into the role and simply managed to keep his head above water while the rapid currents of coincidence continued to thrust him to the front of the line. After being framed for a terrorist attack, the friendly neighborhood Sallis had become a battle cry. Once broadcast across the heavens on the bloody battlefield of Pyramid, he became a legend. At this point, where he wanted to be a leader or not, it seemed the tides of time weren't stopping anytime soon. It had been three days sense he'd been gutted by a necromancer's blade in the darkness of the Catacombs and Lenga herself had tended to the moleman, but the cursed blade had left traces of damage that even the greatest healers in the world couldn't eliminate completely. His shoulders hunched over a bit, even as he stood up straight, as his stomach muscles had knotted back together a tad too tight. Despite his posture, he didn't look weak. Even if he did, the entire population of Batloe had his back – especially the five Pyramid survivors behind him.

Among the five friends he'd made in the hazy aurelian glare of Pyramid, Saber Otubak and Redael Ropo guarded his flanks. The two chidras had been wounded pretty bad in the Battle of the Unburied but they'd avoided any lasting limps. Their injuries had disappeared alongside their criminal records, as the two had been enduring extended stays in the Emendation Interprise well before the Revolution began. Renovations of the Cloches would coincide with their own metamorphoses.

The Laymen, Miners, Unhelmed, and Ex-Cons integrated their foreign allies into the audience that day as well. Two in particular would become folk heroes of the desert nation: Sniper, the giant bearn archer, and Pesh, the pyromaniac, bone bending healer. As members of the Golden Dagger, they weren't supposed to entertain a fanbase. Sniper did do his best not to garner any attention but with Pesh as his partner he incidentally played the straightman and only hyped up her antics. Despite the law of the land, Pesh was busy laying out a line of zirra between her thumb and index finger – for the whole world to see – while riding piggy-back on the shoulders of the towering assassin.

The two hitmen with Sniper and Pesh were unrecognizeable to the Laymen as they hadn't physically helped in the fight. Like Sniper and Pesh, one rode upon the other. A large red foxbird sat perched on the shoulders of a tall blonde electric elf with an eye patch over her left eye. Only a few of those in the Cloches knew them to be Skar and Einna Yelkao, two of those few stood not too far away.

A sud stained, bulbous bellied bar tender tended to his friend as they scowered the crowd for familiar faces. Sam Budd had been Drakken's plus one. They'd made it in time for the

inauguration but had come for the funeral. The former Obsidian Boatswain wasn't the only one that had lost someone in the chaos of the uprising. While the day was one of celebration, it was bitter sweet for most as well. Especially the for the two shorter companions that had followed Sam and Drakken in.

Tumbling over one another, a dark garbed Knome struck a colorful cloaked Knome in the jaw before taking his foe's slipper to the shin. The two were causing quite a distraction. Not because anyone cared to stop to Knomes from fighting but because everyone assumed the fight was a little less genuine than it appeared. Each time the couple bumped into the legs of a Layman, Miner, or member of the Unhelmed, the Batloen would first check their pockets before getting out of the squabblers' way. The only one to stop the Knomes was one their size – in weight rather than height. The peacemaker stood only as tall as the old men's hips considering the fact that he stood on four legs instead of two.

Cowboy the Vallhund stuck his snarling snout between the two Knomes and they peeled off one another. Behind the beast was Zaria Ein, the Strategy Admiral of the Imperial Navy. Whipping out her index finger, as if it were some kind of wand, she pointed past the Knomes to the stage under the shattered cloches at the end of the chamber. She need not utter a word, the two little men understood the order. They'd have to settle their feud elsewhere. Elsewhere also was Zaria's sidekick. She and Cowboy typically created a trio, completed by the see-through Shisharay in elaborate armor but Lalmly Shisharay was not amongst the audience.

There were others missing too. Not far from the Admiral and her pooch was another high ranking military officer, though the army this figure fought for was a tad less prestigious. Wake Ragashi, Captain of the Kou Warriors, had recovered from Voting Day. Their outfit had gained legitimacy by throwing in their lot with the Laymen but still was widely regarded as a mercenary horde of "Clansmen". Speaking of which, Kenchi Kou was at Wake's side. The one and only Atlas was tucked under his arm like a football. Alfred, the polymorphed monkey, was perched on his shoulder. But like with Zaria, Wake's trio was incomplete. Wake's best friend and Kenchi's big brother was not there to celebrate with them – but he was there.

Smirking like the devil on Good Friday, Tenchi Kou rolled his shoulders and winked at his kid brother from stage where the Magi once sat. The General, as his Sondoran separatists knew him, or the Dragon, as patriots of the Cagirent knew him, had his right hand on the hilt of the sword that hung from his belt: the Mystak Blade. Nearly the oldest sword still on Mystakle Planet, it sat opposite one of the youngest blades beneath Solaris: *Future*.

While Tenchi was right handed, his neighbor, Tou Fou, was left handed. The earth elf, known as Mr. Woodsman, by the select few Obsidians still alive had been assigned the spot next to the human. The earth elf matched the human's pose but couldn't quite capture the confidence. As the ceremony commenced, he glanced to the woman that stood on his left.

Tabuh Sentry's right hand brushed his as she tickled her holster. The golden gun that waited there shone like her eyes as she met Tou's gaze. They'd come along way since leaving the docks of Yelah, Iceload. Bobbing and weaving from one catastrophic event to another, it seemed only now they could catch their breath. The two elves sighed.

As they exhaled, Daernar Darkblade held his breath. He was coated in sweat like the slick skin of an amphibian, blending the black swirls with the pale pink complexion of his kind. He stared straight ahead but he also didn't – his eyes were peaking into a world no one else could see. Three days sober, he lived in a world of hallucinations and pain. Lenga had been able to heal his many wounds but even she could do little for withdrawal – even if she could, he wouldn't have consented. The mirages didn't offer him reprieves, but they did offer him the illusion of some sort of shot at repentance.

Hallucinating beside him was Paud Gill. While actually convicted of several murders unlike his neighbor who still only faced an allegation, Paud harbored no guilt. His suffering was of a more physical nature. Daernar had gone three days without alcohol, Paud had gone three days without knowing the whereabouts of his sickly sister. He'd spent the time prompting his pain, attempting to enflame his molten veins, in hopes that a clarifying vision might burst through the clouds of torment.

Bold could sense his allies' agony but had also been alongside Lenga when he'd done all that he could. Lenga was the only hero missing the ceremony it seemed. While it had been three days since Pyramid and the Battle of the Unburied, there was no rest for the worthy. Just as Bold had abandoned the plight of his people in bondage, he'd abandoned the plight of those in triage. This belief was as dillusional – if not moreso – as the dillusions endured by the two men to his right, but nonetheless Bold endured the idea.

The lady on his left also had a terrible time coming to terms with what she had left behind: her right arm. Marvell of the Ax did miss her former appendage but in all honesty she was in a good mood. Not only had she kept her axes, she'd managed to keep a job in her favorite industry: war. Completely oblivious to the suffering of her comrades, she only missed her right hand because it meant there was one less to pat herself on the back with.

Benjamin Fasthoof could've loaned her his tail to give her a good swat on the shoulder as his anterior appendage was whipping about behind him like a leash attached to a writhing lion. There was a victorious warmth settling in his stomach but, like with Tou, a fair bit of anxiety to go along with it. He stumbled his way from the steppes of Dogloe to the stage of Batloe. He'd done fine but at what point did all this momentum leave him landing flat on his face?

Surprisingly, his best friend, the faux-human beside him, felt likewise. Fetch wasn't scared of faltering in the next quest, he was scared of being strung up in the meantime. The contraband in his left eye socket was the only reason he wasn't on all fours and now in the spotlight of every story beneath Solaris, how was it that they wouldn't come for his shadows? How long could a mancer be Antipa before Antipa came for them? He anxiously glanced over at the bow mounted to the hip of the woman beside him.

The Gustbow complimented Lalmly's decadent armor, which complimented her immaculate expression: stoic and yet warm. Would she have garnered such awe were she not beautiful? One need only ask once before the equally beautiful bow would pump a lotus-dressed arrow into their chest. While thoughts raced through her comrades minds, hers was at ease. As a

Shisharay, she'd been bound to a quest well before the Layman's Revolution. The only thing that had changed for her was the unfamiliar energy she felt when near the man standing beside her.

He felt it too – especially now that his limp had been healed – but while Lalmly had nothing else to ponder over, Sharp Otubak had plenty. He'd been doing nothing but dwelling since the Battle of the Unburied. He'd finally killed his father. *Finally?* His biggest regret was the thing he'd been looking forward to since he'd first learned his old man's name. *What now?* Looking past his thoughts, he let his focus settle on his best friend.

The Princess – or at least, for now – stood in front of the eleven, not far from where her sister had stood before the explosion. Ironically, she felt like exploding. She knew the results of the election but she did not know how her people would respond to her decision. Daffeega Shelba was ready to get it over with.

She stood a step behind the Emperor. His coarse robes reminded her of the burlap worn by the Laymen, but Saint hadn't been a peasant since he was a child. Practically born into the bottom of the Munkloen caste system, he grew up shoveling shit between the roots of the kapok trees. Less than two decades later, he'd conquered the globe. The half elf had only relinquished said grasp once in almost five hundred years and yet there he stood, strong as ever. His shoulders were broad, his forearms bulging, and his grin unbismirched even as his cheeks cut into the eyepatch that crisscrossed his face. Beckoning Daffeega, he ended his address to the audience.

“Now welcome, Batloens, your new Queen!”

Daffeega strode up to the Emperor and dropped to one knee. Saint held the crown out in his arms. The tiara made Saint's own look like a makeshift headband. Batloe's crown was encrusted with a massive specimen of each of the gem known to the desert sands – Batloe was not just the magic and science capitol of Solaris but also the largest exporter of jewels on Mystakle Planet. When the first ring ran out of room, another circlet was attached atop to fit another tier of sparkling stones. The crown was as colorful as Daffeega's sparkling robes and it would've fit nicely on her head but after it levitated up out of Saint's hands it did not land on the Princess' head.

“I kneel before you with honor.” Daffeega state. She did not rise from her bow, nor did she raise her voice to reach those in the Mosque and the rest of the Cloches surrounding. The purple stone on the Staff of Uthemarc glimmered and projected her words for all to hear plainly, “But I cannot accept the crown.”

The tiara floated back down into the Emperor's hands. Murmurs dispersed amongst the congregations. The people were exhausted. They trusted Daffeega. They elected Daffeega. What now? What next? What was she talking about? The leaders of the Laymen and Miners exchanged anxious glances as she continued.

“From Tlow-Vare to the Foot Islands, from the Wings of the coast to Space City in the heart of Batloe, our citizens have voted and our people have elected me to rule and I am honored and I will do my duty – however, my first responsibility is to rectify the wrongs of the former Crowns. This election was not fair. In Tadloe they vote based on specific agendas. In Manaloe they vote by political parties. In Dogloe they vote in favor of platforms.”

Just as anxiety had wafted through the crowd, understanding began to unfurl from the rostrum that elevated the Princess and it swept through the masses like a cool breeze on a Summer day.

“Four days ago, the people of Batloe braved the polls to vote for a name – my name – but in reality we all were voting for something else. We were voting for a right to vote. There was one policy on the ballot: democracy. Now that the people have spoken, now that democracy is here to stay, *now* is the time to vote for the Crown.”

She had a point. Their options had been between a charitable Princess and a conspiring necromancer. The vote had little to do with how they sought to be governed and more to do with saving them from the clutches of a psychopathic maniac. While they’d still likely re-elect Daffeega in a heartbeat now that the smoke had cleared, would not they be better off actually getting to elect their national executive the way every other democracy in the Trinity Nations did?

“As Princess, I will act as Queen and facilitate a year of campaigning while a new champion rises from the midst of our grand people. I’ve met many heroes from the very same sands as I during my time as Princess and over the last few days I’ve come to know even more than before. For a long time, I believed I could serve my people best by pushing policies to slowly reform our way of government but now I know otherwise. It is time the Shelban family pass down the Crown, it is time that the Cloches belong to *Vare and Tlow-Vare*.”

The tiara in the Emperor’s hands shot up towards the grand aperture where Uthemarc’s Cloche once shimmered. Twirling like a whirlwind, the crown quickly transformed into a rainbow blur as the colorful gems blended together. At first it was just an illusion of motion but then the illusion manifest into reality: the crown was unraveling! The jewels popped free and the gold unfurled into tiny threads of aurelian string then both the precious metals and rare stones shot out in all direction – like the sparks of a firework – to rain down on those gathered below. The chamber was filled with excited cries of joy as people scrambled to catch the scattering riches. The act seemed very likely to start a stampede had Saint not stepped up to calm the masses. Muttering the Sacred Tongue under his breath, he launched another array of treasures into the air – this spray more precisely targeted individuals. Those still scrambling to snatch a sapphire from another were peppered with rubies or emeralds. The act assured the masses that they would be compensated for what they might’ve missed out on and as the actor raised his voice to speak once more the people understood the exchange and calmed down. They could afford to listen to the old king a little longer especially now that he was essentially paying them.

“The era of Kings and Queens is coming to an end.” The Emperor proclaimed, “Already, the people of Mystakle Planet have begun to turn away from their rulers to search amongst themselves for solutions. This was what the Lord warned on that night a little over a year ago when the storm carved the name of twenty-four heroes into the roof of the Cathedral – this was what the Foretelling foretold.” He beckoned to Daffeega just a stride behind him and then to the eleven more further back, “Here stand the first twelve heroes named on that fateful day.”

The twelve fidgeted as he named them.

“Tou Fou, Tabuh Sentry, Tenchi Kou, Daernar Darkblade, Daffeega Shelba, Sharp Otubak, Paud Gill, Lalmly Shisharay, Fetch Eninac, Benjamin Fasthoof, Boldarian Drakcor the Fourth, and Marvell of the Ax – the Mystakle Samurai,” Saint donned them, “named after those Samurai I met decades ago in Delia. The Delian Samurai operated in a liminal legal state somewhere between the Layman and the Lord. Ordained by the will of the people and immune from the authority of any throne, they served their people with unabashed effectivity. Likewise, our Samurai, the Mystakle Samurai, won’t be bound within the confines of the Trinity Nations, they will fight injustice wherever it rears its ugly head.”

“Economic disparity here in Batloe but also abroad in Foxloe. Piracy and crime syndicates within the Empire that infect the ports of Tadloe and Sentrakle yet also plague neutral nations like Aquaria. Fascism within states which oppose our alliance, like the Mystvokar in Iceload and the Cagirent in Sondor, will not be exempt from the Samurai’s reach – nor will the savagery of the Disciple’s warlords in the Dragon Islands or the slavery of the vile Sovereigns of Vinnum Tow. Wherever the people rise up and raise their voices, the Mystakle Samurai will answer their call.”

While Saint rambled on, the supposed Samurai began to speak amongst themselves.

“Sounds a bit like he’s passing the buck, huh?” Tenchi muttered, slipping a cigarette out of his back pocket and pinching it between his lips.

Prompting Tou to ask what he’d been dwelling about anyways, “We can’t really be ‘immune from authority’, can we?”

Tabuh reached across him to flick the stoge out of the human’s mouth before he could light it, warning, “If we play our cards right we might.”

Daernar broke his trance to forbode, “The laws of man should be the least of our worries.”

A few “Samurai” down the line, Marvell remarked, “He talking about guilt or liver disease?”

“I’d take both,” Fetch shrugging, “over giving up shadows.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Sharp grunted from the end of the line, “We’re heroes today, scapegoats tomorrow.”

Bold concurred, “The minute wae wage the wrong war they’ll throw us out loike rotten fish.”

Lalmly crossed her arms, “Then we don’t miss.”

Paud agreed with the Shisharay, “Nothing’s changed.”

“Shhh!” Ben hissed, nodding his horns towards the back of the Emperor, “I think we’re supposed to step up now!”

Sure enough, Daffeega gave them a quick glance back and the eleven quickly joined her on the edge of the rostrum overlooking the congregates of the Mosque. Together, the twelve began to kneel even as Saint continued to pontificate:

“-they will kneel for no...”

Half froze mid squat while others fumbled to straighten back upright but Saint's words rolled on as if he'd made no gaffe.

"...one man but for all!"

Kneeling alongside the twelve, the new heroes quickly followed suit and the Cloches erupted in applause. Leaning forward so that he could scan the faces of the Mystakle Samurai, Saint asked with a warm whisper that cut through the clamor of praise before them.

"So what's next?" He asked.

Each had an issue close to their hearts and eleven of them began to mull over how best to pitch their problem but one beat the rest to the punch.

"Saint!" Marvell blurted, "I've got something to show you!" She glanced up and down the line of her comrades, "Something all y'all need to see."

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A bridge of polished stone stretched between two cliffside, like the top of a dam spanning between two mountains. Keeping with the dam analogy, the river being dammed was nothing more than darkness. Where the mountains breached the surface was where the mountains began, there was seemingly nothing but abyss beneath the bridge and the stairways the bridge connected. The only material between the overpass and the Under far below were two massive jug-like vats. They sprouted downward like tear drops. Their wide bottoms narrowed as they rose until their spouts were pinched off by two walled wells which pimpled the bridge.

The Emperor and his Samurai stood along the bridge, observing the odd black cisterns. Above them, a broken rope bridge dangled against one of the cliffside. This was the rift which Ben, Fetch, Marvell, Bold, Lenga, Daernar, Paud, and the Pyramiders had crossed, the bridge was that which Marvell had boldly traversed. She'd noticed the odd structures at the time but figured it were an issue to bring up at a later date. That date being the day of Daffeega's inauguration. And so there the thirteen stood, gazing upon the insidious structure beneath their feet.

"They look like crow eyes." Ben noted, "Something like enertombs."

Daffeega looked up from the runes that decorated the western well, "He's right. This one could contain bone."

"Aye," Bold agreed. He stood on the otherside of the group, reading the eastern well, "This one shadow."

"But both are empty." Fetch stated.

"If shae'd filled them with all the bone and shadow in the Catacombs, what could shae have done?" Tabuh asked.

"Anything." Daernar grunted.

"Anything?" Tou gulped.

"Anyding." Sharp concurred, "She'd bring back Creaton."

"Or worse." Lalmly added, "The Queen of Darkness."

“No.” Paud countered, “She wouldn’t share the Black Crown, she’d claim it herself.”

An eerie silence threatened to settle in but Marvell fended it off with a sigh of relief, “Good thing we blew her up!”

Before anyone else could join her in reveling in their victory, the fourteenth among them piped up. Though there were only the thirteen in the chasm, there was arguably a fourteenth conscious amongst them. Tenchi had left his brother topside but had brought the boy’s machine along. While Daffeega, Bold, and the Emperor himself could more than cover lighting their way, Tenchi still preferred to have some resources at his disposal *just* in case. The Globework had remained quiet for a while, but suddenly it chirped to life.

“Truth isn’t dead.”

The eerie silence that had threatened to settle prior now smashed into the thirteen like a tidal wave. Their hearts sank so abruptly that for a moment they thought the bridge had disconnected and they’d begun to plummet. Tenchi slapped his hand over the animatronic head’s beak, silencing the robot just as everyone stood on their tiptoes to hear what Atlas, the one and only, had to say next. He nudged Saint with the arm he cradled the Globework in, saying, “Truth is the Empire’s problem.”

Turning to Marvell, he said, “We’re not bounty hunters – not anymore.”

Marvell nodded.

Tenchi gestured towards Lalmly, “We’re more like Shisharay.”

Lalmly crossed her arms but didn’t disagree.

“Defenders of the people,” Tenchi continued, “not hunters of villains.”

Sharp and Paud couldn’t help but make eye contact at that comment.

“You’re not a dog,” he pointed at Fetch, then he pointed at Ben, “and you’re not a gmoat.” Then he opened his pointing hand to wave it at the rest of them, “Whoever we were before, we aren’t anymore.”

Fetch’s tail would’ve wagged if he weren’t in humanoid form, but Ben’s tail wagged for the both of them.

“Our nobility-”

Tabuh bowed her head.

“-our anonymity-”

Tou flinched.

“-and our infamy?”

Daernar’s shoulders sagged.

“We’re starting fresh.” Tenchi smiled towards Daffeega, “And so too are our enemies.”

Tenchi clasped Bold on the shoulder, “There’s enough problems underneath Solaris for us to fix before we start chasing after this or that necromancer.”

“Aye.” Bold agreed.

Finally, Tenchi turned back to Saint and jerked his thumb towards the Cloches far above, “Thanks to that little speech back there, the world knows we’re coming.” He bowed low to the Emperor then straightened up and said, “Now we’ll take it from here.”

“So be it.” Saint let out a curt chuckle, but the twinkle in his unpatched eye softened the potential derision of the scoff into a well meaning remark. Turning, the Emperor headed towards the stairs leading to the Cloches side of the chasm. With his back turned, he chuckled again, seemingly musing to himself despite speaking loud enough for all to hear, “That’s the wonderful thing about prophecies. If they’re true, then I don’t have to do anything at all.”

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A strange creature rose from the waters lapping at the mountainous beaches north of Katirjaramoh. The thing was an amalgamation of barnacles and bones. Clumps of coral crusted across his ribs like armor while crustaceans crawled about within his chest cavity. Kelp had replaced his joints and sashes of seaweed served to act as skin. The arid Batloen breeze was a relief after days spent being tugged this way and that by the cold tides at the bottom of the sea.

That said, Smidt didn’t really feel the freezing ocean floor anymore than he did the scalding desert surface, all he had felt the last eleven days had been his conscious and that of his master’s. Except, in the last few days, his master’s presence had essentially disappeared. He knew this couldn’t mean she was dead – for if she were, so to would he be – but he still couldn’t explain his newfound freedom. Expecting her return, he’d kept the course. As he breeched the surface of his destination, his master finally returned to his mind.

“SMIDT.”

Smidt cringed at Truth’s voice, screeching across his consciousness.

What? His mind’s voice barked back.

“CHANGE OF PLANS.”

He knew she didn’t have to scream but he also knew that tone policing the necromancer would not improve his material conditions. He stopped trudging forward. As the surf slid back out to sea, he dug his phalanges into the sand and waited for her next command.

“COME TO ICELOAD.”

Had Smidt lungs to breathe, he would’ve sighed deeply. Instead, he simply turned west and started marching oncemore.

The End.

Map

1. Coraljen
2. Aidaros
3. Men
4. Fort Gonchi
5. Kilko
6. Shwayjen
7. Gongchan
8. Jinurdojen
9. Baejen
10. Sanction
11. Submarine Canyon
12. Malpirendaw
13. Binchingjen (lost town in the Wobniar Woods)
14. Shanhubee (above water: the Coral Bridge)
15. Aquaros
16. Anura Island
17. Nevomnrock
18. Port Dunleh
19. Yelah
20. Nahreh on the Sentrakle River
21. Drebstar on the Nevomnflow River
22. Fort Bluff
23. Shata
24. Black Lake City on the Black River
25. Snowforge
26. Hale Villages
27. Ipativy and Fort Vanii
28. Crosscurrent on Star Lake on the Etihw River
29. Etihw City
30. Knomeloe
31. Glacia on Low Crotch River
32. Mount Krynor & Queen's Canyon
33. Vaniakle
34. Argolian Temple
35. Zviecoff and Medull River
36. Poricoff
37. Medullbrik
38. Recercoff
39. Mount Kurr
40. Ardeana, on Middle River Lake
41. Fort Dunvar
42. Morainakle
43. Latipacoff and the Latipac Canals
44. Fort Cannon
45. Arusio
46. Mystsilatipac (Village Region)
47. Condatus
48. Christcoff
49. Naru
50. Southbay
51. Icewalk
52. Uran on the Uran River
53. Bearncoff
54. Ursine Mountains, Southpoint, and Fort Zannon
55. Castle Icelore
56. Icelore City
57. Korrakle
58. Dragon Islands (North-Kein, West-Rein, East-Bein)
59. Chidrasachatown
60. Shametown (Ancient Chanetown)
61. Mountaintown and the Hills of Shame
62. Dnailloh and the Fire Mountains
63. Medallion
64. Schmoak
65. Port Nowhere
66. Habba, the Hot Valley, and the Southern Mountains
67. Space City and the River of Uthemarc in the Three Part Desert
68. Tlow-Vare and the Rift Mountains
69. Farra and Fire Lake
70. Katirjaramoh
71. Oturani
72. Rift City
73. Acirfa
74. Koravahnt City and the Great Rift
75. Hannavas
76. Ezidixo City
77. Eastfoot and Westfoot
78. Coose
79. Draebuhl
80. West Meriamuhl
81. Dakrib surrounded by the Northern and Southern Forks of the Kishastand River
82. Yelkaovuhl on the Bar River (river that wraps around the Kishastand River Valley)
83. Ehcatsum
84. Dogtown and Eninac River
85. Kat Mountain
86. Enivuhl
87. Mountpond
88. Porton

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| 89. Meriamuhl | 123. Rah and the Rah River | 153. Factory Town |
| 90. Blugri | 124. Toxica | 154. Inwood and the Bay of Bamba |
| 91. Mountainside | 125. Eastport & Northern and Southern Fou Lakes | 155. Sodpaz |
| 92. Mericor | 126. Westport & Fou River | 156. Mystwood and Mystwood City and the Mysty River |
| 93. South Eson and the Eson River | 127. Fou Town | 157. Blue Island |
| 94. North Eson | 128. Swampville and Escano Swamps | 158. Industropolis |
| 95. Basher and Cage River | 129. Kraddonville Islands | 159. South Fang and the Stoned Mountains |
| 96. Cormacton and the Polestand Mountains | 130. Oreh Island | 160. Hawk Eye or the People's City and the People's River |
| 97. Coridahk | 131. Harp and the South Ring River | 161. Calleranta |
| 98. Odneuni | 132. Chick-Chaw and the Winged River | 162. Hawkvale |
| 99. Cage Town & Zion's Stronghold & Zion's Mountain & Swamps of Cormac | 133. Kine | 163. Tidtoe |
| 100. Koul | 134. Tenta and the East and West Ring River | 164. West Fang |
| 101. Riverbush City and Riverbush and Kou River | 135. Sereibis and Sereibis River | 165. Gogo Grove |
| 102. North Cori | 136. Dratherman | 166. Hormah's Isle |
| 103. Mountainvuhl | 137. Jungle Port on the Jungle Canal | 167. Skirm |
| 104. Sandtown | 138. East Nevomnu on the Brown River | 168. Mount Ahsik and the River of Fire |
| 105. Tween Rivers | 139. Jungloe | 169. Chentah |
| 106. Fort Cage | 140. Hightop and Hightop Hills | 170. Leege |
| 107. Fort Crown | 141. Panta and the Pillar of the Past | 171. Hormarah, The Acropoliskia, and the Hills of Dalvary |
| 108. Fort Blunder | 142. Kakal | 172. Canaan |
| 109. Ragashi | 143. Bash, Rath, Paph (in order from West to East) | 173. Reege |
| 110. Mountain Zou and the Raga Mountains | 144. Fox Island | 174. Bila and the Chane's Wall |
| 111. Dagar and the Peace River | 145. Dragonrok | 175. Jaza and the Rage River |
| 112. Banai | 146. Babasachaloe | 176. Wallend and Fort Doom |
| 113. Green Town | 147. Babaramoh | 177. Niek and Chane's Bay |
| 114. Won, Ash Lake, and the Green River | 148. Machine City | 178. Antariloe |
| 115. Bay Town | 149. Savannaramoh | 179. Barrotown |
| 116. Inton & the Swamps of Inton | 150. Dragonfork | 180. Nezorff |
| 117. Ta-Nissassa | 151. North Fang | 181. Goon |
| 118. Kemplor & Saluman River | 152. Tubakamoh | 182. Blimp on the River of Life |
| 119. Portville | | 183. Manaville |
| 120. Suinus | | 184. Swampwood |

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| 185. Whitewood | 214. Doggenham, the |
| 186. Phinn on the Phinn | Citadel, & Meriam River |
| River | 215. Eeron |
| 187. Fork of Light | 216. Collah and Collar |
| 188. Riverbend | River |
| 189. Woodland Ridge | 217. Arden & the Arden |
| 190. Weatherbee | Mountains (aka Scruffy |
| (Christian Isles) | Mountains) |
| 191. Greentree | 218. Yipper |
| (Christian Isles) | 219. Powtown |
| 192. Christon (Christian | 220. Paugh |
| Isles) | 221. Woove and Wolf |
| 193. Cliff Creek Village | River and Tuft Woods |
| on The Christian's River | 222. Marabel and |
| 194. Petara | Marble River |
| 195. Johnstown | 223. Soto-Na |
| 196. Tail City | 224. Ahsikloe |
| 197. Fantum | 225. Dodcha |
| 198. Doorum, the | 226. Dickums and |
| Savior's Effigy, and the | Dickums River and |
| Glass Lake | Dickums Mountains |
| 199. Tallum (and the | 227. Eman-Modnar |
| Kahn Channel) | 228. Elohssa |
| 200. Trader's Fortress | 229. Tael |
| 201. Vinn Town | 230. Tiptown |
| 202. Graand City and | 231. The Cathedral |
| Graand Galla on the | |
| Dabadi Bay south of the | |
| Graand Pyramids | |
| 203. Light Sands & the | |
| Giant's Temple | |
| 204. Mormument, the | |
| Red Obelisk, and the | |
| Diamond Back Mountains | |
| 205. Bullum | |
| 206. Akaum & Kisha's | |
| Statue | |
| 207. Dooran & the | |
| Anubian Shrine | |
| 208. Graize | |
| 209. Lacka | |
| 210. Harn | |
| 211. Dogtown and River | |
| Nase | |
| 212. Kuru | |
| 213. Drule | |

