

# THE GAHIJI SAGA



SETH PEN

## The Hunted

She hit the ground running. The dash was haphazard. Having cleared the railing of the boardwalk, she'd turned a nine-foot jump into a twelve and the ground she was now running on was muck. It was more of a scramble than a run. She scraped and clawed her way onward, into the shadows of the next boardwalk as the stones of her pursuers crashed into the mud behind her.

"Ah'll bae donum." She whispered with a thick Sentry accent, cursing her fate even as she swore to overcome it. "Ah'm saein that spaech."

Her arrival under the second deck had sent the prior inhabitants scurrying: rats. Big, fat, cat-sized rats reared up from the sludge and took off like a tidal wave. Meanwhile, she skidded to a halt and clung to the first column she could. Pressing her body against it, she waited until she could hear the feet of her pursuers thunder overhead. Their slurring and spitting paused for a moment as their clamor kept them from keeping tabs on their prey. They hushed one another as they hesitated.

One of the rats was taking their sweet time, dogpaddling through the murk by her ankles. Reaching down, she grabbed the little rodent and tossed it after the others. KERPLUNK!

*"THERE IT GOES!"*

*"GET IT BOY'S!"*

*"FREAK!"*

*"MONSTER!"*

The gaggle was off to the races once more and she stayed put. Soon she could no longer hear the gang and instead the sound of the rally filtered down through the dusty planks to her pointy, elven ears.

"Selu!" She murmured.

Venturing out of the shadows, she climbed up one of the corner pilings. Clambering up to where the post met the deck, she peered over the edge. The gang of teens had yet to figure out they were chasing rats, giving her the all-clear. Slipping between the banisters, she rushed down the boardwalk towards the demonstration. She didn't slow as buildings rose up on either side of her, hiding her from the goons. Time was also against her. If anything, she picked up speed.

Soon she was running between citizens. Ducking under the legs of looming bears and squirming around the couples of elves swaying together. Folks were none too pleased with her interruptions but they were far too entranced by the speaker.

*"A minotaur, in Sentrakle?"*

*"Talkin unitay, no less!"*

*"Populism, flopulism-"*

*"Hush, hae's spaekin!"*

Then she saw him. Peering between the hammer and drill of two masons and past the helmeted heads of two welders, she saw him!

Commander Lanigiro raised his hand in a grand wave to the crowd. His long, furry fingers cut through the air. The columns of smoke in the distance bent as if bowing. The pale, Sentrakle sun suddenly seemed to warm. The stooped shoulders of the laborers rolled back as their spines stiffened to attention – so much so that she had to find a new spot to see the stage!

Weaseling through the legs of the men and women, she found the barrel-like bottom of a jib crane. Deftly, she climbed up past the wheels and gears then shimmied up the column to the brace that jutted up diagonally towards the boom. Clinging to the machinery like a monkey, she returned her gaze to the giant man on the platform.

She caught him mid sentence, “-all of Iceload is welcome in the Knighthood – Ipativy and Sentry, Aznaru and Azuran, nellaf and minotaur – only honor is required.”

The smokestacks of Nahreh seemed to thin behind the minotaur. The factories, which usually loomed over her, appeared to be sinking into the swamplands beneath the boardwalks. Meanwhile, the Commander’s podium did not quiver.

“The capacity for honor is in all of us!” He beat his chest, then held out his hand. “Like a match in your hand,” He pinched his fingers then flicked. “you need only to strike it! It is completely up to you. It is never too late and certainly never too early. Whether you’re an old man-”

He grasped the edges of the dais and leaned over it. His snout turned towards the crane and his wide oaken eyes landed on her.

“-or a young girl.” He smiled at her, “Choose honor!”

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Snow swirled up from the canyons faster than it could fall from the heavens, burying the town of Vaniakle where it huddled in the shadow of the mountains. Great mounds of white filled the roads and wooded trails like thick layers of mortar while overflow spilled out into incessant avalanches that thundered down the bluffs only to be replenished by the deluge plummeting from the peaks above. Louder still than the bombardment of snow was the howling gale that surged through the village like a demonic spirit, assaulting any who dared mar the blizzard’s unblemished alabaster.

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

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

Gahiji strode immediately towards the hearth. A cluster of locals eyed him as he approached, then they turned back inward as he passed. He stopped to the side of the fireplace, letting the snow melt off his cloak and kit bag while the smell of burning wood warmed his soul. He watched the fire flicker through his hands and trained his ears to hone in on the clique behind him.

They scooted their chairs closer together. Their whispers hid under the crackling flame, but Gahiji caught a phrase here or there:

*“Who could she be?”*

*“He’s out there, under the snow.”*

*“They did it.”*

*“They took it too far!”*

With his head down, Gahiji peered over his lapel. There were two groups in the tavern: the locals in the armchairs by the fire and the soldiers at the bar. Though the soldiers seemed a rowdy bunch, their winter coats were uncreased and their boots were still stiff and rigid. There wasn’t a place on the continent where one didn’t need proper winter gear and few places as cold

as Vaniakle but when it came to Vaniakle, there were few places colder than the space between the locals and the soldiers. Outside of the fire light but before the bar, between the two clusters, a darkness loomed as deep as the ravines that split the village.

Aside from Gahiji, it seemed only the bartender could cross the divide. Effectively warmed, Gahiji turned from the hearth to find a place to sit and stow his bag. When he did, he made another survey of the tavern and accidentally locked eyes with the gentleman behind the bar. The man had large brown eyes. His wide skinny hands wrapped steins with long spidery fingers. His face was lacerated with the black markings of a nellaf and contorted to an expression similar to that of the locals. Keeping his lips pursed, he hid his frown behind focus. As if pouring a beer wasn't something he'd done a hundred times before, his brow also gave it away. Unfurled as if there was nothing on his mind. Gahiji knew well the look of someone straining to act unbothered. Smacking down the last soldier's glass, the bartender muttered something to the men then dried his hands on the towel at his hip and marched out from behind his palisade, making a beeline for Gahiji.

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

The man was a giant. He was sprawling out of his chair. As a bearn, their race towered over elves, nellafs, and spirits but this gentleman appeared to be large even for his kind. His peculiarity didn't stop there. While bearns were typically covered in dark brown fur, this lanky lad's coat was as black as an unlucky cat – and unlucky he seemed: his final significant feature was a patch clasped over his right eye.

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

Then the bartender stepped directly into Gahiji's line of view.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

Gahiji leaned out of his chair to look around the bartender.

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

The bartender whirled around and hollered. “YA GODI CROWS, LEAVE THAT BOY ALONE!”

The locals in the armchairs by the fire fell silent. The only sound in the pub was the nervous laughter of the five soldiers. They raised their hands then slowly backed away from the table in the corner. The black furred bearn stayed behind. Once the jesters were a few paces away, he reached up and extinguished the candle in the lantern with two fingers then plopped back into his seat. As he slipped back into the shadows to sulk, the bartender stepped into Gahiji's new line of sight.

“Crimpsin tiad...” He muttered, shaking his head until Gahiji met his gaze. Then he asked, “Any food?”

“I’m sorry.” Gahiji settled back in his chair. “I don’t eat or drink.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Unlike any of you.” Gahiji assured him.

“Like one of you?” The man asked.

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

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

“Yes.” Gahiji said.

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

“I’d like that room!” Gahiji exclaimed.

The bartender turned around, one eyebrow raised.

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

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

Gahiji slid on a glove and shook Birger’s hand, “Call me G.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yea, the Mountain Pass does too.” Birger said, “No one aside from you has come or gone since.”

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

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

“Suicide.” Gahiji explained.

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

Gahiji’s eyes switched back to the soldiers. They’d gotten up for a refill. Gahiji could hear some of their comments at the bar:

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

*“No, he asked for a glass of ice.”*

*“Ice - Oh yeah! He could use the eyes!”*

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

“Did you know the elf?” Gahiji asked.

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

“Could they be lying?” Gahiji asked.

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

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

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

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

A stein smashed to the floor behind them and the military boys burst into raucous laughter. The substitute bartender threw up his hands and left the bar. Birger cursed, gave Gahiji a nod, then headed back to work. The soldiers all pointed at one another then began to fight over the remaining four mugs of beer, sloshing more booze over the broken glass. Birger arrived ready to crack heads. Pushing and shoving the soldiers aside – which led to more spills – he fought to clear the scene of the crime only to inspire even more discord. As Birger stooped to pick up the larger shards of glass, one especially bold cadet decided to pour out the rest of their ale on the back of the bartender’s head. Birger reared up swinging.

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

The fight at the bar had calmed down. The soldiers were still snickering but apologizing, the main offender was tending to a broken nose, and Birger was fetching the mop and broom, pontificating about how the culprits would have to do the cleanup. He saw Gahiji move towards the door. His eyes widened at the sight of the sword on his shoulder but with a shake of his head he got back to work reprimanding the cadets.

Gahiji opened the door, stood firm against the immediate gust of winter, then stepped out into the cold.

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Wind coursed through the village, carrying snow with it like a river, before careening over the ridge and pummeling down the trail to the abandoned abbey below. Living parishioners forsake services during the Winter, but the dead stayed year-round. Their sable obelisks jutted up from the earth defiantly, impaling the belligerent blizzard gusts. Snow burst in all directions but stopped short of the chapel. It was as if the squall had some sort of reverence for the house of worship – but the storm, burying the gravestones as it was, had no respect for the dead. The blizzard wasn't alone in that regard. The one living creature in the graveyard was in the midst of desecration.

The black furred bearn stood in the center of the cemetery. His eye patch was in a coat pocket. Among the deceased he didn't have to hide, he could look them in their faces as he stole from them. While the eye could no longer see the nuances of a person's expression, he could visualize the fluctuations in their emotions. One's light flared when angry or distraught and dimmed when content or – in this case – dead. Still, the dead held on to some energy. Much of it locked away in their bones, but some remained in their flesh. This energy was called shadows and it called to the bearn's cold, dark eye.

Reaching forwards, he rocked his shoulder blades back and called to the shadows. Darkness rose from the graves like steam, squirming out of the snow like charmed cobras. Then they struck. They latched onto his body then twisted around as they traveled up to the marble obsidian taking residence in his right eye socket. The orb slurped in the shadows and sent shockwaves of euphoria through his body. His skull lulled on the end of his spine and his eyes rolled back into his head and-

*GRAR!*

Fire burst into life behind him with the roar of a lion. The blizzard evaporated and the clouds split apart as the flame stabbed the night sky, splattering the facades of the mountains, the

village above, and the cemetery below with an amber glow. The brilliance was blinding to both his living eye and the eye he had sacrificed, but it ended almost as soon as it began. The flare evaporated and the storm rushed back into place. Beneath the rift, stood the culprit: the spirit.

Standing on top of the snow, Gahiji's cloak billowed in the wind. He held a claymore with both hands. The blade shone crimson, reflecting the light of the stone embedded in the hilt. His silver eyes bore into the bear's.

"Don't run."

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

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

The bear's pitiful timbre returned as he shrieked, "I didn't do it!"

The serpentine tendril swirling around the cadet split into five separate spheres then hurled outwards like cannon balls. Gahiji surged forwards to meet them. Raising his sword, he cut through the first. It split in two and fizzled out of existence. He ducked under the second then hurdled the third. His blade had stopped shining red, shifting to glow a glacial white just as a long shaft of ice shot up from the snow to skewer the fourth projectile. Gahiji swung his sword low, obliterating the pillar of ice and sending the top half hurtling to smash the fifth sphere. And then Gahiji was on the bear. Skidding to a halt, he raised the broadsword and stopped with the tip of the blade tickling the hard surface of the bear's sacrificed eye.

"Don't move." Gahiji commanded.

The bear whimpered in response. "I didn't do it!"

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

"I can prove it wasn't me!" The bear proceeded.

"I'm not here for-"

"I can tell you where she is!"

Gahiji tapped the tip of his sword on the bear's eye, causing the cadet to freeze as rigid as the tombstones surrounding them.

"I'm here for who turned you."

The bear gulped. "They turned Skarbek too."

"Who were they?" Gahiji pressed.

"Truth." The bear answered. "They went by Truth."

Lowering his sword, Gahiji took a step back from the shadowmancer.

The bear knew he was trapped. Elevation was all that separated the chapel from the village and the narrow passage between the two was already clogged with knights. Though his ears weren't as fine-tuned as Gahiji's, his crow eye cut through the swirling snow and saw the shapes of the soldiers closing in. Peculiar, he couldn't see Gahiji with the sacrificed eye. He had noticed the spirit's radiant energy in the tavern. The foreigner's glow was the second brightest shine he'd ever seen and yet now his crow eye saw nothing. Some magic protected the spirit. *Could that magic protect me?* He had to hope.

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

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

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

Gahiji continued with the cold disposition. "The Knights are soft on mancers—"

"The Knights are soft on *nothing* in the mountains." The bearn hissed before curbing himself. He gulped, then pleaded, "Take me with you."

Gahiji paused. The lone shadowmancer was not his problem and certainly would be no asset to his search, however if he was telling the truth then how could Gahiji abandon him. He'd sentenced many a mancer to exile but not one to face execution. Then again, he wasn't the only mancer in Vaniakle. *Skarbek*. Gahiji's eyes narrowed.

"Where is Skarbek?" He demanded.

The back doors of the chapel flew open. A squad of armored men and women filed out. Two stopped on the right side of the steps and two stopped on the left. They took off the crossbows strapped to their backs and began to latch their strings. On the shoulder of one of the four archers was a tiny little red dragon. It huddled between the bearn's head and high collar, hiding from the snow in the fur of the soldier's neck. A steady stream of smoke emitted from its tiny nostrils, puffing in spurts like the dots and dashes of Morse code.

Five soldiers descended the steps, three of which drew swords. The final knight remained in the double doorway of the church. This tenth soldier stood with her chest puffed out and chin tilted towards the heavens such that she had to look down the crooked arch of her nose to glare at the two men in the graveyard. Snow fell out of the folds of her tricorn hat as she glowered. Her overcoat matched the hat. She appeared to be in full dress blues – fitting for the venue though there were no funerals being held just yet.

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

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

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

"I can't if you run." Gahiji barked back.

"Drop the sword, spirit!" The officer in the doorway ordered.

Gahiji didn't budge except for his eyes. They shifted from the black furred bearn to the nellaf in uniform. His scowl was all the knight needed to know regarding Gahiji's intentions. She lowered her upturned nose, put a hand on the hilt of the saber at her hip, and marched down the steps to confront him.

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

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

The four soldiers on the stairs loaded their crossbows. Three of the five soldiers with swords stopped before the detective and the shadowmancer. The other two stood back and pulled out handcuffs. The commanding officer arrived beside the first three and stopped. Squinting with her dark nellaf eyes, she waited for Gahiji to respond.

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

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

The officer's glare didn't relent, but she gave the "drop the sword" bit a break. Pointing at the black furred bearn, she said, "That's Prahvate Retskcirt." Despite being a nellaf, Korrak's accent was thick as a pale elf from the boreal forests of Sentrakle, quite unlike the dialects of those native to the Blue Ridges. "Hae your necromancer?"

"No." Gahiji didn't lower his sword but he did take a slow step forward, putting himself between the private and the Captain. "He's a shadowmancer."

"Shadow slanger, bone bender," Korrak shrugged, "Ah don't give a farakin-"

"My necromancer has already left." Gahiji interjected.

"Impossible." The woman spat in the snow.

Gahiji shook his head. "Not for a mancer of their caliber."

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

"I was late." Gahiji stated.

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

"I intend to fix the damage they've done." Gahiji replied.

"How's that?" The nellaf asked.

He nodded towards Retskcirt. "By capturing the necromancer's disciples."

"What about the one your necromancer killed?" Korrak retorted. "You gonna brang Prahvate Skarbek back from the dead?"

"Skarbek isn't dead!" Private Retskcirt blurted. All eyes turned to the black furred bearn. The Captain strolled forward, beyond the safety of her line, and marched between the bearn and the spirit. The bearn towered over his superior and yet it was he who gulped. Keeping his head staring straight ahead at Gahiji, he continued, "They-"

"You're one big, black rat, huh?" Korrak hissed, "You know what wae do to rats?" She stomped her boot in the snow and smeared it as if extinguishing a cigarette, "Same thang wae do to mancers."

The statement struck Gahiji like the blizzard had when he left the tavern. This was not his first trip to the frozen continent nor to the particularly frigid Blue Ridges, yet like the cold it was easy to forget the intensity the moment you've warmed back up. Iceload had been changing in recent years. Each region radicalizing in different directions. A company of Honor Knights in the south might as soon wage war with those in the north than join with them against some outside threat. *And where is this lot from*, Gahiji wondered, *certainly not from around here*. His wide silver eyes returned to Private Retskcirt as he put pondering aside to prepare for the problem at present.

"Captain, Sir," Retskcirt begged, "I made a mistake-"

"Ah'll say..." Korrak crooned.

"-if I turn Private Skarbek in-"

"How's lahf in prison sound?" The Captain offered, looking to her troops to confirm, "Wae could use the frae labor, couldn't wae?"

Retskcirt seemed shocked. Glancing down at the nellaf, he met her eyes for the first time, stammering, "R-r-really?"

"Ah offer to spare your lahf and you call mae a laher?" Korrak scoffed.

"No, Captain, Sir!" Retskcirt yelped.

The Captain smirked, "You ain't got anay options, Prahvate."

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

“Forsetai Straet...” Korrak muttered.

Everyone turned – even Gahiji, as he followed along instinctually. They craned their necks and peered up through the onslaught of snow, scanning the ridge to where the village blended in with the shadows of the mountains. Vaniakle was so small, one couldn’t help but glance though none could make out much – none except one: the shadowmancer.

While everyone watched for different shades of darkness, Private Retskcirt saw distant flickering lights of life. This called his attention away from the alleyway. Instead, he looked towards the tavern. The patrons were filing out the front, cast out into the storm mere minutes before midnight, while one last-call client staggered in through the back.

A glimmer beside him took his focus from the town summit. His right eye rolled around in its socket until it locked back onto the detective. The spirit’s shine had returned. *What’s different?* Retskcirt wondered just as he spotted the answer. A medallion glistened in a pocket of Gahiji’s coat – a medallion that his organic eye had seen dangling from the spirit’s neck moments prior. His heart fidgeted in his chest and his stomach squirmed as a scheme began to manifest in his shadow muddled mind.

The signaler continued. “It’s bad. Captain Medull is asking for your presence and-”

“That bad?” Korrak remarked.

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

The Captain whirled around to shout at the soldiers behind the swordsmen, “You heard the man, get those cuffs on Retskcirt!” As they jumped to action, the Captain turned to Gahiji, “Listen hare, spirit, Assload maybae part of the Empahr but wae do thangs differentlay **under Commander Lanaegaero.**”

“I’ve noticed.” Gahiji replied.

“Well *know this*, spirit,” Korrak snarled, “you better thank twahce fore interfaring with anythang else tonaht.”

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

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

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

The labyrinth of Vaniakle encircled her. Main Street cut straight through the maze, but she stuck to the alleyways, zigzagging through the neighborhoods as she arched towards safety.

Her mistakes were behind her now, she'd covered her final track. The journal tucked in her chest pocket was the last link to her past. It bounced against her, jabbing her breast to cause just enough discomfort to remind her it was there. She was thinking about that when she realized she'd run into a dead end. The wall rose before her as if it had suddenly decided to jut up out of the snow. Her crow eye didn't pick up the inanimate barrier and her biological eye had been too bleary to see. She turned around and froze.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Boys!” The soldier yelped.

The soldiers whirled around to silence their friend only to see what he'd seen: the elven woman.

She took a step back but could already feel the wind curling off the wall behind her.

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

There was no interrogation. A series of thoughts shot through their minds. Like insects in a hive, they all did the same calculus and arrived at the same conclusion. The flare plus the crow eye plus the fact that she had seen them leave the brothel equaled they could not let her escape. They stepped towards her together.

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

They froze. While she hadn't spoken in the Sacred Tongue, it was her voice that stopped them. Again, thoughts flashed through their minds, only this time they couldn't come to a clear conclusion. The soldiers swiveled their heads, exchanging glances. She sounded just like

Skarbek. Turning back to the woman, the five realized that she looked quite a bit like Skarbek. The big bear shook his head as if knocking the mystery out of his mind. What was clear was what must be done. He drew his sword and charged.

She drew her own as shadows began to unravel from her eye. Rushing forward, she raised her saber to stop his claymore. The nellaf beside the blade master arrived with their saber drawn too and with the shadowmancer's arm deflecting the bear's attack, her torso was open to the nellaf. His blade cut through her jacket but rather than hitting flesh, it stuck fast in the leather-bound diary and wrenched it from her body. The assault didn't draw any blood but it spun her, taking her support away from the prior parry. Committing to the spin, she twisted out of the way as the claymore crashed down behind her. With her back to the soldiers, she would've been done, but she was not just a swordsman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wielding a large two-handed sword, the elf nearly split her in two. Sparks of obsidian energy shot in all directions as the blade collided with the shield. She held the shield with the

wounded arm, thus even though the buckler held firm, she buckled. Falling to one knee, her head was vulnerable. She hastily sliced at her foe's legs with her sword. He tilted his blade to block. She shot up from the snow, keeping her shield pressed flat against his blade, and drove her shadow-made sword up under his ribs. The stab lifted the elf off his feet and he fell flat on his back as she tore the sword free.

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

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

"You coulda gotten away with killin that queer," the nellaf snarled, "but now you're faraked!"

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

"Skarbek?" He gasped.

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

"Please," he sputtered, "h-h-help!"

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

*I need to leave.* She thought. She pulled her sword from the body below her then took the man's crossbow and slung the strap over her shoulder. As she shimmied the quiver out from under the corpse, she looked back towards the dead end. The bodies were still warm, their lights still bright in her crow eye. As their blood continued to flow out of them, their shadows remained trapped, calling to her like the dancing amber of a warm fire. Glancing down, she strapped the quiver belt around her waist then paused. *I need to leave!* She thought again, even as she stood up and marched away from the only way out.

Kneeling by the next body, she told herself: *There's time for one more.* She held out both hands palms up above the bearn as if worshiping at an altar. His fur bristled. Tufts ripped free like the grains of a dandelion. A silky black gas rose, snaking its way up to Skar's eye. Pure ecstasy rushed through her. Suddenly her fear and pain all felt like distant memories – and her urgency had been completely abandoned. One by one, she made her way through the rest of the bodies and devoured the intoxicating darkness.

By the time she finished reaping and started back towards the tavern, she was delirious with euphoria and had completely lost track of what she had been doing when she'd gotten cornered on Forseti Street. Her journal, mangled by the sword of the soldier, had been left behind. Forgotten, in a pool of melted snow and blood.

- - -

The snow was churned up and painted in blood, striped like the dark markings that curled around Captain Korrak's skin. Where the blood pooled too thick to seep into the snow, it sat slowly freezing like clumps of cherry pie. Five bodies lay strewn across the blind alley. Though the living tried not to lay eyes on the gore, they couldn't escape the smell. Even in the cold, the odor was thick enough to punch up through their frozen nostrils. An acrid metallic scent, like they were inside a forge and not outside in an icy backstreet.

The first corpse lay flat on their back. Their head was more submerged in the snow than the rest of their body, so much so that the snow caved in around them and buried their face. A minaret of ice rose from the crater, drawing observers' eyes upward to the roof that extended out over the unfortunate soul. There was one large gap in the maw of icicles. Such a fate was not completely unusual, but the state of the rest of the knight's body was.

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

The Captain jumped back, as did the soldiers behind him. Gahiji and the hand-cuffed Private Retskcirt didn't flinch.

"Shadowmancy." The spirit explained.

"So there's two of them?" The nellaf growled.

She glowered at her prisoner and then at the detective before turning to the captain that stood at the end of the alley. Captain Medull was an older soldier – especially old to be a captain. His expression was either stoic or his drooping brow and sagging cheeks created an effective mask to suggest such. At his feet, sat a mancer hound. Black swirls crisscrossed the beast's white fur, like the stripes of a nellaf, and its eyes were bright, pale blue like its elven master. Its tail thumped in the snow in rhythm with Medull, who tapped a book in his hand with his index finger. It was a small leatherbound notebook that had been nearly torn in half.

"This journal was Private Skarbek's." Medull said.

"Hae did this?" Korrak asked as she started down the alleyway towards Medull. She had to step high and wide to avoid the blood and bodies of her fallen comrades. "Godai pale elf."

Medull and his dog shook their heads, "*She* did this." Master and monster nodded towards the building beside them, "I've got two inside talking to the residents--"

"The hookers?" Korrak snapped.

"-they accuse a tall blonde, lady elf." Medull proceeded unperturbed, "They say the boys recognized her."

"The one seen leaving Skarbek's dorm." Gahiji mused. He shifted his eyes to watch Retskcirt but didn't turn his head to alert the others. The bearn's head was bowed and his eyes were still. Either he knew nothing or he was completely disassociating. Gahiji turned back to Medull, theorizing, "They caught their alibi and she killed them."

“Shae’s prolly just another whore.” Korrak grunted, “If shae’s aeven rael.”

“Would be unlike the ladies to kill their clientele,” Medull replied to Korrak as he and his hound watched Gahiji, “but even more unlikely for a stranger to arrive in Vaniakle unnoticed.”

“And yet,” Korrak grumbled, “Detective Jay hare says his bone bender already done came and went. Laeving us with a shadow slinging traitor and Skarbek’s mysteray woman...”

Korrak seemed prepared to ramble on, but Medull interjected, “Captain, I believe Skarbek *is* the mystery woman.”

Korrak stared blank faced back.

Medull handed her the torn journal.

While Korrak looked it over, Gahiji trudged down the alley to examine the bodies. The next, an elf, lay not far from the first. Flecks of snow decorated their cheeks, making their altered flesh look like speckled onyx. The victim’s eyes were wide. His hands clutched the wound in his gut. The next victim was another elf with another wound in the stomach, the color once more leached from their flesh. Fourth was a bearn. Two arrows stuck out of his back. He lay on his side against the left wall of the alley. His tongue lolled out of his snout. It was a murky black, like dried lava flow. Then the fifth.

The two officers were observing this final victim now too. The body sat upright. His left arm lay palm up in his lap, slit from wrist to shoulder, but that wasn’t the most significant laceration. The nellaf’s throat had been cut wide open. The cut was horizontal and clean.

“Donum.” Korrak cursed, “Ah godai execution.”

“It appears so.” Medull nodded.

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

“Five on one?” Gahiji interjected, looking to Medull, “Did the women say who started it?”

“*Who started it?*”

Korrak whirled on Gahiji, jabbing her finger into his coat. Gahiji’s hand jumped to his sword and a red light emanated like a lion’s mane between the hilt and sheath but whether Korrak saw it or not, she’d already backed off. She yanked her finger away to point at the dead soldier behind her.

“That shadow slanger turned them to glass!” She shoved past Gahiji and stormed back down the alleyway towards Private Retskcirt, ranting, “You’re gonna tell us where Skarbek is or wae’re gonna have to assume you had something to do with it and wae’ll slit your furry farakin-”

Arriving in front of the Private, Korrak reached up and grabbed him by throat. The soldiers at the end of the alley averted their gaze, cringing, while Captain Medull and the mancer hound simply shook their heads. Gahiji’s grasp tightened around his sword but it loosened a moment later because as soon as Korrak’s fingers wrapped around the bearn’s throat, he disappeared. Private Retskcirt’s face exploded into a plume of inky darkness. Korrak jumped back with a shriek as the rest of Retskcirt’s body dissolved before her. She reached out to grab a tendril but all the darkness disappeared, melting into the shadows of Forseti Street.

Korrak turned slowly, like an old machine having to grind through rusty gears. Her head was tilted at an angle and her face was quickly filling up with blood. She too seemed she may suddenly explode.

Captain Medull stepped in front of Gahiji, putting himself between the two as if Korrak might calm if Gahiji was simply out of her sight. He pointed at the journal in Korrak's hand, "Skarbek's at Charq's Tavern – or at least Charq will know where she is. Retskcirt..." he glanced back at Gahiji.

"He can't be far." Gahiji stated, "If he knew where Skarbek was--"

"--then he'd likely be headed to the tavern as well." Medull concluded. He looked back down the alley towards his stewing compatriot, "We'll still need a full sweep of Vaniakle – in case I'm wrong – but you take your battery on to Charq's. I'll clean up here and signal the Major. He'll send dogs and I'll meet up with them but you ought to get a head start." Medull gestured to the snow swirling around him, "Before this storm buries any more tracks."

His dog marched forward and emitted a muffled woof.

Medull grunted to concur, then said aloud, "Take Loki. In case it's a trap."

Loki rustled his shoulders then trotted down the alley to Korrak.

"Signal me the second you find either of them: Retskcirt, Skarbek, or Charq."

"Ah'll signal when they're dead." Korrak hissed.

She turned her back on the detective and her fellow captain then stormed down the alley. Loki paused and looked back at Medull. Medull's lips had parted to reel Korrak back but he stopped himself and simply shook his head. The two privates left behind with him shifted in their boots. They were shivering despite their winter coats and bearn fur. After a moment, he raised his hand to signify for the hound to proceed and Loki did so without another beat of hesitation.

Korrak turned the corner and her troops started to follow.

Medull leaned over to Gahiji and asked, "Are they going to be slaughtered?"

The two subordinates froze.

"That's up to Korrak." Gahiji stated.

Then the detective followed the battery out, accompanying them back to the tavern.

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They didn't see him coming. He stood on the deck of the inn completely unnoticed. This was due to no act on his part, though Retskcirt could've rendered himself invisible. His furry fingers traced the chameleon-shaped stone that stuck out of the amulet in his pocket. The rusted copper pricked him and he jerked his hand away. He glanced over his shoulder with a shiver. His bearn eye saw little and so too did his crow eye – that was a relief. Without the medallion, there was no way the detective would sneak up on him again.

*He let me steal it.* The quivering wasn't from the cold. A mixture of anxiety and adrenaline thickened in his mind like the saliva that caught in his throat. *He'll help us escape...right?* Mentally, he retraced his steps.

*The path from the chapel to the village was steep and narrow. Snow hid the crags of erosion that twisted the tilted steps until the stairway cut into the mountainside. The blizzard roared through the tunnel and the wind pummeled the climbers in the pitch black. No torches could survive the gusts, the knights felt their way forward on their hands and knees. They crawled up the mountain single file, cursing the deafening storm.*

*Halfway up, Retskcirt hesitated. Fissures split off from the main passage, none traveling too far but some providing enough space for one to step out of the way and take a breather. Eyeing an alcove, Retskcirt held his breath. While his hands were shackled, his cursed eye was unobstructed. He let a thin layer of shadows coat his body, taking the shape of his silhouette and*

*then the color of his fur, cloak, and even cuffs. Then he stepped out of himself. For a moment, two Retskcirts stood one in front of the other on the steps. Then he stepped aside and let his doppelganger pass.*

*His consciousness was split. He could see, hear, and feel through his clone as he guided the duplicate onwards and yet he still had control of his original body, hiding in the crack in the wall. After the first soldier passed, he exhaled. His breath was lost in the rushing wind but he inhaled and held it again just in case. He was less concerned about the knights, but the detective had yet to pass.*

*Despite the snow pelting his shoulders and the wind wrenching the tails of his cloak, Gahiji did not stoop to climb like the soldiers. He strode up the incline with grace. His silver eyes bored into the darkness, unbleared by the conditions.*

*Can he see me? Hermes wondered.*

*A bark in his clone's ear diverted his attention. He hustled his duplicate along before his captors could strike him. Each step apart strained him further, he had to stay close to keep up his ruse but he couldn't move yet.*

*The detective was parallel with him now. The spirit's form glistened in Retskcirt's crow eye. He could hardly make out the medallion in the man's pocket. Keeping his wrists close together so as not to rattle his chains, he reached towards Gahiji's coat as the detective stepped past him. His fingers slipped into the pocket, his fingernail snagging the coiled chain of the necklace, then he lifted and froze.*

*The detective took another step up the pass. Then another. He didn't look back.*

*Retskcirt let him travel a little further then stepped out behind him and followed.*

*There was no tell, but Retskcirt was sure the detective knew. He simply didn't know why. He lingered behind the parade until they reached the top of the ridge. Back in the village proper, he kept near through parallel alleyways. With brick buildings between him and the battery, he could stumble and stagger so long as he kept his clone marching onwards. Once at the crime scene, where his doppelganger could stand stupid and go unnoticed, Retskcirt took off for the tavern.*

The medallion would come in handy, but not yet. He didn't want to startle the two anymore than he had to. A façade of compliance had proven to be a rather effective gambit so far, Retskcirt felt inclined to let it ride.

Their glowing forms, like inverted silhouettes, stomped around upstairs, dancing around one another as their heads bobbed and hands gestured in the heat of some debate Retskcirt couldn't hear. A debate that ended when he entered. He only had to pull the door open a sliver to slip through but that was more than enough for the storm to billow past him. The blizzard roared into the tavern, throwing Retskcirt onto the sticky floor and slamming the door shut behind him. Looking up through the ceiling, Retskcirt's crow eye met that of Skarbek's.

The two stared at one another. The rafters and floorboards were but gray films between them, barely obscuring their radiant auras.

Meanwhile, Birger Charq switched his gaze from Skarbek to the hardwood. He didn't share their curse and had no clue who lingered beneath his feet. He jolted to action. Spinning around, he marched to a corner of the room where a wardrobe was waiting by a window. He reached past the coats with both hands and grasped the bandaged handle of a machete and the cool metal shaft of a mallet. Before glancing back at Skarbek, he turned to the window. The window was shuttered but he could peak through the slats. Nothing but darkness. That was a relief. If the knights were there, there would be torches or lanterns. So this intruder-

*The detective!* Hope straightened his spine only to be immediately bent back in apprehension as he saw Skarbek's grimace.

"Retskcirt." She said.

"Farak." He said.

"It's Hermes!" Retskcirt hollered, "Skar, Birger, I come to help!"

The bearn hollered from the stairs. He'd stopped on the landing, not confident enough to face them yet but simultaneously desperate to get the confrontation over with. Physically, he was no match for the two. With the ability to see their energy, he knew he couldn't even handle them individually – especially handcuffed. His presence was still a threat, but not a threat of violence. He was a stick in the spokes and he knew that, but he could be of use. He just had to convince them of that.

Skar appeared at the top of the stairs. Shadows swirled down around her left arm, wrapping it like the gauze that curled around her right.

"I met the detective." Hermes said.

Skar's shadows slid down her wrist and jumped to bind them both together as she scoffed, "Ah sae that."

Hermes shrugged his shackles. "These are Korrak's."

"Is she coming?" Birger arrived behind Skar, his face pale aside from the black swirls of his nellaf complexion.

"I didn't tell her!" Hermes blurted before admitting, "But they'll be here soon. Out with the dogs. They found Forseti Street."

Skar flinched. Birger cursed.

"It's good you're here." Skar stated, surprising both men. She continued, "The detective won't take us willingly."

"We don't know that." Birger argued.

"Wae can't risk him not." Skar snapped.

"We can't risk it either way." Hermes interjected, staring earnestly at the elf. "You haven't seen his power."

"Then whah you hare buttin in?!" Skar demanded, "Another crow'll just make it harder to convince him!"

Hermes bowed his head.

Skar knew why. *Nowhere else to go.* They were cornered. They'd been cornered before the detective arrived but his arrival seemed to offer some sort of miracle. The timing was too fortuitous. Retskcirt's intrusion had to be a part of the serendipity. Glancing at Birger, she saw him leaning away from her. She rolled her eyes, cursing. *Farak mae, now it's two on one.*

"You didn't meet him." Birger stated, "He *will* help us. He-"

His nostrils flared. Birger slipped the handle of the hammer through the painter's loop on his left pants leg then slid the blade of his dagger between his belt and britches. As his fingers reached up to his breast pocket, a tiny creature shot up the stairs. Hermes flinched and fell back against the wall, swatting at the thing as if it were a mosquito, but it whistled past unbothered. It was fixated on Birger. He had retrieved a box of matches and struck one. An indigo flame danced to life, illuminating the bat-like reptile as it slowed to orbit the small column of smog that rose from the tiny tendril. The shield dragon's nostrils were flared like its master's, emitting spurts of smoke from its mouth while it inhaled through its nose. Birger may not have been as fluent as the trained signalers of the Honor Knights, but he could smell enough code to confirm what he thought he'd sniffed before.

“They’re sending out hounds from the Mountain Pass, going to do a sweep of the village – but worse than that,” Birger gulped, “Korrak’s already on her way here – and she has a dog.”

“Donum.” Skar bowed her head, “They found it.”

Birger clasped her shoulder. She moved to look at him but her eyes caught something else first. Retskcirt saw it too. Their vision pierced the stairs and tavern walls. The wood and stone obscured their view but they could see the approaching glow like the sun rising up into a morning mist. Korrak and her battery were marching down Main Street, with Gahiji shining right behind them.

The avenue was bent like an elbow, with Forseti Street being a finger, the chapel the shoulder, and the Mountain Pass a foreign object jabbing Main Street right in the funny bone. Charq’s Tavern sat just south of the bend. The weather would delay them, so too would their caution, but not for long. Five, ten minutes at most.

“Korrak’ll kill us.” Hermes blurted.

Birger blew out the match and caught the shield dragon on his index finger, transporting the little reptile to the railing before he started down the stairs.

“We surrender to the detective.” Birger said.

Skar followed him, “That won’t stop Korrak.”

Birger nodded in agreement even as he disagreed, “But it’ll force G to help us.”

Skar stopped behind him on the landing. Hermes still stood there, crammed into the corner listening to the two.

Skar said, “Wae’ll have to kill them all.”

That stopped Birger. He was at the bottom of the stairs, staring out across the dark, empty bar.

Hermes piped up, “It is the only way.”

Birger roared. He grabbed the banister beside him and wrenched the handrail off the balusters, then threw the splintered wood across the room. Skar came up and embraced him from behind, hugging his heaving chest.

“Crimpsin tiad.” Birger cursed, “They’re forcing it this way. None of this had to happen. They never had to come here. Vaniakle was-”

“Then wae never would have met.” Skar reminded him.

Rocking his head back, he leaned his cheek against hers.

“We have five minutes.” Hermes interjected, jingling his shackles.

Birger jolted back to attention, barking orders, “Skar, get your crossbow then watch the door.”

She let go of him and dashed upstairs.

He turned to gesture to Hermes, “Hermes, come with me. I’ve got bolt cutters in the back and we’ll find something for you to hit folks with back there.”

In the darkness of the tavern, their crow eyes did little good. Walls and surfaces hardly shone more than empty space. Only Birger really knew the place well enough to maneuver. Fortunately, Skar only had to make it to the door. Hermes had to follow Birger through an obstacle course to get to the back. A few yards from the base of the stairs, Birger shoved right through a pair of saloon doors and marched into the kitchen. The pantry was an exit hall in the back made narrow by the slipshod shelving stacked on both sides. Here Birger’s familiarity was less help, the clutter was such that he had to feel around amongst the tools and products to find what he was looking for.

While Birger struggled, Hermes looked around. Though he couldn't see much, he could feel the wind coming down the narrow hall. With his crow eye, he could faintly make out the edges of a door beyond Birger. Judging from what he knew of the orientation of the tavern, he figured that door likely led to a backstreet that hooked around to Main Street but also snaked deeper into the tenements beyond. The medallion suddenly felt to grow a little heavier in his pocket.

Birger nudged him and he flinched. Birger had the bolt cutters. He caught the links of the shackles between the beak and started pinching.

"You think we can take out a whole battery?" Hermes asked while Birger worked.

"We don't have much of a choice." Birger grunted, grimacing as he strained.

"If we get rid of Korrak, they may back off." Hermes suggested.

"Then with our luck," Birger growled, "she'll go down last."

Hermes' eyes drifted over Birger's shoulder towards the door but flicked back to Birger as the chain snapped with a CHINK! Birger tossed the bolt cutters and began scrounging around for something else in the shelves. Hermes watched him.

"Y'all love each other?" He asked.

Birger paused to chuckle, then started back. He said, "Enough to die for it."

Hermes frowned as he glanced once more at the door, then back at Birger. With a sigh, he gave in. He slipped his fingers underneath the chain and fished the amulet out of his pocket to show Birger. In the darkness, Birger could hardly make it out and even if he could've he'd have no clue of the significance.

"The detective slipped it to me." Hermes claimed.

"And?" Birger asked.

"It hides you from mancers." Hermes explained.

Birger gasped, "And maybe mancer hounds!"

Handing Hermes a wrought iron bar, Birger took the medallion, "We could use this." Then he frowned, squinting at Hermes in the darkness, "*You* could've used this?"

Hermes shrugged and Birger knew what he meant. They were cornered. There was no hiding, there was no running. They were going to have to fight their way through Korrak and fly out with the detective. Otherwise, they were all going to die.

- - -

The knight swung the barrel towards the wall of the pub, splashing out a liter of zeal oil. The smell cut through the storm like a clap of thunder. Simultaneously pleasant and repulsive. There was a strong note of dead fish but also a sweetness that outlasted the stench to tempt one to take another whiff. The blizzard was unconvinced – the snow refused to absorb the substance. What didn't cling to the cedar log siding pooled across the snow, trickling between the boots of the soldier.

Wincing with the soldier on oil duty, was a civilian minotaur. She stood five yards from the tavern but to the left of the door, just out of sight of the door slot. Despite that, her presence would be known for her partner was hard to miss: a curlhead. The curlhead sat like a cat with their haunches hiked up to the bottom of their chest and their front paws planted between their feet. The creature's wings were folded and tucked tight against their scaly hide to break the wind. The dragon had a snake-like neck and their head reached up then arched down to stay about eye level with their master. The species took their name from the fleshy curl that extended

from the back of their head, spiraling in towards the nape of their neck like the horns of a ram. The minotaur turned away from the tavern to stroke the snout of her steed. Not only was she a dragon tamer, but she was also a hunter. In fact, she was the hunter that had slain the zeals and collected the oil – oil she had a feeling she would not receive gold for. Since the soldiers had moved in, she'd been able to sell twice as much oil as usual but the Honor Knights paid only in credit. She and her steed grunted then turned to watch the battery.

“PRAHVAHT KRYSTYN SKARBEEK!”

Captain Korrak stood fifteen yards from the front of Charq's Tavern. Two crossbowmen stood on either side of her, one being the signaler with the shield dragon. The three swordsmen under Captain Korrak were between her and the tavern, the third had been ordered to douse the inn. Two more swordsmen stood behind Korrak with the hound: Loki. While he'd sat stoically in the alleyway, Loki now stood on all fours with his hackles raised. His pale, sapphire gaze bored into the second story of the tavern while his big, dark nose throbbed.

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

The hound looked over at Detective Gahiji. The spirit had been lingering just a few yards behind the knights, watching the back of the belligerent captain's head. He felt the dog's gaze but didn't meet it.

“YOU'RE FUCKIN THE INN KAEP!”

Gahiji's eyes wandered over to the grizzled book Korrak had discarded. The violet flame in his chest, hidden behind his clothing, flared. Striding to flank the small formation, he retrieved the notebook. As he opened it, the Captain continued to holler.

“DID YOU WANT TO FUCK PRAHVATE OREH OR PRAHVATE ETIHW?”

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

“DID YOU LUST FOR PRAHVATE AZNARU?”

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

“DID YOU TRAH TO KISS PRAHVATE AZURAN?”

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

The page was torn off after that.

“DID YOU FUCK PRAHVATE ICELORE BAEFORE YOU KILLED HIM?”

Gahiji stared up at the tavern. His eyes couldn't pierce the façade like a shadowmancer's but he wondered if Skarbek was looking back at him now. The dragon was, as was their master. The minotaur's brow was furled, arched like the horns that sprouted from her head. Gahiji thought about how Birger had talked about the Honor Knights. He remembered how the locals had gossiped. He looked back at the captain. The woman was practically frothing at the mouth.

Steam poured from her orifices like she was some form of locomotive. Spirits breathe but not through their mouths. The flames in their chest consume oxygen at varying rates. Thus, a spirit's chest still seems to expand when they take a deep breath even though their lips can remain sealed in a firm line as did Gahiji's. He frowned as he inhaled deeply. The fire in his chest flared.

The Captain hollered on, "IS THAT WHAT YOU DO TO THE PAEPLÉ YOU LOVE?"

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

"I'm with her." He stated.

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

"We surrender." Birger continued.

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

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

"BURN IT!" Korrak bellowed.

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

Then it stopped.

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

Gahiji stood behind Korrak, his sword drawn. The blade emanated a vermilion light, making the snow around him glow like magma. The captain saw the glare beneath her feet, but she'd known it was him the moment she saw the fire stop. She turned to the detective.

"Their fate belongs to the Emperor now." Gahiji said.

"They killed fahve of mah knahts." Korrak growled.

"They still have rights." Gahiji stated.

FSEW PLUNK!

Gahiji and Korrak jumped. One of the swordsmen standing between Korrak and the tavern twisted towards them, though their feet didn't follow their torso. Sticking out of the middle of their forehead was a slender wooden stick with feathers on the end, a stick their head hammered into the snow as they fell stiff into the snow.

The storm shutters on a second story window slammed shut, but not before Gahiji got a glimpse of dark fur. Gahiji wasn't the only one to have noticed the mancer, though the canine had sensed him when they first marched up. The tavern reeked of shadows, the specific strain of pungent odor similar to that which Loki had caught a whiff of on Forseti Street but far stronger. This was no shadow silhouette, this was the real Retskcirt. A fugitive and now an assailant.

Bounding over the body of the fallen knight, Loki tore through the snow and up the steps to the tavern porch. Birger staggered out of the doorway and back into the bar, hardly getting out of the way as the hound barreled by.

Korrak shrieked, "BURN THEM!"

This time, the flames spread. As the dragon poured out another column of fire, the blaze splashed against the façade of the tavern and unraveled. The entrance disappeared behind an inferno.

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

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

"Korrak!"

Gahiji's sword glowed white. Glacial sheets of ice were spreading across the spirit's torso, encasing his coat and tunic like plates of armor. The two swordsmen, a bearn and a nellaf, moved to stand behind Gahiji, creating the bottom points of a triangle with Korrak standing at the top. To the left and right, the crossbowmen spread out and took aim.

"Those bastards've killed six of us." Korrak hissed her words through clenched teeth, "Aeven the Emperor wouldn't blame mae now."

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

"Then consider this a coup!" Korrak exclaimed.

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

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

Blood poured out on the snow as Gahiji turned back to parry the bearn. The crossbowmen were reloading and Korrak had a clear shot at him from behind but she'd been distracted. After the detective had baited a swipe out of the captain, she'd trembled with fury and in doing so she caught a blur of motion in her peripheral vision. Whirling around, she swatted away a slicing saber just a moment before it would've cut through the back of her neck.

Unfurling from the darkness like a poltergeist stepping out of a wall, Skarbek stood behind her.

“Going to stab mae in the back, eh prahvate?” Korrak growled, “Same way you did our boys on Forsetai?”

The dig made her wince. Moreso than the two wounds in her right arm. But she bit her lip and steeled herself. Shadows flowed from her crow eye, obscuring her face. Her blonde hair stood up as if conducting static electricity and a shiver ran down her spine. The inky energy ran down her torso and floated up to her right hand where they solidified into a quadrilateral shield. She twisted her boots into the snow and crouched like a cat ready to pounce.

With a roar, Korrak charged. Slicing fast across her body, the captain’s blade struck the private’s shield and the shadows held fast. She twisted her arms and jerked her elbows back to draw her sword back against the shield, cutting a figure eight in the air, and again the shield held. Skar had put more shadows into this apparition than Korrak had expected – so at least Skar hoped. After the second WHAP! Korrak brought her blade up over her head to bring it down in a cleaving motion for Skar’s collar. An odd strategy, as the nellaf stood nearly a foot shorter than the elf. Skar easily raised her shield to deflect, then stepped in to stab at her foe.

Korrak was already skating forward, sliding beneath Skar’s thrust on her knees. Korrak rose from below, carving up into Skar’s torso with her blade.

Skar staggered back. Her shield in the snow, her right hand clutching the wound. The laceration stretched from her hip to her breast. It seared but it wasn’t deep, her organs remained organized inside her. She was more shocked than anything else. Korrak had played her like a fool.

“You got no raht baeing a knaht,” Korrak scoffed, “but you already knew that.”

Skar reached down to grab her shield, the shadows smoldering in the snow by her boots.

“That whah you went and baecame this little abomination?” Korrak continued, “Compensating for a lack of honor?”

Again, Korrak charged with a roar but this time, as she sliced for Skar’s gut, Skar didn’t block with her shield. Nor with her sword. Instead, she drew her sword and shield behind her and rocked back, watching Korrak’s blade sweep by. Then, standing on one foot, Skar planted the other square in Korrak’s chest. The kick threw her off her feet. Skar advanced, ready to skewer the captain into the snow, but Korrak wasn’t Skar’s only foe.

FSEW PLUNK! FSEW PLUNK!

Now it was Skar who roared. She fell to one knee, her shadowy shield evaporating as her mind lost control of anything other than the blinding pain as two crossbow bolts embedded themselves in either arm.

The captain had already recovered from the kick. She strolled back into the fight with a smirk slapped across her face. Raising her sword, she sliced down. Skar raised her saber and Korrak’s blade bounced off but she fell back onto her rear. Her arms, wounded from the fight in the alley and the fight now, gave out beneath her and all she could do was scoot away. She hurled shadows at Korrak but the captain cut through the black energy and it fizzled out of existence. Leaning on her left arm – the relatively less wounded arm – Skar tried to get up, but Korrak kicked her in the face.

“Pathetic traitor.” Korrak remarked.

Skar spit in the snow and tried again, her fist balled around the hilt of her saber as she punched into the snow, but again Korrak kicked her down.

“You’ll rot in hell.” Korrak laughed.

The captain reared back with her weapon.

Skar jammed her fist into the snow once more. Her eyes bored into Korrak's, unflinching. Her lips curled back as she bared her teeth. There was no ounce of recognition of impending doom, only a righteous rage boiling within her. Shadows seeped from her flesh like steam. When she spoke, her voice didn't waiver, it was loud and clear – like a trumpet blaring through the storm.

“Ah'll sae you there.”

With adrenaline and fury coursing through her veins, Korrak couldn't even hear Skar's threat, but Gahiji did. While the private had been losing to the captain, the detective had been winning against the other swordsman. The knight had been far more talented than his former comrade, however he still ranked a few skill levels lower than Gahiji. Each stroke of the bearn's broadsword was deflected by a mirroring strike from the spirit – and the spirit had more in his arsenal than steel. The opal sheen that had been pulsating from Gahiji's claymore had yellowed into a neon blonde. When the detective's sword collided with knight's again, an electric charge shot down through the blade. Tiny slivers of lightning danced around the weapon, bouncing from the hilt to the soldier's gloves and dancing up his arm to his chest and head. The bearn locked up, his sword fell out of his hands, and he fell backwards into the snow.

“Surrender!” Gahiji ordered.

But the bearn did not. He reached for a dagger at his hip. As he did, Gahiji looked over his shoulder to see that Skar was in as dire a situation as his own foe. He turned back in time to deflect the dagger with his claymore glowing white once more. A shard of ice rose from the snow at his feet, rising to levitate level with his eyes. With a flick of his wrist, he launched the icy arrow at Korrak. The projectile struck the captain in the back, toppling her like timber just as she was about to land the final blow.

Skar ripped her hand from the snow, falling flat on her back as she got her blade between her and Korrak, catching the captain's throat with the edge of her saber. Korrak gaped as the blade cut in, but before she could do anymore Skar slid her sword across until it scraped against the joints of the captain's spine. Blood gushed over her and Korrak collapsed with a brief spasm, then went limp.

Gahiji didn't have the luxury to watch. He'd turned back to his own fallen knight, deflecting a second dagger.

“Surrender!” Gahiji demanded.

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

Striding forward, Gahiji drove his sword down into the man's abdomen. He hesitated for a moment, considering what elaborate magic he might be able to utilize to spare the soldier's life – *There is no time.* – then he twisted the sword and yanked the weapon free. He turned back to the captain. Skar was struggling to get out from under her but Korrak was no more. The icicle still slowly melting in her back as blood oozed up to stain her uniform. The detective turned to the crossbowmen on either side of him. They'd locked in new quarrels but had stopped short of taking aim.

“Surrender.” Gahiji commanded. He jerked his head north, in the direction of the barracks, “Run.”

The two soldiers' eyes flicked away from the detective to check in with one another, then they took off down the street. Gahiji's sword turned blue. Water rose from the snow to coat the blade, washing the blood from the metal. As he cleaned his sword, his hand sank into his coat and retrieved a small device. It was shaped like an octagon with a trapezoidal dome within which a faint red light shone. Throwing it into the snow at his feet, he stomped on it with his boot. The

device chirped and the red light spread to engulf the entirety of the object. Somewhere far away, Gahiji's ship woke up.

The zoomer would need to hurry. Korrak's colleagues would be there soon. With the storm waning and the fire blazing, Charq's Tavern glowed like a beacon. The street smelled of ash and sulfur. Gahiji could feel the warmth from fifteen yards away. The walls had become skeletal, black silhouettes amidst the raging auburn glow. A crimson haze emanated from the blaze. Every conscious soul in Vaniakle would be aware of the fire. Reinforcements would arrive before the roof caved in.

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

Skar had gotten up. Bolts stuck out of both arms, her clothes were torn and bloody, and her face was gashed and just now beginning to swell. But she was standing.

"Birger." She said, shivering.

Gahiji paused. She didn't look like a mancer that had just gotten their fill. Considering her state, she'd need every drop of shadows she could get. He rushed over to help her walk, draping her relatively-less wounded left arm over his shoulder then he pointed to Korrak and said, "Best reap her sh-"

"No." Skar stated.

Gahiji didn't press further. He nodded in concurrence, "Birger."

Then they made their way towards the back alley.

As the spirit and elf fought half the battery outside, the other half had invaded the tavern – starting with the mancer hound. Loki hurdled the flames surging through the doorway, completely ignoring Birger on the floor. The dog's nostrils flared as he sprinted for the stairs, simultaneously, Hermes' eyes widened as he watched the creature through the floorboards. Fumbling with the crossbow, the shadowmancer finally got a bolt in place as the beast slammed into the door.

The frame splintered and the door sprawled open. Loki landed as Hermes raised the bow, firing as the dog pounced on him.

FSEW PLUNK! CRUNCH!

He didn't see the quarrel hit nor did he hear it as all Hermes heard was the fracturing of bone as the beast bit down on his wrist. His reaction was completely involuntary. His trigger hand flailed free of the bow and snatched a bolt from his quiver, jerking back to stab it into the dog's head like a dagger. His strength wouldn't have been enough to drive it through but Loki had begun to writhe, the canine intending to wrench the bear's hand off his arm like a crocodile. Instead, the dog snapped its head up right as Hermes brought the bolt down. The quarrel punctured the hound's skull, penetrating his brain, and Loki died without so much as a whimper.

Kicking the dog off him, Hermes clutched his wrist. His hand dangled like a dead leaf from a twig and pain ricocheted up his arm. His vision bleached white but he managed to reach out with his shadows for the creature beside him. Reaping the canine provided some relief from the pain, enough for him to hear the commotion below and feel the heat rising beneath him.

When the hound rushed the stairs, Birger moved to chase after him then paused. *Hermes can handle one dog*. He glanced back at the burning doorway. The porch was completely hidden in flames. Birger figured he could jump through, but with no clue what waited on the other side he might be leaping into the jaws of the dragon. His head whipped back towards the interior. *The*

*pantry.* If he didn't act fast, they'd be cornered in the burning bar. The pantry was the only other way out. Wishing a silent, "Selu!" to Hermes, Birger took off for the kitchen.

A circular window, like a porthole in the bilge of a ship, was installed in the door to the alley. The clouded glass glowed amber by the time Birger got to the pantry. He cursed then turned back around into the kitchen. Slipping his machete inside his belt and the mallet through his painter's loop, he stopped at the chopping block. There he grabbed a butcher's knife and two paring knives, then he went back to the entrance to the exit closet and waited just outside, holding his breath.

The door banged open. Firelight poured down the hall, pushing the shadows back from the threshold Birger hid behind. The storm billowed in, almost masking the sound of boot steps. Birger spun around the corner and threw the butcher's knife. The soldier in the front jumped back and Birger hurriedly threw the two paring knives before dipping back out of the-

FSEW PLUNK!

The first knight had fallen back onto his comrade, disabling the first two, but a third had leveled his crossbow over the shoulder of the second and fired before Birger could hop out of the hall. The quarrel soared through the pantry and struck Birger in the right shoulder.

"Donum." Birger cursed.

Pulling out the hammer and dagger, he flinched. His right arm wouldn't raise all the way, but he could still stab and slash with the machete. And his left had the mallet. He retreated from the pantry entry while the soldiers got untangled. Hustling out back onto the main floor and hiding to the right of the double doors, he crouched in wait.

They left the light in the pantry, prowling through the kitchen in darkness. The main floor was lit by the burning front of the building, but wedged up against the wall Birger cast no shadow. He listened hard to their footsteps but couldn't tell how many to expect. He tightened his grip on the hammer and raised it up by his head.

Two knights burst through and Birger struck immediately. He slammed the hammer into the knee of the closest then stood as the soldier pitched forward and drove his dagger up into the man's stomach. Driving further with that momentum, he pushed the gutted man into the second, bowling him over but that was as far as he got. A third soldier barreled through the double doors, slamming into Birger's wounded shoulder and knocking him to the floor.

The knight wasted no time, standing over Birger he raised the crossbow to point it at the nellaf's head.

FSEW PLUNK! FSEW PLUNK!

The knight fired, but not first. From the stairway a bolt came hurtling across the bar. It had taken Hermes sometime to get to the landing and it had taken him even longer to load the weapon with one hand, but he'd gotten the quarrel off before the soldier standing above Birger. The bolt even struck the soldier before his finger pulled the trigger. It slid into his head above his ear, wrenching life away from him almost instantaneously, lifting him off his feet and toppling him over, and yet his finger still squeezed the trigger. The arrow was no longer aimed at Birger's head, instead it struck him in the torso. Bursting between two ribs to puncture his right lung.

Clutching the wound, Birger gasped. Exhaling all the air he had in his lungs so he had no more to gasp as he saw the soldier he'd knocked over in the doorway getting up. Birger had lost his machete in the belly of the first knight; all he had left was the hammer. Hermes was sputtering and fumbling in the stairway, using his boots to keep the bow steady as he pulled back the string.

The knight raised his bow and took aim. Birger threw the hammer. It clattered off the crossbow as the soldier pulled the trigger. FSEW PLUNK! The bolt buried itself in the beer-soaked floorboards beside Birger's head.

"Selu!" Birger wheezed.

"Donum." The soldier snarled.

Both men looked towards the stairs. Hermes had gotten a second bolt loaded. With the bow cradled between his knees, he pulled the trigger – FSEW PLUNK! – striking the knight in the chest.

Birger let his head fall back to the floor as the pain washed over him. Air was seeping out around the shaft of the quarrel, getting between his lung and ribcage and applying a scorching pressure that inflamed his entire right side. His shattered shoulder paled in comparison to this new injury. Blood gurgled up his throat as his breath rattled down his windpipe.

*Skar.*

He had to get up. Clenching his teeth, he rolled over onto his left side. Hermes had staggered over and was kneeling beside him. The bear's right hand dangled by his side, his left reached out to Birger. Hermes was saying something about healers but Birger couldn't hear much as he shifted and the pain escalated, even his vision blotted out for a moment.

*Skar.*

Hermes helped him to his feet, the bear having to stoop so low he was doubled over to stay at shoulder height with the nellaf. They stepped over the three Honor Knights and passed the double doors into the kitchen. Further from the inferno on the main floor, Birger was beginning to regain control of his senses. He could make out Hermes' rambling-

"-the dalvarist fled – that's good. I guess? I can't see past the flames though..."

-and see the trail of blood he'd left as he'd made a beeline out of the kitchen before.

"Skar?" Birger murmured.

"There you go!" Hermes exclaimed, relieved, "I can't see past the flames but..."

They'd made it to the pantry. Another Honor Knight lay dead there, sitting up against the shelving with three kitchen knives sticking out of him. Hermes helped Birger step over the man as they approached the exit door. Opening the door, Hermes dragged Birger outside.

The storm had finally settled into a mere flurry. The flames roared, snapping and coughing in loud bursts of sparks, but the blaze was muffled in the alley. From their angle, Hermes could finally see around the fire with his crow eye but before he could remark, someone beat him to it. Skar came around the corner at a full sprint, nearly slamming into the wall as she tried to make the turn.

"BIRGER!"

Hermes pivoted to hand off the innkeeper but Skar still knocked him over in an effort to get to Birger. Skar slid underneath Birger as he slumped to the ground. Cradling his head in her lap, her eyes shifted to the bolt in his breast. With her crow eye, she could see his energy waning. She could see different shades of shine as blood shifted to places it shouldn't be inside his flesh. Shimmering waves of light washed over him from his waist to his neck as the pain came in varying spurts. The sight was sobering. She forced her focus away from the bolt, concentrating on what she saw with her living eye. Focusing on her organic senses, clinging to every bit of Birger she could hear and feel.

He nuzzled into her grasp and positioned so that her face was in his line of vision.

"Skar...I..." his murmur was lost in a gurgle.

He started shaking. She stroked his cheek and somehow his agony subsided a little. Over her shoulder, he saw Gahiji arrive.

“G,” he grunted, “we surrendered...”

“Yes, Mr. Charq,” Gahiji confirmed, “I’ll get them to the Dragon Islands.”

“*Wae.*” Skar hissed.

Her head snapped back to scowl at the detective. One eye was as vibrant as a polished sapphire, the other pitch black. Both were narrowed down to a glare that made the flame in the spirit’s chest quiver.

“No, no, no...” Birger muttered. His bloody hands reached up to clasp Skar. He pulled her face down to his, forcing her gaze to soften as their eyes met one last time. He whispered, “Leave me here...in the Ridges...you go.”

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

“Private Skarbek...” Gahiji paused, swearing under his breath, “Donum.”

A crash in the tavern let loose a plume of sparks as the flames roared higher. At any moment, the walls could collapse and the blaze might spill out into the backstreet. The fire had long surpassed a level Gahiji could handle with his sword and so too had the situation altogether. Approaching the two, he crouched down beside Skarbek. He said, “Let me help you get him. My ship will be arriving soon.”

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

They walked out of the alley together. In the distance, the lights of the next battery could be seen marching down Main Street, but no sooner did they see them than did Gahiji’s zoomer soar over their heads and twist to land beside the device the detective had left in the snow. Shaped like a speedboat, the three had to work together to get Birger gently onboard. Gahiji got to tampering with the controls in the cockpit as Skar and Hermes got settled in the back.

Skar watched Birger while Hermes watched the tavern disappear into the radiant amber blaze. The squealing and snapping of combusting timber had replaced the howling winds, as if the flames had melted back the blizzard. Another snowstorm would overcome Vaniakle soon enough, but for now the fire raged, defiantly reminding the bleak mountain peaks that even in the coldest, iciest of nights, the bold warmth of a fire could prevail.

“Baefore wae laeve the Blue Ridges, ah want to bury him hare.” Skar stated.

“Yes, ma’am.” Gahiji promised.

Then they left.