Wizardry Novels

These novels written by: Chris Beebe, based on the trilogy of games by Sir-Tech Inc.

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Wizardry 7 - Crusaders of the Dark Savant

Part 1 - Alliances

Our Enemy

The great metal bird travelled through the darkness of space for three months. Through the small windows, its passengers could see the brilliant, lonely lights of a thousand stars spreading out like so many winking fireflies. They ranged from light blues to bright yellows, and even some reds and greens, but they were all woven upon the same beautiful black tapestry that none of them had seen so clearly before. Sometimes they would even travel by glowing, colorful clouds of wonderous reds or unearthly blues. It truly was a magical place.

Outside of the metal bird, the "ship," it was always night, and the inside was permanently lit by a strange magic of some kind. Light descended from the ceiling behind heated sheets of some strange and hard material, and lit the interior with a constant flow of unwavering luminescence.

Inside its great belly, the Fighter Shss, the Samurai Lucciana and the Priest Hiromi had travelled with their stoic pilot, the machine-man Aletheides, on their journey to the planet Guardia. Aletheides spoke little throughout the journey, and left the three girls to their own devices.

The interior of the craft was certainly lacking in privacy. There were no partitions between rooms, save the restroom off to the side. There were a few buckled seats inside the ship, where the three girls had strapped themselves on their departure from Llylgamyn, but the frightening rush of power that had gripped the ship then was gone now. The steel floor was their bedding, the seats their dining table, and each other, their whole world.

The size of the ship allowed for little in the way of physical practice or sparring for Shss and Lucciana, so the two settled on reviewing battle tactics... and in Lucciana's case, her rusty memory of the many spellbooks she once studied. Hiromi even tried to introduce her skill with magic... and her faith... to the Samurai, but Lucciana's lack of belief in God made it impossible for her to use even the most basic of healing spells.

Shss might have made a better student, were it not for the language barrier. She had made remarkable progress learning Galactic Common, and had even imparted a few words of Lizardman to the other two, but there was still not enough of an understanding to foster a true discussion of who God was. Perhaps

later, *she thought...*

Aletheides, while quiet for most of the journey, had more than a few choice words about the Astral Dominae, the artifact of great power that was hidden somewhere upon the planet Guardia, and the Dark Savant, the malevolent being who sought its power.

He spoke time and again of the Dark Savant's evil works throughout the cosmos. His Black Ship would appear out of nowhere in orbit around a planet, and demand that its people tell him what they knew of the lord of the universe, Phoonzang, and of his most powerful creation, the Astral Dominae. When his threats were returned with a lack of knowledge, or even resistance, the Savant would ruthlessly slaughter any and all intelligent life on the planet's surface. His evil truly knew no restraints or bounds.

To protect the Astral Dominae from this cruel force, Aletheides insisted, was the most important task facing the universe now. If it fell into his hands, his power would be unreachable, and unstoppable.

Other than this, the three learned nothing. Not a mention of his origins, his plans... the girls only knew that he served the Cosmic Lords, and that was it. Any other questions were met with a simple "Quiet, you're wasting oxygen," and nothing more.

None of them took his advice too seriously. The ship was constantly punctuated by whispered stories and giggles, much to the apparent chagrin of their serious pilot. Shss and Hiromi in particular enjoyed their stumbling conversations of jumbled language and pantomime, though Lucciana seemed more reluctant to speak.

Eventually, as the weeks drug by, they started noticing the change in the air around them. It was crisp and clear before, like the cold and fresh air of a lush forest, but lately it seemed hotter and heavier. The three found themselves breathing harder and harder every day to take in less and less oxygen.

Aletheides chastised them, saying he warned them that this would happen, and that their constant conversations led the air to such pollution. He had tried hard enough to get to Guardia as quickly as possible, and now the energy required to get them there was being offset by the energy needed to clean the air in the ship.

Hiromi and Lucciana began a daily ritual of conjuring small Whirlwinds and the air blasts of Missile Shields to help purify the air. Their magic ran low every day, and though it allowed the ship more energy on its path to Guardia, it was a clearly losing battle... they weren't going to make it.

The very same day that Aletheides pointed out a small blue dot in the ocean of stars, one that looked in no way different from any of the other points of light they had seen, was the day the red lights flashed all over the ship. At that time, Shss had seen through her darkening vision that her friends Lucciana and Hiromi had fallen unconscious on the floor, and weren't moving. She tried fruitlessly to shake them awake before she asked the machine-man for help, but he was busy working at the controls and didn't respond.

As her friends lay there, she was surprised that she didn't feel panic, or fear. She just felt... tired. She tried one last time to shake Hiromi out of her stupor, then was overcome by the lack of oxygen. Her eyes drooped, her muscles gave way, and she fell facefirst onto the metal floor, unconscious.

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Hiromi woke up with an unbelievable headache. The room flashed back and forth between red and black, but a quick healing spell later, her vision adjusted. She was all by herself, lying on a very tall bed in an unfamiliar room. She sat up with a groan and looked around.

Wow, she thought, *it's beautiful!*

The walls and ceiling were painted pure white, and the floor was completely covered by a large fuzzy sheet. In one corner was a bookcase, though she couldn't read any of the titles from this distance.

She hopped off of the bed and put on her sandals resting at its base, then began to explore the room. She noticed too late that she was still a little dizzy, and stumbled slightly.

There was a small bowl with metal rods protruding from it attached to the wall, and after twisting one of them, she jumped when it caused water to spray into the bowl from a tiny pipe in the middle. There was even a bathroom off to the side, complete with a bathing chamber and more of the water conjuring rods.

On the far wall was a window looking out. She had felt so at home that she thought she was back in her church in the mountain on Llylgamyn, but when she looked out of the portal, she saw nothing but multi-colored stars. She was still aboard one of the mighty ships of the sky.

She saw her face in a mirror hanging in the washroom... her hair was a mess. Little by little, she gathered up all the loose strands and tied them back into a ponytail. *I miss the pigtails,* she thought, *but I guess it's time to grow up, considering the business we're in right now...*

There was a knock at her door. "Mistress-entrance-possible?" asked a monotone and hollow voice.

Hiromi's stomach tied in knots; she was alone and had nobody to protect her here. If the person outside meant her harm, she could do little to fight them off. Her mouth opened and closed in fear and confusion, and she frantically looked for a hiding place. *Maybe under the bed...?!*

"No-response-from-guest. Possible-injury," it said. "Will-now-enter..." The door slid upwards into the ceiling with a whir, and a figure glided ominously into the room.

Hiromi's eyes widened in fear at it. The being was easily twice her size, dressed in a metallic grey cloak with blue shoulderpads that had yellow stripes on them. Two small red triangles dotted down the center of its body like buttons to its black base, and its brown, misshapen, inhuman face was almost completely concealed underneath a grey mitre-like helmet.

In the middle of the odd headpiece was a small current of red light travelling from the thing's brow to the very top of it, much like Aletheides' exposed machine brain might have looked... if it carried only a single color on a solitary vertical line. It was holding a spear that glowed blue and white at one end at its side.

She started to back up, knowing not what kind of spell could affect a man-machine, or how she could protect herself. It stared at her for several seconds, then spoke. "Guest-health-confirmed. No-injury. Apologies-Mistress."

Hiromi's stomach still fluttered thinking of how alone and vulnerable she was here, without her friends. *Friends...* she thought.

"Where are Lucciana and Shss?" she asked. "Where am I? Who are you? What's going on?"

"Warning-data-overload," the man-machine replied. "Sort-queries... generate-responses.
Identify-query:'Friend-location-status'-Location:Near-Status:Safe.
Identify-query:'Mistress-Location'-Location:Aboard-Dedaelis.
Identify-query:'Savant-Guard-Identity'-Identity:Savant-Guard.
Identify-query:'Situation-Current'-Situation:Rescue-from-derelict-ship-of-Cosmic-Circle-servant-COMPLETE-Relocation-to-safer-quarters-COMPLETE."

"So everyone's ok?" Hiromi struggled to understand.

The Savant Guard remained motionless as it spoke. "Yes.
Savant-Guard-will-bring-guests-to-meeting-area," it said. "Please-come-with-Savant-Guard-Mistress."

Hiromi stood her ground. "Not without my friends!" she said stubbornly.

As if it were pondering something, the machine-man lifted its head in an almost Human display of thought. "Savant-Guard-only-ordered-to-bring-smallest-guest-to-meeting-area. No-other-orders-given."

Immediately, Hiromi climbed back up on top of the bed. "I'm... this is confusing," she said, looking at the Savant Guard. "I'm sorry, I can't go anywhere until I see my friends. Please understand, we're..."

Wait a second... she thought. *"Savant Guard?" As in, "Dark Savant?"*

When the words clicked in her mind, she immediately shrank back into the corner of the bed in fear. "Who... do you serve?" she asked.

"Savant-Guard-serves-Dark-Savant," the Savant Guard replied patiently, and Hiromi's heart skipped a beat.

Before she had a chance to physically react, it spoke. "Please wait. Receiving-new-orders," it continued. After a few seconds in apparent thought, it finally broke its silence. "Savant-Guard-serves-Mistress. Security-level-1. What-is-your-order-Mistress?"

"Wha...?" Hiromi stammered in confusion.

"Invalid-command," the Savant Guard replied. "What-is-your-order-Mistress?"

Hiromi shook her head. *What is this thing, anyway?* she thought, but finally decided to play along. "Take me to my friends," she requested.

"Affirmative."

***

"What are you talking about?! I have no clue what you're saying. Just tell me where the other three are, and nobody gets hurt!"

"Mistress-please-calm-down. Status:"Other-three"-Status:Safe..."

"Like I'll believe you! Put down your weapon and take me to them if they're so safe!"

"..."

"I apologize for the lack of humanity my Guards are capable of showing. Surprise guests aboard my ship are a rare sight, and I have not planned a proper introduction. You are free to see your friends on either side of your room, but I ask that you travel only where you are allowed."

The powerful voice came from everywhere at once, though even then, its gentleness could not be denied. Lucciana sheathed her katana and shoved aside her metallic captor. "Move it."

The Presence had been clawing powerfully at her mind for a few minutes as she awoke, when it suddenly and abruptly declined in power. Every day since the day she cut off the Bane King's head, she felt it... but come to think of it, it wasn't until a few minutes ago that it felt that strong.

Outside of her room was a massive hall, bigger than most castles and even some of the bigger towns of Llylgamyn. Doors lined either side of it, likely leading into several other of the beautiful quarters kept ready for other unannounced guests of their mysterious host. Her eyes were still focusing from the disorienting and painful lack of air on Aletheides' ship earlier, and she could see nothing but darkness at either end of the incredibly long hall.

There was another one of those machines standing outside the door to her left, and it had a companion in tow. Lucciana almost didn't recognize her and her new hair. "You ok, Hi?" she inquired.

Hiromi ran forward and hugged her friend's legs. "You're ok!" she exclaimed. "I thought I could still felt the Pr... I mean, I was worried when we got separated..."

All at once, she pulled back. "Hey, your clothes are so clean now," she pointed out, then looked down at herself. "Come to think of it, so are mine... who's been messing with our things?"

"Check underneath your robe," Lucciana suggested. Hiromi did so, and felt another layer there. "The outside one is clean, but they left the dirty one beneath it," the Samurai explained. "I think they're taking measures to earn our trust, though the metal goons aren't helping at all."

She shrugged. "Anyway, that voice said I was in the middle of the three of us, which would make Shss right behind us..."

"What voice?" Hiromi asked.

"You didn't...?" Lucciana started to ask, then shook her head. "Never mind. Let's check the room over here."

***

"Kar-bitz-pakran-spelk?" Shss knit her eyebrows in confusion.

"Mmman-mel-mimmom-man?" She shook her head again.

"Eniendren-asbendurendi?" It was getting tiresome, speaking to this strange metal creature.
"Warning-exhausting-supply-of-available-languages," the Savant Guard said.

"Shss?" Lucciana called out.

"Here!" the Fighter yelled back.

The door opened from the motion outside and Lucciana and Hiromi came in. "Stay here," the Priest said to someone else outside.

"Do you guys get paid to stand in the way?" Lucciana muttered at the towering Savant Guard besieging Shss with questions. She pushed past it and saw her friend looking slightly flustered in the middle of the gorgeous room. She grasped her wrist and smiled. "You're ok," she said.

"Yes, and you and you," Shss replied, with a nod at each of her friends.

Hiromi gestured out the door. "Come on," she said. "We have to find a way out of here before something bad happens."

As they were walking outside, she beckoned Lucciana closer. The Samurai bent down, and Hiromi whispered something that made chills run down both of their spines: "I think this is the Dark Savant's ship."

Lucciana was shocked into silence for only a second, then spoke. "*I sake,* Shss." At her warning, the Fighter slowly let a hand down to her side for easy access to the spear on her back. She nodded slowly and said, "Yes."

"Savant Guard," Hiromi said to the machine-man following them, "please take us back to our ship."

But it remained still. "Impossible," it replied.

At that, Lucciana's hand went down to her katana's handle. "And why is that, praytell?" She silently began to draw her blade as the machine spoke. "Ship's-owner-has-already-departed."

"What?!" Hiromi exclaimed. "Why?!"

Lucciana let her katana slide back into its sheathe while the machine explained.
"The-Master-may-explain-to-the-Mistresses," it said.

"Please-follow-Savant-Guard-to-Dark-Savant's-throne-room."

The Savant Guard began to glide ahead, down the magnificent, almost impossibly wide and tall hall. There were Savant Guards everywhere, thousands of them, floating up and down the corridor from a wide open chamber far ahead of them. All of the girls noticed then that there was a figure sitting upon a throne there, watching them this whole time, but he was too far away to make out clearly.

The group huddled together. "I don't trust any of this," Lucciana whispered. "No safe..." Shss added. "So what do we do?" Hiromi asked.

"If I may request the honor of your company, please come to the end of the hall where my Guard is currently travelling," the gentle, booming voice said.

Lucciana looked around for the source of the voice, but only saw the many Savant Guards gliding down the hall, themselves... and the figure on the throne.

"Tell me you heard it that time," she whispered, and the other two nodded. With a sigh, she started to walk after the Guard. "Guess we don't have much of a choice," she said, while her heart thumped almost loud enough for the world to hear. The other two followed.

The command center was awe-inspiring. There were Guards stationed at attention on both sides of the massive room, motionless and without feeling. To the sides were drawings of massive clusters of tiny white pinpoints, which Hiromi assumed were stars. Other charts depicted closeups of entire planets in every color of the spectrum, with certain parts labelled and marked in a strange language.

Beneath all of these pictures were a few metallic boxes with buttons in simple rows and columns upon them, with Guards working on them. On the wall opposite them, there was an absolutely massive window that let the light of a million stars splash through in a breathtakingly beautiful display. In front of that window was the dais and the throne, seating the enormous figure of the Dark Savant.

His body was covered with an impressive layer of metal, much like his servants, with glowing blue slits in the legs and a pair of shining purple jewels on his chest. Like some great king of the stars, he sat tall and proud, a majestic red cloth draped over his shoulders.

Though he bore some resemblance to his Guards, his left hand was clearly organic and resting on the arm of the great chair he sat upon. His other hand, in stark contrast, was covered with a glove crackling with blue electricity.

From inside the transparent dome that covered his entire head, two red eyes stared out from a shadowed head, much like the button-like ornamentation on the metallic cloak of his Guards. He was imposing to say the least, but when he spoke, all three of them felt strangely at ease.

"I welcome you to my ship, the Dedaelis, though some may have you know it as the Black Ship. Truly, I have been judged as no other being has before me.

"I am said to be the most malevolent creature in all of the cosmos, and yet, I strive only for equality, for freedom. For too long have the Cosmic Lords had a stranglehold upon the stars, dictating who may learn what, and when. For too long have they decided men's fates with the stroke of a pen, and with the whim of an observer.

"You may have been told stories of murderous rampages or torture at my hands across the stars, but I assure you that they are all exaggerations, stories from the minds of those too blind to see the true villains."

Hiromi quivered at the power this being commanded, shaking only harder knowing that she had to speak. "Um..." she started.

"Yes, my child," the Dark Savant said. ***"Please, feel at ease to speak."***

She shuffled her feet nervously. "You're going against... the will of the Cosmic Circle, right?" she asked, to which the Dark Savant nodded slightly. "I've never heard of them, but... who I serve, well, I think that, um, maybe... maybe God and the Cosmic Lords are the same," the Priest said. "If that's true, then you..."

Suddenly, the Dark Savant laughed long and loud, and his voice echoed throughout the halls of his ship. ***"God... and the Cosmic Lords, the same?!"*** He laughed again. ***"There can be no greater difference! You will understand someday, after you have joined the race for the Astral Dominae."***

Lucciana spoke as quickly and as accurately as she could in hisses and clicks to relay the information to Shss. However, it seemed by the look on the Fighter's face that Lucciana hadn't done as good a job as she thought with her translation.

"Join?" Hiromi asked. "You mean you're not going to hurt us?"

"Cling not to your prejudices, child," the Dark Savant answered kindly. ***"for I not only offer you freedom, where your companion would abandon you, but I also offer you my support on your mission to find the blessed device. It will never again belong to the arrogant, removed Cosmic Lords, those whose tyrannical grip on the stars will end soon enough. Never again will they withhold the secrets of the universe from mortal minds, and never again will they consider themselves removed from the universe they supposedly serve.***

"The Astral Dominae is in no safer hands than mine, and my subordinates, the T'Rang, seek it even as we speak," he explained.

All three of the girls were enthralled by this charismatic god of the stars. To listen to him was more awe-inspiring than the words of a thousand kings, and more comforting than the soothing voice of a loving parent.

"In fact, he continued, ***"in just a few short minutes, a supply ship will be taking them from the Dedaelis to the planet's surface, and you are freely invited to go along with them. Whether you choose to work with them or not is entirely up to you, but I do implore you to consider the option, for the alternative is far worse.***

"Consider the servitude in which you have been raised throughout your many lives, always beneath and bowing to the ones who consider themselves the lords of this universe. Consider this, and make your decision."

Lucciana pulled the two aside. "Well, it seems like a way to get down there," she said. "If Aletheides took off, we have no other way to get to Guardia. Or home, for that matter."

Having already made up her own mind, Hiromi looked at her friends for support. "So we're going to join him?" she asked.

The Samurai shrugged. "Aletheides abandoned us after he pressed us rudely into service," she said. "But now, the Dark Savant is offering us the choice to help him after he saved our lives. We may have not known our previous host as well as we thought.

"They both sweet talk well enough," she continued, "but it seems the Savant is the only one willing to back his words up with the right action."

Hiromi nodded. "Plus, it's a whole lot better to come in with friends and allies than taking an entire planet to war by ourselves!" she said, then turned to the Fighter. "Shss," she continued, "*A, i, ea te T'Rang ta Guardia sho Astral Dominae. Eo Dark Savant, eo sha!*"

Shss widened her eyes and smiled. "You're getting better than me at speaking Lizardman, Hi," Lucciana said with a wry grin.

With a giggle, Hiromi turned with the others to face the Savant once more. "We'll go with the T'Rang, if

that's ok," she said.

"Excellent!" the Dark Savant's voice boomed. ***"You are in luck, for one of the strongest of my children has business to attend to upon Guardia's surface, and he will accompany you there. Elson..."***

"Yes..." a voice said, and a shadowy figure emerged from the side of the throne and knelt by the Dark Savant, facing him. Shss could have sworn it was completely light there a second ago, but she hadn't seen him until now.

Under the light, she could see a figure dressed completely in black from head to toe. Only a small slit in his cowl allowed a peek at his identity, but other than a small strip of slightly tan skin and brown eyes, it told her nothing about him.

He rested one hand over his knee and the other deathly still at his side, waiting for a single word to set him into action. Lucciana shivered slightly, knowing that if the Dark Savant said the word "kill" with the slightest motion to any of them, that the Ninja would gladly obey.

"The High Father Elson will accompany you to Nyctalinth and the T'Rang fortress there," the Dark Savant said. ***"Among the stars, he is known as the Fiend of Nine Worlds, and is as powerful an Assassin as can be found. His services belong to me, and I trust your safety in his hands more than any other's."*** He nodded at Elson. ***"You may go."***

The Ninja stood and hopped lightly down from the dais, though his boots made no sound at all. He began to walk down the great hall leading to the docking bay. "Come," he ordered.

Shss started to walk after him ahead of the others, needing no cue to act. *I know that word at least...* she thought.

When they had reached the portal that lead into the ship bound for Guardia, Lucciana and Hiromi walked in, but something made Shss turn around.

There was a girl standing there, maybe eighteen or nineteen years old. She had close-cropped raven hair, and was dressed in V-shaped red shoulderpads, with a tiny covering of purple cloth over her right breast and a small piece of golden metal over her left. Her black undergarments were held up by a small red sash, and her uneven black stockings travelled all the way down to her black boots on her left leg, and halfway down her thigh to a black buckle on her right.

Over her right eye was an imposing black eyepatch, and her left hand was covered with a metallic grey glove, sparkling with blue energy much like the Savant's own. She stared into Shss' eyes with her visible blue one, with an intensity that made Shss feel self-conscious and look away.

When the ship's door hissed and began to close, the Fighter was brought back to her senses. But as she stepped completely into the ship, she looked back down the massive hallway to see that the girl was gone.

***

"*Ssss sssha sssasss sasasasasa...*" the T'Rang hissed amongst themselves. It was pretty clear that they were laughing at their passengers, even though they spoke a different language.

Lucciana felt slightly annoyed, but even more mystified at being surrounded by such alien creatures. In truth, they all felt like strangers in this cramped ship.

Hiromi elbowed Shss playfully. "What are they saying?" she asked with a mischievous grin. "You quiet," Shss replied, and her friend snickered.

The T'Rang were ugly creatures, like giant spiders with large, vertical, snake-like bodies. Their faces and

claws were orange and chitinous, and it was impossible to see where either of their dark eyes were looking at any give time... or indeed, how many eyes they had in total in either deep pool of black. Long, needle-like stinger/antennae emerged from somewhere on their backs beneath their brown gowns, and moved when anyone behind them made a sound.

Their long, gossamer spider-like clothing reminded Hiromi of delicate Faerie clothing, at the same time that it looked like a spider's web. She thought back on her friend, wondering how she was doing. She sure had a lot to tell her when she got back...

The T'Rang cackled as they spoke, and spittle dripped from their elongated mandibles. An outsider might have assumed them unintelligent if they weren't piloting the ship leading straight for the planet in front of them.

Before long, Hiromi started to make out continents and oceans on the stunningly blue and green planet, and knew that Kiwi would be jealous knowing what wonders she herself had seen, and the mischievous Faerie had not. They were travelling fast, and even the vaguery of large landmasses soon gave way to specific, sprawling cities and dense forests after a short time.

"Elson, is it?" Lucciana asked their deadly companion, who was hunched over slightly and staring at the floor. "Yes," he replied, but continued to stare neutrally down with his arms crossed over one another in his lap.

"Will you be coming with us to find the Astral Dominae?" she asked.

"No," he stated. "I was only ordered to accompany you to the surface. After that, you are out of my hands."

Hiromi turned to him. "So you work for the Dark Savant?" she asked. "What are you going to do down here?"

He raised his head to look at her briefly. His eyes were cold... killer's eyes that made the Priest look quickly away in sudden fear. "I am not free to discuss clients, or their orders," he said. "You need only know that you are safe with me until we reach the surface, then you will do as you will."

What a cold guy... the Priest thought. She didn't pry any further.

Shss couldn't stop looking out the front window. As they descended closer and closer to one of the yellow-bricked cities, she reflected on just how far she had come these past few days. From a Lizardman living quietly in the swamps, to travelling among the stars with strange creatures and new friends. She looked down at Hiromi sitting next to her, who looked back and smiled warmly.

Her heart melted as she smiled back. No matter where she went, she would be true to what she believed and follow her friends to the ends of the planet... whichever planet that may be. She had no idea what home was hers, with the Amazulu or the Lizardmen, but for now... she knew she belonged here.

Drones

D'Rang T'Rang, nephew of the great K'Borra T'Rang, master Assassin for the T'Rang Empire and slayer of a hundred Umpani toads, was firmly ordered by the powerful and wise Queen of the T'Rang, H'Jenn-Ra T'Rang... to welcome the new conscripts to Nyctalinth.

His blood boiled at this ridiculous duty, but he would never go against Her wishes; he was as loyal a Watcher to the Empire as any other. Only minutes ago, he had gone to the Imperial Chamber to report the lack of Umpani resistance in the forests and ruins east of the city... but he hadn't even the chance to open his mandibled mouth to speak before She interrupted him.

"HEY-YOU," She hissed.

"*Hey you?"* he wondered. *She must have momentarily forgotten the name of Her greatest Assassin...*

"BRING-THE-NEWCOMERS TO-ME," She roared. "THEY-WILL-ARRIVE ON-THE-SHUTTLE FROM-THE-DARK-ONE SOON. GO AND DO-NOT-RETURN UNTIL-THEY-ARE WITHIN-OUR-GRASP!"

D'Rang bowed and slithered out the door to the distant Spaceport. The ground there was charred black from the engine fires of the ships that daily landed and took off from here, and T'Rang scurried left and right to board ships, hurry into town on an errand or to jot down the comings and goings of all T'Rang and goods through the port.

It really needed to be cleaned, but with the Umpani cows right around the corner, threatening to eliminate every T'rang with even a moment's lapse in vigilance, that kind of luxury was far out of reach.

The war with the Umpani had been fought for decades, even centuries. Most of the T'Rang couldn't even remember what had started it all; they only knew that surrender or a single moment's hesitation in one of their many battles throughout the stars could mean the deaths of every T'Rang in the Empire.

D'Rang was raised on tales of the Umpani's treachery, their slaughtering of innocents and widespread kidnapping and murder at their hands. Few T'Rang, if any, were not pressed into military service from a few weeks after their birth, and it was D'Rang's great delight to be known as a Watcher of the same blood as the hero K'Borra.

Thousands of Umpani had fallen before his uncle's rod, and thousands more would become notches on D'Rang's own soon enough. Now, if there was only some way to convince the Queen of that...

The brown and black ship was suddenly above him as it broke through some low clouds. Within seconds, it descended and slowed to a gentle stop on the blackened Spaceport landing area.

The hatch opened, and the newcomers emerged. D'Rang gripped his Stun Rod in anticipation of meeting the great warriors the Dark Savant had sent to aid the T'Rang.

By Her name, they were ugly.

The taller one's skin was dark and smooth, and she wore simple white fabric obviously as clothes, not as armor. Her primitive black spear was slung diagonally on her back, and disgusting locks of black hair hung off of her scalp and down to her shoulders, swaying with every step she took. For some reason, she had no protection for her feet.

Next to her was a girl in a simple white robe, again clearly dressed for show rather than for battle. *Why are these fools here, anyway?* he thought. At her side was slung a curved black scabbard, probably housing some cheap, stone age blade. As repulsive as the first was, this one, with her black hair pulled into a tail on top, pointed ears and unnaturally pale skin, seemed just a step away from death.

D'Rang sneered at the nauseating sight, and sized up the third of this primitive band. She was half the size of the others, with long brown hair on her head pulled back in a tail... wearing not only a green cloth robe, but to top it all off, a shimmering golden necklace with a glowing red jewel in the middle.

More show, he thought. *What are they thinking, coming into a war zone dressed like this?*

For some reason, the Fiend of Nine Worlds was travelling with them. Though he seemed the same size and stature of the two girls standing before him, he thankfully kept his vomit-inducing figure hidden behind a black mask and garb suited for stealth.

In truth, D'Rang hated him. The Dark Savant, the powerful, reprehensible scourge who pressed the T'Rang Empire into an "alliance" that benefitted himself more than D'Rang's people, hired Elson to assist the T'Rang in the race for the Astral Dominae.

No T'Rang regarded him with any sort of respect... that is, until his first mission. Though he had only been

ordered to scout Orkogre Forest and the environs around New City, he had managed to return with a dozen Umpani horns, then spoke only to ask for his next duty. There was not a wound on him.

Though most of the T'Rang still distrusted him, none looked at him with condescending eyes after that. From then on, outright insults became little more than whispered mockery behind his back. *Someday,* he thought, *my Queen will recognize me in the way that She recognizes this outsider...*

The Fiend continued down the ramp of the ship and past D'Rang towards the Imperial Chamber without a sound, but the other three stopped in front of him.

"Are you the one who's going to greet us?" the pointy-ears asked.

D'Rang hissed a laugh... and stifled a choke of nausea. "It dependss," he chuckled, "are you here to sstraighten the ssleeping quartersss?"

She let her hand rest on the handle of her primitive blade. "Excuse me?" she asked, and D'Rang started to laugh. "We've come here to fight with the T'Rang, and to find the Astral Dominae."

He chuckled harder, almost losing his grip on his Stun Rod. "You? Warriorss?" he asked. "That iss difficult to take at face value, when you wear clothing ssuited for the housse-bound mate of a medieval noble...

"You," he continued, pointing at the pale one, "wield an antiquated blade incapable of cutting even the weakesst of materialsss! And your dresss... how do you expect to deflect a blow from the large-bellied Umpani hogss wearing that?"

"My sword is my armor, fool," Lucciana spat. "Would you like a demonsssstration?!" she continued, mocking his speech.

D'Rang cackled. "And you, sshort one! Have you not a weapon to even defend yoursself?" he asked. "Perhapss you could be like your dark friend here and wear clothess ssuited for cleaning, with a weapon besst utilized picking parasssitess from your backssside!"

Without warning, the pointy-ears slid her blade out of her scabbard and towards his neck with alarming speed. "Say what you will about me or my technique," she stated icily, "but you will not speak of my comrades in such a manner."

D'Rang glared at her with fire in his black eyes. He hissed what seemed like an angry warning, but his head glowed at the same time, so she knew it was actually an incantation. Seconds later, a moth with the wingspan of an entire foot appeared, hovering to the side of her head.

She didn't seem to fall for it, but was distracted momentarily nonetheless. As the dark one removed the spear from her back and brought the blunt end down on the moth's head, D'Rang let his Stun Rod fall forward between the pointy-ears' blade and his neck, and the two metal weapons clanged against one another.

The moth Illusion disappeared in a puff of smoke, and the T'Rang stood proud against the foolish, unprepared bladeswoman. Their weapons were deathly still against the other, and the entire world seemed to wrap itself in the tension of a single pent-up breath.

Shss was worried that their adventure would end here, in the midst of an entire city of angry alien warriors. Even now, more groups of the spider creatures were throwing glances their way, wondering what was going on. "Lucciana..." she whispered.

With a quick glance around, the Samurai saw them, too. "As much as I would relish removing your head from your chitinous neck, I will not risk my comrades' lives over this," she said. She pulled her blade back and placed it back in her scabbard. "Now, take us to your Queen before I mention this to the Dark Savant."

All at once, D'Rang's body tightened, thinking of the dark one's wrath falling upon them. The Umpani could be defeated easily enough, but with the Savant helping them in the destruction of his people, things might become too difficult to manage. He did not want to be the reason his people were defeated here.

He pulled his Stun Rod back and rested it at his side. "Do not think thiss iss over, wretch," he warned. "We will continue thiss another time, and you will know then the power of the T'Rang Empire, and of the mighty D'Rang T'Rang. Do not forget thiss name."

He wheeled around, and his spidery brown robe fluttered with the movement. As he slithered away, the three girls could see the sickening trail of brown goo that the T'Rang perpetually left behind him. As she tried to ignore the sight, Hiromi beckoned her two friends down to her. "I think we might be on the wrong side, guys..." she whispered.

Shss nodded. "Yes, must go," she added.

"Way ahead of you," Lucciana whispered back. "We'll find a chance to slip out soon enough. Until then, play along."

Hiromi made a face. "That means no more challenging others to duels..." she chastised her friend. The Elf grinned and shrugged, then followed the arrogant T'Rang on his way out of the Spaceport.

The ruins of this once beautiful town were now beset by crumbling stone and thickets of weeds, which were only cleared away from the ground when their presence became more of an obstacle than an eyesore. T'Rang scuttled about in every direction with agitated looks on their faces, as if being outside made them extremely nervous. Behind every one of them the trails of brown goo followed, marking the town with unsightly zigzags of sickening streaks.

From every group, the party suffered the angry, distrusting and even outright hostile glares of T'Rang busily running from building to building. Though the T'Rang had come to adopt these alien ruins as their new home, it was Shss, Lucciana and Hiromi who were now the true outsiders.

D'Rang forged ahead on a clear path through the rubble and weeds, almost like he was distancing himself from the party. Still, he glanced back now and then to make sure they were following him, though never with relief. "Disgust" or "annoyance" would be better terms for his heated glances.

The first of many doors they walked by was clearly labelled by a sign on the outside: "T'Rang Empire Security." Hiromi could only imagine the kinds of guards they had stationed inside.

"DO NOT SSTOP UNLESSS I TELL YOU TO," D'Rang shouted in her face, and Hiromi jumped with fright. She could have sworn he was several dozen feet ahead of them!

Shss placed a comforting arm around her shoulder. "You very mean, why?" she asked D'Rang.

"Outssiderss... you dare to interfere in the T'Rang Empire'ss affairsss, with the Dark Ssavant'sss forced blesssing, and you quesstion my feelingss?" D'Rang hissed at her.

Shss cocked her head slightly. *Something about... outsiders...?* she thought. *...Oh.*

"We outsiders, you outsiders, together fight, live," she said. She extended her hand, but D'Rang turned around and marched past Lucciana.

"If you are not T'Rang, then you are my enemy..." he spat. "And I will prove to this universse that the T'Rang are the mightiessst creaturess alive, no matter how much you all wissh to desstroy usss!"

He turned right into the entrance to the High Chamber. "Come, sstop wassting my time," he called back. "H'Jenn-Ra T'Rang iss waiting."

After a painfully long wait, the slow ones finally made their way over to him, and he opened the door

leading in. The tall guard, whose name he always forgot, greeted him only with a point of two of his claws to the west.

D'Rang nodded and gestured inside. "Do not dawdle, and do not wander," he spat. "Follow only the directionss you are given." Before Lucciana could pass him, he held his claw in front of her body to stop her. "And you..." he said with a clack of his mandibles, "I will be ssseeing you later, pointy-earss." She nodded, and the three girls walked in.

There were T'Rang lined up in the corner, dozens of them, eyeing their every move. Slowly, one of them lifted several of its claws, pointing the girls down the corridor. The three avoided fallen rocks and rubble in the dilapidated hallway, until they finally reached the end of it.

"T'Rang Empire Imperial Chamber."

Hiromi shivered as she read the sign. If the soldiers were that hostile, she didn't want to meet the Queen. Shss squeezed her arm around her shoulders again, like she usually did when her friend was worried.

Though she still felt uneasy, Hiromi drew strength from her friends' proximity to her. She looked up at Shss to see her comforting smile, and returned it. She knew they would both protect her to the death.

Lucciana gripped the doorknob and pushed the door open, which creaked and groaned eerily as it slowly opened into the new room. A short and wide hall ended abruptly in a dead end, with a single window barricaded by bars in the middle of the wall. To the left and right, a batallion of T'Rang stood poised and ready to attack, should any of the three make a single suspicious move.

Once the three had entered, dozens of claws, stingers and other assorted appendages pointed towards the single window in front of them. Lucciana led the way to it, and the other two followed closely. As they drew near, Shss took up a position at the back of the line with the swordswoman at the front, keeping Hiromi relatively safe between the two of them.

Nothing happened for a few seconds, until Shss began to hear something strange. She turned her head back to the dragging, gooey sound that started far off in the distance, and slowly slithered up to the bars.

The room was covered in shadow, but once the figure had finally approached the window, there was no way Shss could miss the obese brown slug. She envied Hiromi her short stature, knowing she didn't have to see this disgusting sight.

The drooling, spitting, cackling T'Rang with a foul-smelling stream of gruel running down her face was easily ten times the size of a normal T'Rang. Shss was thankful that she couldn't see the very back end of her body, but the bulbous mass that made up what she could see was enough to make her retch. For the sake of interspecies understanding, she stifled it as best she could as she turned away from the window.

"YOU-ARE-THE-ONESS THE-DARK-SSSAVANT-FAVORSS," the great slug hissed.
"I-AM-H'JENN'RA-T'RANG, AND-YOU-SSERVE-ME-NOW."

Hiromi held onto Lucciana's robe when she heard that voice. There were only shadows coming from the window from that high up, but she couldn't shake the powerful feeling of danger that now pervaded the room.

"I-DO-NOT TRUSST-ANY OF-YOU," she said. "IF-YOU-WOULD HAVE-THE-POWER OF THE-T'RANG-EMPIRE-AT YOUR-UNDESSERVED-SSSIDESS, THEN-YOU WILL FIRSST-SSEE-SSHRITISSS, THE-MIGHTIESST OF-ALL-T'RANG-ASSSASSSINSS!

"GO-NOW, TO THE-ANTHRACAX, AND TELL-SSHRITIS-"TO SSTRIKE!" RETURN-TO-ME AFTER-YOU HAVE-DELIVERED-THISS-MESSSAGE... IF-YOUR HEADSS-ARE-SSSTILL INTACT! HA-HAHA-HA-SSSSSHT!"

With the squishy sound of brown goo behind her, H'Jenn-Ra T'Rang withdrew into the shadows, back to

her bowl of delicious gruel.

Lucciana was glad she made it this far before it happened. She turned away from the window towards the stone wall and coughed loudly, and successfully stifled the vomit that threatened to make this a very short alliance with the T'Rang.

Shss put the nauseated Samurai's arm around her shoulder and carried her back towards the entrance. The small army of elite T'Rang guardians moved to intercept their path.

Before she could prepare for battle, the guardians moved to their left, blocking both the door the party had entered from and the large hallway leading to the left. A dozen clawed appendages pointed towards the door at the end of the hallway to their right.

Shss helped Lucciana down the hallway, until her friend gently nudged her away and took to walking by herself. It was a simple wooden door with a large sign on it: "T'Rang Empire Anthracax." The Fighter repeated the word, then asked, "What?" to nobody in particular.

"I don't know either," Hiromi replied. Shss shrugged and pushed the door open.

The room was completely taken up by the massive machine in the corner. Four black pillars surrounded glowing blue tiles on the ground, and there was a simple lever on the wall, whose purpose was unclear.

Lucciana cautiously placed a sandaled foot on one of the blue tiles. There was a strong vibration coming from underneath the machine, but other than that, it seemed utterly innocuous. Even when she stood completely in the middle of the contraption, aside from feeling a full body tingling from the vibrations, there was nothing.

Hiromi went to stand underneath the lever on the wall, but couldn't reach it. "What do you think this will do?" she asked.

Shss moved forward to put a hand on the lever, but motioned for Lucciana to step off of the machine before she did anything... and once she was safely with the other two, she pulled.

A low hum filled the room and shook all three of them to the core. Suddenly, they felt themselves being pulled towards the machine. Weakly at first, but as only scant seconds went by, a blue light began to fill the room... and not one of the three could stay in place any longer.

All three flew through the air towards the machine, where the light was the very strongest and brightest. Hiromi screamed, Lucciana and Shss vainly clawed at the pillars around the tiles to stop their motion, and everything in the machine disappeared in a final flash of blue light.

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Hiromi was still screaming when all three of them were dumped onto the tiled floor. Her own voice was enough to remind her that she was still alive, and she stopped crying out long enough to collapse on the floor in exhausted fear.

The other two were next to her in the middle of the four black pillars. It seemed like they had gone nowhere, but the room was different, smaller... the machine actually took up the entirety of it now.

There was another lever on the wall, and a door opposite it. Hiromi glared angrily at the lever, and Lucciana smirked. "That was... weird," she chuckled. The three stood up and pushed their way through the door.

It was impossible to notice him at first. He seemed to almost melt into the shadows, but when he emerged into the waning light of the sun streaming in from the window outside, she wondered just how she could have missed such an enormous T'Rang.

Nine feet tall, shrouded in the thick, black spider-robes of an important station, and wielding a massive rod with a dangerously glowing tip and four curved metal hooks surrounding it, Shritis T'Rang stood before the party. The aura of murder he gave off was in complete contrast to his relaxed stance as he looked the party over.

"How dare you intrude on the domainss of the great T'Rang Empire..." he hissed.

Hiromi spoke quickly, in a panic. "No, wait!" she shouted with her hands in front of her. "The Queen sent us to you with a message!"

Shritis' black eyes narrowed. "H'Jenn-Ra T'Rang, working together with prey? Do you take me for a fool?" he asked.

Lucciana gestured to him as she spoke. "To strike," she explained. "H'Jenn-Ra tells you to strike."

The T'Rang cackled. "Very well, then."

Before anyone could move, Shritis strode forward and jabbed his rod's glowing globe into Shss' chest. As her now paralyzed body could slump to the floor, he drove both of the fleshy stingers coming from his shoulders into hers. Violent fire burned her from the inside, but she suddenly hadn't the strength to move, or even scream. Her vision darkened.

Hiromi conjured up water from her stomach and shot a Paralyze spell at Shritis, and the freezing liquid bolted from her hands in two streaks and struck him straight in the chest.

Shritis laughed; it had no effect... in fact, he laughed so hard that Shss was shaken off of his erect stingers, and fell to the floor. Lucciana had her katana out and was about to strike, but her friend fell backwards into her before she could leap at the T'Rang.

"Run!" Hiromi shouted. Lucciana's anger kept her stationary for just a second, and her arm burned with the desire to take this creature apart piece by piece.

But when Shss coughed, and a black liquid mixed with blood began to dribble from her mouth, it was all Lucciana needed to sheathe her sword and join Hiromi in her run through the Anthracax door.

Shritis laughed even harder, his voice echoing off of the walls of the small house. "Run, prey, run!" he shouted. "No matter where you go on thiss planet, the mighty Asssasssin Sshritiss will find you!"

Lucciana struggled to get to the Anthracax with Shss in her arms, just as Hiromi pulled the lever on the wall, and the room turned blue.

On the floor of the Anthracax in Nyctalinth, Shss wasn't moving, and her body was turning purple. Hiromi conjured forth the strongest feeling of air she possibly could from her body and blasted a Cure Poison spell into Shss' bare stomach.

But the venom was too strong, and despite the fact that she used enough air magic to run herself completely dry, she only managed to slow its effects.

Unfortunately, it was also enough to mercilessly bring Shss back to consciousness. She gurgled a cry of pain as the poison coursed through her body, and she started to spit up more of the black liquid.

Hiromi knew there was no other choice. Removing the small amount of magic she used to keep Lucciana's Presence at bay, she devoted every last scrap of her being, every last spark of magic at her disposal, to nurture the greatest amount of God's love in her body. The warm liquid feeling washed over her in a powerful rush, and she directed it into a constant flow from her hands and into Shss.

Lucciana was holding her friend's head in her lap while Hiromi's magic went to work, and the room lit up brighter and brighter with every second that the healing spell went to work. The wounds in Shss' left

shoulder and chest closed up slowly, but the real battle was being fought on the inside, against the poison. Her body tensed and relaxed as her heart carried the poison through her with every beat.

It took a few seconds, but Lucciana started to feel it: the Presence was gaining ground. Anger flared in her with every second she saw her friend suffering on the floor, until she felt only the burning desire to pull that lever down and murder the bastard who had tried to kill her friend.

Looking up briefly from her work on Shss, Hiromi noticed a startling change in Lucciana: her pupils were beginning to dilate, her eyes got blacker by the second, and her skin seemed to become even more pale than it had been a minute ago.

Her heart skipped a beat when she noticed the final change: two of Lucciana's teeth grew in front of her eyes and poked out from her mouth in two sharp points.

Lucciana shook her head violently as she started to hear the voices. *Blood... feed...* She clutched her head as the feeling washed over her. She looked up at Hiromi and saw only the blood in her cheeks, heard only the sound of her heartbeat. She had... to kill her...

No... I have... to kill Shritis...! she thought. *He's the one responsible!*

And with that, she rose up and let Shss' head down on the floor. Then, drawing her sword, she reached for the lever...

"*Lucciana!*" Hiromi screamed as her hands continued to glow. The Elf pulled her hand back, and struggled internally again. Her teeth shortened and her cheeks became slightly more rosy, but seconds later, they grew longer and her face became pale again. She was flitting back and forth as her struggle continued...

"I don't have the energy to hold it back anymore!" Hiromi cried. "Please, be strong until Shss is well again!"

I... can't... Lucciana thought to herself, then wheeled around and saw her dying friend in a new light: not as a reason for vengeance, but as the reason to battle the essence in her mind. She didn't know how much longer she could hold it. "Please don't die, Shss! Please...!" Hiromi cried.

Suddenly, the door burst open, and a group of T'Rang guards began to pour into the room. Hiromi turned to them with tears in her eyes. "*Stay back*!" she warned.

When she yelled, it almost seemed as if she had grown several feet, and the T'Rang faltered in surprise. It bought the Hobbit enough time to use the last of her magic to heal her friend.

Shss began to relax a little, just as Hiromi's hands started to dim; her natural defenses were beginning to take over fighting the poison. Finally, the Priest slumped over, exhausted, onto her friend's chest.

Against the wall, Lucciana fought even harder against the Presence, but it was winning again. *I really wasn't strong enough to fight it off alone after all...* she thought.

The T'Rang quickly recovered from their shock, and the foremost one jabbed the tip of his Stun Rod into Lucciana's neck. She whipped her katana around towards the T'Rang, but a current of electricity shocked her to the very core. Within seconds, she was out cold.

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Shss couldn't move. She let out a muffled groan in the darkness.

In response, two familiar hands touched her stomach again, and a wave of water washed over her. Every place it flowed to, Shss could suddenly feel again, and was soon able to move without difficulty.

She sat up, bracing herself for the pain of the two puncture wounds the T'Rang Assassin had given her... but felt nothing. She couldn't see Hiromi in the darkness, but the Fighter could certainly feel her smile.

They were in a prison, in a small room enclosed by a locked door with a small window in it. Shss felt around in the blackness and felt a cloth lump in the corner. She squeezed, and it felt solid at the same time as it groaned... Lucciana, no doubt. They were all safe, for the moment.

A metal door slammed from somewhere outside. A shadow quietly prowled down the corridor outside and caused a brief puff of air as it passed. Shss stood up and looked out the window... it was that Ninja from the Black Ship.

He was walking towards a lump in the corner, one that stirred slightly as he approached. As he knelt at its side, Shss saw that the lump was a girl, caught underneath a net and chained to the floor.

Her blonde hair was matted and caked with blood, and her entire body was scorched and bruised. Her royal purple shirt with white trim was torn in several places, and only a small purple strip of cloth around her waist and ragged black boots kept the rest of her covered. A single rag tied around her mouth prevented her from shouting for help.

Despite this, she faced Elson with a fierce pride that made Shss' spine tingle in admiration. He pulled the rag down from her mouth to let her speak. "You serve the infestation, do you?" she growled with surprising strength. "Have they tired of holding me hostage? I will tell them nothing, as I have told them nothing since they brought me here!" As soon as she was finished speaking, she spit into the mask covering his face.

Elson was unfazed. "Be quiet," he commanded, ignoring the saliva running down his cowl. He reached into a small sheathe on his back, and withdrew a small, curved blade. The girl stared defiantly into his brown eyes, and ignored the cry of "Wait!" from one of the cells down the hallway.

"You will look back upon the day you murdered Jan-Ette of the Helazoid Legion, pig," the girl said icily as she ground her teeth. "You will look back upon it, and curse the day you brought the wrath of the Helazoid upon your cowardly head."

Surprisingly, the Ninja brought the blade down on the net, and sawed cleanly through several of the ropes that bound Jan-Ette to the floor. She was speechless as he removed the ropes from around her body and flung them into the corner, sheathed the blade, then used a small metal lockpick from a pouch at his side to undo her bonds.

He was done in seconds. "Can you walk?" he asked, but Jan-Ette was too stunned to know what to say.

"Can you walk?" he repeated.

"No," the girl finally answered, "the T'Rang have tortured and crippled me to impede my movement..." She pointed at the slits on her heels, along with her broken legs and ankles.

Elson sighed, and looked around for something that might help. There were was just debris heaped in the corner, and a few cells... *Ah, right. Perhaps the ones in there could...*

He was at the window faster than Shss could have expected. "You. The ones from the ship," he said calmly. "Is the Priest with you?"

Shss turned the words over in her mind for a few seconds, and once she had a handle on their meaning, she opened her mouth to answer. "Yes," Hiromi whispered from the back before her friend could reply.

Something metallic jingled in the darkness. There was a *click,* and the door opened. "Bring her here," Elson ordered, and was at Jan-Ette's side almost before Shss could blink.

Hiromi was still exhausted from healing Shss earlier, and she reached her hands out in the darkness.

"Shss, please help me up..." she said with difficulty.

She did so, and reached into the cell to grab the Hobbit around her waist. She hefted her up like a child on her shoulder, and slipped another arm around Lucciana. She felt a bulge in the Elf's robe; apparently, the T'Rang didn't search underneath her clothes to find the hidden blade slung at the Samurai's waist.

With both of them over a shoulder, she brought everyone over to where the battered Helazoid was lying on the ground. She gently let Hiromi and Lucciana to the ground and took a look around.

Their weapons, along with a heap of several others, were being stored in the corner. Most of the other weapons were dull or rusty, but there seemed to be some semi-useful ones among the bunch. Nonetheless, Shss plucked out only her spear and Lucciana's sheathe and katana and tied them all carefully to her back, then knelt back down with the injured girl.

Hiromi made sure to push the Presence back in Lucciana's mind as she slept. It only had a foothold in her mind when Lucciana was conscious, of course, but she wanted to be prepared for when she woke up.

It was the only reason her insufficient sleeping schedule had worked from the day they plunged into the sea of stars to today. The Priest did her best to sleep after Lucciana did, and to wake up far before her, to keep the Presence from taking hold of her friend's mind. Stamina spells kept her from needing as much rest as the others, but it was still causing her quite a bit of distress.

But it was for her friend's sake... she needed no further motivation.

Hiromi nurtured God's love from her body and placed her hands on Jan-Ette's stomach. The Heal Wounds spell went to work immediately, and the girl's injuries shrank, closed and knit in a matter of seconds. However, the light in Hiromi's hands dimmed quickly... she hadn't had enough time to fully recuperate.

"I'm... out," she whispered, and collapsed again. But this time, Shss was there to catch her.

Jan-Ette looked at her body with wonder. She had never been healed before... just a second ago, she was near death and couldn't move, and now it was as if she just left on the mission to find the Crusaders!

She smiled with thanks at the collapsed Hobbit, and looked at Elson with confusion. "Why are you helping me?" she asked. "Don't you work for the T'Rang?"

He dismissed her with a wave. "My client will remain anonymous," he said. "I was ordered to protect you, and that's all you need to know."

Despite his aid, she still looked suspicious. "How can I trust you when you switch sides so easily?"

Elson shrugged, his eyes neutral. "If you were ordered dead, you and everyone in this room would have had their throats slashed before you could scream," he said. "I am many things, but I am no liar."

He stood up. "Now stop wasting time. The T'Rang will be here any minute." With that, he grasped Jan-Ette's hand in his gloved one and brought her to her feet. With her hand still in his, he pulled her roughly to the door.

"Wait," Jan-Ette said.

Elson looked up towards the sky and sighed softly. "Yes?" he asked.

She quickly pushed his hand away and pulled a small, non-descript triangle of metal from her pocket. She touched it in a few key places, and as it began to shimmer, the symbol of the Helazoid Legion appeared: a red eye underneath a grouping of silvery blue clouds. She pushed it into Hiromi's hands.

"Thank you, brave warriors, for coming to my aid," she said. "Please hold on to this banner, and use it

anytime you need my assistance. Simply speak my name, 'Jan-Ette,' and it will signal me to your position, wherever you are. It is a high honor to receive such a gift, though you deserve nothing less for your selfless deed. Let destiny prevail!"

She smiled and joined Elson at his side, when the door burst open. It was D'Rang T'Rang and a swarm of T'Rang, and they looked furious.

"You will not esscape my wrath again, traitorss!" D'Rang hissed, and he lunged at Elson with his double-hooked Stun Rod. With barely any effort, Elson sidestepped the powerful charge and kicked the T'Rang in the back as he flew by.

The first of the T'Rang rushed forward with his Stun Rod flashing through the air. Elson feinted right, then slipped in under his guard to the left. A single elbow to a vital organ under his left side, and the T'Rang dropped.

Another was right on top of Elson, but the Ninja dropped low and shot his boot up and under the T'Rang's chin. His neck broke instantly, just as another T'Rang's sizzling rod sought his exposed side. Elson pushed his hands on the ground, rotated in midfall and fell on top of the rod, pushing it to the ground and bringing the T'Rang still clutching it right over him.

The Ninja held tight to the T'Rang's rod and used it as a vault to get back to his feet. He simultaneously kicked the next T'Rang advancing on him in the side of his head, at the same time that he shoved the T'Rang whose rod he was using into the door of a cell. The T'Rang's head cracked against the metal bars on the window, and he slumped to the floor.

Now, it was his turn. He leaned forward with his arms behind his back and ran towards two T'Rang, who both thrust their Stun Rods forward in tandem. He slipped right between them and slid out the pair of Ninjato in hidden sheathes on his back.

Not stopping as he ran by, Elson cut a large slice in each T'Rang's side. They both dropped their Stun Rods and fountained green blood onto the floor before they slumped down with them.

The final T'Rang was standing at the door, and though his Stun Rod was prepared for an attack, it seemed he was not. He backed up a step and sucked in air to scream for more guards, but Elson silenced him with a sudden dual thrust into his neck.

Meanwhile, D'Rang was flying towards the ground after his failed lunge at the Fiend of Nine Worlds. Before he hit the ground, a hand met his spidery gown and pushed him backwards, back to balance.

He waved his Stun Rod through the air at the figure, and was surprised to see that it was the ugly pointy-eared thing from before. She was awake... and her katana was in a dismaying position.

Lucciana chuckled as she held her katana to his throat. He saw that her face had returned to normal. "We'll finish this sooner than expected, I see..." she said, as she withdrew her blade and took a battle stance. "We duel with honor!"

D'Rang gripped his Stun Rod with both pairs of his claws. "To the death, pointy-earss..." he hissed, "...and to make ssure your friendss don't interrupt..."

A fire began to burn between Shss and Hiromi as the T'Rang's head glowed brightly. Suddenly, a giant, muscular creature with yellow skin and horns sticking out in a fan shape along its head erupted forth with a burning aura. Its hands glowed with fire as it attacked.

D'Rang thrust his Stun Rod forward while Lucciana was distracted, and clipped her ribs. The shock startled her at the same time that it made her knees feel very wobbly and weak. D'Rang brought the staff around for a second strike, but Lucciana was prepared this time. She would have to hope Shss and Hiromi could take care of themselves.

Shss unslung her black spear and sliced up the creature's body. A red streak went up and left along its torso, and the flame was thankfully low enough not to damage the spear. The Fantasmagora spoke arcane words of power, and a black skull drove into Shss' chest. She could suddenly feel herself slipping away into death again.

An exhausted voice dispelled the Death Wish from Shss' body. Once her friend was free to fight again, Hiromi pulled forth air from her body and cast her final spell of Silence on the Fantasmagora. Its mouth continued to move, but it could no longer speak. It turned away from Shss and slashed its claw at the exhausted Priest, but was blocked by the Fighter's spear.

I'm sorry... Hiromi thought as she struggled to stay conscious and hold the Presence back. *You're on your own now...*

Shss spun her spear around in an arc and pushed the Fantasmagora's arm up and away. *I didn't know Demons were so weak,* she thought proudly.

She flipped her spear over and drove the blunt end into its stomach. The Demon doubled over and its face met Shss' knee. Seeing stars, it fell to the ground with an extremely dizzy look in its eyes, and didn't move anymore. Slowly, the fire around it dimmed as it returned to its home dimension, defeated.

At the same time, Lucciana dodged D'Rang's stingers before they drove into her neck, and pushed his Stun Rod out and away. She lunged forward and thrust her katana straight through his heart.

They... they killed her...! I'll never forgive them! NEVER!

I swear, on Her life, Her body and Her blood, that the T'Rang will someday be strong enough to wipe out all of our enemies from this universe! I will become the strongest warrior our Empire has ever seen, and I will make them all cower when they hear my name! Nobody shall ever make me or my people a victim again!

The T'Rang grunted and grabbed the handle of her katana with his claw, then pulled it out of his body. Another claw extended, and he raked his talons over her face with a single swipe.

Lucciana pushed the thoughts out of her mind and replaced them with her own. *That was a clean kill! Why...?*

Then, she realized: alien beings, alien bodies. She winced at the slices on her face at the same time as she chuckled slightly. What an obviously bad assumption she had made... Goto-sama would surely have scolded her for it.

She pulled the katana completely out of the rest of his body and spun around, aiming straight for the T'Rang's neck. At least that was one area where most creatures sported vital parts.

D'Rang thrust his staff up vertically and held firm. Lucciana's katana struck it hard and pushed it sideways, but not enough to cut the T'Rang, or even dent the rod.

But she wasn't finished. While she swung, Lucciana conjured fire in her stomach and blasted a powerful Fireball straight from her free hand into the T'Rang's face. Though he blocked her katana, the fire singed and burned his eyes long enough for her to recover, swing her katana around and slice off D'Rang's left needle-stinger and an outstretched claw.

The T'Rang screamed in agony and fell to the ground, still clutching his Stun Rod. *Magic!* he thought. *The conniving prick-ear used magic!*

She had a clean kill shot open to her now; the T'Rang was writhing in pain and his Stun Rod waved around with no apparent plan of defense. As his voice continued to scream in her mind, she drew her katana back... then sheathed it.

Placing a sandaled foot on his torso, Lucciana ripped the Stun Rod from his clutching claws. "I'll take this as a memento of our fight," she said.

The T'Rang cried out in agony from his missing limbs. Before she turned away, Lucciana conjured two more bursts of fire, and shot two Fireballs into each missing extremity. The T'Rang yelled out even louder as Lucciana cauterized the wounds before he could bleed to death.

She saw that Shss and Hiromi had vanquished the Demon, but the Priest was barely conscious. The battle over, she gestured them towards the door where Elson had made short work of the many T'Rang there.

Shss gathered Hiromi up in her arms and went to join Jan-Ette and her black-garbed protector. She screwed up her face in sorrow and tried her best not to look at the lifeless, murdered bodies of the fallen T'Rang warriors. No matter where she went, it was more of the same...

Before Lucciana joined them, she knelt down and whispered to the T'Rang. "On another world, at another time, as different people, we might have been allies..." He didn't move or respond in any way, and she was unsure if he heard her or not.

Elson began speaking before she and the other two girls arrived. "The T'Rang have sent a small squad to check up on their prisoners, but when they don't report back, there will be reinforcements," he said. "I can certainly dispose of all of them, but with someone to protect, it could get complicated." Jan-Ette huffed slightly at the barely hidden jab.

"I will recover my ward's rocket sled being held nearby, then she will take off while I distract the guards," he explained. "Once the bulk of them are after me, you three make for the Anthracax. It will be less guarded when you get there."

"We go together," Shss insisted.

Lucciana nodded in agreement, but Elson shook his head. "You helped me accomplish my objective, now I'm helping you escape," he said. "As far as I'm concerned, all debts are paid."

"It'll be safer if..." Lucciana started, out of breath from the fight and shaking with excitement.

Elson held up a hand to silence her. "You don't seem to understand," he interrupted as he looked on her with empty eyes. They were unbelievably cold in the neutral light of the prison's hallway. "None of you have any relationship with me, and I will not suffer any who get in the way of my work. Stay out of my business and I'll stay out of yours; cross me, and you will die. Do you understand?"

Lucciana narrowed her eyes and waved a dismissive hand away from her. "Perfectly," she responded.

He turned around, pausing briefly to acknowledge Jan-Ette. "Stay here," he ordered her, and before she nodded, he was already out the door and running under the cover of night in the courtyard.

Only seconds later, they heard the dying screams of T'Rang, and a powerful, groundshaking roar filled the air. The frightening noise came to rest outside the prison and died down, but did not disappear completely.

The door suddenly flung open, almost knocking Shss and Hiromi to the ground. "It's ready. Get out of here, now," Elson told everyone.

Lucciana saw the source of the noise then: it was a floating red machine, and it was growling like the ship that had brought them to this wretched planet. Jan-Ette flung herself over the side of it, sat down on her knees, and she and the machine suddenly blasted into the air with unbelievable speed.

At this point, every T'Rang in the area was pointing and running towards the escapee, but it was too late. Within seconds, she had disappeared past some clouds into the night sky.

Elson sprinted towards the entrance of the town, past a multitude of angry T'Rang. They wondered briefly what their ally was doing as the prisoner escaped... only until he had sliced his Ninjato through several of them as he made his way out of the town. The T'Rang understood then his betrayal, but it was too late. With a powerful jump, he was up and over the wall of the town and running towards freedom.

The army of T'Rang followed him en masse, leaving a massive trail of brown goo behind them. When the bulk of them had exited the town gates after the traitorous Ninja, Lucciana knew it was time. She beckoned Shss out, and the two ran straight for the High Chamber with Hiromi in the Fighter's arms.

Aside from the moment when Lucciana almost slipped in a trail of goo, they made their way across the courtyard without incident. Nobody shouted, and nobody came rushing out to end their lives. Lucciana grabbed the door handles to the High Chamber, but it was now locked.

She quickly conjured a feeling of earth from her stomach to her hands and Knock Knocked the door open. She and Shss ran in, past a group of confused guards who hadn't moved since the mess began, and towards the door to the Imperial Chamber where the Queen and the Anthracax resided.

Blazing Psionic Fire spells chipped stones off of the hallway around them, and Hiromi and Lucciana resisted the terrorizing effects of an impotent Psionic Blast spell. Though Shss saw the eyes of the Amazulu Queen once more as the spell took a hold of her mind, she knew she was already over and done with that chapter of her life. She had already vowed to be merciful, and the T'Rang's spell served only to re-emphasize how far she had come these past few months.

Lucciana shot an Iceball at the floor behind her and caked the ground with slippery ice shards. *That should keep them busy for a little bit...* she thought with a smile.

The Imperial Chamber was unlocked, but a mass of T'Rang were waiting for them. Lucciana opened the door, fired her most powerful Fireball at the floor, then slammed the door shut. With a thought, the ball exploded, and T'Rang shrieks ripped through the closed door.

She opened the portal again, and holding D'Rang's Stun Rod in her right hand, cut down the last few T'Rang between the party and the Anthracax with the katana in her left. She let Shss and Hiromi go first, taking a stinger in the thigh and the hooked end of a Stun Rod in her back as she waited for them to escape before her.

She grunted and removed the stinger with a slice, then batted the Stun Rod away before it could paralyze her.

"Lucciana!" Shss shouted from inside the teleporter. The blue light began to fill the room, just as the Samurai jumped over mangled T'Rang bodies and into the Anthracax.

As the light overwhelmed them, and as a multitude of screaming T'Rang voices erupted in her mind, Lucciana cut the protruding lever and mechanism from the wall. Sparks shot out of the alcove as the party was whisked away to the dwelling of Shritis T'Rang.

The NEPs Arrive

Janus and I shared a room for most of the journey through the stars. There was plenty of room on the ship, enough for each person to have their own place to sleep (though the big smokey Dragon who was piloting us to our destination cramped things up a little!), but I never really found myself sleeping alone in my own room.

Maybe because the ship is so big, I don't know... but I felt myself getting lost inside it, so much so that I always felt uneasy.

Actually, on second thought, that's probably not true. I was uneasy, yes, but I think the real reason was because of him.

Hiromi asked me to stay with Janus, to look out for him, but it started to go beyond that promise after a few weeks. Day by day I would think less of just protecting or standing by him, and more about being with a person so much like me... I had no idea how lonely he was growing up.

At least I had my mother by my side, and Master Jang later on, but to grow up by yourself the way he had...

I not only understood that loneliness, but even surrounded by those who cared about me, I experienced it as well. He and I, we're the same... trying to come to grips with two parts of ourselves struggling for dominance, or at least coming to some sort of agreement with the other.

Master Jang and my mother never met, at the same time that the "Faerie" part of me never seemed to come to grips with the "Monk." I never wanted the two to meet, because I knew that if they did, one might have to overpower or destroy the other so I could feel more like a whole being.

So I never let them near one another, keeping both at a comfortable distance. Sometimes I would act like a Faerie, sometimes like a Monk. Sometimes I stayed with my mother, and at others, with Master Jang.

But at the very least, I could choose who I wanted to be at any given time. Janus, on the other hand... I could never imagine hating half of myself and wishing it would disappear, and never being able to change it no matter how hard I tried.

I am grateful that Master Jang told me to go to the castle, so I could first meet Hi-chan, and then someone like Janus. Our other companion, however, is a different matter.

Tearn hasn't spoken to us even once. He comes out of his room briefly to get some food or ask Bela how much longer it will be until we arrive, but otherwise, we never see him. I remember only him threatening our lives before we left Llylgamyn. It's certainly not a memory to leave as a first impression!

Even so, I know at the same time that I don't really understand much about him. He said something before, about helping his people, getting revenge. I don't know the details, but I just hope I have the opportunity to learn more when we get to Guardia. But even then, he still scares me.

I guess that's about everything. Just a few minutes ago, Bela told everyone that we were about to arrive. For the first time since we left a few months ago, all four of us gathered together to see the blue dot in the sea of darkness approaching in the front window. It was truly amazing to see a world from the outside for the first time.

When we got closer, all I could see at first was a massive ocean enclosed by a large ring of land. Only minutes went by before those continents were close enough to see big buildings and sprawling towns, the roads connecting them, clouds and millions of trees.

We're going to meet a race of people called the "Umpani." Bela assures us that they've never been to Llylgamyn, and we won't recognize what they look like. Once we've arrived, he's going to talk to their leader, General Yamo, and work with him and the Umpani to track down where the Astral Dominae is.

While he speaks to Yamo, the three of us are going to enlist in the army and see what we can do to help them against the war with the T'Rang, the Umpani's mortal enemy, and the Dark Savant, who is rumored to be the most powerful, evil being in the galaxy. All three of these groups are looking for the Astral Dominae, and Bela thinks that having the power of the most reliable of the three groups on our side will greatly improve our chances of finding and protecting this mysterious artifact.

"Private Kiwi," he said with a laugh. I actually like the ring of it!

We're moving in close to a city now, and I can actually see other skyships entering and leaving while we set down on this big strip of stone. The ground of this port/courtyard is scorched black from where all the ships blast the stone with those powerful flames that shoot out from beneath them. There are several dozen other ships on the ground around us, being serviced and piloted by even more of the Umpani

people.

They're really big, I just noticed. Dimensions get skewed when you're that high up, but as they've come to greet us now that we've set down, it makes me shiver to see how muscular they all are. And Bela tells us the whole army looks like this!

I hope everything goes all right... for me and Janus, for Hi-chan, and for the whole galaxy. A lot is up in the air right now, but all I know is that I'll do my best, in every way possible.

I can feel you nearby, Master Jang. Watch what you've taught your student during those many lessons, and all the strength you've given me. I'll protect everyone with just my own two hands, and my burning spirit!

***

"Welcome to Guardia," the Umpani greeted as the four stepped out of the ship. He scowled a little bit as he looked over the four, from the big black Dragon and Dracon to the furry Felpurr and diminuitive Faerie.

He was easily seven feet tall, and built solidly enough to throttle any enemy with his bare hands, no matter the size. He was shaped much like a Human with arms and legs, torso and so on, but his skin was grey and rough. He had no hair, and his mouth was wide and long like a beast's. From the middle of his face above his nostrils, an impressively long and sharp white horn protruded up and out towards the sky.

Tearn noticed that as he lifted one mighty hand over his white shirt in salute, his other was still hovering over the long-barelled metallic object slung at the side of his formal red jacket. What purpose it served he could not fathom, but if Bela's description of these people was accurate, it was certainly some weapon of war.

On his other hip, there was a bulge underneath his jacket, to the side of his blue sash and green shorts. When his jacket rustled with the salute, Tearn saw the familiar sight of a large, flat-ended blade hanging there, stopping just above the brown buckles around his legs. He was certainly ready for anything.

Bela nodded, and swept his claw wide as he bowed with respect. "I am honored," he said, "But if I may see your General... time is running short."

"Of course," the Umpani replied, "but the others are not cleared to visit the headquarters of the Imperial Umpani Federation. If they are here to help us in this war, as I have been told, they will need to speak with Sergeant Balbrak at the Recruiting Station."

"You three do not mind starting from the bottom while we begin our search, do you?" Bela asked with a wink.

Kiwi shrugged. "Doesn't matter, as long as you have our backs," Janus said.

The Umpani followed their reactions with his eyes, satisfied, until they came to rest on Tearn... he had his arms folded and seemed really impatient. "This whole chain of command thing is a waste of time..." he muttered.

"If you will not enlist, then consider yourself a hostile in the eyes of the IUF! You will depart this city immediately and never return!" the Umpani shouted.

This is bad, Tearn thought. *I can't go making enemies the day I touch down here... I'll just play along.*
"...however, an alliance would be beneficial to both parties, so I have already decided to join." He stared at the Umpani coldly. "Consider holding your tongue until another is finished speaking."

"Insubordination?" the Umpani growled with his hand on the metallic object.

Tearn stared straight back. "Insubordination... if I were your subordinate. Idiot."

Bela stepped between the two and raised his claws in a "hold it" motion. "Ok, ok," he chuckled nervously, "now that we are all introduced, let us consider this an interspecies gaff and move on. Remember, we are all allies here; it is the Dark Savant and the Astral Dominae we should be focused on now."

The Umpani snorted and let his hand leave the object. "And the bugs. The T'Rang may be weak in comparison to our superior forces, but they've got numbers," he said, then pointed down the courtyard towards one of the exits. "We'll go this way, towards Command HQ and the Recruiting Station. Keep up, and don't wander off."

Kiwi shrank away from Tearn and fluttered shyly over to Janus' right shoulder, to keep the Felpurr from seeing her. Janus started to follow Bela and the Umpani, and Tearn came right after.

The entire town looked like it was once an ancient city. The massive old stones and the remains of residential areas, a vast park and a marketplace all spoke to that fact.

In a telling testament to their race, the city had been refurbished into a model of military resoluteness and order by the Umpani. They had taken all of the old materials around the town and created entirely new buildings to serve their functions here, or just took up residence in the ones that were still standing.

Straight ahead in the middle of another grassy courtyard, Umpani battled back and forth amongst themselves with their large and powerful swords. Their strength was unreal... the flat-ended blades dug deep into the ground and flashed through the air with a speed contrary to their size, but not surprising at all considering the size of the Umpani wielding them.

Though he marvelled at all the new sights he had seen, including now, something had been nagging at Janus' mind for a few days now. *So many things have happened,* he thought. *We've gone from a single planet to an entire universe to consider. It's almost too much, thinking of all the people living out their lives among the stars while we lived, rather alone, in our comfortable niche of the universe.*

But does the universe have a destiny? Do we? Can we change it if we had to? And this Dark Savant, where does he fit into all this? What is our role in the face of his power? I wonder... in the end, if we are truly going to end up helping in any way...

"You ok, Janus?" Kiwi asked. "You look distracted."

He shook himself from his thoughts. "Just thinking about our enlistment, that's all," he lied.

She giggled. "Never thought I would sign up to be in an army!" she admitted. "...Or flying through space, or talking with Dragons for that matter."

The Umpani interrupted them. "This is Command HQ," he said. He pointed at a large building, with burly guards positioned at the main archway leading into it. "Bela will come with me, and the rest of you," he said as he pointed south across the field of sparring Umpani, "will head to the old church there.

"If anyone stops you, or asks what you're doing here, tell them the watchword, 'Victory,'" he explained. "And if the word's too long for you daisies to remember, just tell them you're 'New Recruits.'

"Now, move out!!"

He withdrew a piece of parchment from his pocket and turned around to show it to a guard outside the command center. The guard looked it over, and after the two spoke in hushed voices for a second, the guard nodded and stood aside.

"You are on your own for a while," Bela said to everyone, "so try and get along, ok?" Then, he and the Umpani disappeared into the building.

Janus was suddenly aware of how alone they now were. Without Bela to vouch for them, the three were now truly required to fend for themselves. He wondered if the Umpani were as accustomed to seeing

Dracons in their midst as the easily frightened denizens of Llylgamyn were... and if not, if their reactions would be roughly the same.

Kiwi could already feel the eyes of the distrusting Umpani on them. Some of the ones resting from their training in the courtyard glued their fiery eyes to the group, watching their every move. The guards in front of the IUF's headquarters looked especially impatient and angry, and were probably chosen to guard the most important of the Umpani's buildings for that reason.

With a shake of his head, Tearn started to pad across the soft grass towards the church that they were ordered to go to. "Stop embracing the look of a spineless weakling and you'll not be considered one," he barked. "Pull yourself together and let's get this over with, Dracon."

"What about me?" Kiwi muttered. "Big shot..." Janus patted her on the head and followed their proud companion into the former garden and church, turned renovated army station.

An archway led into a beautiful grassy garden, where small groupings of flowers were struggling their way to the surface here and there. It was most likely an effect of nature, Kiwi reasoned, considering that weeds were slowly invading from outside of the garden. The Umpani were warriors, not gardeners.

The church itself was a massive white building with double doors, and a small path leading up to it. Though the people who had bowed and prayed here were long gone, the building itself stood proudly in rememberance of its former service.

It had clearly been repaired where the walls had been patched up with old boards, and an anticlimactic sign swayed in the wind from a small string hanging on a nail: "Recruiting Station."

The door opened, and a squad of four burly Umpani made their way out, when the two groups stopped to eyed one another. The Umpani seemed to scan the three for something from head to toe, but after a few seconds, they pushed past the party and through the archway to the training area.

Tearn and Janus walked through the open door into the Station, which was covered with posters depicting the glory of service to the IUF. One particularly impressive one depicted a sword and another of the long metallic objects crossed over one another, all on a passionate red background, with the words "Join Now!" beneath it written in gold and black.

The church was rather spartan, and had only one desk with an Umpani sitting behind it. Any chairs or religious items had long rotted away or were shuttled away by the pragmatic alien warriors. The soldier was writing furiously on a piece of parchment at a desk, right in front of a small strip of metal that read, "Sgt. Balbrak."

"Shut the door," he ordered without looking up. His voice was calm from years of experience, but they could feel that it might raise in volume at any moment, should the need arise. He raised his eyes for just a second to get a look at the three, then glanced back down to put the finishing touches on his report. Finally, he rose up to full height and stood before the party.

Balbrak was very tall, easily a head above even Janus. His white shirt, brown vest and green pants were all kept trim and tidy, befitting a soldier of his rank. He withdrew a small red handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the ink off of his hands before he spoke. "You're the new recruits?" he asked while shaking his head in confusion. "Where's Bela?"

"He's talking to General Yamo," Kiwi answered. "He won't be joining us," Janus added.

With a sigh, Balbrak spoke. "So, instead of a Dragon the size of a bug Queen, I get a bunch of shrimp... what do any of you greenhorns expect to do against an enemy like the T'Rang?"

Tearn stepped forward. "I am the leader of this band, and I accept full responsibility for their actions," he said. "Now hurry up and get us enlisted so we can get to work."

Kiwi caught Janus' eyes and pointed at Tearn with a confused look. "We're following Tabby's rules now, huh?" she whispered. The Felpurr's ears pricked up and he shot a look at the Faerie, but when his eyes settled on her, she was looking up at the ceiling like nothing happened.

"It's by Yamo's order that you're getting in, not mine," Balbrak said with narrowed eyes. "I have no choice in the matter. But before you make the choice of signing up, I must tell you one thing: the Umpani don't usually allow outsiders like yourselves to enter our domains, much less enlist in our forces, but we're a little short-staffed right now.

"If you make any wrong move, you will receive the appropriate response. We also do not take suspicious or outright traitorious actions lightly. Do not forget this, do as you're told, and above all else, place your loyalty to the IUF before all else. Do you understand?"

"Yep!" Kiwi shouted, with her hand over her chest in salute. "Glory to the IUF, and victory over the Savant!" Janus shrugged coolly, and Tearn nodded in agreement.

"Very well," Balbrak said. "You are now NEPs within the IUF, the Imperial Umpani Federation. That stands for 'Newly Enlisted Personnel,' but what it basically means is this: you go in first, you come out last, and you do anything you're told to do... or you will be tried with treason and executed."

He turned back to his desk and scribbled on another piece of parchment. "Here are your orders," he said while he wrote. "You are to report to Sergeant Kabomm at the Supply Depot just north of here, and get your standard IUF requisition gear. Go out of the Recruiting Station, make a right at Command HQ, and continue north until you see it. Bela and General Yamo have already come to an agreement about your supplies, so you will not be charged this time for your gear.

"After this," he continued, turning around and giving the papers to Tearn, "you will provide for yourselves, and carry out missions as I instruct you to do them. Now, go to the Supply Depot and follow Sergeant Kabomm's orders to the letter, and report back to me if he has no orders for you. Dismissed!"

Everyone started to file out of the room, but Balbrak interrupted them. "Oh, I almost forgot. Take these." He reached into his desk and pulled out three small badges, each clearly labelled "IUFSTFNEPS."

"Wear these when travelling around here, and you won't be stopped," he explained. "Just make sure you don't go wandering where you're not supposed to, and remember the IUF motto at all times, NEPs: Duty, Power, Victory!"

Kiwi nodded. "Thanks!" she said. She was waving goodbye as Janus and Tearn walked out the door, and she almost slipped off of Janus' shoulder when he stopped suddenly. The little Faerie turned her head to see what was the matter, only to see that the same four Umpani from before were waiting for them as they came out. This time, their eyes came to rest on what they were looking for: their badges.

"So, this is the fresh meat everyone's been talking about?" one Umpani with a cracked horn commented. "They'll make good sacrificial meat for the T'Rang before the real soldiers mop up!"

Not again... Kiwi thought.

"Look at the one on the big guy's shoulder! What does it think it'll do against one of the bugs?" an Umpani with a scar over his lip asked with a condescending grin. Kiwi was close enough to read his tags: Tracker Rork. "Maybe it's a good candidate for... the Trial!"

"Yeah, I think so!" the first laughed. "Hey you, little winged one, we have a rule here. You join the IUF, and we're the ones who make sure you're ready to fight before the T'Rang get a hold of you." He unsheathed his sword and pointed it at her. "And I choose you to be the one to fight with!"

Tearn shook his head and pushed past him, leaving the others behind. "You'll fight me," Janus said, then stepped forward with his claws outstretched.

Kiwi hopped up on his shoulder. "No way!" she said. "I'll take him on! You ready to get pounded, you big brute?" She hovered in front of the Umpani and held her fists out in preparation for his strike. She could now clearly read his badge: Tracker Rhallick. Apparently, he was the leader of this crew.

"You're not going to fight someone that big while I'm here," Janus insisted. "Let me take care of this."

She turned around and winked at him. "Trust me. It'll be over in two hits!" she promised.

Rhallick laughed. "Little fledgling is weak, but spirited... that's good," he said. "But it takes more than spirit to win a battle!" And with that, he raised his sword high and slashed at the air, but Kiwi easily flit out of the way. He expertly timed his slices and recoveries to continually fill the air around him with his swooshing sword, but it never came close to connecting.

He didn't lose his temper, though, and continued to swing in a furious rhythm. Kiwi flit, dodged, swooped and flipped over every slice, and finally came to rest on top of the sword. "Stop moving around!" Rhallick yelled, and shook his sword hard to get her off of it.

"Ok," Kiwi said, and dropped to the ground. She held her fists out again, and prepared for his strike. "You ready for the counter-attack?!" she challenged with a grin. Rhallick laughed hard in response, and before anyone could react, he lifted his gargantuan foot and crushed the tiny Faerie beneath it.

"Kiwi!" Janus yelled, and almost slugged the Umpani... but the look on the soldier's face stayed his claw: one of confusion. He looked down and saw that the Umpani's foot was raised just a few inches off of the ground, but the shadow covered whatever had stopped him.

Suddenly, Rhallick's foot was pushed up into the air, and his entire body rocketed several feet off of the ground. Kiwi launched out of the grass and straight into the Umpani's back with a powerful punch.

Before he had time to grunt in pain, she was already back at his foot, and wrapped her arms around it. Janus jumped back as Kiwi flipped the Umpani completely around in a wide circle and slammed him facefirst into the ground. There was a loud thud that echoed off of the walls of the garden, and the Umpani groaned.

"Wrong!" she exclaimed. "Spirit is the *only* thing you need to win!"

At the same time, Janus heard a creak coming from the Recruiting Station, and saw that Balbrak was coming out to investigate the noise. He stood in the doorway for a second, looking over the scene.

Then, without a word, he grabbed the doorknob and closed it behind him.

"I win!" Kiwi said happily, and stood on the Umpani's back with her hands raised in victory. Without warning, the Umpani suddenly flipped over, threw her off of his back, then enclosed his fingers around her disoriented body. He brought the Faerie close to his face, right next to his mouth.

"Heh," Rhallick groaned, "guess I'm getting a bit rusty." He grinned. "Welcome to the IUF, um..."

She smiled. "Kiwi," she said proudly.

"Kiwi," he repeated, and opened his hand. She sat down on it and giggled. "Where'd you learn to fight like that?" he asked.

She waved her hand to the side and smirked. "It's nothing big!" she insisted. "All Monks learn how to purify their bodies and defend themselves."

"The Munk? You learned from the Munk?" he asked. "Me and the boys were just about ready to go to Munkharama and scout for any bugs... didn't know those old men did anything besides practice dark magic, much less join up with the IUF..."

Kiwi was confused, but suddenly realized that they had been abandoned. "Thanks for the fun, but we've got orders to be at the Supply Depot soon!" she said. "We'll see you later!" She waved and sat back on Janus' shoulder, and the two of them ran to catch up with Tearn.

Rork helped Rhallick to his feet. "You got pounded," he chuckled. Rhallick pushed him away. "Going easy on her is all!" he protested. His comrades sniggered at the blatant lie, and they all started out towards Munkharama.

Monster

The Supply Depot was huddled in the back of the old town storage area, now converted into an impressive silo of equipment for use by the IUF. Tearn heard thuds and cries of battle behind him, but cared little for whatever idiocy the confrontational Umpani or his weakling "allies" were up to.

The stones were polished well around the portal leading into the Depot. What's more, when Tearn entered the first door, he could see that they were heavily reinforced from the inside. He wondered about the lack of guards for this important area, until he saw the seemingly impassable second metallic door.

He was in a small room between the door leading outside and the one leading inside. Here, a black object with a glass lens tracked his every move from the far ceiling corner. Tearn reached out to open the door in front of him.

The locked handle didn't turn, but a voice simultaneously spoke out from the black object. *"This is Sergeant Kabomm with the Supply Depot,"* it said. *"Identify yourself, and present orders."* Tearn complied, and fished the paper detailing his orders out of his brown robe and held it up to the enigmatic object. "Tearn, Newly Enlisted Personnel for the IUF," he stated.

There was a whirring sound as the lens grew smaller and larger. Finally, it stayed in place for a few seconds, then the door in front of the Felpurr unlocked with a *click,* and began to open. He pushed in, and stared face to face with a wild-eyed Umpani behind a window blocked by several steel bars. Aside from the likely locked door to his left, there was only a single wide hole at the window's base to allow access to and from the supplies behind the great alien creature.

The soldier laughed. "A bit scrawny to be joining the finest military organization the galaxy has ever seen, eh, NEP?" he asked. "I gotcher gear right here, *if* you have the 9250 gold pieces for its purchase!"

"The Sergeant assured..." Tearn started, when a red light beeped under Kabomm's nose. "'scuse me a second, greenhorn," he said. He looked down at a flashing piece of glass, which displayed the room behind Tearn through some sort of sorcery, like a Wizard Eye spell everyone could see. The black and blue ones were standing there, looking quite confused.

"Papers please," Kabomm spoke into a long black object with a soft tip.

Seemingly confused, the Dracon looked up at the object on the ceiling. "Papers?" Kiwi asked Janus. "Didn't Tabby take them?"

Tearn snorted quietly. "They're with me," he growled lowly, trying to keep his anger in check. Kabomm glanced over at him, then nodded and pressed a button by the picture-machine. The door clicked open, and they stepped in.

Kiwi immediately turned bright red when she saw Tearn standing in front of her. The way she hid her face behind the Dracon was enough to quell his desire to murder her. "So anyway, NEPs..." Kabomm continued. "You get me the 9000 gold pieces, and you getcher gear and new orders."

"Like I was trying to tell you," Tearn repeated, "the Sergeant assured us that we would be taken care of."

In a microsecond, Kabomm's grin faded. "Oh. Freebies," he mumbled unhappily. He pried open a box at his feet and returned to business. "That will be two flak vests..." he muttered while he rooted through the

box. He pulled them out and held them up for size comparisons.

"Too heavy," Tearn said. "Too big," Kiwi added.

Janus nodded and reached towards the hole as Kabomm slipped a pair of Janus-sized vests through. "Guess they're mine then..." the Dracon said.

Kabomm went back into the box. "Two Muskets and ammo..." he continued. He held up two of the long metallic objects that were slung at the side of every Umpani, and two horns full of black powder. When all the Sergeant received as a response were blank looks, he grunted and said, "Long range weapons, much better than that primitive wood shooter you prehistoric types use."

Tearn dismissed the guns. "Don't need 'em." Kiwi giggled. "Do I look like I can hold something like that up?" she asked.

Janus shrugged. "Me again," he said as he took both firearms and the horns from the opening.

The Umpani looked doubtful as to what these three could possibly accomplish. "Lastly, you get your NEP badges," he finished as he fished out the three tags from the box.

"Got that already," Tearn said. "Me too!" Kiwi added. Janus flashed the badge on his new jacket.

Kabomm scoffed. "Well, it seems like one of you has been decked out real nice. So if you aren't gonna buy anything, which I'm sure you're not, you can take these orders..." he said, then rudely shoved a parchment through the window, "...and get the hell outta my station."

Tearn picked them up and scanned them quickly. "Firearms training... the Dracon can take care of that." He dropped the parchment back in the slot. "I'll be in the NEP's Barracks getting some rest until you're all done fooling around."

Without hesitation, he pulled his robe tighter around his body and left the Supply Depot without the others. When he got outside, he saw that it was starting to get dark. *Now's a good a time as any to get some sleep, before I get started on this Dominae business,* he thought.

The door closed behind him, and he started south between the trimmed grass along the well-kept pathway to the barracks. He tensed up slightly as he noticed a group of guffawing Umpani heading straight for him. Tearn's head glowed underneath his robe as he prepared a Hold Monsters spell, should they be as belligerent as the others were.

They walked by him without incident, some punching and grappling the others playfully as they headed on past him. Not even a glance; Tearn relaxed and kept walking.

He let out a deep sigh. *I wonder how my people are doing?* he thought. *It's been what, three? Four months now...?*

They were a strong people, the Felpurr, and had held off the advances of the Rawulf for years. Though he knew that the war would be a perpetual stalemate until one side or the other found some supreme key to victory, at this moment, battles likely still raged and innocent Felpurr were probably still dying.

Tearn would be that key, and turn the tide against those filthy curs. The only problem was that it had been so long since he first started out for the blasted pen. One wild and unfounded lead after another... that's all he had to show for his efforts on Llylgamyn.

He passed by the Umpani Headquarters, where Bela and the Umpani General were no doubt scheming and plotting about how to best procure the Astral Dominae for their own interests. He knew from experience... people with power invariably ended up abusing it to take advantage of those weaker than them.

For all his peaceful talk, Tearn did not trust the Dragon. He simply provided the ride he needed to arrive here, to find that which would make the bastards on Llylgamyn pay for their crimes.

The Umpani Guardsmen were eyeing his every move as he walked by. They distrusted him, as he distrusted their "might is right" approach to life. Tearn could only imagine how gung-ho and out of touch with reality their leader was.

For him, might was simply the path to vengeance, and nothing more... and to beat an enemy like the Rawulf, he needed much more strength than he had now.

"Mister Tearn?" a high-pitched voice came from behind him. The Faerie, no doubt.

"What?" he answered rudely, but didn't turn around.

"I know... we haven't had the chance to talk as much as we could have since we went on the ship together," she stammered. "It's all my fault. And I was really mean back there... so, um... I'm really sorry..."

She flushed red and hovered shyly behind him. "I just want you to know that Janus and I, well, we're your teammates," she continued. "I'm not asking you to open up to us or be our friends. Just please know that you can trust us, anytime you need our help. Fighting or otherwise, ok? We're from the same planet, and we're in this together, I think. That's... that's all..." she finished softly.

"I..." *Appreciate that.* "...understand," Tearn said and thought at the same time, and waved his paw backwards at her while he kept on towards the barracks. He had little time for this sentimental rubbish, but the other two might prove useful in the future, much like the alliance with the Umpani.

I'll let them tag along a little longer, until I get a lead on that device, he thought. *I won't need them after that...*

He finally reached the NEP's Barracks and pushed the door in. The floor was covered with straw mats, and was dirtier than his oily room on Bela's ship had been at first. Part of the training, or pure disdain for the lower ranks... either way, he had seen it before. He was used to this kind of life.

Tearn stepped over the rumbling, snoring body of a collapsed Umpani on the ground and found a sad and dingy mat of straw in the corner. He was already meditating on images of spells and arcane magics before he even sat. While his body rested, his mind was hard at work, devising new ways to annihilate the treacherous Rawulf, and his new enemies on this planet.

***

That one looks kinda funny... she thought. Janus was off training, Tearn was sleeping, and Kiwi was **bored.** They only needed one firearms expert, and since Janus was the only one cleared and skilled enough to train, she was left to explore on her own. Fifteen minutes after Tearn entered the barracks, she saw an Umpani plopped down on the ground, arms folded, in deep thought.

"Whatcha doin'?" Kiwi asked. Without a moment's hesitation, he hurriedly stuffed the parchment bearing his orders into his vest, and stood up quickly before the floating Faerie. He was going to yell at her, but then saw the badge she was carrying. It was about half the size of her entire body and she hid behind it, with only her bald head poking out and grinning from above it.

The Umpani choked back a laugh and put on a tough face. "What does it look like I'm doing, NEP?!" he shouted. "I'm reviewing my orders and preparing to set out for the glory of the IUF!"

Kiwi's eyes went wide at his enthusiasm. "Really?!" she asked, suddenly interested. "Cool! What're you gonna do?" She hovered around his vest, trying to read the hidden orders.

"That's classified!" he shouted as he swatted at her.

She huffed in annoyance. "Aw, c'mon! I won't tell anyone... 'L. T. Gruntwrapper,'" she said, reading his badge.

Gruntwrapper shook his head. "That's 'Lieutenant' Gruntwrapper, special operations officer under General Yamo himself!" he said proudly. "And who are you?"

"Just a NEP," she answered. "A very bored NEP..." A thought suddenly struck her. "I can read minds, you know! Maybe I'll just sneak a peek at what you're doing..." she teased.

He sighed and started to walk away. "Don't you have anything more important to do besides harass a superior officer?" he asked. "Go lift some weights, pipsqueak."

Kiwi resisted the urge to probe his mind. It wasn't right to sneak into people's thoughts, unless it was an emergency, of course. When she went into Master Jang's mind without permission that one time, she was frightened to hear him scold her in her own.

"'kay," she sighed. "Guess I'll just go off by myself," she answered with mock sadness.

For some reason, he bought it. Gruntwrapper looked around, then motioned Kiwi closer with a pitying face. "Ok, NEP, I'll give you a clue," he said. "I'm going on a very dangerous mission... something no other Umpani would even consider doing. Don't tell anyone I said anything, but I'm off to find something very special, ok? Don't go making that face anymore."

"The Astral Dominae?!" Kiwi whispered excitedly.

Gruntwrapper's mouth hung agape for the briefest of seconds, then he spoke. "N, no, something else," he stammered. Her smile suddenly faded at the look on his face. She was taken completely aback when she noticed the stark terror in his eyes.

He glanced left and right again, and she could see beads of sweat forming on his forehead. "I have to go," he said quickly, and rushed off to a small building next to headquarters. After he fumblingly slid his badge into a device on the door, it clicked open and he disappeared inside. Kiwi's stomach knotted up as she wondered what was bothering the Umpani so much.

***

Lieutenant Gromo was polishing the last of his beauties on the table when the new recruit walked in. He was surprised when it was not an Umpani, but a large black Dragon that entered the Firing Range. "Bela? I thought you were supposed to meet General Yamo?" he asked the creature.

"I'm Janus, one of the new recruits," he said as he displayed his badge. It was a temp pass; he must have gotten pressed into service rather quickly, which meant he might have to dumb the lesson down. "Oh, one of the other offworlders," Gromo said as he sat facing the newcomer. "Well, come over here, then. You did bring your Musket with you, didn't you?"

The Dracon removed one of the guns from where it was slung at his belt. The other still clung to his side, just outside of his double layers of armor. "Little afraid of injury, are we?" the Umpani snortled at the sight of the flak vests. He picked up a horn of more of the black powder, along with one of his babies. "So what kinda experience you got with these here weapons, NEP?"

Janus turned around, and indicated the crossbow at his side, and the bow slung on his back. "I have been using weapons such as these since before I can remember," he said.

Gromo beamed with admiration. "A Long Bow and a Chu Ko Nu?" he asked, with an odd trace of respect in his voice. "I had no idea we had other primitive weapons enthusiasts on board with the IUF! Let me shake your hand." The older Umpani reached out a sooty hand and took Janus' wrist, squeezing and shaking hard. "An honor!" he said with a nod and smile.

"I don't think you understand," Janus replied. "These are the weapons I have used all my life to defend and provide for myself."

After staring at him for a few seconds, Gromo burst into a fit of coughs and heaves. Janus couldn't tell if it was just a reaction to the smokey Firing Range, or if he was being made fun of.

With a cough and a wheeze, the Umpani spoke. "Well, *ugh,* Janus, let's get down to business, shall we?" he suggested. "How many years experience have you had with a firearm?"

Janus braced himself for the expected condescending response. "None," he replied.

Gromo really laughed this time, until he saw that the newbie's face hadn't changed, then composed himself. "You're serious. Well, we'll keep this under both our hats, all right?" he offered. "Your combat buddies may not be as forgiving as ol' Gromo." He stood up with a Musket in one hand, and a horn of powder in the other.

"First of all, get you gear in order: Musket, and your powder and shot," he said, indicating each one. Janus held them both up as he did. "Next, it's real simple. Just take a little handful of gunpowder..." the Umpani said, as he picked up a small bit of the black powder, "and set it into the barrel, here, nice and gently..."

He did as he was told and started to put some of the powder in, before the Umpani interrupted him. "No, no, no, wait..." he said with a shake of his head. "See, that's the trouble with all you greenhorns: in such a rush to blow something up, you forget the finesse of marksmanship. You put too much in and you'll blow the rod..."

Janus started to feel a growing annoyance with the complicated mess of loading this weapon. A bow had three simple, infallible steps: nock, pull, release. This was just...

Gromo chuckled. "Now, now, don't get discouraged... I can see it in your face," he said calmly. "I went through at least four of these babies before I got the loading down right. Now I *run* the training!"

Janus worked his maw in worry as the Lieutenant continued. "Just pour a little out and try again... there you go," he said as the Dracon started over. "That's the perfect amount. See? No problem.

"Now, take one of the Musket balls and slide it on in, like this," he explained as the ball rolled down the hollow tube of the Musket. "Tap it in firm... yeah, like that, and you're ready to... HEY! Watch where you're pointin' that thing, NEP!" Gromo cried out as Janus swung the barrel up to test the aim.

He nodded in apology and pointed the barrel upwards; he still couldn't believe some dirt and a ball could be more effective than a well-placed arrow.

Gromo composed himself. "Watch yourself, NEP... you hold an awesome power there," he said. Janus fought the urge to roll his eyes. "Now, of course, is the most important part of the training: shooting," his teacher continued, with a voice that sounded just slightly too happy. "Follow me out back to the range and we'll get a little practice in, before I send you back to Balbrak for new orders."

They walked out a door in the back and passed by a window enclosed by metal bars, which was looking out onto a long stretch of grass. The narrow range was enclosed by a pair of high walls running all the way down it. Janus closed the door behind him, winding the corner to where the soldier had been walking.

He was already down the narrow field at the dead end ahead. There was a target there, with a very clear set of blue and yellow rings surrounding a red bulls-eye. It was covered in holes, almost as badly beaten as the chipped wall behind it.

Gromo picked up a discarded target, this one fresh and unblemished, and hung it on the wall by two pins. When he was sure it was level and secure, he walked back down the range to Janus' side.

"All right, I hope you're ready for this. That Musket of yours has got quite a kick to it," he said as he helped Janus hold and position the firearm properly. "Now hold the butt of the gun to your shoulder, and brace it there. Line up the sight on the muzzle with your eye and the middle of the target," he said, backing up slowly, "and gently pull back the hammer under your thumb. Then gently, *gently,* squeeze the trigger."

Janus followed every step to the letter. After the soldier had backed up, the fledgling marksman pulled back the small piece of metal on the bottom of the gun.

BOOM!

The powerful sound of the shot echoed off of the walls, and the recoil pushed Janus straight into the window behind him. He hit the metal bars with a grunt, but managed to keep his balance. His ears were ringing.

Gromo uncovered his ears and looked down at the range to where Janus had fired. He cocked his head slightly to the side. "Well, at least you managed to snag the wall..." he commented. He clapped his hand on Janus' shoulder. "But you'll get the hang of it. Practice here until you can reliably hit the target, then I'll send you back to Balbrak."

"What?!" Janus shouted.

Gromo snickered and leaned in close to the Dracon. "KEEP SHOOTING 'TIL YOU GET THE HANG OF IT," he yelled.

"OK," the Dracon yelled back. Gromo fished out some muffs from his pocket and put them around Janus' large ears. After playfully snapping one of the ends against his throbbing eardrums, the Umpani turned and went back inside to polish more of his guns.

Janus looked with amazement at the tool in his claws, then back at the blast mark it had made in the wall. Luckily, he had shot far enough away from the "correct" area that he could tell his shot from the thousands of others, but one thing was perfectly clear: anything that could puncture that far into solid rock was a clear upgrade from arrows and bolts that would have simply skittered off of the surface.

He gripped the barrel of the Musket tighter, and nodded. This was a new playing field, and they all needed new skills and equipment to survive here. He carefully tapped sufficient "gunpowder" into the barrel of the Musket, popped in another ball of steel, and took aim once more.

***

Kiwi was lying on her back in the middle of the tall grass and flowers outside the Recruiting Station. A nice, cool breeze blew through the church's garden, at the same time that the grass kept her nice and warm. It was a beautiful night to just relax.

She saw the moon for the first time since they arrived. It was very big, much bigger than it was on Llylgamyn. The beautiful, pale surface flecked with small, oddly shaped shadows made her spine tingle; it was an amazing sight.

All at once, Janus leaned over her and blocked out the wonderous celestial body. "Hey," he said.

"Hi, Janus! How were the guns and stuff?" she asked.

He wiped a claw on the grass, leaving a very obvious black trail of soot in its passing. "Dirty, but good enough, I guess," he replied. "Where's Tearn? Still resting?"

Kiwi nodded, and looked back up at the moon. "Yeah... I'll ask him to come here while I get our new orders." Her stomach suddenly growled embarrassingly, and she grinned sheepishly in the darkness. "I'm getting a little hungry," she giggled.

Janus sat down by her. "I know. We really should get something soon..." he agreed.

In truth, he recently began to feel the Dragon coming out, craving the sweet and salty taste of meat. When they got their next orders, he definitely wanted to find out where all the food was, before his lesser half managed to take hold.

"Well, I'll go get something," she offered. "Stay here and rest up, ok?" She took her leave of him and fluttered up to the door of the Recruiting Station, where her head glowed ever so slightly for the briefest of seconds. Janus collapsed back onto the grass. *Nice moon...* he thought.

"Sergeant Balbraaaaak!" Kiwi called out inside the paper-filled office. "Team Kiwi ready for new orders! Can we talk to the General now?"

Balbrak was behind his desk when the Faerie came in. He dropped his pen, and pushed the orders into Kiwi's tiny hands. "Thank Urrhina someone finally shows a little loyalty around here!" he exclaimed. "Did you get your gear? Are you done with your training?"

"Yeah, we..." Kiwi started. "Good," Balbrak interrupted, "because we've just received a report of a small band of people north of here, in Tramontaine Forest, and nobody's shown up to take care of them yet. That's where you come in. Get up there ASAP, and search that forest for any sign of intelligent life.

"It may just be Rattkin, or Munk, or another of the locals. But if it's the T'Rang..." he trailed off, then pushed the papers into Kiwi's hands. "Take no prisoners. Dismissed."

Kiwi balked. "But... we just finished training, and we're all really tired!" she protested. "Can't you send anyone else? Or at least give us some food? We're starving!"

"Suck it up, soldier!" Balbrak yelled. He opened his desk and pulled out three canisters. "You can have some of my rations," he said, handing them to a Faerie with already full hands, "but rest is for the weak. We're at war here! Don't forget that!"

Her overexciteable commanding officer pushed her overloaded body back into the garden outside, and she tumbled through the air onto Janus' chest. The Umpani slammed the door shut, and Kiwi winced at the sound of his anger. "What a grouch..." she complained. "Here's some food, though." She handed a canister to Janus.

He eyed it suspiciously, then asked, "What's up?"

Kiwi handed him the parchment. "Bug hunt, I guess," she said. "Those T'Rang sound kinda scary. I hope they aren't too strong..."

As she spoke, Tearn suddenly approached and spoke up from behind them. "Let's finish this quickly," he said. "They might let us in to see the General sooner if we bring back a few of their heads."

She looked up at him, unsurprised. "Got my message!" she commented.

He grumbled, then glanced down at Janus' Musket. "With the racket going on across town, who could possibly rest, anyway?" he asked.

Janus tossed him one of the tins. "Food, eat up on the way," he grunted, and stood up. "Mmm," the Felpurr replied neutrally.

Kiwi sat on Janus' shoulder as they headed out the northern exit of Ukpyr, eyeing her large portion of the bounty. "You guys can share mine, if you want..." she offered.

***

"This...? This is a ration?" Janus asked. They had just left town when he opened one of the tins. There

were a few pieces of meat, many assorted breads, and a couple of sweets. It looked delicious, but he knew it wouldn't be enough to hold the hunger back.

He devoured it in seconds. Kiwi only nibbled a little at her bread, and passed the rest of her tin to Janus. "Here, I'm full," she lied. He didn't argue and ate hers as well, but he was still hungry. There just wasn't enough meat...

Tearn led the way through the dark forest. The night sky was a beautiful tapestry of stars, and the shadows of the trees around them were a lot less dark underneath the brilliant light of the full moon.

Animals skittered about here and there; Janus could sense their movement all around him from years of living out in the wilderness. He could sense their motives, their size, the way they were moving. Even now, he could tell that the creatures around them were timid. Prey...

NO! he shouted in his mind. *Hold on for just a few minutes, dammit!*

Kiwi shivered and held on strongly to Janus' neck. She couldn't see anything in the darkness. "It's all right," he comforted her, "nothing around us will attack. I'd know if we were in danger."

She nodded. "Ok," she whispered. She was cold, not scared, but if it made him feel better, she'd play the part of the helpless little girl. *If we get into a fight, I'll probably be the one to defend him,* she thought with a smirk.

A bird called out in the distance, and its cry echoed through the forest. Tearn swatted at a bug on his paw, while he turned over several excuses in his mind to explain their inability to find their target. *We found dozens of them. I incinerated them all, so we couldn't bring any bodies back. So sorry.*

Then, something started to hiss in the shadows ahead of them. Interestingly enough, it was right where the road ended in a great clearing where a great, shadowy oak tree rose in the middle. From the darkness, a dozen dark shapes slinked forward in a semicircle towards the party. There was a squishy sound accompanying their motion, and as they drew closer, Janus saw that they were leaving trails of goo behind them.

All of the shadows save one stopped. This one moved cautiously forward, its many claws raised in the air in a gesture of nonviolence. So this was a T'Rang.

When it stepped out into the moonlight and out of the shadow of the oak tree, they all saw the figure, clothed in a spidery brown robe, with needle-antennae waving around its head and numerous limbs protruding out of its body. Its mandibles moved as it began to speak in a mixture of clicks, hisses and flying spittle.

"I am K'Borra..." it hissed, then stopped. It seemed to recognize something, then shouted to its comrades around it. The second the order was given, a dozen white hot orbs lit up in the darkness, revealing the faces of several ugly T'Rang and the glowing, hooked rods they held at the ready.

Tearn was ready for the onslaught. He pulled a waiting red potion from his robe and shouted out, "Avert your eyes!" Janus and Kiwi did so for the briefest of seconds, as did a few of the T'Rang. The ones who were too slow or distrusting, however, suddenly faced the sun-like, brilliant light of Tearn's Blinding Flash potion as he smashed it to the ground.

The blinded T'Rang cried out and clutched their sensitive eyes, while Kiwi launched herself off of Janus' shoulder and into their defenseless chests. A single surprise kick and punch to each T'Rang knocked the wind out of them, and sent them to the ground.

Janus whipped out his crossbow as fast as he could, considering the amount of armor he was wearing. He aimed for the nearest advancing T'Rang as it thrust its staff's glowing orb and the hooks around it towards his chest, and he pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened; the crossbow was jammed!

He had no time to think about why before the orb caught him in the chest, while one of the hooks surrounding the globe pierced his vest. Though his armor provided ample protection against a blade or other mainstream weapon, when the orb came into contact with him, it grew brighter and sent an electrical shock through the hook and into his entire body.

It rocked him to the core, even with all the resistance, and he suddenly felt drained and unable to move. The T'Rang hissed a laugh as another orb joined and doubled the excruciating, shocking pain.

A fireball rocketed forth into one of the T'Rang's faces, and it dropped its Stun Rod. At the same time, a blue blur darted through the air and straight into the other's dripping jaws, and laid a haymaker so mighty into its clacking, insectal face that it spun the bug-man around in a complete circle, before it collapsed on its own glowing rod.

Kiwi shot from T'Rang to T'Rang in front of Janus, laying punches into each and every one of them, and knocking them down one by one. Tearn fired several glowing Magic Missiles into the group to his right, and the bright streaks danced between them before they punched several holes through their bodies.

Janus reached back to unsling his bow, but realized he had left it back with Gromo, along with all of his arrows. He really had been relying too much on Queequeg's gift these past few days...

Only the T'Rang who spoken earlier was left now... and it was no ordinary T'Rang, either, larger and more skilled with its glowing rod than the others. Icy water shot out of its claws and into Kiwi before she could even reach it. Her body slowed down to a fraction of its original speed, and the T'Rang pierced her shoulder with one of the needle-stingers sprouting from its back.

While she was impaled upon its spine, the T'Rang swung its staff around and batted the prone Faerie across her chest, off of its appendage and onto the ground. She groaned in pain. Janus tapped a small square of gunpowder into his Musket.

Tearn roared and threw a purple potion into the T'Rang's face, which exploded in a shower of glass and released a purple gas. Though the T'Rang seemed slightly weakened from the Poison Gas bomb, it still had the presence of mind to fire a streaking, electric Energy Blast into Tearn's chest. Janus rolled a steel ball into the muzzle.

While the Felpurr recovered, the T'Rang's head glowed, and Tearn was suddenly confronted with the solid and inescapable fact that he was utterly, completely, hopelessly powerless. With the image firmly in the Felpurr's mind, he wasn't able to piece together that it was a Terror spell that had a hold of his senses. Janus braced the Musket against his shoulder.

The T'Rang grew a hundred feet taller right in front of the Felpurr's eyes, and he took a step back in horror. He saw the large, glowing globe advancing on him. He felt like whimpering, but his desire to stand firm in the face of death was stronger. *I'm a soldier!* he thought defiantly. *Even if I'm about to die, I'm a soldier!*

He saw something else, though. A giant black Dracon, his firearm lined up with his gargantuan enemy's neck, was slowly squeezing the trigger of his behemoth gun. He pulled the trigger back farther, farther...

Seconds before, K'Borra T'Rang was the leader of an infiltration group sent to find the location of the Umpani battleship, the Horatha. Once the T'Rang had secured its orbital coordinates, it would only be a matter of time before the Empire would destroy it. The Umpani's powerful hold on the skies and atmosphere above would be crippled in a single move... and he would be a hero, considered an even greater warrior than he already was.

That was seconds ago. With a single roar of Janus' Musket, K'Borra's head, and a good portion of his chest, exploded with a fiery **BOOM!**

The Dracon looked down the barrel of his gun at the headless T'Rang, stunned, as his lifeless body slumped forward to the grass below. There was no way it could be that powerful...

Kiwi gurgled from the ground. "Owie, owie, owie..." she cried softly. Janus placed the Musket back in the holster at his side, and gently picked up the wounded Faerie. He then turned around to check on Tearn, who was backing up with fear just a second ago.

He had already recovered with the battle over. *Shameful...* he thought. *Absolutely disgusting...* He shook his head with anger at himself, and walked over to Janus and their injured comrade. "You ok, kid?" the Felpurr asked. Kiwi smiled and waved at him.

"We should get something... something to treat... um..." Janus started, then sniffed the air. His stomach growled as the smell of raw meat met his nostrils.

"I thought I saw something that looked like Rainweed back... hey, what are you doing?" Tearn asked Janus, as he turned to K'Borra's headless body. Janus pushed the wounded Faerie into Tearn's paws, then made his way to it.

"The hell's wrong with you?" the Felpurr demanded.

Janus turned around, his black eyes completely cold and hollow. The Felpurr cocked his head to the side in confusion, but said nothing more. Janus growled from deep within his chest, an animalistic rumble that shocked Kiwi more than it did Tearn.

Who...? Is that... Janus?! she wondered in a panic. *He's dressed the same, but...!*

Janus turned back to the body of the T'Rang, dug a claw into its succulent flesh, and ripped out a clawful of raw meat. He devoured it whole, smacking and licking his jaws as he ate. Every few seconds, he tore more of the T'Rang's body from his torso and consumed it whole as his two companions looked on in disgust.

Tearn shook his head, pulled a flask full of clear liquid out of his robe and unstoppered it, pressing it to Kiwi's lips. She sipped at it until her body was full and her wounds had closed up completely. After she was done, he closed the bottle and put it back in his robe, then let his paw drop so the Faerie was forced to fly out of his paw.

"Sick... freak," he muttered as he walked away from the grisly sight.

He was almost full, and beginning to come to his senses. When his feeding frenzy was finally sated, Janus' thoughts returned to normal. It was at that moment that he saw the ruined, devoured body beneath him and tasted raw meat, felt his stomach completely full. He suddenly remembered what happened.

No... he thought disgustedly. He turned around, but Tearn was already walking back down the road towards Ukpyr.

Sick freak... The queued words finally came to him, and repeated themselves indefinitely in his mind. *Freak...*

With T'Rang meat still hanging from his jaws and smothered over his lips, Janus saw the most disturbing sight of all: worse than the haughty Felpurr's dismissive backside, worse than the mutilated body at his knees, worse than any of the many people who had baselessly attacked him with whatever weapon they could find.

Kiwi, one of the only people he had ever called "friend," was staring at him with horror in her eyes. Though she whispered it as silently as she could, Janus could hear her reaction as clear as day: "Dear... God..." She tried to keep her focus on him for a few seconds longer, in politeness, as if nothing was the matter... but she eventually gave up, and started to retch on the grass behind her.

Janus looked at her in stunned silence as her tiny body heaved, bent over the grass with such nausea. He couldn't think of anything, couldn't say anything. This was his... friend.

And with that final act of betrayal, Janus gave up, on everything. Friendship, belief, life, himself... at that moment, he knew nothing could be trusted.

He got to his feet, kicked the T'Rang body on the ground and roared with frustration. He screamed, long and loud, with every last ounce of anger and sadness and revulsion at himself and the world around him. Animals fled through the trees around them, birds took off into the night, and the only one party to Janus' display of grief was Kiwi.

Finally, the Dracon could scream no more; he felt drained and utterly devoid of life. He looked up into the heavens, questioning the meaning of his entire life, if nothing would ever change. He wondered if someone were truly out there, worrying... or possibly, laughing.

He silently put his Musket back in its holster with a heavy heart, and slowly plodded back down the road to Ukpyr, where he purposefully avoided Kiwi's eyes. "Janus..." she whispered, but he did not even acknowledge her presence. The Faerie watched him leave, feeling too disgusted with herself to follow. *I was supposed to be his friend...!*

God, I'm so stupid! she thought to herself. *I always screw everything up! With everyone! It's always my fault... Master Jang and Hiromi... they're so clueless. They don't know the real me. The worthless, selfish, useless me... if they knew, they never would have stayed with me.*

I'm so worthless... I hate myself...

Janus disappeared into the darkness. Kiwi was alone now, and not just physically. She truly was, for one of the few times in her life, all by herself, with nobody to look out for her. Janus hated her, Master Jang was dead, Hiromi and her mother were gone... and she was all alone.

The trees and the shadows seemed to creep in around her. Every one of them contained a wild creature of some sort, waiting to pounce and chew her to pieces. *And I deserve it...* the Faerie thought. She hovered up and over the trees, and flew after Janus fast enough to see him from behind, but not close enough for him to know she was there.

Tiny droplets splashed on the road below her, joining the watery stains in the stone created by the one walking in front of her.

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Tearn tossed and turned on the straw mat. His previous disgust had long melted into pity, for the freak and the little one who cared for him. Neither had come to the barracks after the mission was done, though if he listened hard, he could hear tiny sobs coming from just outside under the night sky.

Far in the distance, the rhythmic, thunderous roar of Musket fire echoed far and wide over the occupied city of Ukpyr. The Umpani were used to the explosive sounds and slept soundly, but Tearn knew exactly who it was, practicing during these late hours.

Janus woke up Lieutenant Gromo, who even slept with the guns he cared for so much. He was grumpy at first, but when Janus told him it was for the sake of training, Gromo was only too happy to oblige him with the needed materials. Out on the range, the Dracon looked at the Musket briefly, in a different light than when he had first used it earlier on in the day. Just a rotation of the barrel, and all of his struggles could end here.

But again, he chickened out, like he always had every time he had an opportunity like this. He didn't know where to go from here; he only knew that he had this gun in his claws.

And so, he started shooting. The blasts rocketed out of the long barrel of the Musket and tore the target in

the back to shreds, hole by hole. When he had destroyed one, he replaced it with another and started all over again. Hours passed, and Janus shot.

With every passing minute, his blasts ended up more and more on the mark. And when the sun rose, he was even able to hit that tiny dot in the center of the target on a continual basis. But it wasn't a dot to him anymore, though... somehow over the course of the past hours, it started to look like himself.

"Freak," he said, Janus thought. **BOOM!** *He was right.* **BOOM!** *And for a second,* **BOOM!** *I thought differently.* **BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!**

Though Janus didn't know it, Gromo had been watching him since he started shooting, and he recognized that look in the Dracon's eyes. What was it? The seventh or eighth time he lost a comrade in combat? After so many friends killed in action, the Umpani just learned to deaden the pain by concentrating on something else, focusing on the apathy inherent in a repetitive task like shooting.

He picked up one of his shiny firearms. *They're only beautiful... because they helped me escape something ugly...* he thought. He looked out the window again, and soon enough, the NEP did exactly what he was waiting for: three successive bulls-eyes. Gromo picked up a giant backpack and opened the door to the range, holding the new badge in his hand.

Janus fired one last round, then looked at him with dead, emotionless eyes. "Yes?" he asked in a monotone voice. He looked extremely tired.

Gromo held his hand out, fist closed and pointed down, over the space between the both of them. Janus held his claw underneath it, and Gromo dropped the badge onto his black scales.

"Welcome to the TUFS, Trained Umpani Force Scouts, an honor achieved through ones proficiency with a firearm," the Umpani said. "Congratulations, soldier." Janus read the badge, and it indeed confirmed what the old soldier was saying.

"This is also for you," the Umpani added. He held the shiny firearm and the backpack out to Janus. The newly promoted TUFS looked the gifts over, but didn't accept them just yet. His eyes met the Umpani's in silence.

"Standard TUFS issue gear," Gromo explained. "A flak jacket, a double-barreled Blunder Buss, and enough ammo to last you through several wars. Use them with pride, and bring glory to the IUF."

Janus hesitated for a second, then slowly took the gear. He looked the gold-plated, wooden Blunder Buss up and down from both barrels, to stock, then back again, marvelling at its beauty.

Then, he opened the backpack to find an unbelievable amount of powder-filled horns and steel balls, and a jacket made of the same material as his vest, but big enough to protect his entire torso and a fair portion of his arms and neck.

He looked up to thank Gromo, but the Lieutenant was already back inside the main building. Seconds later, he heard snoring.

Here it was, another tool. One whose power would bring him closer to the Astral Dominae... or could even give him something he wanted, right now, if he so chose to do so.

Janus shook his head. Life was such a joke...

With his numb claws, he manipulated the positioning of his belt and holsters to make room for the new weapon. With everything secured and ready to go, he left the Firing Range for the Recruiting Station, and new orders.

On his way out, Janus placed Queequeg's Chu Ko Nu, which the Lieutenant had so clearly adored, next to the sleeping officer. Then, without a word, he left.

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Kiwi was still lost in thought. Her eyes hurt from crying so much, and she was still hugging herself for warmth. She had passed out for several hours outside, and before she knew it, it was night again. At this point, she was sure Janus had left her. *Why not?* she thought. *Everyone else does.*

He actually did end up coming back for her and Tearn, even though it was an entire day later. They had a mission to go to New City and speak to a Tracker named Rodan Lewarx. Deliver a message, come back... that's all they had to do.

She noticed his badge had changed, too. He told her that he got it from shooting at the Firing Range, and it just meant that he was trained, not better or higher rank. He was probably just trying to be humble.

When she tried to steer the conversation to what happened the previous night, he simply answered, "Let it go. It's no problem." Then, he swiftly changed subjects to New City, the supposed meeting place of all races on this planet.

She dropped the subject as he wished. But they could all feel it, even Tearn. The tension in the group was even greater than it had been the day they left with Bela, and the day they arrived on this planet; it was so thick they could almost touch it.

The "Humpawhammer" was their destination to get to New City. It was an impressive orange portal surrounded my a metallic circle, that turned on or off depending on the position of the lever next to it. Janus pulled it without caution and stepped through the glowing portal in a flash of light. Tearn slowly and cautiously followed him.

Kiwi hung her head one last time, thinking about what she was going to do after what had happened. Then, all at once, she suddenly felt alone... surrounded by strangers. She was in danger, unwanted, useless.

With a frightened flutter, she darted into the portal... after the last remnants of her final, fading friendship.

Merging Episode

Alone...

The blue light faded, and Shss, Lucciana and Hiromi were standing in the middle of the machine when it disappeared. The room was very dark, especially after the light was completely gone. Though sunset had begun in Nyctalinth, wherever here was, it was the middle of the night.

The pitter-patter of raindrops on the roof of the small house removed all doubt: the machine had taken them someplace completely different.

"Let's move quick," Lucciana whispered. "We won't have much time before they fix the little 'problem' I caused..."

Shss moved for the door, just before Lucciana blocked it with D'Rang's Stun Rod. "I'll go first this time," she whispered under her breath. The Fighter shook her head, but Lucciana was adamant. "Take some time to look over your new weapon. *Ka ket rash.* (This weapon doesn't kill)," she insisted.

She took the black rod from Lucciana, testing its weight with both hands as the Samurai listened intently at the door for signs of Shritis T'Rang. The yellow globe on the end of the Stun Rod was glowing faintly, but the weapon was not vibrating or shaking with its power. Surrounding the orb at the tip were a pair of metal hooks that curved out, clearly meant to hold down struggling prey as the orb rendered them immobile.

The grip at the base of the rod was clearly meant for T'Rang physiology, with three large indentations for their sharp claws. However, Shss found that if she paired off her fingers and let her thumb rest on the

outside of the staff, she could hold it easily. It would do until she could make some modifications to it.

"I'll conjure something to fight for us if I have to," Hiromi said, "but only because this is an emergency. Let's go, quick..."

Suddenly, the door opened. It was Shritis.

The nine foot, black-garbed T'Rang seemed even bigger than he was a few hours ago when the girls first saw him. The Presence in Lucciana's mind suddenly overwhelmed Hiromi's constant, yet small, amount of concentration holding it back. She was beginning to change again.

Shritis took in the sight of the three before him for only a second before he spoke. "Sso you have joined uss after all," he hissed, with his eyes on Shss' Stun Rod. "In good time, too, for my minionss and I were about to asssault the compound of thosse potbellied hogss, the Umpani. Conssidering your recent hisstory with the T'Rang Empire, I will allow you the personal honor of murdering the bumbling Tracker, Rodan Lewarx. You will join me, of coursse."

Lucciana's skin grew deathly pale. Her eyes dilated, and blackness overwhelmed them both as her hand shook on the handle of her blade. "You... hurt... my friend...!" she growled.

Though she tried her best to fight the Presence off, Hiromi soon realized that both it *and* Lucciana were now fighting her.

"You will die... die... DIE!" she screamed. Her katana was out of its sheathe and slicing through the air at Shritis' neck before anyone could even blink.

Though Shritis, the master of all T'Rang Assassins, was trained to both utilize and combat that kind of speed, he was only barely able to use his Psi Rod to block the powerful blow. Her blade stopped on one of the four hooks surrounding the globe, and the T'Rang shot out both of the fleshy stingers over his shoulders at Lucciana's face and chest.

He sensed motion at his side, and dropped a claw to block the expected attack. He spared only a moment's glance to see that the girl had another blade, and had tried to plunge it hilt-deep into him!

Lucciana dodged Shritis' first stinger, and grabbed the second one behind the tip with her teeth. Poison dripped into her mouth as she pulled it and Shritis down to her, then headbutt him in the center of his chitinous face.

As he recoiled from the painfully powerful strike, Lucciana spit the poison out of her mouth and into his eyes. He was immune to his own venom, but the burning sting came nonetheless.

Shss and Hiromi moved to join the fight, but Lucciana must have sensed their movement. She turned around, her black eyes flashing. "He's mine!" she yelled.

At the same time, Shritis thrust his Psi Rod forward faster than Shss could see, and caught Lucciana in the neck with one of its sharp and massive hooks. It punctured straight through... a sure kill shot as he touched the globe to her face and activated the rod.

Electricity ran down Lucciana's body, and she saw stars. She dropped her wakizashi against her better judgement, but using her now empty right hand, she pulled the sharp hook out of her neck, even as Shritis struggled to keep it there. Once she had the rod in her hands above her head, the wound hissed... then closed up. There was not even a scar left on her pale skin.

Lucciana yanked the staff from Shritis' grip, then threw it to the floor with a clatter. He desparately swiped at her with his claws and shot his stingers through the air, rending flesh with every rapid attack.

But the second he wounded her once and moved to make another, the first one would close. "Impossible...!" he hissed in the native T'Rang tongue. "Guards, assist me!"

While his minions poured into the room to see what had happened, the Samurai dropped to the floor, picked up her wakizashi and attacked.

The swords were everywhere at once, slicing mercilessly towards his body and flying out to disarm or dismember any of his minions who got too close. Shritis blocked, parried and dodged every last blow of the blades, but without a way to wound this creature, there was no point in fighting. None of his counter-attacks, from his claws to his stingers, were having any lasting effect. And his worthless allies were too afraid to advance!

The girl finally scored a lucky nick along his chest, and green blood dribbled down his robes. T'Rang limbs and heads rolled in every direction following every lightning fast cut away from his bleeding body and into his subordinates.

Their fear, their deaths, excited her. "He" was right... death was the only answer... and the only punishment fitting. Covered in her enemies' blood, Lucciana laughed with absolute ecstasy.

All of a sudden, Shritis saw the small one grab onto the bladeswoman's leg. "Lucciana, stop! *Please!!*" she pleaded.

The crazed Samurai felt the tug on her leg, the feel of someone trying to stop her vengeance. With a single motion, she unthinkingly swung around, pushed the Hobbit away and cut at her flying body.

The katana sliced straight through Hiromi's green robe and her amulet's chain, across and into her tiny chest. To her surprise, she felt no pain as the blade sliced through her... it was as if someone had simply poured a pleasant stream of water along her chest, and it was slowly running down her skin. Nothing felt wrong, and she felt no fear.

As she struck the ground, though, the wound tugged and pulled her skin in two different directions. She cried out in pain as her amulet fell from its sliced chain and struck the stone with a *tink.*

Lucciana's black eyes contracted in an instant, back to round pupils surrounded by blue irises. "Hi...?" she asked in shock.

Shritis saw her distraction, and wrapped a claw around Lucciana's neck. In less than a second, he plunged a stinger into her chest and withdrew it, then pushed her back and away towards the other two. As the wound in her chest closed, he backed out the door with his minions, into the rain.

"Ah... ow!" Hiromi cried as she flowed a weak healing spell through her body. The wound was closing, but it still hurt so much...

Lucciana knelt at her side. "Hi...! No, I'm so sorry!" she cried out.

Immediately, Shss blocked Hiromi's body with the Stun Rod and stared at Lucciana with a mixture of betrayal and fear. Not knowing what else to do, Lucciana backed up into the corner of the room and slumped down, putting her katana back into its sheathe. Seated among the limbs and heads of those she had wounded and killed, covered in green blood, she began to shake.

"Hiromi, you ok?" Shss asked, as the wound knit underneath the slice in her robe. With a smile, Hiromi finished up the last of the spell and shyly closed the tiny opening in her robe, just before the cut closed up in the fading light of her last healing magic.

In the corner, Lucciana silently stared off into the distance. Unbeknownst to the others, there were T'Rang screaming in her mind. *This is how it ends?! I die for the glory of my Queen... Now what am I supposed to do?! Where am I?*

Hiromi sat up as the Samurai closed her eyes and shook her head, struggling with the voices. She picked up her fallen amulet, then joined her friend in the corner. At the same time, Shss recovered Shritis' long black Psi Rod and watched the door leading outside... keeping a close eye on Lucciana in the meantime.

"I'm ok," Hiromi said with a smile.

Lucciana shook her head. "I... don't have the power to fight it off. I'm not as strong as I thought..." she whispered.

"It's not..." her friend started.

"I almost killed you, Hi," she interrupted, and looked up into Hiromi's eyes. "I never should have come on this journey, not with this thing along for the ride. If I had known..."

The Hobbit put a finger over Lucciana's mouth. "To tell you the truth, I wouldn't have been able to hold the Presence back without your effort," she explained. "It's only because you allowed it to win and fought me a second ago that it took hold..."

Lucciana thought back... yes, she was fighting Hiromi. The Presence promised to be the tool of her vengeance, and only asked for blood in return...

As Lucciana considered her words, Hiromi took her finger off of her mouth, paired it with her middle one, and plinked the Samurai on the forehead. She blinked at the playful admonition, and Hiromi smiled again. "I'm not angry with you... even though I know you're hiding something," she said. "I trust you'll tell us in due time what's wrong. But you know I was trained to help people."

In silence, Lucciana nodded in shame. She simply stood up, and tried to ignore the carnage she had created. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

Shss turned her head away from the door and stopped her friend with a look. There was no judgement in her dark brown eyes, just genuine concern. "You angry, very angry. Angry Lucciana very weak. Trust, ok? Angry Lucciana lose," she stated, pointing at the Samurai's head. "Lucciana fight It, no run."

With a blush, Lucciana looked down into the corner. Shss opened the door with her new Psi Rod at the ready, and walked out into the pouring rain. The brown goo led out and right, past a couple of buildings and out of sight. The T'Rang were gone.

She held a rod in each hand, and pointed towards the goo. "T'Rang here," she said loudly over the sound of the raindrops splashing on the window and ground. "No safe."

Shritis could clearly see them around the T'Rang house from the shadows. The dark one had his staff, but with that insane swordswoman with them, he had no opportunity to get it back.

He ordered his minions to head straight for the Umpani station here in New City, telling them he would be along shortly. While these spies were distracted in and around the T'Rang house recuperating, he would destroy their headquarters, then come back to finish the job.

They could roam free until he found another weapon. But until then, he was going to avenge himself on all the Umpani fools these traitors served. The females' time would come soon enough.

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Janus heard a humming and a loud swish when Tearn materialized out of the orange portal in the small room. It was night, and it was raining. Raindrops battered the roof of the building he now occupied, reminding him that he was now nowhere near Ukpyr, the Umpani occupied City of Glory.

He reached for the door in front of him, holding the sealed parchment bearing the message for Rodan Lewarx with their orders wrapped around it, and heard shouting. "I don't give a damn WHAT Yamo says!" a man's powerful voice yelled out. "We move out NOW and finish those frothing cockroaches before they get their claws on the globe! Do you want to be the one to tell Yamo that the bugs beat us to it... while we were wasting our time guarding this useless heap of mortar?!"

"Please, Rodan, calm..." another said, before the first voice overpowered him. "Shut up, Rhallick," the first one, probably Rodan, shot back. "We're moving out, and we're moving out now. If any of you are going to play the part of good little soldier, you can stay here with your hide intact. Otherwise, follow me to..."

Another humming and a swish announced the arrival of Kiwi. Before he knew it, the Faerie blasted out of the orange light and crashed into his back with a surprising amount of force. Janus fell into the door and pushed it open as papers went flying out of his claw.

"Oof!" Kiwi yelled as she got caught up in the flutter of flying parchment. With the door now open, Tearn saw several Umpani officers standing around a much larger one, who was standing next to a door leading outside into the rain. The Felpurr could see the rain splashing on a window to his right, and faintly make out a pillar of stone surrounded by muddy grass outside.

The big Umpani with the impressively long nose horn was regally dressed in an officer's dress, though his demeanor suggested he was no more than a common soldier. His red jacket was fitted with beautiful golden epaulettes on both shoulders, and hung snug and clean over his white dress shirt and green military pants. Around his neck hung a glimmering medallion of gold, suspended by a thick chain.

Kiwi smacked the ground hard on top of the party's orders, right next to the Umpani's large, elephantine feet. She was close enough to read the tag on his chest: "Rodan Lewarx, Master Tracker," but was too in awe at this impressive figure to move an inch, or say a word. Slowly, she looked back and forth between the wonderous medallion around his neck, and his fiery eyes. Despite her best efforts, both the medallion and his look captivated her so powerfully that she couldn't bring herself to look away.

Everyone fell into silence as Rodan's company wondered what he would do to these intruders. He stared at the Faerie for a few silent, painful seconds, ignoring the Dracon getting to his feet and the Felpurr still in the doorway. The rain pattered on the building's roof and windows, made even more poignant by the silence of the occupants inside. The frighteningly still and tense atmosphere seemed to actually calm with the soothing sound of the raindrops on the Detache Station.

With meticulous care, Rodan unslung the double-barreled Blunder Buss from his side, tapped some gunpowder and a ball into it, then slowly brought the end of the huge gun down to meet Kiwi's tiny, awestruck face.

The angle of the gun caused the ball to slowly roll down the barrel, and she knew that he would have to fire before it fell out completely. Her time was short before that happened, but after what happened with Janus, she almost felt like she didn't deserve to stop him.

When Janus and Tearn stepped forward, every Umpani in the building drew their respective hardedged Walriblade and halted their advance. "Hey...!" Tearn started.

At last, Kiwi summoned every last ounce of willpower and courage to break this strange trance that the powerful Umpani had upon her, and to end her near-suicidal silence. While her companions tried vainly to explain the situation, she stuttered, "Um... mes... sage for you, Mister Lewarx..."

She nervously tapped the piece of paper under her very sweaty back, and cried out in surprise as Rodan ripped the parchments off of the floor and sent her flying. He pulled up the first piece detailing their orders. "Deliver spec... dispatch to Rod... ...warx..." he read, through the Faerie-shaped smudge in the middle. It looked authentic enough, despite her sweat.

He dropped the orders to the ground and unsealed the parchment addressed to him, then scanned the letter addressed to him in haste...

"O SWEET JUSTICE!" he screamed, and crumpled the paper in a ball. "Shritis T'Rang is here! *Here!* Of all places in the universe, he's doing the bugs' dirty work on this little ball of dust!" He whooped with joy, and looked up towards the ceiling.

"I know you and I have waited a long time for this, Dad," he said on the verge of tears, but with a

powerfully confident edge to his voice. "Today's the day we get our revenge on that roach and his festering kind!!" His eyes suddenly blazed across his captains, lieutenants, every subordinate in the room. "We move out, NOW! That's an order!" he shouted.

Kiwi recognized two of the Umpani in the room: Tracker Rhallick nodded confidently at Rodan's order, his cracked horn bobbing up and down with the movement. Lieutenant Gruntwrapper, on the other hand, was in the corner, apparently trying to blend in with the wall. He shivered and sweat even more nervously as Rodan's eyes found him, even in the dark corner.

"You too, NEPs," Rodan said to Janus and Tearn, before he looked more closely at Janus' badge. "Excuse me, NEP and TUFS. I'll overlook your little bout of trespassing here, so long as I see at least five bug kills from the both of you.

"And you," he said to Kiwi with an outstretched finger. "Where's your badge?"

Kiwi sat up on the ground and hugged her knees to her chest. "Too big..." she barely managed to whisper. She stared at the floor, thinking only of Janus' broken face back in the forest.

"Well, get up, soldier! We have a mission to carry out," Rodan shouted, and stormed out the door with his subordinates following closely behind. Kiwi nodded sullenly, and unenthusiastically took to the air. Tearn had already walked out the door, but her spirits were lifted slightly when she noticed Janus still standing at the doorway, waiting for her. He didn't look back at her, but still...

When he heard her wings beating behind him, Janus started after the Master Tracker and his crew into the pouring rain.

They marched out, holding their uniforms tight against the beating weather. The large and grassy courtyard they entered had a giant stone pillar adorning the middle around the muddy lawn. Visibility was low, but not low enough to miss the fifteen glowing yellow orbs making their way through the rain towards the Umpani Detache.

The T'Rang! "Formation! Line up and load up!" Rodan shouted. In tandem, every Umpani tapped powder and shot into their Muskets, and took a staggered formation of six kneeling, six standing with Muskets pointed out and at the ready. The T'Rang drew close enough to see their ugly, clacking, spidery faces.

"Ready!" Rodan shouted with his Blunder Buss pointed out. Undaunted, the T'Rang slunk forward with that digusting brown goo trailing behind them. Some of their claws and heads glowed with readied spells while the others charged straight forward with their Stun Rods out.

"FIRE!" the Umpani Tracker roared, and the sounds of a dozen firearms blasting into the courtyard pierced the night sky. Four of the T'Rang shrieked and dropped to the ground a dozen feet away, with several new holes in their bodies pouring forth green blood. Two more continued to limp forward as tiny, flaming balls of Psionic Fires and larger Fireballs rocketed forward and struck the Umpani line.

As a few of the unlucky ones took the brunt of the spells and fell, clutching their broiling bodies in pain, a wandering group of strange beings happened upon the scene. "Stop-fighting.
There-is-no-combat-allowed-in-New-City. The-Dark-Savant-so-dictates," the figures ordered in monotone voices.

They were dressed in dark, metallic robes, and a strange red light travelled up their tall helmets. They were also wielding glowing staves similar to the T'Rang, but the polearms were colored blue and more elongated and flat at the end. Because they were a hundred feet away and just barely coming around a corner, the rain obscured their full identities.

Rodan shouted the final order to charge. The remaining Umpani dropped their Muskets, pulled out their Walriblades, and ran forward with a chilling battle cry. As the Master Tracker unsheathed his jagged Rhinablade, he yelled at Janus and Tearn. "NEPs! TUFS! Take care of those Savant Guards, and we'll eliminate the bugs! Duty, Power, VICTORY! For the IUF!!"

He ran forward into the frenzied melee of Stun Rods and swinging swords as Tearn pulled out a green potion and threw it into the crowd of strange metallic figures. The Acid Bomb exploded and devoured one of the figures, and he wasted no time drawing closer.

On the fly, Janus loaded his Blunder Buss and Musket, stopping just a dozen feet away from the beings. As Kiwi flashed over his shoulder, he pointed the loaded firearms in either claw at the Savant Guards. One of them shoved its Laser Spear towards an exposed part of his neck, and he barely had enough time to dodge to the side and take the hit on the collar of his flak jacket.

He shouldered the Laser Spear out of the way and kicked the Guard in its torso. He didn't expect the thing to be as hard as it was, and his foot began to throb in pain. Even so, before the Guard could get back up, Janus blasted a hole in its chest.

Wires protruded and sparks flew out of the exposed part of the Guard' body. Janus didn't have time to be surprised, and blasted to pieces the next Guard that advanced on him with both barrels of his Blunder Buss. Still a third of the machines advanced while he destroyed the second, its Laser Spear flashing through the air towards his face. Janus felt no fear, and made no move to dodge. There was no time... this was it.

Kiwi shot up from below Janus, and pushed the Laser Spear up towards the sky, taking a brutal shock herself in the process. She followed through on her flight and drew close to the Guard's chest. She elbowed it, dented its armor with a backhanded punch, then caved in the dent with a side kick. It wasn't enough to destroy it, and after the Guard smashed into the mortar of the building behind it and fell, it rose back up just as quickly to try again.

Seeing that they were in trouble, Janus reluctantly opened his maw and sprayed acid on the rising Guard, and it melted from the outside in as he emotionlessly loaded more rounds into his two guns.

At the same time, Kiwi turned and flew towards another Guard moving on Tearn's blind spot. She punched the Guard in the back, and for the first time, her hand hurt... it *really* hurt.

The Guard wheeled about to face its new opponent, and swung its Laser Spear down upon her. Normally a slice so slow would have been child's play for the Faerie to dodge, but it actually managed to clip her leg as she flitted left. The cut on her leg began to bleed heavily, and Kiwi spun towards the muddy ground. She couldn't move...

He almost died because I'm so stupid and slow and weak... she thought as the pain racked her body. *I couldn't even hurt it... I shouldn't even be here. Everyone will die because of me, when I mess up as usual...*

As Tearn whipped around with glowing paws, the Guard plunged its Laser Spear down towards her body, and she closed her eyes and prepared to accept her deserved death. Raindrops fell on her broken body, washing her blood into the mud below as it blended with her tears.

The battle was going very well for the Umpani. They had lost four of their men to the rods and spells of the bugs, but they took out twice as many with their own powerful blades.

Tracker Rhallick himself led the charge on the final few T'Rang, the spellcasters in the back. He neatly sliced two of their bodies in half before they could fire another spell, and rejoiced seeing their green blood splatter against the stone pillar in the center of the courtyard. Thankfully, the heavy rain washed their diseased blood quickly off of his body.

Finally, Rodan thrust his Rhinablade into the last T'Rang's body, and pulled up and out of it, effectively cutting the T'Rang in two. "Bugs! Urrhina damn you all!" he roared. "I will not leave a SINGLE ONE OF YOU ALIVE!!" The other Umpani let out a powerful shout of victory that overpowered the rainstorm and echoed off all of the nearby buildings.

Their leader, Shritis, wasn't among the bodies, and Rodan cried out in rage. "I'LL KILL ALL OF YOU

ROACHES! ALL OF YOU!! I'LL HUNT YOU DOWN AND RID THE GALAXY OF YOUR FILTH!" he bellowed, then looked around in a rage. "WHERE ARE YOU, SHRITIS?!" he screamed.

For the next few seconds, there was nothing but silence. The T'Rang were all eliminated, the newcomers had taken care of the Savant Guards and were now tending to their fallen comrade, and none of his men dared say a word. There was only the steady hiss of the rain, and the sound of Rodan's furiously beating heart.

Then, a strange sound came to him, even over the steady stream of the storm. It sounded like... wriggling worms, or liquid soap on dirty hands. Only feet away Rhallick was staring at him, but his eyes were not focused on anything in particular. The sound continued as the Umpani's body shook, then lifted off of the ground.

"Rhallick, what...?" Rodan started, pointing his Rhinablade in his friend's direction. A meaty sound erupted as a T'Rang stinger protruted up and out of the lifeless Tracker's body, dripping a black liquid from its tip. And then, just as quickly, the stinger withdrew from the lifeless corpse, then dropped the Umpani as it emerged on the other side.

It belonged to the nine foot shadow standing behind him... the stinger of Shritis T'Rang. "Hahahaha..." the Assassin hissed, and stepped out of the shadow of the courtyard pillar.

Lieutenant Gruntwrapper saw the whole thing. He began to whimper in absolute terror at his dead companion's body and the hideous monster that was coming towards them, but all he ended up doing was giving Shritis a first target.

The hook of the T'Rang's Stun Rod caught Lieutenant Gruntwrapper in the face, and cut deeply from his left cheek up to his forehead. Blood ran down the Umpani's face as he screamed and stumbled backwards, clutching his now sliced open eye.

Shritis advanced, feeling absolute power at the Umpani's terror. Gruntwrapper looked back up at the master of all T'Rang Assassins... and retreated another step. The very second his elephantine foot touched the wet and muddy grass, the T'Rang lunged forward to end his miserable life... but at the same time, felt a pair of swishes from Umpani blades behind him.

Holding his bleeding eye and face, Gruntwrapper turned around and ran as fast and far away as he could, disappearing into the rain amidst the shouts of his battling companions.

Before Rodan could even blink, Shritis turned the Stun Rod around in his claws, then simultaneously stung and paralyzed the two Umpani behind him with his stingers. The Umpani convulsed and fell, dribbling black fluid from their mouths. Things happened so fast, that Rodan had only managed to take a few steps towards the T'Rang before they were down.

Shritis reached into his robe and threw a purple potion at the remaining group of Umpani, just as they were ready to attack. The Deadly Air around them invaded their lungs and they fell to the muddy grass in induced seizures, and Shritis swung his Stun Rod around to meet Rodan's expected charge.

"MURDERER! I WILL MAKE YOU BLEED!!" screamed Rodan. He cut down at Shritis' body, which the Assassin easily parried with his Stun Rod. Shritis plunged a stinger into Rodan's right shoulder, and laughed as the poison began to run through the Umpani's veins, ever so painfully.

Rodan's arm went numb, but he went on fighting anyway. He ran forward, aiming his horn at Shritis' body as he dropped his blade to his ready off hand. Though his clumsy charge missed, he managed to come within inches of cutting Shritis' torso with the Rhinablade... but the Assassin dodged that attack as well. As the Umpani flew by, Shritis darted his stinger into his exposed spine.

With a sharp cry, Rodan hit the muddy ground; he couldn't move anymore. *It... can't end like this! Our vengeance!!* he screamed mentally. But try as he did, his body would not respond to his calls to rise.

Shritis hissed another laugh as he kicked the Tracker over, exposing his face to both the rain, and his own blissful countenance. He reached down and grabbed the Golden Medallion around Rodan's neck. "Your father'ss?" he laughed. "I remember him..."

Rodan wanted to scream at him, but even his lips and vocal cords weren't working now. "He begged for hiss life in the end," the T'Rang continued. "He wept at my feet, telling me he had a wife and a sson. It wass quite pathetic... and I granted him a ssuitably pathetic end when I removed his head."

With a single motion, the T'Rang ripped the medallion off of its chain and tucked it away in his robe. "Now die asss he did, by the claw of the great Sshritiss T'Rang!" he yelled, turning his back to the dying Rodan. "Asss your life sslowly bleedss away from you, remember how you have failed your people, and your clan!"

Shritis reached into his spidery gown and pushed the button of the detonator. Off in the distance, in the direction of the Umpani Detache, there was a massive explosion. The flames burst into the sky, but were just as quickly extinguished by the rainstorm. His shadow melted into the darkness of the pillar under the moonlit sky, as the rain continued to fall.

Part 2 - Turmoil Within Us

Friend vs. Friend

The way was clear, and Lucciana and Hiromi joined Shss out in the rain. The Hobbit sneezed twice and stopped to look herself over. The tear in her robe was getting her body soaked, and she suddenly felt very uncomfortable. Seeing this, Lucciana again chastised herself for her loss of control.

Shss took a final look around and noticed her shivering friend. She laid both of her new T'Rang rods against the wall of the T'Rang house and removed the white shirt Lucciana had given her so long ago, handing it to Hiromi even as the rain began to soak it. With only her old animal hides covering her chest, she ushered Hiromi into the dry house to help her fit the oversized shirt on.

Lucciana stood out in the rain. Her chest burned sympathetically from her left shoulder to her right hip... but for some reason, she didn't feel the usual sense of anger or betrayal that accompanied the physical pain. That girl truly was a remarkable person.

She had flashes of a mountain, a place she had personally seen from the outside but never physically gone to herself. It felt peaceful and happy there, a feeling she had lost long ago when Goto-sama, her companions... and her family... were taken from her. Surrounded by friends, people who cared... Lucciana bit her lip to choke back a sob. She would probably never go back to that peaceful place in life, not completely.

The shirt was too big for Hiromi, but it was to be expected. At the very least, they were able to tie her amulet's chain around itself and conduct a makeshift repair of where Lucciana had cut it. Hiromi thanked Shss, and went back out into the rain to be with her other friend. Shss took another quick look over her rods, knowing these might be her weapons from this point on.

Near the globe on the top, and a few inches up from the base, were two small buttons. Shss accidentally found the first one when she put her hands in the finger grooves on the bottom, and the orb glowed brightly and without a sound. Knowing that their stunning power was related to lightning in some way, Shss was surprised to see that it didn't affect her own body, considering how wet she and the rod were.

The second button on top did the exact same thing when Shss found it, and the room lit up slightly. However, when she pushed both buttons at the same time, the orb's light became easily twice as bright as when a single button was pushed.

All in all, this was the absolute perfect weapon for her. She had had aversions to using the Queen's deadly spear since she acquired it, wielding it solely for the sake of protecting her friends while nothing

else was available.

She widened her eyes in anticipation of using this merciful, otherworldly weapon. Once she got the balance of its weight down, neither man nor beast would harm anybody close to her.

When she stepped back out into the rain, she saw Hiromi's comforting hand on Lucciana's hip. The Samurai patted her on the head... then started to walk away. "Where are you going?" Hiromi asked after her in confusion.

Her friend waved back without looking. "Neither of you will be in danger again," she said. "Let me go. Just... don't follow me. I won't hurt either one of you again."

"If you leave, I won't be able to hold the Presence back!" Hiromi shouted, and Lucciana stopped. *She's right again...* she thought. *I can't believe my arrogance in thinking I could handle this! When I came, I put both of their lives at risk!*

Lucciana sighed softly, debating internally what she should do. But in the end, there was only one clear choice. She turned and walked back to Shss, staring her in the eyes. Using the sound of the rain to mask her words, she leaned up next to her ear and whispered slowly and clearly so the Fighter could understand every word.

"If I lose control again, kill me. Do you understand?" she asked.

Shss shook her head, and pushed the button on the Psi Rod's hand rest. The staff's orb glowed, and Lucciana spared a glance at it before looking back into her eyes. "I *no* kill," she replied flatly. "No more."

Lucciana turned away and began to walk out among the simple stone houses and city walls. Hiromi joined her as she passed. "Then I will do it myself, if need be," the Samurai said. "I won't lose either of you to this..." With a sigh, Shss followed her.

Hiromi didn't hear the whispers, but she guessed correctly what they were speaking about. "And I won't let anyone die, do you understand?!" she exclaimed to her friend's back, but Lucciana didn't stop. "I will always protect both of you... not just because you're people, but because you're my friends! I love you dearly, Lucciana... and Shss, too!"

Love...? the word repeated in Lucciana's mind. *Then why don't I feel the same for her? Why can't I feel it for anyone?*

Together, they walked down the narrow alleyway between the city walls and a couple of seemingly abandoned houses. Though the rain might have been playing tricks on her, Hiromi could swear that she saw curtains ruffling and shadows darting away as the party approached. There was a palpable aura of fear about the town.

The houses and walls were made of simple yellow brick and mortar, in great contrast to the silver ships of steel that brought them to this planet. Hiromi could only wonder what the people of this world must have thought, when alien beings wielding alien technologies had descended upon them so suddenly.

Perhaps that was the reason that there were so few people about at the moment. She was surprised enough when the machine-man Aletheides appeared before the party on Llylgamyn; she could only imagine her terror if an entire force of strange beings had swooped upon her unready mountain in her youth.

"'Paluke's Armory, Mail...'" Shss started, then stopped as she struggled with the ampersand on the door's sign. "'Buh? Fine Leathers,'" she continued. *"Ka te bo?* (Weapons and armor?)" she asked Lucciana.

The Samurai nodded. "Looks like it..." she said, and opened the door.

The store was piled up from bottom to top with stacks and stacks of old and used armor, weapons,

scrolls, books and other assorted junk. At hearing the door open, a green-skinned humanoid with vertical tusks emerging from both sides of his mouth rushed out of the back room. He had the frame of a man, and wore a fanciful blue robe with orange trim, but the rest of him spoke volumes of his alien origin. Well, alien to them, at least.

"Ort!" he proclaimed, and began to speak very quickly with a big smile on his face. "I am Paluke, Armorer of New City! This is your lucky day! I have a few remaining pieces which I am sure can be easily fitted to suit your needs! *Snortle* Sorry I don't have more to offer right now, but it seems everyone is preparing for war!"

"Hi, Paluke," Shss said, and unloaded her obsolete Stun Rod onto the floor. "You take?"

All at once, his face fell. "Oh. More adventurers unloading their junk," he grumbled as he sadly and unenergetically lifted the T'Rang staff. "If that's the case, let's conclude this quickly."

After he had gotten a good look at the weapon, his chest rose agonizingly slow with a drawn in breath. When his lungs could take no more, he unleashed a sigh of epic proportions, not taking his eyes off of the Stun Rod. "...Another one...?" he asked at last, and shook his head in dismay. "1400 gold, take it or leave it."

He counted out some shiny gold coins and tucked them in a bag, tossing it to the ground. "We'll... take it?" Hiromi asked, confused. She picked up the slightly heavy sack of coins.

"Great," Paluke said sarcastically. "Now, kindly remove yourselves from my store." He stood up from the new addition to his junk pile and shooed the three girls out, muttering something about being "New City's garbage collecter."

The three stood outside, and Hiromi broke the silence with a laugh. "That poor guy! I bet nobody shops there," she said. "We should come back later when we find something nice."

Shss hissed a laugh. "Green man no happy...!"

Just then, a crowd of the silent, serious Savant Guards, like the ones they had seen on the ship, wandered by. Among them there were slightly bigger ones that carried Stun Lances, weapons that were clearly brighter and longer than the Guards' Laser Spears.

One of those bigger ones motioned them on. "Keep-moving. Do-not-linger. The-Dark-Savant-orders-your-compliance," it stated in a monotone voice.

"They certainly have a better grasp of language than the ones on the ship..." Lucciana commented when they had passed the frightening crowd of machines. "Though I think it would be better if we kept our allegiance with the Savant to ourselves. Who knows how he might take our current relationship with the T'Rang..."

Hiromi nodded as they passed a large, dingy grey building with several windows peeking inside. She was walking next to one of them when the two big hands shot out and pulled her up around her shoulders. "Please...!" a man yelled. "Get me out of here! You have to help me!!"

Shss pointed her Psi Rod at the window and Lucciana drew her katana, but both were too worried about hitting Hiromi while she was being held by the green arms.

Even though Hiromi saw the bulky arms, too, she was not afraid at all. She sighed. "Why do people keep grabbing me from behind?" she wondered out loud.

The hands held her for a second longer. "...Sorry..." the man said, and released his hold on Hiromi's green robe and amulet. She dropped back down to her feet, and turned to see that the man was holding the bars of the window with his shadowed face pressed against it.

"Nobody has stopped to help me since I was put in here several days ago... not the townspeople, not the Guards, nobody!" he continued. "Nobody will listen!" He tightened his grip on the bars.

Lucciana frowned at him, then gestured her head down the alley. She started to walk away.

"Please, wait!" the green-skinned man said as he held his hand out pleadingly. "You have to help me out of here! If I don't make it back to my homeland in time, it may mean the death of our king, and the fall of our lands!!"

All at once, Lucciana stopped and turned around. She narrowed her eyes at the man. "Who are you exactly? And why are your realms in danger?" she asked.

The man dropped his arms in relief. "I am Captain Boerigard, a military leader of the mighty Gorn Empire, which has stood valiantly between the prejudices of the Dane and Munk for centuries," he introduced himself, then grunted angrily. "That is, I was, until I was betrayed and ended up here..." He pounded on the mortar outside of the barred window to accentuate his point.

"Outsiders began the conflict in my lands, though it is to you creatures from the stars that I now implore for assistance," he explained. "My people have been deceived! The betrayers... they came to us with the promise of a new way of life, and new technologies to help our people. But they did no such thing!

"Once they knew enough of our people, they fanned the flames of dissention among the multitude of Gorn tribes, and sought to overthrow our beloved King Ulgar!"

As he spoke, Lucciana unconsciously moved closer to the gesturing man. "Please, you must let me out of here!" he continued. "Even now, those tribes still loyal to the king fight among those deceived by the outsiders! Brother against brother... this war will be the bloodiest conflict this planet has ever seen... and I fear without the information I have, the deceived shall be the victors!!

"If you do not help us, the Gorn will fall, and there will be nothing left to keep the mutual hatred of the Dane and Munk from turning this planet into an unending, horrible battlefield! You must help me!"

Hiromi considered all the excited man's information, then pulled her friends to the side. "We've been caught up on the wrong side before... how do we know if he's telling the truth?" she wondered.

Lucciana spoke aloud. "I'll show you. Boerigard," she stated, looking at the window. He leaned in closer to the window bars. "Hold your hands out, palms up to me, and hold them still," she ordered. Boerigard did so, though they shook with the excitement of his speech, and of the people who might help him after days of solitude.

"We can't get involved with another group we know nothing about," Lucciana explained, "so consider this a blood promise. Do you swear on your life and your honor, through your blood, that what you have told us is true?"

Boerigard's shadowy head nodded. "To the letter."

"And you will offer your blood as proof of your honor?" she asked, and Boerigard closed his hands into fists and opened them again in a show of his resolve. "For my people," he stated.

Lucciana raised her katana, leaned back and neatly sliced across the palms of each of his hands. His red blood dripped and spattered into a puddle on the ground, but he made no sign or sound of injury.

She stood still, as if she were thinking about something for the briefest of time. "He's telling the truth," she finally said to the other two as she sheathed her katana, "or at least, he believes it to be the truth. In any case, we can't let a good man rot here..."

Hiromi looked as confused as Shss. "Wh... how do you know that?" she asked.

"Never mind that," Lucciana replied. "Can you take care of his wounds while Shss and I find a way in?"

"Yes, but..." Hiromi started.

"Good. Shss, come on, let's get him out of here," she continued, then walked around the corner. Shss looked at Hiromi, wondering what she should do.

"Wait up a second," the Priest whispered, then looked up at the window. "I'm sorry, Mister Boerigard... can you forgive us?" she asked. "Let me take a look at your hands..."

As Hiromi's hands glowed, and she began to knit Boerigard's bleeding wound with the very last of her recovered magic, he spoke softly. "No forgiveness is necessary, courageous ones, if you can help me," he replied. "I would gladly give my life to save my brothers, my king, and my land."

Once the cuts were gone, Hiromi squeezed his hands hard. "Don't do that! There's always another way!" she exclaimed.

He nodded. "Then perhaps you can help us find it," he said. "Now please, get me out of here!"

Hiromi let his hands go and rounded the corner. Lucciana was standing there, in front of a wooden door labeled "New City Constabulary," and six Savant machines. Five were the regular Guards, but one was one of the bigger models they had seen just minutes before. A red emblem hung from the doorknob behind them, though who knew what it meant.

"Leave-the-premises-at-once," the big one said. "You-are-not-allowed-to-pass-without-proper-clearance." It lowered its Stun Lance menacingly in front of the Samurai's face.

Lucciana raised her hands in surrender, and cast a smile back at her companions when she heard their footsteps behind her. "Very well..." she started. Suddenly, her hands began to glow with a mystifying rainbow of swirling color. The air crackled with energy...

A sound like a dozen screeching spirits tore through the air as tiny streaks of rainbow-colored magic fired out of Lucciana's hands, then blasted the Savant Trooper in its misshapen brown face. The others immediately hovered forward silently and with deadly purpose to attack the Samurai, but as she expected, the others arrived to help her.

Shss smashed the Laser Spears of the two nearest Guards to the ground with her Psi Rod, then jabbed the weapon at the nearest one. The hook sliced through its helmet, and Shss pressed the button near her hands.

The machine shook violently as the electric shock overcame and blew its internal systems, and not even a second had passed before it was fried. Shss pulled the hook out, kicked the next Guard in the stomach and thrust again.

Machines... Hiromi thought. *I have just the thing for them...*

She conjured fire in her stomach and blasted them through her hands at the Guard on Lucciana's right. Lightning zapped out of her fingertips and danced from machine to machine, finally streaking to a halt in the Savant Trooper. Lucciana's Magic Missiles had already caused enough damage to disable it, but the Lightning caused it to burn from the inside as its systems overloaded.

Finally, Lucciana unsheathed her katana and sliced the tips of the remaining three Guards' Laser Spears in one stroke, thanks to the Lightning spell that had considerably slowed their movements. She sliced one neatly through the torso, cutting it in half. Then, she turned around and jammed her katana backwards into the next's midsection, pulling the blade down and out of its body when she was sure it went all the way through.

Once it was out of its body, she cut through its torso left, up and right, down across its left side, and

across its neck equivalent with blinding speed. As it fell to pieces, she held her hand to the final one's emotionless face and exploded its head from the inside with a Fireball spell. The mechanical remains on the floor erupted sparks, but didn't make any motion beyond that.

"B... e... e... r..."

The sound had come from the pile so quietly that they didn't notice it at first. Shss pushed aside a ruined Guard torso and pulled the speaking head of the Savant Trooper out of the wreckage. "Beer..." it repeated. "Beer..."

"Beer?" Lucciana asked nobody in particular, then smirked. "My kind of machine..."

"Buh ee ee er..." Hiromi repeated to herself. It wasn't "beer," unless it was intentionally spacing out the letters. With the machines' strange way of speaking aboard the Black Ship, she wouldn't be surprised if that was the case.

They left the hopelessly, redundantly chatty head on the floor, and Lucciana walked into the jail first with her sword at the ready. There was a large steel door at the end of the hallway, and a black box at its side. Three buttons were on its top, blinking with no apparent pattern. Red, yellow, blue...

"Do you think we can knock this thing down with any of our weapons?" Lucciana asked once the others walked in. "There might be more Guards coming soon..." She looked around for a hidden entrance, while Hiromi took a closer look at the box and Shss peered out the window and into the rain for any potential reinforcements.

Then, she remembered something. "Hiromi," she said. Her friend smiled and nodded, still looking at the black box. "You said you could conjure creatures, maybe one with extra muscle... hey, what are you doing?"

Hiromi pushed four of the buttons on the console, each press followed by a cute, high-pitched beep... and the door clicked and unlocked. She giggled and stood as tall as she could before her friends. "Blue, yellow, yellow, red," she said proudly.

Lucciana shook her head at how simple the combination was. As Shss walked by to join Hiromi in the jail, she held up three fingers, then widened her eyes. "That's not three!" Lucciana exclaimed.

The jail was as quiet and somber as any prison the Samurai had ever seen before... or been in. There was a clear leak in at least three places, where rainwater was making unsightly black puddles on the floor to their right, and in two of the corners. It was dingy, and the air was stale. Large barriers made entirely of metal bars lined the opposite wall, and judging from the skeleton in the cell in front of them, they were very well secured.

"In here!" Boerigard's voice came from one of the cells to their left. Hiromi hurried over, though she couldn't see inside very well. Shss found a switch on the wall, though, that instantly brought light to the whole building.

Boerigard, like Paluke, was human...oid. All three girls finally got a good look at the Gorn, whose tusks were polished and dangerously sharpened. He was dressed in yellow iron plates that covered both a kilt made of dyed blue leather and his shins, and he wore red sandals.

Lucciana was amazed to see someone dressed so similarly to her companions in Yamato. Though their worlds were an unfathomable distance apart from one another, they had developed a similar warrior's code, and even used nearly identical armor that served for functionality as well as protection. She wondered how else their culture was similar to the one she had adopted as her own, and what this strange coincidence meant...

"The cardkey... they used to have one on the wall over there," Boerigard said, pointing down the hall. There was nothing there.

"How open this?" Shss asked, pointing at the gate.

"There's a reader here," Boerigard replied, pointing at it as he explained. "It runs off the same power as the lights, which is why they keep it dark in here most of the time."

Shss nodded. A barrier running on the same power as the lights, which were just like the Savant Guards. "Back," she ordered, and pressed the Psi Rod to the card reader.

Boerigard jumped back and pressed his back to the windowed wall behind him, Hiromi and Lucciana covered their ears, and Shss pushed the button at her fingertip. Sparks shot off of the reader and burned her where they landed, but it was little more than an annoyance. The bars suddenly came loose and swung outwards towards the girls.

"I'm free! I'm free!!" the Gorn shouted. He rushed out and embraced Shss with all his strength, kissing her full on the lips. Shss widened her eyes, in surprise this time, as the Captain went to each of his saviors and squeezed them tight. "You have saved my people!"

His face darkened. "No, you have merely freed the messenger," he corrected himself. "I must get to Orkogre Forest at once and let Lord Galiere know of what has happened. I thank you all, from the very bottom of my soul."

He rushed into the corner where the prisoners' effects were kept. There, he pulled out the seal of the Gorn Empire and an old prisoner release form, and stamped the seal on the back of the paper. He rushed back and gave it to Shss.

"You have done us all a great service," the tusked man gushed. "If you wish to aid us in our struggle, or simply wish to pass through our domains, present this to any Gorn still loyal to the king. They will know you as a friend, and shall do you no harm."

Lucciana was so excited and distracted by all of the fighting in the past few hours that she completely forgot why they were here in the first place. Here was her chance to ask an actual denizen of Guardia... "Captain, do you know where the Astral Dominae is?" she asked.

Boerigard turned his head to his cell and spit on the ground. "That damn globe!" he shouted. "It's what brought all you blasted outsiders here in the first place, and what might lead to the destruction of the entire Gorn..." He stopped suddenly and caught himself. "Oh, uh... no offense, outsiders. We Gorn are hardly the trusting type, what with an entire planet to protect from murderous fools, and this civil war being the cause of you visitors and all..."

Unfazed, Lucciana upturned a "who cares" hand. "I understand," she replied. "But do you know where it is?"

He thought for a second. "We Gorn have fought battles all over this planet, from the forests of the Munk and Rattkin to the tower of the Dane and beyond. If anyone knew the situation of every place we have visited and battled in, it would be our king."

"Then it would be best if we spoke with him directly..." she reasoned.

Hiromi tugged on her robe, and beckoned Shss over. The two tallers girls knelt down. "It's... a war over there," she whispered. "It's not only dangerous, but... I don't want to kill anyone, or get involved with something like that..."

"We have no other leads," Lucciana whispered back. "You saw the force that the Dark Savant and the T'Rang have. We know the T'Rang's intentions aren't good, and I'd say that the Savant is simply guilty by association. We have to find the Astral Dominae, quick, before entire armies are upon it rather than just a band of three..."

But Hiromi still looked unsure. "I help, protect Hiromi..." Shss assured. The little one's face didn't change,

but she eventually, begrudgingly, nodded.

Boerigard was standing at the door as they spoke. "I must go, before things get any worse," he called out. "Our lands lie beyond New City's eastern exit, then north where the road forks, if you will help us. May Uggbah watch over you all, no matter what path you choose..." With that, he bowed and rushed out into the rain.

"We go," Shss proclaimed and went after him, but he was already gone. It was no wonder he travelled alone, considering the man's incredible speed.

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Hiromi was on Shss' back, behind her friend's cris-crossed Psi Rod and spear. She was so tired from their trek down the road and constant healing, and her sandaled feet had muddied up so bad, that Shss simply knelt down in front of her and carried her the rest of the way. The little Priest felt terrible knowing that her friend was barefoot and carrying her, but even when she refused, Shss still insisted on helping.

Day had started to break once they reached the crossroads, and the rain had finally stopped. Other than a few weak insects, which Hiromi had named "Bitterbugs," attacking just outside the city gates, there was nothing to meet them out here. She felt sorry for them when they were defeated, but when the girls left the bugs, they were twitching on the ground from Shss' Psi Rod shock, not in pieces from sword slices. They looked so comically helpless...

The land outside the city was made up of a vast forest and a few small fields the whole way down the road leading out of town. The trees were absolutely stunning in the morning light as the red and orange light of the sun revealed their height and lushness. Everywhere she looked, there was green: green grass with tiny creatures lazing about, green trees with birds pleasantly chirping from within their leaves...

Every once in a while a great flock of birds would fly overhead, in the same "V" formation that they flew on Llylgamyn. Hiromi felt less homesick at the sight of how similar their worlds were, no matter how far apart they were...

Her stomach knotted up when the errant thoughts left her mind and were replaced with the reminder of her stress: they were heading straight into a war. There was nothing she wanted to see less than people dying over a misunderstanding.

If his people have truly been betrayed by other visitors like us... then there's no reason to fight, she thought. *I hope he's relaying a message of negotiation, rather than orders for an assault... no matter who is in the right, no person deserves to die...*

Lucciana noticed that the Hobbit had been lost in thought on the way out of the city, and even now was focused on nothing in particular and utterly silent. Was fighting really bothering her all that much? If so, she might not even take part in the struggle, if it came down to it.

The three pushed past a heavy thicket of droopy trees on the leaf-covered road, which was sprouting grass among the stones here and there. It slowly opened up into a massive field to its left and right, though there were several trees standing tall on the edges of the great plains.

Situated in the grassy and muddy fields were thousands upon thousands of Gorn, dressed in the distinctly Gorn/Samurai style. With that many eyes about, it was almost certain they had been seen. Shss let Hiromi down to the ground, and she and Lucciana placed their backs to the Priest in a protective formation, backing away from the unbelievably large Gorn army.

Lucciana felt something closing in from the trees around them. *"I sake..."* she hissed to Shss, but she didn't need to be warned; she felt the same presence.

The trees rustled... a twig snapped. Then, the leaves exploded as twenty Gorn erupted from the trees and attacked. The battle started so fast that Hiromi had no time to react. "Wait!" she screamed in what

seemed like slow motion.

Reacting automatically, Lucciana sliced a regal Gorn dressed in royal purple Gorn armor across the belly without even looking, just above a belt on which were slung a dozen different weapons of war. Her cut left a deep, but not fatal, wound there, while she simultaneously took his lance in her left shoulder.

Assassins! They will never reach the king! his voice came in her mind. Images of King Ulgar upon his throne, waiting kindly and patiently to hear his subjects' worries, filled her mind. She saw him handing out food to the starving, building houses for the needy, overseeing a thousand seperate tasks of philanthropy and care for his subjects. And she saw it all through the eyes of his most loyal subject...

"Lord Galiere!" Lucciana shouted. The Gorn around them immediately stopped their attack, even though Shss had temporarily stunned two of them... and even with their leader bleeding from an impressive chest wound. "Hiromi, quick, heal him!" she continued.

At her friend's insistence, the Priest stepped forth to place her glowing hands on his chest, but Galiere held his lance to her neck, and a hand over his wound to stop the bleeding. "Do not move, in the name of the Gorn Empire!" he barked. "Explain this intrusion!"

Lucciana sheathed her sword and bowed. "Please forgive us. We were sent by Captain Boerigard to aid you," she explained.

Hiromi looked back at her with a confused expression. "How did you...? Since when did...?" she stammered.

Galiere's eyes softened from an almost blazing red to a peaceful yellow. "You're... the ones who saved him." He jammed his lance tip-down into the ground, standing it there, then returned the Elf's bow. "We are in your debt, kind strangers..." he said graciously.

Some of the Gorn knelt by their two fallen comrades, along with Shss. "They ok, alive," she said. The fallen Gorn looked extremely irritated at being so readily defeated, but Shss grasped both of their arms in respect anyway.

Surprisingly, other Gorn approached to help not only Galiere, but Lucciana as well, and they dressed her wound. At her inquisitive look, the Gorn bandaging her bowed his head slightly. "You are our sisters," he said solemnly.

Hiromi ushered the love of God up and over her body, until almost her entire body was glowing. She slowly walked over to Galiere, wary of the lance sticking out of the ground, and placed her glowing hands on his chest. "A Shaman!" Galiere cried out as his cut began to heal. "We lost so many of your kind to the deceived..."

"Oh, uh... Priest, actually," Hiromi answered with a smile. His wound closed, and with his blood still on her hands, she drew close to Lucciana and knit her shoulder as well. The other Gorn were recovering from their respective paralysis, and standing up slowly.

When it was clear that everyone was healed and attentive, Galiere spoke. "In truth, we've lost more than our Shamans to the deceived," he said, "we've lost most of our numbers as well. It was all we could do to marshal our forces here, to wait for the Assassins who come to take the king's life...!"

He shook his head in disbelief. "Boerigard told me that our alliance with the Dartaen clan inside the castle had been broken," he said, "which means that the Assassins could be on their way from either of the two entrances into our forest to finish the king!"

The girls noticed that as he spoke, he glanced about nervously, as if he expected someone to leap out at any moment to kill him. "No Gorn can lay a hand on our powerful king but these Assassins," he explained, "though none of them are within the castle at the moment, according to our remaining spies. While we guard the entrance here, away from the deceived and their armies, Lord Bernhard watches the entrance

north of here for signs of the murderers who would end our king's life."

"Have they come by yet?" Lucciana asked.

Galiere shook his head. "No, and please forgive us for thinking it was you," he said apologetically. "In truth, I did find it strange that Assassins would travel so clearly in the open..."

These people... Lucciana thought, *they're no different from the people of Yamato. We fight the same, act the same... even dress the same. And now... just like Goto-sama...*

She balled her hand into a fist. "I'll gladly pledge my support to your cause, and fight to the end for you," she proclaimed.

Hiromi stood up in front of her. "Hey... wait!" she protested. "You don't even know these people, and now you're going to kill for them?!"

Though her friend looked like she wanted to say something, she soon decided against it. "I... can feel that what they speak is the truth," she said. "I will fight for their sake if it means bringing peace to their lands." Her eyes were resolute as she looked upon the enemy army on the muddy plains.

Hiromi scoffed. "Wha... how can you treat life so recklessly?!" she exclaimed. "It's bad enough that I've seen you kill people in front of me, but now you're actually seeking out people to murder?!"

"How *dare* you, you little...!" Lucciana spat out as she wheeled on the Hobbit, but didn't finish her sentence. "I have only ever killed to protect you or myself, not out of some sick desire to cause suffering to others! It was only yesterday when..."

She looked at the ground, pained. "I lost control..." she mumbled, but immediately after the difficult admission, she shook the thought away and stared back into Hiromi's eyes. "But you saw what happened to Shss! You know about the Presence!"

Shss stepped between them, but Hiromi spoke again anyway. "I... that was unfair, I'm sorry," she said. "But still, killing isn't the answer. War and murder never are! People are going to suffer, and die, no matter which side they're on! Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"And what would you have us do, instead?" Lucciana asked.

"Talk!" Hiromi shot back. "Listen to the other side, understand why they're attacking, then work towards a common solution. Anything to avoid fighting!"

Galiere stepped in. "We have tried to speak to the deceived many times, but the outsiders... they have convinced them beyond any doubt that our king is the enemy," he said. "Our brothers have pressed this war upon us. We fight only to protect our king, and our lands, though we wish it would not come to that..."

"Then don't fight!" Hiromi exclaimed. "Let me talk to them; I can try and convince them!"

With a shake of his head, Galiere spoke again. "You are not Gorn," he said. "Though you are our sister, they will not recognize or listen to anything you have to say. We are a very distrusting people..."

Lucciana added, "So we've heard."

"Then try and talk again!" Hiromi suggested, though the look on Galiere's face offered little in the way of hope. "We have tried dozens of times, but they have never responded," he explained. "The power is in their hands as long as they hold the forest, the castle, and our king..."

"Then... something! Anything else..." Hiromi stammered as her stomach twisted in knots.

Lucciana was angry. She wanted to explode, yell at the idealistic child who understood nothing... but she

kept her anger in check. "And while you sit around thinking about what to do," she hissed icily, "good men will die. We have a chance to do something about that now... I'm going with these people, and I will battle with them."

Hiromi closed her eyes and shook her head. "Why...?" she whispered softly. "Why these people... of everyone we have seen? Why do you have to kill?"

"You've spent your life secluded in a mountain," Lucciana responded. "You've lived it sheltered within a perfect atmosphere of family, friends, companions. I was robbed of my chance at that kind of life."

Hiromi said nothing as she continued. "Living in such a way, free of conflict and the trials of reality... that kind of life leaves you optimistic, idealistic," she said. "You feel and believe in the best intentions of people, the best possible solution. But idealism only works in a *perfect* world."

With one step closer to her, Lucciana was standing over her. The Priest looked up meekly, and their eyes met. "But this is not a perfect world," she continued. "Not Llylgamyn, not Guardia. Realistic problems dictate the need for realistic solutions. Talking is out; the enemy is not only at the gates, it's in the castle... and good people's lives are at risk."

"It's not right," Hiromi protested, shaking her head. "I don't care what you have to say about this... people dying is never right..."

After a brief pause, Lucciana turned her back on Hiromi and crossed her arms. "Not right, you say," she said. "So after another round of pointless discussion with the enemy, rolling over and allowing the slaughter to occur would be right?"

"No..." the Priest conceded, but remained unconvinced. "Keeping this stupid war from ever happening would be right!" She balled and unballed her hands into fists. "And God would feel the same way, too! I don't care... I just don't care what you have to say about war being necessary. It never, ever, ever is!"

She suddenly felt a surge of energy through her body, one that immediately lifted her spirits as she realized what she had to do. She smiled a smile mixed with both confidence and sorrow, and looked up into the yellow eyes of Lord Galiere, beaming. "And it doesn't matter to me what you say, either," she said. "I'm going to talk to them for you. With or without any of your help, I'm going to make this stop."

"You can't..." Galiere started, but she started to walk out towards the mass of Gorn in the plains, her arms outstretched in a peaceful gesture. Lucciana let out an exasperated sigh when she heard her footsteps squishing away in the mud.

In no time at all, Shss ran over and grabbed Hiromi's shoulder. The little Hobbit turned around and hugged her. "If I don't come back... please know... that you aren't just my friend. You're my sister," she whispered.

Shss was dumbfounded, and didn't understand what was going on. "No. I go, Lucciana go," Shss said.

"I'm not going," Lucciana stated, then looked away. "There won't be another Yamato..." she continued under her breath.

Shss didn't bother to try and convince her. Hiromi smiled for what might be the last time at her friend. "I think I can hold the Presence back from a farther distance. Just please try and fight it a little harder than usual..." The Samurai dismissed her with a rude wave, and Hiromi returned it politely.

It hurt to know that they would be parting ways here, but Hiromi knew... actions didn't come from a vacuum. Something was bothering her friend, but if she didn't want to talk about it, she couldn't force her. All she could do was forgive: Lucciana for her anger, and herself for being too forward.

"One more thing, Hi," Lucciana said. "That girl's banner... I'll need it."

Hiromi turned around and cocked her head to the side. "So you can rain death on people from those rocket sleds?" she asked. "I think I'll hold on to it."

"So I can protect the king. Hand it over," the Samurai demanded.

After a few seconds, Hiromi finally pulled the small, triangular metal device out of her robe pocket, and looked at it in her hand for a short while. After a brief moment of consideration, she held it out to the Samurai. "Here," she said.

Lucciana turned around and snatched it out of her hands, holding it close to her lips. "Jan-Ette," she said.

With a cleansing breath, Hiromi started to walk through the mud towards the Gorn army. "We'll have this war over by tonight, I promise!" she called back. "Jan-Ette can come to the party we have afterwards!"

As she drew farther away, Lucciana didn't feel guilty... when she hoped against hope that the two came back empty-handed.

Brother vs. Brother

The tension grew thicker in the air with every passing minute. The army of the Insurrectionist Gorn shifted restlessly and cast glances of worry and resoluteness at the ever burgeoning army of Gorn on the outskirts of Orkogre Forest.

As Gorn loyal to King Ulgar were being called back from every corner of the continent, from forests and oceansides to townships, ruins and battlefields, the army of the Loyalists grew ever larger and stronger. It was hard to miss such a long line of green-skinned, muscular soldiers armed to the teeth, pointing spears, swords, and other weapons of bladed and blunted wrath at the deserters.

Nobody knew what was going on within the castle. Loyalist Gorn lined up against the trees on one side of the road, opposite the forest that led to the castle, and the deceived army standing in their way.

Galiere estimated a quick head count. The good news was that most of the outlying Gorn fighting with the arrogant Munk, the decadent Dane, the dishonorable Rattkin and the invader Savant Kui'Sa-Ka were here, ready to lay down their lives for the welfare of their king.

The bad news was... this was it. He sorely hoped the "Elf" had something up her oversized sleeve that was as devastating as she claimed, though right now she was only lying on the ground, staring at the clouds above.

Lucciana's stomach knotted painfully, the same as it did whenever something stressful or dangerous, yet inescapable, was on the horizon.

The Presence, the Bane King's essence, was whispering to her to kill... even the Gorn around her, the ones she claimed to be fighting for. However, she could still feel herself holding it back, along with another strong, unmoving and absolutely stubborn strength fighting alongside with her.

Hiromi...

She had been thinking since they had their argument a half hour ago. The Bane King and this strange transformation... at first she believed that the King's essence had some kind of malevolent hold on her mind.

The Bane King was gone ever since she beheaded him on Llylgamyn, no question about it. His spirit escaped from its trap in that pale, vampiric corpse, where it lingered in the physical realm for far longer than it should have.

But his thirst for murder and power did not go with him, as such feelings usually did with any of the other creatures or people she killed. Whether it was intentional for the King to leave his troubles behind him, or

more likely, a byproduct of that stupid pen and its Bane, she was now forced to contend with the overpowering desire to take another's life... and spill their warm blood upon her.

At least, that was what she first thought. She killed a Vampire born of a cursed pen, and his problems were now hers to experience.

Then, she began to think... what if that Presence was not just burdening her with the suffering of the Bane King? What if it was exposing and empowering something that already lay deep and festering inside her all of these years? Something that made her want to show the world her own pain, and make it suffer as she had...

What if she really did want to kill?

Dammit... she cursed in her mind. Every time she thought she fixed one problem in her life, another went and popped up to torture her. She was tired of this whole mess called life, flitting from one painful experience to the next, and simply doing her best to survive.

I seriously wonder if anyone else in the world spends as much time inside themselves as I do, she thought, *locked in the midst of a dozen personal trials and troubles in their own minds...*

...She had a battle to go to, and these thoughts would not do. Lucciana stood up from her comfortable spot on the road and scanned the crowd of Gorn warriors for the one in royal purple...

There he was, speaking to some of his men. "Lord Galiere," she shouted out, and waved him over.

Galiere shot her a glance, finished up speaking to his men and met up with her. "I need something strong, to steady my nerves," she said.

He nodded, and unhooked a flask from his belt. "Just a nip," he warned. "It's powerful stuff..."

Without hesitation, Lucciana took the flask from his outstretched hand and upended the entire container into her mouth. "Hey... we've got a battle to fight!" the Gorn protested as the liquid fire burned down her throat. He shook his head as she finished. "You still haven't told me what this plan of yours is," he added. "I don't need you passing out before you tell us..."

"I'll be fine," she replied, wiping her lips; the drink wasn't that strong at all. "When Jan-Ette and her... whatever they call themselves, come here, I'll explain everything."

Though Galiere nodded, he certainly looked doubtful. He returned to his men to finish the preparations for battle, knowing that the war could start at any moment.

The alcohol went straight to her empty stomach, but she felt only a slight flush. Weak, indeed.

She looked around for another pickmeup... and saw a much bigger flask hanging off of another Gorn's hip. He was sharpening his spear as she walked up to him, and looked up at her approach. He blinked, and she smiled.

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"But how is killing them all going to solve anything?" Hiromi asked the Gorn officer once more.

"They killed Murkatos!" he shot back. "They started this whole war! And the people of the stars have shown us our king for what he really is: a favorer of the rich, a murderer of the poor, a man who lives his life in such a selfish manner, that it was a wonder our people have not seen his true colors until now."

"But why?" she protested. "Why is it King Ulgar's fault? What did he do to hurt you?"

He clenched his hands angrily in response. "I explained this several times already, outsider," he growled.

"I have told you again and again! This is a war between the haves and the have-nots! The rich and the poor! The powerful and the powerless! Evil and good!"

Several other Gorn screamed and shouted in agreement, casting jeers and throwing mudballs at Hiromi. Shss bodily blocked them all, and was barely able to control her anger enough not to lash out at them.

"For years, my people have fought the wars of the rich, died for their ignoble causes!" the Gorn continued. "The people of the stars made it clearer to us than our own experiences could in our centuries as a power upon this world. We will not be victims anymore! We will cast off the nobles' chains of oppression and enact a new order within these lands!"

Hiromi was confused. "And become the very same evil you decry now?" she asked.

The Gorn shook his head angrily. "No!" he shouted. "Our rule will be just, and equal towards all. We will work together to build towards a common destiny..."

"But somebody has to be on top to oversee all of this, right?" Hiromi asked. "Somebody has to rule, to plan and guide. And you have already equated power with evil! Don't you see? You'll never stop fighting, if you start now! There will always be someone stronger than you, someone you will hate for their strength and want to destr...!"

A mudball suddenly struck her in the jaw. She cried out in pain, but continued anyway. "Look at you all!" she implored, spitting mud out of her mouth. "You're a force to be reckoned with! Half of the Gorn population is here, now, and desiring of change!"

It was getting harder and harder for them to hear her now. The Gorn yelled and shouted louder and louder, not wanting to even listen. "Please don't turn to murder!" she implored. "King Ulgar *has* to hear you now... he cannot help but hear your voices! Speak with him, instead of demonizing him! Come to an understanding!!" Her voice drowned out from the sheer volume of the yells.

The Gorn in front of her laughed. "Look at the mouthpiece of the Loyalist forces, trying to persuade us to return to a life of servitude," he sneered, then suddenly turned deadly serious. "We will *not* fall for your tricks, child," he bellowed. "Never again will we battle for an unjust king, or listen to your lies any longer!

"The Loyalists have made certain of this battle with their murder of the Wizard Murkatos. They knew when his protective magic around our great nation fell, it would only be a matter of time before it would come to war between all of us. They have decided their fate; now we enact ours!"

A mighty cheer rose up from her right, past the great half-circle of Gorn. Hiromi thought it was in response to the speech the Gorn had just made, but then the massive army parted. Four Gorn wearing the same armor of every other Gorn, but dyed shimmering white, ran forward towards the thickest section of the forest. One was wielding a strange metal tube, and another held a handful of jagged metal stars, but the others and their weapons were obscured by cheering Gorn.

Behind him, a massive battalion of Gorn spearmen raged forward, screaming a monstrous battle cry. The very ground shook from their movement, and Hiromi's Gorn opponent gripped his Awl Pike tightly. "Leave. Now," he ordered.

No! No, no, no!! she yelled in her mind. "STOP! Don't do this!!" she screamed, but the Insurrectionists' battle cries joined with the Loyalists' into a spine-tingling, frightening scream of insane bloodthirst.

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A roar filled the air, descending from the sky. *Finally...!* Lucciana thought.

At last, the weak Gorn firewater was doing its job: it took a second for the image of the sky to shift into her field of vision when she looked upwards... she was lagging. The Presence was nothing more than an annoying, pestering tickle at the back of her mind, now. She felt completely relieved, for the first time in a

long time.

Jan-Ette's rocket sled came down first, setting down before the group of Gorn in front of Lucciana. The soldiers held their weapons at the ready, even though she warned them of the girl's arrival. *"Distrusting" of outsiders?* she thought. *I would use a stronger term.*

The Helazoid touched a button on the control console, and the glimmering red sled quieted completely, hovering ominously several inches off of the ground. Several dozen other Helazoid similarly set down around the encampment, while even more hovered in the sky. Jan-Ette hopped down, and clasped Lucciana's hand with a smile. "What brings the Helazoid legion into Gorn lands?" she asked.

Lucciana looked straight into her blue eyes. "War," she said simply.

Jan-Ette nodded. "I assumed so."

Flames burned in Lord Galiere's eyes when he stepped forth. "And what is that supposed to mean, girl?!" he demanded, but before the atmosphere could get even more heated, Lucciana stepped between the two. "They're here to help, Lord Galiere," she said. "Please put away your weapon and listen to what I have to say."

He shook his head in disgust. "I don't feel right leaving Gorn matters up to outsiders," he said with his eyes on Jan-Ette, but he did as he was asked.

"Now," Lucciana said to everyone around her, "from what I understand, the Insurrectionists not only control the castle, but the path leading to it. Naturally, with an army between us and the king, who is locked in his throne room inside, that would be a problem.

"But with flight on our side, we can send a strategic strike straight into the heart of the castle using our best men," she said. "Including me, of course."

Galiere nodded. "Once the Wizard Murkatos was killed by the traitors, the spells protecting our lands from tribal warfare were dissipated," he said. "However, though many have tried to kill King Ulgar since the great Wizard fell, nobody has been able to best him in combat, as long as he wields the Heart Piercer spear and his magic. Constant Lifesteal spells and his life draining spear assure that any of the few wounds he suffers in combat are healed within seconds.

"But," he said, with a heavy tinge of fright in his voice, "the traitors... they are said to have received some kind of help from the ones who came from the stars: weapons that can eliminate this advantage, and strike the king down in a single blow."

He pointed to the army of Gorn between himself and the Castle, in the deep, grassy field outside Orkogre Forest. "The Assassins," he said. "Gorn in opposition to the king, with skill rivalling our best warriors, are being outfitted with the most dangerous weapons the outsiders have to offer."

Galiere pointed out towards the north. "Lord Bernhard and I guard the only entrances into Orkogre Forest and await the Assassins' arrival, for their entrance into the Insurrectionist-controlled castle will mean the end of our king..." he said.

At that, Lucciana put her arm around Jan-Ette's shoulders. "So we send our bravest and best straight to the king, while Galiere and Bernhard's armies push in from the east," she said. "The enemy will have three choices at that point:

"First, they could send their entire army to bolster their defense of the castle. They will most likely wound or kill some of the ones sneaking into the castle, but our army will slaughter them from behind," she laughed drunkenly, as she used her hands to illustrate their many deaths.

"Second," she continued, "They could focus their entire attention on our army, which will give our surgical strike not only leeway to bolster the king's defenses, but also the ability to strike at the enemy's backs

while our army engages them.

"Lastly, and most likely, they'll split their forces up between the castle and our army, effectively splitting their strength in two and making it easier to tear them to pieces!" she laughed again, stumbling slightly.

She caught herself, then stood up straight. "Galiere, his best men and I will ride with Jan-Ette, straight over those traitorous pigs, and we will put an end to this war!" she roared. She unsheathed her katana and raised it high. "For the king!!"

The assembled Gorn cheered with approval, raising their weapons in a similar fashion... even Galiere himself was caught up in the moment.

Jan-Ette looked less than enthused. "I am honorbound to assist you in this fight, as you are one of the ones who saved my life," she said, "but Helazoid are not accustomed to involving themselves in the affairs of other races. We will not kill without reason."

"Reason?" Lucciana asked incredulously. "Revolutionaries threaten the rule of a just king, and we are here to stop them. Is that not reason enough?"

"We have no information on either side of this conflict," Jan-Ette explained, "and even if we did, I doubt this fight is a product of nothing more than a difference of perspective. There is no 'good' or 'bad' in a battle such as this."

"You would draw equivalence between murderous usurpers and a benevolent king?" the Elf asked incredulously. "It appears that though your technology has advanced to impressive heights, your culture has yet to evolve significantly."

Jan-Ette ignored the barb. "Say what you wish," she replied. "We will not kill in another's name, no matter what debt the Helazoid owe. We will transport you, and nothing more."

Lucciana glared at her. "As long as you are helping us, it matters little how you feel," she stated flatly.

Cowards. A bunch of moral cowards, she thought to herself, but refrained from speaking aloud. *They cannot commit to a decision about who is in the right, blinding themselves to everything rather than understanding anything. It must be nice to feel so superior and removed, while others suffer through these trials of "perspective."*

Lucciana was fourteen then. She pushed the emissary up against her old house, seconds after she held her dying family one last time. "Why?! Why didn't they help us?!" she screamed at him with tears in her eyes. She shook him hard, and gripped his clothes tighter. "WHY?!"

The emissary's voice shook as he spoke. "They... none of them thought it was their business. No matter how I tried to convince them of our plight, they all just ignored my pleas! Some..." he choked, almost unable to speak any further. He coughed and sniffled, then found the strength to continue. "Some said we brought it on ourselves..."

These Helazoid are just like every one of the nations who let my people suffer and die, content in their own positions of safety and removed judgement, Lucciana thought angrily. *No different than those who allowed Daikuta to murder and conquer as he saw fit. All the ones who ever refused to take a stance, and merely drew generalized pictures of a more serious conflict...*

How dare they... how dare *they call something like this a matter of perspective. This will NOT happen again to another benevolent nation, not if I can do* anything *about it...*

"LORD GALIERE!" a stumbling, sprinting, huffing and puffing Gorn screamed from behind her. Galiere ran out to meet him. "The Assassins! They've broken through, and they killed scores of our men!

"...He's dead! Lord Bernhard is dead!!" He fell to his knees in exhaustion. "They... the army is moving in to

stop them, but... I fear the Assassins will reach the castle before we do!"

Galiere was stunned. "They're...? Bernhard..." he whispered, and allowed himself only a second to mourn his friend's death.

A scant second later, he quickly reverted to the leader his men needed him to be. "We must move out now!" he shouted, gesturing groups of Gorn at a time. "Everyone from first company, pair up with a Helazoid and prepare to leave immediately! Second company, pair up with any 'zoids left without a rider! The rest of you, gear up and reinforce the northern army NOW!"

He turned quickly, then spoke to a soldier wielding an impressive banner with the Gorn symbol of two pikes crossed behind a castle stitched upon it. "Gerhard," he said solemnly. "You will lead this attack in my stead."

Gerhard nodded, and held his spear high. "Gorn companies, stand at the ready!" he shouted. "Spearman in the front, archers right behind! Form companies two, four and five in front and charge on my signal, company three to the east, raid formation!"

Jan-Ette waved down a sled flying low above them all. As it descended next to her, Lucciana got a better look at the flying machine... the pilot had put an impressive amount of time into it.

The sleek engines on both sides were much larger than Jan-Ette's, and the steel block and pipes jutting out from the center roared with a power twice that of the other Helazoid's machines. Even the red surface was polished to a shimmering finish.

A beautiful girl with long blonde hair, wearing the purple and white flight jacket of the Helazoid legion, hopped down. She was wearing blue-tinted lenses over her eyes, and smiling broadly. "So who's ridin' with me?" she asked cheerily, rubbing her slighty dirty flight glasses with two fists.

"Ha-Li is one of our better pilots," Jan-Ette explained to Lucciana, as Helazoid all around them descended and paired up with Gorn soldiers, "and you will be with her. The leader of the Gorn forces will come with me, and we will move out when you're ready."

Lucciana waved slightly at the fiery girl, then held out her hand to shake her pilot's. Ha-Li nodded confidently, and jumped an impressive jump back onto her steed, holding out her hand to pull her passenger up. With a tug, the Samurai was kneeling down on the soft material that made up the open-aired machine's knee rests, then held on tight to Ha-Li's waist, keeping her back on the comforting backrest.

"Just to let you know," Ha-Li whispered, "not all of us are as, shall we say, insufferably arrogant as Jan-Ette and her clones..." She winked, then said, "Whatever you need me and my baby to do, we got you covered."

Finally, some good news, Lucciana thought with a smile. She nodded, then took a look over the control console of this chariot of the skies.

Through her increasingly wobbly vision, she saw a myriad of buttons, switches, levers, blinking lights, gauges and other enigmatic controls on the sled's console. It must have taken incredible amounts of time and training to master its operation, she realized.

Satisfied, she turned to address her assembled team. "We attack now!" she shouted to the impressively quick Gorn and their new partners hovering around her. "Once we reach the castle, make straight for the king and fortify his position! As for the ones still here," she continued to the ranks and rows of Gorn soldiers out in the field, "though your battle is removed from the king himself, it is for him, nonetheless! Slay the Insurrectionists, and we'll protect him with all we have!"

Amidst the ensuing screams of battle, Lucciana leaned in close to Ha-Li. "Let's go," she said.

"Nice..." the Helazoid said with a nod and a smile, clenched her fist in anticipation, and rolled the small handle under her left hand forward. The sled roared to life, and lifted into the sky quicker than Lucciana expected. Her stomach tied in knots as their height increased, and she began to see glimpses of the battle on the far side of the forest.

Galiere was right behind Lucciana and the other Helazoid, clinging tightly to Jan-Ette. *This isn't natural,* he thought, *to be in the air with as much ease as the moths or birds of the sky...*

He saw them, then... hundreds, maybe thousands of them: Vampire Vultures, fluttering high above the battlefield in lazy circles around the largest pockets of fighting Gorn. It was said that during times of the greatest portents of death, they would flock by the score from the Witch Mountains to patiently await the arrival of hundreds or thousands of fresh corpses to devour.

He had never believed it possible until now. The sky was practically blotted black from the sheer number of the carrion birds in the sky, drifting nonchalantly above his brothers and theirs.

As the rocket sled reached a sufficient height, and Lucciana and the others blasted towards the castle with he and his Helazoid partner in tow, Lord Galiere couldn't help but wonder what this omen meant for his people.

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Shss physically picked up Hiromi and began to run back towards the Loyalist encampment. This area was no longer safe.

"Put me down, put me down!" Hiromi repeated over and over while she beat at her friend's shoulder. "We can't just run away! We have to stop this!!" she exclaimed.

Though she understood that the Priest wanted to go back, Shss saw little point in going back to an assured death when the battle was already underway. There was little they could do to help...

Hiromi suddenly went dead weight in her arms and slipped out underneath her, running back towards the two Gorn armies getting closer and closer to one another. "Hiromi!!" Shss yelled, but the Priest was already heading straight for the soldiers.

The gap closed more and more... pikes were held out, thrusting straight for the enemy's throats. Bows drew taut on both sides and launched a wave of arrows through the air. The armies were almost on top of each other... Gorn screamed with rage, yelled for the blood of their own flesh and blood.

And then, they met.

The powerful charge erupted in the center of the two attacking groups, throwing Gorn bodies in every direction as pikes thrust through armor and flesh to instantly kill their targets. The arrows fell from the sky then, some knocked from their path by the enemy's volley, and into the mass of Gorn on the other side.

Cries of pain and death filled the air, and Gorn fell by the hundreds. They slipped on their brothers' spilled blood and were trampled underneath the powerful throng of their comrades' attacks. Even then, more Gorn from both sides joined the fray until there was nothing but green-skinned men battling their brothers as far as the eye could see, thousands on each side thrusting, parrying and slicing at their enemy.

Hiromi happened upon the first Gorn body, one who had taken an arrow in his heart the second the battle had started. He was breathing painfully and slowly when she came to his side, and didn't even have the strength to focus his eyes on her.

She nurtured and erupted God's love from her heart and chest to her hands, and placed them on the Gorn's chest. The wound closed and spat out the arrow, knitting his heart from the inside. Within seconds, the Gorn was back on his feet, smiling at the Priest with pike still in hand. To Hiromi's dismay, he waved slightly at her, then charged back into the fray of whirling blades and lunging spears.

"NO!" she screamed. "Stop fighting! Don't..."

But despite her protests, the Gorn was already engaging a soldier busy with one of his allies. The healed Gorn buried his pike in his enemy's back with a single thrust, killing him instantly. Hiromi's heart sank, knowing that that man's death was now on her hands.

Shss drew up to her side, and grabbed her shoulder. "Go now!" she shouted. "No safe!"

Hiromi just shrugged her hand off and ran forward to the man who was just killed, but Shss grabbed her again. "Let me go!" she yelled as she tried to escape. "Let me go!!" She struggled to get free of Shss' powerful grip, but the Fighter was adamant.

Another Gorn took a sword slice to the throat, and fell just feet away from Hiromi. She looked pleadingly at her friend.

Just then, a Gorn warrior with pike in front of him ran forward to impale Shss from behind, and Hiromi's pleading look suddenly changed to one of horror. The wordless warning, coupled with Shss' heightened senses, were enough for her to let go of the Priest and unsling her Psi Rod.

The Gorn's speartip was only feet away when Shss dodged to the side, spun around, and jabbed the globe into the Gorn's neck. She turned the rod's power on, and the electrified Gorn dropped within seconds to the muddy ground.

She turned back to find Hiromi, only to see her working on the Gorn who had just been killed. The battle raged around her, blood splashing over her face as a Loyalist Gorn's throat was suddenly slashed out. Through her tears, the Priest called back the spirit of the slain Gorn, and re-attached his spirit to his body. The weakened Gorn's eyes fluttered open slowly while Hiromi mended his mortal wounds. He was still sick from his sudden resurrection, and wouldn't be fighting for some time.

When the Gorn whose throat was cut fell on top of her, Hiromi grabbed him around the neck and forced healing into his body. The falling Gorn, now completely healed, lashed back into the fray with his sword in hand.

But not even a second after he rushed forward towards the battle, he heard a hum, then a buzz, and he suddenly couldn't move.

Shss pulled the Psi Rod's globe away from his neck, and took up a protective stance above Hiromi. Neither side would be pleased to see a healer working for everyone's benefit...

And so it was that Gorn came at Hiromi from every side, both the Insurrectionists and the Loyalists. Shss stood above her, ready to battle to the last to protect her friend.

The first Gorn sliced downwards at Hiromi's back as she worked on another wounded soldier. Shss batted his sword down with her rod, and after pitching the globe into the ground, cracked the base of the rod against his skull. The Gorn fell to the ground, unconscious.

Another pair of Gorn thrust at Hiromi from in front of her, but she was too busy healing another wounded soldier to notice. Shss bounded over her kneeling friend and whipped her Psi Rod's globe into the first's face, shocking him to a jerking halt.

The second's pike was almost on top of Hiromi, and she realized that she wouldn't be able to stop him in time to save her life. Thinking quickly, she did the only thing that came to mind: she crouched her leg in front of her friend to take the pike in her left thigh. She screamed in pain as the sharp tip cut straight into her bone.

She elbowed the pike down the center with incredible force, snapping the polearm in two. The surprised Gorn stepped back, and Shss used the opportunity to snag his armor with one of the Psi Rod's curved hooks, pull him forward and punch him in the jaw. As the Gorn lay out cold on the ground, Hiromi's

caressed her protector's thigh from behind, and the pike's tip popped out of the now knit wound.

On two now healthy legs, Shss stood up and spun her Psi Rod around in a great circle around the Priest as Gorn closed in from all sides. After she pushed both buttons on the staff, the globe suddenly lit up like a blazing star, catching two Gorn in the chin and stopping on another's shoulder in its flight. None of them could do anything besides drop to the ground in twitching heaps.

Two more Gorn stepped forward, pike in one's hand and sword in the other's, while Shss stopped her spin. She stepped towards the spearman and waited until the swordsman drew close enough, then kicked the bladesman in the stomach while the considerable reach of her Psi Rod touched the spearman's hands.

He cried out as the electricity ran through his body, and dropped his spear while the other doubled over with the wind knocked out of him. Immediately after, she flipped the spear over and clocked the swordsman in the cheek with its base.

While Shss swooped her Psi Rod around in every direction and humanely rendered multiple Gorn unconscious with a variety of kicks, bashes and shocks, Hiromi snuck to the outskirts of the main battle with new intentions.

She happened upon the squirming body of a Gorn with a broken blade in his chest, and conjured forth two energies this time: first, she healed his wounds with a single warm feeling of pure love from each hand. Before the Gorn could move, though, she filled his body with an icy Paralysis spell, rendering him immobile for several minutes.

There are too many...! she thought through her tears. *I can't save them all! I couldn't... I couldn't stop this!!* Even as she knelt down over another Gorn's body, her vision was tunneling, and the world was growing black. *God, grant me the strength to help these people, please!* she thought desparately.

Shss headbutt a Gorn in the nose and kicked his chest, and he stumbled back. When she looked down to see how Hiromi was, though, she was frightened to see her gone... but a pile of bodies to her right was all she needed to see to know where the Priest was.

Gorn lay around her kneeling figure, blinking but unmoving. Surprisingly enough, the soldiers around her were no longer trying to kill her. In fact, some stumbled next to her, holding their hands out, imploring her to help them.

No matter the source of the wound, no matter the Gorn, Hiromi grasped their hands and pulled them to her, seconds before they fell unconscious or paralyzed around her. Then, she hopped out of the large circle of unmoving Gorn bodies and laid her hands on all of the many soldiers reaching out for her assistance. One by one, Gorn grasped her hands, then dropped.

Energy issued forth from her body and healed every one as bleeding, dripping, groaning and eviscerated Gorn grabbed every part of her body, pleading for just a little of her rapidly fading strength.

They were clutching at her from every direction... her legs, her arms, her face, from every part of her, they groaned and groped and cried for assistance. Hiromi relaxed and let the warm liquid run throughout her entire body, sending the energy from every part of her body to every Gorn whose hands begged for her help.

With every Gorn she healed and paralyzed, more and more of her consciousness slipped away. One after another, she healed countless Gorn... but felt herself slipping more and more into darkness. *There are too many to save...* she thought. *God, please lend me more power...*

But as with her first plea, her prayers remained unanswered. With Gorn still holding her tightly, and crying out in pain, Hiromi lost herself to the caressing shadows.

Shss saw the Gorn around her, grabbing her desparately, and her frail frame suddenly lose its balance.

As Hiromi's eyes closed, but before she struck the ground, Shss caught and hefted her over her left shoulder. She fled the group of wailing Gorn with her Psi Rod in her other hand, away from the blood-soaked plains behind them.

Another massive army of Gorn approached from straight ahead of her and to the right. The final groups of Insurrectionist Gorn stationed around the castle, and the Loyalist army of Lord Galiere, charged forward to meet one another in a second bloody meeting of whirling blades and thrusting spears, arrows in flight and vicious battle cries.

The gap between them was growing smaller and smaller with each passing second, so Shss poured on the speed, running between the armies on either side of her. Galiere's army recognized the two outsiders, but the Insurrectionist army sent a small group of Gorn to tackle the two girls.

Shss stopped and set Hiromi down between the trunks of two nearby trees, then unslung her Psi Rod to deal with the ones who wished to harm her friend.

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The wind swished through Lucciana's topknot and threatened to undo it, but the ride was amazing nonetheless. This high up, she could see that Guardia, or at least this portion of it, was one massive forest. Green was all she could see, an impressive thicket of trees that spread out in every direction.

Below her, the armies of the two rival Gorn groups smashed into one another, and Gorn bodies went flying. The cloud of arrows blocked her view for a second, and was followed by the death screams of hundreds of Gorn as the archers found their intended marks. Luckily, this high up, they were safe from the volley.

She couldn't see the castle, wherever it was. Galiere said it was underground... but she didn't believe him. Who ever heard of an underground castle?

Jan-Ette and Galiere soon pulled up beside Lucciana and her pilot, and he shouted to her over the roar of the engines. "That clearing over there!" he yelled, pointing at a large, grassy field surrounded by a circle of trees. "That's the entrance!"

Lucciana looked closer and saw a rather large group of tough-looking Gorn in the clearing, dressed in full battle gear, and ready for any kind of assault. *But probably not this kind, I'd wager...* she thought with an evil smirk.

There was a commotion from the ground, what sounded like a collective cry of surprise. She didn't need to look down to notice what had happened: they had been spotted. Arrows shot up from a few select archers, clearly to keep from hitting their own people as the Gorn tried to bring down the flying machines above them.

Lucciana's spine tingled in surprise when an arrow whizzed by her ear: they had composite bows! She screamed over to Jan-Ette at the top of her lungs. "Get everyone to the castle, now!" she ordered. "They see us... and they can hit us!"

She nodded in response, and pushed a button on her console. *"Everyone to the castle, full speed. Follow me!"* her voice came from every sled travelling through the air. She looked back at Galiere. "Hang on!" she yelled, and pulled back on the left handle of the sled.

The rocket sled shot forward twice as fast, and the sound of engine roars engulfed the entire forest as the Helazoid legion enabled its collective boost thrusters and shot towards the castle in a mighty red blur.

Two lucky arrows tagged a Helazoid in the arm on one sled, a Gorn in the chest on another. The Helazoid struggled through the pain to continue their flight to the castle, but the Gorn on the other sled slipped off of the machine before his pilot could do anything to help him.

With his last ounce of strength, and as the fall threatened him with blackout, the Gorn screamed a cry of rage and fell straight into a crowd of Insurrectionists, with his pike pointed straight down. Below, one unlucky Gorn with his mind on fighting the dirty followers of the king was impaled by the falling Loyalist. He, his killer and several others standing around them were killed instantly as the Gorn's fall shattered their bodies with its sheer force.

Ha-Li rolled the left handle backwards and Lucciana felt them picking up speed, but she squeezed the Helazoid's shoulder. "Not you," she said into the girl's ear. "Turn around and take us low. We're going to make sure the others get to the castle safely!"

The Helazoid grinned maniacally, and leaned left on the sled. It turned around quickly, and the nose was suddenly pointed at the army of the Insurrectionists that had shot at them earlier. "All right, baby, show us what you can do!" she yelled to her machine, then rocketed the sled straight down into the crowd of Gorn.

The Insurrectionists in the back rows, seeing that the mysterious Helazoid sleds had disappeared, were now simply waiting for their comrades in front to die before they had room to step forward and kill the supporters of Dictator Ulgar.

A strange, loud roaring sound made more than a few look up, though. One of the sleds was bearing down on them, too quick for them to get their bows ready. Pink lances of fire erupted from the machine and blasted into their ranks, burning holes in numerous Gorn and killing them by the dozens.

As Ha-Li blasted her lasers into the crowd of Gorn, Lucciana leaned slightly out to the side, conjured a powerful, burning feeling in her body, and conjured a Fireball the size of her torso into her hands. With a thought, she launched it into another crowd of the traitorous Gorn. It exploded and sent charred bodies flying everywhere, just as the Gorn recovered and sent a hail of arrows back at the two girls.

Voices of Gorn screamed in Lucciana's mind, but she could hardly hear them; the firewater kept their cries far and away from the forefront of her mind. *"Yaaa!"* Ha-Li screamed as she wove the sled between thickets of the arrows, turning, swooping, rising and diving to avoid the brunt of them.

Lucciana was surprised to see only one or two arrows scratch the side of the sled, and only one which popped off of the windshield in front of them; Ha-Li had actually managed to avoid the brunt of the attack.

Feeling safe in the hands of her skilled pilot, she conjured cold from her chest, as much as she possibly could, and launched it into the crowd of archers. As Ha-Li pulled up and away, hundreds of sharp ice blades exploded in every direction, impaling scores of archers through their armor and flesh.

They drew farther and farther away from the archers as arrows whizzed by. "That should keep everyone safe..." Ha-Li said. Lucciana nodded and looked back at the shrinking Gorn figures... just as an arrow whizzed by her face and lodged itself in the Helazoid's right side.

"Ugh...!" she cried out as she shot forward and struck a few buttons, then slumped over the right handle. The sled immediately dipped foward and moved towards some trees on the ground.

"Ha-Li!" Lucciana cried, but she was out cold... or dead. She was bleeding massively from her side...

Lucciana withdrew her katana and cut the shaft of the Barbed Arrow, but the damage was already done. They were going down in a hail of Gorn arrows, and the pilot was out. There was only one thing left to do.

After conjuring a quick lance of fire to cauterize her wound, Lucciana unsheathed her katana. "Forgive me," she said, pushed Ha-Li as far forward as she could, then sliced her blade along her back.

Immediately after, she closed her eyes and opened her thoughts to the screaming voices in her mind for the one she needed to hear... and found it. She opened her eyes immediately after, feeling the weight of the rocket sled shifting with her every movement.

With a quick shift to the left to compensate for Ha-Li's unmoving body, Lucciana looked over the console.

Right throttle, pull back to engage forward thrusters. Left throttle, push forward to fly up, pull back to engage secondary boost thrusters. Small metal clutches on each throttle to engage retro rockets... buttons for lasers, lights, engine power switch, trunk, communications...

Got it.

She reached around Ha-Li's body and placed each of her hands on the two throttles. She pushed the left one forward, and the sled suddenly rose out of its descent, straight up and forward into the air. When she took Ha-Li's hand off of the right thruster, they stopped moving forward and gained altitude even more quickly.

Once they were safe enough from most of the Gorn archers, Lucciana pulled the left and right throttles back simultaneously, and they fired straight towards the castle. "Hang on..." she pleaded with her unmoving companion as she pressed a button on the console.

"Jan-Ette," she said out loud, "Ha-Li has taken a hit from the Gorn archers below us. Prepare something to stop the bleeding when we arrive at the castle." She waited a few seconds, until the Helazoid's shaky voice came out of the machine's speaker. *"Understood. Come as quickly as possible,"* she answered.

Jan-Ette let go of the communications button, then set down in the clearing near the castle entrance. *What happened this time?* she thought. *Why is that hotshot always in such a rush to end her own life?!*

Galiere and his men had already dispatched the Gorn in the clearing, thanks to their superior numbers and the Helazoid flying machines. Right now, they were doing their best to hold off the Insurrectionist army's advances into the clearing, while a small contingent of his men kept watch over a ladder leading into the underground castle.

They had sheer numbers and terrain on their side at the moment, as the narrow path leading into the clearing of Orkogre Castle was much too narrow for more than five enemy Gorn to attack at a time. The Loyalists held the line, using their spears to keep the enemy at bay.

Lucciana and Ha-Li descended, though as they did, Jan-Ette saw that the passenger was at the helm. Strange as that was, when she saw how pale her unmoving friend had become from loss of blood, her heart quickened in worry, and she gripped the bandages from her rocket sled in fear for Ha-Li's life. The Samurai expertly brought the sled to a gentle stop above the grass.

After placing her arm and hands over the sword, arrow and burn wounds on Ha-Li's body, Lucciana lept down to the ground, and brought the wounded pilot to the ground.

Jan-Ette immediately wrapped and put pressure on the wounds to stop the blood flow, not noticing that Lucciana had returned to Ha-Li's rocket sled and had taken off into the air. "Hey!" she shouted after the Samurai, but her voice drowned out under the sound of the engine.

Lucciana rolled the left throttle forward and leaned her body towards the nose of the rocket sled, easily balancing and shifting its position to point towards the fighting Gorn. She took aim at the trees around the rebel Gorn, and pushing a pair of buttons on the throttle bases, fired a stream of lasers into each side of the path leading to the castle.

The tree trunks exploded, and the trees toppled down on top of the front line of Insurrectionist Gorn, almost crushing some of her own allies. She kept firing, creating a massive wall of dead trees that would take some time for the traitors to wade through.

With that, she returned to her seat and rolled off the throttle, bringing the rocket sled to a quick descent towards the ground. She engaged the vertical thruster just before impact, and the rocket sled stopped only inches off of the ground with a sudden jolt. *Ha-Li is an amazing pilot...* she thought.

"Galiere! Rally your men and lead us into the castle!" Lucciana yelled, hopping off of the rocket sled and onto the grass.

Galiere immediately shook away his wonder at the futuristic weaponry, and shouted a simple "Move out!" as he waved his lance towards the castle entrance.

While the army disappeared into Orkogre Castle, Jan-Ette got a better look at her friend. With a mixture of horror and anger, she saw the slice on Ha-Li's back... but when she looked up, the Samurai was already gone.

Galiere slid down the ladder into the musty castle first, right into the middle of three Insurrectionist guardsmen. Two of the Gorn thrust their lances at his ribs, while the third slashed at his throat with a curved sword.

He slipped out from between the two lances and was inches away from the swordsman before the Gorn was able to complete his swing. Galiere slid out his curved blade and drove it into his enemy's stomach, where it stuck firmly.

As the swordsman gripped the blade in his belly in pain, Galiere let go of it, pulled a pair of pointed Sai from the back of his belt and trapped the lances of the recovering Gorn in tandem underneath the hanging ladder. With a flick of both his wrists, the polearms were wrenched powerfully from their hands, and Galiere slipped his Sai back into his belt while he took out his less lethal Nunchaku.

He wheeled them around his sides just as the first line of his men slid down the ladder to reinforce him, then slipped under the ladder legs and cracked both metal sticks into each of the Gorn's heads. They were both out before they slumped against the wall together.

Finally, as the Loyalist Gorn poured in by the dozens from above, he turned to the first Gorn he felled lying on the floor in agony, and pulled his blade out with all the strength he could muster. With much resistance, it finally exited with a fountain of blood.

"Do you wish your pain to end?" he quickly asked the bleeding Gorn.

The fallen soldier coughed blood, and gurgled painfully, "Mercy... life... please..."

Galiere tore off a strip of his regal purple tabard, then wadded the cloth around the wounded Gorn's stomach. Whether it would stop the bleeding or not was uncertain, but it was all he could do for now. "Hold it there. We'll return for you when the battle is over," he said hurriedly, then turned back to his men to issue orders.

He pointed to the first of two passages in the small area around the ladder. "Company A, guard the west entrance and keep reinforcements from the barracks from arriving. If things get too serious, follow us into the throne room. We'll make our stand there."

Ten Gorn nodded, and bodily blocked the small hallway leading off into the darkness. "Everyone else, Lucciana..." he continued, when a white-robed figure dropped last to the ground. "Here," the Samurai said, almost losing her balance.

"Follow me!" he ordered, and charged down the hallway to the north, with Lucciana and his men close behind, to the throne room.

The underground castle was musty and drafty, almost like a cave constructed of ancient, polished stone. The hallway Galiere and the others ran down was as dark as the one the first company was guarding, but Lucciana could already hear the shouts of Gorn coming from both directions. She hoped they could find the king and enlist his strength before the main force of the castle's defenders found them...

Metal jingled as Galiere fumbled with the castle keys and unlocked the gate ahead of him. Rats scattered from the grinding sound as the portal slid up into the roof above them, and the small group of almost a hundred Gorn marched ahead through the narrow hallway.

Galiere, passing two small hallways to the left and right off of the main path, paused to look down the left

hallway that ended with a massive gate. He felt a tinge of sadness as he read the sign he had seen a thousand times before: "Murkatos Outer Sanctum."

He shook his head slightly. *Why did you have to die...?*

Around two more corners of the narrow hallway lit by glowing candles on the wall, Lucciana, Galiere and his men stopped short. There were shouts of battle behind as Gorn Insurrectionists, rising to meet the unexpected invasion, poured out by the dozens into the hallway to engage the Loyalist party from behind.

"Take them down!" Galiere yelled, and moved forward without the men in back, who engaged the enemy as the main group continued on. He, Lucciana and the remaining men passed two more small hallways. The Gorn leader spared only a moment to duck into the hallway to their left and tug a lever that opened a gate in front of them. He knew what would come next, and ran in with his blade at the ready.

Gorn Lords, Ashigaru, Shaman and others of high rank were waiting for them inside the large chamber, and rose to meet the challenge. *Almost there...!* he thought quickly.

Galiere roared with fury and charged between all of them, cutting out and through the purple tabards and black metal plates that signified Gorn of station, now turned traitorous towards the king who had supported them for all these years.

Blood spattered over him, and Lucciana was right on his heels, striking out blindly at the wobbling forms all around her as she stumbled after the Gorn leader. The rest of the Loyalist army marched in, running into the mass of Gorn officers and pushing them to the wall with a spear charge, but their enemy was ready this time.

The battle between the Loyalists and the Insurrectionists continued in the chamber. The stones were soon stained with red blood, a mixture of multiple Gorn who had once shared a meal together in this very same castle.

All three of the other chambers were empty as Galiere and Lucciana stumbled through them, over mounds and mounds of weapons, armor and other war supplies. Galiere's men kept the traitors behind them busy enough, allowing the two to finally slip through to the hallway leading to the throne room.

His heart sank when he saw what the end of the hallway led to: an open throne room gate. They were inside!

A scream of agony erupted from the massive chamber in front of him. There was no doubt... it was the king's! Lucciana heard more Gorn pounding down stairs to her left, but she had no time to look... the king was in danger.

To her right, something suddenly smashed into a clear wall and roared loudly. In a second, Lucciana took it in: a massive, black-haired ape with pointed teeth, and it was clearly excited and scared by the fighting within the castle. She jumped back in surprise while Galiere ran into the throne room... and stumbled into the arms of a Gorn.

"Gotcha, pig!" he whispered in her ear as he squeezed her around the shoulders. Lucciana instinctively drove her head up and back, and was satisfied to hear bone crunch. The Gorn released her and clutched his nose, and with a single slice, she removed the Gorn's head with a clean stroke of her blade.

She kicked the headless torso, still standing disgustingly on its own, into the base of the stairs. The body blocked the Gorn behind it from coming any farther forward, its weight and their fear temporarily paralyzing all movement.

With a smooth motion, she continued the flight of the sword and directed it into the glass screen between her and the frightened ape. The screen cut neatly down the middle, and Lucciana dove into the throne room just as Gorkunga, the Killer Ape, smashed the jagged bits of glass into the hallway and charged at the struggling Gorn on the stairwell.

Lucciana's vision was still wobbly and her vision lagging, but the next sight she saw poisoned her emotions with memories of her own life in Yamato... and of the tragedy that befell her family. Three Gorn dressed in white, plated Gorn armor stood proudly in front of another one, whose hawkish eyes were fixated upon the constricting body of the former king of the Gorn, Ulgar.

His once powerful frame was darkening, squeezing in on itself and being devoured from the inside by the hawkish Gorn's poisoned weapons, a handful of Death Star shuriken, some of which were still in his hand. By the second, the king's body was being eaten from the inside.

He was already dead, but the desecration of his form and of his legacy were plain to see: not only did these Assassins want King Ulgar dead, they wanted him annihilated.

No amount of alcohol could have quelled the fire that broiled in her then. Once more, she was powerless to stop evil from murdering good. Again, she could only watch as those dear to countless others were killed in the name of greed. Ulgar, Goto, her family... their faces passed by her mind's eye, and she grew angrier with the sight of each of their kind and smiling faces.

From the very depths of her soul, throughout the castle and up into the battlefield above, fueled by memories of her past, her own innate magical nature, and the suppressed Presence within her, Lucciana screamed a cry of rage so fierce, that Gorn combatants and forest animals alike paused with disbelief, or fled in sheer terror.

The first wavering Gorn she set her sights on was no exception. He lifted a black gloved hand to her, but activated it much too soon in his frightened haste. A laser shot out of it and exploded a massive hole in the stone floor, just before Lucciana's sword sliced down and around, removing both of his arms.

The bleeding Gorn passed out from the shock as Galiere engaged the next one, a serious-looking warrior holding a small black tube. He pressed a button on its side, and suddenly, a glowing red beam erupted from it with a *swoosh.* The Light Sword burned through the air at Galiere, and though he parried the attack cleanly, it simply sliced straight through the metal of his blade.

Galiere backed up and conjured water from his stomach to his entire body, flooding it with a Superman spell. His entire body tingled as he felt everything about him boost to peak heights, from his muscular mass and speed, to his perception of the situation and overall intelligence.

The Gorn sliced the humming Light Sword through the air at Galiere, but hit nothing but a blur. A burning pain suddenly shot through his spine as Galiere's lance tore through him, and he suddenly felt his legs give out beneath him. He lost all feeling in his hands and dropped the Light Sword, then watched in horror as his unresponsive body fell straight through the falling, vertical blade.

The final two Gorn began a deadly attack combination of the shuriken of the Gorn in the back, and the dual firearms of the one in the front that spat lasers with unbelievable speed. Through her shifting and wobbly vision, though, they could not have moved any slower to the enraged Elf. She deflected a shuriken harmlessly to the ground with her katana, then batted another towards the one wielding the two pistols.

The Death Star nicked his shoulder and deposited its poison as he shot at the Samurai, and he suddenly realized that there was no way he was going to survive. He kept firing anyway, screaming at the girl who seemed to actually be *dodging* every one of his shots.

Lucciana stepped between the two streaking laser paths, ducked another volley and sidestepped yet another. With every shot the Gorn missed, she stood another step closer to him. Finally, she held her sword out sideways and ducked beneath his shots, then sliced his legs out from underneath him. Before he could even cry out in pain, she thrust her blade through his throat.

With more quick movements of her blade, shuriken deflected harmlessly away from Lucciana's body as she stared daggers at the murderer of the benevolent king... the symbol of everything wrong with the

universe.

The Gorn stopped throwing the stars at her... and took a step back, looking into her empty eyes with utter fear. He flung every last shuriken he had at her body in a final attempt to slay her, but she had already anticipated the move and flipped over the mass of poisoned throwing stars.

He tensed his leg muscles and pushed for a run towards the door... when the world went suddenly black. Her blade sliced across his eyes... *Oh, Uggbah, it hurts!* he thought. *I'm blind!!*

"You... I will never forgive you... you murderer! You *godsdamned murderer!!*" Lucciana screamed, coming up behind him with her blade held across his belly. Disemboweling... one of the most painful ways to die, she thought in her single-minded rage.

She cut deep into his stomach, but the Gorn's sobs stopped her from making the slice a lethal one. "We... we wanted freedom, equality... nothing more!" he cried. His whining incensed her even further, and she almost drew the sword along his belly...

Galiere suddenly appeared from his left, then decked him in the jaw. "King Ulgar offered nothing less!" he roared. "And now he is dead... by your hand, traitor!"

The Gorn passed out from sheer fright. Lucciana's anger didn't abate, but the firewater and his helplessness allowed her enough control to drop the wounded, blinded Gorn to the ground. Soon, there was nothing but silence... and no-one to bear witness to the end of the Gorn Empire but a heavily breathing Samurai and her horrified companion.

Everything hit Galiere at once. He failed his people... what few of them remained alive after all this slaughter. He failed his kingdom, split in two from this war. And worst of all, he had failed his king, who was now nothing more than a pile of ragged bones, wrapped in a regal purple robe and golden crown.

He knelt down, and removed a tiny blade from his belt at his left side. In death, he would serve his king, in the way he could not here. He touched the tip to his stomach, pushed hard...

Before he knew it, Lucciana grabbed his hand; not even a trickle of blood was drawn from his stomach. "Don't," she said gently.

Galiere looked up at her pleadingly. "But... I have no honor, no king, no purpose to live..." he said softly.

She squeezed his hand... and he slowly dropped the blade at her insistence. She brought her face close to his, and stared into his yellow-black eyes with absolute seriousness. "Believe me. Don't," she assured him. He shook his head, not knowing what to do.

"Your people will need you... Lord Galiere," she whispered softly, putting her hand on his shoulder. "Do not let what remains of your kingdom fall into anarchy without you."

Galiere held her gaze for a few seconds, then silently stood and walked to the remains of his king. He knelt down and carefully wrapped the bones in the purple robe, placing the crown carefully on top. Once he stood up, he almost felt as if he could not continue on, could not take a single step or live another minute in his shattered kingdom.

Lucciana clasped his shoulder strongly. "I understand all too well your burden now," she said. "And though you may not understand it now... you can, and you will get through it. I promise you that."

He took a shaky step forward, carrying the bones of the man he once served with honor... both for his sake, and the sake of his people. With every successive memory of his king that returned to his mind, Galiere's strength returned little by little, until his faltering, solemn steps became a steady death march out of the throne room.

His rampage over with his bludgeoning of several Gorn, Gorkunga was back in his room and playing with

a doll, ooking softly. The dazed Gorn Insurrectionists by the stairs half-heartedly lifted pikes to bar Galiere's path, but just as quickly dropped them when they saw what he carried.

Lucciana and Galiere, with their former enemies left behind them, walked past bodies of Gorn from both sides of the conflict, including ones who were still wounded, or even still fighting. One by one, though, they all ended their conflicts when they saw the growing procession heading their way. Some stayed to treat the wounds of their bretheren, no matter the side they were fighting for, but many more followed the two warriors on their way out of the castle.

The gate to Murkatos' Sanctum opened as Lucciana passed by, but Galiere did not stop for her. She cautiously went without him into the peaceful chamber, decorated with comfy pillows for meditation, and enormous piles of burnt incense. The smell still lingered, though Murkatos had been dead for some time.

She was not surprised when the clouded, ghostly visage of a robed Gorn appeared before her, and spoke in a voice of deep regret.

"I have not the honor to speak with my own kin, outsider," it said. "Know my tale, and speak its truth to my people. As I, Murkatos, was once protector of this land, so, too, did I fall prey to the desire for material wealth and boundless strength. The visitors from the stars seduced me with their promises of treasure and power, and once I had thrust my own people into this war of blood versus blood, they were soon rid of me.

"The deceitful live lives of unending fear of all those around them, a self-perpetuating cycle of mistrust and betrayal that consumes every fiber of their being. Through my traitorous actions, an entire nation has fallen, and countless have died.

"Tell my people of my story, of the truth behind their downfall. This tragedy must never be repeated; let my death and the suffering that awaits me beyond be my penance... as well as an example to the people that I realize, too late, I loved so dearly."

The Ghost faded from view, disappearing into a wispy cloud that permeated the air around it, until nothing was left. A small clatter on the ground beneath the area it was floating brought Lucciana's attention to a small object on the ground, which wasn't there a second ago.

A small twig, of a bonsai tree of all things, lay alone on the stone floor. She solemnly knelt down and picked up the small piece of the tiny tree. *So, too, was the Kingdom of Gorn reduced to a small piece of its former glory, a shadow of what it once was,* she thought.

Outside, Jan-Ette had already sent home the bulk of her forces, keeping only a small team for safety above, and with Ha-Li and herself on the ground until the wounded girl stabilized.

From the depths of the castle, she saw the strange sight of a procession of Gorn, and the Samurai, following the leader of the Loyalist forces, who was holding a regal robe and crown in his arms. She stormed forward towards Lucciana nonetheless, determined to kill the one who hurt her friend.

The Samurai saw her, knowing that her Helazoid ally had found the wound, and held her hands out peacefully as they approached one another. Jan-Ette, surprised, allowed her to come forward.

She leaned in close to the Helazoid, and told a story that made Jan-Ette's eyebrows knit in disbelief and confusion. Once she saw the pained and hollow eyes of the Elf, however, she knew she had to be telling the truth.

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The battle... just stopped.

The few Gorn remaining after the tremendous war laid down their weapons as they took in the sight of the procession heading their way: it was Lord Galiere, Shss saw, and he was carrying something.

What once was thousands, even tens of thousands of Gorn teeming in the castle and battling with such viciousness, was down to a scant few hundred. Bodies were everywhere on the grassy field, among the trees, and the entire forest reeked of the coppery smell of blood, and the fetid smell of entrails and corpses.

Worse still, the vultures who had been circling just moments ago were picking the battlefield clean of evidence of the horrendous battle. Ironically enough, they now outnumbered the entire population of Gorn.

The procession stopped in the middle of the forest, right between the two most massive battles sites between the Loyalists and the Insurrectionists. Gorn spread out and away from Galiere, tending the wounds of injured soldiers as best they could before the vultures got to them. By and large, they were losing the struggle.

Hiromi sat up with a groan, and Shss picked her up and set her on her back. "What happened...?" the Priest asked with a complete lack of energy. She slowly gazed out onto the slaughterfields, and to the groups of birds feasting on the rotting corpses.

She sobbed, and tears rolled down onto Shss' hides and back. "No..." she choked, and began to wail. Shss set her down, turned to her and squeezed her tight, but nothing was stopping her lamentations for the thousands who had died.

Someone soon approached... it was Lucciana, whose face was as somber and full of sorrow as Shss had ever seen. "The king is dead," she whispered. "We couldn't save him..." Slowly, she looked down at the choking, sobbing Priest, and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Hi..." she started.

Hiromi slapped her hand away, and buried her face in Shss' chest, crying even louder. "They're... I couldn't help them! Oh, God, why did you allow this...? Why wasn't I strong enough?!" she sobbed.

"Hi, you have to see something," Lucciana continued, wobbling slightly, but Hiromi continued to cry and didn't look up. She sighed, and gently peeled the Priest away from Shss, pointing out to the group of Gorn.

Hiromi pushed her away again. "Get away from me!" she screamed, and started to run by herself out onto the road. Lucciana was behind her in a second, wheeling her around forcefully. "For Gods' sake, *look!*" she yelled in Hiromi's face, and pointed again at the group of Gorn.

She begrudgingly did so, and was shocked... shocked to see former enemies grasping one another's hands, embracing one another in sorrow, kneeling over a pile of clothes and a crown, probably of the king, and tending to the wounds of other Gorn, no matter how they were dressed or who they fought for.

"You say that war is an awful thing, and is never the answer," Lucciana said. Hiromi stood stunned at the sight of the two groups of Gorn, once enemies, together in one place... in peace. "And you are right that it is awful. But if you look only at the dead bodies, only at the ones you couldn't save... you're not seeing the answer it has provided.

"Look there, now," Lucciana continued, pointing at the survivors of the bloody war. "Gorn brothers, former enemies, who have finally come together after this bloody war. The king is dead and thousands died, but *this* is the result: a true union of warring tribes that has not happened in the entire history of the Gorn. This war was a tragedy... a necessary tragedy.

"Unless you take *every* part of this war into account, you will never understand the whole picture," she stated. "Look at the bodies, and let them remind you that this war had a bloody toll. Then, look at this procession, and understand the outcome of the conflict. Everything together makes a part of the bigger picture. Here... this horrendous, awful war that took the lives of thousands and brought a kingdom to near ruin... had a miraculous result."

Hiromi felt torn... between the knowledge that this war was a needless, murderous slaughter... and the

current sight of peace among the many bodies. *War can't be right,* she thought. *The toll is too grisly to have any positive effect. But...*

There the Gorn stood, among one another, with no blade raised in anger. They wept together, spoke and assisted one another... in complete contrast to what was happening when the three first arrived. It was all so... disgusting, confusing, wonderous... she couldn't pin down what it was, exactly.

Hiromi wrapped her arms around Lucciana and Shss' waists and hugged tight, needing nothing more right now than to have everything sorted out for her. So many people, so many died today...

They held her shoulders with comforting hands, then exchanged a look. They both felt the exact same way at that moment: they had had enough death for one day.

Shattered

The last of the Helazoid rocketeers zoomed off into the sky and disappeared with powerful engine roars and streaks of fire trailing behind.

Lucciana's head-sized, white gourd of firewater swung from her waist and struck her leg with every step. The feeling was a comfort and a reminder that the Presence, the voices and the memories had no hold upon her for as long as the drink was there for her.

She didn't even need to ask for it. Lord Galiere, standing next to a group of Gorn who were bitter enemies just minutes ago, simply handed it to her when she tried to offer her condolences. His puffy red eyes echoed his thoughts of sorrow for his lost kingdom, but there was something else there: a resolve, a strength, hope for the future... and a gracious look to a friend who had done all she could to help.

No words were exchanged. She merely accepted the gift with a nod of thanks, took one sorrowful last look over the battlefield, and carefully walked back over the blood-soaked grassy field covered in the bones of Gorn.

On the outskirts of the battlefield, a warrior's body lay face up, unmoving, his face knotted in a twisted look of sheer pain. His gloved hand was frozen in place, clutched to his stomach, trying vainly to hold his entrails in from where his belly had been slit open.

As if to mock her, a single Vampire Vulture descended from the sky and began to pick at the warrior's dead flesh. Its ruffled black feathers preened with delight, and its blood red eyes stared at its meal with a mixture of frenzied hunger and delirious happiness. At the sight, Lucciana gripped her katana's handle so tightly that it felt like her hand was going to bleed. She ground her teeth in anger, and the whole world slipped away until only the view of prey and meal was in her sight.

The vulture tore off a piece of the Gorn's cheek with its sharp beak, and with the ragged green flesh still in its mouth, cawed in warning at the approaching Elf. She snapped.

Lucciana let her hand drop from her blade and raised it to meet her other, holding both palms out in claws at the feasting carrion bird. "Burn, you miserable bastard!" she yelled. *"Burn!"*

A glowing hot, bright red Fireball blasted from her hands and straight into the vulture. As it shrieked in pain and flapped towards the Samurai to defend itself, its dry, feathery body burst into flame. The vulture's flight lost its steam halfway towards her and Lucciana jumped to the side, unsheathing her katana and driving it firmly through its torso and into the ground.

The vulture jerked wildly against the painful pin until she lodged her knee into its cold and undead back, and clamped her hand over its beak. The flames licked off of its body onto her robe, but did not catch or burn her. "How does it feel... to be at another's mercy for once?" she hissed, staring into its upside-down, vengeful eyes.

She felt its body twist and writhe beneath her as its engulfed body burned brightly, then began to smolder.

It took a minute or two, but slowly, it stopped struggling. Just before its eyes turned as glassy and cold as the Gorn it had just been feasting upon, Lucciana calmly, painfully broke its neck.

She breathed heavily, dropping the bird's lifeless head to the ground and pulling her sword out with a meaty sucking sound. She stood up unsteadily under the effects of the alcohol, and as the rush of battle wore off, she was left to consider the ramifications of what she had done.

No voice screamed, no feelings overwhelmed her; the firewater continued to do its numbing job well. She saw that some Gorn were staring at her, while others had come to protect the body of their fallen friend, maybe to bring him back at some point in the future.

And then she was back with the others. They continued down the dirt road between the looming trees, nobody speaking a word. Every now and again when the buzz began to wear off, Lucciana would unsling the gourd from her side, nip at the contents, then return it to swing freely at her side.

Shss and Hiromi unknowingly shared a common worry between them. Neither had killed a single Gorn, but the deaths of all of those people still felt like their own fault... the fault of three people who took part in a conflict they knew nothing about. The fault of this small band of do-gooder adventurers... this "party."

Hiromi and Shss walked together, Shss' hand on her friend's back in comfort. Lucciana, for her part, stayed a few steps to the side of the other two. She got the feeling that they blamed her for what had happened... but nothing, of course, could have been further from the truth.

Just before the road split leading west and east, Shss helped Hiromi up and over a hole in the road, one the Priest did not see while she was so lost in thought. The movement shook a few tears from her, which Hiromi quickly wiped away before Lucciana could see them, and she continued to turn the slaughter she had witnessed over and over in her mind.

As they approached the crossroads, Shss heard a familiar slithering sound coming from the west. She pushed Hiromi off of the road into some nearby bushes and tugged Lucciana over to her, clamping her hand over both of their mouths before they could make a sound.

While an unresisting Hiromi fell to the dirt like a rag doll, Lucciana narrowed her eyes in confusion at the Fighter. But then she heard it, too: hissing, clacking, and the sound of excreted brown goo. It was the T'Rang... and from the sound of it, a lot of them. They were bunched up to the west, and slithering down the road towards the group.

Shss motioned for Hiromi to sit still, though she made no move in confirmation and continued to stare with glassy eyes at her feet. She peeked around the dense green foliage at the coming band of five spidery creatures.

They were children, from the looks of it. While other T'Rang were sized from roughly the same height to even heads above any of the girls, these came up to about Shss' chest, if even that. They hissed and cackled among one another in their alien tongue, clearly not taking their duties too seriously. Shss certainly didn't want to hurt them, but if they were discovered...

The darkness in the bushes dimly lit up. Shss immediately looked for its source, and found it in the glowing yellow aura surrounding Lucciana's hands. She held out a hand to stop the Samurai from hurting the T'Rang Youngers, but before she could do anything, the light faded... the spell was complete.

There was a moment of silence as Shss' warning hand hung over Lucciana's wrist. She hoped the Youngers were all right, or at the very least, didn't notice the light and their hiding place. *Maybe Lucciana fizzled the...* she began to think.

"Hee hee hee!" a high-pitched voice tittered from off in the sky. "Wanna play?" another asked mischievously.

Two thin girls floated forward into the group of T'Rang, dancing and laughing as they took to the air. Their

heads were covered by hooded black robes that draped down their bodies, but as they spun and twirled in the air, Shss saw that it opened suggestively in the front to reveal their long, silky peach legs.

The T'Rang Youngers looked confused. Two of them assumed a defensive stance with their long Shock Rods poised to meet a potential attack, but the other three simply stood still in wonder, or wandered left and right in a panic, unsure of what to do.

Shss was captivated by the sight of the strange Faerie Witches. *Where did they come from?* she wondered. As she looked on in awe, the first one raised her arms out and wide, and a bright light flashed in the air, blinding some of the T'Rang. One of the defenders and two of the confused Youngers fled in fear, smashing themselves into nearby trees and one another, and slipping on their own brown goo. *It might be comical if it weren't so sad,* Shss thought to herself.

As the first Witch giggled and disappeared in a bright flash of yellow light, the second flipped delicately in the sky, and the air around her hooded head glowing brightly. She smiled eerily, just before four of the Youngers suddenly fell asleep and dropped on the spot. With an echoing, fading laugh of pure mirth, a yellow light took her as well, and she was gone.

Shss finally took her eyes off of the otherwordly scene, and realized her hand was still poised to stop Lucciana, hanging over her authoritatively. Before she drew it back, she caught the Elf's cold eyes staring into her own. Her blue orbs travelled down to Shss' hand, then back up to her face. Shss immediately pulled her hand back.

"So, I am a child killer now, am I?" Lucciana asked. She stood up from the bushes and took the crossroads to the right, away from the sleeping T'Rang. Shss got the message clear enough.

She gently nudged Hiromi, letting her know that it was time to go. Without a word, the Priest stood and followed after Lucciana, multiple thoughts weighing heavily on her mind. Unfortunately, Shss couldn't see where she had gone... she was lost somewhere in the trees. She feared waking the T'Rang, so she gathered Hiromi up on her back behind her Psi Rod and spear, and trotted down the road after Lucciana.

The forest grew darker down the path, though there were still several hours of daylight left. The trees themselves seemed to be looming in on her, staring at her, whispering a warning not to tread any farther.

A flap of cloth pierced the silence to Shss' left. She saw the hem of Lucciana's dirty white robe flutter next to a tree, then disappear as she walked out of sight and into the sinister forest. "Lucciana!" she shout-whispered. The seconds passed, and there was no response. If she had heard, she gave no indication of stopping.

Hiromi suddenly began to whimper on her back, and Shss shot a glance back to see her face contorted with extreme effort and strain. She shook her head painfully, and her face scrunched up even tighter. Shss gently let her to the ground, then picked her up in her arms, cradling her as she ran after Lucciana.

By now, she didn't care about stealth anymore. "Lucciana!!" she shouted again, but nothing aside from her own echo responded. She sprinted forward as fast as she could with Hiromi in her arms.

Her eyes began to play tricks on her... the branches of the shadowy trees seemed to reach for her as the desire to leave grew stronger. As she wound her way among them, they nipped and scratched at her arms and drew thin lines of blood.

A clearing of neatly cut grass surrounded by a half-circle of the biting trees made her sigh in relief. Lucciana was there, walking through an old brown archway covered in moss. It lead straight into a mysterious grove, where Shss could see rows of vegetables and fruits growing in the ground, as well as peaceful trees that stood serenely in contrast to the ones behind her. "Hey, stop!" she yelled.

Nonetheless, the Samurai walked into the grove, but Shss now saw that there was something in her hand: a twig, or a branch of some kind. She walked forward over the crisp grass amidst beautiful, multi-colored flowers to a stone tile in the middle of the ground.

Hiromi cried out in exhaustion and pain, and Shss laid her down on the ground, taking her hand and squeezing supportively. She looked up to see Lucciana laying the twig upon the stone tile... and what happened next relegated all sights of "Faerie Witches" to an unexpectedness level somewhere near "moss on a tree."

In mere seconds, the twig grew to the size of a branch, then a thick trunk, all the way up to a tree the size of her brother. Despite its brownish-green trunk and roots for legs, its orange face was almost Human. It gestured wildly around, pointing at Lucciana, then to the northeast. It was saying something, but Shss couldn't hear.

When it was finished, Lucciana simply nodded. Its job finished, the tree suddenly shrank to a smaller version of itself, then just a root, then finally winked out of existence.

Lucciana looked unsteady for a second, holding her head. After a brief moment of disorientation she shook her mind clear, looking around the grove as if seeing it for the first time. She spun around, and seeing Shss and Hiromi behind her, unsheathed her katana and lunged forward. She screamed something that Shss couldn't understand in the heat of the moment. Shss stood up and unslung her Psi Rod, ready to meet Lucciana's attack and protect Hiromi to the death.

The movement saved her. All suspicion to the Samurai's motives were gone in an instant as something pierced her shoulder, instead of her neck, from behind. Shss instinctively crouched down and grabbed behind her, grasping firmly the weapon in her back.

It wasn't metal, but wood and leaves... a branch!

As Shss painfully snapped it off, Lucciana jumped, spun and beheaded the orange-faced tree-man with a slice through its neck equivalent, following up with a series of red Fireballs behind her friends.

Shss looked around as she grabbed her Psi Rod and hoisted it up. The forest... it seemed as if the entire forest was coming alive to kill them. Trees slowly marched in from every direction, their grasping branch-arms seeking the flesh of those who had intruded upon their sacred grove. Several were on fire now, but it was doing little to slow their combined advance.

She charged forward and swept the Psi Rod at three of the tree-men at once, but the effects of the stun were dismal at best. The trees capitalized on her sudden defenselessness, and she watched as two of their branches grew before her eyes and jabbed into her chest and thigh. She snapped them both off and swung the Psi Rod around, using its blunt end as a weapon, instead.

Wooden limbs and sharp, pointed edges flew in every direction from the quick and powerful swipes of Lucciana's blade as she deflected and cut to pieces every branch that came at her. Now and then, the tree-men would leave an opening that allowed her to behead or slice in half the more careless among them, but by and large, they were gaining ground.

Shss felt her strength being sapped away by the unending scratches and pierces that came from the trees all around her. Nonetheless, the butt of her Psi Rod smashed to splinters the faces and trunks of tree after tree as she brought the rod down and around, again and again, into the skulls and bodies of the reaching creatures.

All of a sudden, Hiromi cried out sharply behind them. Shss and Lucciana both whipped around, seeing that the "peaceful" trees of the sacred grove had come to life as well, and were beating and slashing at their helpless friend. Immediately, they screamed in a combination of rage and fear, running with all of their might towards their fallen friend.

Lucciana was there in a second, thrusting into the body of one of the trees and out the side. The thin strip of wood that still connected its upper torso to its lower quickly collapsed under the weight of its head, and the tree-man broke into two unclean halves.

Her blade sliced around and up another tree's body, and it stopped flailing at the injured Priest. No matter

how much she tried, though, she couldn't stop the dozens more from coming and taking stabs at Hiromi.

At the same time that Lucciana ran to help the Priest, Shss was charging alongside her with all her might. But all at once, she seemed to instantly shrink... and the trees grew a hundred feet taller in the span of a few seconds. Shss looked around, panicked, as some of the trees started to scream at her with high-pitched shrieks of anger.

She wasn't fooled by the Terror spell, not this time. Gritting her teeth, she ran towards the first of the hundred foot trees, but stopped when the air was suddenly filled with a purple gas that she couldn't breathe. She fell to the ground, choking, as the Poison Gas invaded her lungs. The last thing she saw was Lucciana desparately fighting off the trees, while Hiromi shouted something with the last of her energy. It sounded like, "Stop fighting!"

No, there was another sound at the end. As the trees mercilessly beat and stabbed her unconscious, Shss figured out what Hiromi was saying: "Stop fighting 'It'...!"

***

Night bugs cried out rhythmically in the darkness. Off in the distance, a bizarre hoot of a strange animal reminded her again that this was not her home. Shss woke upon the once cool grass, now turned sweaty and hot by her sleeping body. Her eyes adjusted, and after a time, finally made out the image of the almost full moon gazing down at her. Even the stars eventually came into focus.

Hiromi was sitting over her, looking relieved, but at the same time, scared out of her mind. Shss sat up slowly... when she suddenly realized why she was here in the first place. She lept to her feet, noting quickly that her injuries were gone, and prepared to punch the first creature that...

She was astounded by the sight: all around her, the hacked and severed limbs of the tree-men lay strewn about in several tall heaps. Sometimes waist high, the piles of the dead were at once composed of splintered limbs, severed torsos and the surprised orange faces of the creatures that had made such short work of the three earlier.

"What...?" Shss started. She looked back at Hiromi, finding the Priest dragging her heavy Psi Rod from where she had dropped it back over to her feet. Shss relieved her smaller friend of the burden, and tied the weapon to her back again. "Who did it?" the Fighter asked, sweeping her hand across the piles.

"Lucciana..." Hiromi whispered in a quivering voice. She looked Shss in the eyes and pantomimed her words so Shss could understand better. "Just before... when those things were going to kill me, she won."

On her friend's confusion, Hiromi pointed at her head. "The Presence, the Thing," she said with an almost panicked tinge to her voice. Shss nodded emphatically that she understood. "Lucciana stopped fighting it after the Gorn War," she continued. "She let it win, and joined it."

Shss flashed back to the incident in the T'Rang house. *Could she really have become that... on purpose?* she wondered.

Hiromi squatted down and hugged herself. "Her eyes... I won't forget when they turned so deeply black," she said quietly, more to herself than her friend. "It was pure nothingness, like the darkest recesses of hell, like a moment after soul death..."

As her friend spoke, Shss slowly approached a smashed white object, whose pieces were strewn about near a pile of the tree-men' mangled branches and trunks. It was in too many pieces to identify, but the smell of Gorn firewater was enough to know exactly what it was.

When she turned, she saw that Hiromi looked like she was in shock. "And then... she killed them all... I couldn't even see her!" she exclaimed. "She was a blur, and that awful sound of metal cutting through wood, it just kept coming, faster than I could take it... the trees were screaming...!"

Shss immediately started back for her friend. "When the sounds stopped... she was gone," Hiromi continued. "And all that was left was..."

She trailed off, and the gravity of the situation finally pressed itself in its entirety on her mind. All at once, Hiromi knelt and clasped her hands together. "God, please heal Lucciana!" she implored. "Please, I have begged of you every night since this journey began to help her, but now is the most important time of all! Heal her, and bring her back to us, please! Please!!"

Seeing her friend's movements, Shss expected the laws of nature to change, beings to materialize out of thin air, wounds to be inflicted, *something* from this obvious spell... but nothing happened. Aside from the night bugs, there was not even a sound.

Hiromi started to cry once more, knowing her prayers went unanswered... until she felt sudden warmth by her face. *Could it be...?* she thought. *You heard me after all, God. Thank...* she started, but she looked up to see only Shss, holding her hand out and down.

The Priets blinked. "Go, find Lucciana together," Shss said.

She felt suddenly betrayed. Once more, God had not answered her prayers, and had left His children to solve their own problems. Her nights of studying God's power and mornings of singing His praises, days spent preaching His greatness, all of it flashed before her, leading up to the one point when she asked God of a favor that could potentially impact several lives for the better.

And she received nothing. It was her the whole time... the magic, the caring for others, everything. Anger shot through her for a second, of all that wasted time spent serving the infinite representation of a fair weather friend. But she calmed immediately, knowing what she had to do now. *Well, fine then. If that's how He wants it...* she thought bitterly. *So be it.*

Hiromi nodded, courage filling her as she grasped Shss' hand. With a spine-tingling affirmation of the newfound sense of power within her, she happily took point for the first time since she had met her friends on Llylgamyn. It was just her and Shss now, but she wouldn't rest until Lucciana was found and safe. Shss had to sprint to catch up with the tiny Hobbit.

When they reached the edge of the grove forest, Hiromi stopped. Shss trotted up beside her, and realized the reason for the stall: which way were they supposed to go? Shss immediately thought of the T'Rang Youngers, incapacitated and helpless just a little to the south.

Before she could think any further on it, Hiromi's tug on Shss' clinging white shorts brought her attention around to the north, farther up the road. She felt guilty at her relief, seeing the giant yellow lizards' slashed bodies there. As long as death followed on a path opposite the T'Rang Youngers, it meant that they were safe, and that Lucciana had gone the other way. She nodded, and the two started down the road of grisly murder.

It seemed almost every few feet along the road, between trees and in grassy fields, they found more and more bodies of assorted animals caught in their last moments. A small flock of three black bird bodies were in sliced pieces, and along with a few scorch marks, rested against the bark of an old tree in the forest to her right.

Yellow bugs were pinned to the trees with their own mandibles and claws, green blood dripping down the bark of their impromptu headstones. Giant blue moths, their beautiful green wings and red antennae ripped off and tossed in a field of red flowers, lay pathetically in a grassy field, long dead.

As they moved on, the bodies started to thin and spread out, leaving crowds of living black crows, chittering yellow beetles, hovering moths, and even a few of the tree-men cowering and casting a frightened eye at the two girls now travelling down the path. Every time Hiromi or Shss met one of their looks, the animal would immediately retreat farther into the bushes, or conceal themselves even more behind a tree.

That was when the humanoid bodies first began to appear. They almost seemed like beasts at first, tiny creatures with brown fur lying in the distant grass. But once the road had broken off and gotten overgrown with weeds, Shss got her first good look at one of them.

They had two arms and legs, fingers and toes like she or Hiromi, but their faces were long, furry and rat-like, and they had tails. The dyed green, cotton and leather pants that Shss had mistaken for fur or coincidental marking, and the small daggers and swords lying near their bodies, both spoke of these creatures' intelligence.

Shss choked back a cry of overwhelming sorrow at the killing field she hadn't seen until now. Where the road trailed off and the forest began, hundreds upon hundreds of the rat people were strewn about in their death throes, lying in bloody grass, slumped against trees... the vast majority had been beheaded or cleaved in half by a blade, though a select few had been disemboweled. None of them, however, were moving.

"Oh, my..." Hiromi stammered with her hand over her mouth. The animals were bad enough, but now actual *people*? She scanned the deadly scene over until she found a pile of bodies that caught her eye. *No, she couldn't have...*

In the distance, a small group of eight or nine prone rat children, some up to Shss' knee and others barely up to her waist, lay silently under a tree. Hiromi walked towards them in shock, kneeling down next to them. She placed a sorrowful hand on one of their heads.

"EEE-CHAAA! HELP! SHE'S BACK!!" the rat child screamed, following up with the others' piercing cries as Hiromi jumped back in fear. They were alive!

The other rat children joined in the high-pitched screams for assistance while Hiromi tried to console them. "Please, calm down!" she implored. "It's ok, we're here to help!"

At that moment, Shss ran forward, chopping downwards at a throwing dagger bound for Hiromi's neck. Her Psi Rod struck the weapon with a *clink,* and it flew harmlessly into the ground.

"Don't touch 'em, murderers!!" a rough voice squeaked out. It was a rat-man dressed in formal black slacks, but the rest of his furry body was bare and covered in a variety of ornate tattoos. Along his chest, designs of blades of differing lengths and colors plunged through thorned roses, coiling their way around his body to his back.

"So you're the ones Don Barlone' sent me out to kill," the rat-man whispered. "Nice handiwork, I'll admit, but you're not gonna touch anyone under my protection. That includes the kids!" He flicked out another dagger and tossed it at Hiromi, who was still kneeling next to the squealing rat children.

Shss tried to deflect it, but missed by an inch. Luckily, the dagger deflected off a sudden Whirlwind blast that Hiromi shot between herself and the rat-man. "Wait!" she started. "You don't understand!"

At the same time, Shss charged towards him, and he met her with a sudden ebony blade from his side, clanging it against her Psi Rod. He pushed the Psi Rod into the ground with his Vorpal Blade, striking Shss across the jaw with his left paw.

The Fighter backed off in a feint of mock pain, and he lunged forward for the kill. She sprung her trap and spun, catching the rat-man in the neck with the orb of the Psi Rod, and activated the globe. An electric buzzing pierced the night air, until the rat-man shoved her Rod slightly away from his neck with a great deal of strength clearly still left in him.

Shss pushed the rod across and to the back if his neck, placing one of the Psi Rod's hooks against his throat, just as he brought his Vorpal Blade's edge along the artery in her own. Hiromi didn't dare make a sound now, though the children kept crying.

"You ain't gonna take 'em while I'm still alive, giants," the rat-man hissed. "I'll kill at least one of you before

you do. Kids..." he said to the frightened children. They kept crying, not hearing him. "Shut up, you brats!" the rat-man yelled. "Do not shame the Rattkin, or the Razuka, with your pathetic simpering!"

One of the children stopped crying long enough to look up at the voice's insistence. "Ratsputin!" he cried out in a voice almost too high to be natural. "It's Ratsputin! He's come to save us!" The other children stood and backed away from Hiromi, looking at the older Rattkin for guidance. A few were still crying.

"Get in the Ruins, now!" he barked, and the children suddenly hopped to life and scurried off deeper into the forest. Ratsputin nodded ever so slowly at Shss, and gently pulled his Vorpal Blade away from her throat. Shss followed suit with her Psi Rod.

He backed off. "I guess you could have killed those kids at any time, but you didn't," he said. "Maybe you aren't the ones who have slaughtered my people, but you are still not welcome within the Rattkin Ruins. Enter, and die."

Hiromi stood up and waved after him. "But we know the person doing this!" she exclaimed. "And she's... being controlled. Let us help you!"

Ratsputin sheathed his sword and ran after the children, calling back, "Your *friend* will meet the combined power of the Ronin and Razuka soon enough. We'll send her back to you in pieces!"

The tattoo of a masked Rattkin on his back, dressed in the elaborate white costume of an ancient spirit of death, stared back at her as Ratsputin retreated into the waning light of the forest. Brandishing a pair of daggers outside ornate robes covered in flowery and sunny symbols of life, and wielding a stare icier than a normal tattoo should convey, it served a potent warning against following.

No matter, though. Shss waited until he was gone, then beckoned for Hiromi to come. The Priest wasted no time hopping to her feet and joining Shss in chasing down the mysterious mouthpiece of the Rattkin Razuka.

Three Separate Journeys

The rain fell on the unmoving body of Rodan Lewarx. His once regal jacket was torn badly, and his clothes were caked with mud and grass.

Janus knelt down and tore the fabric from the Umpani's shoulder, revealing a black splotch of skin surrounding a fingernail-sized hole on his leathery grey skin. Blood and a small trickle of black liquid oozed from it... He quickly looked around for something to help. An herb, a place to rest, a doctor to take the fallen Tracker to...

At the same time, Tearn finished checking the other fallen Umpani. "Dead," he said callously. He wiped his paws in a puddle of muddy water to remove the blood of the dead soldiers, then started off in the general direction of the center of town.

"This one's still alive," Janus called after him.

Tearn turned and shrugged, his robe drenched and dripping. "So? He was a soldier," he said. "It's our... their fate."

Kiwi flew closer to him. "Then why did you save me back there?" she asked. "I'm a soldier, too."

With incredulous eyes, Tearn turned to face her. "You're no sold... it's..." he started, but when he saw her sad eyes, his heart melted. *That look,* he thought with a sigh. *I was saving this one for myself, but...* He pulled out and unstoppered a swirling purple potion from his robe. "Give this to him," he said. "Don't drop it... it's my last one."

With a slight smile of gratitude, Kiwi wrapped her arms around the flask's elongated neck. She tested the weight, then lifted it into the air. Tearn continued to hold his paw underneath it in case she dropped it, as

he suspected she would, but she managed to keep a good grip on it all the way over to the Umpani.

Janus opened the Tracker's mouth, and Kiwi brought the flask to the side of his face. She dipped down to the flask's base, then pushed up, tipping the end into Rodan's mouth. Janus freed a claw to help her, and they administered the fluid to him together.

Rodan lay still, and the potion started to dribble from his mouth. As Kiwi righted the flask, Janus took a closer look at him. His arms and legs, his throat... "His entire body is constricting. He won't be able to swallow it..." he surmised.

We have to wake him up... Kiwi thought to herself. Her head began to glow... and after she concentrated all of her mind on the fallen soldier, she opened up a link between her mind and his.

WAKE UP!! she screamed in his mind, forcing it to purge itself of its own self-induced coma. Rodan's eyes immediately shot open, but before he could spit out the Cure Poison fluid in his mouth, Kiwi clamped it shut. *You have to drink this, or you'll die,* she explained in a comforting manner.

His eyes shot around, trying to take in the scene around him. *Shritis! My men! What happened?!* he screamed into Kiwi's mind, but she simply slapped him on the lip. *Drink!* she commanded.

At her insistence, Rodan swallowed the bittersweet liquid. It streamed down his throat to his stomach, then something began to flow into and through his body.

The magic went to work quickly, following arteries and veins to his shoulder and spine, where Shritis' stingers had injected the venom. As it coursed through his system, a painful burning accompanied every area in his bloodstream where the magic neutralized the venom trying to shut down his internal organs.

It burned worst at the two puncture wounds, like a hot poker torching him from the inside. Rodan grit his teeth and cried a muffled cry of pain. As the minutes dragged on, the black spot on his shoulder minimized to the size of a large beetle, but did not shrink any more than that.

The magic was finished. Kiwi waved Tearn over desparately. "We need one more, quick!" she insisted. "The venom's still in his system!"

Tearn shrugged helplessly. "That was my last one, and I can't make another one so easily. I need time to conjure the ingredients," he explained. "And without knowing the plants here, I can't just feed him any herb I might think is beneficial. But..."

How uncharacteristically generous of you, a voice came in his mind as he took out the last of his healing potions. "This will restore his vitality for the time being, but it's a temporary fix," he said, just before he padded through the muddy grass and put the end to Rodan's mouth.

Kiwi could see that there was a small amount of the clear liquid missing from the potion. *The same potion he used to heal me after our first mission...* she thought.

Rodan quickly gulped the potion down, anything to stop the nauseating, burning feeling of the venom still in his body. The sweet water ran down his throat the same way the other had, releasing its inherent magic when it reached his stomach. He felt strength returning to him and his wounds closing, but the poison was too much for him to fight alone. Thinking only of what had happened to his comrades, the Umpani passed out again.

"We have to get him somewhere safe, quick," Janus urged, "before that poison kills him..." He looked around for a place to take him, but saw nothing other than lonely, abandoned houses surrounding the grassy field.

He nodded towards the Detache. "Kiwi, try and see what happened to the Umpani station," he suggested. "Find out if it went up in that explosion, and let me know. Tearn..." The Felpurr was looking in the other direction as Kiwi fluttered towards the Umpani station.

Janus shook his head. "You've done enough. I'll find a place to take him," he finished.

Kiwi only needed to fly up fifty feet before she saw the smoking wreckage of the Umpani Detache. The rain had put out most of the fire, but there was nothing left, aside from a blackened husk of mortar and stone.

Helpless, powerless fools... "Might as well see this through..." Tearn grumbled in resignation as Janus reached down to help Rodan up. The Dracon put an arm and a claw into the mud around the Tracker's uninjured shoulder, lifting him up. He winced slightly when he saw the puncture in Rodan's spine, then threw the wounded man's right arm over his shoulder as Tearn did the same with his other.

Their eyes met. *"Freak..."* Janus heard in his mind, the word echoing inside him with a single look into Tearn's relaxed green eyes... but he did not avert his gaze.

Tearn guessed what the thing was thinking about. *Perhaps it'll come to blows here,* he thought. His eyes dilated completely black with the anticipation of a fight, but the Dracon finally looked away, towards a distant, lonely house being battered by the rain. As his eyes returned to their normal color and he stared at the solemn thing, Tearn scoffed quietly. No morals, and now no courage... it was to be expected.

Kiwi descended from the sky. "It's trashed, completely," she explained, and Janus swore under his breath. "But... I did see something else, just north of here," she continued. "It was a big building, with a beautiful garden out front. We might be able to find help there..."

Janus signalled towards the area she indicated with a quick movement of his head. "Go quick, let them know we're coming," he said. "If they can't help, keep looking." Kiwi nodded and waved, then shot through the sky towards the building.

The multi-colored flowers were beautiful, standing strong against the fierce rainstorm. Even with the weather being what it was, several men in hooded red robes and simple brown rope belts around their waists were gently tending to the plants below her. They were pulling weeds and clipping hedges, despite the difficulty of the slippery mud and cold weather.

Two of them were standing with their backs to her, next to an archway leading into an open-aired gazebo. In the middle, surrounded by a small moat, was a grand statue of a beared, smiling old man in a white robe. The statue looked like it had been carved recently, and the figure almost seemed alive. As she looked the figure over, the two robed men turned simultaneously towards the sky to greet the descending Faerie.

"Hoyo, kind soul," the one on the left said. They were both older men, with slightly large noses and serious demeanors, though despite their lack of a smile, they exuded gentleness all the same. "I am Gong, simple Munk of Thesminster Abbey," he introduced himself. "What brings you here on this cold, wet night?"

Kiwi gestured wildly. "There was a fight, just south of here!" she exclaimed. "Everyone except me and three others were killed, but one of the others might die if you don't help him! Please, can you do something?"

The other Munk whispered to Gong and pointed at the church. Gong nodded, and his companion trotted inside, careful not to slip on the wet stone surrounding the statue and the moat. "We'll prepare ourselves for your friend," he said, much to Kiwi's relief. She calmed as her heart began to beat slower. "But if you or the others have any weapons, please leave them with me before you enter," he continued.

Kiwi held her arms out. "I don't have anything. I'm a Monk," she explained, then waved and flew quickly back to her friends. Gong scratched his head in confusion. She was awfully short... and blue-skinned... for a Munk.

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Gong gently carried the wet firearms out to the front of this church, Thesminster Abbey, to the storage area in the front. Rows of long wooden benches covered the simple temple, mostly occupied by a small army of sleeping Munk on and around them. Even the party's sudden intrusion and subsequent conversations did little to stir them. The only ones awake in the holy house were the three new arrivals, and Father Rulae.

Rodan was lying unconscious on a table usually used for discussions between Father Rulae and his esteemed brothers, now turned makeshift medical bed. His legs and most of his chest were wrapped up in heavy blankets, and his shoulder was completely exposed to the withered hands of Father Rulae.

When she saw the injury clearly under the candlelight, Kiwi's stomach knotted in worry. Not only did it seem blacker and more diseased than it did through the darkness and rain, but the spot had seemingly grown since Rodan drank Tearn's potion.

Father Rulae was a very old man. He wore the same hooded robe of the others, except it was blue. Though his demeanor was kind and humble, it was obvious from the looks and bows of respect he received from the others that he was the leader here. He ran his gentle hands along the injury on Rodan's shoulder. "What... did this?" he asked in a weak voice.

"T'Rang," Janus replied. "It's T'Rang poison. There's another wound on his spine."

Kiwi wished against wish that Hiromi was here... she would know what to do. She missed her friend, dearly, and it pained her to think of the Hobbit's smiling face, not knowing where she was or if they would ever see each other again. *She'd know what to do about Janus and Tearn, too,* she guessed. The Priest would know just what to tell them, everything they needed to know to fix everything in just seconds.

Rulae sighed softly. "One of the visitor races like you and your friend here, no doubt," he surmised. "I had hoped we could avoid bloodshed when you all arrived. In truth, Guardia has not been the place it was since you foreigners have come and disrupted our ways."

Kiwi blushed, but Tearn was not so humbled. "Can you help him?" he asked with his arms folded.

With a certain amount of hesitation, Rulae nodded. "I... believe I can," he answered.

The Felpurr saw where this was going, and scoffed. "After the donation?" he asked with a sneer.

"No, no donations are necessary," Rulae laughed, then let out a soft wheeze and cough. "We're not Dane!" Some of the Munk still awake in the church chuckled with the old man. "You can give what you will, or nothing if you cannot spare anything. I will certainly try to heal him... Phoonzang willing, we can try and purge the poison from his body, no matter what form it takes."

He closed his eyes, bowed his head and touched his fingertips together. "Lord Phoonzang, wise Munkharam, by the truth of the Sacred Stone and the blessing of the Holy Work, watch over this poor creature..." he intoned as he placed his hands on Rodan's body.

Several seconds passed as the old Munk held his hands there, with nothing but the sound of the rain on the rooftop to break the silence. There was no light, no magical being from the heavens descending to cast away the malicious poison. Tearn snorted a laugh at the ridiculous sight.

Time passed, until finally, slowly, Rulae's eyes opened. "It is done," he said. "He will need to rest for a few days, but he will... recover short... ly..." Suddenly, the old Munk lost his balance, but a red-robed brother emerged from the shadows and caught him.

As the man took Rulae out to another room, Gong returned from the storage area in the front. "We will take care of the rest regarding your friend. He will be safe with us," he promised. "While he rests, you should all wait here until the storm has passed. Follow me." He beckoned them out of the church, and the three followed.

The front door led to a beautiful grassy path that wound all the way around the Abbey, surrounded by high walls of stone on both sides. Though it was only visible to the Munks who made their residence here, it was still as beautifully kept as the garden in the front. The grass was cleanly cut, and obviously cared for very well.

Gong led the way to a small, dry room with a bed in the corner. He ushered them in, saying as he left, "I'll be back with blankets."

"Wait," Tearn said, and Gong turned around. "I need to speak with someone about an artifact I seek. When will the Father be available again?" he asked.

The Munk shook his head. "A healing session takes a lot out of the good Father, and he will not be up and about for a short while." He paused. "Is this about the Astral Dominae?" he asked directly.

Tearn nodded. "Where is it?" he asked, but Gong shook his head. "Many on Guardia have quested for its power, before you outsiders came," he answered. "And none have been successful. However, if anyone would be able to narrow it down for you, it would be Master Xheng, the Lord of the Five Flowers."

As Gong continued, Tearn's blood began to boil. *Yet more roundabout ignorance, from one clueless idiot to another...* he thought angrily.

"Xen Xheng runs a secret school in the divine city of Munkharama, east of New City, and he seeks out exceptional students of varying races and creeds from all over this planet," Gong continued. "It is said he has been just about everywhere on this world searching for the most enlightened among us."

Tearn couldn't supress a deep and audible growl. "Seek the Queen, seek Xorphitus, ally with the Umpani," he snarled. "This runaround is getting exceedingly irritating. I had no idea the Guardians were as ignorant and helpless as the people of Llylgamyn." He pushed the Munk aside as he strode out the door. "Get out of my way!" he barked.

"Where are you going?" Kiwi asked.

"I'm going to that Munk city," he shot back over his shoulder. "One way or another, someone is going to tell me where the globe is. Come with me, kid, or stay with the freak. I don't much care either way."

The word passed through Janus' mind once more. He tried to supress his fury at the callous dismissal, but in the end, a lifetime of anger and pain won out. He pounded the wall of the guest room, then rushed out of the room after the Felpurr. "Hey... Janus, wait! No!" Kiwi screamed.

Tearn heard the clumsy, angry Dracon's charge and the Faerie's protest, and knew what to expect. He felt fire burn in his stomach. "Stop, there is no fighting here!" Gong yelled, even as the Felpurr spun around and whipped a stream of fire across Janus' flak jacket.

Janus absorbed the painful flame that burned through his jacket, and continued to charge forward, anger in his eyes. His jaw opened, and spittle dripped from his razor sharp teeth. As the Dracon hissed a dangerous reptilian hiss, Tearn prepared another spell to kill this monster once and for all.

All of a sudden, he shot a stream of acid at the Felpurr's face. Tearn immediately stopped his Iceball spell, and used the same watery feeling in his chest to conjure an Ice Shield in its place. The transparent blue shield surrounded his head just as the acid struck.

The blue light held the hissing green liquid in midair just long enough for Tearn to duck sideways, and just before the shield gave way. With the spell no longer holding it, the acid fell to the stone floor and began to eat at it with a sharp hiss. The shield was meant to block only magic-based acid; the breath of a creature ate through it as it would any other weak material.

Kiwi flew out, and seeing her two former companions fighting, she suddenly felt very small and alone. She was paralyzed with fear, and didn't know what to do. If she said anything, she might lose them both...

Janus screamed a scream of reptilian rage, his voice echoing off of the walls of the Abbey, and his sharp black claws reached for his enemy. He ran forward with the intent of rending the arrogant Felpurr into pieces, with talons clutching and unclutching in anticipation. Tearn roared with the ferocity of a dozen lions, and ran back towards Janus. His brown robe billowed behind him as his claws extended, ready to tear the monster into bite-sized pieces.

They didn't even see him coming. There was just a sudden fist in both of their faces, and they both skidded to a halt, flailing at their new enemy. Gong grabbed Janus' claw before it struck him, and kicked Tearn in the stomach. As the Felpurr reeled, the Munk elbowed Janus in his chest with such a force that it felt as if he was wearing no armor at all.

As Janus exhaled sharply in pain, he grabbed the Munk's robed arm and flung his lean form behind him. Gong flipped sideways, but landed painfully on his head while Janus thrust his claw at the breathless Felpurr. In response, Tearn grabbed Janus' claw and held it still with his left paw, slicing his right out at the Dracon's face. Janus blocked, and the two titanic brawlers grasped claws and paws in a frightening display of strength.

Janus snarled, intent on murdering the condescending Felpurr. He pushed his claws down and forced Tearn almost to his knees, his muscles shaking with strain. His feline opponent growled, vowing never to lose to this beast when his family still cried to him for vengeance. He pushed back, digging his talons into the back of Janus' claws and drawing slightly acidic blood. "You will die, here and now, Dracon!" he snarled.

Shrinking back even farther, Kiwi tried her best to melt into the wall behind her. She closed her eyes tight as Gong jumped at the two again, kicking the back of Janus' knee. It buckled under the strength of the blow, allowing Gong to jump, spin in the air and drive his heel into the Felpurr's jaw. Tearn's head hit the Abbey wall and he spun around in a daze.

Other Munks who had heard the commotion surrounded Tearn out of nowhere as he attempted to finish the attack on Janus. When he saw the gathering crowd, the Felpurr knew things had gotten out of hand. He smashed a Stink Bomb potion into the ground, forced air into his padded feet and flew straight up and out of the open-aired Abbey.

Revolting beast...! he thought as he shot through the air, the rain stabbing him in his drenched and furry face and wetting his robes even further. *He devours that corpse, attacks me... I use a valuable potion to save that Faerie from those machines and one of their worthless friends... and now* I *am treated like the enemy?!*

Flying towards the eastern exit of the town, Tearn burned hotly as the rain chilled him to the core. *I don't care who the next person I meet is. Anybody who gets in my way next, anyone who delays the deaths of those wretched dogs, will tell me what I want to know... or they will die.*

If only that little girl wasn't there, I would slaughter them all...

Kiwi heard nothing but silence, and slowly peeked a frightened eye open. Gong had Janus pinned to the floor with his knee in his back, and the Dracon's arms held securely in his hands. Neither was going anywhere, and Tearn was gone.

"You must leave..." Gong started, but then, Janus pushed his body up from his chest, bucking the Munk off of his back. He let go of the Dracon in surprise, and Janus was suddenly to his feet, behind him, holding Gong's hands behind his back.

The... the monster... has me! the Munk thought to himself. *My lord Phoonzang, I come to see you soon...* He closed his eyes, waited for death... and Janus let him go. The Munk tripped and fell to the floor.

Behind him, Janus stood proudly. "Forgive me," he whispered. He crossed his arms in front of him peacefully. "If you would direct me to my weapons, I will be on my way."

Gong nervously, ashamedly, got to his feet and brushed off his red robe. He waved away the other Munk congregating there, and they took their dripping selves back outside to finish their gardening. He sighed slightly, and reflected on his misjudgement of the situation, and of the one before him.

"I understand from your friend's words the reason for your anger," Gong sympathized. Janus winced at the word "friend" as the Munk continued. "But we do not allow combat within these walls. Vow not to repeat your actions, and you may stay."

Janus looked out into the night sky. Even if the Felpurr were close, the rain would have obscured him. "He is gone. You don't need to worry anymore," he said. After a brief nod of apology to the Munk, he went back into the guest room.

Kiwi stayed outside, hugging her knees to her chest. She wasn't wanted in there with him, and she didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable by intruding. Seeing this, Gong looked confused. "You may stay, little one," he told her, but she simply shook her head and buried her face in her knees. Gong paused, then continued. "If... these accomodations bother you, then we could find you another place to sleep..." he offered.

She shook her head roughly. "No! It's not that... it's just..." she trailed off, but she knew she couldn't say anything without hurting Janus' feelings anymore than she had. Gong beckoned her to him, but she didn't move. "You can come speak with Father Rulae if you have any troubles," he said. "His counsel has supported many of us through the years."

He pointed behind him. "He is resting behind us in his room, but he should be glad to have the company. I still have weeds to pull..." With a final bow, he said, "Begging your leave," then ventured back into the rain.

In truth, the Faerie wanted to talk to someone, but she was too scared to talk to Janus... not because of what happened with the T'Rang, but because she might end up hurting him even more in trying to fix things.

Then again, as long as she let the tension between her and Janus fester, then she would be the one guilty of supporting his grief, she reasoned. After a few minutes of pondering, she flew to the room Gong had indicated.

Janus, alone in the guest room, heard the entire conversation. He lay on the bed, facing the wall, his heart thudding heavily in his chest after the battle with Tearn. *It wouldn't have been so bad if she had come in...* he thought, as exhaustion carried him away to sleep.

There was a very small, almost inaudible knock at Rulae's door. "Come in," he beckoned from the bed. The door opened, and the small, winged creature fluttered in. "Can I speak with you?" she asked.

"Of course, child," Rulae nodded, while a cold draft blew in. He tightened his blanket more tightly around himself, so Kiwi closed the door quickly.

The room was very spartan, she noticed. Just a bed, a flickering candle, and the old Munk whose features it lit up and darkened with every movement of the flame. She took a seat on his floor. "My friend and I... I said something horrible to him, and now we haven't spoken for a long time..." she said.

Rulae nodded, and Kiwi continued. "Plus, there's this Astral Dominae everyone's looking for, and this big war going on between our Umpani friends and the T'Rang, and our other companion hates everyone including me, and my best friend Hiromi is missing, and..." She shook her head and sank into the floor. "Everything is up in the air..." she whispered.

He could see the weight of a hundred problems weighing down on the little one's shoulders. But... "Well, there is no real reason to worry about this war," he said. "I suspect the globe is the reason there is so much fighting, and if you find it first, the battles will cease. The only problem, of course, is finding it! And of course, few on this planet know its location!"

He coughed weakly, then continued. "So if you do as Brother Gong says and find Master Xheng, then you will certainly learn its location," he said.

Kiwi reflected on the carnage the other two had almost caused. "You heard?" she asked shyly.

Rulae nodded. "Yes, and because I was listening, I understood," he said. "Now, I ask you, have you been listening to your friends?"

"They're not talking to me," Kiwi replied.

The Munk waved his hand at her, and shook his head. "No, no," he said, "have you been listening to everything? Their movements, their tones, everything that might tell you about how they feel, despite their words?"

She thought back. *What he had said to me?* she wondered. *I remember his scream after that mission...* She shivered at the memory of the torment evident in that roar. *"Let it go. It's no problem," he said. He wanted me to stop talking to him about it. Then, there was the Umpani Detache, and...*

The rain-soaked Umpani Detache door. A pause. A shoulder extended... he waited for her.

Right? He wanted me to come with him, didn't he? she thought hopefully. *Why else would he wait for me?*

And now, she was in here, sorting out their problems with a stranger. She nodded and shot to the door. "Thanks, I have to go..." she said, and slammed the door hard behind her. Kiwi winced as she looked back at the wooden portal... she had forgotten her own strength.

Inside, Rulae dropped his head on the soft mattress. *Guide them to the answer, and the path they alone must tread shall become clear.* The Holy Path had guided thousands before her, and thousands more would it assist in the coming millenia. He reminded himself to ask her if she would like to join the order tomorrow.

Kiwi quietly snuck into the guest room, then closed the door behind her. Janus was in the corner, on the bed and under the sheets with his eyes closed. She couldn't tell if he was sleeping or not, but she had to say it now. "I'm sorry, Janus..." she whispered, and lay down on the stone floor by herself. She closed her eyes, and was asleep before she knew it.

He opened an eye when he heard her breathing in that familiar, steady way that she always did when she slept. Silently, he removed the great blanket from around him and placed it on the floor, covering all of the Faerie except her peaceful face.

With that, he lay back down on the bed and faced the stone wall. *I know...* he thought, just before he drifted away into slumber.

***

BONG!

The bell shook Janus and Kiwi as they slept peacefully, and filled the entire room. He shot up with his claws out, ready to fight the intruder. She flew to a hover and held her arms out sleepily, but threateningly, as she looked around with sleepy, half-closed eyes. *Any burglar is gonna...* she thought.

BONG!

The morning bell sounded again. All over the Abbey, Munk were awakening to a new day of chores and service around New City. Janus opened the door, and an annoyingly bright stream of sunshine invaded the room. He grunted and took a look outside.

It was a clear day, not a cloud in the sky, though the garden was still muddy... a sign of the previous

night's rainstorm. Janus stretched and took a step outside. "You're up!" Rulae shouted from the other side of the church. The old man seemed surprisingly energetic and fit today.

He trotted up to Janus. "Did you have a good sleep? Where's your young friend?" he asked.

Janus indicated the room behind him with his head, and went to find Gong and his guns. "I'll be waiting outside, Kiwi," he said. She nodded in response, and hastily gathered up the giant blanket from the ground while Rulae sat down on the bed. *Must've fallen on the floor when that big dumb bell sounded,* she thought as she folded it.

"So, did you talk with your friend?" Rulae asked.

Kiwi kept folding as she answered. "Um... yes. Everything's fine now, thank you," she lied.

Rulae smiled. "I'm glad to hear it," he replied. "But, I wanted to ask you something."

She finished and sat down on the fluffy square, then looked up at him. "I believe a girl as kind as you would benefit from the ways of the Holy Path, the teachings of the Divine Munkharam," the old man said, gesturing his hands above and around his head. "Never have I met a person not of the Munk who I felt might take to our ways so readily, especially one not of this world!"

"But I *am* a Monk," Kiwi stated.

Rulae laughed. "Ah, yes, that would be cause for confusion," he replied with a light laugh. "Our race of people, we are called the 'Munk.' At the same time, we practice the art of the 'Monk.'"

He looked out towards the sky, as if viewing a distant memory. "Long ago, this city was populated by every race imagineable," he said. "We all lived by the law of the Sacred Stone, in a common direction for all of our collective destinies. However, as time went on, some began to have different views of the meaning of the Sacred Stone.

"Our people, led by the divine prophet Munkharam, held true to the genuine precepts set forth by the Stone. We called ourselves the 'Munk' after his example, and we all serve the Creator, the Builder and the Father, Phoonzang."

Kiwi nodded. "So what do you believe?" she asked.

"We know that the Sacred Stone asked us all to be responsible for ourselves, and to honor those who come before us for their wisdom and insight," he explained. "We are to remain loyal to our brothers, and serve and teach others when we are able. We honor Munkharam for his teachings, and father Phoonzang for his benevolence."

"And the others? The ones with a different idea about its meaning?" Kiwi asked.

Rulae made a sour face. "The ones opposed to the Holy Path are the Dane. The misguided Dane," he said in a voice tinged with annoyance. "If you see a tall, thin, robed man with skin of blue, I advise you not to speak with them."

Kiwi shrank back slightly, and Rulae backpedaled. "Ah, I am sorry," he said quickly. "This has nothing to do with the color of their skin, and everything to do with the greed and self-indulgence inherent in their beliefs.

"From their tower of sin, the Dane and their madman of a prophet, Torquesade, the Magna Dane, spread their lies in an attempt to corrupt and convert the poor children who heed their misguided message," Rulae said in a pitying voice.

"I advise you not to associate with their unsavory kind, and if you do speak with them, be very cautious. You would just as likely end your conversation unscrupulous and with a lighter purse than with any kind of

enlightenment."

The Dane sound like a terrible bunch of people, Kiwi thought. "I like your message better," she giggled.

Rulae nodded. "It is admirable to see such morality brimming within you, young one!" he exclaimed. "If you wish to learn more of our faith, seek out Brother TShober at Munkharama Bridge east of here. Go out of town, then take the crossroads to the east. You'll see him soon after.

"Tell him, 'Slay not he that cannot hear, be thankful ye that hath an ear,' the first of many lessons you will learn on the Holy Path. He will let you into the Holy City, where you can meet Master Xheng and walk the Path, and learn all you need to know about the globe and its location."

"Ok," Kiwi nodded, forgetting everything he just said already. *No need to cause trouble and tell him, though,* she thought with a smile. She thanked him and waved, flying out the door.

She passed by the statue of the old man then, and stopped to take a closer look. She read the inscription: "Father Phoonzang." *So this is him...?* she thought, and looked up into his eyes... his sparkling eyes, it almost seemed. The statue seemed so new and lifelike, even moreso than the previous night.

Phoonzang stood proudly poised with a sense of boundless strength and universal love, his long beard flowing down over his beautiful robe, his hands resting firmly at his sides. He looked like he was smiling at her. Kiwi gave the statue a funny look, then flew over the small pool of water surrounding the figure to meet Janus.

He was waiting out front, where the Munk were working in the garden. Kiwi flew up, and noticed that he looked more complete with his guns at his side again. "Where to?" he asked plainly.

"Munkharama," Kiwi answered. "Someone there should know where it is... Xen Xheng's his name." She paused slightly. "It's the same place, um, Tearn's going to..." she added.

"If he attacks again, I may have to kill him," he stated with a slight sigh. "Are you all right with that?" Kiwi floated silently for a time, not really wanting to give an answer... but she knew he wouldn't accept silence. At last, she nodded.

"Good," Janus said. "Let's go."

In truth, the feeling of tension was still there. Rulae was right that she had to listen to understand, just like Hiromi had told her months ago. The next step was up to her.

"...Janus?" she asked. He turned to face her with a neutral expression, and fear suddenly overwhelmed her while panic gripped her chest. She couldn't do this! *I'm sorry! You're my friend! I was stupid! I'll always protect you, from now on... say something, anything!* she screamed at herself.

She blushed, and looked at the muddy ground. "Um... n... nothing, sorry... I mean, um..." she stammered, thinking hard. "Just... Rodan. Are we going to take him with us?" The weight of fear lifted from her... and was replaced twofold by worry and shame.

He shook his head. "We should find the Astral Dominae as soon as possible," he answered. "The Munk will take care of him, right?" She nodded. "Good, then. We'll meet the Umpani later if we can," he added. "Until then, we still have a job to do." He began to walk west, away from their intended exit.

Kiwi looked up. "Oh, uh, sorry. Munkharama's to the east, is what Father Rulae said..." she said as she flew after him.

"I know," he replied. "I just saw something over here we need to visit..." He pointed at a simple building of yellow stone and mortar, with a single window peeking in. "Paluke's Armory, Mail & Fine Leathers," the sign said.

She fluttered to the window and looked in. A tall man with green skin, wearing a purple robe with orange trim, was busy sweeping up his old store with his back to them. Unbelievable amounts of junk were piled in the corners, from old books and parchment, to rusty and dented blades of many different origins, to cracked armor of a multitude of different materials. The man did his best to sweep everything up into particular piles, seemingly sorted by category. But in the end, the eventual goal of his work was a mystery to all but him.

Janus opened the door, and the man whirled around. He had tusks growing vertically out of his mouth, and his face reminded Kiwi of a pig. He must have thought similar thoughts of the "bug" outside his window by the face he made at her, but he was all smiles once Janus had walked in.

"Ort!" he greeted happily. "I am Paluke, Armorer of New City! This is your lucky day! I have a few remaining..." He stopped suddenly. "Wait... are you a buyer, or seller?"

Janus undid and dropped his flak jacket, then undid the straps of the flak vests beneath it and let them all fall to the floor. Kiwi flew in at that moment, amazed at the absolutely massive amount of muscles on the Dracon's body. She blushed as he recovered his jacket and put it back on. "Seller," he said simply.

Paluke rolled his eyes. "I should think so," he grumbled. "Why purchase anything of value from ol' Paluke when you can just dump your garbage off and walk out with his hard earned money?" He threw up his hands in exasperation. "What is it now? This armor have holes in it?" he asked. "Perhaps you have some rusty blades or ripped pieces of paper to add to my lovely collection, hmm?

"And now you let the bugs in. Shoo, shoo!" he said, flinging his hands at Kiwi. "Get out! There's nothing for you to eat here!"

Kiwi put her hands on her hips. "EXCUSE me!" she said angrily, much to Paluke's surprise.

Janus unslung the second of his two Muskets and placed it on the floor, leaving the other Musket and the Blunder Buss still in their holsters. "Just these," he said. "Two vests and a gun."

With a wary eye on Kiwi, Paluke knelt down by Janus' gear, then scoffed. "More IUF crap?" he complained. He gestured to the corner where several other Muskets and flak armor sat sad and forgotten. Sighing heavily, he counted out gold coins from his pocket, then placed them in a pouch. "5000 gold pieces, for the lot, if you promise to bring friends next time," he said. "Ones who aren't in the middle of spring cleaning."

He tossed the pouch at Janus, who caught it and tucked it into his ammo bag. The Dracon waved, and Kiwi stifled a laugh as she went out with him. *Perhaps the Helazoid might have better work for me...* Paluke thought in annoyance.

"Did you see the look on his face?" Kiwi laughed as they left the store. Janus smirked, and the two kept on towards the eastern exit of New City.

The city really was amazing in the daylight. Houses were scattered in every direction, surrounding the massive Abbey of the Munk in the center of town. Still, though it seemed beautiful enough, it felt very off. For one thing, besides the Munk, nobody was outside. Janus might have thought it a ghost town if he didn't see shades of movement within windows here and there.

He felt something pull his attention to the right, and saw machines like the ones they had destroyed the previous night hovering down an alleyway. They were cold and silent creatures, dressed in those long, metallic grey robes and holding their imposing blue-tipped Laser Spears. Janus certainly hoped that none of them knew what happened.

Beckoning Kiwi to his side, they weaved between two very close houses, past windows looking into shadowed, empty rooms, to a great archway leading out of the city, before the machines could see them. Luckily, none of them seemed to notice, or even want to follow the two.

"So busy, gotta make more..." a squeaky voice came from their left.

Janus turned to it with one claw on his Blunder Buss and the other in his ammo pouch. A strange and small grey-furred rat-man wearing green pants and a pair of odd glass lenses over each eye scurried past them with an armful of papers in paw.

"Blueprints, blueprints! 'Give me your blueprints!' That's all they ever ask for..." the old creature muttered. As he walked by, Kiwi noticed that the lenses made his eyes look comically big. She laughed against her better judgement.

The rat-man turned around. "Hmm? Yes? Something funny, little Faerie?" he spoke quickly. "No time for laughter with work to be done. Busy, busy... and before you ask, no, you can't have any blueprints for the town. They've all been taken, and even the ones that haven't been taken have been snatched from me! Copies of copies of copies... ooh... now I have to remake that map from memory. Was Dungore's inn over here... or over there?" He looked around, puzzled.

Then, he seemed to get more agitated. "Ah! Now you've made me waste all this time!" he complained as he rushed off down the alley. "Lazy children, running around all times of the day in any manner they wish! So much work to be done!"

Janus watched the rat-man on his muttering way out, shrugged, and ventured down the path leading out of town. He loaded his Blunder Buss and Musket as they walked between the narrow pair of walls down the stone path, and pulled back metal tabs on both of the guns, causing a clicking sound to emanate from each.

"One second," he said as they emerged onto a road leading out in the middle of an impressively large forest. He held both guns at his sides, aimed at the grass beneath and away from him, and fired.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

He nodded, and raised the Blunder Buss into the air while he kept the Musket at his side. "They still work, even after getting wet," he said. He cast a relieved look at the three large holes in the grass, then his face went serious again. He nodded down the road, beckoning Kiwi to follow him.

Kiwi smiled, and suddenly felt more like her old self, living life happily surrounded by friends. The feeling thankfully lasted, at least for a brief while.

Ash

It was a surprisingly short trip to Munkharama. Tearn was drenched from the pounding rainstorm, but thankfully, his on-and-off Levitate spell had enough power to get him up and over the churning, fish-infested waters of the river below him. Whatever those darting and biting red fish were, they certainly didn't look too friendly.

Before the spell cut out, dumped him out of the sky and broke his legs, he released it... and stepped ankle deep into a convenient mud puddle. He swore, and pulled his muddy foot and robe hem out of the disgusting pit.

But it didn't matter... he was here.

For a city dedicated to Munk, it was surprisingly barren. It made him wonder if this truly was the place where he would find Xen Xheng... and the location of the Astral Dominae.

He had little time to be surprised; the last thing he wanted was for the other two to catch up and complicate matters. The big one he could handle out in the open, especially with no Munk around to interfere, but the Faerie... she and the Dracon had a bond of some sort, he could see.

All the way to Munkharama, he had wondered what would have happened if he had killed him in the

church. Would she have attacked? Cried? Whatever her response, he didn't want to see it.

Tearn sighed. If only the freak weren't around, things would be so much easier.

The stone path was narrow and surrounded closely by walls, wide enough for people to walk comfortably ten abreast. It must have been a nightmare if a trade caravan ever came through.

After a hundred or so feet of twisting and winding in on itself, the path opened up into a grassy field, which felt delightful on Tearn's feet. The ground seemed high and level enough to have few mud puddles, but he kept his eyes open anyway.

Someone must have been maintaining the grass, because it looked even and well taken care of. It seemed that the Munk who lived in Munkharama were at least somewhat more sane than the ones who worked out in the rain in New City, which was good news if Xen indeed lived here.

The walls wound out to the left and right around the courtyard, around a building of modest construction. Drawing closer to the white walls, Tearn peeked into a window and saw a humble well, complete with a bucket at its side.

To his right was a simple wooden door. The town seemed empty enough, so he pushed it open and entered a small and bare room, save a few straw mats lined up in the corner. *The New City Munk were rather hospitable,* he thought. *Their neighbors shouldn't be much different.*

Just to be safe, though, he froze the doorknobs and locks of both of the doors on each side of the small room. If anyone came in while he was sleeping, they would make quite a racket trying to enter. When he was finished, he laid his muddy, soaked robe out in the corner of the room, stretched out on a small mat and went to sleep.

***

He was running, huffing and puffing with severe exhaustion, and trying to get back to his home. "A massive counter-attack..." was all his commanding officer had said before Tearn was dashing, jumping and flying his way back home to his family. His house was on the far edge of the Felpurr city, facing the opposite direction of the Rawulf town hundreds of miles away. But still...

When he reached the outskirts of the city, he suddenly couldn't breathe. But it wasn't from the long run... it was from seeing the many plumes of rising smoke.

Minutes later, he was home... and the Rawulf, the dog-men of the plains, were in his desert town among his people. He couldn't even hear the screams of terror and death until he saw who and what was causing them. Perhaps he was blocking out the sound in fear, he didn't know, but near the battling Felpurr civilians and the trained Rawulf soldiers clanging pitchforks and swords against one another, he saw it: his house was on fire.

"Tearn!!" *he heard his wife scream. She was running out of the blazing inferno that was their home to meet him, with their two children right behind.* "Daddy!" "Help us!" *they yelled in absolute terror.*

Almost immediately thereafter, he saw the Rawulf wolf rider approaching with blade in hand.

He cried out in fear, pointing and screaming at the approaching soldier. His wife saw, and started to pull her children into an alleyway near their house, but then she stopped. The wolf rider got closer, gripping his glowing hand around his blade and spurring his mount on even harder. It was a spell, and they were paralyzed.

Tearn ran ever harder, until he was finally in range to use his spells. With all of his concentration focused on the charging Rawulf, he launched his most powerful level of Hold Monsters spell on him and his mount. Sparks of energy crackled from his paws, but nothing else happened. The Rawulf drew closer.

He tried again, a much less powerful version of the same spell. Again, small sparks sizzled from his paws as the spell fizzled once more.

In a panic, and with the Rawulf almost on top of his family, Tearn used the same power level once more. Finally, a ring of white and blue energy finally streaked forward into the rider and his mount, seconds before they could reach his family. The Rawulf took the paralyzing spell directly, and laughed gruffly as he shook it off. The mount didn't even seem to notice it. It wasn't powerful enough...

Everything seemed to move in slow motion. All Tearn could do then was roar loudly with a feeling of his own powerlessness, as the Rawulf sliced his wife in half and beheaded his children with a single slice of his massive blade.

As their bodies fell to the ground in pieces, everything else disappeared... he could see only their corpses, sluggishly collapsing as if the world itself had been slowed. He stopped running, then walked slowly towards them in utter shock. It was like a dream... something this ridiculous could not be happening. It was stupid... ludicrous, like something out of a play.

The wolf rider came about, his sights set on Tearn. Then, all of a sudden, a single arrow from the town suddenly lodged itself in the soldier's eye. The Rawulf lost his balance and he and his wolf crashed into the ground, roaring in pain.

His wife was barely conscious and fading quickly, but she still had her paws on her children's bodies, protecting them until the end. She turned her head to look at them one last time, but Tearn was kneeling at her side, and holding her back from seeing what happened.

She fought him and turned anyway, and said nothing when she saw the carnage the Rawulf had wrought. The last thing she did before she died was look up at him with tear-filled eyes, which slowly went dead only seconds later.

The battle raged on around him until pieces of his company and others arrived to rout the Rawulf. Tearn stared at his family for what seemed like hours... until the battle was finally over, and friends from his outfit arrived to pull him away from the grisly scene.

He didn't even remember being pulled up at that point. The next thing he knew, he was standing over the quivering body of the Rawulf who had killed his family.

There was a sword in his paw. The soldier's eyes darted about, fearful of his impending death. Tearn, eyes cold, stomped his foot down on the Rawulf's neck. The mongrel couldn't move, and couldn't stop the emotionless Felpurr.

One of Tearn's company grabbed his right arm and tried to get his sword back before he did anything, but stumbled backwards as he was pushed to the ground. Before he could get up, Tearn plunged the sword into the Rawulf's belly, eliciting screams and gurgles of pain from his dying enemy.

The pain of his family's death was in the back of his mind at this point, as he twisted and turned the sword in the Rawulf's innards, slowly torturing him to death. Finally, his friend got up and stopped the grisly murder, pulling Tearn away.

The sword wouldn't come out without killing him, and it wouldn't stay in without the same result. In a final act of mercy, Tearn's friend cut off the Rawulf's head, and relieved him of his pain.

Despite his efforts in the past and the circumstances of the kill, he was relieved of duty as a soldier of the Felpurr army for his lack of honor. It was lucky he wasn't executed for the crime... but it didn't matter at that point. Throughout the investigation, the trial, the rebuilding of his town, Tearn shut down, and simply relived the torment that would become his nightmares for years to come.

On the weeks following his dismissal, he had not healed. He still dreamed of their screams, and every passing day, awoke ever more in a rage.

When he remembered the death of the Rawulf, however, his mind was temporarily at ease. Anger was his blanket, and revenge became his counseling.

From that day forward, Tearn wandered the land, learning and memorizing the most powerful of spells, and practicing day in and day out the skills that couldn't save his family then. And during those many years, he slaughtered countless Rawulf of all shapes and sizes. There was not a Felpurr or Rawulf alive that didn't know his name.

But it still wasn't enough... there would always be more a powerful rival, someone with greater skill than he. The only way to make all of the mongrels pay for what they had done was to find a power above and beyond anything ever known before.

And one day, he finally found it: the Cosmic Forge.

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The rain had stopped, he could hear. Through his tear stung eyes, he saw that both of the doors were still intact.

It was the dream again. As much as it cut him deeply every time he saw it, it still reminded him of his purpose: the Astral Dominae, kill the Rawulf. Tearn threw off his red blanket and stood up, prepared to explore the rest...

Blanket? He looked down with confusion. He had had no blanket.

Come to think of it, his robe seemed rather clean and fresh from something that had been outside for so long. He hurriedly rushed over to it, his tail swishing out of the back of his shorts clinging tightly to his body. He was relieved to see his potions still slung carefully inside the padded lining, but was reminded of just how short his supply was getting. He would have to conjure some ingredients and make new ones soon.

Placing the warm, clean robe around him, Tearn cast a suspicious glance at the ice covered doorknobs still on either side of him, then warmed and opened up the one opposite the door he first entered.

Through that door, and another one in the small closet beyond it, he entered an open-air hallway leading left to the well that he saw earlier, and right to an impressive structure surrounded by a beautiful moat. The more interesting choice was clear between the magnificent pillar of the town of Munkharama... and a well.

In keeping with true Guardian fashion, the town was clearly labelled by a sign on his way out of the hallway: "Holy City Munkharama." This was it.

In a massive, open-air courtyard surrounded by the shimmering white walls, a raised white ziggurat surrounded by water rose out from the middle. Beautifully tended grass and flowers grew all around the great structure, winding all the way around it for thousands of feet.

At its four corners were great pillars, though they seemed more for show than anything else. Stairs led up the structure from every side, up to a flowered gazebo with a figure standing proud in the middle. He couldn't see from this distance what it was.

In the middle of all this beauty, and for the first time in a while, Tearn's chest almost stopped clenching, his face almost relaxed, and he almost forgot why he was here on this planet in the first place.

Almost. There was still work to do.

He approached the great structure, taking in the sights around him as he wondered again where everyone was. It was eerie being in a place so well maintained and beautiful, with no locals, tourists, or any other sign of life.

He approached the moat surrounding the structure, taking a look into the waters and carefully splashing a paw in it to make sure there was no hidden trap. The water descended a few feet into the ground where it was stopped by white stone at the bottom. The liquid was so clear that it looked like there was nothing there, just an empty stone track running around the length of the structure.

When he was certain it was safe, he pushed air from his chest to his feet and hopped gracefully over the dozen feet wide water boundary. He climbed the stairs leading to the figure on the top, seeing that it was a statue of a robed and bearded man. He looked familiar... an exact duplicate of the one he caught a glimpse of at the church the day before.

As he drew near, the statue's eyes seemed to twinkle at him, and it looked much more welcoming that it did just a few steps ago. "Builder of the Temple," the rusted plate said at the bottom of the very fresh and gleaming statue. Other than this, the structure was empty, completely devoid of life and useful equipment.

Tearn took a look around from his new vantage point, and saw nothing really out of the ordinary... just a couple of non-descript buildings surrounding the courtyard. The moat extended all the way around the structure, as did the grass around it. It was a breathtaking sight of the whole courtyard at once.

Behind him, the moat widened and flowed into a pair of arches, into another big building and out of sight. There were also four gazebos at each of the four corners of the courtyard, surrounded by flowers and seemingly freshly painted.

Next to the arches, there was smoke coming out of a window on the wall. Tearn descended the steps and Levitate-hopped over the moat once more, and could barely make out the sound of clinking and hissing, sounds familiar to one who practiced Alchemy.

There was no door leading in, so Tearn used the last of his Levitate spell to walk lightly upon the moat water leading into the arches; it seemed to be travelling in the same direction as the origin of the sound.

The arches led into a flooded room with a great chest sitting upon a tethered raft in the middle. Tearn ignored it and found dry land, a small pathway, just as the spell cut out for good.

He followed the path around to a door leading east, next to a small, chilly wading pool labeled "Polar Munk Society." He snorted with slight amusement and pushed past the door into a final bare hallway.

The sound was coming off from his right. Tearn's head glowed blue-white beneath his hood as he closed his eyes, and cast a simple Wizard Eye spell. Through the spell, he could see that the door in front of him led to another courtyard, separate from the one with the ziggurat, where he could hear the sound of clinking bottles more clearly. He stopped the spell and walked lightly into the new garden.

A fairly large-sized house was in the middle of it, made of the same white stones as the rest of the city, and a quaint door led inside. Tearn heard a man humming softly inside.

He quietly padded across the soft grass to the front door, when it opened on him. A broad-smiled Munk wearing the same blue, hooded robe as the Father at the New City church smiled broadly and ushered him in. "Come in, come in!" he urged. "I've just prepared my special blend of mustard bat tea in preparation for your arrival."

"Where's the Lord of..." Tearn started, but the Munk withdrew before he could finish. He sighed and quickly followed.

The inside of the shop was covered with shelves, populated by all manner of jars and vials containing liquids of every color in the spectrum. Some fizzled and frothed, others looked crusty and old, and still others were open and on a table where the old Munk was mixing them. The air smelled sour-sweet, and made his eyes water. "Where's the Lord of Five Flowers?" Tearn repeated. "Are you him?"

"In due time, in due time!" the Munk said cheerily. "I am Brother Moser, teamaster of Munkharama! Please, try some of my special brew while I explain everything." He held out a cup of freshly mixed yellow

liquid to Tearn, who took it reluctantly.

It smelled really bad, and it looked like there was something still floating inside it. Within seconds, whatever it was had melted into the drink and become one with the liquid.

"Master Xheng said you were coming, and that you were to be directed to..." Moser started, when Tearn's cough interrupted him as he took a sip of the drink. It was tea... very spicy, very powerful tea. Not particularly bad tasting, but almost undrinkable for his unready throat.

Moser looked apologetic. "Oh, hmm. Must have put too much mustard in that one." He reached out and took the cup from Tearn, and offered him another cup of green tea. "Try this, I believe you'll enjoy it."

Tearn coughed and rubbed his throat. "I've had more than enough. Where's the Munk?" he demanded.

The Munk smiled and pushed the cup forward. "I insist, please try some," he offered, so Tearn simply shook his head and swiped the cup out of Moser's hands, then took a tiny sip of the sweet liquid. What happened next amazed him.

From even that tiny swallow, he could feel the energy of all six realms of magic flood into his body. Blazing fire, soothing water, free air, strong earth, inquisitive mind and holy divine filled him with just that tiny taste of the tea. He was refreshed... completely refreshed.

Moser nodded and grinned. "Moser's Mojo Tea, that is," he said. "Took me several years to come up with the perfect recipe for it. Would you like some more?" Tearn nodded, and sipped again. He was brimming with magical energy, all of his depleted inner stores filled within seconds. With enough of this, he could make more potions...

"Do you mind..." he said hesitantly, hating being indebted to others, "...if I take a few of your empty flasks? I'll find a way to pay for it later."

Moser waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, of course, Brother!" he said as he gathered up bottles and stoppers. "I always have several dozen to spare. You may take as many as you need, as long as I have enough left to continue my brewing."

He set the containers down in front of his guest and went back to his table. Tearn knelt down and conjured ingredients in a small area in front of him, from leaves and animal parts to minerals and other volatile chemicals that, when mixed, became potions of incredible power. The small shop lit up with every summon, and the clinking sound that brought the Felpurr to the shop filled the air once more as he worked.

"Now, you seek Xen Xheng, do you not?" Moser asked. Tearn looked up at him briefly, then returned to his conjuring. "Well, he is a difficult one to find. More often than not, he is the one who finds you! Master Xheng runs a secret school here for Guardia's most gifted children, and the way to that school is normally hidden."

Tearn might have felt annoyed, if he weren't busy. "However, the true path to Master Xheng is clear," Moser continued. "Walk the Land of Dreams, and if you can avoid the temptation of the pipes and patrons, then find a way past your own echoes, Master Xheng will not be long after."

He sighed slightly. "Recently, though, we have been having some... difficulty with the darker half of our faith, the Munk of the Dark Forest. I suggest you exercise caution when travelling by yourself."

"I saw no-one as I came in," Tearn remarked, finishing a clear Heal Wounds potion and stoppering it.

"Yes, well, we battle them day and night to keep our city free of their blasphemy," the Munk replied. "They infect the Underground Temple with their scheming ways, plotting the overthrow of their good bretheren and a place to safely practice their dark magics."

"No," Tearn interrupted. "I saw nobody. No Munk of any faction, nobody at all."

Moser smiled. "Nonetheless, we are around," he replied.

At last, the Felpurr's expertly skilled paws finished the last of the conjured ingredients and potions, and he stoppered a final Poison Gas concotion. After he downed the last of his tea, he began placing his newly created potions into the pockets in his robe.

"Where is the Land of Dreams?" he asked tiredly, knowing another pointless chase was about to begin.

Moser pointed at the wall, towards the west. "Across the courtyard, on the opposite side of my shop, you will find the Palace of the Gran Melange," he explained. "Through the Land of Dreams within, you will meet the Lord of Five Flowers, and perhaps, learn something new."

Tearn finished the last one. "Thanks, old man," he said to Moser as he waved slightly. "I'll be on my way then."

Before he could go, the Munk held out two more green potions to the departing Felpurr. "For the road," he said with a wink. Tearn nodded, and placed them with the rest of his potions, near the ones used for healing. With a slight bow, he was out the door and on his way back to the massive courtyard in the middle of the town.

When he was through the series of doors he hoped Moser was leading him to, and past some empty rooms with more guest cots in the corner, Tearn was standing in another small, grassy field. Ahead, one of the buildings he had earlier dismissed as a part of the ambience of the town spiralled up several hundred feet into the air.

He stopped when he saw the sinister-looking black-robed Munk with short brown hair, clutching something opposite him in front of the building. As Tearn drew closer and could see around the corner, he saw that the Munk was holding another old, white-haired Munk by his blue collar, and choking him painfully.

"Our Lord asked for more than this," he said calmly, throwing a bag of black mush on the ground. His eyes grew suddenly cold, and his voice grew in volume. "How much of our tribute have you smoked away, old man?!" he screamed in his face.

The old Munk was turning the same shade of blue as his robe. *The blue one's back is to the Palace door, which means he probably belongs to it,* Tearn deduced. *If that's the case...*

Before the old man blanked out, Tearn conjured a swirling fire energy from his body. Rainbow-colored energy wrapped around his arms in two perfect corkscrews, joined together between his paws, and shot into the black-robed Munk's visible right eye.

He dropped the old man and cried out as darkness fell upon him; he was blind. The Prismic Missile always had a different effect, but none of them were anything short of devastating. With a spine-tingling sense of power, Tearn fired another Missile at the Munk, and he gasp-choked as his body quickly hardened into stone. The Palace of the Gran Melange now had a new lawn ornament.

Tearn calmly walked to the Munk's side, who seemed more interested in getting his bag of mush back than he was at his own brush with death. He flailed to the side, snatching and grabbing at it, until his fingers finally found the comfort they sought.

"It's not pretty..." he wheezed, "...when we run out." Tearn held his paw out and pulled the old man to his feet, but he lost his balance, and grabbed onto the Felpurr's robe for balance. The physical contact irritated him, but he kept his anger in check until the Munk could stand on his own two feet.

"Thank you for saving me," he said. "The Dark Forest Munk need all manner of materials to perform their dark magic in our holy temple..."

Tearn laughed inwardly. He didn't help the old man because he was the good one... he helped him because he was more closely linked with Xen and the Astral Dominae.

Really? a voice asked in his mind.

"Can you let me in?" he asked. "I'm in a bit of a rush."

The Munk laughed. "Well, I suppose I can forego the whole test needed to enter the Land of Dreams, considering you're not real and all." He doubled over in laughter. "A walking, talking cat!" he giggled. "What crazy images the Blackroot inspires!" Tearn shook his head in disgust, then opened the door into the Palace.

It was smokey inside, almost too thick to see. Munk lay about on velvet cushions, in differing levels of spaced out stupor, and gripped long pipes that spewed forth the source of the stinging, cough-inducing atmosphere.

One Munk, who was being pampered by two slim nymphs dressed in the red robes of Munk, chuckled to himself. He stared out into space as he spoke softly. "It's a dream, you know," he said. "Everything. You pierce the veil between levels of consciousness, and you'll understand, too."

He chuckled. "We look around, thinking this is it. This is the most important thing in the world! We kill Dane, we hate their beliefs... but we're all going to the same place in the end." The Munk lay back, and the nymphs cooed and giggled as they tussled his hair and robe.

Tearn, for some reason, was completely drawn into his dialogue... so much, that he didn't notice the subtle change in his own demeanor as the dizzying cloud of smoke took a hold of his mind. He started to feel flighty, airy...

"We all make up the tapestry of life!" the Munk said blissfully. "One missing thread, one lost story between us all, and it comes undone! Who among us can say he knows all? Who can say they have heard all the stories, and understand the rich weave we all have a part in creating?"

Tearn pulled himself away from the Munk and stumbled around without thinking, up and down who knew how many ladders, past small paths of grass and more hazy Munk than he cared to count. Was that...? No, it couldn't have been. "A Ghost," he laughed loudly to himself.

He lost feeling in his legs, and felt higher than the clouds. It was like there was a Levitate spell all around him, and he was just going with it. Ladders, paths, Munks, images whirled by.

Then everything changed... he could see Munk all around him. They were looking at him... they were all looking at him. Tense, judgemental of his every move. Tearn moved a digit on his paw slightly. *Damn... I hope they didn't see that...* he thought. *They might want to fight if I make the wrong... damn!! I moved it again! I'll kill them if I have to!*

His world, though drenched in sunlight, was dark, even completely black around the things he was looking at. Right now, he saw only one Munk lying on the ground, judging him, even as the old man's eyes were on the floor.

Tearn forced his vision outwards, and suddenly saw the numerous, judgemental Munk all at once, the whole room in that instant. Then, within seconds, the entire world seemed to drop away, save the one Munk he was focusing on.

It was hard to concentrate on anything else than what he was doing, and was getting harder by the second. He could feel the energy of the six realms of magic swirling within him, fire specifically. At that thought, a burst of flame suddenly blasted out of his paw without his consent, and Tearn immediately tried to think of something else.

Munk, Munk... the globe, my family, ziggurat, moat, water, ice... he thought, when a shard of ice shot up

and lodged itself in the ceiling as the image came to his mind. He was losing control... losing his ability to use his own power. *But without it, I'm nothing!!* he screamed in his mind.

Tearn panicked and widended his view of the room again, spotting a ladder in the corner. *Ladder, ladder, ladder, my goal, the ladder,* he kept repeating to himself as he ran for it.

He stumbled down the ladder into the shaft, and came to a dark hallway with black walls, one that led to an ebony door. The door occupied the entirety of his vision; he could see nothing else. Though it was absolutely foreboding and reeked of danger, it called to him, beckoned him through...

A single, big-nosed Munk sat in the corner with a pipe in his mouth. He wasn't looking at Tearn, but spoke to him nonetheless, in a soft, soothing voice. "Escape. Run away. Your troubles, they're insurmountable, yes?" he asked. "You must get away, leave them far behind."

Tearn wasn't really paying attention to what he was saying. Something about running away... but the sound of his voice, that alone, calmed him. It reminded him that he was still here, still alive.

"What are you running from, dear friend? Have you asked yourself? Do you run from your worries, your responsibilities, your past? Your enemies, your parents, your place of birth?

"Or is the one you are running from... just yourself?" Tearn's heartbeat slowed... and the Munk's voice filled his entire being. "Oh how unfortunate they are, those who seek escape only to be further trapped within their own fear. Will you be one of these, dear friend? Those many of us who seek escape from something around them?

"Or will you look within and find that which you fear? Face it, conquer it, and let it control you no more?"

The ebony door slowly opened of its own accord. Blackness and shadow enveloped the room, then the entirety of Tearn's mind. He was walking.

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He was awake, but there was nothing but darkness around him. Tearn squeezed his paw, and felt relief knowing that it was solid enough. He wasn't dead... at least, he didn't think so.

A small spark of fire appeared in front of his eyes. It twirled and danced, slowly at first, then in wide, graceful circles and twists in front of his eyes. The fire became energy, and the energy grew and took form: it was him. His own face looked back at him, emotionless, a blank slate.

Three more fires burned beneath it, and they followed the same dance that the first had, turning to form what he suspected they would: the faces of his wife, son and daughter smiled at him and giggled happily. All at once, they drew closer, then suddenly retreated as quickly as they came... and the blackness turned to their scenes of life.

She was in his arms, his beloved. The tiny bump in her stomach was proof that their lives would be beautiful from here on out.

His daughter was upon his back, screaming as he ran too fast down the road of the small village... laughing... truly happy. His son lit a small fire underneath the pot bearing that night's dinner, as Tearn beamed with pride. He had never used magic for anything other than troublemaking before then.

Fire enveloped them. *Tearn!! DADDY!* the voices screamed, over and over, as he watched their bodies smolder grey and black and break into a million pieces, scattering into the darkness. But Tearn was an observer at that point... he could feel nothing, judge nothing, save what the memories themselves represented. He simply saw, and learned.

The Rawulf begged for his life, bleeding from the gullet. The shaggy, grey-furred dog-man was wearing a blue uniform bearing the sigil of the Rawulf Military Corps. As Tearn ripped out his throat, he felt a surge

of power rush through him. His spine tingled, and he roared in ecstasy at the sheer ease of the kill. This was his vengeance. This was his... cornerstone?

Tearn saw himself, laughing, burning from the inside... and as his laughter grew louder, the flames grew brighter. Amidst a madman's cackles, only his guffawing, dripping skull was left as his fur and skin melted, brain charred to a crisp and blazing ever brightly. Grey and black ash swept across the scene. The Rawulf's death gave him delicious pleasure... and his family was still gone.

The ash disappeared, and Tearn was in darkness again. The memories churned in his mind, of those he had loved and lost, those he had slaughtered, spared, saved. He stood in the darkness, watching, waiting.

A small light soon flickered in the distance, drawing nearer and bigger with every second. Unlike the others, it remained a small ball of energy for the entire time it spoke in his mind. Images flooded him, each representing a word, an idea, a feeling... but it was as perfect a communication as if they were spoken aloud.

The one, one of three, shortly six, shortly four, it said, as the images of the Dracon, the Faerie and the others on Llylgamyn floated into his mind. *You have been given a gift: the gift of your own memories. Those you have locked away, those at the forefront, all of the experiences that make up who you are today.*

You understand now, the path that you have chosen, and the reasons for your decision. So, too, do you also understand what this path will lead to, and what you can do to change your own destiny.

Tearn nodded in the darkness. He knew exactly what he had to do. *Thank you,* he thought gratefully. *I didn't understand...*

The light moved slightly up and down, as if pleased. *And soon you will forget,* it said, without a trace of exasperation or anger... it felt more like acceptance of an undisputable fact of nature. *It is in the nature of fledgling consciousness to do so, to return time and again until the lesson has been learned. But do not fear, dear one. Though your experience here will be forgotten, the lessons... the feelings, will linger, tickling the back of your mind when you need them.*

Tearn understood. He had done this countless times before. *You return to the denseness, but know that you always have a place here,* it said. *And know that I will always love you.*

The light faded slowly, and Tearn began to fall.

***

Thump...

He was on the grass, outside, and the sun was shining on his face. Tearn opened his eyes. *What happened?* he thought. He saved that old Munk, then walked into the Palace, then there was smoke everywhere... no, wait, not smoke... ash?

Tearn shook his head and sat up. He was in a beautiful garden, surrounded by flowers and a path leading out through an archway, to a quaint house just past it.

Tending the garden were two small children, dressed in the red robes of the Munk, who didn't seem to notice him. One seemed Human like the Munk, but the other's skin was blue with slightly glowing yellow eyes.

Once the grass rustled as Tearn dizzily got to his feet, the blue-skinned one pointed at him, grabbed the other's sleeve, then they ran together into the small house behind them. Tearn shook his head, dispersing the cobwebs before he stumbled forward towards the little building. "Xen Xheng School of 5 Flowers," said a sign on the wall of the archway. *Finally...*

He slowly pulled open the door, and faced a multitude of children and teenagers, with some adults, staring at him with wide-eyed confusion and surprise. They were seated in two semi-circles on mats in a large, open dojo, facing the middle.

Their diversity was staggering. Small rat-men, more of the blue-skinned children, Humans, even a child with dark green scales that looked like the Dracon. As Tearn's gaze lingered on him, he shyly looked away towards the floor.

CLAP, CLAP! two handclaps came, and the students scattered around into every errant shadow and corner of the room, hiding themselves so well that if Tearn hadn't seen a small flap of robe or heard tiny, childish laughter here and there, he might have thought the room was empty.

Tearn cocked his head in confusion, then blinked... and when he opened them, an old Munk was standing before him. He jumped back and snarled reflexively, then composed himself just as quickly. *There is no way anybody could be that fast...* he thought to himself. *It's probably just an effect of that Blackroot crap...*

The Munk's was kept covered underneath his hood, but his white beard was full and neatly trimmed. His blue eyes shone mercifully as he stared gently at Tearn. He was dressed in the blue robes of the higher ranked Munk, though his simple rope belt was adorned with five beautiful flowers of differing colors.

Timid purple, dangerous blue, courageous yellow, a red one that was dripping a slight amount of its crimson fluid onto his robe, and finally, a slightly oderous white...

"Slay not he that cannot hear," the Munk said with a smile.

Tearn could feel the eyes of dozens of students upon him, wondering what he would say next. Some of them were mouthing something he couldn't hear or understand. He was confused, though... at his new surroundings, the experience he just had, and the cryptic message, all pressing down on him at once. "The hell are you talking about?" he asked rudely. "Are you the Lord of Five Flowers? Where's the Astral Dominae?"

The Munk blinked in surprise. "Now, those are some very good questions," he said. "As to the second, I am he. The first and third, on the other hand, will be more difficult to answer in the span of a few breaths."

Before he could continue, Tearn cut him off with a raised paw. "Let me guess, old man," he said in exasperation. "Either you don't know where the globe is... or you do, but you have some fool's errand for me to take care of before you'll tell me anything I want to know. What is it now? Kill a Dragon? Bring back treasure? Spelunking? Gardening?

"You know what?" he continued with an exasperated shake of his head. "Since every one of you yokels is going to keep bartering cryptic garbage and half hints for my valuable power and limited time, I think I'll just go and turn this entire planet upside-down and find it myself. To hell with all of you."

When he was sure the newcomer was finished, Xen spoke with an amused chuckle. "You've seen much in your journeys, young one, and now you walk the Path without realizing it. I am, of course, Xen Xheng, Lord of the Five Flowers. These are my students," he said with a sweep of his hand towards the shadows. "We are all followers of the Holy Path, as described in the Holy Work, penned by the divine prophet Munkharam himself."

"Until the Dark Forest Munk stole it!" a kid yelled from the shadows.

"Yeah!" another yelled from Tearn's right. "The Dane probably made them do it, too. Stupid baldheads!"

There was a chorus of agreement from the shadows, though not as loud as it could have been, considering all the students Tearn had seen earlier. As Xen looked around his dojo, the Felpurr rolled his eyes. "So I find the Holy Work, and you'll grace me with the hint that leads to the man whose cousin saw a picture of the globe, old man?" he asked with a sarcastic smirk.

Xen looked back at him. "The globe of which you speak can be found upon the Isle of Crypts, a small island in the middle of the Sea of Sorrows south of here," he explained. "New City sits upon the ocean's shore, and the island can be found due south of there.

"To reach it, you need a boat which can be found in New City. It was constructed by a Munk sailor, Wikum, many moons ago... and its power source, a sphere called 'Wikum's Powerglobe,' is in the Underground Temple that the Munk of the Dark Forest currently infest."

Tearn opened his mouth to chide the obvious attempt at recruiting help. *Find the Holy Work first,* then *I'll get what I want, right?* he thought.

Xen beat him to it. "And yes, the Holy Work is there, guarded by the Lord of the Dark Forest himself, but the globe that powers the boat is in a different room," he said. "Neither treasure is necessary for the acquisition of the other."

Tearn stared at him blankly. *This is a first,* he thought.

The old Munk laughed. "Well then, armed with this information, you may follow your own path to the treasure of Guardia, blessed by the Holy Path and the Land of Dreams itself!" the Munk said. "Not just anyone makes it through the Palace of the Gran Melange; you are to be commended for braving and completing the journey.

"Now don't let me keep you," he finished. "Your destiny awaits, young one!" And with that, Xen gently pushed Tearn out of the dojo and closed the door, just before the sound of someone clapping twice filled the air. After a second of stunned silence, Tearn rushed forward and yanked the door open.

The dojo was empty... and no errant feet or robe flaps, giggles or whispers accompanied the room this time; it was truly empty.

He scoffed. "How am I supposed to get into...?" he started, then felt something in his paw that he had neglected for the past minute. Clutched in it was a smooth, oval-shaped grey stone with the symbol of a blue moon upon it.

It hadn't been there a second ago. *How...?*

Incompatible

The Faerie kept a shy distance from the Dracon as the two wound their way through the forest, walking on the humble road leading out of New City. Just outside of the city, they came upon the dazed bodies of a few twitching bugs, kicking helplessly at the sky as they recovered from their recent beating. Someone or something had come through here recently.

The grass was still wet, making pockets of muddy water on both sides of the road, though the puddles invaded the main path in small pools here and there. Janus didn't seem to mind, and stepped wherever he pleased. With all the travelling he did in a lifetime, shoes just did not seem like a necessary thing to wear... as often as he walked, ran and jumped them to shreds.

Kiwi's stomach did flip-flops as she fluttered down the road next to him, but it wasn't a feeling of discomfort from flying, or even of imminent danger. It was more like a constant pressure, a reminder of how difficult things had become.

In all her life as a child of the Faerie Queen Saeren, she had never had such a wide array of unfinished problems weighing down on her mind as she did at this point in time. Her thoughts were a jumbled mess of questioning voices, each struggling to bring to her attention the problem they personally championed as the most important and vital to solve right now.

I wonder what happened to Tearn? Was I too mean to him? Will the T'Rang try to kill us after what happened in Tramontaine? How is Janus after what I said? Will we be ok by ourselves? What happened

to Rodan? Is Hiromi ok?

She was so consumed with her thoughts that she bumped into Janus' back as he stood silently at a crossroads. She flew back quickly in fear, afraid that he would be angry at her for causing him so much distress. Instead, he just asked, "What's wrong?"

Kiwi was too afraid to talk to him about the serious doubts she was having. After all, she had done enough to hurt him. "Um, I..." she stammered, "I was just thinking about the Umpani. With the Detache gone and Rodan almost dead, I don't know how we're supposed to get back to Ukpyr, or..." She trailed off, embarrassed.

Janus stiffened his lower jaw, thinking. "We'll find a way back," he assured her. "As it stands now, both our major orders and our own goal is to find the Astral Dominae, so as your commanding officer, I'm ordering you to follow me and find it before anybody else does."

The over the top, teasing speech helped her to relax, knowing that at least the problem of her and Janus had just sorted itself out... but she still wished with all her heart that Hiromi were here right now. More than anybody else, she knew how to make everything right, and exactly what to say when everybody needed it. *She was... still is, my best friend...*

Janus interrupted her thoughts. "You look tired," he commented. "Why don't you take a rest up here for a bit?" He stretched his broad shoulder out, and Kiwi took a seat with a broad grin. Maybe things weren't so bad right now.

He looked north, then east, his face hardening with absolute seriousness. Though he had heard snippets of something going on to the north ever since they left New City, he wasn't sure until now what it was. Clanging metal and distant screaming, multiplied by a factor of a thousand.

There was a massive battle being fought to the north, and he certainly did not want to be a part of it. He wondered offhand if Tearn were somehow responsible for it... but knowing that self-centered thug, he wouldn't be surprised.

Luckily, the Munk directed them east, towards Munkharama. Janus motioned there, down the road that continued a few dozen feet, then disappeared to the south amidst a thicket of trees. "Let's go that way," he said simply, not wanting to worry his little charge. Kiwi nodded emphatically, and they were off.

Focusing his attention away from the distant battleground, Janus listened intently to the sounds of nature around him. There was running water, the rustling of something small and furry in the bushes to the north, something fluttering around above...

He looked up and saw the giant green wings of four moths easily his size. Their heads and bodies were an unearthly bluish-purple, and their eyes and tongue red were darting about, testing the air around them for predator and prey alike. The air swished underneath the beat of their wings, and they simultaneously let out a haunting, echoing call above the forest and out into the wilderness.

Without realizing it, Janus sighed softly; it was an incredible sight. The moths cried out one more time, then continued their flight slowly, softly out of sight.

Then, another sound came to his ear. It was... he winced at the noise before he could identify it, but finally found the strength to listen again. Something was dying, painfully and slowly. The pleading call continued, a wailing, cresting and falling moan that belied whatever torturous experience the poor animal was undergoing. The sound moved him... he never before let an animal suffer for long, and he would not start now.

He trotted down the road between the trees, while animals and insects scurrying to get out of the way of the massive creature that might soon devour them. The sound of flowing water grew louder, as did the sound of the dying animal. As the two rounded a tree at a corner of the path, they caught their first glimpse of a wide river running north and south, cutting straight through the forest.

The road ended at the river and continued on the other side, and the only visible means of crossing was a wire strung between trees on either side... or by the more conventional means of wading. Darting, biting red shapes that broke the surface, teeth gleaming, nixed that idea immediately.

The dying creature was so loud now, even Kiwi could hear it. She flew off of Janus' shoulder and above the trees, and was surprised to see its source. As Janus followed the path around a group of trees, he, too, saw the source the awful sound.

A singing Munk, his robes covered in dirt and leaves, hummed and crooned and shouted in a voice neither Kiwi nor Janus could believe. Was it possible to be so off key? "Danesh plagued by rotwormsh, shmashed iiiin the gashket..." he warbled.

He was washing his hands in the river next to a bottle of clear liquid, and Kiwi watched in horror as a group of the biting fish swam with deadly purpose towards his exposed limbs. The Munk swayed and continued his song, "A good drink'n girlsh up abooooove..."

"Look out!" shouted Kiwi. The older Munk turned glazed, searching brown eyes towards her, as his big nose vibrating with a long, drawn out sniff. "Hi-ho, fair brothershhh..." he slurred, just as one of the fish clamped down on his hand, its teeth running straight through it.

Kiwi screamed in horror, flying down to aid the poor Munk as Janus aimed his Musket at the gnawing fish. But with the Munk so close...

"Hey, ya gotsh me today," the Munk laughed, as he squeezed the fish with his free hand. It opened its mouth reflexively, and he immediately backhanded it into the air. As it tumbled down, but before it could strike the ground, he spun around and kicked it, sending it flying back into the river. A few seconds later, it splashed into the water, and the Munk staggered backwards and fell on his bottom.

Kiwi fluttered to his side. "Are you ok?!" she asked worriedly.

He looked up, trying to pick which of the two fluttering, winged Faeries he should speak to. "Huh... even the bugsh're talkin' today," he muttered, and laughed. "Well doncha worry little moshquito, 'caush Brother Tshober knowsh a li'l trick'er two from 'ish daysh in the divine shhity."

Slowly but surely, the wound on his hand began to close. It was almost imperceptible to see, but without a doubt, it was knitting.

Janus calmed from the dual scare. "Who are you? What are you doing here?" he asked.

Tshober wobbled his vision over to the Dracon. "Well, the beashtsh're talkin', too?" he asked. "Maybe I shhould go a li'l easier on the reservesh next time..." Kiwi's stomach knotted at Tshober's comments, but if Janus cared a whit about what the Munk said, he didn't show it.

"Anywaysh!" he shouted. "Help me up'n I can go'n introdush myshelf properly..." At his insistence, Janus put a powerful arm under the Munk's shoulder while Kiwi tugged on his robe. "Thank ye bosh," Tshober said, brushing himself off. He staggered backwards, but Janus caught him.

"I'm Brother Tssshober... which I shink I shaid already," he hiccuped. "I guard the bridge ta Munkharama over the Eryn River, 'n I keep thosh filthy Danesh from shteppin' foot'n our fair shhity." Janus looked out on the river, noting the clear lack of a bridge.

He wondered just what the Munk had done to deserve the job of guarding something that didn't exist, but he didn't think on it further as he looked upon Tshober again: the Munk's head was making slow, revolving circles as his eyes focused on nothing in particular.

"Good," Janus said. "We need to get there and meet with Master Xheng."

The Munk shook his head violently, almost teetering to the ground if it weren't for Janus' assistance.

"Nope, can't letcha go'n caush any more trouble'n we already have, what with our blashphemoush, shelfish, evil'n corrup..." He caught himself. "Er, our mishguided'n unfortunate brothersh'a the Dark Foresht."

"But I'm walking the Holy Path," Kiwi explained.

Tshober laughed. "A moshquito'n a Dragon on the Holy Path?! Shoundsh more like a Dane trick, but doncha worry none. Yer not so bad fer one'a the blueshkinsh, sho I'll letcha both go." Janus let Tshober's arm go, and the Munk fell on his rump again.

"Listen..." Janus started.

"Slay... uh... let's see," Kiwi struggled to remember. "Slay hearing, to that and... no, that's not it..." At her words, Tshober's wobbling head followed her with clear interest.

Suddenly, she snapped her fingers. "Don't kill deaf people!" she exclaimed, but just as quickly, her grin slipped away. "...Or something like that?" she wondered aloud. She tilted her head slightly to the side in confusion, and placed her hand on her chin in thought.

"Brother!" Tshober slurred out, standing and embracing Kiwi in a mighty bear hug. "Moshquito'r not, if Father Rulae'sh taught ya the firsht leshon'a the Holy Path, yer more'n welcome to ush the trolly!" The Munk staggered over to the bushes and recovered a hidden handle attached to a wheel, and placed it on the cable spanning the river. He stumbled back over to Kiwi and Janus.

"The Dark Foresht Munksh... they have the Holy Work!" Tshober shouted. "From the belly'a the Temple, which'sh shtood shince the beginning'a time, they've worked ta plumb the shecretsh'a the Work, 'n ush itsh powersh to shpread their disheashed beliefsh on the resht'a Guardia!"

He gestured wildly around. "'n jusht between you'n me, methinksh they've been workin' with the Dane'n their hedonishtic lie of a 'religion' ta poishon thish world'n shlaughter every one'a the followersh'a the Holy Path!"

Janus and Kiwi exchanged a wary glance. At the same time, Tshober's eyes darted about, as if invisible eyes were watching him. "Shave the Holy Work'n you'll find Master Xheng! I'll be here'n make shure none'a the blueshkinsh follow you..." he promised, uncorking the bottle at the river bank and taking a swig.

When he started to sing again, it was incentive enough for Janus simply ignore the trolley, and merely jump across the river. "Moshquitosh'n Dragonsh I looooooove..." the Munk intoned, as Janus struggled desparately to block the noise out. Kiwi flew straight across the river and joined him on the other side.

Almost immediately after they began their trek, the shimmering white walls of the city of Munkharama rose out and above the trees. Much like New City, a small road surrounded on either side by high walls led them straight to the archway, and welcomed the two to the outskirts of the holy city of the Munk. Wet grass wound around a humble building on the northern edge of town. As Janus approached, he could see a well through a window in the white wall.

But his attention was soon fixed upon the door to its right: it was as normal a wooden portal as he or Kiwi had seen since their arrival on this planet, save for the block of ice that had managed to freeze not only the door's knob, but its locking mechanism, and a good portion of the door and wall next to it.

Janus didn't bother to suppress a dull rumble of anger in his throat. *He's here*, he thought, then spoke to Kiwi without looking at her. "Can you imagine the torturous reign that damn cat would have over this planet, and countless others, if he got his hands on the globe?" he wondered.

Kiwi shifted on his shoulder and inhaled slowly as if she wanted to say something, then seemed to think better of it and remained silent.

He backtracked around the corner, winding his way around the structure and to the other side. The silence of the city was unnerving. Janus wondered idly if the drunken, paranoid Tshober might have actually been telling the truth about a war between the Munk, and these "Dark Forest" and "Dane" types.

Luckily, the planners of the city of Munkharama enjoyed symmetry as much as Janus enjoyed his solitude, and an identical door and window waited for the party on the other side of the structure. This door, however, lacked the frozen lock that the other so frustratingly sported.

Janus squished over the muddy grass and turned the knob, sighing audibly in relief when it turned without incident. The room inside was bare, save for a few cots in the corner of the room, making him think of a guest room for visitors of the hospitable Munk.

Tep, tep, tep, tep...

Very faintly, Janus heard the sound of padded feet stepping on something solid, moving into the distance. He dug his claws into his own scales, and his body shook with anger. A few drops of acidic blood escaped the new wounds on his palms, falling to the floor with a hiss as they ate into the stone.

"Stay here," he ordered Kiwi with frightening solemnity, "and don't come outside until I tell you to."

She quickly fluttered away from his shoulder and hovered in midair. "What's happening?" she asked.

There are no Munk here to stop us this time, Janus thought. *We settle this now.* He opened the door across from him and entered the great courtyard of Munkharama, a field of grass surrounding a moat of crystal clear water, and a great white pyramid-like structure with two figures standing at the top.

Tearn raised the Moonstone to the statue's ever smiling, unblinking face once more. The two had to be connected; the Moonstone and the "O" of the "Builder of the Temple" plaque sported the exact same sign of the cross. And yet, every time he raised the stone to the statue, nothing happened.

The skin on the back of his neck suddenly prickled, and his fur stood on end. Somehow, he already knew who was standing there before he turned around and confirmed the sight for himself: the corpse eater, the Dracon, was standing at the base of the ziggurat with an Umpani firearm in each claw. He stood silently, perhaps waiting for Tearn to make the first move.

The Felpurr was happy to offer it. He kicked up a quick Levitate spell, and flying a few inches above the stone steps down towards the Dracon, charged a broiling hot Fireball spell in his paws. Without a sound, Janus raised the larger of the two guns and unleashed a thunderous blast at Tearn's chest. Tearn flew to the side and avoided the bullet, feeling a small explosion strike the stone steps behind him and kick up rock chips into the back of his brown robe.

Janus fired again, swearing as his opponent again telegraphed the move and rolled sideways through the air. The Musket's shot made another, smaller pockmark in the white ziggurat as Tearn grinned cruelly. *I have you now...* the Felpurr thought triumphantly.

Raising the Blunder Buss again, Janus fired off the last of his shots from the double-barreled firearm. Tearn's smirk immediately turned to a look of horror. *Three shots?!* he thought in a panic, and flew upwards to avoid the blast. As the metal ball ripped through his leg and he roared in pain, he launched the blazing Fireball at Janus.

His aim wasn't entirely off, but the spell that was meant to critically injure or kill the Janus exploded a few feet in front of him, scorching the Dracon with a blast of pure fire. The explosion lifted him off of his feet and smashed his body into the door far behind him, and as he struggled to stand again, he saw stars.

The sound of Janus' body smashing into the door of the guest room thundered, echoed, then died. Kiwi sat in the corner, her hands over her ears, shaking her head quietly. She dropped her hands and hugged herself as she heard him get up and start to run. *If I get involved or hurt them... they'll both hate me...* she thought miserably. *I'm so powerless, so worthless...* She hugged herself harder, and shuddered as she

sobbed.

The shock of the bullet ripping through his leg made Tearn lose control of his Levitate spell, and he plummeted, skidded and rolled to a stop several dozen feet away from the Dracon. He was standing next to a gazebo housing a golden urn, using one of its strong wooden supports to steady himself on his wounded leg. Across the grass, Tearn and Janus' ferocious eyes met, and a deadly second of inaction passed between them.

Then, Janus started to load his guns, furiously tapping powder and balls into both of his firearms. Tearn saw his chance and lunged forward, and aimed another Fireball for the explosive powder at the Dracon's side.

As Janus finished loading his guns, he saw the flaming ball heading straight for his ammo pack, and flung it as far out and away from himself as he could. With no time to escape, he took the Fireball directly in the chest. Tearn closed his paw and the Fireball exploded, and flame and smoke erupted from the blast.

For a second, the Felpurr thought it was over, and that he had won. Then, Janus' body emerged from the smoke, flying straight towards him. His flak jacket was torn and on fire, but he was still gripping his gun, staring angrily at the confused Mage.

Just before the Fireball had struck, Janus swung his body around the glowing flame. The resulting explosion burned his back with a flaring burst of unbelievable agony, but the force was enough to fling him straight at Tearn.

Time stood still as both barrels of the freak's gun flared and the bullets ripped through his furry body. *This can't be it... not when I'm so close!* Tearn thought angrily. The pain gathered like a massive tidal wave, threatening to overwhelm him. It rose and rose as his vision darkened, then crested, broke...

And then, it was gone. The Dracon flew past Tearn and landed on his feet next to the western wall of the courtyard, his jacket charred black from behind. Janus painfully stood up, while his burned body protested with every muscle he moved.

He turned around slowly and walked back towards the Felpurr to finish the job, when Tearn realized what happened. The fool's shot ruptured his healing potions and sent the liquid straight into his body, closing the wound as quickly as it had been made. He heard Janus walking up behind him and hunched over, feigning great pain.

But at the same time, his head glowed imperceptibly underneath his hood as he remotely watched the freak approach with a Wizard Eye spell. Seeing his position behind him, Tearn reached into his robe and wrapped his paw around a flask. The Dracon was almost upon him...

And then, he spun around and threw the bottle at Janus' jaw. It shattered and a green acid erupted onto the Dracon's face with a devouring hiss. Janus silently clutched his face, then just as quickly moved his claw aside to open his jaws, and breathe his own green acid into his hated foe's face. To Janus' dismay, Tearn managed to absorb the bulk of his breath on a conjured blue shield, but some of the acid caught him on the cheek.

Janus dropped his guns and lunged forward to throttle Tearn with his bare claws, roaring in fury. Tearn caught his claws with his own paws, at the same time as he conjured a cold feeling from his chest. A second later, the Dracon's claws were frozen solid in two large blocks of ice.

The Dracon let one of the ice blocks holding his arm drop to the ground, but raised and smashed the other into Tearn's face with unreal strength. The ice shattered on impact and sent Tearn spinning through the air. Janus watched him crumple to the ground, and smashed his other claw and the ice block into the gazebo's support, smashing both it and the ice into pieces. The gazebo's roof collapsed with a loud crash.

Tearn got unsteadily to his feet and faced Janus. He reached into his robe and removed a black vial, then unstoppered it and kept it shut with a single digit. His paw shook at the thought of actually using it.

The Death Bomb... an Alchemical cloud that, once it had a target, would attempt to snuff out its victim's life every second for an entire minute. Only the most powerful of creatures could withstand its effects, and until now, Tearn had never needed it.

At the same time, Janus recovered and pointed his Musket at Tearn's heart. At this distance, there would be no missing, no magical avoidance. Tearn's muscles tensed as he prepared to unleash the black vapors on the Dracon. Janus' clawed talon moved the trigger back ever so slowly.

A shot erupted. Black mist hissed and beckoned for a life to steal. And then, there was absolute silence.

Tearn breathed heavily, wondering why he couldn't feel the pain of the bullet ripping through his body.

Janus was equally confused. The vial was heading straight for him, and then it was suddenly gone. The two snarled and growled, and with a powerful roar, lunged at one another again.

Something struck Janus from underneath his jaw, hard and fast. His battle cry caught in mid-shout and as his head snapped back. The force smashed the side of his maw with unbelievable power, and he spun and struck the wall behind him, suddenly unable to move from the shock of the blow.

The blue blur then rocketed into Tearn's body with a spinning punch, flipping over and kicking him a few inches into the air. Before he fell to the ground again, it drove both of its palms into his back, and the Felpurr joined Janus in a daze against the wall of the holy city's courtyard.

When the world stopped spinning, the two turned pained heads to their tiny attacker, who was fluttering in midair, but visibly shaking. Kiwi looked between them, with tears still streaming down her blue cheeks. "This isn't right," she whispered. Janus and Tearn ignored her, and reached for one another again.

But in a flash, she was between them.

They stopped just before they crushed her between their powerful limbs. When Janus looked into her frightened green eyes, he immediately lost the will to fight. Likewise, when she looked over her tiny shoulder to Tearn as well, his eyes visibly calmed, and he sat up and against the wall. With a shake of his head, he removed one of his healing potions from his robe and began to sip at it. The fight was over.

Janus grunted and pulled his burned body up with great strain. Without a word, he collected his guns and limped heavily over to his abandoned ammunition pack.

Tearn followed his every move in case this was some sort of trick, until Kiwi flew before him. Her head glowed, and her voice came into his mind. *I don't believe for a second you would hurt someone without a reason,* she said in his mind as she bit her lower lip, *and I hoped that we could work together, no matter how much you try to push us away...* Her eyes were shining like two watery emeralds, overflowing with the emotion of her plea.

Telepathy, and affecting the thoughts and emotions of those around her, Tearn noted. While the former was a type of magic he had seen many times before, the latter was in no way connected with the arcane. It was a power only one other had ever held over him... another little girl.

He sighed in disapproval, but she was right. "All right, kid," he said to her, then turned to his former adversary. "Hey, Dracon," he almost spit the word out after Janus, but stopped himself from doing so. "We'll call a truce for now and settle this later. Just stay out of my way until then," he added.

Janus put the ammo pack back at his side. His eyes flamed even at the distance he stood apart from the other two. "Gladly," he called back.

Kiwi mentally thanked Tearn with a heart-melting smile, then flew over to Janus. "Some punch you have there," he commented, with his eyes still on Tearn. She rubbed the back of her head with a grin, but watched uncomfortably as Janus loaded his guns with his eyes still on the Felpurr. "What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Keeping one loaded and pointed at that bastard's head," Janus replied, his gaze unwavering. And with that, he crossed the courtyard with his charred body protesting every step, but refused to give Tearn the pleasure of seeing his pained face.

Tearn gulped down the rest of the healing potion and felt his wounds close with every fresh breath of air. He withdrew the Moonstone from his robe as the other two approached, and showed it to them. "This opens a path to the Underground Temple, where the Dark Forest Munk live," he explained. "It's connected to the statue at the top of the ziggurat, but nothing happens when the two come together.

"When we do find a way in, we need to find the Munk Holy Work," he continued. "It's just a religious text the Dark Forest idiots stole... simple get in and get out mission." Tearn deliberately kept the Powerglobe of Wikum's boat a secret. With any luck, the Dracon would get himself killed trying to find the Holy Work, and he could swoop in and clean up after.

"And the globe?" Janus asked.

Tearn's heart throbbed suddenly, thinking the Dracon had found him out, until he realized that he meant the Astral Dominae... not the boat's globe. He shrugged. "Guardia rubes don't know anything," he said simply.

"Then we can bargain the book for information later," Janus said, with a glance at the ziggurat. "I'll check the ziggurat first." Tearn scoffed inwardly. *Yeah, you do that,* he thought. *Not like I already checked it a dozen times.*

The three split up. Tearn took a closer look at the four gazebos housing the four urns at the corners of the courtyard. Intricate patterns covered the outsides of the urns and each was a different color, but there was nothing inside, under or around them that might suggest a key or a clue of any kind.

Kiwi flew high up, getting a larger view of the city as a whole. The ziggurat was featured prominently at the middle, with the statue of Phoonzang tall and proud at its peak. The city was build around it in sections, making the structure a combination of maximum defense and accessibility for the devout Munk.

It was Janus who found what they needed. At the four corners of the ziggurat, in each of the intercardinal points, were four deep pools of water. Each was tinted a different color: red, yellowish-orange, green and crystal clear. It was easy to see how someone without the eyes of a Ranger might have missed the prize at the bottom of each.

Four coins made of solid ruby, amber, emerald and diamond scattered mystic light at the bottom of each pool in all directions, changing the color of the water at the same time as it concealed their own locations. The dive into each of the pools was utterly relaxing. A tingle shot down Janus' spine as the crystal clear, shimmering waters soothed his burns and cleansed his wounds with every successive dip.

A minute later, a very wet Janus called down to Tearn. "Hey," he shouted. Tearn glanced up briefly at the soggy Dracon, intent on ignoring him, until the glimmer of the coins caught his eyes.

Kiwi saw the coins in Janus' claw, as the Dracon looked down at the gazebos spread around the courtyard, and Tearn stood up from a colored urn. At the same time, they all put the pieces together: four urns, four coins.

He threw the amber coin at the Felpurr, and he caught it with a single paw. Then, Janus looked up to see Kiwi coming down and offered her the diamond and emerald coins. "Just take them to..." he started, but she was already off towards the nearest urn to the northeast with a, "Gotcha, gotcha!"

Janus lept down the ziggurat several steps at a time towards the crimson urn to the southeast and opened it, dropping the ruby coin inside. A whoosh of energy heralded the sudden disappearance of the coin.

Finally, with all the coins in their respective urns, the three gathered together around the statue of

Phoonzang. Tearn could feel the energy of the Moonstone throbbing in his robe this time, and when he had received confirming nods from both of his temporary partners, he raised it to the gentle statue. There was a flash of white light...

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"Look out!!" Kiwi screamed as the battle started. Tearn's sensitive eyes were still adjusting to the sudden gloom when Janus and Kiwi were already in the fray.

The three were underground, in a musty, dark chamber with black stone making up the floor and walls. It was easily twenty feet from one side of the room to the other, plenty of space for the dozen yellow Creeping Cruds surrounding them to form an effective pincer attack.

They oozed along the ground, seemingly harmless, were it not for the fact that several were breathing devouring green poison from every direction. As Tearn's eyes adjusted, he started to make out disgusting bumps on them that resembled searching red eyes.

Janus' guns blasted twice and cleared a path to a corner of the room amidst flying spits of poison, where he spun around and aimed, but did not fire the final shot. As Tearn charged up a minor Firestorm spell, he soon realized the Dracon's reason for hesitating: he was waiting for him to finish casting the spell. Tearn snorted in condescension, then launched the burning cloud of flames into a group of four Cruds.

Confident of the Felpurr's inability to attack for a short while, Janus lined up the two Cruds in his sights, then fired off the last of his shots through one and into the other. When the bullet passed through the two Cruds, they seemed to lose their temporarily stable forms and spilled outwards onto the floor in smelly piles of yellow goo.

Kiwi flew under and into a Crud, then kicked it straight up into the air. It latched onto her leg, so she kicked out her other leg into it to get it off... but succeeded only in trapping it, too. With both of her feet stuck in the Crud and hovering at a good height, Kiwi shot feet first into the ground, and her captor exploded on the ground with a goopy squish.

What she didn't see was the gob of poison coming behind her. Tearn, however, did. With a feeling of protective water in his body and paws, Tearn conjured a powerful Ice Shield to absorb the poisonous breath. The elements did not match up, but the shield's strength held the bulk of the poison at bay. The rest hissed on the ground at Kiwi's back.

She turned to Tearn with a smile and salute of thanks, then rocketed backward with an elbow into the sticky slime. Once her arm was stuck, she swung the Crud around and around through the air until it was forced to let go, and it flew into and exploded against the nearby wall.

Janus returned with loaded guns, Blunder Buss and Musket blazing and sparks flying behind the Faerie, and stomped down on a Crud that was getting too close to her.

Finally, there was only one muck left. Kiwi stuck a small blue hand in it as Janus reloaded, and Tearn charged up a final Fireball. She shot an evil grin between the two, and flung the Crud into the air between the two former enemies.

Tearn flung the Fireball underhanded into the flying Crud, the ball penetrating and igniting it from within. Finally, Janus tracked it with both barrels of his Blunder Buss, and once it was sufficiently away from Kiwi and Tearn, unleashed both barrels worth of ammunition into its burning body.

The Crud exploded in midair, sending its flaming, chunky bits into every direction of the room. Janus and Tearn raised their respective claw and robe to protect themselves, while Kiwi simply fluttered left and right to avoid the pieces.

When the sound of the explosion stopped echoing around the Underground Temple, Kiwi cheered and flew between the other two. "Wow!" she exclaimed. "Did you *see* that thing? We messed it up!" She

fluttered around Tearn's head excitedly. "You gotta admit, that was really cool!!" she continued, then came to a laughing stop on Janus' head.

Tearn smiled at the energetic Faerie despite himself, lost in his memories of the life he once had, but his face fell when his eyes travelled down to the Dracon's face. The Felpurr bit his lower lip, and a few awkward seconds dragged on.

Kiwi's face fell, until both Tearn and Janus spoke up at the same time. "Yeah, kid," "Maybe," they commented in unison. Her face lit up again at their words, and she pointed towards the north. "Then, onward team!" she said happily.

I can't believe it! she thought excitedly as Tearn came up to join her and Janus. She noted with a cry of joy in her heart that Janus even waited for his former enemy. *Everything... everything is finally working out for the best! I never thought I would have this feeling again...*

They all walked through an archway into a narrow hallway leading around the corner. "...Nice shooting," Tearn commented, his eyes never leaving the wall ahead of him. Kiwi's heart lept. "Nah," Janus replied as he reloaded. "Anyone can shoot a gun." He paused, then hmphed. "Fire from your paws, on the other hand..."

Tearn barked a laugh, then just as quickly closed his mouth and turned away. Even so, when he turned back, the smirk remained. Kiwi caught it happily, and felt an energetic tingling wash over her. Everything was going to be fine.

When they came around the next corner, a prominent lever stood out next to a portcullis with interlacing bars. Kiwi flew off of Janus' head and to the gate. "Hey, check this out!" she beckoned. Tearn and Janus crowded around her, and saw the massive wooden chest on the other side of the gate. "What do you think's inside?" she asked excitedly, trying vainly to fit her tiny body between the even tinier holes. "Jewels? Gold? Magic? One of those globe thingies?"

"Hmm..." Janus wondered aloud. "Dunno. This lever'll probably open it, though." He reached out and tugged on the wooden stick, pulling it down and hearing a clear *click* from within... but nothing happened.

"Maybe it's broken," Tearn observed. "Who knows how old this dump is."

"Think I should force it?" Janus asked with an impatient sigh.

Kiwi nodded. "Yeah, might as well!" she said. "Why not?" Tearn added.

Janus nodded back, and pushed the lever into the wall and up with a great deal of power...

...Too much, it turned out. The lever snapped off in his claws, and broken pieces of the shaft jammed in the socket and fell to the floor.

"The hell... no-one told you to break it, oaf," Tearn said rudely. Janus held the broken lever in his claw, grinding his sharp teeth in seething anger. He snapped the broken piece in half and threw it to the floor, then wheeled on the Felpurr. "Who asked you, you flea-ridden furball?!" he yelled.

Tearn narrowed his eyes at Janus. "Keep talking, freak, and maybe you can explain how 'force' equates to 'breaking the damn thing in half!'" he spat back.

On hearing that venom-laced word, Janus advanced on Tearn and growled lividly, baring his sharpened teeth. "Do not call me that again," he snarled.

No, no, no... Kiwi thought to herself. *Why... why do you keep teasing me with happiness and then taking it away? Why?!*

"Guys..." she started timidly.

"Shut up!" Janus roared at her, and Kiwi shrank into the wall as best she could. Tearn thrust his paw at him, and with a quick glance at her shivering body, growled, "Leave the kid alone, freak!"

Janus slapped his paw away. "Keep your damn opinions to yourself, jackass," he hissed. "The two of us were doing fine before you showed up and started picking fights."

Tearn snarled, but backed off. "I knew this was a bad idea," he growled. He thrust his a digit at Janus. "Any other day, I'd broil you alive, freak. But I made a promise not to harm you, and my word means something. However..." he paused, purposefully ignoring Kiwi, "The next time we meet, you will die."

He started to walk off, but stopped, then turned around again. Janus flexed his arms and readied himself to gun down the arrogant Felpurr, but his attack came in a different manner than Janus expected.

Tearn shook his head condescendingly. "You know what? I take that back," he stated. "I don't need either one of you sheltered little children interfering with my mission here. You're weak, the both of you... living out your lives in comfort, getting upset at every little thing that doesn't go your way."

He scoffed. "You're both nuisances... pathetic, quivering little obstacles," he growled. "Neither one of you has any idea what pain truly is. And I doubt either of you ever will." And with that, Tearn strode back down the hall, his footsteps fading into the distance.

Janus tried to bottle his anger in as best he could, but in the end, his ability to hold back was just not enough. He roared loudly, unleashing an echoing scream that reverberated through every hall in the Underground Temple.

When he was out of breath, he smashed his muscled right arm into the gate as hard as he could. The bars bent inward and the gate broke straight off of its hinges in the wall, knocking over the treasure chest and smashing to pieces into the stone wall behind it. The chest spilled its contents on the floor, but neither Janus nor Kiwi were interested in what they were.

He was breathing so heavily and so consumed with rage, that until the pain caught up with him, he didn't notice that he had shattered his wrist bone. Still, he held his guns tightly and walked the opposite direction of the Felpurr, around the corner.

"Janus!" Kiwi screamed after him. "Stop, please!"

He hesitated, debating his relationship with the Faerie for the briefest of moments. "What's going on?" she asked. "What do we do...?" she continued.

Janus made up his mind then. "You do whatever the hell you want," he interrupted coldly. Then, he started walking again, and no amount of the Faerie's calls gave him pause to reconsider his decision.

From the beginning I was alone, feared by anything smart enough to know how to run... and how to hate, he thought. *It was a hard life to live without someone to run to; I've been on my own since as far back as I can remember.*

But no matter the trial, I always got by. My life was never complicated... eating, sleeping, wandering, running for my life... not until I met up with the others. Ever since I joined the race for those stupid artifacts, I've been at the mercy of the people I forged relationships with. The kind ones, the troubled ones, the blatantly wrong ones... all the people I've met have something in common.

They all complicated my life and bring me nothing but more pain. No more... never again.

The thought was liberating. Janus' step felt lighter, his mind clearer, now that he was no longer tied to the fates of those who could constantly betray him.

All at once, his chest clenched up when he heard Kiwi's flutter behind him.

"Go away, Faerie," he ordered. But the fluttering continued, and he wheeled around, angry at her disobedience. She was several feet off of the ground, as high as his chest, and tears were streaming down her face; it did little to quell his rage. He flicked his claw at her, and she ducked to get out of its way. "I said get out of here!" he roared. "No Dracon was created to mesh with others! So fly yourself out of my sight!"

"Why?!" Kiwi cried out in a mixture of fear, sadness and anger. "Why are you doing this to me? Why does everybody leave me?!"

Janus snarled in response. "Why don't you ask your friend the Felpurr?" he shot back. "You seemed to have no problem forgiving his many insults, and placing responsibility on both of us for fights he continually pushes for!" he accused.

She turned bright red... she *had* been doing that the whole time. Sobs choked up in her throat... she had no idea what to say to such truthfulness.

Janus hissed sharply at her reaction. "Who could possibly know about my pain, besides another Dracon?" he roared. "We are incompatible creatures, for we have no contemporaries! We are God's bastard children, the devil spawn He creates for others to spit upon! We exist only to fuel hatred in others. Believe me when I tell you that I'm doing you a favor by leaving you here."

Even as he walked away, Kiwi continued to flutter after him. "But why do you think you're so terrible?" she sobbed.

Suddenly, he shot his Musket into the ground in front of him, feeling the echoing blast carry his anger away for a brief, calming second. Although he continued to walk, he still spoke with his back to her. "Are you blind, sprite? Have you not noticed my scales, my teeth, by blood?" he asked. "Every part of me that reminds the entire world that I am not of the natural order? Have you any idea what it means to be hated?"

Kiwi stopped behind him. "You hate me now," she whispered.

Janus stopped, his right claw on his hip, a movement that sent pain shooting through his wrist. He turned around again, the wrath fading slightly from his countenance, and bared his frightening teeth. "Have you any idea what it means to be half a person?" he asked with muted anger.

"Yes," she answered simply.

Silence enveloped the space between them. If he believed her, he gave no indication that he did. "When I was younger, I met a man in the forest near my home," Kiwi explained. "His name was Jang. He was the one who turned me to the path of the Munk in the first place." Janus stood back, crossing his arms over his chest and listening with only slight interest.

"At first it was a great relationship, and I was really happy," Kiwi continued. A hint of a smile flit across her face, then disappeared just as suddenly. "Then... Master Jang asked me to take a step further onto the path of the Monk. I had to cut off all of my hair."

She let out a pained sigh, and looked off to the side. "It's an affront to Faerie culture to abuse any part of your body, and that includes the natural growth of your own hair," she said. "My mom... the queen Saeren, she was shocked at first, but she understood in the end. But... the others..."

Tears streamed from her eyes in tiny rivulets down her cheeks. She choked her next words out through her sobs. "Every day, my brothers and sisters, they would all laugh at me, call me horrible names, try everything they could to hurt me as much as the possibly could. No matter what my mom said... they never stopped..."

A lump formed in Janus' throat and the last traces of his anger faded away. "The only..." Kiwi coughed, then continued again. "The only people who ever accepted me for who I was, were my mom, Master

Jang, Hiromi, Smitty... and then you."

She sank to the floor and pressed herself up against the wall. "But now, Master Jang's dead... my mom and Smitty are back on Llylgamyn, Hiromi's gone... and the only one I have left, the only friend I have with me, is you. And now, you're going to leave me, too!"

Janus slowly stepped one step towards her, then another, and another. Kiwi buried her face in her knees. "I thought of all people... you would understand..." she whispered. Sobs wracked her body as she silently cried.

Without a word, the Dracon knelt down beside her and scooped her up, holding the frightened and crying Faerie close to his heart. He gently cradled her as she dampened his charred jacket with her tiny tears, surprising himself when his own slid down his cheeks to join hers.

As he held the little girl, down the hall, Tearn looked down at his feet in shame. He unpressed himself from the wall behind him and walked into the treasure room, plucking out the tiny sack of gold coins and the white key that were concealed in the chest before they came along. All this trouble for a little money, and a pathetic piece of metal...

He shook his head in disbelief. *With all the trouble I've caused, I don't deserve... friends... like that...* he concluded. He pocketed the key and continued his exploration of the quiet temple, alone.

Part 3 - Conflict Among Us

Picking up the Pieces

Grimal. The very name inspired reverence, or terror, depending on who you asked. Don Barlone' may have always considered Ratsputin to be the gathering paw of the Razuka, the one who filled the crime syndicate with the strongest, the brightest, and most importantly, the fastest. Bertie may have been the supplier, and Ol' Blienmeis may have been the one to teach the neophytes how to steal.

But Grimal was the doer, the enacter, the executioner, the one who took care of the toughest jobs and made sure they got done right. Nobody messed with Grimal; the very mention of his name was enough to make all but the stupidest of disloyal Rattkin swear their renewed allegiance to the Don of Dons, Barlone'.

The massive Rattkin looked over his group of the best the Razuka had to offer, his loyal little wrecking crew. Through their loyalty, not a single coup upon the Don had been successful. And now, some new contender to the throne was soon going to realize what they had to come through to get to the Don.

Tattooed Rattkin Razuka stabbed their curved Dongfu blades in midair, gutting invisible enemies. Scarred Ronin flared wild energy between their fingertips and darted their Vorpal Blades around in neat slices. And Grimal, himself, stood in the corner, arms folded across his chest.

He was large, heads above every other Rattkin in the Ruins, and he was muscled in a way no other Rattkin could possibly hope to become. Body tattoos of daggers, Assassin masks, skulls and dripping poison each served as a tally to those he had killed, and in what particular manner he had done them in. Grimal never forgot a kill, and never failed a mission.

His brown fur had started to grey here and there, serving to make him look the stately and wisened part of the guardian of Rattkin Razuka holdings.

Life had been good for the enforcer of the Ruins. He had cracked more than his fair share of heads, and made more than a few contenders to the Don's fortunes disappear, all the while assuring his place by the Don's side.

He looked around the suspended bridges and indoor hallways that connected the trees of the forest, high up here in the Rattkin Ruins. The entire city was built out of remnants of an ancient city, stone by stone and piece by piece, until the Rattkin had a stable city to call their own.

By and large, the Rattkin were not welcome in the cities, as they were known for their thieving and conniving ways... so they simply fashioned their own dwelling, far from the distrustful eyes of those in New City and beyond.

While the stones and other materials used to make the city in the trees were old, they were far from unstable. The old city had stood on its own for who knew how long, and the Rattkin Ruins would stand until the end of time... or until they found someplace better to live.

Here in the hallway between one of the two tallest trees in the forest, on wooden planks surrounded by protective walls that kept Rattkin younglings from falling to their death, was the perfect bottleneck position to stop would-be attackers.

Grimal had never really *needed* it before, but Mick the Pick seemed rather agitated when he brought word of the Ghost killing Rattkin by the hundreds. The skinny Rattkin had always been a bit of an exaggerator, but Grimal was not one to take chances when he didn't have to. He twirled his Dongfu around and around in his paws, anxious to meet this new assailant of the Razuka criminal syndicate... perhaps they might last past the first blow.

Shiiiiink, clunk... shiiiiink, clunk...

The strange, distant sounds of metal scraping on wood, followed by a blunt and heavy stop, floated down the rafters and hallways to Grimal and his group. It was still far away, whatever it was.

Shiiiiink, clunk... shiiiiink, clunk... There it was again. Some of his men began to pace nervously, as they were used to Rattkin sprinting in full assault when they were enacting rebellion... this was just unorthodox. They began to mutter amongst themselves, wondering what exactly was coming.

"Relax," Grimal ordered quietly. *Shiiiiink, clunk...* His men snapped to attention, though Grimal could not help but feel slightly uneasy at the strange sound of the forthcoming attack.

Shiiiiink, clunk... The sound was getting closer now, almost around the corner. Whatever it was, it would be upon them in seconds. Blades were raised, spells were chanted... *Shiiiiink, clunk...*

And then, she was there. As she stepped out into the hallway, she dragged and scraped her curved blade along the wood below her, leaving a small, scarred trail that ran for who knew how far in the other direction. Finally, the sword came to a rest as she stood in the middle of the hall.

Her hair was long and black and hung down in a topknot to below her shoulders, though it had largely come undone. Errant strands covered most of her face, leaving nothing visible except for her mouth. Her deathly pale lips were closed, perpetually solemn, and pointed with the rest of her face towards the ground.

Her white robe was covered in all manner of dirt, grime, and stains of green, brown and red that were clearly blood. She stood relaxed, unmoving, standing as if nothing could be amiss. As unearthly as her posture was, and as much as he could not wrap his mind around why she was standing there like that, Grimal's mind was suddenly focused solely on her unmoving mouth.

"Hahahahaha!" he laughed at her, loudly and uproariously. "Nothing to say? Slaughter the weakest among us, and when you finally meet a challenge, you're suddenly paralyzed with fear, girl?" His men laughed along with him, albeit much more nervously than Grimal.

She continued to stand silent and still as Grimal and his men looked her over. Then, slowly, she raised her katana a single foot into the air. Grimal and his men laughed even harder.

Once she did so, fresh red blood dripped off of her blade and onto the floor with tiny ploks. The hallway immediately silenced.

She slowly raised her head, and her matted black locks of hair fell away from her deathly pale face,

revealing at first her small, still nose, then falling away from her eyes.

They were deeply, horrendously, stomach-churningly black, and staring out at the suddenly frightened Rattkin. Her mouth opened, slightly, ever so slightly, and revealed two glistening, pointed white fangs that made one of Grimal's subordinates drop his Vorpal Blade in fear.

Grimal could not explain what happened next. He was standing behind his men, a dozen strong and a mix of the best Razuka and Ronin the Ruins had to offer him. He swore, he could completely swear, that all twelve of them were standing strong, and all but the one who panicked were prepared for an assault.

He blinked... and his party was dead.

The Ghost held her sword out and down, only steps away from Grimal, surrounded by the pieces that used to be his subordinates. Fresh blood was splashed all over her white robe and ran down her sword in a thick river of crimson death.

It couldn't have happened that quickly... but he could swear that as he glanced right, a Rattkin Ronin's black-garbed body was still sliding silently to the ground with a surprised look upon his face. When he finally slumped to the floor, the Ghost stared at him with those hellish, piercing black eyes, and took a step forward.

"You... how..." he stammered, his Dongfu at his side. The Ghost made no further move to advance, and simply stared at him, judging him. Her head slowly tilted to the side.

Behind her, there was movement. Without a sound, a Rattkin Ronin drew up from among his slaughtered comrades, retrieved the sword he had dropped, and lunged at the Ghost from behind. Without a moment's hesitation, she spun around and removed the Rattkin's head from his shoulders. At the same time, though, his Vorpal Blade plunged through her belly and out her back.

The Rattkin Ronin's head rolled to a stop by the bodies of two older Razuka, and his body slumped over and fell while Grimal whooped in bittersweet victory.

"Ha! Nobody can stop my company, you pale bitch!" he said jeeringly. "Now all I have to do is explain this mess to..." he continued, reaching a paw out to push her over.

The Ghost reached down and pulled the blade out of her stomach, and a hissing sound accompanied what could only be the regenerative powers of the Undead. Before she had even dropped the sword to the ground, the exit wound had already closed halfway. Grimal gaped in horror as she slowly spun to face him again, and the dirty, poison-dripping hole in her stomach closed behind the tear in her robe.

He thrust his Dongfu forward to stab the monster, and in another blink of an eye, both of his arms were suddenly on the floor. A momentary heat passed along his neck, and seconds before Grimal gave in to death, he saw the horrible figure of the white Ghost beneath him, her mouth over the slit in his neck, greedily drinking his sticky blood.

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As much as they searched the edge of the forest, Shss and Hiromi could not find the entrance to the Rattkin Ruins. They hid as well as her family in the swamp, Shss noted.

The road that broke off into grass and dirt just before the forest reappeared here and there as small strips of trail, until it finally ended in the middle of several dark trees. Shss kept her black spear ready for more of those tree-men, refusing to make the same distracted mistake of weapon choice that she had made before.

In a small pathway into the forest, the trail picked up again and lead straight to a stone road surrounded by thick walls, much like the exit to New City. Shss' heart lept thinking that they had finally found the entrance, but despaired to see that the path was choked off by a massive tree, its roots having long since

pushed up stone over the centuries, and its trunk and branches barring all entry.

Hiromi huffed in impatience. "We have to get inside, quick!" she insisted. "Come on, let's hug the forest and see if we can find another way in. If not..." She let her eyes travel all the way up the trunk of the tree. "I guess... we could try to climb this thing."

Backtracking, they returned to the forest of frightened creatures and dead bodies. *Wait,* Shss thought. *We haven't seen any bodies by this entrance...* "Rattkin," she said aloud. "Follow Rattkin."

Hiromi nodded and waved her hand back at Shss. "I know, we have to follow the Rattkin," she said. "But where did he go?"

Then, it dawned on her. "Oh, of course!" she exclaimed, "All we have to do is follow the... the..." Her face fell as the solution to the problem was overtaken by a new revelation: to track Lucciana down, more Rattkin had to create a trail through their deaths.

Shss nodded, and picked up the trail of even more butchered Rattkin. Though the trail to the blocked entrance of the Rattkin Ruins was free of bodies, there were stomach-churning piles of them among the shadows of the trees to the north.

The two made their way respectfully, but hastily, among them, but the clearing here was also free of pathways into the Ruins. Bodies were strewn about the small, grassy field, but the only way to travel was out, Hiromi saw.

"Here," Shss said, clearing away some hanging foliage from a concealed path. Hiromi ran up, avoiding the mangled bodies, and Shss helped her up and onto the new path.

It was almost completely free of the carnage that marked the outside forest's grasses, but there were gruesome corpses scattered here as well. One Rattkin was slumped against a tree, his eyes staring lifeless and cold at the ground beneath it, with a bow still clutched in his paws. Another was up ahead where the forest path opened, lying facedown without signs of life. His arm and body were grotesquely held up by a sword jabbed blade first into the grass, which his lifeless paw was still holding.

Beyond the body, Shss saw it: a stone pillar... no, three of them, markers of civilization. The entrance *had* to be here. Hiromi sprinted past her, scanning the trees and the stone, trying to find a way into the Rattkin Ruins. She disappeared around the most distant pillar before Shss could stop her.

"Hey, this is... *whoa!*" she yelled. "Shss! Help!" she called out, each cry for help growing softer and softer until Shss could hear the Hobbit no longer. The Fighter dashed around the pillar and skidded to a stop in front of a strange sight.

Through some strange coincidence of nature, the old brown tree bark of the tree blocking the path in front of her had gnarled and twisted itself into the vague formation of a face... an old man smiling gently at her.

What was even stranger was when the figure winked at her. Before she could react, the tree grasped Shss in its branches and lifted her up, and despite her verbal and physical protest, was passed from tree to tree over the darkening forest.

With a cry of horror, Shss felt her spear slip from her hands and fall into the mass of leaves and branches below her as the trees roughly passed her along. After a few minutes, she was dumped, rather harshly, on a bed of grass inside a small bungalow.

Hiromi was there, rubbing her bottom and wincing. When Shss arrived, the Priest held out her hand and helped Shss to her feet. "Not the kind of travel I'm used to after smooth spaceships rides and teleports," Hiromi said-mimed.

Shss nodded, rubbing her neck as she got up. All at once, the tree behind her rustled, then whipped something in its branch out at her. It was her lost spear, and before the wooden shaft could leave a nasty

welt on her back, Shss wheeled around and caught the weapon in a single hand.

Guardia's trees sure are jerks, she thought tiredly.

The small room, containing only a ladder leading down under its wooden floor and a door through the opposite wall, smelled... really badly. The stink was apparently coming up from the ladder, and the tree and hole behind the two girls offered little in the way of ventilation. It was an identical smell of bloody death as it was outside, but nauseatingly more concentrated. "I go," Shss said solemnly, and took the ladder down two rungs at a time.

She dropped to the floor with a clunk, staring out into the dark hallway. The smell of death assaulted her nose even stronger than before. Using the Psi Rod on her back as an intermittent torch, she flicked the globe on and off as she tread carefully down the smelly hallway. The first few jolts revealed nothing, until she realized it was a matter of where she was looking.

The floor squished beneath her, and she jumped back onto solid wood, lowering a glowing orb to the ground to see what it was: the body of a Rattkin. It was about a dozen of them in fact, all surrounding her, motionless, with assorted weapons strewn about the room, covered and caked in fresh blood. Lucciana had been this way...

Hiromi dropped down behind her with a slight thud. At her height, she noticed the carnage immediately, covering her mouth and nose with her sleeve. Shss waited for the Priest to join her at her side, then carefully stepped over weapons and corpses down the hallway.

"Lucciana," Hiromi whispered, "how could you?"

The hallway cut right and continued straight in a T-intersection, and Shss made the decision to continue forward where she saw more bodies. Up ahead, there was a very faint clunk and skitter, then there was the sound of stumbling, running footsteps.

Shss was down the hall and on the shadowy figure before it could climb up a ladder and out of sight. "AH! Help meeee!" a tinny voice screamed in terror. "She has me! She has me! She will kill Bertie! Help me!!"

The figure struggled in Shss' powerful grip, but accomplished nothing in his frantic flailing to escape. Using one hand to hold the creature down and the other to flick on the Psi Rod's orb, Shss illuminated the area and revealed its face.

It was a cowering Rattkin with barely any muscle mass to speak of, almost to the point of looking malnourished. Shss suspected it had more to do with increasing his own speed than a lack of food. The Rattkin hit the ground and covered his head, unwilling to face his captor in the light. "Do not kill me do not kill me I have nothing I can't hurt you spare me spare me oh please spare me!" the Rattkin chittered off faster than Shss could understand.

He had no weapon, and he seemed traumatized enough, so she let him go. Without her holding onto him, Bertie crashed his head into the wall, then just as quickly got to his feet and shot up a ladder at the end of the dark hall, and out of sight.

Something began to nag at Shss as Hiromi caught up to her. "What happened?" Hiromi asked, but Shss paid her little mind. There was something she was missing about this whole thing. Presence or not, she found it hard to believe Lucciana had done this. *Is that it?* she thought. *Or is it something else? Something I'm overlooking?*

In any case, the Rattkin would not run to where the killer was... which meant the path behind her was where Lucciana must have headed. The queued question finally caught Shss' attention, and she merely answered, "Scared Rattkin."

The shadowed hallway led to another door, and into a grand room filled with old crates and rusted weapons. It was probably a storehouse, though the Ruins' more valuable equipment was probably hidden

somewhere more secure.

The orb on Shss' Psi Rod cast frightening shadows with every flick of the button, but if it was capable of running out of power, she did not want to risk losing it in the middle of battle. The shadows of barrels and old training dummies stretched and grew, shrank and fell with every foot the two crossed across the storehouse. The light seemed to favor creating unreal, terrifying images, rather than illuminating true danger.

Three doors ahead, and little time to check them all. Shss opened the first on the left, revealing a dark, shadowed... dead end. Hiromi opened the second, and a hallway stretched out and around the corner.

Shss hoped against hope that the last would lead them without fail to their destination. She turned the doorknob, and pushed out. A wave of cold air rushed into her face and washed away the stench of bodies and blood for just a second, but it was a welcome respite, nonetheless.

There was grass here, and the night sky above; they had found a way outside. "Do you think she's out here?" Hiromi asked, shivering as the draft caught up to her.

Shss shook her head, but stepped outside anyway. Anything was better than the smell inside.

Though the two only saw the bare wall of the bungalow in front of them, around the corner, the path opened into a massive, grassy courtyard, which might otherwise be completely filled with the bustling activity of the strange rat-men.

It almost seemed relaxing as the two stepped onto the cool lawn, free of bodies and misanthropic trees. Under the moonlight and to the west, though, the remains of a large, roaring bonfire and a pile of assorted bones dumped against the wall firmly spoiled the temporary image of peace. These ones were long dead, the victims of the voracious appetites of the Rattkin.

Further, as the two walked south past the outer edges of the Rattkin Ruins' bungalows, a creepy building began to take form in the shadows. A giant, sinister-looking head with bright white makeup, a large red nose and a silly hat pointed enthusiastically at the entrance to the building from above it. Standing on either side of the entrance were two Rattkin, gutted and left for dead, still clutching their swords.

As they drew closer to the building, Hiromi made out a door with a sign attached to it: "Rubi's Funhouse." She repeated it to Shss, adding, "Wonder what they mean by 'Fun...'"

A small pin held the sign to the door, with the sharp tip pointed out. Behind it, the faded picture of a miniature version of the head pointing so joyously inside smiled happily at the two new entrants into the eerie building, with the pin jutting out of its nose. The door was locked.

All of a sudden, Shss felt the back of her neck prickle, at about the same time that she heard the metallic clinking behind her. She turned to see a hunched, grey-furred old Rattkin about the size of Hiromi hobbling towards them on a gnarled old cane, and holding a cup. He wore dark lenses over each eye, and with every careful step, tapped his crooked staff on the ground in front of him.

"Coins for the blind?" the Rattkin asked pitifully.

Shss pursed her lips in wonder. As intriguing as it was that this blind Rattkin could find the two so easily without his sight, the gnarled cane in his paw was even more interesting. She couldn't explain it, but there was definitely something special about it. In fact, she could hardly take her eyes off of it.

Hiromi patted herself down, and found the coins that Paluke had given them in New City. "Oh, uh... of course," she said, then digged into the sack to fish out five shiny gold coins. She stepped forward to the old Rattkin, who tilted his head as he followed the sound of her footsteps. Hiromi dropped the coins in his cup one at a time, *clink, clink, clink, clink, clink.* With every sound, the Rattkin's smile grew larger and larger until Hiromi finished, putting the sack back in her robes.

He animated on the spot. "Dear friends, this poor creature thanks you from the bottom of his old and weakened heart!" he exclaimed, patting Hiromi on the back and embracing her with a strength contrary to his visible age. A feeling of warmth swelled in her at helping this poor old man, especially considering what his people had gone through this day.

Hiromi chuckled and gently pushed him away. "My pleasure. I'm Hiromi, and this is Shss," she said, pointing to herself and her friend... before she winced at her gaff.

"Oh, don't worry about it now," the Rattkin surprisingly said, staring off into the distance. "Ol' Blienmeis has been treated much more harshly in his years than by simple mistakes."

"You mean you're not really blind?" Hiromi asked, suddenly feeling foolish for believing the Rattkin's act.

Blienmeis waved his paw "no," then spoke. "I am quite without sight, ever since... well, that is a story for another time," he said. "Suffice it to say, to survive in this harsh environment of thieves, alien invaders, legendary artifacts and rampaging Ghosts, some of us have had to adapt more than others." He looked in Hiromi's general direction. "You wouldn't happen to be one of those aliens, would you?"

Before she realized, once again, that he couldn't see her, Hiromi nodded... then immediately blushed. "I thought as much, though your generosity is in stark contrast to your people and their mission here..." he replied, as though he had seen her.

Shss was impressed with the blind Rattkin, whose other four senses were trained in such a way to even rival her own, but this was no time for chitchat. "Where Lucciana go?" she asked. "The Ghost you mentioned," Hiromi added.

Blienmeis shivered, then turned his head to the left and right to feel shifting air currents and the familiar buzz in his ears of a solid object. Impressively enough, he eventually pointed directly at the door to the Funhouse. "There," he said. "Whatever it was, it startled me in my sleep, but headed directly for the lair of the Razuka."

"Do you have the key?" Hiromi asked.

For a time, he stood still, as if he were contemplating something. Then, he reached into his pocket, and threw a small, red rubber ball to Shss. "That will get you in, but watch out for that Ghost, and be careful dealing with the Razuka," he warned. "They may make you a tempting offer, but cross them and..." he trailed off, then adjusted his spectacles.

"Do be careful, aliens," he said, then turned and began to walk away. "You are entering a world whose dangers you know nothing of." The coins in his cup clinked and jangled, and Blienmeis disappeared into the night.

Shss stepped forward and pressed the ball onto the protruding pin on the door. With an audible *click,* the door unlocked, and the two walked past the slain guards into the old Funhouse.

It was overrun with cobwebs and had clearly not been used in some time. Though it was musty and a little hard to breathe, it was clear that the path had been used quite often. In the dust on the wooden planks beneath them, several dozen Rattkin footprints led straight ahead into a closed door before them.

In addition to those, Shss made out two other sets of tracks. One was a single straight line leading into the distant door that the Rattkin seemed to be fleeing towards. The others were prints of Lucciana's sandals.

She gripped her Psi Rod tightly as she pulled on the door's handle, only to see it, too, was locked. Not willing to wait for another old Rattkin to show them the way, she backed up a few feet, then charged straight into the door. The old wood and flimsy lock gave easily, and the door flew into the room and smashed into a pile of splinters on the ground.

"Hey!" Hiromi yelled. Shss stood ready to battle as she spun around. "That Rattkin stole our money!" she continued, patting her robes down as fast as she could. She almost started after Blienmeis, when the injustice of the theft was immediately squashed by the sight of the two dead Rattkin at the door of the Funhouse.

As frightening as the idea sounded to her, Hiromi felt herself becoming less and less apalled by the sight of murdered bodies, and the suffering they entailed. She offered a silent apology to their memory, and joined Shss in climbing down the ladder in the newly opened room.

The internals of the Funhouse were even more frightening than the ghoulish clown above the front door suggested. How a civilization could entertain itself by the shaded mannequins leaned against the walls and left limp upon the floor was beyond her. Maybe it was an effect of time and rot that caused the jester and clown figures' faces to melt, with their clothes hung loosely upon them like shrouds upon the long deceased, but the Funhouse reminded the girls instead of a massive tomb.

The shadowy crypt was a dismal memory to the people who once thrived here. Shss took Hiromi's hand and pushed on among the eternally smiling, laughing figures, through an archway and down a darkened hallway. There was something going on up ahead... a very faint sound.

A gurgled scream reverberated off of the stone walls of the Funhouse, and removed all doubt that Lucciana was near. Shss carefully jogged down the hall with Hiromi close behind, around the corner, and down another ladder to a room with a strange contraption.

An old metal and wood pivot sat in the corner of the new room. One end was prominently poised in the air under a hole in the ceiling, while a massive chain dropped from a second hole, hanging and unmoving, above the other end of the pivot. A scream rang out again from the hole above the raised end of the pivot, followed by metallic scraping on stone.

"Lucciana!" Hiromi screamed out. When there was no response, she turned to Shss in a panic. "Is there a way up?" she asked hurriedly, running towards the pivot and pushing down upon the raised end. The other end rose up, jingling the chain above it, but nothing else happened.

She then let her side of the pivot down, and the end with the chain lowered to the floor. It struck a particular stone, and a clicking sound echoed off of the walls. But again, nothing happened.

Shss pulled on the chain, felt along the walls, tried everything she could think of to get into and above the empty ceiling hole, but came up empty.

"We don't have time for this!" Hiromi said, pushing a feeling of water from her body and into Shss. Suddenly, every one of Shss' moves was sped up as she came under the effects of the Haste spell. Hiromi followed by blasting air from her hands to underneath the empty hole.

"Go, go!" she yelled.

Shss nodded, tied her Psi Rod to her back in the blink of an eye, and ran straight up the wall and into the hole in the ceiling. She jumped from wall to wall, aided by the wind below her, until she finally found a strange contraption made of dull metal blades behind the metal bars of a gate. The spells wore off together, and she pushed off of the gate and into a hallway behind her.

Hiromi came up right behind, though she was not as lucky to have Shss' agility for a quick pounce off of the wall, and to safety. She began to fall just as Shss grabbed her robe, then yanked her out of the hole and flung her into the hallway.

"Oof!" Hiromi called out as she hit the ground. "That was..."

She suddenly stopped speaking. Shss stood up and took a step towards her to help her up, when she stood still as well. A candle hung on a pillar at the end of the dark hallway, cradled in the claws of a screaming Gargoyle, and offered little enough light as it was to the backlit figure before them. But the

curved sword was key enough to the person's identity: Lucciana.

Fresh blood ran down the curved blade, dripping onto the body of a freshly slain Rattkin with a bow in his paws. She didn't speak, didn't move, made not a single sound. Neither Hiromi nor Shss could see her face.

"Lu...?" Hiromi started. Lucciana stood deathly still. "What... happened to you?" she queried softly, her voice breaking. "What are you doing? Why...?"

Without a word, Lucciana turned away with her blade at her side, walking towards the single source of light in the hallway. Her blade scraped frighteningly loud down the hallway, provoking a whimper off to the left of the candle. When he could take no more of the sound of his impending death, the frightened Rattkin burst past the light source, screaming as he fled for his life with a fleetness almost unearthly. Lucciana made no move to pursue.

"Hiromi, fight Thing!" Shss called out, unslinging her Psi Rod in the process. In the next second, Hiromi got only one word of her prayer for assistance out... and Shss had a single ready hand on her Psi Rod... when Lucciana was suddenly upon them. Hiromi was stunned when Lucciana's knee cracked into her jaw, and Shss had no time to react before the Samurai's katana sliced her deeply from her shoulder, down her opposite arm to her hand.

Shss dropped the Psi Rod and fell to her knees next to Hiromi's coughing form, and Lucciana was suddenly gone. Hiromi nurtured healing energy into her mouth, then laid her hands upon the long, lethal streak on Shss' body.

As Shss' wounds closed, the nagging feeling returned to her. Lucciana did not kill either one of them, as she did the hundreds of others. There were many survivors: the children, Bertie, Blienmeis, and finally, the fleeing Rattkin...

It all suddenly dawned on her: the defenseless and weaponless being spared, how she and Hiromi were still alive...

When Hiromi finished closing her wound, Shss securely fastened her Psi Rod to her back, picked up the Hobbit, and ran down the hallway and to the left to follow Lucciana. Before Hiromi could ask what was going on, Shss spoke. "I know stop Lucciana," she insisted. "Follow me, ok?" Hiromi nodded from underneath Shss' arm, trusting her friend more than anything.

They ran down the hallway, hearing the clang of metal upon metal from just in front of them. Shss barreled down a flight of stairs, around a corner, and finally found the last stand of the Rattkin Razuka.

Lucciana stood in front of a semi-circle of the Rattkin's eight best Razuka, each wielding the short, deadly, curved Dongfu dagger of the Razuka elite. The room was large enough to offer footing for both sides, and candles lit the room from every wall and thrust shadows in every direction.

A deeply shadowed chamber lay just beyond the defending Rattkin. The battle raged between Lucciana and the Razuka, and though none of them managed to score a single hit on Lucciana, she in turn had no room to counter-attack with all eight of the Razuka striking at once.

"Stop!" Shss called out. "No weapon! She stop!" Nobody paid her any mind, and the fight continued. The dance and clangs of the organized Razuka defense echoed off of the walls with every stab, block and parry, until two of the Razuka launched a pair of nets at Lucciana in tandem.

The Razuka stepped back as Lucciana cut one net into two pieces, but the other covered her just as the Razuka stepped forward to finish the attack.

Hiromi flowed the power of earth from her fingertips into Lucciana, coating her in an Armorplate spell. The first few attacks glanced off of the invisible shield, revealing a transparent green barrier surrounding the Samurai where the Rattkin attempted to strike.

Shss looked on in horror, knowing she could not combat this new Lucciana with her current strength... and if Hiromi tried to tangle with the Presence again, it surely would not work before Lucciana injured or even killed the Priest for trying again. Her mind worked quickly to find a solution; if she was right, and since the Rattkin would not be giving up their weapons anytime soon, disarming Lucciana was their only chance of survival... and the Rattkin's sole option against such a superior foe.

In a single second, Lucciana stood up, spun her katana in a circle and sliced a neat hole through the top of the net, freeing herself and catching two Razuka by surprise with clean slices through the sword arm of each. One fell to the floor bleeding while the other lept at her, chittering and screaming. A spin and a slice through its spine quickly ended its counter-attack.

With only six Razuka left to battle Lucciana, it was only a matter of time before they began to fall, one by one. Lucciana started from the outside, stabbing a Razuka in his momentarily undefended side. She beheaded another with a backhanded swing when he tried to capitalize on her lack of attention.

Another Razuka was cut down at the knees, another across the chest, and another took the blunt end of Lucciana's katana squarely in the forehead, knocking him out cold. The last Razuka, his allies slain or out cold, lowered his curved Dongfu as he took in the situation around him.

Knowing he could do nothing, he backed up slowly into the room behind him, dropping his weapon to the floor. Lucciana responded by lowering her katana towards the ground, blood dripping onto the floor, and walked with terrifying purpose towards the chamber in front of her. "Barlone', Order of Taw," the sign read.

The Razuka stepped to the edge of the shadows, when his furry face suddenly contorted painfully. He switched direction and stepped forward slowly, his eyes deadening, until a second Rattkin stepped out with him. The new one was much larger, much stronger, and much more murderous than any other Rattkin Shss or Hiromi had seen.

His serrated black Dongfu was stuck in the back of the fleeing Razuka, and Shss winced as the Rattkin twisted it within the Razuka's back, causing the poor creature to suddenly come to, bleed from the mouth and cry silently.

Lucciana sliced the Razuka through the neck, ending his pain in an instant. The muscular Rattkin dropped his victim's body to the ground, revealing the multitude of ornate tattoos covering the length of his bare chest.

A Rattkin being stabbed in the eye, barbed wire and daggers weaving around the pale faces and dripping skulls of historic Assassins, all of them culminating into the horned, long-faced creature dressed in formal robes upon his back: the depiction of the Rattkin Lord of Murder. A similarly styled and decorated black bow hung from his back.

Barlone' stared at Lucciana with eyes as black and empty as hers: a killer's eyes, devoid of any hint of compassion. "You are the one who has slaughtered my officers and my children, brought to ruin this family I have struggled so long to create," the deadly Rattkin spoke in a rough whisper. "What makes you think you have the right to take a life on this planet when you know nothing of its people or its history, outsider?"

Lucciana stared blankly at him, her attention seemingly fixed on the black Dongfu hanging limp at his side. He advanced slowly, stalking her with dangerous purpose. "I built this family from the ground up," he said. "I nurtured and empowered the most talented, worthy members. I purged those who threatened me, their father, and I have watched over my younglings as the most caring and responsible of parents do."

She silently stood her ground, until he stood almost face to face with her. "And if you think I will let all I have created go to waste without a fight, then you obviously have no concept of the love for his children that Don Barlone' has," he finished.

Barlone' purposefully flicked his Dongfu slightly up to draw Lucciana's attention. Sensing the threat, Lucciana immediately thrust her sword out towards Barlone's neck, where he deflected her strike with ease. The Rattkin grabbed Lucciana's sword arm and plunged his Dongfu under her left arm, straight into her heart.

She headbutted Barlone' in the nose. He staggered back, unslung the bow from his back and fired a series of jagged arrows into Lucciana's stomach. The Bowel Rakers struck true, just as Lucciana removed the Dongfu from her armpit and tossed it to the ground. Though she shrugged off the impacts, it was obvious that she was slowing from the assault.

Nonetheless, as Barlone' continued to fire arrows into her body, Lucciana plucked them out one by one and advanced on him, her wounds hissing shut while she sliced with unbelievable speed at his head. To his credit, the Rattkin dodged *most* of the slices.

Lucciana started to noticed a pattern to Barlone's evasion, and when she saw an opening, sliced down and left where he usually ducked after an overhand chop. The edge of her katana caught him across the right eye. Barlone' responded with a kick to her left kneecap, shattering it instantly as he rolled behind her to retrieve his Dongfu.

By the time he was up and ready to strike, her knee had already begun repairing itself, but she was slow to counter his first strike. With two arrows still sticking out of her stomach and the exhaustion of a long day of battling still weighing upon her, Lucciana took Barlone's Dongfu in her spine, then in her kidney and neck.

She spun around and slashed Barlone' across the chest and shoulder, but neither were killing strikes. Barlone', neglecting his defense, pressed forward with stabs into Lucciana's gut, lungs, shoulder, cheek, anything he could strike.

Lucciana responded in kind, opening up glancing wounds on the pudgy Rattkin's body. Though one thrust of her katana in particular plunged straight into his right lung, the Rattkin fought on regardless. The two opponents continued to slice and stab and thrust at one another's bodies, more wounds opening every second, until something started to become clear: Lucciana's wounds were hissing shut, but at a much slower rate than usual. She was dying.

This was their chance. "Now, Hiromi! Fight Thing!" Shss yelled, then charged forward. As Hiromi started to chant, "In the name of God..." Lucciana's attention was suddenly drawn to them both, but she could do nothing to stop Shss or the spell in her current state.

Barlone' was too busy avoiding Lucciana's kill strikes to avoid Shss' Psi Rod, and took the electric globe squarely in the neck, just before she flicked on both buttons. While Barlone' was shocked with a mighty electrical buzz, Shss kicked her slowed and weakened friend in the stomach. She flew into the wall behind her, cracking her head on the stone. With Hiromi's spell and serious injuries weighing upon her, Lucciana slumped to the floor without a sign of resistance.

With Lucciana out cold and no longer actively helping the Presence, Hiromi fought the one-sided war against the essence, and won handily. "Got it!" she called out, feeling its effects on Lucciana dwindle to nothing. The rapid healing began to wear off as the Samurai's wounds started spilling more and more blood. Shss tied up her Psi Rod once more, scooped up Lucciana in one arm, then ran back towards Hiromi to grab her under her free arm.

Barlone', paralyzed on the floor and bleeding from his right eye, could only watch in unholy fury as the three girls made their escape.

As Shss bounded up the stairs, Hiromi reached across her body to hold Lucciana's face, closing her grievous injuries. As the puncture wounds returned to smooth skin, Hiromi noticed Lucciana's pale face returning its youthful color, and her fangs shrank back into her mouth. Shss tightened her hold on her two charges as she crashed headfirst through an unready Rattkin blockade, the remnants of those unwilling

to die for their Don.

She weaved in and out of pillars down a hallway, hearing the pitter-patter of footsteps and the cries of Rattkin right behind her. "Over here!" "Get 'em!" they screamed as the girls reached the end of the darkened hallway, where a ladder led up.

"Hiromi!" Shss implored, but the Priest was already ahead of her. A feeling of air and water among all of them, and the three girls were Hasted and Whirlwinded up the ladder and running before the Rattkin below could even reach the first rungs.

There was shouting coming from somewhere down the new hall, but it was faint. "Hey!" a Rattkin screamed out from the left side, and he and several others ran towards the girls. Up ahead, another group of Rattkin followed suit, so Shss ducked right into a long hall leading into shadow. Anything was better than where they were now.

She weaved down the new halls for a minute, running blindly into darkness, her face preparing itself for an unexpected wall to painfully stop their progress. But in fact, the unseen came from below: a moving belt suddenly propelled all three girls up a shaft into the ceiling and spilled them all out into a final corridor.

Shss was feeling beyond tired at this point, and her muscles were burning and screaming for rest, but the sound of Rattkin just behind them suddenly restored her fatigue as if she had just started running.

No, it was even more than that. She felt stronger than strong, able to run a hundred miles, or more...

She looked down at her stomach. Hiromi's hand was there, and it stopped glowing blue just as Shss saw her. Hiromi smiled weakly, breathing heavily and exhausted from so many sudden spells all at once. The last Stamina spell left her feeling dehydrated.

The irony of that feeling struck her when Shss rounded a last corner, and Hiromi saw a slick chute of flowing water leading to God knew where. With the sound of Rattkin just behind them, though, Shss saw no choice, and they were all suddenly swept up in its rapid flow.

Quite possibly the only remaining "fun" part of the Funhouse, the water slide passed transparent glass with frustrated Rattkin behind them, around corners and down steep declines that made Shss and Hiromi's stomachs flutter with excitement. Lucciana was still unconscious, and made no sound.

The three bumped and slid from level to level, thoroughly soaking themselves in their escape from the Funhouse. They dropped again, sliding down another long chute towards a final obstacle up ahead.

Shss saw it first: a hole in the middle of the slide that led down into a dark pit, and a stone path beyond it. Carefully, she stood up and slid on her feet with the other two in her arms, and at the last second, lept over the pit to the solid ground just beyond it.

Behind them, Rattkin came down the slide by the score, plunging into the hole and having none of the balance needed to stand up for more than a second. With every Rattkin that fell in, Shss heard a faint splash.

After a short moment, the Rattkin stopped appearing. They were home free.

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She awoke to the sounds of distant bird calls and wind rustling among the trees, all over something high above her. As she slowly opened her eyes, she saw that they were in the mountains somewhere. The black peaks of a forbidding, haunting mountain stood above her as the sun shone in her face. Disorientation overtook her... the last she remembered, she was in the grove with the tree-men, and...

"Shss! Hiromi!" she shouted out. *Are they dead? Was I unconscious while the tree-men tore them to*

pieces?

Hiromi suddenly put a hand on her shoulder, making Lucciana jump in fright, but when she realized who it was, she calmed. "You're both all right," she said thankfully, her eyes passing between the two.

Though Hiromi looked worried, Shss looked both defensive and angry. "After we leave Ruins, we go mountains, hide," Shss explained. "One day we move, you sleep."

Lucciana knit her eyebrows together as a familiar feeling overtook her. They were like whispers at first, but now that she had recovered and awoken, the sound suddenly washed over her like a tidal wave.

Voices screamed at her from inside, thousands of them. Catcalls, screams of terror, anger, beastly roars, feelings of unbelievable pain and confusion. They screamed at her all at once. *Hey, you dumb broad! What do you think you were doing? What gives you the right! Where am I? Someone help me! Graaaaargh! What happened!? Ooooooo...*

"Shut up!" she screamed, clutching her head and falling to her knees, but the voices continued to yell at her. "It wasn't me! I didn't deserve it! STOP!"

She ran her hands down to her scabbard, intent on pulling out her sword and ending her life, anything to stop the cries in her mind... but she felt nothing there. She scrambled around on her hands and knees trying to find her katana, but found nothing but hard soil and grass.

Shss whipped her Psi Rod around and into Lucciana's neck, not willing to grant her any more opportunities to hurt anyone else. Hiromi stopped her with a hand, then knelt down next to her friend. "What's wrong? Who's talking to you?!" Hiromi asked worriedly, but Lucciana couldn't hear her through the myriad of voices in her mind.

Hiromi could feel something, many things along with the Presence, chipping away at Lucciana's sanity like tiny miners. She used the last of her air power to Silence them, and Lucciana stopped screaming long enough to hear Hiromi's next question, though she still held her head in pain.

"What's going on?" Hiromi asked, but Lucciana was silent, only shaking her head in pain. "Please trust us, Lucciana," she softly implored. "We want to help you."

Lucciana slowly let go of her head and sat back, hugging her knees and staring off into the distance. From the very beginning, she had a cursed life, forsaken by everything and everyone imagineable. No country, no friend, no family or teacher, nothing and nobody held her allegiance. Everything she had at one time, everyone, was either dead, or had betrayed her. She promised never to rely on someone else after Yamato, after her family.

And after that night. "It was..." she started, and coughed. "It was only the third, maybe fourth assignment I had taken on after I became a mercenary... some people in a village far to the east were having some trouble with a witch who lived on the outskirts of their town."

Shss sat down a few feet away, with her Psi Rod ready to counter any deception, but listened intently at the same time. Hiromi kept her hand on Lucciana's arm.

"They said she was stealing cattle, making the land sick, that sort of thing," Lucciana continued. "I didn't really know too well myself what was going on, but I tracked her down just the same. She denied everything the townsfolk were saying... but I gutted her anyway."

Hiromi inhaled sharply and put a hand over her mouth, but the other rested firmly on her friend's arm. As strange as it was, Shss understood every word Lucciana spoke.

"She... um, she said something I couldn't understand, but when she stopped speaking, I felt... I don't know how to describe it," she continued. "Both 'here and there,' I guess."

For a while, she sat silently... recalling something, turning it over in her mind. Finally, she spoke. "I will never forget the last thing she said before she died... she told me, 'Their pain is yours.'"

She coughed up very bitter spittle. "I didn't give a good godsdamn what she was talking about, until I came back to the village to collect my fee," she explained. "The elder tried to pay me half of what he had promised, saying that the town had been robbed before I came, and that there was no money to be spared, outside of the necessary fund for food and fresh drink. He probably thought he could get away with it because I was only fifteen, and still new to the business."

Lucciana looked up, recalling the event as she spoke in deadpan neutrality. "I killed him, too."

Even now, the man's voice came back to torment her, though she had long since released him from her mind. "I could suddenly feel him in me... see everything he had done in his past," she explained. "His triumphs, his failures, even the truth in why he couldn't pay me. I even knew that he tried to pay me from his own pocket, rather than dipping into the town coffers. It seemed anything I asked about his life, I instantly knew. Like we... were the same person, sharing one body.

"After I ransacked his house and took what little money he had, I left... but he followed me," she continued. "He was there, every day and night, hounding me, blaming me for my actions. I felt the pain of his death over and over, like he was torturing me from a place I could not reach him: my own mind."

She shook her head. "And I couldn't get rid of him... or any of the others. As I took job after job and took more lives, whether good or evil, they would all stay with me, forcing me to relive their last moments and their pain, over and over. Eventually, I discovered that if I actually tried to understand and accept their pain rather than flee from it, I could placate them and fling their lingering essences into the afterlife." She shot her hand out and up to mimic the action.

"Whether good or evil... I experienced the lives and the last moments, the confusion and pain of people injured by my actions, of lives taken before their time. Eventually..." She sighed deeply. "In the end, I realized that the witch had done something to me, something which I regretted the moment I took that first man's life, but as time went on... it became more and more a blessing."

Hiromi was confused. "How?" she asked. It was hard to imagine a mercenary enjoying the feelings of those they hurt.

Lucciana chuckled morosely. "How?" she repeated. "After I began to pick and choose assignments that punished the wicked rather than simply made me money, I learned to enjoy my life as a vigilante. People respected me for my strength, true, but my name travelled the land mostly because of the work I did. And I loved killing evil people... even more when I got to feel their pain after I was done ripping their bodies to shreds.

"But... now they're back," she whispered. "I heard them screaming at me, but I don't recognize any of the voices. I remember every life I have taken, but these... are new. And there are beasts among them." Her mouth hung slightly open as she took in the sheer number of voices trying to get her attention.

She looked into Shss' eyes, then Hiromi's. "What happened? What did I do?" she asked.

Hiromi's mouth moved, but as every second went by, the myriad of voices grew louder and louder, until Lucciana could no longer think. The noise overtook Hiromi's answer, and the Silence spell finally wore off. The mob of the massacred erupted in her mind again.

She closed her eyes shut and grabbed her temples in pain... when the voices began to retreat, one by one, leaving only one in its place. *Ooooooooo...* the essence of a moth howled in pain. Lucciana opened her eyes, and saw Hiromi's hands glowing.

"If what you say is true," Hiromi said, "then you have a responsibility to offer these spirits comfort. I will hold the mass of them back, bringing them in one by one, if you promise me two things... first, do your absolute best to help them all, even the evil ones."

Lucciana nodded. "That goes without saying, Hi."

Hiromi sighed softly. "And second... you fight the Bane King's desires with all you have," she said, her steely brown eyes staring into Lucciana's own.

She knew it was him, Lucciana thought ashamedly, and looked away.

"Right now, the race for the Astral Dominae is going to be on the backburner to getting him out of your head," Hiromi continued.

Back in the grove, Lucciana could vaguely remember... she let him win. To eliminate their enemies who were superior in number, for her friends' sake... but also...

"A need to kill..." she whispered. Hiromi looked frightened and Shss prepared to strike the Samurai down, but Lucciana shook her head. "No, wait, please... that was why I let the Bane King take over," she explained. "I needed to kill... to stop more evil from spreading and hurting the innocent." *I am so sorry, young moth, please forgive me for taking your life.*

Lucciana stood up, nodding down the trail of the mountain. Shss put her arm around her shoulder and led the way with Hiromi back to the road, several miles away. "When I saw those trees killing you two... I had to," she said. "I had to let him win, to fight with him... and against you, Hi... to destroy those tree monsters and save you both. But then, I blanked out."

She stumbled over a rock and almost fell, but Shss kept her from falling. Lucciana nodded thanks. "After that, I only remember feelings," she said. "Being attacked, lashing out at dangerous creatures..."

Shss understood. "No weapon, safe," she said. "Lucciana inside, together with Thing."

Murderer! I was only defending myself! How dare you!! "At some point after I left you both, I killed someone and absorbed memories of a... father figure of some type," Lucciana continued. "The leader of a crime organization, and as murderous a creature as I have seen. Further..." she choked the word, "...kills... only reinforced that fact. I remember wanting to punish him, and bring him to justice for his crimes."

I had no right to kill you. I am sorry. Please, take whatever you need of my energy and stay if you like, then when you are ready, find your deserved place on the other side...

"I failed, didn't I?" she asked. Hiromi and Shss said nothing; their silence answer enough.

Lucciana walked as quietly as they did for a few minutes, then finally sighed. "You know, I never did find out if that witch was telling the truth about being a good person," she mused. "The curse took effect after she... passed."

Hiromi turned the dilemma over in her mind. "God works to bring us to those we need to change us, and change the world around us," she said, though she wondered if she even believed that platitude now. "Maybe that's it, though. God brings us to the situations... then it's up to us."

Is that enough? the Priest thought. *I sure am bad at cheering people up. If only Kiwi were here... she'd know what to say to make everyone happy again...*

Lucciana said nothing for a time, then motioned for Shss to stop. Taking out the sheathed wakizashi from her robe, and untying the empty scabbard that used to house her katana from her waist, she stumbled over to a nearby tree. A voice in her mind screamed in pain from its sliced open belly.

She tossed both items unceremoniously at the exposed roots of the silent tree, and put her arm back around Shss as they hobbled together back down the mountain. "Can I ask you something, Lucciana?" Hiromi asked from her side.

She nodded. "Anything at all."

"What happened to make you want to kill people so badly?" Hiromi asked softly.

Goto, my family, countless warlords I felled with my own blade, a thousand places and faces... the Elf thought. *It almost seems too daunting a task to mention them all. But all stories start somewhere.*

"Let me tell you about a place... called Yamato."

Ascension

It has been two days since I awoke from the massacre I carried out in the Ruins. Hiromi and Shss explained everything, from the piles of decimated beasts and Rattkin, to even the most minute of details of my own transformed body. The spirits of those I murdered have described enough, though: I have seen my own empty eyes, and have suffered and died from a thousand different perspectives in the past two days, through their memories.

The process of guiding these agonized, frightened and angry souls has been a slow one, but with each spirit I help usher to the other side, the pressure in my mind grows less and less... though the burden on my heart remains.

In turn for the kindness of these two strangers, whose chance meeting on Llylgamyn has touched my life in a way I never thought possible, I told them everything. For the first time in my life, someone other than me knows the entire story of how I came to be... an orphan and a mercenary at fourteen, a murderer shortly thereafter, and now...

I should feel vulnerable, like I have just given away all of the information needed to exploit my weaknesses and destroy me... but I don't.

Having these two carry that knowledge makes me feel... lighter, just slightly more able to carry on with my life and make up for all of my wrongs, as well as celebrate my rights. I'm not sure I ever knew what this was, but perhaps this is what people mean by "friendship."

Something happened with Hiromi, likely stemming from the Bane King's essence and what it meant for the Rattkin, but I cannot say that the change is for the worse. She seems more outspoken, decisive, and clear on her objective on this planet. I can see a resolve in her that was previously muted and ineffective. I don't know how to describe it... she just seems more free.

Shss has kept a close eye on me, more likely to protect Hiromi and herself if the Presence ever got a hold of me again. I can't say I blame her. However, that has not kept her from lending me an arm when the voices got too loud, and helping me across the plains in our flight from the Rattkin as we press onwards. She, too, seems changed. I caught a glimpse of her torment on Llylgamyn, but damned if I know how she has managed to come so far in just a few months.

We have travelled along the mountainous peaks north of New City, trying to find a way back there, where maybe we can find some answers on how to eliminate the Bane King's essence and its hold on my mind. It scratches there daily, demanding a feast of blood and death. But with Hiromi's continued help and my own desire not to give in, its advances have been effectively halted.

Yesterday, in the waning hours of daylight as we crossed the wide, grassy plains just west of where the mountains ended, Shss saw the edge of a city's walls across the open field. To my amazement, she trustingly left me alone in Hiromi's care, as she left us to see if we had finally stumbled upon the place we were looking for.

Just as quickly, she returned and ushered us away from the distant city. It was Nyctalinth... the city of the T'Rang.

There was a bustle of activity there, and more ships around it than we had previously seen. I saw nothing

more than a few blurry black and grey dots in the sky, but Shss assured us that they were there, by the dozens, and most were leaving the city rather than entering it. I thought that if the T'Rang were launching a campaign against another people on Guardia, heaven help the technologically backwards nation on its receiving end.

We made haste to a treeline a mile away, and found the main road leading to who knew where. It was there that we made camp.

I have slept little in the past few days; I cannot with so many spirits still trapped within me. Some are more stubborn than others, intent on punishing me for my actions. One by one, though, they have left me through curiosity, exasperation, fulfillment, or just sheer boredom.

Hiromi has stayed up with me every night that I have been coaxing spirits to the other side, but she collapsed last night with Shss underneath the shadowy trees. Surprisingly, while she lay there, I felt no different from when she had been conscious and actively holding the Bane King's essence at bay.

From then until now, when the sun has just started to peek over the mountains and creep over the plains to the east, I have been here, with Hiromi's head in my lap and Shss asleep beside me. Shss' head is on my shoulder, her breathing calm and slow.

Running my fingers slowly through Hiromi's hair and watching the orange sun rise on this alien planet, I can only think of one thing: how I wish this moment would last forever.

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Shss awoke to Hiromi's short, panicked cry. "I fell asleep! I'm so sorry!" she shouted and sat up. She looked worriedly at Lucciana, who was peacefully watching the sunrise.

"It's all right," she assured her. "I'm ok."

Nonetheless, Hiromi looked suspicious. "Are you sure?" she asked, trying to probe the inactive essence of the Bane King.

Just days before, Lucciana had cut deeply into the Hobbit's body, and absorbed a fragment of her most recent, most powerful memories. She sighed calmly, and a small piece of Hiromi's memories returned to her. "You stayed up all those nights and woke up extra early to make sure I was all right, didn't you?" she asked.

Hiromi blushed and smiled, and Lucciana reached forward to embrace her tightly, whispering, "I will never forget what you have done for me..."

She looked up at Shss and held her hand out. Shss took it and pulled her up, and Lucciana held the two close. "Always looking out for me, right *Jai*?" she whispered in Shss' ear. Shss squeezed her tighter, needing to say nothing.

"Me too, right?" Hiromi asked from beneath them.

"No," Lucciana replied, and Hiromi's face started to fall. "You would be *Mai*, 'little sister,'" she chuckled.

The Priest furrowed her brow in mock annoyance. "I'm older than you, you know," she complained.

Lucciana grinned, and Shss beckoned to the main road. "We soon find town," she said. "Behind me. I will fight."

As they journeyed on, a particularly violent spirit came forth to beseige Lucciana's mind, and she began to stumble. Shss placed her arm around her waist, then put her left arm around her shoulders to help her walk. Lucciana did well to hide her internal pain, though every momentary jaw clench and eye flinch spoke volumes of the spirit's anger at its departure.

Shss squeezed her reassuringly while she kept an eye on both Hiromi and the road. Hiromi walked beside them with the Fighter in the middle, doing her best to hold back the other spirits as her friend struggled with the current one.

The trees got thicker as the road got wider, but there was enough light to see various insectal and harmless critters roaming about in the bushes off to the sides. Shss could tell that they had skirted Nycalinth successfully... from her vantage point earlier, she could see that the bulk of the flying machines leaving Nyctalinth were heading southeast.

Now and then she could see one of the frighteningly silent T'Rang ships flying in the distance. Too far away to spot the three of them, to be sure, but close enough that Shss could gauge their heading. From the direction of the rising sun and the location of the mountains from their current position, they were somewhere far southwest of Nyctalinth. At any point, the road would probably fork east towards New City.

Unfortunately, when they reached the expected crossroads heading south and east, the path possibly leading to New City was simply blocked off: not by a border of men, metal or machines, but my a field of orchids.

Above the thick field of small, multi-colored flowers hovered a thin cloud of pollen, whose purpose and effect upon the body were unknown. Nonetheless, Lucciana needed help, and Shss would not sit idly by while she needed her. "Please hold Lucciana," she said to Hiromi, and gently let the Elf down into the Priest's tiny hands.

"Careful, Shss. I'll be right here if you need me," Hiromi assured as a bead of sweat drew down Lucciana's wincing face. Shss clenched her fists as she walked into the field of pollen.

She cautiously breathed a small amount of it, and felt nothing at first. In the end, the change was so gradual that she almost didn't notice the pollen's effect on her... but after a few seconds, her head started to swim. Her eyes grew heavy, and she wanted nothing more than to take a long, restful nap...

"Ah-CHOO!" she sneezed, and was suddenly lucid. She shook the fleeting sleepiness from her mind, drew back to take a deep breath of fresh air and hurried back towards the trees behind her to safely see just how far the field went.

The pollen itself was thin enough to see to the end of the long field of sleep-inducing flowers, which was a disheartening two miles, give or take. Shss lept to the taller branches of the tree to make sure... and soon realized that nobody could hold their breath for that long on foot. She jumped back to the ground and gulped greedily at the fresh air waiting beyond the yellow cloud, sniffing and rubbing her nose as she returned to the others.

"What's up?" Hiromi asked.

Shss crossed her arms and looked back at the cloud, walking backwards towards her friend for a brief second before turning back to her. "Sleep flowers... we stop and think," she suggested.

"All right," Hiromi replied, and gently let Lucciana to the ground.

The Fighter leaned up against a tree and went over their options. They could try and use magic to blow the pollen away, but she doubted Hiromi had that much power in reserve. A breathing mask of some kind...? The only trouble was where to find it.

After a few minutes of getting nowhere, Shss heard someone approaching. She cocked an eyebrow in surprise at the strange, blue-skinned being coming towards them. He was tall and almost impossibly thin, wearing a blue robe dotted with symbols of stars and crescent moons over a smaller purple robe underneath. His slippers were simple and brown, in contrast to the bright red sash around his waist.

Oddly enough, his skin was a bright sky blue, and his yellow eyes looked carefully around for a potential speaking partner. His lack of a companion did not deter him, though, as he appeared to be talking to

himself.

"Morning," Hiromi said cheerily with her hands supportively around Lucciana, whose eyes scanned left and right at something only she could see. Shss waved, and the man suddenly stopped walking and talking to himself. He thrust his arm out over Hiromi and Lucciana, then let his outstretched pointer finger come to rest on Shss.

"REPENT!" he screamed, then clenched his fist underneath his chin. "Repent, evildoers! The world is at an end, and only the Light may guide you!"

Shss looked at him, worried. *Did the Rattkin send him?* "Who are you?" she asked.

He flung his hands about wildly as he spoke agitatedly. "I am Kymas Turan, deliverer of the Word, sent to purge this world of all sin and wrongdoing!" he proclaimed. "Have you heard the Word, dear sisters?" Shss made a confused face, and Kymas backed up slightly. "Or be you spies of the bloated Munk, whose drunken and insubstantial preaching have brought you naught but damnation?!"

Hiromi held her hands out. "Whoa, slow down! Who are the Munk?" she asked hurriedly.

At her confusion, Kymas visibly calmed, but still looked ready to snap at any moment. Shss placed an arm on her back, with her hand securely on her Psi Rod. "The Munk are the diseased followers of the false prophet, Munkharam," Kymas Turan shouted. "Their drunkards become guardians, their most 'wise and learned' become philosophers of no real worth or substance, and their continued reliance upon that mind-altering black mush is proof enough of their sin!

"They pollute the very planet with their misguided teachings, and their evil stands in stark contrast to the good Word spoken by the Light!" he finished... temporarily.

"Where..." Hiromi started.

"The mighty peoples of Dane, under the leadership of Torquesade the Magna Dane, are the true reflection of the Light upon Guardian society!" Kymas interrupted. "Whereas the Munk ponder morality as subjective and equal to all, and in turn paralyze their own minds, the Dane offer teachings of benefit to people in their daily lives!

"Submit to the Divine Light and know true goodness!" he yelled. "Brave the Tower of Dane, and know your own strength! Reach the top, and acquire power unimagineable!!" He reached his hands to the sky with his last words, and his face reflected the happiness of a man sure of his own path.

"Power... unimagineable..." Lucciana whispered. Hiromi squeezed her arm as Lucciana released the troublesome spirit, and her face visibly relaxed. She stood before the Dane and spoke simply. "Can you heal me?" she asked, being purposefully vague.

Kymas pointed above the trees, to the west. "Outsider, there is nothing the Magna Dane, nor in turn you, cannot do once you have bathed in the Divine Light," he promised.

With a nod, Lucciana gathered the other two into their standard huddle. But before she could explain, Shss asked, "They heal you?"

Hiromi smiled broadly... she was learning fast. "Exactly," Lucciana replied, "if he's not lying. What do you think?"

Shss inhaled deeply. "You cannot fight, and Hiromi need help you." *Which meant...* She nodded with certain purpose. "I will go," she decided.

"Teach me," she requested of Kymas, her brown eyes resolute.

His face softened, but he did not relax. "Then welcome, sister, to the lands of Dane!" he shouted, as he

waved his hands erratically. "Find brother Almagorte, and he shall initiate you into the brotherhood of Dane!"

All at once, his eyes twinkled. "As a new Initiate of Dane," he said silkily, "a tithe of 10% of the gold in your purse shall certainly release the burden of sin from your souls, as well as its weight from your minds..."

Hiromi almost reached into her robe, but simultaneously realized the theft of their gold in the Rattkin Ruins... as well as a sudden feeling of being cheated by an overly energetic prophet. "But she's not an Initiate yet," she said innocently.

Kymas Turan's face grew dark in an instant. "Your faith is as weak as the excuses you spin," he said sharply, and pushed Shss and Hiromi rudely aside as he walked north towards Nyctalinth. As he loudly called down verbal hellfire from the sky above, damning everything and everyone he could see, Lucciana whispered, "Good luck converting the T'Rang, dear Priest..."

Shss led the way through the trees, until the massive black tower came into view several minutes later. Its walls gave off a tangible feeling of the mystic, as well as the countless eons that it had stood proudly upon the surface of Guardia. The Dane had had considerable time to hone their beliefs into a cornerstone of diverse Guardian society... and she wondered just how well they had honed the effects of their spells as well.

As they drew closer to the obelisk, a shivering feeling of cold overwhelmed the three, a feeling that grew only worse as they ascended the great steps into the first floor of Dionysceus, the Tower of Dane.

The featureless, cold black walls ran the length of the entrance chamber they entered, and the Tower looked as gloomy and felt as cold as their outside impression implied. It was a silent, deadly serious place that none of them particularly wanted to enter, but one look into Lucciana's eyes kept Shss from nixing the entire idea of seeking power from the enigmatic Dane.

The only problem was where to go. Seven archways led into seven different areas from the entrance, and each seemed as foreboding as the rest. Three in front, two to each side...

Out of nowhere, a young, bony Dane came from behind them all, so silent that even Shss could not hear him coming. He stopped before them, where Shss could see his feet rising just an inch above the ground. His clothes were identical to Kymas Turan's, but looked much less bright and extravagant. His face was long and thin, but not altogether unpleasing... even boyish.

The Dane felt pleased with his ability to sneak up on the three, but showed only his disgust. *Outsiders? What do they want?* he thought miserably. *By the Light they're ugly... but then again, what outsider isn't?* He smiled condescendingly. "What are you doing here?" he asked rudely.

"I become Inshate," Shss stated.

The Dane laughed in her face. "'Inssssshate?'" he repeated, drawing out her hissing accent mockingly. "What's the matter with you, Snake Girl? Are all you outsiders this oblivious to proper speech, or are you just naturally stupid? You, learning the ways of the Dane... what's next? Rattkin? Or should we start lecturing Phoots?!"

Shss smiled wryly at him, but the Dane was unimpressed. "Can't understand me, Snake Girl?" he asked. "Fine, then. I won't waste any more time with you. My destiny as a High Father awaits..." He floated up and away from the party and through the more distant archway on the right.

The Fighter laughed. *What an idiot.*

She beckoned the other two over, and they followed the floating Dane. After they walked through a small, empty room and hallway, they arrived in a dimly lit studying room, where a congregation of two dozen Dane, including the one who accosted them earlier, were seated.

The young Dane students whispered quietly amongst themselves as Shss and the others approached. They wore identical robes of blue and purple, though they were smaller and certainly more cute than the adult Dane the party had come across earlier. They hushed as the three outsiders came in, and a taller Dane glided forward from the shadows with an authentically friendly smile upon his face.

"Welcome sisters, brother," he said graciously. "I am Almagorte, teacher of the neophyte in the ways of the Divine Light. What brings you to Dionysceus, the Divine Tower of Dane?"

Shss stepped forward, and the younger students sat back with mistrust. "I want to be In-i-ti-ate," she said carefully. The thin Dane from before chuckled silently, and said, "As do I."

The smiling Dane nodded, and gestured towards the ceiling. "Those that seek enlightenment often do!" he said happily. "This is why you have been brought here. You follow the Divine Light to this sacred place, where the Dane do prosper and chase the wisdom and power that we are all entitled to. It is here that you will purge wickedness from your soul and gain in strength, and eventually find the favor of the great Magna Dane.

"But tell me," he continued, "what proof of your righteousness do you offer?"

The Dane at Shss' side removed a sack of jingling coins and placed them into Almagorte's hands, who smiled happily and nodded. "You are truly worthy, brother, and I welcome you as an Initiate of Dane!" He turned to Shss and asked, "...And you, dear sister?"

She patted herself down, but knew already that her only possessions were the two polearms criss-crossed upon her back.

Almagorte tsk-tsk'd her. "Your lack of sincerity is plain for all to see, dear sister," he chastised.

She about gave up hope, when a voice came from her right: "Here."

It was Lucciana, and she was holding a sack of coins, the same ones given to her long ago for her mission to retrieve the Cosmic Forge. As she accepted the money then to continue her life as a mercenary, alone in every respect and running from herself... so she offered it now, in the presence of those she loved and who in turn loved her, in exchange for the healing that might set her free.

The bag looked old and beaten. "Five hundred gold pieces, exactly," Lucciana said, holding it to Shss. She took it from the Elf's hands, bowed slightly in thanks, then offered it to the smiling Almagorte.

"Five hundred, you say?" Almagorte asked, pleased. "It is more than enough! You certainly have earned the favor of the Divine Light this day!" He opened the bag and rooted through the coins, and made a funny face. "'Yeldarb?' 'Trebor and Werdna?'" he asked, reading the coins' inscriptions. "Who are all these people?"

After a while, though, he simply shrugged. Gold was gold, after all.

"Very well, then," he said. "I welcome you as well, Initiate, and wish you both the favor of the Divine Light as you strive for the very top of the Tower! Though your trials shall be many, with faith you will most certainly succeed, and soon enough find yourselves High Fathers of the House of Dane! May the Divine Light guide you both!"

Shss' partner-of-sorts turned to her with a smug and disgusted look on his face, unhappy that he would be challenging the Tower with someone so ugly. "I'll see you from the top, Snake Girl," he said. "After you quit like all the other outsiders before you."

She clenched her fist before him. "Ok, 'Bone Boy,' we race then!" she challenged.

Bone Boy made a face, then lifted higher off of the ground and shot down the hallway, shouting, "Say what you will! No-one other than a Dane has ever stood before Torquesade!" She dashed after him, and

soon enough, they were gone.

Lucciana turned her attention to the next of the voices in her mind, and felt her mind lightening with each successive release. Hiromi sat next to her, chatting up the Dane on the nature of their reliance on the Divine Light and the meaning of their religion.

Numerous shadows bled out from the entrance. The Dane students stood and backed up, and all was silent. A figure stepped out of the darkness, and Almagorte walked forward to meet him. "You've finally come, Master Xheng..." he said, as energy crackled in his hands.

Shss followed the sound of Bone Boy's derisive laughter through several confusing rooms of whispering and chanting Dane to a broad room, whose internals were confused by a mass of thin pillars spread all about it.

"You'll have to be faster than that to make it to the top," Bone Boy laughed from the labyrinth ahead of her. As she sprinted forward to catch up, there was a sudden explosion, then a ghostly moan, then the sound of metal grinding on rock. She heard the sound stop briefly, then just as quickly return somewhere beyond the maze of pillars.

Shss weaved around a strange golden urn to the center two pillars. A quiet hissing sound made her stop, then look cautiously up to the ceiling next to them. There were vents there, dozens of them, at the corners of every section of ceiling that the pillars surrounded. Gas or no, though, it was the only way through.

She held her breath and stepped into the pillars, darting left and right among them as the entire room overflowed suddenly with choking green gas. But the more she wandered and exerted herself, the more her lungs screamed for air, burning her from the inside. She could take it no more, and breathed deep the noxious fumes.

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"Ok, here we go!" Shss cried out from behind her cupped hands. She slowly opened them around her mouth, and inhaled an entire breath's worth of swamp gas. She immediately started to hack and cough, and her eyes began to tear up as her head pounded. She grasped her throat... it was too much! She couldn't hang on, and the world started to go dark...

Serkesh put his scaled hands on her shoulders. "Be strong, Shss," he said calmly, as he breathed the air himself.

Her knees buckled and she dropped knee deep into the sludge beneath her. "I can't," she coughed painfully, placing one hand on a dark tree in front of her. "I can't..."

Her big brother squeezed her shoulders harder, embracing her. "Stop fighting it," he urged. "Breathe it in and accept it, as you would normal air."

Before Shss blacked out, she did as she was told, and relaxed her face, her throat, her lungs, every part of her body in preparation for unconsciousness.

Strangely enough, once she had done so, the pain disappeared. Her eyes opened in surprise, and she let her hands fall to her sides. She turned her head upwards to Serkesh, who was beaming with pride at her success. "It took me five tries," he laughed, "before I could stop crying long enough to black out the next eight!"

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His happy, enlarged eyes receded, and the gas returned to engulf her entire view. It stank... but it was nothing in comparison to the foulest section of her home.

Shss walked through the mist as if nothing could be the manner, and hugged the southern wall of the

floor to a gate barring further progress into the Tower. The numerous pillars on this floor weren't parts of a maze after all... they were merely a collection of obstacles meant for her to run into and collide with in a panicked haze. They would have to try a lot harder than this if they expected her to give up...

The gate was locked, of course, but a swirling essence behind her appeared to show her the way. A smokey grey figure in the form of the mystical Dane appeared before her, its ghostly voice echoing all around her as it charged a fiery red spell. "Initiate of Dane, you will prove yourself worthy before my power if you wish to adva..." it started.

Shss untied her spear from her back, arced it around and up through the Ghost's body, then tied it up again, all in one smooth motion. A glowing, vertical line marked the wound that the Ghost had received, and it exploded in a sudden burst of light.

"Right..." its voice came, and the gate behind her grinded noisily open.

She stepped through, and a Dane dressed in dazzling blue robes with yellow stars dotted about it slid out from the shadows to greet her. "You have passed the Test of the Initiate, dear sister," the Tollen Dane praised. "I honor you as a Disciple of Dane! May the Divine Light guide you!"

And then, he was gone. Shss walked up the stairs before her, and into a weaving maze of dark hallways. She noticed as she walked down them that there was light around her, enough to see, but with no discernable source. The light appeared to originate from periodic positions in the walls, much like a candle or torch, but there was nothing physically there that appeared to cause it. It was constant as well, free of a flame's flicker that cast strange shadows on the walls and made scouting dangers a real difficulty.

Cha-THOOM, Cha-THOOM, came several echoing sounds from just ahead of her. They were pits, which seemed to be randomly opening and closing in a wide area just in front of her. *Cha-THOOM,* the sound came again, and several more pits opened. They all blocked access to the other side of the grand hall, another test of the Tower of Dane.

Bone Boy floated by in front of her, then to the right. Seconds later, even more holes in the ground closed and allowed him access to a small alcove on the northern wall. He must have been controlling them, trying to make a path to the other side to continue his journey.

Shss hissed a greeting. When he turned around, she lept to a spot before him, to one of a few breaks between the many pits... when the holes suddenly started to go wild.

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Yuck! Muddy puddles, stink that didn't wash off for days, and the spiniest, most pointed and hostile bugs the swamp had to offer. Serkesh certainly knew how to pick good places to train.

Shss lept from logs poking out of the leech-infested muddy waters, to miniscule patches of dark brown grass surrounding and supporting the base of trees, to the branches of the trees themselves. She had no fear... her people taught her how to dash and leap, and dodge and chase with the best of them. Her eyes opened wide thinking that she might just have a natural knack at it all.

Over an agitated, rigid insect with its spines held in the air, to the banks where poisonous frogs dwelt and eyed her suspiciously, Shss flipped over and past every danger the swamp had to throw at her.

The frogs spat green poison at her descending body, but missed when she twisted herself between the two streams. She landed between them, plucked them both off of their comfortable spots on the grass and flung them to the tree behind her. They flew through the air, landing precisely and safely on the branches just above the muck. Shss hissed a laugh as they ribbited angrily at her.

With every jump through the smelly, dank swamp, she heard the slightest of rustles behind her, proof that her brother was there and looking out for her.

All of a sudden, her foot slipped on a near-invisible pool of slime on the log beneath her, and she catapulted facefirst towards the infested swamp beneath her.

Serkesh's powerful hand grabbed her around the waist and flipped her over, landing her somewhat uncomfortably near the tree she was aiming for. She stopped at a hunch there, looking back to thank him, but he was gone.

At the very least, he was trying *to hide; a Lizardman that massive wasn't exactly the most graceful and unnoticeable of beings. Shss widened her eyes into the thickest of leaves of the trees behind her, where he was obviously attempting to conceal himself, and continued her effortless leaps through the dingy swamp.*

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They were all opening and closing randomly, but Shss still found a momentary safe spot between two open pits. The ground beneath her fell away as she lept into the air again, flipped sideways, then found berth at another thin sanctuary of solid stone.

She jumped and twisted over and over between the holes, seeing patterns and hearing the motors responsible for the openings engage before they even did so. From thick spots to thin, she traversed the snapping holes with effortless grace.

Bone Boy looked on with a mixture of awe and anger. This test was supposted to be a measure of one's ability to notice patterns, to open a path through a specific sequence of movement in the grand hall!

But isn't that exactly what she is doing? came a betraying thought. His jaw hung open as the dark girl used her free hand and legs in perfect tandem to jump to the other side. He almost cried out in warning when a pit opened beneath her, but caught himself. *Remember who she is,* he thought to himself.

Shss jammed her spear down over the pit, and the base of the pole and the head stopped on both sides of its mouth. Pushing on it, she reversed her descent and flung herself over the surprising opening, and landed with a crouch on the safe side of the crazy shafts. The noises stopped as the pits returned to their silent method of capturing foolish prey.

Bone Boy's mind was awash with conflicting emotions of respect and defensive pride. When she stood up and pretended to dust herself off for show, then waved back at him with a smile, a feeling of competition overtook everything. He would win, even though he might be stuck here a while. If only the pits didn't affect magic negatively, he could just fly over there and wipe the smile off of her face as he shot past.

The gate on the other side of the pits opened readily for Shss this time, and a new Tollen Dane spoke from a seated position in the corner as he daydreamed and stared off into nothing. He looked extremely bored, and didn't bother to look at her as he rattled off his spiel from memory.

"As you have passed the Temple of Divine Order, so do I bestow upon you the rank of Holy Canon," he said in monotone, his eyes half-open. "May the Divine Light guide you, good..." he paused, glanced at her quickly, then knew the final word to speak as he returned to staring at the wall: "...sister," he finished.

Shss hissed in thanks and darted past him. Even the sight of an alien undertaking the Trials of the Dane wasn't enough to shake him from his malaise.

She walked slowly up the stairs, and began to notice that the world around her was growing darker with each successive step. She didn't feel any pain or disease, so it wasn't an attack or some sort of magic... In fact, she concluded, it was probably the lack of sorcery that caused it.

The hanging magical lights that littered the Dane Tower were absent on this floor, and when she reached the top of the stairs, it was absolutely, utterly pitch black; she could not even see her hands. She felt out slowly, and began to run her hands on the walls around her to get her bearings. Judging from how big the other levels were, she figured this one might take a while to get through.

With her right hand guiding her on the wall, and the other in front of her, she slowly followed the northern wall to the west, carefully testing each stone in front of her before she stepped down. She continued this way for several minutes, until the wall under her right hand disappeared and she fell facefirst onto the stone.

She reached her hands out in all directions, and was dismayed to feel that the path split west, east and south, with a large barrier in front of her. *A maze in the darkness...?* she thought, trying to call up an image of the floor she was on.

Suddenly, a light approached from behind and temporarily blinded her eyes, which had adjusted so readily to the darkness. She stood up, just as something struck her head lightly from behind.

It was Bone Boy, holding a glowing orb that illuminated the walls around him. "May the Divine Light guide the worthy, eh, Snake Girl?" he taunted, and flew off to the east with an echoing laugh. Shss tried to dash after him, but he was too quick. Soon, she was so turned around and confused from her pursuit that she had no idea where she was.

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He might have taken away her ability to see, but she would have approved of something covering her nose, instead. That was the point, however: her sight was gone, her nose was overwhelmed... and only her ears and body were there to guide her.

It really was remarkable how much more she could sense at this point: spine thraxes wiggling through the trees, bubbles erupting from the leeches and gas in the swamps, chirping insects and fluttering birds... for the first time in her life, she felt the swamp truly come alive. There was no distinction between her and everything around her; she was as much a part of the swamp as its denizens were a part of her.

With every turn of her head, the difference in air pressure and the sound of her own footsteps detailed the obstacles she would have to surmount or avoid. She lightly stepped over a harmless, squishing grub and walked farther along the precarious log over the deep muck.

Air pressure built in her left ear until it almost screamed as it exploded in strength. She shot her head forward and tilted to the right as a stream of venom buzzed by her ear. This was easy... fun, even!

Shss soon became more brave and trotted along the log to the other side, to a tree surrounded by buzzing mosquitos. Some flew towards her looking for a quick bite, but each was met with an immediate swat. They were really noisy if you really started to listen.

She didn't need her eyes... she didn't even need her ears, she soon realized. Shss dashed through the swamp, avoiding the attacks of frightened creatures and the dangerous environment, letting her instinct take over and guide her through the hostile area and straight back to her village.

When she felt the complete security of being that only accompanied one on their return home, she removed the animal hides from around her eyes, and was greeted by the proud and respect-filled faces of her family and neighbors.

***

There was something in the maze, making a strange sound. It was a slurping and sucking sound, like someone greedily gorging themselves on a pool of crystal clear water. It was coming from... there.

Shss walked through the darkness, turning around corners and avoiding small, loose rocks on the ground as if they were so obvious, they were glowing. With instinct guiding her, it almost felt like they were.

The second you lose faith in your instincts is the second that you are at your most defenseless, Serkesh told her those many years ago.

She walked through the twisting hallways until there was suddenly light in front of her. It was like a curtain of darkness separating her on the north, south and east sides of this oasis of light, with a gate barring any progress to the path to the west. The area beyond the portal was pitch black, but she could sense stairs going up from beyond it. The gate did not open, however, meaning there was something left to do on this floor.

Again following the slurping sound, she entered the darkness to the south, feeling the comfort of blackness gently soothing her sensitive eyes once more. She walked around and around in a counter-clockwise path through a long hallway, and it shortened as it reached its own center.

Finally, she was in another bright area with the curtain of black behind her, and another gate to her left. The sign upon it said, "Lair of the Beast."

Lair, huh? she thought, trying to remember if she had heard that word before. Unless "lair" meant something like "happiness," "friendly party," or "kind and generous love," she assumed with a smile that there was something to whomp on inside.

As the gate slid open and she stepped into the darkness beyond it, her Psi Rod was in her hands and ready to face the onslaught of the Beast. She heard it before she saw it, slurping and sucking forward along the ground, when it stopped before her. Its entire body began to glow in the darkness, presenting her a very clean target.

It was a bug, its hardened exoskeleton rock hard and grey, and its belly green and pulpy. It skittered forward on six tiny brown legs, causing its blue and pink head to bob up and down as it moved. Sickled red antennae hung off of its skull and temples, and deadly red mandibles chomped inwards on invisible prey. When the glow around its body was sufficiently bright, it rose up and unleashed a howling cry from beneath its head, exposing its jagged white teeth in the process.

The Psi-Beast jabbed its piercing mandibles towards Shss, who jumped cleanly left and out of their path. She placed her feet on the wall, flipped backwards over the beast's head and drove the Psi Rod's curved hooks into the side of its neck. The blades pierced its flesh and stuck its head to the ground, and Shss pressed both of the rod's buttons and engaged the electric orb at its tip.

Standing atop its rock-like back, Shss was safe from the current, but the Psi-Beast bore the brunt of the stunning charge, and thrashed about as its energy was zapped away. Shss dropped and wrapped her legs tightly around its hard exoskeleton, holding the Psi Rod in place until its movements became slower and weaker than before.

Finally, it bucked her off of its body. She let go of the rod and left it impaled in the beast's neck as it thrashed into the walls around it, scraping the base of the T'Rang weapon against the stone walls. She unslung her spear and jabbed the base into its soft underbelly, then kicked it backwards. As it stumbled and flailed, she charged forward and rammed the base a final time into its belly.

As the beast slipped into unconsciousness and fell forward, Shss jumped backwards. It struck the ground and sent shockwaves throughout the floor of the Tower. She stepped forward cautiously and unhooked the Psi Rod from its neck, then turned to leave... until she heard a peculiar sound.

She was no expert in any tongue besides the language of her own people, so she had no idea what to make of the monosyllabic wheeze that the Psi-Beast emitted before its death, but it was clear enough when she heard it. If only she knew how to decipher the strange word: "Moo."

Shss let her instincts guide her back to the gate, which still refused to budge. She bested the beast... so why was it still closed? No matter how much she tried to convince it to move, though, it would not open.

She resigned herself to returning to the maze to solve this riddle. Again letting her senses go and feeling through the maze, she found herself near the area where she had originally lost Bone Boy. She reached out her feelings and senses to the extent of the maze, and picked up a very faint whine coming from

somewhere in front of her, to the west.

It was a familiar, almost electric hum... a clear signal of life. Several faint, but distinct, resonances were still somewhere there. Perhaps they might know what to do.

After a few minutes of boldly striding down the pitch black hallways, light erupted in her eyes from a small closet, and she was suddenly somewhere else. Between her and a curtain of darkness was a meditation room, complete with soft, red velvet cushions and a circle of seated, meditating Dane.

They were identically dressed in exceedingly humble, featureless blue robes. Their faces were peaceful and their eyes closed as they silently searched the depths of their own minds for the hidden mysteries of the universe. The one facing her slowly opened his eyes and met Shss' gaze with a calm one of his own, and standing and walking with a grace so gentle that he seemed to be floating, he stood before her.

"Have you come to learn?" Myntor asked her in her mind, his name coming to her at the same time. Shss nodded. The frail old Dane beckoned to an open spot opposite himself, and once she was seated, he closed his eyes and sat silent and still.

Shss closed hers as well, and suddenly found herself standing amidst a million fleeting galaxies, countless stars of bright yellows and soothing blues, and an infinite amount of planets teeming with all manner of exotic life. She found that by focusing on a specific region of space, she could instantly travel to any star or planet she chose, and see exactly the beings or places she wished.

On one world, a massive army of squat, flying creatures with clacking jaws advanced on another army of tall, muscular rock-like creatures. On yet another, a civilization of miniature red lizards who walked on all fours made their home in the ruins of an ancient city, wrestling and playing with one another.

She peeked into a small house on another world, where a smooth-skinned humanoid lay upon the ground in his room, his mind wrapped around the many problems of love, learning and family that overtake adolescents of any race. And then, she was back in the blackness of space again, viewing the universe from the "outside."

Myntor was next to her, waving his hand at the beauty of creation and the myriad of individual lives being carried out even as he spoke. "Once the mind is unchained from the prejudices and limitations of the body," he said, "it is free to accept a universe of truth. But... do we really need to die, just to know?"

Slowly, his body began to glow from the inside. "Or can we find the peace of truth... by unchaining ourselves?" he asked.

His essence exploded into the field of stars before him, becoming one with all of existence. Shss felt herself being pulled back through the rushing galaxies, to a forested planet, into a black tower, to a lone figure sitting in a quiet room. Before she opened her eyes, an echoing whisper came to her mind and spread throughout the now empty room of meditation: "Moo..."

Shss had no idea what happened to the Myntor or the others, only that she alone was now in the room. She stood up achingly, as if she had been sitting in the same position for some time. At the same time, though, she felt strange. "Lighter," or maybe, "airy."

She stepped into the curtain of darkness ahead of her... and passed straight through the wall. Her entire body seemed to buzz as she stepped through what appeared to be solid rock, but once she reached the other side, she felt that the wall behind her was quite solid.

Down the hallway and to the east, Shss came upon the stubborn gate out once more, which finally decided to take pity upon her and grind slowly open. The narrow passage beyond it was dark at first, but light slowly grew in tiny orbs along the walls as a Dane's voice came to her mind.

"Through darkest night to guiding light, you have passed the Temple of Eternal Night," he sang. "Welcome, Priest of Dane." The light illuminated the stairs behind it, and Shss continued to the next floor.

This level was an exercise in confusion and frustration. It was lit well enough, but every few steps Shss took, she was suddenly transported somewhere else with no accompanying sound or reason as to why. It was absolutely disorienting, and soon, she was utterly and completely lost.

The cause of her teleportation was invisible, and she could not instictually feel her way through the strange movement. She sighed, then leaned against a wall between two teleporters she had previously wandered into. In the middle of the jumpers to her left and right, she wondered what she could do.

She only took a few seconds to consider her options, when Bone Boy saved her.

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Her first hunt was a frightening thing. Not only did she have to use the spear she personally fashioned on a creature that could probably break the newly made thing in half, but she had never attacked someone or something that had not been simply testing or training her before. On top of that, she had already lost her prey, and was expected to do everything alone.

But there was a reason that the boars of the swamp were hunted before most other game: they reeked worse than the swamp itself. They bathed within the murkiest parts of the dirty muck, and mixed with their own lethally awful odor, it was a wonder they weren't systematically hunted down to the last just to rid the swamp of their stench.

The boar ran across squishy brown plantlife and dead tree leaves to rest in a tiny field of lush green bushes and hanging vines. It was there that Shss tracked the resting creature through its rotten odor alone, and quickly and mercifully ended its life with a single stab through the heart. She was overjoyed then, not only that her crafted spear was strong enough to best the boar, but that she was able to find and painlessly end its life for her village's foodstocks.

Serkesh appeared from where he had been silently watching her and stood over the boar, where he solemnly offered his prayers and thanks for the life given to sustain the Lizardmen for another day.

She learned how to kill that day... but also how to show mercy and thanks.

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In this case, though, Bone Boy's aroma was... not so bad to follow.

Shss blushed against her will. *In comparison to the boar, of course,* she silently qualified.

Where his smell grew stronger, Shss ran and followed. Her sight was a chaotic whirling of halls and doors, stone walls and cold, empty rooms, leaping from teleporter to teleporter through the level in furious pursuit of her rival. After a while, her sight dropped away, and there was only his smell. Strong here, weak there. Left, then right... straight ahead, left...

The next jump between teleporters landed her in darkness. It was a good sign that she had not been here before, but she thought she was past this test of instinct already. As she stepped forward though, the air seemed to give way around her, and she could not breathe. Nonetheless, she held her ground and stood proud. Her heartbeat slowed, and fear left her.

Several seconds later, the air returned. A vision approached from the distance... butterflies tickled the insides of her stomach as she realized what the object was before it even reached her: the Astral Dominae.

The dark globe was sitting atop a clawed grey pedestal, but its blackness was of an entirely different caliber than the darkness around her; indeed, as the lack of light in this area absorbed what was around it and took what it was offered, the darkness of the globe appeared to take in everything present... from color and light, to even feelings.

As the vision drew closer, Shss saw her own reflection upon its surface, stretched over its spherical shape and looking inquisitively back at her. The globe seemed to become equally curious, then slightly apprehensive as her own mood shifted. Then, it sunk into the floor, and all was dark again.

Another image soon appeared: the young black-haired girl from the ship that Shss had seen nearly a week ago. She was dressed the same as before in her revealing, multi-colored attire, but the Fighter noted upon closer look that her hair seemed to be the exact same color as that of the globe's surface.

She was crouched over the spot where the globe was, and appeared to be fiddling with something in her hands... but Shss could not see what it was. From under the mechanical antenna around her right ear, she slowly lifted the eye patch covering her right eye to look upon the unseen globe that had ignited a planet in conflict.

A light appeared from her uncovered eye, concealing in brightness that which the patch had been hiding. The light engulfed Shss, and she was suddenly outside with the teleporters again.

And then, there was the gate in front of her. She was left so many questions... who was the girl she had seen twice already? What relationship did she have with the globe? And with all the time they had spent coming across absolutely nothing relating to its location, would they be able to find it before a less scrupulous person did?

She let the questions fall on the wayside for now, knowing that action, rather than conjecture, would lead to their answers.

Bone Boy's smell was strong and all-encompassing here... he was most likely just ahead! The gate slid open at her approach, and an exciteable Dane with flashing yellow eyes approached her and shook her hand vigorously.

"Sister!" he cried with excitement. "Welcome, welcome to the rank of Bishop! We get so few who can best the Temple of Aerial Whimsey, and now I can say I have met two of you!" He gestured towards the stairs behind him. "Please, continue on! May the Divine Light bless your journey, sister!"

"Thank you," Shss said, and patted him on the back before she entered the next test.

This level was flooded with water, marked by massive pillars at all four corners, and old chests resting on makeshift stone islands in the lapping blue waves. Bone Boy, his magic of flight long spent, was swimming slowly but surely to the first of the islands, and opening the lid of the trunk.

Shss lept straight to the first island and popped the lid, and easily dodged a series of poison-tipped darts that shot past her, then fell pathetically into the water behind her with tiny plops. Inside was a key and a small sack of gold.

Before she moved on to the next chest, she held both of her prizes before Bone Boy, who looked exhausted as he made his next lap to a chest across the waters. He cursed his heavy, absorbent robes, and sighed heavily as she powered through the stream, even with both of her weapons on her back.

She kicked open the next chest and dodged a guardian's disembodied, meaty hand, removing its key and gold in turn. As she continued to the next few rooms, powering over the waters, dodging traps and becoming richer and finding more keys with each successive chest, a latent thought began to bloom in her mind.

From the very start of the journey... no, from the very beginning of her life, a convergent path was placed before her. She had had a crisis of conflict on Llylgamyn, and even here upon Guardia, but in the end... none of it had any meaning to it.

Shss eventually found the one of the many keys she held that unlocked the gate in the room joining the two flooded, treasure-covered rooms. She was awarded the title of Apostle and congratulated on her deft handling of the Deadly Coffers, but the thought in her mind gained power with every step she took

towards the next level of the Tower. She hardly heard the praise.

From the beginning, she had never considered herself anything other than a Lizardman, despite her looks; the village was all she knew. But when she met the Amazulu, and teamed up with the others on Llylgamyn, she found herself contemplating ideas counter to her culture. Things seemed out of her control, and completely wrong.

Who was she exactly? A Lizardman, or an Amazulu? The question drove her to powerful depression, and at times, near insanity or breakdown.

She had become a true member of the Lizardman tribe after she completed the first part of her ceremony, and secured the pen of unspeakable power. She put down a fiery god and a crazed sea serpent, battled a Vampire and defeated Demons. She rescued Hiromi during the Gorn War, helped track down and protect Lucciana in the Rattkin Ruins, and led an expedition of outsiders on an alien planet... in search of something to protect the sister that she loved, and the universe as a whole.

But through it all... she was always herself.

She came upon a seemingly normal room, which, upon entering it, whipped up a powerful whirlwind strong enough to fling her in circles around the room. Shss unslung both of her polearms from her back, and timed her revolutions until she found an archway leading to where the smell of Dane was almost overpowering. She spun around the room one more time, and was almost upon it.

I am a Lizardman, she thought proudly. She rammed the Queen's black Spear of Death into the ground before the archway, stopping her flight through the gusty room. *And I am Amazulu.*

Bringing Shritis T'Rang's bladed Psi Rod before her, she jabbed two of its sharp blades into the ground next to the spear, and pulled herself into the archway. Once she was out of the swirling winds and stood proudly in the new hallway, the simple, undeniable truth was made clear for the first time in her life.

She gripped the black spear and Psi Rod strongly in each hand, and let the realization wash over her: *But I am so much more.*

Unity

Shss' competitive other half finally arrived in the Temple of the Wanderers, hot on her heels. He sighed disgustedly at the ironic choice of words, considering how soaking wet he was.

With the constant attacks of jealous fellow Dane trying to reach the top of the Tower, Bone Boy lost more of his magical energy than he had predicted he would. There was the pair of Dane on the floor of darkness, who thought they could broil him alive while he calmly floated through with the light in his palm to guide him. They thought wrong.

Then there were those creeping yellow Cruds that seemed to infest every floor of the Tower, the acid-breathing crows, the flying blue jellyfish... but the outsider was probably facing the same trials on her climb through the Tower. Nobody other than a Dane could wield power enough to survive here; her dead body would probably make its appearance at some point.

Almost immediately after the thought, his stomach knotted... but he did not know why.

He reached the swirling room of the everpresent whirlwind in the middle of the final challenge here, the one his High Father mentors had already warned him about. Beyond it was the lever that opened the gate to the Magna Dane, and to his place at the Dane leader's side.

As he entered the vortex, the swirling winds lifted him from his feet and spun him in circles. Though it was slightly nauseating, it was doing a terrific job of drying his robes and lifting his spirits. After a few seconds of spin dry, Bone Boy used the very last of his air magic to dispel the driving winds and came to a rest at the northern archway, where he was told the lever waited.

He calmly stepped along the cold stones through an empty room, to the end of the long hallway with the lever at the end. The hallway was punctuated every few feet on the right by small alcoves, and to the left by a series of latticed gates.

The entire area was charred black; no doubt the warnings of the final test here were true. But even more surprising was the sight of Snake Girl, whose calm eyes were cast to the floor as she paused in deep thought with her back to him.

Bone Boy stopped. Something was different about her than when he first met her...

His heart began to beat just the slightest bit faster, and his cheeks reddened as he unthinkingly let his eyes wander down her dark body. The eye that he could see was a deep pool of beautiful brown, almost covered by the thick braids of black hair that fell from her head and down to her shoulders. She was gently biting her moist, pink bottom lip in thought as her athletic arms were crossed over her chest, and the simple animal hides that were covering... He gulped at the thought.

Down her body his eyes travelled, past the short white pants around her muscular legs. Sweat and a little water dripped down her toned muscles to her bare feet. He drank of the image of this pinnacle of sheer beauty, at once confused and enamored with the girl he deemed nothing more than a hideous outsider moments ago.

As his heartbeat quickened and his eyes travelled back to her face, Shss shook the thoughts from her mind and turned her upper body towards him... and he saw that her face was filled with the confidence of a girl assured of her place in life. As she slowly smiled at him, Bone Boy's heart melted, his world turned upside-down, and everything he was taught to believe about non-Dane was shattered in an instant.

And all it took... was a single look.

"Bone Boy, you come," she noticed with a hissing laugh.

His jaw hung open silently, and he stammered something to the effect of, "A... up... fuh..." Shss looked confused for a second, then laughed out loud. He watched wordlessly as her toned body shook with each successive giggle.

She stepped into the corridor of blackened ash, saying, "Don't forget... we still race."

Despite her confidence, though, she felt an odd clenching in her stomach. It was strange... Bone Boy didn't seem like he wanted to attack, and this kind of feeling was normally reserved for the seconds prior to a large battle.

Then again... she was atop a tower of magic, so who knew what was going on?

Bone Boy shook himself from his stupor. "Hey, w... wait..." he stammered. She turned, and he held his hand out to her. She looked at him with an inquisitive look. "Good luck," he said.

Shss smiled and took his hand, squeezing firmly. The contact sent waves of paralyzing energy through him... a rush he had not felt even conjuring the most powerful of his magics. As he grasped her hand, he let an imperceptibly glowing stream of fire flow into the girl's hand.

Covered by their mutually grasping hands and hidden by the small amount of energy transferred over time, Shss did not suspect a thing. It was about half done now... as she tried to release her hand. He stopped her with a look into her eyes. "You are..." *so beautiful...* he finished in his mind.

Finally, the spell finished, and he reluctantly released his grip. He turned away from her and towards the deactivated room of wind, and vainly tried to come to terms with these many new, confusing feelings in his heart.

Shss hmphed wonderingly. *What's wrong with him?* she thought with a smile. *Maybe he's giving up*

because he knows I'll win! She chuckled, then walked back into the hallway of charred black floors and walls.

"KILL HER, MY CHILDREN! GIVE YOUR MASTER THE GIFT OF HER MAGNIFICENT SCREAMS!" a maniacal voice screamed out. Shss looked left through the gates, just as a large group of half-naked Dane unleashed a screaming barrage of blazing Fireballs to engulf her through the slats in the gates.

She had no time to avoid the very first one, and it screamed straight for her chest... but, to her amazement, it simply stopped an inch away from her body. It was audibly smoldering, but she did not feel its heat. Twisting sideways and cartwheeling to the right, the Fireball continued on its path and exploded in the small alcove behind her, throwing black soot in every direction.

I don't get it! she thought in a panic. *It was like it couldn't even touch me!* She put the thought on hold as two more Fireballs lashed out at her surprised face, and she tensed her muscles to dodge.

Well, if they stop at my chest... she thought. She jumped into the air and placed both hands on top of the two Fireballs, marvelling as they stopped beneath her hands like airborne stepping stones. She pushed off of them, continuing through the air and down the hallway. As she let them go and continued her flipping, darting dash down the hall, the Fireballs animated once more and exploded into the next alcove behind her.

The final alcove was just ahead, where she hoped she could find some respite from the barrage. Another Fireball struck her painlessly in the side, and she dropped backwards to the floor as it continued beyond her and exploded.

She had had enough. Shss stood silently in front of a large hole in the gate with her hands held out defensively in front of her. "AHAHAHAHAHA!" a shadow in the back screamed as his silhouette bobbed with the laughter. "BURN HER!!"

Three Fireballs rocketed from the group of Dane through the holes in the gates, blazing forward to take her life. And with rapid succession, Shss punched, kicked and elbowed them straight back through the gate and into her magic-wielding adversaries.

As the Dane fled and dove to escape the wrath of the reflected Fireballs, the shadow in the back screamed with maniacal rage. Safe from the barrage for the time being, Shss dashed into the final alcove, yanked on a lever jutting from the wall, and ran back down the corridor before they could recover and counter-attack. A crazed screech of sheer fury followed her as she returned to the whirlwind room.

Her heartbeat slowed after the ineffectual attack by the unknown magicians in the hallways. With a deep sigh of relief, she stepped into the now calm whirlwind room. Since the wind was gone, Shss easily walked through it, then through another archway in the side.

Bone Boy was nowhere to be found, and his smell was scattered. *He must have passed me already,* she thought. She ran a hand along her clothes and body, marvelling at how she had no injuries to speak of after the vicious attack... not even a tiny burn. Her body was covered in the black soot that the Fireballs conjured and kicked up as they exploded around her, but that was all.

She simultaneously realized two things: first, Bone Boy let her go down that hallway, knowing full well she might die there.

Just as soon as the thought crossed her mind, though, she realized that he had protected her, and kept her completely safe from the attack. Indeed, she felt fine in this hallway that should have been icy cold... she felt protected and warm. It was only with a few minutes of travel and backtracking that she started to feel the chill of her surroundings once more, once his spell slipped away.

Shss didn't know how to feel about this turn of events, so she gave it no more thought. With a deep, contented sigh, she finally reached the end of her trial. The gate in front of her slid open, and a deadly serious Dane slid out of the shadows to greet her.

He was older than the other Dane she met, and his mouth was so tight and serious that he seemed to not have one at all. His glowing yellow eyes travelled up and down her blackened, soot-covered body, then stopped at her face. He opened his mouth just wide enough to speak.

"Welcome..." he said, as he began to simultaneously spin, then shrink impossibly thin. When his body became a blur of movement and a thin line of mass, it suddenly burst into a pillar of water that streamed behind him, then quickly evaporated. His voice echoed from all around her. "...Lord of Dane."

For some reason, Shss knew that this was it. She had passed the test, and reached the top of the Tower. Lucciana was saved!

She walked proudly to a gated alcove on her left as it slid open to her. She stepped in and suddenly found herself somewhere else... a place that made her heart leap in pride and happiness as it confirmed her suspicions.

She was at the top of the Tower, looking up at the open night sky, and a massive, twinkling field of stars. The moon shone brightly down upon her, and a feeling of victory and peace overwhelmed her.

A chilly draft of fresh night air blew past her and made her shiver, but she breathed deep its purity with great pleasure. Almost immediately after, she coughed and sneezed out a disgusting cloud of black soot. Over the next few minutes, she tried her best to clear her lungs and mouth of the foul substance.

The top of the Tower was dominated in the center by a giant pit, surrounded by a pool of water, which was in turn shut off by a large metal gate working its way around the perimeter. As she drew closer to it, she could see that the pit, too, was covered with ash and soot. She sighed and hoped that she would not be standing at the blackened lip of the hole for some reason anytime soon... but somehow, she doubted she would be that lucky.

She walked around it, casting glances over the open edge of the Tower to the ground below. She was really high up... the trees were a blur of green below her, and she could see the cloud of yellow pollen above the flowers to the east. As her eyes scanned the area beyond it, she ran to the east side of the Tower in excitement.

There was a town there, just beyond the pollen cloud. She could see its walls, and a road leading straight to it weaving among the trees. Judging from its location, she fathomed that it very well could be New City, or at least close enough to it to get good directions. It was just about the only place left to find a lead on the Astral Dominae, with King Ulgar dead...

She coughed another bit of soot from her mouth, spitting the nasty goo over the side of the Tower and into the trees. Now, there were two places she could go...

She stepped next to the lever near her, which bore a sign saying, "Pit of the Demon Spawn." Whatever "Spawn" meant, she knew enough about the first four words to nix any notion of yanking on the innocent-looking piece of wood. The only good choice left her was the stairs.

As she descended them, she could hear a sickening mix of oddly juxtaposed sounds. A scream of pain, laughter and groans of pleasure and ominous chanting accompanied her down the bare hall lit by the strange, flameless globes of light along the walls.

At the end of the hall, she ascended another flight of stairs, then followed the echoing sounds of carnality... and pain... to a large room on her right. The resulting sight of sin and base pleasure overwhelmed all of her senses.

There were Dane of all manner of dress and station in the room, some gorging on the sweet juices and meats of fine food, others enjoying the company of several members of the opposite sex... some more openly than others. The screams of pain issued from the back, where a collection of Dane begged for forgiveness for a prior failure.

In the middle of the throng of bodies stood the foaming leader of the mystical Dane: Torquesade, the Magna Dane. His blue robe was covered with the symbols of dark beasts of the netherworld and arcane symbols, and accentuated at the top by a furred collar and shoulder pads that made him seem even taller than he already was. Underneath the robe, his shirtless, muscular chest bore a glowing amulet of unthinkable power, and his pants were black enough to teach the night sky a thing or two about darkness.

He turned towards her, yellow eyes flashing and brown horns jutting from his head, chanting in a tongue that might have been alive since the very beginning of time. He stepped towards her, and as Shss laid a hand at her side for easy access to her weapons, she spoke.

"You can heal my friend?" she asked. "Please teach..."

The Magna Dane's voice erupted in her mind, and all around them, in her native, Lizardman tongue. "*I YAN SHAK OU DANE,* (You claim the title of Lord of Dane)," his voice echoed and rumbled deeply, "*KE I KET DANE.* (but you are not a Dane)."

Shss looked at him angrily, and pointed below her. "*A shun kresh!* (I passed the test)!" she exclaimed impatiently.

The Magna Dane's voice rumbled and sent tremors throughout the room. Though most of the Dane around him had stopped to watch the exchange between the two, some still remained blissfully within their own worlds of pleasure.

Finally, he spoke. "*ASH, I SHUN...* (Yes, you did)," he conceded, and breathed deeply. After a moment's pause, he reached into his robe... and Shss released her Psi Rod from her back. But when he withdrew several strange items and peacefully held them out to her, Shss relaxed and secured the rod again.

She reached out to take the items, when the Magna Dane screamed, "*KET TA, ANKET!* (Don't come near me, barbarian)!" From behind him, a Dane boy and girl, neither of whom looked even ten years old, took the items from his outstretched hands and placed them in Shss'.

Then, just as quickly, they drew back from her and stood behind the Magna Dane. "WASH YOURSELVES," he commanded, and the children rushed to one of two fountains of flowing, crystal clear water on the wall to her left.

Shss looked over the strange items. A pouch of white ash, a jar of some poor creature's red internal organs, a stone bearing the horned symbol that was splashed upon the Magna Dane's robes, and a book that was bound in a very fresh cover of leather.

"*TE KETSHEN SSH TA KETSHENSHA OSH, TE KESHTA RAK O. ZSH, O SHESH I KESH KETSHENKA, EN SHSHA KETSHENKA, TE RASH KASHA KETSHENKA. BOOK SHESH I KETSHENSHA.* (Take these infernal artifacts to the pit of the Demon, and bring me his horn. Then, I will teach you power infernal, to heal the sickest of the dying, and murder the strongest of your enemies. The book will teach you about the Demon Spawn)."

The Magna Dane swept his hand across his treasures of wine and gold, as well as the assemblage of emaciated, half-clothed men sitting against the wall. "*I KESHTA RAK O, TE ANE I REN, KIN, TE ISHYAN ASHU. KESHTA O, IN SA HIGH FATHER. I TA.* (Bring me the horn, and I will give you food, riches, and my slaves shall be yours to join you in bed. Bring it, and you shall become a High Father. Now go)."

Dane from either side of her pushed her out of the room, and the gate closed in front of her. The Magna Dane slowly turned his back to her, and stood in the middle of his worshipping children as he began to chant once more. She looked angrily at his back for some time as the dark ceremony continued.

Finally, she convinced herself that this was for Lucciana's good, and returned down the stairs and through the hallway back to the Pit of the Demon Spawn.

When the Magna Dane sensed that she had gone, he stopped chanting, then called forth the newest of

his High Fathers. From the far corner, politely pushing away the pining and servile women slaves around him, Bone Boy stood before his master and bowed deeply. He knew exactly what was going to happen to Snake Girl... but he couldn't possibly betray his lord...

"GO TO THE PIT OF THE DEMON SPAWN," the Magna Dane commanded. "ONCE SHE HAS ACQUIRED THE HORN, KILL HER AND BRING IT TO ME."

Bone Boy knelt deeper until his forehead was almost upon the ground. "I will, Magna Dane," he said respectfully, and walked towards the entrance to the hall of the High Father. The gate slid open before him, and he journeyed down the length of hallway that would bring him into the Pit, and the perfect ambush position.

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Shss plopped down underneath the Pit lever, sighed, then opened the book. It was surprisingly written in pictures, rather than words. It detailed the use of the four artifacts over the pit, which would summon and banish the Demon Spawn without the need for a fight. Even more surprising was that the figure who banished the Demon Spawn in the book was depicted as a towering Lizardman in Dane robes.

The first picture showed the Lizardman throwing a jar containing something bright red into the pit, and a fiend below looking up at him. *Throw in the organs of "Ma-nk," and the fiend will be drawn to the pit,* she read through the pictures. The next showed the same Lizardman pouring a powder inside, and the fiend's flames grew strong as he climbed up the pit. *Sprinkle the Ashes of... Dee-Am... into it, and he will become angry.*

He threw a rock into the pit in the next picture, as the fiend's body appeared before him in the fourth drawing. *The Stone of Gates summons the fiend...*

Shss turned the page, and the page suddenly sprang to life. The picture of the Lizardman held the book in front of him and pointed at the fully formed fiend, who was reaching from the pit. Then, the moving picture stopped with the fiend positioned above the Lizardman, who in turn stared victoriously back at it.

I guess that's when the Demon croaks, she reasoned. She slammed the book shut, stood up with her black spear in hand, and pulled on the lever.

With a rush of air, she was inside the perimeter of fencing and over the great pit of the Demon Spawn. It went down too far to see clearly, but she could see that the walls of the shaft were caked with ash and soot and spread up and out the lips of the pit. She breathed deeply, exhaled, and dropped the first of the items into the pit: the innards of the Dane's most hated enemy, the Munk.

She didn't hear a sound as they hit bottom, or even know if they did. But after a few seconds, there was an audible groan that bellowed forth from the blackened pit. Whatever it was, it certainly wasn't Human.

She sprinkled the Ashes of Diam in next, her heart beating faster as a fiery light sparked at the very bottom of the fifty foot pit, then rose steadily. The light revealed that it wasn't as far a drop as she orginally thought, but it was still a good ways down.

A split second after she dropped the Stone of Gates into the sooty hole and held the book before her, a great flame burst out of the pit and ate the demonic tome in an instant. Shss dropped the flaming mass to the ground, just as the red hot arms and large torso of the orange-skinned Demon Spawn erupted from the pit before her with a powerful aura of flame around him. From his forehead, and above his angry red eyes, prominently jutted the Cornu that the Magna Dane sought.

The book didn't say anything about this!! Shss thought, then grinned confidently. *It's Mau-Mu-Mu all over again...!*

"Summoned again," the Demon Spawn rumbled, "by the meddling forces of the upper world. Into the pits of hell I drag ye, naive creature!" He clapped his hands together over the spot where Shss was standing,

just after she backflipped over the water and onto the fencing behind her.

He opened his mouth and jetted forth a blazing breath of pure fire as she lept again to another section of the perimeter. The iron bars melted on contact, and he roared as he swung his hands after the dextrous Fighter.

His hands drew closer to her, so close that she could feel their heat ready to burn her into fiery halves. Everything slowed down as she jumped to the ceiling of the cage, and noticed his cooling hands getting stuck inside the twisted, melting metal bars of the fence below her. Pressing her advantage, she jumped down to the edge of the pit and rammed the black spear into the center of the Demon Spawn's chest.

He bellowed in pain as she single-handedly lifted his fiery body out of the pit and flung him up and over her head, into the pool of water behind her. She ripped the spear out of his body at the apex of his flight, and he landed with a splash and a mighty hiss in the tiny moat. With his hands firmly stuck in the fence, he could do nothing but flail helplessly as Shss exchanged her weapons, placed the Psi Rod's globe in the water and pressed both of the buttons to light it up.

The electric shock washed over his cooling, weakened body until there was nothing left to electrify. His body spasmed and jerked every few seconds from the remaining electricity inside it, but it was clear that he was dead. The Demon Spawn's lifeless body began to sink as heated steam rose up from his extinguishing body, but not before Shss grabbed a hold of his black horn and twisted it off of his forehead with a sickening crunch.

He disappeared beneath the waters, and her heartbeat and breathing slowed as the high of battle wore off. She wiped the sweat off of her brow, vowing never to complain about the heat of the sun ever again, and tried to find a way out of the cage. As she suspected, the black spear was utterly free of damage... but the Psi Rod looked like it could use a minute or two of rest.

The Demon Spawn bored two holes out of the cage, but neither one was cool or big enough to go through without potentially impaling...

"KILL HER, MY CHILDREN!" the Magna Dane's voice suddenly screeched out all around her, sounding much more insane than before. "BRING ME THE HORN! DO NOT LET HER ESCAPE!!" All at once, Dane poured out of both stairwells and unleashed a barrage of elemental magic through the holes in the fence, and Shss saw no other choice but to... jump!

Scraping the black spear along the sides of the pit and even using her own hands and feet, Shss slowed her descent enough to keep her from breaking her ankles upon her impact on the ground. Nonetheless, when she hit the blackened bottom, her legs gave way and she cracked her head on the stone beneath her.

Dazed more than damaged, she wobbled to her knees... when she noticed the hem of a blue robe in her wavering vision. She looked up, at the same time as she slowly reached for her spear, then stopped suddenly when she saw Bone Boy's young face looking down upon her.

He blinked, and she searched both of his yellow eyes in turn. A few seconds passed between them, as Bone Boy debated internally about what he should do. He scanned her two beautiful brown eyes back and forth, back and forth. Time stopped as his field of vision slowly became comprised of just the girl kneeling beneath him, and her face staring back at him...

Finally, he reached his hand slowly down to her. Shss immediately pictured a fiery death from a spell, and whipped her spear into his neck. Nonetheless, Bone Boy wrapped his fingers around her hand on the middle of the spear's shaft, and slowly pulled her to her feet.

Shss blushed and dropped the tip to her side. "S... sorry..." she stammered.

Bone Boy's face turned red when he realized his hand was still on hers, and he backed up suddenly, laughing stupidly. "Ah! No... uh, heh heh..." he chuckled to himself, backing up another step. "I... you

see... the Magna Dane, he's not the, uh, the man I expected, so I didn't want to hurt you for his, um, pleasure," he stammered, with a goofy smile.

With a big smile, Shss took a step towards him. "Really?" she asked, cocking her head slightly.

He turned beet red and looked away. "Y... yeah!" he insisted. His heart pounded harder as she drew closer, when Fireballs began streaming in from the top of the pit. Shss pushed him forward and out of the way, just as the spells exploded behind them. He teetered, toppled, and was caught by Shss' quick hand.

She pulled him to a stable stand and they stood eye to eye, mere inches from one another. He gaped as Shss held his eyes with hers, like she was exploring his very soul with a look. More Fireballs and Iceballs erupted behind them, throwing glowing cinders and shimmering ice shards about the room.

His heart thumped so loud and fast that he knew she must have heard it by now. He turned even darker red, and the rising blood, mixing with his blue skin, produced a purplish skin hue that embarrassed him even further.

"Hey, you ok?" Shss asked, grinning playfully. Bone Boy's mouth worked, but nothing came out. She playfully tapped his cheek twice and released her hand from his. "Come, we must go," she insisted, beckoning down the hall. Finally, he found his head, and followed her in a dash down the dark passageway leading to the south.

He stopped her before she touched the trap ladder with the missing bottom rungs. "Wait," he said, putting his hands to the wall just before it. Shss watched as the bricks disappeared in a flash of green light, and a new passageway opened up.

She nodded, smiled and hissed in thanks as they both jumped into an invisible teleporter and were back upon the roof of the Tower. It took a second to adjust to the sudden shift of location... and what surrounded them was utter pandemonium.

There were fighting figures all around the caged Pit of the Demon Spawn, half in the long blue gown of a Dane caster, and the other a small army of children, teenagers and adults of varying races. The newcomers were dressed in simple, hooded red robes with a single piece of brown cord around their waists, and were battling with nothing more than their own lean bodies to aid them.

"Brother Almagorte!" Bone Boy shouted out, as the Mage shot a wide fan of Whipping Rocks at his target, the false Lord of Dane, Shss. Bone Boy tackled her protectively and was on his feet in moments, prepared to counter his former teacher's attacks, when a large blue blur knocked Almagorte out with a single blow to the stomach.

It stopped before him, when Bone Boy realized that it was a man... an old man with a long white beard and gentle eyes, wearing a blue Munk robe of important station. *The speed of a snake and powerful grace...* he thought. *It can only be the vile sinner, Xen Xheng!*

Just as quickly as Xen stopped, though, he was already moving again, and he was gone from view.

Shss saw him as well, but was able to keep up with his movements. He was heading straight for a neophyte Dane fighting an odd and pudgy red-robed man with very jerky movements. The man staggered about as if he were inebriated, but every stumble and odd lean was accompanied by a powerful punch or elbow into the Dane's body. The Dane unleashed a sparkling missile towards the strange man, who spun around dizzily and avoided them handily.

"Gotsta... *hic*... do a lots better'n that, ya filthy Danesh..." he slurred as he fell into the Dane with a flurry of punches. Shss saw the blue blur reach the struggling combatants, and to her surprise, he rammed a frail-looking fist into the red robe's stomach that sent him painfully into the wall behind him. He continued on his path, indiscriminately toppling both Dane and his own people, with single strikes meant to disable.

His path led him around the caged pit, and Shss saw that he would return to their position in seconds.

What's more, there were more red and blue-robed people joining the battle every second as more and more of the newcomers and Dane teleported in; it was turning into a madhouse.

Shss and Bone Boy immediately exchanged a look and charged down the stairs leading to the Magna Dane, before Xen had a chance to reach them again.

Inside the almost empty hall of the High Father, the Magna Dane was seated and surrounded by the youngest and most incompetent of his slaves and children, who groomed and petted at him with the battle raging outside. Sure enough, the two he expected to return at any moment did so.

The newest High Father and the false Lord of Dane... he thought tiredly. He brought the horn after all... but she was still alive. *Betrayed by my subordinates' weakness...*

Shss pointed the black Cornu at him. "*A keshta rak!* (I brought the horn)!" she proclaimed. "*I shesh A sashes enkesh!* (Give me the power to heal my friend)!"

Without a word, the Magna Dane slowly rose up and waved his hands out, and they glowed bright red. As the children scattered away from him, Bone Boy immediately felt malicious power emanate from the Magna Dane and launched an Iceball at him, but it was too late. Lightning blasted from his fingertips, cutting the Iceball asunder and ripping into Shss' body. She dropped the Cornu on the ground as she flew backwards into the stone wall, and slumped to the ground, unmoving.

He drew forward as Bone Boy fired a Fireball into him, which he grabbed with his bare hands and absorbed into his body. The young Dane tried again, shooting Blades, a powerful Whirlwind, another Iceball, every spell in his arsenal at the advancing leader of the Dane. He caught the dozens of tiny razors and the tornado in his hands, absorbing them as well, and the Iceball shrank as it drew close to his necklace and disappeared.

Bone Boy tried for a last Fireball spell, pushing fire into his fingertips, when the Magna Dane grasped his hands. The new High Father dropped to his knees as he lost all feeling in his body, and felt his life being drained from him, weeks and months of life at a time. His face grew to middle-aged in just a few seconds, then wrinkled and old.

The Magna Dane squeezed harder, and Bone Boy cried out as his former master spoke. "THERE IS A SPECIAL PLACE IN HELL FOR TRAITORS LIKE YOU," he rumbled, as Bone Boy began to lose consciousness. "MAY YOU LIVE AN ETERNITY, ALONE, FROZEN WITH NOTHING BUT YOUR SINFUL THOUGHTS TO WARM YOU."

Shss' body suddenly animated, and she swiped her spear at the Magna Dane's head in two rapid movements. The blast weakened her, and there were two black puncture wounds in her shoulder and belly from the Lightning, but she fought through the pain regardless. The Magna Dane dodged both of the strikes and raked his nails across Shss' face, and her strength left her as he closed in to finish the job...

Bone Boy, his face returning to a youthful color, unleashed a steady torrent of Hold Monsters spells, with as little power as he could use to conjure the energy from his mind. His head glowed, dimmed and glowed again and again as each successive spell attempted, but failed, to hold the Magna Dane in place... until one of them finally broke through.

Being a powerful Bishop with abnormal resistance to the arcane, the low powered Hold Monsters spells had little chance of affecting a being of Torquesade's power. But with so many used so quickly, he guessed correctly that at least one of them would work. He just hoped that Snake Girl had enough presence of mind to do something, because he had no energy to help her any longer, and the Magna Dane would be held for only a few short seconds.

She was, in fact, way ahead of him. The second the leader of all Dane was held in place, Shss drove her black spear into his chest and charged with him upon it, intending to impale him against the wall and finish this once and for all. Bone Boy, completely drained, mentally begged for her to run the powerful

Bishop into one of the water fountains hanging upon the wall, the one closer to her...

Though he was not even remotely adept in the school of Psionics... she heard. As the frightened children scattered to the back of the room, Shss lifted the paralyzed Magna Dane up and next to the fountain, and his hand dipped into the beautiful waters.

The effect of Bone Boy's spell broke then, but it was too late. The water turned his hand to solid stone, and the affliction travelled up his arm and to his shoulder before he could begin chanting a Cure Stone spell. Shss twisted her spear in his chest and interrupted the spell, leaving the Magna Dane completely and painfully helpless as the stone washed over his body... then soon enough left him an eternally angry statue impaled against the wall.

Shss pulled her spear out of the statue, spilling rock chips upon the floor. No longer mounted, the statue of Magna Dane dropped a few inches to the ground, leaned back and fell into the wall, where it stood silently.

When she turned back to check on Bone Boy's condition, she was relieved to see him already returning to his boyish, youthful figure. She tied the spear to her back and walked towards him, smiling as he rose and returned the same delighted face as he drew near her.

"Well done!" came a voice from the archway before they could meet one another. They turned to see Xen Xheng himself, standing before them with his arms casually folded behind his back. "He was one of the two pressing for this war of Dane upon Munk, brother against brother, and with both of them gone... peace is at last possible!" He let his hands sweep forward and clapped twice.

One by one, his more loyal Munk students walked in with dazed and dizzy Dane and Munk in tow, filling the room with their groaning and incapacitated bodies. One Munk in particular conjured up old memories for Shss: a dark green, slightly tusked Dracon, more lightly colored than Janus, but otherwise very similar in shape and size. He proudly helped both an unconscious Munk, and a Dane whose eyes wandered in a haze about the room, to a sitting position next to one another in the great hall.

He left her view completely when a smiling Hiromi, and a much stronger-looking Lucciana, stepped in with the next wave of Munk and Dane. Shss laughed happily and ran forward, nearly bowling them over and suffocating them with her embrace.

"Ugh... breath..." Lucciana whispered, and Shss let her go. The Elf patted her friend on the shoulder. "You did it," she stated with a smile, "but we can start the healing after Xen talks to these people... it's important."

Shss almost told her about the Magna Dane's lies, but decided not to ruin the moment.

Hiromi beckoned Shss down, and ran a glowing hand over the nail marks on the Fighter's face as she spoke. "I never doubted you'd make it to the top, Shss! You're a veritable legend on the bottom floors!" A strange look passed across her face before she continued. "They do seem to be calling you a 'False Lord,' though. Care to explain what you've been doing?"

Shss laughed and tussled her hair, then realized that the entire room was silent except for herself, Lucciana and Hiromi. She looked back at Xen, who stared at her with gentle eyes and a warm smile, and she rubbed the back of her head shyly. Xen nodded deeply and respectfully, standing in the middle of an assembly of Munk and Dane. Slowly, he withdrew an old book from inside his blue robes.

There were murmurs from the crowd as people began to slowly awaken and realize who their neighbors were. One or two Dane and Munk immediately stood up and shouted in disgust at their mortal enemies sitting next to them, but their dull cries of surprise and shock wore off as all eyes rested upon the book in Xen's hand.

When there was absolute silence, he spoke. "Know you all, the Sacred Stone?" he asked. Dane and Munk looked at him in disbelief and annoyance; of course they had heard of it. "The source of all

scripture, the laws that our forebears wrote and followed with devout and pure minds.

"But where is it now?" he asked.

A Dane spoke up. "It is passed down through word of mouth by the Magna Dane, leader of all Dane, to his chosen successors!" he proclaimed.

"Liesh!" the drunken Munk from before slurred at him. "Itsh found wishin the Holy Work'n the Munk alone follow itsh Holy Path!"

Xen interrupted them before the shouting escalated. "No!" he shouted out, and the room silenced with bitter stares. He held the book out in front of him. "*This* is the Sacred Stone," he revealed, pointing to the book in his hand.

"We told you it was the Holy Work, you stupid blueskins!" a Munk child yelled out at a group of Dane in front of him. One of the elder Dane there stood up with hands glowing red and blue, and prepared to kill the disrespectful child.

The Dracon Monk dashed into the middle of the fight and breathed a small stream of acid onto the Munk child's robe. While he struggled to keep the devouring liquid off of his body, the Dracon continued over to the angry Dane and kicked him in the jaw. Before the others could react, he clubbed the next across the back, then grabbed the arms of the final Dane and breathed a painful, but non-lethal, spray of acid onto the back of his neck.

Incapacitated, but far from injured, the Dane and Munk bitterly licked their wounds as they stared angrily at the Dracon. "Thank you, Harashen," Xen said graciously. Harashen bowed, and Shss caught a glimmer of surprise in many of the young Munk's eyes.

Xen opened the book and read from one of its passages. "'Blessed be ye who searches for the answers within, to face the trials without. For he who knows all... becomes all.'" He raised his eyes to look about the room, knowing full well that the passage was a core Dane concept.

There were murmurs among the Munk claiming the book was a forgery, while the Dane were divided among those who believed the Sacred Stone to be in Xen's hands... and those who also believed it to be fake.

"'Let not these answers rest and stagnate within your soul,'" Xen continued from the book, "'let them instead cover the land, serving the betterment of your brother. Truth is strength. Without strength, compassion is impossible. In turn, without compassion, strength is worthless.'"

He closed the book slowly, and turned as he spoke to meet the eyes of every Dane and Munk in attendance. "Do you not see, brothers?" he implored. "The Munk, the Dane, they are the same. During the times of Old City, we lived and worked and strived together to better our lives and the lives of others."

He shook his head sadly as he closed his eyes. "But now, as this division has overtaken us, we have become dependant on our own versions of the truth, and depicted our brothers as nothing more than their flaws, little more than Demons... we have strayed far, my brothers."

"But the leader of the Dark Forest Munk was a half-Dane!" a young Munk girl with tousled hair and a dirty robe shouted out. "It's proof of the difference between those who walk the Holy Path, and those who spit upon it! Even a half-mongrel rejects true enlightenment over alliance with the blasphemers!!"

The old Munk shook his head sadly. "The Lord of the Dark Forest was born of a unique love of Munk and Dane," he explained. Bone Boy's heart thumped quicker, and he felt his knees give way as he looked at the silent Shss. "Despite his parents' realization of the stupidity of this quarrel between our people, their child threw his lot in with the Magna Dane.

"He conspired to bring the Sacred Stone and its power to Torquesade, who alone could completely draw

forth all the power of its teachings," he continued. "They plotted to spread their murderous reign over the land, and to rule jointly over the collective peoples of Guardia."

The Munk children murmured doubtfully among one another. "In short," Xen continued, "he failed because he became solely Dane... just as you have failed walking solely the Holy Path. Once you shut your minds closed to the teachings of others, no matter who they are, you are truly powerless... and truly lost."

A cadre of whispering Dane stood up in unison, their blue robes fluttering noisily behind Xen. At once, the Munk seated next to them retreated to the eastern wall as the Dane sitting among the Munk likewise abandoned their red-robed neighbors. A pair of Dane in the robes of Munk sat in the middle, unsure of what to do. In seconds, the hall of High Fathers was a line of flexing, angry Munk staring at a group of defiant, energy charging Dane.

From behind them, Almagorte stepped out of the shadows and in front of his people. "You have a lot of nerve coming to our Tower and telling us how to live," he said in a deadly serious tone. "Considering the number of Dane who have died to this holy war you have waged upon us, no man can call you innocent... *Master* Xheng," he spit out.

The drunk Munk strode to the front of the Munk line, and Xen shook his head with a pained look on his face. "Brother Tshober... not you, too..." he sighed.

Tshober slurred a yelling response to his Dane adversary. "Don'tcha dare blame your war on ush, you disheashed pox on Guardian landsh!" he warned, pointing at Almagorte accusingly. "Ya money grubbin', shelf-sheeking, shinful pleashure mongersh have given noshing back to our fair planet!"

"Better than helping others solely to preach your nonsense, infidels!" Almagorte shot back. "Or are you too busy partaking of the black mush to crawl yourselves out of your palace?!"

"Oh, lisshen to the Dane preach of morality!" Tshober ridiculed as he raised his fists in a battle stance. The other Munk around him stood up sideways with their feet spread and fists raised, ready for a fight. "High atop hish Tower of shlavery and shin he shpeaks to Guardia of its wickednessh!"

Almagorte, and the line of Dane's hands and heads, began to glow a beautiful array of blues, reds, greens and yellows. "Philosophers preaching nonsense, then doing nothing..." he accused. "After we have broiled you alive, we will make sure to leave you where your animal bretheren can find a use for your dead bodies!"

The Munk flipped, dashed and cried out a mighty, unified battle cry as they surged forward. Magics of many colors and shapes lept and darted from the fingertips and minds of Dane. In the middle, Xen Xheng stood his ground and closed his eyes sadly, his failure evident for all to see. Bone Boy watched helplessly as the attack pressed forward, and Shss and Lucciana tried to grab Hiromi before she sprinted to the middle of the battle.

Inches away from the first Munk's leaping kick and a broiling Fireball, two bubbles of sheer force erupted from her body and around her. The first was a transparent, shimmering circle of green, which expanded into a long cylinder that knocked the bulk of flying Munk back into a comfortable space behind it.

The other was a bubble of swirling rainbow between her and the Dane, catching an exploding mass of spells upon it in the process. With every arcane spell that struck it, the bubble flashed its corresponding element color, then returned to a solid rainbow.

In the blink of an eye, the bubble expanded and created a wall of pure magical force between the Dane and the rest of the room. Spells by the dozens erupted harmlessly into it and lit the room up in a variety of dazzling colors as the Dane tried to penetrate the shield.

At the same time, though the Munk tried to beat at the green barrier with a barrage of powerful chops, punches and kicks, the shield held fast. The room was divided by an Armorplate and Magic Screen spell,

Munk and Dane staring bitterly at one another across the transparent screens.

"This is an era of peace," Hiromi declared with no sign of strain on her face. "It will not be spoiled by misunderstanding and prejudice."

Xen put his hands on her small shoulders and looked first at the Munk to his left, then the Dane to his right.

"Furthermore," he added, "this Tower is a beacon of hope. It is a symbol of the shared history of Munk and Dane, and a reminder of our common purpose and future together. From this point on... there will be no battle within its walls between Munk and Dane."

Almagorte blasted Iceball after Fireball into the Magic Screen. "You can't take our Tower from us!" he roared.

At the same time, Tshober pounded the Armorplate angrily. "You... traitor," he slurred.

Xen sighed and indicated the northern entrance with his head. "Those who wish to continue the senseless battle are free to leave and do so," he said calmly. "And are more than welcome to return when they realize the error of this conflict."

After a few more seconds of beating and casting at Hiromi's protective spells, the Dane and Munk knew they were sunk. By the surprising drove, Tshober led a large portion of red-robed Munk out of the entrance to the hall, from Humans to tiny rat children.

At the same time, Almagorte angrily opened the gates behind him and walked the bulk of the Dane through them. By the time their footsteps had receded into the distance, there were a scant ten people left in the room: Shss, Hiromi, Xen, Lucciana, Bone Boy, Harashen, a Dane, a Munk, and two Dane dressed as Munk.

Xen shook his head as the large groups of Munk and Dane disappeared, but greeted the ones who remained with a smile. "Though our numbers are small, brothers, we shall in time help the others to understand," he assured them. "It will not be long before we share a meal together, in peace."

Hiromi dropped the shields, and disappeared into the shadows to the south. The old Munk looked after her, into the darkness where a large group of Dane slaves were cowering. "First, however, we shall bind the wounds and counsel the spirits of the young ones here..." Xen said. He held a hand out to the shadows, and the slaves cowered even farther back. Without a move, and only a gentle smile, Xen held his welcoming position to the frightened Dane.

After a bit, they began to step forward, one by one, to cautiously take his hand. Xen and his students, old and new, joined soon after, and gently brought them to the cleasing fountain that lay beside the waters that petrified the Magna Dane.

Lucciana finally found a good chance to speak. "That's... the one who was going to teach you to heal, wasn't it, Shss?" she asked as she pointed at the Magna Dane's grotesque statue. Shss looked at her sadly and nodded. The Elf made a face, not exactly surprised.

Xen walked calmly towards her, speaking as he approached. "You seek healing for the spirit lingering in your mind, correct?" he asked. Lucciana's eyes opened just the slightest bit wider in surprise, then she nodded.

His old blue eyes twinkled. "Though I cannot help you release the spirit, or the curse upon you... you do not need my help, or anyone else's," he explained.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"The curse has taught you exactly what it needed to teach you," he replied. "As long as you hold fast to

the tenements of compassion and mercy for others that it has granted you, it will never again affect you."

"So this whole thing was for n..." Lucciana started, then quickly realized something: he was right.

Xen waved his hand at his students helping the Dane children and the former slaves. They were talking to one another, relating stories of their pasts and helping one another with bandaging and cleaning wounds. Some were even laughing.

"It has been centuries since such a gathering has been possible," Xen said happily. "And to think, if that wonderful Faerie and her friends hadn't come along..."

Lucciana looked at him strangely. "Wait, what...?" she started, when a gate slammed shut from the south.

Hiromi walked out, a twisted, wooden staff with a golden serpent's head on top resting on a jeweled cushion in her hands. "Is this it?" she asked Xen.

He nodded, then gestured to Shss and Lucciana. "Make sure none of you touch it. You better leave it in the cushion," he suggested, so Hiromi opened a pocket in the soft pillow and carefully wrapped the staff inside, then sealed it and put it in her robes. It made a comical bulge over her waist, which she tried vainly to flatten.

"You'll need this to open the way to the Astral Dominae," Xen explained. "Return to New City and find the boat hidden in the Curio Museum, and you will have all of the pieces you need to find the City of Sky, the home of the Helazoid. Find them past the mists in the southern seas, and they will provide the help you need to find the globe."

The girls on the rocket sleds, Lucciana remembered. *Who knows how that meeting will end up after the war between the Gorn...* She bowed to Xen and gestured for Hiromi and Shss to join her. "Come on," she beckoned. "Let's go before the Munk and Dane start bolstering their ranks and assigning blame."

Hiromi joined her side, but Shss remained, standing a few feet away from the young Dane in front of her. He paused dumbfoundedly, then fumbled for the necklace hanging around his neck. His nervous and sweaty hands dropped it twice before he managed to get a hand around it and lift it over his head. It was yellow with a simple brown lace around it, and had a beautiful purple gem in the middle.

"Um, here, this is... it'll protect you," he stammered. "At least, they told me it... uh..." He trailed off and placed it around Shss' neck. "Here you go, Snake Girl," he said with a nervous chuckle.

She looked down at the necklace for a second, rubbing a finger over the smooth gem and feeling the warmth on her skin. Then, without warning, she reached her arms around Bone Boy's neck, and drew him close to her. She slowly closed her eyes, and kissed him softly.

Hiromi gaped, her mouth open in surprise. Lucciana pursed her lips in wonder... *Have we been infiltrated by a Shss double?* she wondered semi-seriously. *This isn't the same girl who went up the Tower a few hours ago...*

Bone Boy's knees went weak as he held Shss in a tingling embrace, squeezing her warm body gently as the divine seconds pushed on into blissful infinity. The world dropped away; there was only his body, trembling all over from her gentle hands on his neck... and hers... so delightfully, amazingly warm.

Finally, she gently broke the kiss, and looked him in his deep, softly glowing yellow eyes. "Shss..." she whispered. "My name is Shss."

He blinked in response. "I'm... Belcanzor," he told her with his trademark goofy smile, and Shss hissed a laugh. She would never remember his name, but she knew that grin would never leave her.

She squeezed him one last time, then slowly pulled away. "Come with us," she insisted, gesturing at Lucciana and Hiromi.

Hiromi nodded emphatically. "Yeah, sounds like fun!" she said.

Lucciana folded her arms across her chest, and beckoned him over with her head. "Always room for one more..." she added.

All at once, Belcanzor's face fell. He looked back at the Munk and Dane behind him, all of whom had their eyes upon him. "I... can't," he said sadly. "Not yet. Not while this division still exists between the Dane and Munk..." Shss stood silent and unhappy, but she understood exactly what he meant. "I'm sorry..." he finally said, but she shook her head and dismissed his apology.

"You are brave," she stated, and pulled him close to kiss him one last time. Belcanzor held tight, knowing this might be the last time that they ever saw one another. But all thoughts of the Astral Dominae, duty, and impending war between the Munk and Dane were immediately pushed away by the breathtaking sight of her beautiful face in his mind's eye.

She held his thin body tighter, exploring and pushing with everything she had. Her mind was a whirl, and she started to get dizzy from the feeling of his wonderful body against hers.

Finally, with great regret, she withdrew and held him close in a final embrace, feeling his comforting, warm hands on her back. "Goodbye," she whispered, and slowly broke away from his touch.

She backed away, and her hand slid down his arm to hold his pleading fingertips one last time. At last, she turned away before it became impossible to leave.

Belcanzor tried to run to her, but stopped himself, just as Shss joined her two friends and walked out the entrance to the hall. "I'll bring our people together!" he swore as she disappeared around the corner. *By all the power I have, I swear I will end this conflict soon...* he promised. *Then someday, maybe...*

***

Shss emerged from the Tower with a bright smile on her face. Lucciana walked beside her as the morning sun provided the very faintest glimmer of light in the distance. "So, I suppose we'll need to cure this enchantment as well?" she teased Shss. Hiromi snickered from behind them as the Fighter blushed.

The few scattered Munk and Dane who remained near the Tower, too afraid to assault the Priest who had disarmed them so easily, merely stared as the three girls travelled past them on the road east of the Tower. The tension between their two races, and their anger at the group responsible for Xen Xheng's assault and betrayal in the Tower, was thick enough to prickle skin like a line of ants. Nonetheless, the girls reached the pollen field without incident.

Shss went first, noticing that no matter how much she breathed in the yellow cloud above the field, that she did not feel the slightest bit drowsy. Perhaps it was a result of the Dane training in the Tower, an effect of the Demon Spawn or Magna Dane's power... or perhaps she was still higher than the clouds after her kiss with Belcanzor... but whatever the case, she felt fine within the pollen.

She surprised herself at remembering his name, and her grin grew wider. Lucciana and Hiromi caught the smile and giggled, just before Shss rolled her eyes and suddenly yanked them into the pollen. They fell asleep at her feet, and she laughed... that would teach them. Picking up and hefting each girl over a shoulder, Shss walked through the cloud of pollen to the walls of the city on the other side.

The two mile walk gave her time to think about everything that had happened, from the realization of her own unique nature in the whirlwind room, to the problems that now faced the Dane and the Munk as they strived to annihilate one another... or find common ground.

And yet... he kept coming back to her. His boyish grin, his nervous speech, the warmth of his touch... Shss licked her lips and remembered that moment of pure joy, reliving every bliss-filled second of their kiss. Again and again he drew close, and the world exploded in a bright flash of perfect happiness. She felt so happy in the pollen, that at times, she had to chuckle to keep from crying.

Eventually, the pollen lifted, and she let her two friends down to the ground. She was brimming with energy despite having to carry them and her weapons all the way here. After shaking both of them to consciousness, and a pair of sneezes from each one, the three were walking down the paved road to the high walls of the town ahead of them.

The Savant Troopers hovering silently outside of the city, barring entrance inside, were proof that they had found New City. As they drew closer to the Guards floating in front of a line of beautiful trees on either side of the road leading inside, they crossed their glowing Stun Lances between them.

"This-city-is-under-martial-law," the Guard on the left informed them, as its deformed brown mouth moving in a disgustingly fleshy manner.

Hiromi cocked her head to the side. "Why is that?" she asked with an inquisitive shrug.

"The-Umpani-and-T'Rang-make-war-upon-one-another," the right Guard answered, with its Stun Lance deathly still. "For-safety-entrance-is-not-recommended."

The bugs are attacking? This could get rough... Lucciana thought. "Nonetheless, we would like to enter," she said. The Guards remained still, and Hiromi backed up slowly, worried that they would attack.

"What-is-your-destination?" the left Guard asked after a moment's pause.

Hiromi thought quickly. *Well, we can't very well tell them we're looking for the Astral Dominae... and they might know about the boat in the museum, so that would be a giveaway...* She let her mind wander about her memory of New City, mentally walking the alleyways and meeting the people they met once more...

"Paluke!" she blurted out suddenly, on remembering the flustered Gorn shopkeeper.

The blinking red lights leading up the metallic creatures' helmets and into their heads quickened, as if they were thinking. "Destination-confirmed," they finally said in unison, and uncrossed their lances. "Purchase-quickly-and-depart-as-soon-as-possible."

Lucciana took point and walked fearlessly between them, followed by a confident Shss and a wary Hiromi, the latter of whom thinking that the machines might spring to life at any moment.

The city was crawling with Savant Guards and Troopers, hovering from alleyway to alleyway and at times venturing into some of the many buildings around them. But aside from the machines, there was nobody to be seen. "Paluke" was their code word, and had to be repeated several times to the many guards that accosted them about their destination.

A break in the line of machines formed between the girls and a large building in front of them as they heard a door creak slowly open. Three figures carefully walked out, looking nervously about the city of patrolling Savant minions.

"Wait a second," Hiromi said with disbelieving eyes, "is that...?!"

Find Your Way

"Hey! Who are you?! Hel..." the black-robed Munk screamed.

His voice suddenly failed. As he clutched his throat, wondering what was happening to him, his body was suddenly picked up and thrown headfirst into the stones behind him. A bright flash of light appeared for only a moment before everything dimmed, and a fuzzy brown boot stepped past his prone body.

Tearn's mind was swimming and reaching in a thousand different directions, with the memory of his treatment of the Dracon and his charge taking hold and refusing to let go. He wandered the innards of the Underground Temple for several minutes, turning over their conversation and memories of his own actions... measuring them, comparing them.

His travels carried him in continual circles leading into the main entrance chamber, then into circular hallways and back again, as the played back images and sounds of the past few years assaulting his spirit again and again.

When he entered the main hall again, a pair of strange two-headed lions charged out of the darkness ahead of him, roaring and swiping with their sharpened, vicious claws.

They were easily as tall as him, but were twice as long and muscular. Their orange and black-striped fur was almost an exact match to his own, but their hunger-crazed, dim black eyes under their shaggy blond manes depicted the inherent differences between their species, and the more intelligent Felpurr.

After both of their rends and a ferocious bite cut into nothing but a green Armor Shield spell, Tearn wordlessly conjured a massive boulder above their heads, crushing the both of them instantly. From underneath the heavy stone, the two Bantari whined helplessly and painfully, and Tearn shattered the boulder into a hail of useless stones with a wave of his paw. The Bantari stopped kicking, and lay motionless upon the ground.

Freak... he thought. He winced at the monosyllabic utterance that probably had a world of impact upon the taciturn Dracon. *Neither one of you has any idea what pain truly is. You're weak...*

Tearn sighed and shook his head at the irony of it all. It was an inescapable fact that in his single-minded drive to punish the tormentors of his family and his people, that he had become a practicioner of torture and humiliation himself.

He wandered into just about every passageway the temple had to offer, past ripped portraits of honored Munk and dusty altars of no clear importance, steering clear of the several northern archways from the center room that might lead him into confrontation with the other two. In the end, he found himself staring down the black iron bars of a gate.

He slipped the key from the chest that started so much trouble into the hole, turned it, and the gate raised silently up into the ceiling above it. Beyond this point he would probably find the leader of this underground sect, and quite possibly the Holy Work itself. From there, it was just a matter of time until he found the power source that would bring to life the boat bound for the Astral Dominae.

As Tearn stepped forward into the hall, past strategically placed black candles hanging from sconces on the wall, a thought struck him. Did he really want to kill all of those Rawulf now, once he acquired the globe's power? An acidic feeling in his throat told him no... but if that was the case, why was he down here? What was he doing on this planet?

He stepped around a pile of trashed parchments on the floor, and an empty frame that might have once held a mirror or painting. He could not come up with the answer; all he knew was that once he found the book for the unusually helpful Munk, he would eventually have to wrestle with the question.

Or perhaps, he thought, *maybe I should just leave this struggle to the people who started it and try to find a ride home.* Ideological differences *were* always an idiotic reason to start a war.

He turned back the way he came... until he heard the distant screaming from somewhere beyond the small labyrinth he now occupied. He furrowed his brow and his claws extended reflexively as he wound around massive pillars towards the source of the pleading cries.

Had it not been for the ghastly, tortured yells, the path through the twisting, winding and branching hallways might have confused him for hours. But with the unending pleas for assistance beckoning him, Tearn found a clear path through the large maze.

He hurried past rotting desks and burned scrolls, rusted tools and ruined artwork to a long set of stairs leading into darkness. Though he cast a Wizard Eye spell to spy on what was going on, his disembodied point of view was warped and rendered indecipherable at the bottom of the steps by a weak Anti-Magic shield.

The scream came a final time, and Tearn knew he could wait no longer... he breathed in deep and descended slowly.

Once he reached the foot of the stairs, the light of a dozen burning candles blazing to life assaulted his eyes and left him little time to take in the scene before him. Scores of black-robed Munk carried heavy boxes and coffers of glowing, smoking, vile artifacts from room to room, scurrying with the speed of ones racing against time.

The area he had wandered into served mainly as a pick-up point for new items, as boxes of unlabelled and possibly dangerous equipment, potions and scrolls sat unattended in piles leaning against the walls of the room.

The screams echoed in from Tearn's right, down a hall, but he could not see the source of the voice, or the reason for its owner's pain.

In the middle of the room, a black-robed and bald man stood with his back to him, with his head bowed towards the ground. The second that Tearn disturbed the malignant calm of the bowels of the Underground Temple, however, the Munk turned slowly to face the intruder... except he wasn't quite a Munk.

His eyes were completely dark yellow, almost orange, like two dim suns. Unlike his more robust and pudgy Munk bretheren, he seemed wiry, almost skeletal, but his proud posture betrayed a palpable inner strength. His clothes were dark like the rest of the Dark Forest Munk, but were comprised solely of a loose-fitting vest and long pants. His light skin had a mystical quality to it; it seemed to almost be blue. There was no doubt in Tearn's mind that this was the Lord of the Dark Forest Munk.

The mystical being suddenly opened his mouth, and issued an otherworldly string of words that caused the entire population of the surrounding rooms to animate and come to his defense. "Ba-ga-shi-ta allet ba-Ramm," his words echoed throughout the room, carrying a power beyond what the thin man's body seemed able to produce. He pointed at Tearn, and the throng of Munk surged forward.

The Felpurr shut his eyes tight and smashed a volatile red mixture to the ground, bathing the entire room with the light of a brilliant star. But before the Blinding Flash had dimmed, he felt someone's fist smash against his jaw, and he was sent sprawling to the ground.

As the light faded, he rolled out of the way just in time to avoid a Dark Forest Munk's powerful heel that would have caved his furry face in. He could see that the Munk's eyes were open, and their pupils were contracted, nearly invisible from the bright light's power... but they continued to punch and jab at him with frightening accuracy.

Maybe they can fight blind... Tearn reasoned, *but let's see if they can fight deaf.* Carefully aiming his paws away from his own body on the ground, the Felpurr unleashed a powerful blast of air from his clenched digits to the Munk standing above him.

A piercing howl rung in the ears of those above him, leaving them defenseless enough for Tearn to stand and slice one of them through the throat with his outstretched claws. As he pushed the stout Munk over, another Munk with a bald head jumped and kicked at Tearn's temple, even as a dozen more behind him advanced.

Tearn barely dodged out of the way, then flung a paw out at the next wave of attackers. Hundreds of pebbles and stones launched from the pads on his palm and into them, breaking several arms and noses, but was not forceful enough to stop their assault.

The bald Munk grabbed Tearn by the arms, then painfully snapped them backwards at the elbow. As he roared in pain, he was flung into the wall next to the stairs. He dizzily steadied himself as the Munk closed in, blocking off his escape. He couldn't use his potions with broken arms, and with this many enemies...

He growled with a mixture of fury and searing pain, and unleashed a fiery sensation from his chest to his

broken arms that he had not felt in years. From between his paws hanging limply below him, a white hot globe of concentrated heat grew in size and intensity in a single second. When its power reached critical mass, a long-nosed Munk kicked out frighteningly fast at Tearn's heart, but his foot never reached its target.

In the middle of the crowd of advancing Munk, an explosion strong enough to shake the foundations of the temple itself erupted with a deafening blast, sending out smoke hot enough to melt flesh along with it.

The Munk's kick went high from his sudden propelled flight into the air behind Tearn, but exposed the Felpurr to the full brunt of the Nuclear Blast spell. Tearn braced his back for the inevitable slam into the stone wall behind him, and coated himself with the strongest Fire Shield he could muster.

The shield held for only a scant second, but was enough to save him from a deadly, fiery death. However, as the blast wave smashed Tearn's head into the wall behind him, he felt his abilities as a Mage leave him. The combined drain of two such powerful spells in a row, coupled with the painful strike against the wall, left him utterly drained in the face of whoever might have survived the attack. It was precisely the reason he never used this spell.

Dark Forest Munk, boxes and unholy items were scattered about the room, but several of the Munk were still moving, and getting slowly to their feet. And when the smoke had cleared enough, Tearn began to make out the figure of the Lord of the Dark Forest, holding a defiant hand out to stop any and all effects of the powerful spell.

The Nuclear Blast energy wave dispersed, and Munk stood up to exact their revenge on him... but the Dark Forest Lord himself stood them down with a hand, and charged forward with his hand outstretched at the crouching Felpurr.

His fingers jabbed Tearn directly in the throat, causing the Felpurr to gasp and gurgle helplessly. He couldn't breathe, couldn't cast, couldn't do anything but stare in shock and anger at the sight of his inevitable death.

The Dark Forest Lord raised a hand to finish Tearn... then was suddenly flipping end over end to the other side of the room. He slid to a stop on his two sandaled feet.

Kiwi floated protectively above Tearn, her head glowing as she stared at the Dark Forest Lord. Her eyes swept across the burned and battered bodies of the Munk on the floor, both moving and unmoving.

The glow disappeared, reappeared then disappeared in quick succession, as if she were quickly speaking to someone... and two sudden blasts erupted in the room. Each tagged a separate Munk in the chest, both of whom were approaching Tearn, before they could attack the downed Mage.

Janus stepped down from the stairwell in Tearn's wobbling vision, holding his right arm to his chest and struggling to reload his Blunder Buss with the other. Tearn tried to ask what was happening, but his smashed larynx would not cooperate completely.

The Dark Forest Lord swore in his native tongue, then slid forward towards Tearn in a movement too fast to see... but Kiwi intercepted him with a high-pitched battle cry and grasped his thin hand. Continuing to hold on to the other's hand, the two martial artists traded blocks, punches and kicks in a rapid, furious display of horrifying speed.

Little by little, Tearn felt his magic and his breath returning to him. The world stopped spinning and he caught the sight of Janus loading his Blunder Buss, the barrel held fast between his knees, but the Dracon seemed not to notice anything but the fight between Kiwi and the Lord of the Dark Forest. As he finished loading his gun, Tearn charged fire into his outstretched digits. *Now or never,* he thought quickly.

Janus finished loading when Tearn unleashed the colorful, swirling Prismic Missile. The Dracon turned in time to see the rainbow spell darting towards him, and raised his double-barreled gun towards the Felpurr and shot.

The recovered Dark Forest Munk, his hands inches from Janus' spine, suddenly dropped to the floor, dead. At the same time, the Munk standing over Tearn limped forward a single step, then dropped, bleeding from the gunshot wound, only inches away.

The two looked with suspicion behind themselves, then realized at the same time what had just happened. Tearn slumped back against the wall, respect evident in his once cold eyes. Janus nodded, and saw that the Felpurr's fur around his skull was quickly becoming coated with blood: he had cracked his head open.

Whether from the strain of the spell or a previous injury, it was clear he was hurt bad. Janus tried desparately to load his gun once more, his eyes returning to the furious battle of Faerie and foe.

Kiwi blocked another of the Dark Forest Lord's strikes at her bald head, and pushed his hand away at the wrist. She spun with her other hand still holding his, turning it over on itself and throwing the now unbalanced Munk across the room.

He spun and hit the ground, pouncing immediately back upon her with a powerful roar. Kiwi flit low and drove up, and aimed her knee for the Dark Forest Lord's chin. Unfortunately, he telegraphed her move, twisted in midair, then clamped his hand around her and threw her to the ground, crushing her body with his heavy foot.

The resilient Faerie absorbed the bulk of the blow and pushed backwards as hard as she could. With his foot slightly in the air and his body held up by a single foot, she flew up his leg, punching and kicking the tender insides of his thigh. *"Hut, hah... YAH!"* she screamed on her path up his body. Finally, she clocked him under the jaw and kicked his cheek with enough force to slam him into the wall behind him.

She flew towards him with enough force to break his back, but the Dark Forest Lord pushed off of the wall and ended her flight with an elbow in her tiny chest. She flew backwards in pain and took the brunt of his mystifyingly powerful fist in her face, and spiralled to the ground.

The Dark Forest Lord lept through the air with his knee set to crush her, but Kiwi rolled out of the way, and he merely shattered the stone beneath him to pieces. At the end of her roll, she springboarded off of the ground and kicked him in the chest with a rapid series of kicks, finishing with a punch to his solar plexus.

His instinctual desire to double over became a headbutt that struck Kiwi full on, but she countered with a sudden, powerful uppercut aimed for his chin. The Dark Forest Lord drew back and dodged the blow, then held her hands above her head with his right hand while he drove his left fist into her side again and again.

He grunted sharply and triumphantly with each strike. Kiwi grit her teeth and took the first two blows while trying to shake her hands free, but his grip was too tight. After the third, she wrapped her legs around his free hand and cried out, twisting her body with all her might. The surprise allowed her to slip her hands free and springboard off of the Dark Forest Lord's hand and into his face.

She performed a quick combination of a downward elbow thrust, uppercut and backhanded punch into his nose with her right hand, then finished with a haymaker into his snarling mouth. She managed to knock his two bottom teeth out before he grabbed her, then flung her body into the wall next to him. Her skull cracked off of the wall behind her despite her attempts to slow her flight, and she hit the ground, unmoving.

Now was his chance. Janus fired off both barrels of the Blunder Buss in quick succession, but his heart fell when the Dark Forest Lord dodged both of them, even without his eyes on the guns. All at once, the Monk darted forward, and with a simple cry of, *"Set!"* he cracked his open palm in Janus' armored chest.

Though the flak jacket covering his body was still functional even after all of Tearn's spells, it felt like he wasn't even wearing them when the dark Munk struck him. Janus stumbled backwards as the Dark Forest

Lord turned his attention to Tearn, raising a foot to break his skull in a single kick.

Suddenly, Kiwi darted between the two and caught his heel only a foot away from Tearn's forehead. She was bleeding from the nose and mouth and had quite obviously broken a few ribs, but she bit her lower lip with such an angry focus, that it was clear her fighting spirit was undamaged.

She saw Janus slump to the ground, struggling to breathe, but saw that Tearn offered a supportive look in lieu of any fighting assistance. Kiwi felt energized, but when his supportive croak of "Go get him, kid," reached her ears from his lips, a surge of energy she had long forgotten existed exploded from deep within her soul.

Kiwi pushed the Dark Forest Lord in his precarious position out and away with a scream of sheer power. He flipped over and landed on his other foot, sweeping a brutal side kick around towards the floating Faerie. She blocked it with her left hand, then used its momentum to spin her up and over the Dark Forest Lord's head, bringing her heel down upon the back of his skull. The kick planted him facefirst into the ground, where she plunged downwards into his neck and broke it with a sickening snap.

In the span of a minute, the battle was over. The Faerie fluttered painfully off of his body and onto the ground where she lay down, exhausted and in pain. After a few seconds of needed rest, she stood up, turned to face her opponent's body, then bowed respectfully.

Tearn visibly relaxed once their enemy was dead. "Kid, come here..." he whispered. She looked over at Janus and nodded, then stood before the Felpurr. "In my robe..." he continued. "Clear bottle with... *ugh...* clear liquid... right side..." Blood poured with renewed vigor down his cheek from the wound in his head at the strain of speaking.

She opened his robe and withdrew one of three potions he described, unstoppered the top, and brought the end to his lips. Tearn, however, turned his head weakly to the side and closed his eyes. "No... you two first..." he whispered.

"But you're hurt bad," Kiwi replied worriedly, her eyes on his cheek.

Tearn shook his head slowly. "Don't worry... about me. But hurry... kid..." he choked slowly. *I don't deserve anything after how I treated you...* he thought.

Despite his protests, Kiwi pressed the flask at him again, and the word *"Dummy"* came into his mind. He wondered who exactly conjured the barb, until he saw her mischievous, bloody grin.

He relented and drank greedily at the potion, feeling more renewed with each gulp. When he finished the entire flask, he still felt the opening in his head and painful burns across his body, but the injuries were definitely less severe than they were a few seconds prior.

"Thanks, kid," he said, then painfully stood. He beckoned her up to him as he held out another of his healing potions, opening the bottle for her. Then, without a word, he limped over to Janus and offered him the last bottle. He pointed to Janus' broken wrist. "Pour a little on top to soothe the pain, then drink the rest," he suggested.

Janus did so, and felt the injury lose its painful throb, seconds before he watched his claw straighten as the broken bones pieced together. The burns across his body cooled, and his skin returned to the lighter black it was prior to their titanic battle before the ziggurat.

Tearn backed up a step, but kept his eyes focused on Janus as Kiwi fluttered to his right, holding the healing potion. "Why... did you help me?" he asked. "After all I said, why did you come?"

"We all have a little voice that tells us what we should do," Janus said as Kiwi sat upon his shoulder.

Tearn's eyes passed between the two, and Kiwi put her hand behind her head shyly. He held held his paw out and said, "I appreciate the help."

Janus looked at him suspiciously for a second. Tearn flushed, then bowed his head solemnly and held his paw out farther. "Thank you... Janus," he said as his cheeks burned.

The Dracon relented, nodded, and took Tearn's paw in his claw. The two squeezed strongly, respectfully, not taking their eyes off of the other. Tearn in particular felt grateful for Janus' forgiveness; were he in the same position as the noble Dracon, he didn't think he could possibly offer the same.

After finally releasing his grip, Tearn held his arm up with a beckoning head motion to Kiwi. The Faerie, all smiles, fluttered over to his robed arm and sat down before Tearn's admiring, furry face. "And without you, none of us would be alive. I will always be indebted to you, kid," he said graciously.

Kiwi pursed her lips in mock anger. "Hey, that's not fair!" she contended. "How come he's 'Janus' all of a sudden, but..."

Tearn guffawed loudly before she even finished, and she stopped her protest. "You'll always be 'kid' to me, kid," he explained through his laughter. Janus stifled a chuckle, and Tearn swigged the last of the potion down. Kiwi harumphed with feigned surprise at the Dracon, flying away from the two with hushed whispers of "Picking on me..."

She stopped suddenly at an archway leading to her right, and gasped. Tearn and Janus were by her side in seconds, and took in the sight of the battered, bloody and burned Munk lying chained and prostrate on an altar of stone and blood.

His brown hair was matted over his large nose, and red lines on his neck told of the continued use of painful, cursed amulets. Scattered about his body were several items similar to those in the ruined entrance chamber of the Dark Forest Lord's hold, though some of the rings and scrolls there looked dim and devoid of their power.

They were experimenting on him, and the choking chain of a cursed necklace still clung to his injured neck. "Damn, don't tell me..." Tearn worried aloud, knowing his Nuclear Blast spell couldn't have helped this man's condition. He had forgotten all about the screaming that brought him here when the Munks attacked...

Janus placed a claw on his heart, and felt an extremely weak pulse. "He's going to die any second," he realized aloud.

Immediately upon hearing this, Tearn took an empty flask from his robe and summoned three full pieces of Rainweed, then ground their roots, stems and leaves into paste with a thought. "Hurry..." Kiwi urged, as he mixed the substance with a sudden blast of water from his paws. Plugging the hole and shaking it vigorously, the familiar clear liquid of a healing potion finally took form.

He gave the concoction to Janus, and the Dracon hastily held the mixture to the unconscious Munk's lips and poured the contents into his mouth, massaging his throat to guide the liquid down. Tearn worked hastily on the next potion as the Munk's injuries healed and his eyes fluttered open. He panicked for a second, then realized he was not among the Dark Forest Munk anymore.

"N..." he started, then fell unconscious again. His cheeks drained of color with every passing second. Tearn handed the next healing potion to Janus, then placed his paws on the necklace choking the dying man.

With a feeling of divine power, Tearn clutched the necklace and removed the curse that bound it to the man's neck for a few needed seconds. With a yank, he snapped the chain, then flung the dangerous item to the ground before the curse could take hold upon either one of them.

For the next few minutes, Tearn and Janus took turns mixing and healing until the man was well enough to open his eyes again. "I... can't move..." he struggled to say at last. Tearn nodded and offered the man his one and only potion with a dark blue, swishing elixir inside. Though he gulped the entire bottle down after Janus offered it to him, he was still unable to do anything.

"Might take a while for the curse's effects to wear off," Tearn reasoned, though he kept his true doubts to himself. The man calmed and closed his eyes, relief washing over him. "Do you know where the Holy Work is?" he asked.

The man opened his eyes again, then said, "Across... waters," before he fell unconscious again.

"What waters?" Kiwi asked, flying outside and down the hall. "Oh, these waters!" she called back. Tearn looked out, then back down at the man, and finally picked him up in his arms to join Janus on his way over to Kiwi's discovery.

The hall wound around the Dark Forest Lord's former lair, with small alcoves lining the eastern wall. Kiwi hovered outside one of them, and was pointing inside it. Though most of the alcoves seemed like tiny closets, used only for housing the Dark Forest Munk's demonic artifacts, this one led to a dead end, to a gate barring access to the area just beyond it.

On the other side, water had overtaken a part of the temple and flooded a good portion of it, drowning many of the pews and whatever it was they once faced into a pool of blackened, sludgy water. Kiwi flew to a hole between two of the bars, and was soon on the other side.

"Wait," Tearn and Janus said in unison, then the Dracon spoke next. "It's too dangerous."

"We can find another route over there together... come back," Tearn added.

Kiwi smiled, but did not cross back over. "You two take care of that man, and I'll be right back with the book," she offered. Her two wards opened their mouth and maw to speak, but she interrupted them. "I'll be fine," she insisted. She turned around, but kept them in her sight before she flew over the waters. She smiled and said, "As long as you're both with me... as long as you are there cheering at my side, I'll be fine..."

"Kiwi!" Janus shouted after her.

Tearn nodded. "We'll be on the main level where the Cruds were," he yelled before she disappeared. "Be there in ten minutes, or I'll break this gate down and come after you!" he promised.

"*We* will," Janus added loudly.

All at once, and without his consent, Janus' stomach growled in hunger. He winced, and braced himself for the Felpurr's criticism, or some kind of reminder of what happened with the T'Rang.

Tearn glanced at his stomach to indicate he heard, then hmphed. "C'mon, Janus," he said. "We have to get everything prepared for the kid when she comes back." He hefted up the paralyzed Munk on his back and made his way over dead Munk bodies to the stairs. "And there are two upstairs that can alleviate our little hunger problem..."

***

The ladder popped out from the dank depths of the sunken Underground Temple of the Munk, to the middle of the forest just east of Munkharama. The paralyzed Munk on Tearn's back gave excellent directions; without him, they might have been stuck down there for days.

Everyone breathed deep the cold and clear air, thankful that they were finally out of the musty and humid depths of the temple. And full.

Moreover, thanks to the continued help of the Munk, Wikum's Powerglobe was resting comfortably in Tearn's robe. The Felpurr smiled when the Munk explained the trap that was supposed to guard the globe.

It was orginally placed on a small altar of solid ebony, surrounded by the mummified corpses of long dead

Lords of Munk. Upon taking the globe, a well-concealed vent would release a paralyzing gas, at the same time that the undead remains of the Skeleton Lords would be commanded to rise, and slay the unmoving, would-be thief with diseased swords and sizzling spells.

The Dark Forest Munk disarmed the trap, got the Powerglobe and dumped it in a crate with a multitude of cursed and malevolent items. They were true fools to treat it so lightly.

Tearn surprised everyone, including himself, when he told the other two about the Powerglobe's purpose. He had no idea how long this group would last, what was in store for them, or even what the other two wanted with the Astral Dominae. But for now, it felt right enough.

"Just... a little more..." the Munk struggled to say.

"Quiet," Tearn hushed him, as a parent might speak to their child. The Munk silenced and spoke no further, and the Felpurr smirked... he was really good with that voice.

Animals on either side of the forest prowled in the waning hours of twilight for their nightly meal. Most of the assorted insects, birds, moths and bugs kept their distance from the band of massive adventurers, but a strange, walking tree with an orange face resembling a Human reached out to choke Kiwi after a few minutes walk. A tiny Faerie holding and reading such a large book might have looked like a tempting target to the strange creature.

Apparently, it did not see Janus, because when the Dracon spun around and placed the barrel of his Blunder Buss against its orange forehead, the tree-man mumbled in an incoherent language, then slowly withdrew. There was no fear in its eyes, but there was a clear desire to live in its movements. Janus clicked the hammer back on his firearm and rejoined the others.

Kiwi tittered happily at his assistance, then returned to reading the Holy Work. "This stuff is weird," she commented. "There's a bunch of prayers and stuff about a guy named Munkharam that I don't really understand..." She flipped a few more pages and came across an array of pictures. "Oh, pretty!" she exclaimed. Though not worth risking life and limb for it, the flowers in this book were certainly beautiful.

Tearn struggled to keep a firm hold on the Munk, and hiked his frail body up before the man could slip off of his back. Luckily, the trail was free of holes and rocks, and the puddles from the previous night's rainstorm had dried up enough to make the journey a quick and easy one.

Kiwi grew impatient and hovered up a few feet higher, where she happily saw the entrance to Munkharama. "Finally!" she exclaimed, and slammed the book shut to accentuate her point. Tucking it under her arm, she shot to the entrance of the city, shouting back, "Hurry up, slowbies! We've got a book to return!"

Tearn stopped in the road until Janus caught up next to him. "She always been this impatient?" he asked.

Janus watched her disappear over the treeline. "Long as I've known her," he replied.

With a half-smile, Tearn exhaled sharply and hiked the Munk up on his back one more time. "Young kid's game, this is," he noted, and the two did their best to try and catch up.

***

The children and teenaged students of the dojo looked on with awe at the strange party that came upon them. Not only were they an otherworldly mix of alien races, but they had managed to do what few other Munk could dream of doing.

Xen Xheng carried the paralyzed Munk to the back of his dojo, where some of his older students took him and closed the door behind them. "I gave him a Cure Paralysis potion, but it did nothing," Tearn explained.

The old Munk nodded. "Do not worry," he assured, "he will be treated properly here."

Kiwi shot up from behind Janus with the book in her arms. "Here you go!" she offered. "We risked life and limb, but we got your book... uh, back..." As he took it, Kiwi cocked her head to the side in wonder at the sight of the aged Munk. *Who... is this guy again?* she thought, while a sense of familiarity washed over her.

Xen opened the Holy Work, the most sacred words and teachings of the Divine Prophet Munkharam, with old and shaking hands. Finally... it was back where it belonged.

Without warning, he cheered out loudly, then just as suddenly silenced himself. The children and teenaged students laughed at his sudden gaff, and Xen excused himself. "You do not know how much it means to have this back in our possession," he gushed. "As I thought, it would take the combined strength of all three of you, who walk the Holy Path so diligently, to drive out the infestation from our sacred grounds and recover our teachings."

"Not quite," Janus interrupted with his claw held out to Kiwi. "She killed the Dark Forest Lord, by herself."

Xen was stunned into momentary silence. "You..." he stammered, "you bested the half-Dane... on your own?"

Kiwi smiled and shrank back shyly, and the room exploded into furious conversation. With so many alien tongues from so many different races of children speaking out at once, it was hard to understand exactly what they were saying. A few snippets came out here and there: "Half-Dane?!" "So the blueskins *were* working with the Dark Forest worms!" "We hafta stop 'em!!"

When the scattered conversations reached his ears, Xen furrowed his brow, then waved his hand for silence. Within seconds, the room was absolutely still. "Yes," he explained, "a group of Dane and the Dark Forest Munk were plotting together to destroy the divine city. Their leader himself was a product of both Dane and Munk."

The older among the students debated briefly about what kind of relationship it had to have been to foster such an unholy bastard of a child. Xen pondered briefly, looking among the mixture of Munk, Rattkin, Gorn, and the few Dane students that were picked on mercilessly day after day. Finally, he spoke. "Very well," he decided. "If you wish to strike against the blasphemous Dane and Torquesade, we will leave tomorrow at first light to eliminate them."

The room erupted with cheers from all of the students, save the few Dane who looked at one another with anxious fear. Kiwi, Janus and Tearn exchanged a look as well.

Three of the Munk children stalked over to the Dane with vengeful purpose, grinning at the prospect of finally having their revenge on their scheming enemies. They surrounded and struck out at the young blue-skinned child... when all three of them suddenly cried out in pain: it was like they punched their hands into solid stone!

"That's enough!" Tearn barked, while his paws dimmed from the Armor Shield spell.

Every child in the room quickly stopped their celebration and stared, wide-eyed, at the Felpurr. Silence overtook the room for only a second, before a rat child spoke up loudly. "Magic!!" he exclaimed, and the entire room surrounded Tearn and started tugging at his robe.

"Wow!" "What *else* can you do?!" "Show us more!!" the children pleaded.

At their enthusiasm, Tearn slowly felt his head swim with the happy memories that their urging brought, and felt he had no choice but to give in to their high-pitched demands.

He nodded. "I'll show you... but nobody lays another finger on another person in this room if I do. Got it?" he asked. A chorus of nods and agreement followed, and Tearn made a fist out of his paw. "All right, back

up, give me some room," he ordered. The children made a semi-circle around him, then sat down politely as Xen beckoned Kiwi over.

"May I speak with you, young Faerie?" he asked. Kiwi nodded and fluttered forward... though in truth, she wanted to see the show, too. The two went into the back of the dojo, and the door closed.

"Ok," Tearn began. "First, I will introduce you to a friend of mine..." He conjured divine energy in his chest and flowed it to his paws, which glowed bright yellow. "Come, Golem!" he shouted dramatically.

A dim yellow portal opened in midair between him and the children, and a massive creature of dirt and stone stepped out. Scraping the roof of the dojo, the brown and grey golem roared angrily, and the children screamed and stepped back. Janus yawned quietly at the pedestrian spectacle.

"Who has awakened me..." the golem spoke in a slow and gravelly voice.

Advance on the blue child in front of you, but do not attack, Tearn mentally commanded the creature. The golem roared again, and pointed a stony hand at the Dane child that Tearn had shielded. "You... how dare you pry into the netherworld..." the golem said, with barely subdued rage. "I will teach you to fool with powers you do not understand!"

The Dane child tried to scramble away, but the bully pushed him in front of the summoned creature. The child closed his eyes, shouted in fear, and fearfully punched the golem in the chest.

"GRAAAAAAAR!" the golem roared loud enough to shake the entire dojo... then he stumbled backwards, exploding in a bright wave of yellow light. A glow around Tearn's paws faded, but all eyes were on the Dane who had bested the creature.

Whispered murmurs carried on behind the child's back, until he opened his eyes and saw that the golem had gone. He looked at his blue hands in wonder, then raised his fist in the air with a cheer of victory. The room celebrated with him, aside from the bully, and pats and cheers brought the Dane happily back to his seat on the floor.

"Now..." Tearn said to get the room's attention, "Let's see if anyone else has the strength to handle the arcane..." And before anyone could react, he created a ball of electricity and threw it into the hands of the bully.

He recoiled into the wall behind him when he caught it, holding it gently as the electricity bounced painlessly around his hands. Finally, he raised them to the roof of the dojo and unleashed the energy, and a streak of lightning formed from the magic, shot from his hands, then zapped into the roof.

More cheers and applause accompanied a round of, "Me next, me next!" from the bulk of the children clamored around the Dane and bully, both of whom shared an awed and cheerful smile of amazement with one another.

Amidst the dazzling display of pets and flashy magic, Janus stood quietly and neutrally. His eyes swept the room in search of something more interesting, and he listened carefully over the sound of charging energy and amused laughter... when he heard a soft shuffle to his left.

When he turned to look there, it was extremely difficult to see, but a small fold of red cloth was proof enough that someone was trying to hide there. Janus walked over to investigate, when its owner suddenly pulled the robe back into the shadows. Despite being completely hidden, the Dracon could hear its owner's heartbeat and breathing just fine.

The Dracon sat next to the lone shadow, sighing heavily and resting his body against the wall. "Yeah, it gets a little old once you've seen it enough," he commented to the shadow. Tearn moved glimmering balls of ice through the air to the delight of his onlookers, and the shadow remained silent.

Janus heard its heartbeat slow as it relaxed, however. "You aren't going to watch?" he asked simply.

After a period of silence, a timid voice finally spoke. "I... don't want to," it said. "Nobody likes me, anyway. They're all afraid of me."

Janus nodded, knowing the shadow's plight all too well. "All right," he replied. The two watched the show from behind for a little while longer, until Janus had had enough. He stood up and stretched, and beckoned to the door with his head. "I'm gonna go for a walk," he said, and reached for the door.

The shadow's claw grasped his wrist. "Wait," it implored, and Janus' breath caught in his throat, when he looked down to see a miniature version of his own appendage grasping tightly there. His heartbeat sped even further when the shadow moved its body out into the light. "Can I go with you?" the Dracon child asked.

Janus' maw hung open slightly in surprise, moving, but with no sound coming out. But finally, he nodded. "Yeah, ok. Come on," he said, and they went outside into the grassy field under the darkening sky.

Once they were alone, Janus got a good look at his nervous companion: a red Munk robe and a brown knot holding it tight around the waist... but a scaley, dark green form inside it. His jaw was long and serpentine, his teeth sharp and almost tusk-like, and his green eyes sad and withdrawn. His eyes were not playing tricks on him. *It can't be...* he thought incredulously. *Another Dracon...*

The Dracon child looked up at Janus, then just as quickly looked at the grass again. "Sorry," he said quickly, "I'll go back inside..."

Janus suddenly took stock of the surprised face he was making and relaxed. "No, no, it's all right," he urged, and thought quickly. "Besides, I'm sure you wouldn't be interested. I'm sure Tearn is probably going to get around to his Fireballs right about now."

An explosion suddenly rocked the dojo and the land around it, followed by a multitude of cheers, and the two shared a laugh. *Right on schedule,* Janus thought.

They walked the grounds of the dojo around the corner and back into the courtyard with the massive ziggurat in the center. The grass was crisp and cool, even around the gazebo that Janus himself had destroyed a few hours prior.

"So... you're a Monk," Janus said.

The child nodded. "But I'm a Dracon," he replied. "Master Xheng says I'm the first one of my kind to walk the Holy Path. He named me 'Harashen.' It means 'Blessed Birth.'"

"Where did you meet him?" the older Dracon asked.

Harashen looked into the air, thinking. "Well, I only remember being here in Munkharama, but Master Xheng found me on the Isle of Crypts."

The Isle of Crypts... where the Astral Dominae is, Janus remembered Tearn saying.

"I was alone inside a big tomb of some kind, but I was alive," Harashen continued. "Master Xheng took me back here to train and learn the ways of the Munk."

They walked in silence for a second, until Janus worked up the nerve to ask him the question that was pressing on his mind. "Are you... happy here?" he inquired.

Harashen was silent for a bit as they continued across the courtyard, before he finally spoke. "I'm proud to be a Munk, and I have learned a lot here," he said. "Master Xheng saved me and taught me the Holy Path, and I have become strong spiritually and physically."

An effective dodge, Janus thought, as Harashen looked in the direction of the dojo. After a pause, the young Dracon continued. "The other kids don't seem to like me, though," he admitted. "They never let me

play with them and they always run when I try to talk to them. Only Master Xheng and a few of the adults can stand me."

Janus was immediately reminded of his youth, a time spent running from frightened and angry villagers, all those years of solitude... what a fickle, uncaring God it would take to repeat this same tragedy over and over, crossing who knew how many worlds in this sick universe.

He stopped, waiting for Harashen to face him. "Show me what you have learned," he said on a whim. His young companion seemed confused, so Janus held up his claws. "Come, strike me," Janus urged. "Show me your training as a Monk."

"Really?" Harashen asked.

Janus hunched backwards, as if he were expecting an attack. "Don't hold back," he added.

The younger Dracon nodded, and took a fighting stance with his left leg behind him and his claws balled and ready to attack. *"Heeyah!"* he cried out, and lept at Janus with a flying punch to his chest.

Janus blocked the strike, and kicked his leg out to stop Harashen's expected twin strike aimed at his knee. The child jumped back and swung around, his fist aiming for Janus' face. The older Dracon pulled back and dodged, then grabbed the young one's claw. Harashen struck out with his other, which Janus promptly absorbed on his flak jacket and grasped with his other claw.

Thus trapped, Harashen struggled to pull both of his claws away, then hung his head. "I lost..." he conceded quietly.

At the sudden admission, Janus let go of both of his claws, and the boy shrank back. The older Dracon folded his arms across his chest. "You've lived your life in relative peace, where surrender is an option... haven't you?" he asked rhetorically, then sighed deeply with a shake of his head.

Harashen stood quietly as Janus swept a claw out into the direction of the wilderness. "Out there," he continued, "you will find no respite, and no mercy. Not as a Dracon... *never* as a Dracon.

"Come here," he ordered, indicating the spot in front of him with his head. Harashen did so, but did his best not to look into Janus' eyes. The older Dracon put his right claw under the boy's chin, gently bringing his focus to him. "Now, show me your power once more," he requested solemnly. "Not as a Monk... but as a Dracon."

Harashen wondered briefly what he meant, then suddenly realized when he absent-mindedly placed his claw on his throat in thought. "My... no, I can't," he said simply. "It's not natural."

A wave of energy washed over Janus as his next thought began to take form. From his very first memories as a castaway wild child in the wilderness of Llylgamyn, to his many run-ins with its peoples and to this very day, he never once thought that he would ever say what he said next.

But something about this young child, this little Dracon's personality that reflected so much of his own, was enough.

"Never," Janus stated firmly, "be ashamed of what you are."

And with that, he turned to the ruined gazebo and unleashed a devouring, hissing stream of potent green acid that washed over every inch of its wooden supports, its ceiling, and the ground around it. With a loud hiss and a thick plume of smoke, the wood and a significant amount of the grass around it dissolved in an instant.

Harashen's eyes bugged out. "Wow...!" he whispered in disbelief. "How did you *do* that?!"

Janus turned back to him, and licked and wiped the remains of the acid from his pointed teeth and jaw.

"Now, you try," he said, ignoring the question.

The young one shook his head. "When I try, I can only make a little come out..." he explained. To prove his point, he opened his jaws and shot a small stream of acid, enough to liquify a small patch of grass, but not much else. He coughed loudly, not having used the breath in such a long time after the other children caught him doing it... when their fear of him began.

Janus nodded approvingly. "Good. But you're holding back; I can tell," he commented. "Try again." But before he could protest, Janus held up a single talon. "This time, don't think about the prejudicial opinions of your misguided classmates. Cast away all thoughts of your monstrousness or your lack of humanity. See only your target, and will it to burn. Now, do it!" he shouted.

Harashen quickly opened his jaws again and unleashed another spray of acid from his ragged throat. The stream was slightly stronger and wider than the first, but was still not nearly close enough to what Janus had hoped for.

Suddenly, the older Dracon roared and stomped towards the child, with his claws out and ready to rend him to pieces. The boy backed up, then sweep kicked Janus' muscular ankles. Janus did not even flinch, and grabbed the boy's left arm, catching Harashen's right claw when the boy punched at him in fear. He started to yell for help, and was shocked into silence when Janus bared his jagged teeth at him, opening his maw slowly to devour the boy in a single gulp.

Harashen cried out one last time, then his body responded automatically. He opened his jaws wide and unleashed a hissing, burning spray of unbelievable size and power into Janus' body, covering his head and chest with the powerful acid. It burned, but Janus' natural resistance to the mixture prevented any injury.

Janus closed his maw, and his face softened as he let the boy go. Harashen fell with a look of surprise on his face, but it was not from Janus' sudden attack, or from striking the ground... it was the sheer power of his breath that startled him so.

As the acid still ate at the older Dracon's scales, Harashen looked up at him. Janus towered over him, his jacket covering his massive muscles and his world-weary eyes staring into the boy's own. He reached his claw down like some divine spirit, a teacher sent from Munkharam himself to pull the young one out of his own pit of self-doubt, to teach him how to truly live.

He took Janus' claw, and after he pulled him up, the elder Dracon spoke. "We Dracons... in order to survive, we must use all of our skills, every last tool we have to live another day," he said, and let the boy's claw go. "The world will never grant you mercy... so you must take it for yourself."

Harashen stared at his claws with a new sight, and a new belief about his future. Never before had he thought it possible to be so powerful, or to have such purpose. He looked once more at the symbol of his own potential, at the tempered body and spirit of the elder Dracon.

"Now," Janus said to get his full attention, "show me again."

The boy nodded with a bright smile he had not shown in ages, and shot a thick spray of acid into the melted timber of the gazebo. Janus grinned slightly at one corner of his jaw, and joined the young one in demolishing the remains of the once so beautiful structure.

The gazebo never stood a chance.

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"Yaaaaa!" Kiwi screamed as she punched at the old Munk again and again, but no matter where she punched, Xen was suddenly gone in the blink of an eye.

"You trust your eyes so completely," Xen said from behind her, just before she lunged backwards with an

elbow and hit nothing but air. "Use all of your senses... including your heart!" he called out from her side. She struck there as well, but again, she wasn't quick enough.

The small sparring room in the back was very spartan, containing only a soft mat, a window looking out into the night sky, and a door on either side. They took the injured Munk into one of them, but the other's contents were a mystery.

This "training" seems more like humiliation than anything else! she thought, rapidly kicking a group of enemy air particles. Finally, she had had enough, and flew rapidly around the room, kicking and punching every square foot she could find. No matter how fast she went, though, it was no use: he was always one step ahead, like he could read her thoughts.

Well, then... if that's how he wants to play it! she thought. Kiwi scanned the room, her head glowing, reaching out for Xen's mind... and there he was, hiding in the shadows near the window. Kiwi darted forward with a fist outstretched, then braced herself to feel the old man's puffy stomach... and hit solid stone.

Her fist rammed right through the wall and was overtaken by the cold air of the night sky, and she pulled her arm back in. She could feel his presence right here! She should be inside him right now!

The feeling of Xen's spirit suddenly disappeared, and she could feel him in the room no longer. That is, until he scooped her up in his hand from behind. "Not quite, good sister," Xen said with a smile.

Kiwi pounded on his hand with both of her tiny fists. "Oooh! How did you do that? Cheater!" she exclaimed. The Munk laughed, then suddenly disappeared... and his voice quickly came from everywhere at once. "See for yourself..." he laughed.

Her mind raced. *How could he be doing this? Is he reading my...?* she thought... then smiled evilly. So that was his game!

With much effort, Kiwi emptied her mind of all thoughts, save the feeling of shooting towards the door and punching where she could feel his qi.

However, as she flew towards the target in her mind, she suddenly let her body break right and kick outwards into thin air. *"Oof!"* Xen wheezed, then suddenly appeared out of nowhere, doubled over.

"Gotcha!" Kiwi called out, standing on his body in victory with her arms waving happily.

"Ugh... sparring means, *agh,* not hurting your partner," Xen chastised, and she blushed. "But... excellent work! I can see how you managed to defeat the half-Dane on your own!" he laughed softly, then winced. "I think class is over for tonight, though..."

He shook his head and centered himself, feeling very tired all of a sudden. "If I may ask... who was your teacher?" he asked.

"Jang of Llylgamyn," she replied, beaming.

Xen exhaled sharply. "Hmmm... can't say I've heard of him." He stood up painfully, but with a wonderous smile. "But I'm sure wherever he is... he's very proud of you."

Kiwi's tiny eyebrows knit in confusion as the old Munk retired to the back room. "Can I ask you something...?" she called to his back, but he waved her away. "You should get some rest," he insisted. "You and your friends are welcome to stay the night." He softly closed the door behind him, and only seconds later, she heard the sound of his light snoring.

***

The next morning, Kiwi awoke on Janus' chest to the sound of birds chirping outside. She opened her

eyes sleepily, rising and falling gently on the Dracon's chest with his every breath, and seeing Tearn curled up on a mat near the door. Something was odd...

The entire room was empty.

There were no students, no sounds of snoring or light discussion, no scraps of clothing... no indication that anybody had ever been here in the first place. The dojo was sparkling clean and save for Tearn, Janus, herself and their gear, it was utterly empty.

Kiwi opened the door to the back room and saw that it was equally empty, including both the room that she saw Xen enter, and the small closet with the wounded Munk. *Was it all a dream?* she wondered.

When she flew back to the dojo, the other two were beginning to rise as well. "Morning!" she cried out cheerily.

They grunted in annoyed voices, then looked around, seemingly as confused as she was. Tearn reached into his robe in a panic, and grasped the Powerglobe in relief. "Left in a hurry, did they..." Janus remarked, then checked his equipment to make sure it was all there. Everything seemed in order, but he suddenly stopped when he felt something in his pocket... a folded scrap of red cloth, probably off of one of the Munk's robes.

He opened the folded piece of red robe, and found a drawing on one of its sides. It was a picture of two Dracons, etched in fine black ink. One was big, solemn and staring outwards with a serious look on his face. The other was smaller, and smiling, with hopeful eyes so real that Janus swore he might see them blink if he looked long enough.

Before the others had a chance to see it, or a telltale choke escaped from his throat, he hurriedly folded and placed the cloth back in his pocket with a soft sigh.

"Hey, look at this," Kiwi said. She was holding a note written on a simple parchment in delicate handwriting. When Tearn and Janus joined her, she read it aloud. "*Good morning, brothers and sister. We Munk offer our sincerest gratitude for your assistance with our depraved brothers of the Dark Forest, and hope this letter finds you well and fit to continue your journey.*

"We have embarked upon our pilgrimage to Dionysceus, the Tower of the Dane, and our destiny therein. It is through your actions that this journey was possible, and for this, we again owe you our debt of thanks. Know that whatever your decisions in and for the future, you will always walk the Holy Path.

"To the north you will find the road that brought you here, which will lead you west back to New City. To the south is the road that leads east to Ukpyr, an old ruin currently under the command of the alien Umpani. These are the choices that now lie before you."

Tearn rubbed the Powerglobe in his robe, knowing their destination lay in New City. But... "If we don't explain the situation to the Umpani, we may make ourselves an enemy," he explained. "We'll tell them about the Tracker, then decide what we do after that, agreed?" Kiwi and Janus nodded, and the Faerie looked back at the note.

She read the next part silently before she spoke. "It says this next part is for me," she explained, then began to mouth the words as she went along. A few seconds passed by as her friends waited for her to finish, when she slowly began to smile. She shed two tiny tears as she finished, closed her eyes and rolled the parchment up into a scroll with a tiny laugh of happiness.

"What's up?" Janus asked, but Kiwi waved her hand at him. "Oh, nothing, nothing... just someone saying hello, is all," she said.

The other two gave her a funny look, until she turned and opened the door behind her. "Well then..." she said, energy building up in her and exploding out with a cheer. "Onward, to Ukpyr!"

The Rout

Several hours, few words... such marked the journey of the three heading east of Munkharama to the Umpani-held city of Ukpyr. Nevertheless, despite the silence hanging in the air, there was not a trace of awkwardness among them; it was the silence of three with a deeper understanding of one another, feelings understood without giving them voice.

The sun set behind them after being in their eyes for a good couple of hours, and all three found themselves glancing back upon the brilliant splashes of purples, reds and oranges as the day passed.

Different worlds, but similar beauty. It would have been hard to imagine such similarities a few months ago, but easy to accept once they saw it for themselves.

On either side of the worn road leading to Ukpyr, the sovereign city of the Umpani, were tall grasses and several enormous trees. It was an incredible sight of nature's beauty, leading Janus to label it an entirely new color: "Guardia green." Nothing else seemed to capture its magnificence quite the same.

Suddenly, a group of three strange, green-tentacled creatures appeared from the brush off to the side, walking upon their fleshy limbs. Their heads were in the center of a rotating mass of emerald tentacles, and their inquisitive eyes watched the scaled and furry creatures standing side by side, and the delicate blue-skinned being in the middle.

From the back, the smaller of the three glanced at the party, then back across the road to the south, and issued a strange, echoing cry. "Hoo hooooo," it called, and the two in front of it responded in kind. The larger two skitter-loped on their moving tentacles off of the road and into the trees, while the smaller cautiously approached Janus. He watched in silence as it appeared to dance a funny jig, then raise its arms high in the air.

Kiwi hovered down from his shoulder and held her hand out. "Hello, what's your name?" she asked.

The creature waved its arms for a bit, then reached out to touch her hand with one of its slimy limbs. "Hoo hoooo," it called again, and when the two made contact, the creature suddenly rolled backwards on its many limbs and ran to meet the other two in the trees behind it.

She tittered. "Cute!" she said, then returned to Janus' shoulder.

Tearn stealthily hid his glowing paws in his robe. "And maybe poisonous," Janus warned. "Be careful."

Kiwi stuck her tongue out him with a smile. "Like either of you would let anything happen to me," she laughed.

"Not that we'd need to, either, kid," Tearn added. They started back on the road as the creatures' hoots and a beast's answering groan floated to them over the trees. They walked in silence for a few more minutes, accompanied by steady insect chirps and the sound of rustling wind in the leaves and branches around them.

Kiwi spoke up again. "Are we there yet?" she asked.

Janus scoffed. "You're not even walking!" he countered, then dipped his shoulder low. She slipped off with a cry and fell, then flew unsteadily back up to his face. Janus knew what was coming to him and ran, but Kiwi was on him in seconds, tackling him from behind and pushing him into the dirt.

He struggled mightily, but it was no use... she was unbelievably strong. "All right, already!" he surrendered. "Let go!"

At his insistence, Kiwi lifted up, but not under her own power... and Tearn rotated her towards himself to show her who the true winner of the contest was. He smirked as he held her in place with a movement of his paw.

The Faerie closed her eyes and slowly moved her arms upwards... then all at once, smashed them down into the air, and broke his spell. Tearn stumbled backwards a step, which was enough time for her to get behind him and lock his arms behind his back. "Now what?" she teased, lifting him into the air.

"Hey, hey!" he exclaimed. "Put me down!"

Her supremacy proven, Kiwi dropped him and Tearn landed on his feet, rubbing his aching elbows. He brushed past her to join Janus, who was getting to his knees and regaining his balance from the pummeling.

"I say we let her take point," Janus commented, and Tearn grasped his claw to pull him up. "If she asks for a shoulder... you better give it to her," he said with a smirk. Kiwi hovered triumphantly between the two with a big grin on her face.

"So, kid," Tearn began as they were on the road again. "What are you doing here? On Guardia, I mean."

She looked up and left, remembering all that had brought her here. "Well, I don't care so much about the Astra thingy," she explained. "I just want to find Hiromi and go home."

Tearn nodded. "The shortstack from Llylgamyn?" he asked.

"Yeah," she responded with a great smile. "She's my best friend!" Memories of their first meeting with the Vicar's Ghost and their adventure with the cantankerous Smitty came back to her as she spoke. "There was nothing she wouldn't do to help people..."

Janus thought back to his first and subsequent meetings with the girl. At first, she ran like all the others, and he even threw her words back in her face when she tried to apologize in the prison. But after that...

She was the first person to stick up for him by offering her life as sacrifice in place of his. Though her death may have allowed him only a few more seconds of life, she did so willingly with no regard for her own safety. All other kind strangers prior to her were hardly selfless... people who wanted to use him or who were just repaying favors. It was her, and no other's, unconditional love and respect that he actually believed sincere.

If only to repay her kindness, he knew he wanted to protect and look out for the selfless Hobbit when they found her. If it wasn't for her actions that day... he never would have found his calling as a protector, never would have met Kiwi, never would have come to Guardia and realized so much about himself. *That girl...*

He caught the final word of Tearn's question through his distraction. "...you?" he asked.

Janus shook himself free of his thoughts and shot him a glance. "What is your goal here? The globe?" the Felpurr continued.

He sighed... what a difficult question to answer. "On Llylgamyn," he answered, "Dracons are a rarity. Aside from myself, I have seen no other with a mixture of Human and Dragon's blood." He clenched his jaw, then relaxed as he spoke again. "Naturally, people fear what they do not know, and hunted me without question as to my motives or character. I concluded that it was the Dragon who was to blame, for Humans don't intrinsically fear or slaughter other Humans simply because of their outward appearences."

Tearn bit his lower lip to hold back the obvious. "When I heard about the pen," Janus continued, "I knew it was too good to be true, to be able to write anything and have it come true. Who knew it actually existed... and had such a wonderful curse on it?" he grumbled morbidly.

"'And thus Janus, the Dracon, purged from himself the Dragonian filth and became fully Human.' That was my mantra," he remembered. "It kept me going, a desire that was shattered when I found out about the Bane. So I came here, to Guardia, with the same wish in mind to beg of the Astral Dominae."

Tearn exhaled sharply. "Hey, listen Janus, about all the things I said... don't take them to heart," he insisted. "None of them were ever about you in the first place, so..."

"I know," Janus interrupted. "And you can relax. Recently, I've been having second thoughts on this desire." He calmly let a claw down into his pocket and gently held the red cloth inside. "As well as the nature of Humanity..." he added as an afterthought.

Kiwi fluttered back and kissed his cheek. "Well, *I* think you're cool," she said admiringly. Janus let the hint of a grin wash over his face for a second, then rubbed her head playfully. "So..." he started, directing his question at Tearn, "what brings such a talented wielder of the elements to this madman's quest?"

He chose his words carefully in answer. "Marauders... slaughtered my people and press war on my nation," he said after much thought. "I need the globe's power to stop them...

"...or at least, that's what I thought." he added. "I don't know what I'm doing here either. I'd be just as happy helping the kid find her friend and getting back home as soon as possible, if it were up to me."

Kiwi raised a fist in cheer. "Yeah! You can both come to my house and meet my family," she offered. "And Tearn, you can bring your family to say hello!"

Tearn went silent. "What are they like?" she asked innocently.

Rage burned within him as his family's tortured screams for help met nothing but his powerlessness. Their bodies crumpled in front of him as vividly as the day he helplessly watched them die, and the image of Rawulf charging through defenseless villages whirled by him.

But for the first time, they were coupled with memories of himself leading campaigns into their scattered townships in the plains. Not a single mission under his command was met with anything short of complete success. Piles of smoldering Rawulf bodies amidst rubble and complete destruction were all that remained once his superiors pointed out the offending village on a battle map.

He pictured his family floating in the sky, looking down upon him with smiling faces. His heart soothed, like a cold river splashing over the broiling forest of his memories... and he smiled.

"My family... was as fine a group of loving Felpurr as any man could ever ask for," he said. "My wife was strong in thought and deed... a wonderful cook, a cunning warrior, a guiding, loving mother and a partner in every aspect of my life.

"My son used to brag all the time about how he would be a Mage like me someday. We spent hours between my deployments, working on spells until the sun went down and perfecting his mastery of the elements. And my daughter..."

He paused a second and let his voice calm, and a tear dropped from his right eye. "The beautiful things she used to make. Jewelry, pictures, clothes she wanted me to try on. All the creatures she befriended and brought home to my wife's dismay," he remembered with a laugh. "She was going to begin schooling, shortly before I left on my last mission to the front." He glanced at Kiwi's silent face. "She would have been about your age by now..." he said.

She blushed, and opened her mouth to apologize, console, something, but Janus beat her to the punch. "Once, when I was younger, a little Human girl had her doll thrown into a tree by a local boy, and ran home crying," he remembered. "I was gathering eggs from some nests at the time and saw the whole thing.

"I took the doll and jumped to the ground in front of the boy, saying that I was its guardian spirit and he would be punished for all eternity for his crimes. He messed his pants and took off running, screaming that there was a monster after him," he continued.

Kiwi giggled. "What did you do with the doll?" Tearn asked.

Janus waved his claw forward. "Followed the girl home and left it on her doorstep..." he said.

With a great smile, Kiwi clapped and cheered him. "In my village," she said, laughing, "we sometimes get these big frogs who come in and try to eat us like we're flies.

"Anyone with half a brain knows Faeries are tough and you don't mess with them, which would explain why we get the cream of the foresty crop to attack us! So back when I was still studying magic, my brothers and sisters got together to teach the frogs a lesson."

She put her left hand underneath her balled right fist. "After we captured a frog, one person would clamp the frog's mouth shut, another would grab his belly from beneath, and another would steady its big warty butt," she explained. "Then when we were all in position, we would fly up quickly and launch it over the trees. We called it the 'Frog-a-pult,' and once we got it working, we didn't have problems with the toads after that."

Tearn laughed hard. "It would be my pleasure to meet these friends of yours, kid," he said, "especially since they seem just as bad as you."

Kiwi flexed. "Mom always did nurture our creative sides," she said proudly.

"You think that's bad, wait until I tell you about when my boy got into a scuffle with the neighbor's children..." Tearn said, then paused slightly, "...in the middle of his Fireball training."

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It was dark by the time the laughing party of three made it to the gates of Ukpyr. "So even though I wiped out that rampaging Bubbly Slime horde," Janus explained, "they still wouldn't let me into the Temple of Cant to cure the disease. Just as well, though. I heard their soup sucks... buncha price gougers."

Kiwi and Tearn laughed, just as a burly Umpani guard in a standard IUF brown vest and military green pants stopped them. He looked them over with searching eyes, peering suspiciously past his sharpened horn.

The Black Dragon, cat-man and Faerie... this is them! "NEPs! TUFS! Where in the hell have you been?!" he roared loudly, waving his curved and flat Walriblade at them. "You were asked to deliver that message to Rodan TWO DAYS AGO! WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN DOING?! And why is the Detache in rubble?!"

When he was sure the Umpani's tirade was over, Janus spoke. "It was the T'Rang," he explained. "They destroyed the Detache Station, and murdered the men staffed there. Only Rodan survived, and he's resting in Thesminster Abbey in New City as we speak."

The Umpani swore. "Urrhina damn those bugs...!" he said angrily. "It's good to hear about Rodan, but we have another survivor... Lieutenant Gruntwrapper." He clenched his fist tight around his sword. "They worked him over pretty good... took his eye. He's in shock, and won't say a word about what happened." *And all those men at the Detache... dead,* he thought angrily.

He unhooked a grey device with an antenna on it from his belt, and pushed a red button on its surface. "Command, this is Private Kernek at the south entrance," he spoke into it. "Survivors from New City have returned... it's the message boys."

There was a pause and a loud hissing, then all was silent. Seconds later, a voice emanated from the device. *"Send them to the General,"* it ordered.

"Understood," Kernek replied, and waved them through. "North of here, command HQ," he ordered. "And step on it, soldiers. If the General needs to see you, something big is up."

Across the large, stone and grass training field where Umpani once sparred with uncaring abandon, there were now instead rows of the large, rough grey-skinned creatures standing about, looking around

themselves in confusion and expectation. Some stray piece of gossip, some truth alluded to but beyond their reach floated silently amongst the soldiers, and created a tension thick enough to get under the skin of even their most unshakeable.

In front of them, tall Umpani sporting the regal red jackets of an officer's station were barking orders and demanding attention, and their soldiers snapped immediately to an impressive, formal line.

From this distance, Janus heard nothing but the urgent tone of the orders. But with every point of a finger and sharp command, groups of Umpani scrambled in different directions to carry out the orders that they were assigned.

The building housing the guiding arm of the Umpani military was as strong and unwelcoming as ever. The muscular guards there eyed the three warily, but allowed them passage into the building nonetheless. One of the guards, whose eyes were bloodshot almost to the point of being solid red, walked in a haze as he joined them. It was obvious he had not slept in days.

"Follow me," he said simply, leading them down a hall and past scurrying Umpani holding at times documents, at others weapons of war. They moved past a fortified door guarded by more surly Umpani into another room, stocked to the brim with firearms and blades of all sizes. The horned creatures scrambled in from behind and in front of the group, picking up as many of the weapons as they possibly could and fleeing towards the entrance of the building.

Down the final hall, they walked past a door simply labelled, "Map Room - Restricted." From within, Janus heard the screaming of two groups of Umpani. "We focus our defenses around both sides of the city... and effectively split our forces in two! Shall we sign the city charter over to them while we're at it?!"

Someone pounded something very hard inside. "Well, what would you have us do?!" another voice screamed. "Leave the Spaceport, or Headquarters and the Barracks undefended?! Lose one and we lose our air support... lose the other and we might as well just run ourselves through right now!!"

Kiwi's stomach flip-flopped. The guard at the gates was right... something big was going on.

The red-eyed Umpani led them to a final door, guarded by Umpani more massive than any they had seen before. "C.I.C.I.U.F. - General Yamo," the sign said. One of the guards snorted as they approached, causing a puff of smoke to escape from beneath his horn. He knocked on the door behind him twice, then opened it to allow Janus, Kiwi and Tearn through.

The monstrous Umpani guard followed them inside, but a wave of a muscular arm from the figure with his back turned to them sent his bodyguard back into the hall where he came from. The door closed behind them, and they were alone with the leader of the Umpani military.

He was wearing a regal purple jacket and pants, with massive epaulettes of gold. Though not as apparently large as the Umpani ordered to defend his life, as he turned briefly to eye the party, the experience in his hardened eyes told the story of every battle and mission he had personally ordered, commanded and fought.

He was reading a piece of paper with dismay evident in his weathered face, reading and re-reading it as he struggled to come to grips with the information it presented. After his fifth run through, he folded the paper in half, took a small silver object out of his jacket pocket, then flicked a dial on its top.

The object unleashed a tall, powerful flame on one end which licked at the paper in his hands, until it and the information it contained were caught in a purifying yellow blaze. Yamo dropped it to the ground at its most fiery, then stamped out the blackened husk with a powerful stomp that sent its useless ashes flying.

Then, he turned to them. "What news of New City, and of Rodan?" he asked calmly, and with a steely gaze.

Janus answered. "We arrived at the Detache Station and delivered the orders to Rodan Lewarx, as

requested," he said formally. "After he read them, he became extremely agitated and ordered us all on an assault against the T'Rang. I believe his focus was on a specific T'Rang, but I do not remember the name."

Yamo put his right arm on his hip and rubbed his mouth with his left. With a sigh, he stared at the ceiling. "Shritis..." he muttered in dismay.

Tearn nodded. "We fought him outside the Detache station, along with several other T'Rang," he continued, prompting Yamo to widen his eyes at the news. "And you're still alive?" the General asked.

"We were engaged with another group at the time," Janus explained. "When we rejoined the unit, Rodan was seriously wounded, and the rest of his squad was dead or missing."

Before the information could upset the General any further, Kiwi quickly spoke next. "He's resting at a church nearby," she added.

Yamo relaxed, then was silent for a full minute. The tension in the air pressed down on the assembled IUF recruits, until they could almost stand it no more.

"Bela assured me that he had information vital to the future of the cosmos when he contacted us several months ago," he finally said. "A dark presence roaming the galaxy, terrorizing and subjugating all in its path. A god, they say.

"We Umpani have known of the Dark Savant for some time, but even his might pales to the threat we face in the swarm," he continued, then sighed. "We captured one of their shuttles recently... and it was full of fertilized eggs. It can only mean they are here in this part of the galaxy to infest more worlds, stripping them of all of their resources and leaving them worthless husks.

"You don't want to see one of those worlds, soldiers," he insisted. "The lifeless, barren rocks they leave behind... the image never leaves you."

He gestured to the sky before he spoke again. "The war between the Umpani and the T'Rang has gone on longer than any of us have ever been alive. There are battles raging even as we speak, follow-ups and precursors to thousands more. Bela insists that the Dark Savant is the problem... and yet, for all his talk, he has never faced a bug in combat, or seen them strip entire worlds in a few months.

"The IUF needs you all, soldiers," he said, with a sweeping hand across all three of them. "There must be a Queen somewhere in the ruins north of here, where she and the T'Rang filth plot their next murderous foray into galactic civilization. No Umpani could possibly infiltrate their ranks... but one not of our race might just be able to do so..."

He opened his desk and took out a small, round yellow object with a little ring in its side. The top was covered with a few tiny, decorative green fronds. "We were skeptical of the stories of the Astral Dominae and its power," he said, "and had we known of its true strength, or of the T'Rang presence here beforehand, our position in Ukpyr would have been more heavily fortified. However..."

He indicated the device in his hand. "We always stock our expeditions with the worst in mind. I want you to take this, soldiers," he said, and held the device out to Janus, their ranking member. "The Thermal Pineapple has the power to level a city, but the T'Rang burrow deep. We cannot let them get their claws on the Astral Dominae..."

Tearn never took his eyes off of the deceptively cute device. As the General drew closer, he could only think of how such a thing might have helped end the war on Llylgamyn, saved his family... he had trained for decades to nurture the strength of the elements within himself, and now, this strength was being offered to them as freely as someone might offer a plate of food, or a child's doodle.

Such a strange force of many different faces, power is... he thought.

Looking back on that time, none of them were able to accurately describe exactly what happened next. They pieced together pieces of what they remembered into a somewhat coherent memory later on, though it turned out sketchy at best. What they could agree upon was that General Yamo was showing them how the device worked, with his finger pointing at the ringed pin and instructing them on how to pull, count and throw the Pineapple.

They all remembered the flash of light, and the feeling of being picked up and thrown like dolls into the wall behind them. Curiously, none of them remembered the sound of the first explosion that lifted them so easily, but they all remembered the subsequent ones.

Like a pressure building until it could take no more, releasing itself with a ground shaking roar many times that of Janus' firearms right next to a vulnerable ear, the explosions sounded from all around them at seemingly random intervals.

Kiwi remembered being somewhere extremely dark... underneath the shielded body of Tearn and an Armor Shield protecting them from flying rubble, the Felpurr later explained. Janus was behind them and buried under several hundred pounds of rocks, but once the booms outside were finished, he exploded out from underneath the debris as if the rubble was not even there.

There was a gap in their memory as the shock wore off. The next they knew, they were digging, searching for General Yamo among the shattered remains of his office... and the night sky was clearly visible from the wall that had caved in to the east.

Kiwi found his arm twitching underneath a great chunk of masonry that had blown out from the wall. The three wasted no time digging him out, but they all knew that his crushed and bleeding body would not last long. Tearn pressed a healing potion to his lips, and though the General drank it, his internal bleeding was too severe for the potion to counteract.

His eyes rolled in his head as Janus and Tearn noticed the Pineapple in his hand: the pin that Yamo was demonstrating when the explosion caught him was nowhere to be seen. They backed up and started running out the open wall as Yamo whispered his last words, ones that only Kiwi heard from her position by his side.

"Duty... Power... Vic...t..." he whispered, and then the General spoke no more.

"Get out of there, kid! The Pineapple...!" Tearn roared at her, waiting next to Janus outside. Kiwi pried her eyes from the noble leader's face, but they went suddenly wide when she saw what Tearn was trying to point out. In a panic, she blasted through the open wall to the others.

She grabbed them by their flak jacket and robe from behind and flew them as far as she could, when an even brighter light enveloped the entire world around them. It flung them into the sky, and they spun end over end a dozen feet over the ground.

The next thing any of them knew, they were in a pile of dusty, ruined white masonry, in a wide road leading out of town. The former Umpani barracks to their left and right were spaced several hundred feet apart, though both were in utter ruins.

Kiwi and Janus looked towards the northern exit of town, and their jaws simultaneously dropped: they were now staring down an advancing army of thousands of T'Rang, led by Shritis T'Rang himself.

He looked crazed and bloodlusted, and his hooked Psi Rod was already dripping with the red blood of who knew how many Umpani. He skitter-dashed forward with his eyes set straight on Tearn, who had not yet seen the Assassin of T'Rang Assassins bearing down upon him. Behind the entirety of the T'Rang invasion force, a large pool of brown goo marked their movement into the city.

An energetic hum and shriek sounded out above them, where Kiwi saw a multitude of ships looping, diving and shooting about, firing streaks of brilliant light at one another. The larger, more heavily armed and slower grey "Whales" blasted straight lines of yellow, red and white into the direction of a fleet of

darting, black jagged "Beetles." A particularly maneuverable Beetle fired a burrowing green light into the middle of a Whale, which dug straight through it and streaked into the ruins of the Umpani headquarters below it.

The Beetle flew through the hole it had punctured in the Whale, and the smoking, exploding grey ship suddenly veered off course to the ground below it. It rotated and turned until it was heading straight for the mass of T'Rang led by Shritis, then suddenly gained speed.

Though the surface T'Rang were quick to fire streaks of their own green light back at the descending ship, it was too late, and not enough. In a massive, grinding landing which thankfully blotted out any squishing sounds, the ship crushed the bulk of the T'Rang line and exploded, taking several hundred more with it.

At the same time, Shritis was almost upon them, with his jagged Psi Rod and piercing needle-antennae reaching for Tearn's exposed backside. Janus loaded and fired his Blunder Buss and Musket with a warning shout, but to his surprise, he cleanly missed the unbelievably fast T'Rang with all three shots.

Tearn took the warning and floated forward, then scooped up Kiwi and pulled Janus to his feet as they started running for the assembled line of Umpani behind them. The Umpani in the red jacket in front of them cried out the order to fire, and the line of guns roared and exploded with a mass of screaming, searing Musket balls that found the flesh of dozens of T'Rang.

Janus flattened them all against the walls of the barracks behind them with every successive volley, staying cleanly out of the line of fire, and they made their way to the back of the stalwart Umpani line. Though the shots rang true and dropped numerous T'Rang with each attack, the throng pressed on, as strong and eager to battle as ever. Shritis, himself shot at least a dozen times already, seemed to only grow stronger and quicker with each successive bullet in his body.

The Umpani leader unsheathed his Rhinablade as his soldiers dropped their guns and prepared to charge into furious melee. But before he gave the order to do so, Shritis impaled him with his venomous stingers, then dropped his twitching body to the ground. Six Umpani surrounded him and were summarily gutted, impaled and poisoned to death as their whirling blades found no mark, or simply did not penetrate Shritis' hardened, chitinous skin.

Around him, the grossly outnumbering T'Rang met the demoralized Umpani in a twirl of thrusting blades and electrified rods as the Umpani slowly backed up, and were met with reinforcements from the south. Despite the added manpower, though, it was clear the line would not hold for long.

An Umpani officer stepped in front of the group as three separate explosions in the sky and on the ground cut off some of his words. "You... NEPs! Get... civilians and non-combat personnel... of here! Make for the mountains!" he shouted, then pointed to the southern exit of town and the towering peaks to the north in turn.

Another explosion rocked the mass of Umpani behind them. Beetles were darting down and firing into the assembled croud of Umpani, and the energetic pulse of their weapons joined in an awful crescendo with the gurgling cries of Shritis' next victims, clanging metal and shouts of rage. "...be ok?!" Kiwi screamed, her heart beating a million times a minute.

The officer pushed her and Janus towards a group of fleeing Umpani to the south as he fired off both barrels of his Blunder Buss into approaching T'Rang. Their heads exploded within a split second of one another, and the officer bodily blocked the next advance.

"This is the galaxy's war," he shouted, reloading his gun with trembling hands and spilling gunpowder on the ground. "You fight for all of us, but you don't need to die with us! Get those civvies somewhere safe!" he ordered, blasting and missing Shritis as the T'Rang's rampage continued. Umpani fired their guns by the score into the diving Beetles, and delighted when they brought two of them down in fiery explosions.

The officer dropped his gun as T'Rang slithered forward on him and the three darted for the refugees

fleeing the town to the south. The Umpani unsheathed his sword as he screamed, "For the I.U.F., you filthy cockroaches! Duty, Power, Victory!!"

Tearn took out a green potion from his robe, a liquid so dense it practically threatened to break the bottom of the vial with its sheer weight. He threw it behind him with a mental command of attacking the T'Rang, and continued with the other two towards the panicked Umpani near the south entrance of the town.

"You always have something to make things right, right?" Kiwi asked, with hope evident in her voice.

Tearn's face remained dark as he returned her look. "Kid, you never want to see my strongest spells," he said, with a glance at the growing green lump of flesh in the puddle of goo behind them. "I only ever use them when the situation is hopeless..."

The lump of flesh quickly grew to taller than the buildings around it, a good fifty or sixty feet, into a dinosaur of mammoth proportions. The green-scaled lizard's powerful legs immediately launched it forward as its short but strong arms raked air, and saliva dripped from its ten foot jaws. Only the T'Rang, who were looking in its direction, saw it, but its tremendous roar and thunderous footsteps made the entire company of Umpani turn around in surprise.

The soldiers dove out of the Godzylli's way as it crashed into the mass of T'Rang, who pierced ineffectively at its rough, scaley hide. It tore into them with biting jaw and stomping feet, sending some bodies flying, and smashing others into goo. Several of the more unlucky were eaten alive by the fearsome creature as they screamed for help.

Shritis blinded four successive Umpani with a swipe of his Psi Rod's blades and turned to face the monster, then drove enough venom to kill a hundred Umpani through his stingers and into its thigh.

The Godzylli shrieked and bellowed in pain, but whipped its tail around and into Shritis, nonetheless. He grasped the scaley thing and crawled up its spine, and pierced its scaley hide again and again with his dripping stingers as he slithered up the dinosaur's back.

It whipped its head around and smacked Shritis off of its back, then spun in place. As its tail bowled over several dozen T'Rang, and Umpani backed up and away from its lashing tirade, the great beast grabbed Shritis' airborne body with its short claws, then flung him to the ground. Before he could rise, the Godzylli began to crush his body beneath a single, stomping foot.

Tremors shook the ruined Umpani outpost with every stomp. The T'Rang and Umpani lines held fast, wondering what the beast would do next... but they did not have to wait long. After a mighty roar that shocked every soldier and drone to the core, the Godzylli lifted its foot off of the fallen T'Rang Assassin, bent over, then swallowed him in one gulp.

Then, it turned to the T'Rang line and took a step forward, bending low and close to them, then bellowed so loudly that the line began to falter and scatter. It stepped again, then again, right on top of them, and roared once more.

It suddenly fell silent. All at once, stingers began to pierce through the top of its skull, so quickly that it seemed like black rain falling in the wrong direction. Its eyes rolled in the back of its head, and its head began to slowly circle and waver.

After a few seconds of the deadly assault, the Godzylli whimpered... then as its jaw went slack, the dinosaur smashed to the ground with enough force to knock over a sizeable amount of both Umpani and T'Rang.

The last thing Kiwi saw before she, her two friends and the group of refugees escaped the south entrance of Ukpyr was Shritis' black-robed, spidery body emerging from the fallen beast's mouth... and leading a final charge on the Umpani line with a bloodcurdling scream of sheer, murderous bliss.

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A day and a half later, the morning sun rose over the tallest of the mountain peaks as the survivors of the Umpani rout fled to the cliffs north of the city. There were around fifty survivors in all, from scientists and communications specialists, to just the injured. Kiwi, Tearn and Janus, the NEPs and TUFS assigned to protect their lives at all costs, kept a vigilant eye out for any pursuing T'Rang or hungry creatures in the forest.

Janus and Tearn took point off to the left and right, and led the tightly packed group into the concealment of the trees on the rising mountain path. Kiwi watched their flank and fended off the weak attacks of skittering bugs and fire-breathing crows that tried to pick off a few of the weaker Umpani.

She glanced back to see Tearn speaking to Janus at the front of the group. "Can you handle point for a bit?" he asked. Janus nodded and stepped to the center as Tearn hopped down to the rear to join Kiwi.

"You ok, kid? You look like you're in shock," he pointed out.

Kiwi glanced protectively to the sides of the refugee group, then behind them. "I'm fine," she assured. "I've just never seen so much... carnage, I guess, at the same time."

Tearn re-applied the Armorplate spell around the sides of the group and mentally prepared an Iceball, just in case. "It's tough, the first few times you see a battle," he explained. "It helps to remember why you're fighting when the post-battle depression hits you."

He paused as they approached a great cave in the mountainside, whose internals were masked by darkness. "The Umpani are surely fighting for their lives, and the lives of countless others, against the T'Rang," he concluded.

"Really?" Kiwi asked, sighing as she kept her eyes on a group of rat-men passing the treeline below them in the distance. They did not seem to notice or care about the group above them.

Tearn looked at her with confusion. "Really... what?" he queried. "You saw who the attackers were, and the slaughter carried out at their hands. You heard what the General said."

"Yeah," Kiwi replied. "I heard what he said. And all I know about this war is that is probably has a long history, and now the Astra thingy is at the crux of it." She exhaled sharply. "But I really don't know... maybe it's just an excuse," she wondered aloud.

An old Umpani in a white coat could keep his silence no longer. He suddenly wheeled on her, and his rough and wrinkled skin contorted into a visage of sheer anger. "Shut your mouth!" he roared at her.

Tearn snarled and prepared to launch the Iceball if he made a single wrong move, but Kiwi floated to his shoulder and sat down to stop him. The entire group, including Janus, halted to see what the commotion was about.

"You were not there when my unarmed comrades and I were attacked on Arechna 3c," the Umpani growled in a white hot rage. "You didn't see the glee in their eyes as they murdered defenseless Umpani by the thousands. You were not there for the massacre on Daiger 8, or the sprinkling of the Umpori virus among the Federation planets. You did not see countless races hunted galactically by the millions, and you have *no right* to opine about things you have no clue about!"

The Umpani erupted in cheers and applause for the one who dared give voice to what they were all thinking. Kiwi waited until their voices died down, then spoke. "You're right," she nodded, "I don't know anything about the war. And I wasn't there for any of the slaughter."

"When you know what I do, you'll feel the same," the old Umpani said more calmly, when he realized he had made his point. "And I honestly pray that the Astral Dominae and your home planet, wherever it may be, never fall under the greed-filled eye of the T'Rang Empire."

A younger Umpani with a broken leg limped to the front of the group. The self-appointed leader, no longer

wishing to be near the clueless, pacifist newcomers, led the rest of the Umpani into the cave in the rocky cliffs ahead.

Kiwi watched as they left. "And if either one of you will use the Astral Dominae just to kill the other, then neither of you deserve it..." she whispered. Tearn visibly winced at the comment, flushed, then watched Janus step down to join them.

"Kid... I'm sorry you got dragged into this war," he apologized.

She hmphed and stuck her tongue out after the Umpani. "The war isn't the problem," she said. "It's this gleeful ignorance and stubbornness that'll keep the wall between them for too long... I can't be in the IUF if I don't know for sure what's going on between them and the T'Rang.

"I'll kill if I have to, to protect my friends and people who need my help," she continued, as the last of the Umpani disappeared into the cave. "But not without reason, not without knowing who the real enemy is."

She stared in thought at the morning sky as Tearn tried to wrap his mind around the girl's words. He heard so many contradictory statements... *She'll kill, but she will not fight? Evil can be good? What nonsense is this?* he thought.

Janus and Kiwi started forward to join their Umpani charges in the cave, but Tearn stopped them both with a paw. *I will not see them turned... this conflict will not tear their morality to shreds and leave them an empty shell of hatred. I will go it alone if I have to.*

He looked between them. "I won't have either one of you staining your conscience with this war, or these people," he stated firmly.

But before he could make a move without them, Janus grabbed his robe and pulled him back. "And we won't let a member of our team run off to do something dangerous without his friends to back him up," Janus replied with a firm nod.

Tearn looked between the two... just as a bellow erupted from the cave, followed by the screams of the Umpani. The two clenched their right paw and claw into fists and punched them together. Then, Tearn beckoned Kiwi onto his shoulder, and when she was firmly seated, they all dashed into the cave.

As a dozen Umpani fled out into the morning light, pleading with their three protectors for help, the screams issued forth once more. Before they had even entered the cave, they saw the frightening source of the Umpani panic.

Half a dozen Giants were smashing spiked clubs and grabbing after the helpless refugees. They were easily two to three times the size of Janus or the Umpani themselves, and had long orange beards that hung past their dirty and ripped red animal hides.

Though the brown cave was wide and long, there were passageways leading to the east and west to who knew how many more strapping Giantkin, and a flowing body of water beyond them to the south. Already the Giants had dashed several of the Umpani into the walls around them, crushed a score more and were actively pursuing the survivors as they grotesquely devoured the victims in their hands like cattle.

Kiwi rocketed off of Tearn's shoulder and into the elbow of one of the slower Giants, whose hands were wrapped around an injured Umpani's legs and was preparing to smash him against the wall. The Giant's elbow bone snapped and he dropped the Umpani on his head, and another refugee quickly ran forward to help his dazed and bleeding friend to the entrance of the cave.

The Giant whipped his good, beefy left arm out at the powerful sprite, who ducked it with ease. Kiwi grabbed it from the wrist, and using the Giant's own momentum, shoulder tossed his entire body up and over her towards the flowing river before her. He flipped twice, landed clearly on his neck, then skidded straight into the water. He did not surface.

Too late to save an Umpani scientist crushed underneath a red-eyed Giant's boot, Janus rushed past a fleeing refugee as the red-eye lumbered forward to overtake the runner. The Dracon unloaded all three barrels of his two guns into the Giant's shin, who dropped to his knees when his leg gave out.

Before he could react, the red-eye swung his meaty paw out and struck Janus full on. Through the stars in his vision, he skidded to a halt several feet away, hurriedly stuffed gunpowder and steel balls into his guns, and rushed back towards the recovering red-eye. The Giant bashed his Mang Club before Janus, who lept up and on top of it, then ran up the Giant's arm to his neck.

He twisted violently left and right trying to shake the Dracon off of him, but Janus' balance held as he climbed to the Giant's shoulder. The Blunder Buss and Musket thundered in his claws, **BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!**... and a stream of acid in the now gaping hole in the Giant's neck sealed his fate. Janus lept to the ground off of the thrashing Giant, right into the path of a third, brown-bearded Giant raising his Mang Club behind him.

Kiwi darted out of nowhere and pushed him clear of the smashing club, and Tearn pinned the brown-beard to the wall behind him with six long, sharp daggers made of ice through his shoulders and legs.

The Felpurr set a Giant's clothes and body ablaze with an explosive Fire Bomb, and the Giant dropped the lifeless body of the Umpani whose spine he had snapped onto the stone floor. Another was too slow to back up and avoid a hurled purple potion, which exploded near his mouth. The purple Poison Gas liquid-mist invaded his lungs, and he fell on the ground with a massive thud as the lack of air knocked him out.

Before the inflamed Giant could put himself out in the river, Tearn held up both of his paws and unleashed a nasty torrent of Whipping Rocks. The grey, white and black stones of varying sizes and dangerously jagged edges pierced his flesh from behind with such force, that he fell unconscious feet before he reached the underground river. Tearn left him there and doubled back towards the entrance.

"Take the last one!" he yelled at Kiwi and Janus as he dashed off a corridor to the side. "I'll look for survivors!"

No sooner had he turned the corner around the damp, rough walls of the cave, he came face to back with the pudgy, seated form of a Giant... one that was about his own size. He charged a feeling of ice in him and got ready to spear the Giant from behind, when the flabby thing turned around to face him.

It was a child... the size of a pudgy, humanoid adult, yes, but a Giant child nonetheless. Tearn's glowing blue paws dimmed and disappeared when he met the babe's slow-witted eyes, but flared with mystic energy again when he saw the freshly slain Umpani body he was devouring on the floor. The baby continued to chew as if nothing was wrong.

Tearn heard footsteps behind him, and thought quickly. *The Umpani would demand vengeance for this death...* he thought, *but he's just a child...!* The ice spear was on the tip of his mind. One thought, and it would impale the murderous creature in an instant.

Try as he did, though, Tearn could not bring himself to unleash the icy lance. His paws stopped glowing blue, and he took out a glowing, blue-white potion from his robe.

He threw the potion with expert accuracy into the baby's face, who dropped the Umpani's body and stood up with a broad, goofy smile. Tearn mentally commanded the charmed Giant to run ahead, as far and as fast as he could. The lumbering midget did so, stumbling at one point, but eventually he reached the shadows on the other side.

Tearn's head glowed from beneath his hooded robe, and there was a distant thud as the baby Giant fell to sleep. Kiwi and Janus appeared just as the glow disappeared.

He gestured towards the body of the Umpani. "There was nothing I could do," he said simply. He looked

over the mangled body for a second, then turned to face the other two. Without a word, he walked past them, pausing only to pat each reassuringly on the shoulder.

Something felt strange to him as he walked to the entrance of the cave. *The baby was my enemy... right?* he thought. *He was a Giant, a murderer despite his age, someone opposing me and the people I was meant to protect. But if that's the case, why don't I feel angry about letting him go?*

The three returned outside to the less than fifteen Umpani who had survived the attack. The morning sun was higher over the mountains, and black birds flew overhead under the bright sky. The three stepped away from another massacre, courtesy of the galactic war fought between two races who seemed destined to be at odds with one another.

Kiwi noticed with dismay that the old Umpani scientist was not one of the survivors who made it out of the Giant's cave alive. He had gone to his grave hating the T'Rang, assured in his knowledge that there could be no peaceful co-existence between their two peoples.

Janus was calm, as calm as he was during every violent altercation and massacre he had witnessed in his life. As ashamed as he might have been to admit it, seeing death and hate as a result of misunderstanding was a part of his life, and almost ceased to affect him after all of the years.

T'Rang, Umpani, Dracons, Giants... there would always be a victim and an aggressor, no matter how hard people tried to change the fact. Living beings existed to hate, use and hurt one another, and it was a pitifully rare sight to find one who dared to rise above their own base nature.

As the group tended to the wounded and did their best to cleanse and heal the survivors, Tearn looked in wonder at his own paws. They were paws that were once used to murder his sworn enemies, paws that carried out vengeance and hatred after the death of his family.

Paws that just seconds ago, he used to not only incapacitate and strike down, but to preserve the life of one he should have considered a target.

His whole life, the world had been a simple coloring of black and white, good and evil, us and them. But for the first time today, he was actually able to save lives... of those who wished him well, and of those who wished him harm.

Hell, even those at his mercy, whose lives he could have ended with a simple gesture... would wake up the next day with nothing more than a headache.

Three months ago, he might have been disgusted with himself in betraying his own beliefs. Dark and light, eternally divided, and never the twain shall meet.

As the baby Giant slept soundly within the cave, Tearn looked out upon the Umpani he and his friends were able to protect. Slowly but surely, the world ceased to be an eternally combatitive jumble of light and dark in his mind's eye. If it was possible for him to save, even love his enemy...

Amidst the polarized opposites of black and white in his vision, just the tiniest, almost imperceptibly small amount of grey slipped into view. It was as plain and usual a color as could be... but to Tearn, what a beautiful sight the growing, fledgling little pigment was.

After a moment's rest, the Umpani refugees and their protectors drove deeper into the forested mountains north of Ukpyr, in search of sanctuary from the grasping claws and meaty paws of their tormentors and pursuers.

God in the Machine

If it hadn't been for Gromo...

The surviving Umpani soldiers were scattered about the mountains and jungles that surrounded Ukpyr to

the north, east and south. Though the fact started out as whispered rumors, the survivors of Ukpyr that they ran into eventually removed all doubt: the T'Rang had taken the unfortified Umpani city, and there was little they could do about it now.

That night, as Janus led the group through a thicket of very dense trees, they were all suddenly surrounded by seven Umpani in green and black-striped camouflaged uniforms and facepaint. They pressed their many Muskets at Janus and Tearn's necks as they ushered the survivor Umpani through to the caves ahead.

Kiwi immediately flew above the treetops and waited for an opportunity to distract or neutralize the guards, but for the time being, there were too many of them to do so. She watched as they led her friends to the mountain path, where the Umpani survivors silently trudged up and into the shelter above. There was a figure hunched at the top of the mountain road, the moon at his back throwing his features into darkness.

She could tell he was very tall, even as he knelt. In his right hand he gripped a long, powerful Blunder Buss, which was thankfully pointed at the sky, rather than her friends. She fluttered silently from branch to branch, closer to the top of the mountain, until she could finally see who he was.

It was Sergeant Balbrak, their commanding officer and coordinator for the NEPs in Ukpyr... and he was wounded. A simple red bandange around his beefy forearm was stained almost completely brown with the sheer amount of blood he had lost. His face was a steely mix of anger and unshakeable resolve, and it, too, was stained with the rivulets of blood that had dripped off of a massive cut on his forehead.

Nonetheless, he was still there, commanding his people as best he could. It was a testament to his own willpower, and to the strength of the Umpani military force as a whole.

Though he did not descend the mountain path to speak with his captives, Balbrak did communicate through the small machine that was at every Umpani side, the device that allowed their voices to traverse a great distance in an instant.

"The scouts were right," his frighteningly neutral voice sounded from an Umpani's voice machine in front of them. The soldier cradled his broken right arm over his chest while he held the voice machine to Janus and Tearn. *"You have returned with just over a dozen of my people. Where are the others?"*

Janus spoke after a prod from an Umpani's Musket behind him. "They were ambushed, and killed, by Giantkin just west of here," he explained. "We tried to..."

"You failed, whatever you tried, and now good men are dead!" Balbrak's suddenly angry voice erupted. His shadowed body shifted, and he slowly lowered his Blunder Buss at the two as he descended the mountain path.

With the cool muzzle of a gun on the nape of his neck, Tearn immediately considered any spell that would not be noticeable to the trained Umpani. Nothing powerful, subtle or quick enough came to mind.

Balbrak continued his march down. "As an officer of the Imperial Umpani Federation, by mandate of statutes 114.23 and 125.94 of the military code of conduct unbecoming a soldier in a hostile environment..." his voice boomed from above and all around them, "...and in proxy of the late Commander in Chief of the Imperial Umpani Federation, General Yamo... you will be executed for the incompetence that cost the..."

A crackle cut his transmission short. *"...lay that order! By Urrhina's name, belay that order, Balbrak!"* a voice shouted from both of the voice machines. Janus immediately recognized it as the voice of the Umpani Firing Range's own Lieutenant Gromo.

Balbrak immediately stopped his descent, and his excited voice came forth from the broken-armed Umpani's voice machine. "Gromo! You're ali..." the excited shadow on the mountain called out. His shadow fiddled with the communicator in his hand, and his voice suddenly ceased to be broadcast over

the entire area.

After a crackling sound, the Umpani retreated up the mountain with the device next to his mouth. His muffled voice carried on for a few minutes over the night air, and as his men shifted uneasily, Tearn's head glowed weakly under his hood in preparation...

Finally, just seconds before the Felpurr attempted to paralyze the entire company of Umpani around him so he and Janus could make a break for it, Balbrak's terse voice squawked out of the voice machines. *"Cut 'em loose,"* he ordered, *"and get them out of my sight."* He paused slightly as his men looked up for confirmation of their orders, then his voice came again. *"Take their badges, too; effective immediately, they are relieved of service,"* he said.

Tearn silently sighed in relief, and apathetically flicked his NEP badge from inside his robe pocket to the Umpani with the broken arm. With impressive speed, the Umpani dropped his Musket into its holster at his side, then caught the tiny wafer in his now free hand.

As Janus unpinned the smokey and charred TUFS badge from his jacket and handed it to the snorting Umpani beside him, he silently thanked the aged firearms expert for his apparent show of mercy. Perhaps when it was all over, he would have a chance to thank him in person.

"In exactly one minute, you will be considered trespassers upon IUF grounds," Balbrak's voice warned from the device next to him. The two wasted no time leaving the area.

They pushed into the trees and away from the group of Umpani on high alert as Kiwi spoke in their minds. *Right behind ya,* she warned, then flew between the both of them. "I was about ready to let them have it when they let you go," she assured them.

"I know," Janus replied. "I could hear you breathing in the trees. You sounded scared."

Kiwi exhaled a cleansing breath. "I didn't want to hurt people who treated us like friends before," she said. "Besides, I think they've suffered enough for today, and..."

Tearn patted her reassuringly on her tiny back. "Relax, kid, he was just worried about you," he said, and Kiwi smiled and said no more. "And I promise you," he continued, "that I won't let anyone force you to do anything you don't want to again... and that includes signing up with people we know nothing about."

Kiwi nodded and thanked them both.

Suddenly, a screeching bird with talons outstretched dove from the trees and into Tearn's face. Without missing a beat, Janus rushed forward and punched the black rook in the back and sent it sprawling into a nearby tree. As its eyes dizzily rolled in its head, Janus stood back and said, "I always enjoyed the solitary life..."

Tearn lazily stretched his arms upwards, unfazed by the attack. "Just about had it with the military myself," he commented passingly. "Why did we sign up in the first place, anyway?"

"Bela," Janus said as he lept over an exposed tree root. "He said we could find support from the IUF, but I think he knew as little about this war as we did."

"Hmm... who was he, anyway?" Tearn asked. "Brother of yours?"

Janus scrunched his jaw up slightly, then scoffed. "Nah," he replied, "he's a full-blood."

Kiwi perked up from his side, and flew onto his shoulder. She crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head strongly as she spoke. "Hey, don't talk like that!" she insisted. "Just because..."

"It's all right," he interrupted, "I didn't mean it like that."

An awkward pause passed between them as she rode on his shoulder and they moved between the dark trees. In truth, she noticed that Janus really did seem different from before.

Finally, she broke the silence. "You know," she started, with a sly grin, "I never understood how a holy man and a Snake Queen could have a Dragon for a son..."

They reached the banks of the Eryn river, where Brother Tshober once guarded the non-existent bridge so diligently. One by one, with Kiwi's wings and Tearn's magic to guide them, they all flew across the fish-infested waters, towards New City and the path to the Astral Dominae.

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The next night, they were at the high walls of the occupied town, which was bustling with the activity of many of the silent, wandering, cold machines that they had fought the night of the first T'Rang assault. Several dozen covered the entrance east of Town, while a Wizard Eye spell allowed Tearn to see the hundreds more patrolling the alleys and streets inside the city.

"It's... packed," Tearn whispered from the treeline east of the occupied town. His eyes were still closed as he continued his mental walk through the city. "There are a few openings between the Guards here and there, but it'll be tough."

He silently mindwalked through more of the buildings as Janus spoke. "So what do we know so far about this boat and the globe?" he asked.

Kiwi spoke, before Tearn decided to interrupt his spell and explain. "We know that there's a boat somewhere in the city, and that Tearn has the thing we need to power it," she summarized. "Using the boat, we can get to the Isle of Crypts in the sea south of here and find the Astral Dominae."

"Trouble is, we don't know where the boat is," Janus pointed out.

Pondering their next move, Kiwi put her fingers to her chin and sat down on his leg in thought. *Did we forget something Xen told us, or...?*

Tearn slowly smirked as he opened his eyes. "I think I have something," he said confidently. "Follow my lead, and keep quiet." He dashed out of the trees northeast of the city center, and pressed himself up against the city wall there. When the others joined him, his head glowed slightly as he looked at the area on the other side of the wall.

Gong, Rulae and the other Munk were busy cleaning the inside of Thesminster Abbey. Tearn's invisible eyes roamed the walls, taking in the entirety of the peaceful church, from the flower garden outside to the calm seating area and guest rooms inside. He noted that Rodan Lewarx was nowhere to be seen, not inside, outside or around the holy building.

His paws glowed, and air pushed Janus and him off of the ground. The Felpurr held his arm under the Dracon's shoulder, and guided him quickly up and over the walls onto the brown roof of the Abbey. "Ok, down, quick!" Tearn hissed, and as Kiwi joined them, they dropped carefully to their bellies as a group of four of the Savant Guards hovered by to the west.

When they disappeared, Tearn huddled in close to the other two. "When I fly down, follow me right after. And stay quiet!" he whispered. Janus and Kiwi nodded.

His head glowed one last time and he sent his consciousness wandering just southwest of them. Past a locked house populated by cowering humanoids with green skin and tusks, and another with a group of rat-men arguing with two emotionless Savant Troopers his mind went, until it reached the building he was looking for.

The minutes dragged on as group after group of the silent machines hovered past the fixed point in space that Tearn spied upon. At some times, there were would be even three or four squads of several Guards

and Troopers silently whisking past the door labelled "Forbidden Zone."

He had ample time to explore its internals and externals, and by the time the machines finally started to temporarily thin out their patrols outside, he knew the layout by heart.

The entrance was a wooden door with a red and black emblem on the handle, a sign unique to the town and indicative of the potential dangers... and rewards... inside. There were five Savant Controllers inside: four standing guard with glowing Disruptor electric lances in hand, and one working on an odd machine in the corner. And in that machine... were exactly the clues they would need to find Wikum's boat.

The machines outside the Forbidden Zone finally moved off in several different directions, leaving a hole in their ranks outside of the building, one that would last all of twenty seconds before another patrol arrived to fill the space.

"Go," he hissed sharply, and his Levitate spell carried him down to the grass outside of the church as Janus thumped silently behind him. Kiwi darted after Tearn as he flew straight between two buildings and sharply cut left around the corner. She could hear the machines whirring closer and closer from all around her, knowing they would be upon them in seconds...

She and Janus rounded the corner, and saw Tearn waving them into a building with an open door. They halted suddenly as they saw the Savant Controller inside, whose head was missing the usual blinking red lights leading into its brain equivalent.

A small spark of electricity jumped off of its lifeless body as Tearn quickly pushed them inside and closed the door behind them. Machines whisked by seconds later, but there were no sounds of warning or anybody trying to enter the building. They had made it.

From the small light just down the tiny hall of the Forbidden Zone, Kiwi and Janus saw Tearn mime an explanation. He pointed to himself, then conjured the tiniest of sparks in his furry paw before dispelling it, then pointed at the motionless Controller. The message was clear: *"I zapped it."*

Kiwi silently cheered and held her fist out, and Tearn tapped his own against hers with a smug grin. He then put a single digit to his mouth, to which the others nodded. He hunched over, then slowly and quietly stepped down the tiny, bare hall and to the right.

There was a reinforced wooden door there, and attached to it was a tiny grey device with blinking, colorful lights upon it, at just about waist height. Only a tiny slit at its base offered access into it.

Tearn beckoned them over to him, and he closed his eyes as his head glowed for just a second. Then he nodded, opened his eyes and pantomimed silently once more.

First, he pointed to the left side of the door, held up a digit, then pointed at Janus. The Dracon nodded. Next, he pointed at the middle of the door and pushed the digit forward twice, held two up then pointed at Kiwi. She clenched her fist with an excited grin and nod.

Finally, Tearn pointed to the right, held up the digit, then indicated himself. Janus stood up and hunched over, ready to charge, and Kiwi put her feet to the wall behind her and prepared to launch when the door opened.

Tearn's paws glowed green and he touched the door, which issued a painfully loud *click* in the once absolute silence. He flung the door opened as his paws glowed bright blue, and as Kiwi whizzed by his right ear, he unleashed the ice lance from his paws.

The world seemed to go in slow motion as they carried out the perfectly executed sneak attack. The Savant Controller in front of Janus had just barely begun to swing its Disruptor lance when the Dracon grabbed and ripped its head off with a powerful twist. Sparks shot from its neck as it slumped forward, but Janus caught its heavy metallic body before it could make any more noise.

Kiwi punched a hole straight through the first Savant Controller's torso, which continued to hover in place as she emerged from its other side and spin kicked the remaining one in the chin. Its head snapped around to the complete opposite direction, and its body flew into Janus.

He caught it, and though his feet skid along the ground under the force of the flight, he brought the Controller to a more-or-less quiet halt on the floor.

They simultaneously looked at the Controller who was hunched over the grey device in the corner of the room, but was now pinned facefirst into the wall behind it with three ice lances through its head, neck and torso. Its body ceased to move, and the sharp ice blades in it kept any telltale sparks from disrupting the machine behind it, or alerting any machines outside.

"Excellent work," Tearn congratulated in a hushed voice.

Janus finished checking the bodies of the two Guards beneath him. "Think they alerted anyone?" he asked, and Kiwi shook her head. "They didn't call reinforcements when we rocked them the last time," she commented. "As long as nobody comes in, we should be fine!"

It was a small room, possibly a security station. The walls were bare stone and only a few things immediately lept to their sight as they scanned the room: the door leading them in, the machine that the Savant Controller had been working on, and the door and window leading to a jail cell to the east.

The large portal leading into the prison was solid steel, and a green light was on above it. Peering through the barred window, Kiwi saw that it was thankfully empty and devoid of bodies, bones or suffering inmates.

She floated to the hole she punched in the standing Controller before her, and peered through it, to Janus. *And to think I couldn't even punch one a few days ago...* she remembered. He waved at her through the opening, and she tittered quietly.

"This is it," Tearn said, indicating the machine in front of him. It was an odd device, springing out of the ground on a brown stand with grey wires leading into the stone below it. The machine itself was a grey box with a black display and odd symbols written upon it, and red, green and blue blinking lights surrounded the screen.

On either side were curved fins that served no apparent purpose, but just in front of the screen was a pad bearing strange symbols that none of them recognized. A black device with a keypad was attached to the machine's right side, an object that the Controller failed to remove before he was destroyed.

Janus crossed his arms. "This is... what, exactly?" he asked.

Tearn shook his head and knit his eyebrows together. He rubbed his furry chin thoughtfully as he spoke. "I... don't understand," he said. "When I looked in here, it wasn't... I mean, these symbols weren't..."

The machine sprang to life then, as words they could read began to flash across the screen:

Identifying language... identified: Galactic Common. Switching from Cosmic, please wait...

Kiwi's jaw hung open. "W... what did you do?" she asked Tearn, who shook his head in confusion as he cautiously backed up. "I don't know... I didn't do anything!" he insisted. Janus pushed the both of them behind him protectively and prepared for an instant, white hot death. He grit his teeth... and the machine beeped.

They all looked at one another, then cautiously walked forward to read the new message on the screen:

Language download complete. Command:
Black Ship Status
Black Ship Log

Research Files
Exit

Tearn chuckled triumphantly. "See? Told you," he said, successfully keeping the prior nervousness out of his voice.

"'Black Ship?'" Kiwi asked in wonder. Almost immediately, the screen turned completely black, then words scrolled across the machine's blank face:

Multiple commands accessed. Please specify: BLACK SHIP STATUS, BLACK SHIP LOG

Kiwi clapped her hands over her mouth as the original menu reappeared, and was relieved to see nothing jump out and attack her.

"Voice activated, huh?" Janus wondered aloud. He looked at the others and said, "Well, then it would stand to reason that if we're looking for something, it would be under..." Tearn nodded, and Janus turned towards the machine. '"Research Files,'" he said aloud.

FILES
Command:

Kiwi hovered in front of the screen. "Command? What do you mean, 'Command?'" she asked. "Please explain."

The machine was silent, and its lights glowed uncaringly. The others, similarly confused, began to try suggestions. "Access?" Tearn asked. "Go," Janus ordered. But each time, the machine refused to do anything.

The Felpurr harumphed and shook his head. "Some 'Research Files,' you piece of junk," he grumbled.

He sighed, then turned away from the unhelpful machine. "Sorry I made you guys..." he started, when an idea suddenly struck Kiwi. "General Yamo," she interrupted, his death still fresh in her memory. The words on the screen disappeared and were replaced in a quickly scrolling flood of information:

Name: Yamo, Olexander
Class and Origin: Umpani, Male, Planet Umpana
Age: 72+
Description: Intelligent, powerful, honorable, respected. Rough grey skin, large nose-horn. Rumored to be getting soft with age.
Distinguishing Marks: Hycodet Cross of Valor, three scar-holes on left abdomen.
Threat: Formidable. Commander in Chief of the Imperial Umpani Federtation, trained in the use of IUF issue sword and firearm. No magical capability. In possession of top of the line IUF equipment, including Rhinablade, Blunder Buss and Thermal Pineapple (hand-held nuclear device).
Current Information: Personally commanding the 124th East Regiment of IUF Galactic Forces upon Planet Guardia, based in the remains of the city of Ukpyr. Opposes the T'Rang presence in the holy Nyctalinth ruins. Currently searching for the Astral Dominae.
***UPDATE* Slain in an unexplained explosion in Ukpyr prior to a T'Rang assault. Scans report presence of nuclear radiation.**

"Wow," Kiwi remarked. "That was... descriptive."

Janus nodded in amazement, then spoke. "Wikum," he said simply, and the information on Yamo erased, replaced by entirely different data:

Name: Wikum, Erin
Class and Origin: Munk, Female, Planet Guardia
Age: Deceased

Description: **Eccentric, inventive, intelligent. Pioneer of seafaring technology on Planet Guardia.**
Threat: **None.**

"That's it?" Tearn asked a little louder than he wanted. He calmed, then spoke again. "We did all that just to get some history on boating?"

The machine seemed to laugh quietly at him as it blinked silently. "Let me try next," he offered, and Janus gestured for him to move forward. "Wikum's Powerboat," he told the machine. The information erased.

Name: **Wikum's Powerboat**
Location: **New City, Planet Guardia**
Description: **Nautical creation of Erin Wikum, currently the fastest Guardian-made vessel on Planet Guardia.**

"How helpful," Kiwi laughed. "Well, I could always fly to the Isle of Crypts and bring the globe back if we can't..." she half-joked, when the information on the screen erased again.

Name: **Isle of Crypts**
Location: **Planet Guardia, five hundred miles due south of New City harbor in the Sea of Sorrows.**
Description: **Resting place of the Astral Dominae.**

"Yeah, we know that, you scrap heap," Tearn grumbled. Kiwi giggled as the information continued:

Currently populated by Undead, Demons, Dragons, mythical beasts and cybernetic caretakers.

Janus sighed. "Ok, I *really* didn't need to see that..." he commented.

It looked like the machine was finally done smashing their morale, though, so Kiwi spoke up next. "Well, let's cut to the chase, shall we?" she suggested. "'Astral Dominae!'"

Name: **Astral Dominae**
Location: **Isle of Crypts**
Description: **Creation of Phoonzang. One third of the universe's most powerful artifacts. Contains the power of Life.**

"The power of Life..." Tearn whispered, and his eyes suddenly went bright. Janus and Kiwi looked at him briefly, then returned to the screen.

Previously kept hidden by the power of the Cosmic Forge. Revealed after the pen's theft by two larcenists from the planet Llylgamyn. Currently the subject of a two-way war between the Dark Savant and the T'Rang, and the Umpani. Connected to the descendants of Phoonzang, notably Vi Domina.

Janus crossed his arms over his chest. "Anybody else get the feeling that we stepped into something a little over our heads?" he wondered aloud.

"'Phoonzang?'" Tearn asked the machine. The information erased, but a curious message appeared:

File not found. Command:

"Weird..." Kiwi remarked. "When it doesn't have information on something, it's not supposed to say anything, right?" she asked the group. They looked at her, confused, so she gestured towards the screen. "Watch. 'Flippydoodle.'"

The message remained, and nothing happened. "See? It doesn't know 'Flippydoodle,' so it doesn't do anything," she explained. "But when you say 'Phoonzang...'"

As she spoke the word, the screen erased and re-displayed:

File not found. Command:

"You get a message," she finished.

Tearn nodded slowly. "I see... you mean there might have been something written about him before, but now it's been deleted, or protected so others can't read it."

Kiwi nodded with a triumphant grin on her face.

"Well, anyway," Janus interrupted, "there are a few more things to look up here." He looked back at the machine. "'Vi Domina,'" he said to it, and the screen erased.

Name: **Domina, Vi**
Class: **Higardi, Female, Planet Dominus**
Age: **24**
Description: **Strong-willed, confrontational. Black hair, blue eyes, light skin and dress.**
Distinguishing Marks: **Eye patch, right eye. Transponder glove, left hand.**
Threat: **Highly dangerous. Natural combat talent with close and long ranged weapons. In possession of a White Sword, a blade of unmatched sharpness, and a Frontier Phaser. Healing ability. Prone to violent outbursts.**
Current Information: **Aboard the Black Ship. Confirmed connection to Pz.**

Wow. "And the 'Dark Savant?'" Kiwi asked the machine.

Name: **Dark Savant**
Class and Origin: **God, timeless**
Age: **Irrelevant**
Description: **Powerful, benevolent. Opposes the reign of the tyrannical Cosmic Lords.**
Threat: **Supreme.**
Current Information: **Aboard the Black Ship, Dedaelis, orbiting Guardia.**

"Huh! Interesting," she remarked. "A god in a ship?" She looked up at the ceiling as if she could see through it.

As she hovered back to the machine, Janus and Tearn shared a glance. The word bounced in their minds and between them, and they spoke in unison. "Dark Savant..." Janus started with a whisper. "...Savant Guards?" Tearn finished.

The two could almost feel the dark god's eyes on them now, boring through the ceiling and into their ignorant, paltry souls. They both looked at Kiwi in worry as she cheerily said, "Kiwi!"

Her stomach did a flip-flop as the information erased from the screen. There was no way it possibly...

Name: **Saeren, Kiwi**
Class: **Faerie, Female, Planet Llylgamyn**
Age: **14**
Description: **Small, powerful, childish. Blue skin, rainbow wings. Heavily reliant upon others for security.**
Distinguishing Marks: **Bald.**
Threat: **Very high. Master of a high level form of martial arts that relies upon speed, direction of force and counter attack to quickly disable or kill. Technique is akin to the Linartian-style martial arts form "Sudden Rain" of the planet Linart, or the Oniran-style "Wing" of the planet Onira. Learned in the beginning stages of Psionics.**
Current Information: **In New City.**

"Kid..." Tearn started.

Kiwi's heart thumped louder as she spoke again. "Janus," she said shakily, and the screen blanked.

Name: **"Janus"**
Class: **Dracon, Male, Planet Llylgamyn**
Age: **20**
Description: **Tall, massive. Black scales and elongated jaw, Umpani flak jacket. Acute senses.**
Distinguishing Marks: **Two fang scars on left shoulder.**
Threat: **Substantial. Master of ranged weaponry and expert marksman. Capable in the use of historic weapons such as bows and crossbows, as well as modern gunpowder-based projectile weapons. Has the ability to breathe acid orally from an internal acid sac.**
Current Information: **In New City.**

"Kiwi, we've got to get out of here!" Janus insisted, but even as shivers of fright tingled down her spine... and a bright white light appeared in the corner... she spoke up once more. "T... Tearn..." she stammered, and the screen blanked again.

Name: **Rothias, Tearn**
Class: **Felpurr, Male, Planet Llylgamyn**
Age: **35**
Description: **Violent, brooding, magically powerful. Orange and black stripes of fur, green eyes (black during battle or times of heightened alert). Sighted in brown robe containing a number of dangerous Alchemical mixtures.**
Distinguishing Marks: **None.**
Threat: **Very high. Master of the versatile spellbook of Mage, as well as the destructive spellbook of Alchemist. Capable of mass slaughter with seconds of preparation, though repeated use of powerful spells may leave him vulnerable.**
Current Information: **In New City.**

Janus grabbed her around the waist and pulled her away from the machine, darting for the door with Tearn. As she was pulled away, Kiwi managed to cry out, "Hiromi!" The screen blanked and text scrolled across the screen, but she couldn't make out the tiny print from this distance...

Before they reached the door, the white light culminated into a powerful brightness that enveloped the room, and a girl was standing before them.

Black eyepatch, White Sword in her hand and pistol at her side, there was no doubt in Janus' mind that this was Vi Domina, the girl on the machine's file. She was dressed provocatively for a "highly dangerous" person, in stockings that covered her left leg and cut off above the knee on her right.

As his face flushed, Janus' eyes went from her black boots to her chest, which was unfortunately covered... fortunately barely... by a strip of purple cloth and a small piece of yellow metal over her breasts. A V-shaped red piece of metal travelled down from her shoulders to her solar plexus, then back up to the other shoulder, and sat underneath a broad, metallic yellow collar.

Under her short black hair and the antenna behind her right ear, her visible blue eye stared confidently, and her smug lips formed themselves slowly into a proud smile. "Hey hackers," she greeted as her grin widened. "Whatcha doin' in the Dark Savant's files?"

The very second Tearn's paws started to glow red, the girl's pistol was out of its holster and against his forehead. She laughed loudly as Kiwi prepared to launch off of Janus' chest and deck her. "Now, now, fuzzball!" she teased. "Let's not be hasty and start blasting the first pretty girl we see now, shall we?" Tearn growled quietly, but the aura disappeared from his paws.

Vi flipped the Frontier Phaser around in her hand and re-holstered it in an impressively smooth motion. Janus was in love. "Who are you?" Kiwi asked, and slowly relaxed.

The girl looked at her with adoration in her eye. "Oh, cute! A Faerie!" she exclaimed, and Kiwi blushed. "My name's Vitalia Domina, but you can call me 'Vi' if you want," the strange girl answered. She bowed as Kiwi scratched her head thoughtfully.

"Oh!" the Faerie suddenly remembered with a snap of her fingers. "You're the one on the Black Ship... the one 'prone to violent outbursts.'" Tearn winced at her bluntness, but Vi simply laughed out loud. "Is that what the Dark Savant had his drones put on my file?" she asked.

She calmed herself and arched her back, cracking her knuckles in the air. Janus' heartbeat thumped faster than before. "He's probably still steamed about me blasting those Troopers last week," she said proudly. "They're his pawns, you know? And I had enough of their 'The-Dark-Savant-orders-your-compliance!' nonsense," she said in a monotone mockery of the machines' voices. "So..." she finshed, and made a gun out of her hand and pretended to shoot the silent Controller in the back of the room.

She sheathed her sword at her side. "Which brings me to why I'm here..." she said.

Tearn narrowed his eyes at her. "Not to kill us..." he deduced.

Vi sighed and smiled, and looked at the ground thoughtfully before she turned back to the interesting cast of characters in front of her once more. "Lately he's been getting more and more," she said, then paused slightly. "I'd like to say 'obsessed,' but 'cracked' seems like a better word... talking about fate and the will of the Gods and somesuch.

"At first it seemed like a great adventure, you know? And he was such a nice guy, in a fatherly sort of way," she continued. "Cruise the galaxy in style, and all that. But lately, he's starting to give me the creeps." The strange girl looked at each of them in turn. "You guys wouldn't happen to have a way off this backwater rock, would you?"

Before they could respond, a flash of blue light came from behind them. When it finally dimmed, a shadowy figure began to take form in their collective vision: it was the Dark Savant himself.

He was a massive being, even taller than Janus. His armored body was wrapped in a red cloak that draped over his metallic shoulderpads, his chest, and his arms and back. Though his left hand looked organic, his right was covered by a buzzing metal glove that was streaking with bright blue energy.

Or perhaps... it *was* his hand. Above his large, plated boots, a purple jewel sat placed in the middle of his body armor.

What transfixed the party more than anything else, though, was the face of this god among men: it was concealed underneath a transparent dome that warped the image of the walls behind it and the shadowed face within it. However, it did little to keep his deadly, triangular red eyes from shining forth in disappointment and anger.

"My beloved child," his voice boomed and echoed around the room. ***"I thought that you and you alone would be the most loyal to me, but it seems that even you have turned. Why have you conspired against me so?"***

The three were paralyzed in awe of the mammoth god of the stars, and nobody in the room had the presence of mind to act... except Vi.

She unholstered and blasted her pistol into the cosmic juggernaught's helmet. Shaking free of his mental paralysis, Janus grabbed Kiwi, and retreated into the corner with Tearn as streaks of light shot out of her gun and punched into the Dark Savant. A mighty billow of steam erupted from his neck.

"GRAAAAGH!" the Dark Savant roared in pain, but he still managed to raise his gauntleted hand to rocket a streaking bolt of electricity into Vi's body. She was suddenly thrown back into the wall behind her and cracked her head on the stone, then crumpled to the ground in a painful heap.

Steam and sparks erupting from his helmet, the Dark Savant gasped and wheezed as he lifted Vi from the ground with a single hand, then opened the jail cell door and threw her in like a doll. The green light above the door flashed then turned off, and a red light next to it suddenly lit up.

Just before he disappeared in another flash of light, the Dark Savant looked at the frightened and angry forms of the three still in the room. His red eyes calmed and softened, as if he were smiling.

"My children, if you need me..." he said strangely, ***"...I am just a prayer away."*** He waved his fleshy hand at them with genuine kindness, and then was gone.

Janus immediately stood up and started to pound on the door. "Vi! You ok?" he shouted, but the door was too large to break down, and there was no apparent keyhole. Kiwi flew through the bars in the jail cell window as Tearn got to his feet, and the Faerie knelt next to the bloody and burned girl. "I think she's all right!" she called back.

There was pounding on the steel door behind her. "The door's locked," Janus said to her dismay.

Kiwi fluttered forward and stood just behind it. "Stand back," she warned, then put her feet up against the stone behind her and pushed off.

Janus backed off just as there was a strong pound from the jail cell, and a large dent pushed out from the door. "Kiwi..." he started, as the dent grew larger and larger with her successive blows. "Hey, wait..." he warned, just before the door broke off of its hinges, fell to the ground with a loud **BOOM!** then skidded to a stop at the center of the room.

"...OWWWW!" Kiwi shouted, gripping her right fist in pain. She blew on it and fluttered around, whimpering, "Owie owie owie..."

With a shake of his head, Janus walked in. "You could've just taken the bars off the window," he pointed out.

She looked sheepishly at the narrow bars and rubbed the back of her neck, when more pain shot through her hand. She winced as Janus knelt at Vi's side. "And keep it down," he warned. "There are still a bunch of Guards outside."

Kiwi stuck her tongue out at him. "If she and bubble-head didn't bring them, nothing would," she commented, but Janus simply held the unconscious girl and said nothing. "Hmph!" she said dismissively. "You're welcome!"

A thought quickly struck her, and her face fell when she realized what the sudden battle had made her forget. Immediately, the Faerie blasted back to the mysterious machine to see what message it had displayed about her friend's fate.

Slowly but surely, Vi came around. She coughed twice while lying in Janus' claws, then smiled bravely. "That glove sure packs a whallop..." she laughed, and sat up.

"Take it easy," Janus urged, but she didn't listen. She stood up, wobbled, and leaned herself against the wall with her hand over the burn mark on her bare stomach. "It's all right... once I get back to the ship, I can smooth things over with him," she said.

Janus looked at her skeptically, and Vi tapped his cheek twice. "Hey, what's that look for, handsome?" she asked, and he flushed again. She laughed, then her face fell and she turned serious. "We need a ship!" she exclaimed. "He can't get the Astra-thingy without me, and he'll chase me to the ends of the planet to get me back. And since he saw you guys with me, he'll be after you, too!"

She's right, he thought. *If we're on his files and he knows we're working with Vi, we won't be able to escape him if we find the globe...*

Vi continued. "But if we can get out of here before he knows we found the Astral Dominae, we're home free!" she proclaimed.

"Only you can get the globe, right?" he asked, with a slight trace of wonder.

She nodded proudly. "Yep! That's why he chose me," she answered. "Which reminds me... take this." She took the antenna off of her ear and handed it to Janus. "If you find the Astral Dominae, use this and let me know. I'll work on getting us a ride out of here!"

Janus put the device around his ear as Vi reached for her wrist, but she suddenly stopped to look him in the eyes. "One last thing," she said. "Don't trust the spider-faces... they're working with the Savant."

Then, without another word, she touched her hand to her wrist and disappeared in the same flash of white light that brought her into the Forbidden Zone in the first place.

His mind occupied by talk of Gods, ships and globes, Janus wandered out of the jail cell to a very sullen Kiwi. "Don't worry, kid," Tearn assured her with his paw on her back. "I'm sure your friend's all right."

She nodded slowly, and they both watched Janus as he approached. Behind them, on the screen of the strange machine, was written:

Timeout - no response from user. Disconnecting...
Disconnected. Login name:

Interlude

Ten Worlds

Just a few days prior, Nyctalinth was buzzing with activity from their coming assault upon Ukpyr, former City of Glory, turned Umpani outpost. The sky roared with every ship that jetted many miles over the trees towards the unfortunate city. The sticky, slurpy sound of a thousand T'Rang oozing along the ground with the mighty Shritis T'Rang in the lead was almost deafeningly foul.

As the days dragged on, the city became quieter and quieter. Soon, it was a rare occurrence to hear any sound at all, save for the gruel slurping and egg birthing of the T'Rang Queen, H'Jenn-Ra.

In her chamber of long shadows, brown goo and sticky mire, she noisily attacked several giant bowls of foul-smelling gruel with powerful slurps. Every once in a while, she would stop to emit a body-wide groan that might have been the T'Rang equivalent of a satisfied sigh, or possibly a mighty belch.

She was impossibly, dangerously tall, heads above the nine foot leader of T'Rang Assassins, Shritis. Though dressed in the spidery brown gown of every other T'Rang, and having a similarly shaped face and stinger-antennae, the difference between her and her drones was apparent in the culmination of her rear: a large, bulbous abdomen that spat out white eggs at an alarming rate, and shivered with every heartbeat.

The eggs shook violently from the inside before they hatched and burst open, usually within minutes of one another. It was like clockwork... every three hours or so, the chamber would be filled with the squishing sound of hundreds of opening egg sacs, and T'Rang Youngers would spill and ooze out the eastern exit. They were small, unarmed and resembled little more than grubs, but each one carried the potential to become another of the T'Rang Empire's greatest Assassins.

Every so often, one of her more trusted attendants would arrive from the entrance to the east and refill the bowls of gruel that sated his Queen so happily. They would arrive every hour upon the hour to refill her vile bowl, visits amidst the fleshy tear of a hundred eggs and a mass exodus of Youngers.

It was a grotesque alien symphony of slithering, slurping and servitude, and it carried on day after day. But as with all things running so perfectly efficient, eventually there was an aberration.

A spidery T'Rang Elder, utterly indistinguishable from his thousands of stinger-waving, rod-wielding, mandible-clacking brothers, appeared at the barred window to the south that offered the sole access to the Queen for Her less important spawn.

"My Queen," he hissed in the alien T'Rang tongue.

H'Jenn-Ra slurped the last of another bowl of grey gruel, and slithered to the window. "WHAT IS-IT, DRONE?" She demanded as spittle drooled down Her chin.

"The city of Ukpyr has been taken," he informed Her. "As we speak, we have our technical staff decoding their most precious documents and are uncovering the secrets of the IUF's ability and plans here. What's more, we have rooted out and destroyed several Umpani fortifications in the mountains north and east of the city."

"WHAT-OF-THE ONES WHO-HAVE-BEEN-RAIDING OUR-SUPPLIES, AND-THEIR LEADERS?" She roared loudly.

The loyal T'Rang clicked his mandibles together a few times, then withdrew a mass of dozens of metallic objects from his pocket. Each one was a small metal wafer attached to a chain, and was bearing the name of a slain Umpani soldier: Kernek, Rocklin, Gromo...

H'Jenn-Ra hissed happily. "GOOD, YOU-HAVE SERVED-MY-PURPOSES WELL!" She proclaimed. "WE-WILL HAVE-THE-UMPANI PIGS-ON-THE RUN SOON-ENOUGH!"

The T'Rang before Her left the dogtags on the windowsill, but didn't leave just yet. "There is just one more matter of importance, my Queen..." he began hesitantly.

She snatched the tags from the window and spit, "YES?"

"There are rumors that a single Umpani soldier is leading the series guerilla strikes against us," he explained. "He and his soldiers come without warning, murder several dozens of our guards, then disappear just as quickly... sometimes with spoils." He paused, and chose his next words extremely carefully. "Though his company is too small to be of any real danger to us, it is also too small to be easily found..."

H'Jenn-Ra flung the ball of dogtags into a pile She was keeping in the corner, each a reminder of Her success here on Guardia. "RECALL YOUR-SCOUTING-PARTIES AND-TIGHTEN YOUR-DEFENSES," She ordered. "THEY-WANT YOU-TO-FOLLOW-THEM INTO-THE-COVER OF MOUNTAIN-AND-BRUSH. REMAIN-WITH THE FALLEN-CITY AND-SPRING THE-TRAP UPON-THEM, INSTEAD!"

The T'Rang Elder before Her cracked his Stun Rod on the ground, then slithered backwards towards the exit. "Your words are wise, my Queen," he said graciously. "We will do as you command."

As he slithered away between the Imperial Guard lines, the T'Rang Queen returned to the middle of her gooey chamber to a delicious feast of porridge.

And through it all, the shadows watched.

She was a peculiar creature, like the bastard child of a beetle, a spider and a worm. With every gulp of gruel, there was the slightest contraction in her neck and torso equivalents... a food tube.

One spot just beneath her waist equivalent vibrated and expanded more than the rest of the tube with every swallow: her stomach, no doubt.

With every hissing syllable that erupted from her clacking mandibles to the T'Rang Elder, the very bottom of her yellowish abdomen expanded and retracted with the movements of the set of lungs there. As her gruel descended down her throat and past her stomach, it made almost imperceptible bulges over the very same area.

Moreover, as the Elder delivered his news of the successes in Ukpyr, the top of her abdomen shook faster and louder. Judging from how far the vibrations went, her heart travelled the entire length of her

giant, egg-spitting abdomen. All three organs of lungs, heart and stomach culminated in that one spot at the junction of thorax and abdomen.

A design flaw, perhaps?

As the Queen continued to slurp loudly, her outstretched limbs moved in their expected pattern. *Contract your arm muscles to bring the food in, flood blood into the limb to extend it, repeat...*

The shadows stretched and grew... and H'Jenn-Ra darted her many eyes around the room, sensing something was wrong. She waited, deathly quiet, as only the sound of wriggling T'Rang larvae filled the room. Nothing at all...

Thus satisfied, she returned to her gruel.

In all honesty, he hated having several outstanding jobs at once. Each order was like a line of loaded words permanently etched into his mind, taking over his very sight and paralyzing his mind. While having two or three concurrent duties provided the very focus he needed to operate at the peak performance he was hired to utilize, more than that was just a burden.

The days upon Guardia were long and glutted with unresolved missions, but he was finally catching up. The Umpani scouts were dead, the Helazoid was delivered safely... and now another sentence would be erased from his mind.

Elson's body separated from the shadows, almost as if they were gripping him, as he darted forward towards H'Jenn-Ra T'Rang. In the blink of an eye, his Ninjato blades sliced through the T'Rang Queen's throat and flooded it with her own green life fluid.

As she vainly gurgled and struggled to cry out a scream of warning to her guards, the Ninja plunged both of his blades into the armored union of her digestive, respiratory and cardiovascular systems.

She thrashed around, knocking over defenseless T'Rang eggs and coughing up blood as she tried to slither forward towards the window. If she could make some noise, any noise that would alert the guards outside, they would surely call for her attendants and protectors just east of here...

Elson ran up the wall in front of him and back flipped off of it, flying backwards through the air towards the fleeing Queen. As he twirled gracefully through the chamber, he flung a handful of shuriken in a straight line through the top of the Queen's abdomen, to the heart that quickly pumped in fright within it.

The metal stars pierced her fleshy skin in a perfectly straight line. Each tiny wound erupted with the Queen's green blood, and her own terror hastened her demise with every panicked pump.

She was almost to the window. If she could just tap it once, they would raise the alarm for her...!

The Assassin was on her neck then, yanking her head backwards and keeping her from using the last of her strength to seek her guards' help. She tried to pierce his flesh with the stingers coming from her back, but he seemed to know the places she would strike before she even did. As he twisted and ducked every successive strike, the world started to go dark, and her great body went slack. But though she could no longer move, she could hear him quite well for her last few seconds of life.

"H'Jenn-Ra T'Rang," he whispered, "rogue Queen of the T'Rang Empire. Your existence is no longer necessary."

Finally, the T'Rang Queen who had slaughtered thousands, birthed millions and was on the verge of acquiring the unstoppable power of the Astral Dominae... shuddered weakly and slipped silently into the abyss.

Her great body struck the ground with little sound as Elson worked to lower it gently and quietly to the brown goo below them. Her multitude of arms, claws and stingers contracted in on themselves as she

bled silently, in the final, post-mortem movement of her lifeless body.

The T'Rang Queen's death would mark the turning point of the conflict here on Guardia. Perhaps it would spur the T'Rang to genocidal rage and leave the planet a barren wasteland. Perhaps the Umpani would gain the upper hand with their enemy in confusion over the loss of their leader. Who knew what effect it would have on the race for the Astral Dominae...

And yet, to Elson, it was simply the completion of a job. This was not the first time, nor probably the last, that he would hold the fading life of royalty in his bloody, gloved hands.

Another order stricken from his mind, the Ninja felt lighter than he had in weeks. He flicked his black cloth-covered arms at the body of the T'Rang Queen, marking her body with dots of her own green blood. *Now,* he thought, *it's time to take care of that Helazoid...*

With an almost imperceptible flutter in the darkness, the Ninja disappeared as quickly and as quietly as he had appeared.

***

T'Rang slithered left and right in the High Chamber and around the city, rounding up suspects and clearing the area around the scene of their beloved Queen's death. Brown goo followed them wherever they went, though the city was already painted from the earlier scramble for the invasion of Ukpyr.

D'Rang T'Rang slowly drew forward into the High Chamber with the rumors that their Queen had been killed. Despite the harried rush of his brothers to keep people from entering, for some reason, they let him pass without incident. Though he moved with the emotionlessness of a trauma-induced trance, he remembered at least a few guards making direct eye contact with him... and letting him continue, unharmed.

When he arrived at the window that had been the only barrier between him and the Queen he loved and supported so dearly, it felt like a dream. He knew what he might see there, and yet, it seemed unreal to see Her body tightened under the strain of Her own contracted muscles. Just days before, She was full of life and giving him orders. Now, She lay in a grotesque pile of blood and meat, with eggs still protruding from Her abdomen.

Even as the one-stingered T'Rang realized that his beloved Queen was dead, he was surprised to not feel anything at Her passing. As the days would pass, he would come to realize that it was not shock, nor delayed grief of any kind that robbed him of his sorrow. He had already lost his birth mother to the Umpani, and in a week, both his uncle and his Queen had been slain.

The truth was, there was nothing left to take.

Two of his remaining claws gripped his Stun Rod with a new purpose. Despite his losses and the loss of the T'Rang Empire through each of those deaths, he was still alive. The Empire had suffered enough at the hands of prejudiced outsiders... and even though he hated to admit it, it had also suffered under the old and corrupt who ruled over every T'Rang from on high.

The death of his Queen was a wakeup call. In its current state, there was no way the T'Rang could survive the coming years of war with the Umpani... and truthfully, the T'Rang's unending war with the rest of the galaxy. There was only one thing to do to ensure their survival, to avenge the losses he and every other T'Rang had suffered here this day: revolution.

D'Rang walked from the grisly sight behind him, a plan already forming. First, he would need support... and that upstart Z'Ant seemed like the perfect ally.

Part 4 - The Cost of Love

...No Longer

"HIROMI!!" Kiwi screamed, and bolted from the open door of the Forbidden Zone. Shss' Psi Rod was off of her back in a second at the sudden scream, and Janus unholstered his Blunder Buss in surprise. Tearn closed the door blocking his view with a gesture of his paw, and revealed Lucciana charging a Fireball spell in surprise.

Shss looked at the now tackled and laughing Hiromi, and immediately realized who her attacker was. She exchanged a glance with Lucciana, whose hands dimmed as she looked at Tearn and Janus with disbelief. In a scant few seconds, the entire group disarmed, and was watching the joyous reunion.

"Where have you been? What's happened? Are you ok?" Kiwi fired off with tears in her eyes. Hiromi laughed and hugged her tight. "Hey, are you listening to me?" the Faerie asked from the death squeeze, then laughed. "And what's this lump in your dress?"

Lucciana stepped forward and held her hand out, taking Janus and Tearn's claw and paw in turn. "It's good to see the both of you..." she said, then gave them a confused look. "How'd you get here, anyway?"

As Shss pulled Hiromi and Kiwi off of the heap they had tangled themselves in on the ground, two separate patrols surrounded the large group in the alleyway from either side.
"Halt-what-is-your-destination?" the Savant Guard on her left asked. "...is-your-destination?" the metallic Trooper on her right repeated.

"Paluke," she, Hiromi and Lucciana said at once.

The Guards stayed for just a moment as they eyed the strange group of people in the alleyway, but they eventually moved on down their original paths. "Keep-moving," they ordered.

More of the machines approached Janus and Tearn from behind. "We should probably... Paluke... find somewhere quiet to talk," Tearn suggested as the machines started to surround them.

They broke ranks on either side and continued on, leaving the six a scant few seconds to decide where they would go. "We could go to the Munk church," Janus suggested. "They were very kind to us... Paluke... a few nights ago."

The girls minus Kiwi waved their hands left and right in a "no, no" motion. "I don't know if we would go over so well with them right now..." Hiromi wheezed as she fended off a powerful hug from the Faerie.

Tearn sensed the ever-silent arrival of more of the Savant Guards from the west. "Maybe we should go to the harbor," he offered. "They might have a few leads on a boat we're trying to hunt down..."

Shss looked at him inquisitively. "You too?" she asked.

The Guards' impending arrival interrupted her train of thought. Without further discussion, Tearn led them down the alleyways he had spied upon before he entered the occupied city.

The brightening morning sun cast curious shadows down the alleyways of the city. But even with darkness covering their every move, they could still feel the eyes of frightened people in hiding from the patrolling machines, watching their every move.

It was difficult to tell whether they viewed the new arrivals themselves, or their proximity to the Savant Guards, with such fearful suspicion. The entire city felt like a barrel of gunpowder, just waiting for a single match to erupt the entire town in explosive conflict.

Though the feeling of a city at war could choke the feeling of ease from even a hardened soldier, Kiwi and Hiromi seemed to think little of it. The Faerie sat on the Hobbit's shoulder with her tiny arms around her friend's neck, like a tether to keep her from disappearing again. She whispered something into Hiromi's ear and pointed at Janus, making mock firing motions with her little hands.

Hiromi looked impressed as she looked at the towering Dracon. Then, she whispered something in Kiwi's

ear, crossing her fingers together and pointing at Shss. "No way!" Kiwi whisper-yelled, and giggled. They were subtle enough to escape the notice of Lucciana and Tearn, but the above average hearing of Shss and Janus caused both of them to shake their heads at the gossip.

Finally, they reached the harbor of New City, a humble strip of wood that met the salty Sea of Sorrows. The sun splashed beautiful reds and oranges along the surface of the calm waves as black birds swooped down and around in the far distance, plucking red fish from the waters. In some cases, it was the fish who bit the birds from the sky. The gentle sound of the waves lapping against the wooden planks of the harbor did much to set their troubled hearts at ease.

And though none of the others could hear it, Janus could swear that somewhere off in the distance, a woman was singing hauntingly, urging him to join her for a morning dip that would surely be his last.

"Let's try here!" Kiwi suggested, pointing at the building behind them. A modest structure with a single smudged window that allowed little light to penetrate to its internals, the New City Dock & Marina was most likely as old as the city itself. The stones and mortar looked ancient, though the fish-shaped sign bearing the name of the shop was decidedly new, and probably replaced as the salty air weathered it over time.

Lucciana walked up to the door and knocked three times. A few seconds passed before an audible *clink* issued from within, while Shss pressed her face next to the window to get a better look inside.

A red cloth suddenly smudged out the dirt from the inside, and a gruff old face looked out so quickly, that it nearly gave her a heart attack from fright.

Inside, satisfied that it wasn't more of the machines looking to bully him about something again, the man opened the door and offered his shop to the tired adventurers. They walked in, one by one, taking in the marvels of the dockmaster's shop and his current project.

"Sorry to intrude," Hiromi apologized as she bowed and walked in.

He held his hand out to the middle of the structure. "Think nothing of it," he assured. "Since the Savant stepped up his patrols with those blasted machines of his, nobody's come around anyway." Finally, as the last of the party walked in, he closed the door behind them.

The shop was dimly lit, and trophies of sea creatures of every size lined the walls. One looked to be a long, green snake-like creature, whose jagged teeth were perpetually open in a growl of warning. Another was squat, brown and humanoid. Its eyes were deep pits of black, and its long and powerful arms looked well suited to pulling hapless sailors off of their ships and to a watery grave.

Once everyone was inside, the old Munk walked the span of the room and closed the door on the opposite side, locking it securely. Before he did so, Lucciana saw the bow of a great ship there, a skeletal base of curved wood and supports hoists that kept the old Munk's project elevated as he worked upon it.

"Have a seat," he offered, pointing at the dusty floor and excusing himself from the group. His hair was greying and his face and flesh were wrinkled, but his tanned and powerful muscles looked several decades younger. He wore only a simple pair of tanned green shorts, with a dirty, ripped red cloth hanging from the back pocket.

Janus recognized it. "You're a Munk..." he stated more than asked.

The old dockmaster walked to the corner of the shop, and poured six cups of hot water from a kettle over an open flame as he spoke. "By birth, sonny," he answered. "I don't follow the practice anymore." He dropped six bags of leaves in each cup and handed them out to each of his guests.

"Name's Sogheim Wikum..." he introduced himself. "With Ol' Granny Erin's blood flowing in my veins, the sea is the natural place to thrive," he continued with a chuckle.

Janus looked at the cup and small bag with a funny look, removing the leaves and sniffing cautiously. Tearn held his cup up in front of the Dracon and dipped the bag in and out several times. The Dracon looked back to his cup and mimicked the action, then watched as the leaves stained the water brown.

"Erin Wikum?" Kiwi asked. "The one who build the Powerboat?" Sogheim nodded in surprised respect, as Xen's words returned to Lucciana: "The boat buried in the Curio Museum..." she remembered aloud.

Sogheim sat down underneath the large snake trophy. "Up on your ancient history, are you?" he asked. "Yes, that would be her. And that would be the ship," he said, then relaxed against the wall. "Though it doesn't do you a lot of good since the Dark Forest Munk took over the Underground Temple and stole the power source... not to mention that nobody remembers what the damn combination to get the ship is."

He sighed in relaxation. "S'all right, though," he continued calmly. "Ol' Granny Erin knows as well as I do that sailing a boat you made with your own two hands is infinitely more satisfying.

"Which reminds me," he said as he slowly stood up, "break time's over. Help yourselves to whatever you need here, long as you don't go tracking any of them machines in here while you're at it..." With new determination, he unlocked the door to the back room. Seconds after he closed it behind him, the muffled sounds of sawing and pounding followed.

Tearn looked at Lucciana. "Hey Samurai, how did you know where the boat was?" he asked. "I didn't see anything in the museum that looked like a boat."

Lucciana sipped slowly at her tea as she looked down at her blood-stained robes. "Please don't call me that," she answered softly.

"Why don't we start from the beginning?" Hiromi suggested, deftly changing the subject. "Like, how did you guys get here without a ship?"

Janus, Kiwi and Tearn looked at one another, and Janus finally nodded. "Remember that Dragon on Llylgamyn?" he asked.

Lucciana nodded as she drank the sweet tea in her cup. "The son of the Bane Queen," Kiwi added.

He continued, secretly glad he didn't have to waste time on ancient history. "He brought us here to look for the Astral Dominae with the Umpani," he explained. "They're a militaristic race who came to Guardia to investigate if the rumors of it being here were true, and are fighting with these bug-like creatures called the T'Rang."

At that moment, Lucciana remembered Shritis' deadly stingers shooting into Shss' body, and her friend bleeding black... and quelled the anger when she reassured herself with a glance at her friend's healthy face that she was fine.

"We came to New City to deliver a message to their lead Tracker," Tearn continued, as he picked up the story. "We were ambushed by the T'Rang and lost nearly every soldier with us. After that, we took the injured to a nearby church and picked up a lead on the Astral Dominae." He exhaled a cleansing breath, then spoke again. "Janus and I got into a few... spats, but we eventually joined up to..."

"'Spats...'" Janus muttered with a harumph, and sipped at the surprisingly sweet and tasty tea.

Tearn relented. "All right, we duked it out a few times," he conceded. "What does it matter? We're sitting together now, and that's the point."

Kiwi laughed, more for the change he had undergone in the past few days than his fumbling dismissal of his fights with Janus. He pointed a single digit at her. "Quiet, kid," he ordered, and she snickered as he smiled at her. "Anyway, this Munk leader, Zenzay or something..."

"Xen Xheng," she corrected. "He told Tearn that the Astral Dominae was out on an island in the sea, and

then told us about a boat in New City that could take us there." Tearn sat back and let her speak. "Of course, he didn't exactly explain where it was... so we went back to the Umpani city to check in with them, before they got angry at us for being gone so long."

They all remained silent for a few seconds, waiting for the one brave soul who would speak up and continue the story... and it was Janus who ended up biting the bullet. "That's when the T'Rang attacked," he said.

Shss remembered the brutality of the T'Rang Shritis, the torturous treatment of their Helazoid captive, the tense atmosphere of the city just before they escaped... "They kill how many?" she asked.

Janus breathed deeply and exhaled slowly, looking towards the ceiling. "Just about everyone, the way the battle was going..." he surmised. "Especially when we met the small band of survivors, it was clear there weren't many left."

With a sigh, Hiromi shook her head. *Just how much more can this planet take?* she thought bitterly.

Tearn redirected the conversation. "After that, we took the forest route back to New City to find the boat." He nodded as he swept his paw towards the ocean. "Once we find the Astral Dominae, I think the planet will get back to normal. If not, well..." He trailed off, then nodded to indicate that he was done. *No sense in deflating what little hope we have left with the "what ifs,"* he thought.

"We saw the Dark Savant," Kiwi whispered, as if he could hear them even now. "He's unbelievably strong..."

Lucciana nodded in agreement. "Yes, we figured that when we saw him, too," she said. "But please, continue."

Kiwi widened her eyes. "Really? You met him?" she asked, but Janus continued where they had left off. "Tearn found a machine that dispensed information with nothing but a word," he said. "It was unhelpful regarding the boat we were looking for, but I think..."

"...It detailed quite well who the enemy is in this conflict," Tearn finished. "The information machine was a tool of the Savant, and he knows all about the Astral Dominae. Who knows why he hasn't made his move yet, but I think it has something to do with a girl aboard his ship."

Shss covered her right eye with her right hand, then raised her left hand up like she was testing the feel of a gauntlet. "Black hair, eye like this, glove?" she asked.

Kiwi pointed at her. "Exactly!" she exclaimed. "We saw her, too. The Dark Savant blasted her..."

Tearn sucked in his breath at the memory. "There's a link between her and the Astral Dominae, though the machine didn't give details," he explained. "All I know is that she wanted to get off the Savant's ship, and he attacked her because of it.

"She said he was insane, obsessed with finding the Astral Dominae... and when he showed up in the Forbidden Zone, I was inclined to agree with her. If we find it first, she promised us all a ride out of here. So when we find the globe, we should call her."

Janus tapped the receiver over his ear to emphasize the point. "And that's about it," Kiwi said at last. "More or less," Tearn added.

Shss, Hiromi and Lucciana looked at one another. "Well, to tell you the truth, when we met the Dark Savant..." Hiromi began, "...we said we'd work with him and the T'Rang."

Tearn and Janus gave them disgusted looks. "Are you serious?" Kiwi whispered to Hiromi.

She nodded slowly in response. "The Savant saved us from asphyxiation on Aletheides' ship," Lucciana

explained. "After he picked us up, he told us that our pilot had taken off without us."

"So what did you do?" Janus asked with suspicion evident in his voice, but Lucciana simply looked him square in the eyes and shrugged. "What anyone in the company of an all-powerful god and his malevolent minions would do: we took one look around, armed ourselves with their weapons and booked," she stated.

Tearn barked a laugh, and Janus stifled his... he had been wrong about them after all. "More or less," Hiromi added, echoing the Felpurr's words with a smile.

"How suspicious you are," Kiwi scolded Janus. "I knew Hiromi would never join that bubble-headed weirdo." Janus nodded and coolly raised his claw in apology.

Just as quickly, though, Lucciana's face fell, and took it upon herself to detail what happened next. She took a deep breath, then began. "The Bane King is here," she revealed.

Tearn's neck quietly burned from the Vampire's bite. "What do you mean?" he asked.

She tapped her temple. "Well, his essence is. I won't get into details," she said, "but suffice it to say that he has been inside me for several months, and he came out only days ago, just after the Gorn Civil War."

"North of New City?" Janus asked, and Lucciana nodded. "That was the battle we avoided, Kiwi," he told the Faerie.

Kiwi winced. "Sorry... we should have been there for you..." she apologized, but Lucciana dismissed her apology. "Don't be," she said. "Nothing short of a miracle could have stopped that war from happening. As it was, they already had centuries of tribal conflict, the lies of a group of alien visitors and the death of the main source of their protection working against them."

She looked down, remembering the bloodlust in the Gorn's eyes for their own brothers. "Shss and Hiromi tried to convince them not to listen to the outsiders' lies. I tried to keep their king from being killed by his own subjects.

"And we all failed," she finished poignantly. Hiromi looked at her friend, trying to form her worried thoughts into words.

Shss continued for the both of them. "Many Gorn die, but they become friends," she explained.

Lucciana and Hiromi nodded in unison. "It looked like they were ready to rebuild and work together after the war..." the Elf said as she bit her lower lip, "...even though it cost them most of their peoples' lives in the end."

"And what happened to the Bane King after that?" Tearn asked her, as he noted that the other two were remaining noticeably silent.

"I let him take over," she said neutrally.

Janus gave her a skeptical look. "...Why?" he queried, with a slight trace of suspicion returning to his voice.

Lucciana looked at her two friends. "They were in danger, and I needed his strength to help me," she explained. "So, I let him win."

The sounds of swiping blades, hacked tree limbs hitting the ground and the screams of the tree-men came back to her as she stared off into the distance... and those screams soon became the shrieks and squeals of the forest creatures, and the Rattkin. "And then... he broke loose."

Tearn leaned in, intrigued at the potential power of the girl's new persona despite himself. "His essence

led me north to the Rattkin Ruins," she remembered in bits and fragments. "Granted, I was able to keep myself from killing everything except the ones who attacked me first, but still... the bodies were piled up by the thousands by the time he was through."

Shss put a comforting hand on Lucciana's back, and was relieved to see that she didn't shrug it off. "First came the droves of hostile forest creatures, looking to get a quick meal from a sole traveller," she remembered. "Next... the Rattkin fought at first to rob me, then to protect their lands. With every one I ran through, I got the distinct feeling that they were living under the shadow of a criminal organization, and this guy named Don Barlone'."

She took a few seconds to trace back her memories from the many spirits she had released in the past few days. "Most of the Rattkin I killed were staunch supporters of Barlone'," she finally said, "and fighting to protect their ability to rob, rape and kill the others in the Ruins, and even beyond it. But there were some innocents in there... fighting to protect their families. It was from them I learned of Barlone's true nature."

Looking into everyone's eyes so expectantly and intrigued on her own, she continued. "Deep down, I knew I wanted to bring justice to him and all those who supported him. It's the reason the Bane King had control of me for so long," she said, then sighed. "Again, I failed to do even that. When I finally regained my senses a day later... Barlone' was still alive, and I had the deaths of all those people on my hands. I could still smell their blood on me."

All at once, Kiwi noticed that her everpresent sword and sheathe were nowhere to be seen, but respectfully kept her silence about their whereabouts.

Hiromi finally put together what she wanted to say. "Lucciana, I know now what you were trying to say that day, after the war..." she said. "It's something I didn't want to admit... but you were right. Fighting is necessary sometimes."

Lucciana was silent for a moment... then, she nodded grimly and said, "Yes, it is... but murder is not right, either," she answered. "The key is balance... as it always has been."

Shss patted Lucciana on the back and nodded with respect. How far she had come... how far they all had come in the past few months. "After, we try to find how to kill Thing," Shss continued. "We find Dane, but leader not help. But, we talk to Xen and he say we come here for boat. He also say go to Helazoid city to get help to find Astral."

With an amused snort, Janus spoke. "He told us where the Astral Dominae was, and where to find the boat's power source," he summarized, "and you three where the boat actually was, and where we should go with it. I get the feeling he wanted us to meet here and work together, for whatever reason." Kiwi smiled and nodded.

Shss stood and stretched, then cracked her knuckles in anticipation. "Sounds good," she said with a smile.

Hiromi and Kiwi stood up next, and they both put their hands into the center of the party in unison. "Of course I'm for it!" Hiromi insisted.

"Yeah!" Kiwi added. "This sounds like a lot of fun!" Shss put her hand on top of theirs, and watched as Tearn stood up.

He snorted and chuckled. "I could probably do it all myself, but hey, I'll let you all tag along," he remarked. Shss looked at him strangely as his paw rested on her hand, but Kiwi's snicker put her suspicions to rest.

Janus watched from his seat on the floor, finally downing the last of his tea and leaving the cup on the floor, then stood up and put his claw on Tearn's paw. "I'm in," he said, with a quick glance at Kiwi and Hiromi.

There was only one left. Hiromi looked at the still seated Lucciana, and smiled warmly. "You don't have to come, after all that's happened," she assured her friend. "I think we would all understand if you decided to remain."

Shss nodded in agreement. "You do not kill if you stay," she added.

With only a second's hesitation, Lucciana stood and brushed the dirt off of her backside, and put down her empty tea cup. "I insist," she stated. "After all that's happened... I want to see this through to the end. I know what absolute power can do to someone, especially those locked in warfare... or the mentally unbalanced."

On her words, Tearn felt both intrigued and curious. *You know, do you?* he thought.

She looked out among all of them, hands, paw and a claw in the middle in solidarity. "And if we can't trust anybody else to back us up without an ulterior motive... then all we have is each other," she continued. "I'm coming with you, whether you like it or not. But first..."

She clapped her hand down on Janus' black claw. "...I'm gonna need a weapon."

"Yeah!" Kiwi yelled out, and single-handedly pushed everyone's arm into the air in cheering readiness. "The party's all here! So let's get to it!"

Shss smiled as Sogheim's voice came from the back room. "If you're all finished turning my shop into a fortress of anti-Savant blustering..." he chided as he opened the door, and set down a small box of tools with a series of metallic clanks.

Oh, boy... Hiromi thought in fear. *Is he a sympathizer?*

"...I'd suggest taking up some business with Rossarian, over at the Arms of Argus," he continued. "Only the most dense of the people in New City don't know he's dealing weapons on the black market. Oh, them and the machines, of course."

Lucciana thanked him. "Just promise to give 'em hell," Sogheim said. "And don't let the machines see you carrying anything outside of the shop, or they'll be on you for sure. It's illegal to trade weapons in New City since the Dark Savant ordered the ban on sales and possession..."

The Elf nodded, and patted Hiromi and Shss on the shoulders. "Sit tight, I'll be right back," she said. Before she opened the harbor door, though, she patted herself down. *Right, no money...* she thought.

Shss whistled at her, and after she turned around, she threw the sack of coins she got from the Tower of Dane to her. As she caught it, Shss said, "I don't need, so use all."

Lucciana stood silently for a second, then nodded with thanks.

Hiromi, with Kiwi on her shoulder, stood up and stepped next to Lucciana. "Actually, I'll go with you to make sure nothing bad happens," she insisted, then laughed slightly. "Plus, I wanted to see what Paluke was up to since I saw him last..."

"No way," Kiwi said in disbelief. "You picked on that poor guy, too?" She laughed as Hiromi shyly looked at the ground. "Ok, that settles it!" she exclaimed. "We have to pay ol' Paluke a visit, too."

Tearn nodded and waved with a very slight movement of his paw. "Careful, kid," he urged. "Be back in twenty minutes. It may be less suspicious with just the three of you, but it's still dangerous."

As Lucciana and Hiromi walked out the door, Kiwi waved back at him. "Ok, *Dad*," she said, and stuck her tongue out playfully. As the door closed, Janus noticed the slightest shine in the Felpurr's eyes, which immediately dimmed when he caught him looking.

Before she went outside, something made Hiromi look to her right at an empty plaque that rested on the wall. She hadn't seen it before with her back to it, but now it was in plain sight: "Brombadeg," the label beneath it said simply.

It must be the last game Sogheim wants to hunt, she thought. For some reason, just the name of this unseen beast was enough to send a shiver down her spine.

Outside, the morning sun was finally in full view, and brought a bright sense of misleading hope to the frightened and confined town of New City. Keeping to the same alleyways that had brought them from the Forbidden Zone to the harbor in the first place, the three girls came into contact with very few of the Savant machines. Those that did cross their path were immediately shooed away with a quick "Paluke."

"That's the church where we left the Tracker Rodan," Kiwi said as she pointed at the steepled, flowered and cloistered Thesminster Abbey. Munk in red robes calmly weeded and tended to the gardens along the outside walls, though it seemed the single-minded hovering of the Savant machines had bent the flowers in perfectly straight lines here and there.

Still, as with the difficulties of rain or endless repetition, the Munk diligently tended to their multi-colored charges as best they could. "How's he doing?" Lucciana asked.

"I dunno," Kiwi replied, "but I'm sure he's all right. Father Rulae said he would be ok."

A large-nosed Munk, and another with kind blue eyes looked up as they approached. Kiwi hid behind Hiromi's head as they shouted, "Hoyo!" After Hiromi returned the greeting, Kiwi whispered to her, "I'd just as much not see Rodan again, considering we got kicked out of the IUF!"

They turned right and came face to face with a hole-in-the-wall building bearing the dual sword-crossed title of "Arms of Argus." Lucciana motioned for them to stop. "I'll go in first," she said, and reached out to grab the door's handle. Slowly, she pushed in and the door opened into the unlit shop.

The morning light streamed in over the tarp and cloth-covered sides of the shop, and a thin layer of dust was spread over just about everything. As the door squeaked loudly throughout the small building, a sudden shuffle and the sound of several metallic objects falling over sounded from the back room.

A tall, muscular horned creature with rough grey skin suddenly charged from the back room, with a blade in one hand and a Musket in the other. When he saw who the intruder was, he cast a suspicious glance out the window to his right, then bellowed loudly to her. "What are you doing here? We're closed! Get out, now!" he roared.

He placed two meaty paws on Lucciana's shoulders and started pushing her out the door, all the while muttering about the flimsy locks on the door. However, when she dug her heels into the ground and pushed back, she sent the unready creature staggering backwards.

"Hey, an Umpani!" Kiwi said from behind them as she and Hiromi walked in, and the Umpani winced as more people came in to disturb him. *Just three girls... I can take them if I need to,* he thought. "Is he the one dealing weapons on the black market?" Hiromi asked.

Lucciana smirked as the Umpani blustered, recoiled, and gestured wildly behind them. "Shut the door, for Urrhina's sake, shut the door!" he ordered them.

Immediately, Kiwi fluttered off of Hiromi's shoulder and pushed lightly on the wooden portal, but it closed with a creaking slam behind them. *Oops...*

The Umpani pulled the drapes on the window shut, throwing the room into darkness. Seconds later, there was a clicking sound, and light appeared from a glowing tube on the ceiling above them. As he looked among the girls once more, he immediately switched gears and smiled graciously at them, then pulled down the cloth covering the racks along the wall to his right.

Dust kicked up and swirled around the impressive arsenal of weapons under the tarps. From the sharp to the blunt, new and expensive to the rusted and cheap, there was a tool to fit the need of anyone in the market for something to club, slice, blast or whip their enemy into submission.

Hiromi made a disgusted face as the Umpani looked proudly upon his merchandise, then gave his three customers a smile and a wink. "The name is Rossarian, proprietor of the Arms of Argus and the unofficial weapons dealer of New City," he introduced himself. "Shall we trade?"

Over the next ten minutes, Lucciana and Rossarian compared notes on the best weapon to suit her, while Hiromi and Kiwi sat in the corner and waited. The Priest looked on at the Elf discussing weapons with the shopkeeper, and wondered ever so briefly if re-arming her would lead to the re-manifestation of the Bane King, and even more death...

When she remembered the look on her face following the massacre at the Rattkin Ruins, though, all doubt fled from her mind. Lucciana was clearly a different sort than the one she first brought back to life on Llylgamyn. Even as she laughed with the weapons dealer now, she could see the shining difference between the old and new her.

As the two looked over another shelf of weapons, Hiromi noticed Kiwi sitting on her lap and looking up at her with tears in her eyes, biting her lower lip. "What's wrong?" Hiromi asked, and she put her index finger on her friend's little cheek.

Kiwi wiped away the tears and let a smile slowly come across her face. When she saw her friend's brown eyes again, though, she silently cried just as hard. "I missed you so much," she whispered. "All those times we needed you there to help us, to counsel us... I missed you..."

She flew up and hugged Hiromi's cheek, just gently enough not to hurt her. "Back..." she choked and sniffed, then paused for a second to get her voice back. Hiromi put her hand on her tiny back. "Back in the Forbidden Zone, I thought I lost you, and that I would never see you again!"

Hiromi squeezed her back. "I'm right here," she said in a comforting voice, and gently patted her friend. "I won't be going anywhere without you. We're all a team now, every last one of us." Kiwi nodded, and Hiromi felt the warmth of the girl's tears fall on her neck.

"I won't let anything happen to you," Kiwi promised, pulling back and staring her friend in the eyes. "I've learned a lot since Llylgamyn, and I'll use it all to keep you safe. Ok?"

With a smile, Hiromi nodded. "Thank you so much, my best friend..." she answered.

"'Best?'" the Faerie asked, as her face lit up.

At her friend's doubt, Hiromi raised her hands in disbelief. "Of course, 'best!'" she insisted. "Nothing can break us up, Kiwi... not our party, and not our friendship! No army, no monster, no god is strong enough to even dent what we have. Always know that."

Kiwi nodded and hugged her friend with a great smile, though this embrace did not include the same restraint that the previous one did.

Rossarian and Lucciana burst out laughing, and the Umpani clapped the Elf along the back. She stumbled forward, then steadied herself. "The cheers of the townsfolk may be good," Rossarian said, "but I always preferred the crunching sound of a tyrant's head being smashed in." He laughed again, and clapped his hands together in anticipation.

"I love a challenge," he declared, then began to count off on his fingers as he spoke. "So the weapon must be prime for defense, both of yourself, and others. It must be light enough to carry by hand, and be useable in conjunction with a Mage's spellbook. It must cause a severe amount of damage in a short amount of time..."

He grinned as his mind whirled with all of the possibilities, mentally considering and crossing out candidates for purchase one by one. Lucciana opened her mouth to speak, but Rossarian cut her off as he raised a fifth finger. "And of course, most importantly, it must incapacitate rather than kill." She smirked, then closed her mouth and nodded.

Rossarian made a delighted sound as he walked down the length of weapons on the wall. "Ooohoohoohoo...!" he chuckled happily, and ran his finger down the curved blade of a katana. "So exciting!"

He hummed idly as he took weapons off of the shelf one by one, and carried them all simultaneously in his massive right hand. "Let's see... Pandora's Wand and Winterwand... good for incapacitation but low on damage, and Pandora's can kill," he muttered. He moved next to a black staff with a skull and bat insignia at its tip, then grabbed it carefully by a white cloth wrapped around its base. "Staff of Doom... high power and great and knocking things out... kills on contact, though, and drains life..."

He scanned over the remaining weapons. "Maces and bows... too dangerous to just knock out, huh..." he mumbled. "So many swords here. Any one of them would be great for a gal like you... hmm." He stood silently, scanning the room one last time. "Samurai weapon..." he thought out loud.

"Of course...!" he finally blurted out with a snap of his fingers, then put the weapons in his hand back on the shelf. "A Samurai brought this one in a while ago, in as good condition as I have ever seen one," he informed her. He walked into the back room, and more crashing sounds erupted that continued for several seconds.

"What is it?" Lucciana called out. The Umpani was quiet for a few seconds as something else fell on the ground, then emerged with the weapon he was looking for in his hands. For all intents and purposes... it was a stick.

It was six feet long and perfectly uniform from one end to the other, granted. But still, it was a stick. Rossarian threw the light brown weapon to Lucciana, who braced herself for the sure massive weight of the thing. As her fingers wrapped around it, though, she felt little force pushing at her.

She tested it with both hands and threw it up a few times; it was barely five pounds, if that. She twirled it slowly in her left hand, feeling the exquisite balance and craftsmanship involved in making such a fine weapon. It had been a long time since she had held one of these.

Rossarian chuckled at Lucciana's obvious taking to the bo. "Prime for defense with extended reach and durability," he said, with his fingers going up as he listed each of Lucciana's requirements in succession. "Light enough to carry, easily used alongside magic, highly damaging... and, if used properly of course, it'll knock your foe out quicker than one of Father Rulae's sermons."

He stopped the Elf's impressed twirling of the bo with a hand, then took it from her. "This... is the Zatoichi Bo," he said proudly, and ran a hand along it. "Beautifully crafted, and a very rare piece."

Lucciana chuckled... she could practically see the coins in his eyes. "How much, exactly?" she asked.

Rossarian stopped caressing the weapon, long enough to look at her with a knowing twinkle in his eyes. "If you have to ask, you probably don't have enough," he commented. "It's 100,000 gold pieces."

Well, that was it. Shss didn't have nearly that much in the money pouch.

"But," Rossarian continued as he turned to the back of the shop, "I do have lesser models here. Maybe you could try a 1750 gold Hayai Bo, or possibly just a Quarterstaff until you can scrape together the funds." He set down the Zatoichi Bo against the wall in the back and reached for another staff in the back room.

"Forget it," Lucciana said after him. "I don't think I can manage more than five hundred. Thanks anyway, Rossarian." She turned to the door behind her and opened it, and Hiromi and Kiwi stood up.

As they stepped outside, Rossarian called after them, "Ah, too bad. Take care, then! Come back anytime to shoot the breeze on your mercenary life, all right?"

On his farewell, and before Lucciana could react, three coldly silent Savant Guards appeared out of an alleyway to her left and turned their disfigured brown faces towards her and the shop. In a split second move, she pushed Hiromi and Kiwi backwards into the shop and slammed the door shut, and hoped that they didn't seen the weapon racks inside.

As Rossarian swore and began covering the shelves, the pounding started on the other side of the door; they had been found out. "Hostiles-detected," a Guard droned outside as its Laser Spear thrust through the door and plunged through Lucciana's shoulder.

"Look out!" Hiromi screamed, and pulled Lucciana off of the electrified weapon. A second spear aiming for the Elf's chest burst through the door and barely missed its target. She healed Lucciana's shoulder wound with a glowing hand, and the light joined with the one around Kiwi's head as she mentally pleaded for help...

"Just great!" Rossarian grumbled. He didn't bother to cover the rest of the weapon racks, and retrieved the Zatoichi Bo from its resting place in the back. "Hey girl!" he called out, then tossed the staff to her. "Consider it a free trial offer! And if things get hot, push the wood in on either end and twist," he told her. "It'll break one of your criteria for a weapon, so do it just in case, all right?"

Lucciana tightened her grip on the staff, nodded, then wheeled around and blasted the door off of its flimsy hinges with a single kick. The two Savant Guards who had their spears in the door went flying out beneath it, and she jumped out with the amazingly light bo in hand. Easily leaping over the last Savant Guard's thrust, she spun sideways and kicked its head in succession with both of her heels, then followed up by swinging the bo around and into its metallic back.

The force of the Guard's tumbling flight and drop to the road below was surprising, coming from the weight and seemingly common nature of the bo in her hands. *Rossarian wasn't kidding... this thing is amazing!* she thought.

"Yeah!" he shouted from behind her with a clenched fist. Nothing made him happier than seeing the agents of his loss of business get it so hard.

"Sorry about the door!" Hiromi called back, as Kiwi flew off of her shoulder and punched twice through the wooden wreck on the ground. Each descent was followed by metallic crunching and buzzing that faded quickly as the machines beneath were destroyed.

Lucciana stepped back slowly. Hiromi looked beyond her, at the advancing armies of Savant Guards and Troopers coming from the north and east, and seemingly spilling out of every alleyway and house in sight. The Munk of Thesminster Abbey let out a collective sigh as they retreated inside, some casting sad glances at the flowers they had just planted and re-planted moments ago.

She and Kiwi pushed Hiromi behind them, and Kiwi cracked her knuckles, grinned, then held both of her fists in front of her in readiness.

Lucciana held her right hand out towards the machines in front of her, with the Zatoichi Bo hanging in her hand behind her. "Stay here," she ordered Hiromi, then glanced sideways at Kiwi. "You ready for this?" she asked.

The Faerie nodded and grit her teeth confidently. "You know I am!" she declared.

Simultaneously, they both charged forward with screams of battle. Lucciana's right hand glowed bright red, then rocketed several explosive Fireballs into the midst of the Savant machines. As several of the machines fell from the blasts and others flew through the air, she slung the bo in front of her and swung.

Kiwi was at the chest of the lead Trooper before it even knew she was there. She drove her palm into its

metallic chest and it crashed into two others behind it, leaving them all in a tangled heap of grinding metal. Two on either side counter-attacked with a simulataneous thrust at the floating Faerie, but she flew up quickly and grabbed both of the Laser Spears behind their glowing blue ends, then yanked the Guards towards her.

She planted a haymaker into the chin of the first one, whose spinning body silently landed headfirst on the hard stone beneath it. The second she spin kicked in the helmet, and she happily cried out, "Yeah!" as its body twirled in a screwdriver spin into another Guard behind it.

Unfortunately, the Faerie was too engaged with the first two Guards to notice the next Trooper's Stun Lance coming towards her. By then, it was too late... before she knew that the machine was there, the tip of its lance pierced through her tiny back in a fountain of blood.

The very second her vision began to dim, though, a burst of energy flooded over her. She saw that Hiromi was dancing oddly next to the Arms of Argus, spinning through the air and flinging small balls of warm light at her and the likewise engaged and injured Lucciana.

Each ball eradicated her pain and closed the Stun Lance wound more and more. With a nod of thanks to the Priest, Kiwi reached behind her, grabbed the shaft of the spear... then lifted it and the machine holding it, above her. The Savant Trooper, atop the now vertical spear but refusing to let go, extended alongside it like a metallic flag that had just lost its buoyant rush of wind.

Kiwi pulled the spear out of her, then swung it around and down, smashing it and the stubborn Trooper into the mess of machines behind her. Several exploded from the furious assault, and sent bits and pieces of gears and shrapnel in every direction. More healing balls from Hiromi plunged into Kiwi's back and closed the Stun Lance wound, leaving her fresh and ready to take on the next wave of machines rounding the corner.

At the same time, Lucciana thrust the Zatoichi Bo into the next Savant Guard and knocked it to the ground, then wound the staff around in a great circle and clubbed the machine in the chest. At the same time, a Trooper to her left thrust its Stun Lance towards her ribs.

She did the splits and dropped low to avoid it, rammed the end of the bo into a Guard to her right, and finally dodged around the Trooper's lance to come to a jumping stand. She whipped the bottom of the bo beneath her and up into the chin of the Trooper, then swung it around to clip two successive Guards in their chests.

Hiromi's healing spells were a massive help during the first wave, and now the Elf felt refreshed on top of healed, and able to take on a hundred of these machines. Her hands glowed blue before she froze the grey body of a Savant Guard solid, then knocked the final one's spear out of its hands and popped it powerfully in the head.

Even as it fell without a sound, hundreds more of the machines were hovering and pouring out from everywhere in front of her. She breathed heavily with excitement... and was ready.

They had a few seconds before the next wave of machines attacked. Hiromi panted with the exertion of having cast so many spells at once, and wondered how much longer she could keep it up. "Do your best, guys! I'm rooting for you!" she screamed out breathlessly to them. Kiwi turned and saluted quickly, and Lucciana charged another spell.

Almost immediately after turning to see her friend, Kiwi pointed with a shout, and flew towards the Priest with blinding speed. Hiromi turned around just in time to see the Stun Lance heading straight for her, but Kiwi kicked and rammed the Trooper into the wall behind it in the nick of time. *It was so quiet, I couldn't even hear it...* Hiromi realized.

Kiwi launched back into the fight to help Lucciana, but Hiromi knew that even a sprite of her speed and power wouldn't be able to pull the double duty of protecting her and assisting Lucciana for long.

Nonetheless, she cast a Stamina spell on her to keep her fighting, then prepared a healing spell.

All at once, three explosions rocked from the sky above them. Fire enveloped the middle of the machines and melted their bodies to slag in seconds. Hiromi looked up and saw three backlit shadows in the sky to the southeast: one flying, two falling. The smaller of the falling shadows hit the ground as Hiromi's eyes adjusted to the brightness.

It was Shss, who drove forward to assist Kiwi in her struggle against the machines. The Fighter cold-cocked the first Savant Guard in its jaw, then returned her hand to her black spear and ran the next Trooper through. Wires and electricity exploded out the other end as she pushed it into a grey and black Savant Guard behind it.

She left the pair of impaled machines on her spear as she dropped it, and unslung her Psi Rod to face the next Guard. She hooked its helmet and quickly zapped its body with the glowing orb at the tip.

Janus reloaded quickly and fired another triple burst of screeching Musket balls into the Guards behind him. The first clipped one of the machines through its blue and yellow shoulderpad, but the other two blasted clean holes through the grey chests of two others.

The wave of machines capitalized on his sudden lack of ammo and plunged their electric spears into his body, effectively latching themselves to him before he coated a half dozen of them with a wide spray of devouring, green acid breath. As the liquid ate into their bodies, he ripped their lances out of him with pained grunts, then backed off to pack more gunpowder into his guns.

Before another line of machines were upon him, a dozen swirling, bright streaks of light struck the Trooper on the very far left of the line, and quickly jumped with loud shrieks from it to the Guards beside it. The first three fell immediately, and the others soon looked too confused or injured to continue on and attack Janus.

Lucciana's hands dimmed, then she turned back to her own line of Guards to deal with, when a blue streak shot to her left and levelled two with a series of spinning kicks and elbows to their hardened chests. As thanks, the Elf planted the bo in the ground and used it as leverage to jump kick into a Guard aiming for the blindingly fast Faerie. From the blur of the Faerie's strikes, Lucciana detected the hint of a smile.

Kiwi uppercut a Savant Guard in the chin, and its Laser Spear went flying and pierced the chest of a Trooper behind him. Before it reached the ground, Lucciana grabbed the end of the bo in both hands and swung a baseball swing at the falling machine. The resulting crack echoed off of the walls of the city, followed by the high-pitched, piercing sound of metal scraping on metal as its body crashed into the ones behind it.

Lucciana threw the bo into the air and charged a Whipping Rocks spell with her right hand, as she reached out her left to Kiwi. She clapped her tiny hand strongly against the Elf's, then barreled into another Savant Trooper as Lucciana unleashed the jagged rocks from her hand and caught the falling bo.

Another trio of explosions from Janus' guns accompanied Shss as she shocked and brought down the tenth machine fighting against her. Again, a Savant Trooper barely clipped her twisting body with its lance, this time along her thigh... and again, a warm ball of energy exploded into her back and immediately knit the wound.

She drove two of the hooked blades of the Psi Rod into the chest of the Trooper, then twisted sideways to avoid a Stun Lance aimed for her neck. She let go of the rod and ripped the polearm from the brown hands of another of the machines, turned it around, and plunged it through its owner's chest.

As it vibrated with the internal shock and loss of vital system functions, she pushed both of the buttons on the Psi Rod's shaft, which was still stuck in the other machine, and electrocuted it before yanking the rod out of its body.

A massive boulder and a stream of fire suddenly crushed and melted the Guards and Troopers in front of her. She spared a second's glance to see the man atop the Arms of Argus, who was standing tall against the wind fluttering his robe, and the multi-colored energies launching from his furry paws.

From atop the roof of the shop, Tearn fired lances of ice, large Fireballs and jagged rocks past his allies and into the lines of machines. Streaks and balls of red, blue and yellow fired from his sleeves with every successive spell, and the explosions and screeching of tearing metal heralded the destruction of many of the Savant machines.

When his strength began to leave him, Tearn opened his robe and began throwing potions of varying colors into the crowd of machines. Storms of acid erupted next to Kiwi and Lucciana, clouds of fire enveloped the machines next to Janus and Shss, and every machine that dared break through the line and approach Hiromi was immediately stopped by a jagged spear of ice through its head.

The explosions, gun blasts, piercing spears, streaking spells and thudding of wood and flesh on metal finally died down as Janus kicked the last of the machines to the ground, held it there with his foot and blasted its head off with a pull of the trigger on his Blunder Buss. The battle was finished.

Hiromi looked out over the twisted piles of twitching, sparking Savant Troopers and Guards stacked chest deep all over the center courtyard around the Munk temple. She did not envy those who had to clean up the mess...

Janus loaded his guns as he walked next to Shss, who jerked her spear out of the two machines she impaled it upon. Lucciana and Kiwi, breathing heavily, joined them in standing next to Hiromi as Tearn lept gracefully from the roof next to all of them. Sweating and panting, they all looked upon one another with a newfound respect.

With a confident smirk, Tearn spoke. "And that..." he started, "...is what parties are made of!" Kiwi finished with a cheer.

Shss placed her Psi Rod on the ground and leaned on it. She shook her head with disbelief. "None can stop us," she realized as she smiled slowly.

Even Janus nodded in agreement. "You all right, Hi?" Lucciana asked.

Hiromi exhaled sharply, then looked happily over everyone. "You know it!" she assured her. "The Astral Dominae is as good as safe, don't you think?"

Little by little, people began to peek out of their windows and emerge from their homes to see what had transpired. Gorn, Rattkin, Dane and Munk alike crowded the streets, looking upon the carnage that a small group of six had wrought. With disbelief evident in their eyes, they eyed their neighbors with looks that said, "This must be a dream..."

Whoever started the first screaming cheer, it spread like a raging fire to infect every last person who had, up to now, been living under the boot of the Dark Savant. The party joined in happily.

Lucciana squeezed Kiwi and Hiromi tight as Shss put her arm around a reluctant Tearn and cheered. Then, with a great smile, Kiwi darted up and out of Lucciana's embrace to clamp down on Janus' cheek and squeeze hard. He found it hard to stifle a grin with the celebration roaring around him.

Rossarian emerged from the Arms of Argus, just as people began running towards him and forming a line to get their hands and paws on what the Savant had barred them. The party stepped aside as men and women of different races emerged one by one from the store with many assorted weapons in hand, vowing never to be made defenseless victims again.

Lucciana, though, cut through the throng of people to hold the Zatoichi Bo out to the man who had loaned it to her. Rossarian, trying desparately to carry out five sales at once, pushed it back into her hands. "Keep it!" he told her. "You've brought freedom back to this town... and more importantly, customers back

to my business! I'll make a hundred times what that thing is worth at this rate!" he finished happily.

"Thank you, for everything," Lucciana said, but her words were drowned out by the clamoring of Rossarian's many customers. When she rejoined the others, Janus pointed his guns back to the harbor to the south. "We should probably get going," he said.

Hiromi and Kiwi looked at one another, then giggled with a sudden, similar thought. "Just one more thing to do before we go," the Priest said with a smile.

Paluke swept more of the filthy dust that came through the window of this dirty town out the front door. Some massive battle had happened outside, but it wasn't exactly unexpected considering what was going on recently. Besides, he had enough worries with all this overstock of useless junk without some fools' rebellion against the Savant's rule to add to the mess...

When he finally looked out the window in curiosity, he saw the piles of Savant machines lying on the ground, and wondered who could have put up such a fight before they were expectedly put down.

Then, from the crowd of milling strangers outside, a girl and a Faerie approached his shop with mischievous smiles on their faces. He recognized them immediately.

As Hiromi and Kiwi approached Paluke's shop, the drapes around the windows suddenly shut, and a green hand put a white sign against the glass before it retreated. "Closed, will be back shortly! Have a nice day!" it said. The sign quickly fell back into the shop, and the same green hand just as quickly pushed it back into place.

Nonetheless, the two knocked politely on his door, and waited for Paluke to open it. His pudgy face peeked out from the other window, and he called out, "Hey, can't you read? We're closed! Beat it!"

Kiwi laughed and waved Shss' money pouch in front of the window. "We have something for you!" she offered.

Paluke made a face. "Yeah, I bet you do," he commented sarcastically, then closed the drapes behind him. Hiromi giggled despite herself and nodded at Kiwi, who dropped the sack of coins at the armory's doorstep, and the two went back to join their friends.

The last thing they heard before they were out of earshot was a door opening, and the voice of a joyous Paluke screaming, "Dane coins? Authentic Dane coins?! I'm rich! By Murkatos' name, I'm rich!!"

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The assembled party stood outside of the Curio Museum, just east of the New City Marina. Tearn's head glowed once more, and he swept his mind through the inside of the museum with a Wizard Eye spell. "I'm telling you, all I see are a bunch of weird exhibits," he said as he opened his eyes. "All the walls either lead straight into the ocean, or back into town."

Shss looked at the others and shrugged, then opened the door and walked inside.

The morning sun was the only source of light for the creepy building. Spiderwebs hung in the corners of the room, though their insectal owners had long hunted out and abandoned the old building in favor of a place they could thrive.

Kiwi floated towards the first of the strange exhibits: "The Petrified Homonculous." In a dome of beautiful, completely clear crystal, a small stone figure in the shape of a Gargoyle roared silently with its arms outstretched. It was made with such detail and care, she could swear it was alive, and waiting to be freed...

Lucciana approached the next display as Shss walked to her right towards a strange collection of heads on the wall behind it. Calling itself the "Wand Majestik," and urging her to please "Do Not Touch,"

Lucciana's exhibit was, of course, made even more intriguing.

Four glowing balls hovered on a pedastal in the shape of a pyramid, three at the base and one at the top. In the middle of the pyramid, floating in space, was a metal rod. She cautiously reached a hand out to touch one of the bottom balls, bracing herself for a shock or a trap of some kind.

She was surprised when her fingers passed right through it like it wasn't there. Most likely, she figured, the wand was also without form. "Weird," she commented, and moved on to the next exhibit with Shss.

Hiromi chuckled at Shss' side at the sight of the "Twisted Heads" exhibit. Three imp heads protruted from a metal mural with three separate expressions on their faces, eternally cast in the emotions of laughter, happiness and surprise. Shss carefully took the laughing imp's head in her hands, and tried to pull and push on it to make it do something.

Though her initial movements did nothing, when she turned the head to the side, she was surprised to see that it rotated completely upside-down. Even more surprising was that the previously laughing imp now carried an expression of pure, neutral silence. Turning the other heads, their reversed features also appeared to change emotions from happiness and surprise, to anger and fright, respectively.

Janus heard the faintest of sounds. "Wait," he said. "Flip that one again." He pointed to the now frightened imp, and Shss turned it back into its original emotion of surprise. "Ok, turn it again," he asked. Shss did so...

Click. There it was again.

It's coming from this wall, he thought as he pushed his claws up to the wall to the east. "Keep turning them," he said. Shss turned imp heads one by one, until Janus heard a pair of clicks. "Scared, angry," he said as he watched the motion of the imp faces and listened to the clicks in the wall. "Someone remember that."

A few minutes later, they found the precise combination of six twisting imp heads to open the way forward, and the wall Janus was leaning on suddenly disappeared. He fell facefirst into the ground beyond it, breathing deep the musty air that assaulted him from the dimly lit and bare stone pathway they had opened up.

Tearn noticed as Hiromi helped him up that a multi-colored shine appeared for the briefest of seconds where the wall had been, dispersing when Janus fell through it. Annoyed, he sent his mind through the new path and saw the boat just around the corner. *It was shielded from spying all along...* he realized with a sharp sigh. *Should have known...*

"Great work!" Hiromi congratulated him as Kiwi flew to his shoulder and patted him proudly. Janus spit the smallest gob of acidic blood from his maw at the wall, melting the stone a little in the process. He wiped his jaws and walked forward, making sure the others stayed behind him as he did.

Around the corner, docked in a small pool of water surrounded on three sides by the standard dark, yellow stones of New City, was Wikum's Powerboat. Tearn walked behind Janus with a small Fireball in his paws to light the area and the boat in front of them.

It was a dozen feet high and several times as long. Janus stepped up a plank leading from the banks of the small pool onto its deck and helped the others up as he took a better look around. The first thing he noticed was a strange black barrel with an indentation at the top sitting at the stern. It was connected to several transparent tubes that led out of it and into the internals of the ship.

When the last of the party was aboard and everyone began to look around, he took a closer look at the device. The tubes led down into and past the hold of the ship into the water below the ship, though it was unclear exactly what purpose they served. It also seemed like something was meant to be set in the indentation atop it, judging from a few faint scratches on its surface.

"How do we make this thing move?" Lucciana asked.

Tearn looked around for anything they could use, but she was right to ask. "There's an oar over there to help us bank," he said as he pointed to the wooden object along the side of the boat, "but no rowing oars, no sails..."

Janus beckoned him over. "Try this," he suggested, pointing at the barrel.

When he approached, Tearn noticed the rounded shape of the groove on top of the barrel. "Everyone hang on to something," he said, and withdrew the black Powerglobe of Wikum from his robe. When he was sure everyone was ready, he placed the globe in the groove.

The immediately boat began to move. Water suddenly and very loudly shot through the tubes and into the small harbor below them, causing the boat to slowly drift forward into the wall in front of them.

"Turn it! Quick!" Kiwi shouted, pointing at the rudder control next to Shss, who pushed on it as hard as she could. The boat slowly turned, then lurched forward towards the wall opposite the bank from which they had boarded.

Janus alone noticed the button on the wall that they were about to crash into. Without a second thought, he raised his Musket, aimed and fired at it, hitting it squarely in the center. It depressed, and the wall suddenly fell down and out, then sank into the sea with a powerful splash.

The boat jumped over the wave that the falling wall created, and bucked Shss straight up and off of its back end. Before she hit the waters of the Sea of Sorrows, Lucciana grabbed her arm and held her firmly over the edge of the ship. She held Shss' light body with an evident look of strain on her face, trying hard to hold her friend up with a single hand.

She was about to drop the Zatoichi Bo into the sea when she suddenly got help from the others. While Hiromi and Janus tried to regain their footing on the shaking ship, Tearn and Kiwi both flew back and helped Lucciana pull Shss up and onto the deck.

On her knees, Shss relaxed and exhaled sharply at the close call, then nodded in thanks to everyone. "Four or five?" she asked Lucciana with a grin, but her friend shrugged. "I've lost count, but I'm sure I win," she replied with a grin.

The party walked around the deck, taking in the vast and wide sight of the entirety of the ocean before them. Minutes passed as the boat ripped through the waves, and soon, even the harbor of New City and the trees around it had faded from view, until there was nothing but water as far as the eye could see.

The fresh, salty air was a welcome relief from the mustiness of the museum and the smell of potential death of the battle before it. The sun's reflection shimmered on the surface of the water, and flocks of birds flew with them towards game in the deeper part of the sea.

With every passing second, Wikum's Powerboat gained more and more speed and rocketed its six new occupants south over the Sea of Sorrows, in hot pursuit of the Astral Dominae.

Untold Secrets

All was quiet and steady on the sea. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but the constant, gentle rock of the waves with not a single creature to be seen. The sun fell in the western horizon and sent warm colors in every direction as if it were melting in the very waters themselves.

The very first of the bright stars in the sky began to make their twinkling appearance. Dark clouds could be seen gathering far in the distance to the south, but they did little to faze the distant points of light in the waning red and orange twilight.

Slowly at first, a brown dot appeared over the horizon, growing larger with every passing second. Soon, it

came close enough to make out its identity: a long, tall brown ship, with a furry wolf-like figurehead at its bow. It left a large wake of divided water behind it as the wolf stared ever angrily onward, and drove through the deceptively calm sea with amazing speed.

Below its deck, Shss was lying on a bed bolted against the wall in the aft of the ship, with a clear smile on her face. She slept underneath a thin white blanket, but on top of the sheets rested a yellow necklace that she gently held in her hand.

Janus was also asleep, or at least in as close an approximation to it. His massive body sat opposite of Shss and the bolted beds, leaning comfortably against the wall behind him. He was still and breathing slowly, and his body was unmoving as he rested, but his mind was still awake on a level that allowed him to hear everything going on around him.

Though he could not consciously understand a conversation in this state, one wrong or sudden sound and his guns would be out and ready to blast any intruder. Even now, his claws rested on the guards and stocks of his Musket and Blunder Buss, and were ready to move in an instant.

Across from him, Kiwi lay bellyfirst on a table facing Hiromi, who sat on a chair with her hands folded neatly in her lap. The Faerie looked at her friend with concern. "I see..." she said. "It must have been scary being alone with her when Shss started to climb the Tower."

Hiromi shook her head. "No, I knew she was a different person," she answered. "When she changed and ran Shritis off, then assured us she would be fine afterwards, I had my doubts." She looked towards the stairs leading to the top deck where the former Samurai stood even now. "But when we got to the Tower, I could... feel... the difference. I could feel her kindness to the spirits within her."

Kiwi sat up. "Shritis almost killing Shss, the Gorn, the Rattkin... it sounded like a pretty hellish journey you guys went through..." she remarked, but Hiromi's face was remarkably relaxed. The faces of friends old and new passed before her mind's eye: *Quinn, the pirates, Kiwi, Smitty, Shss and Lucciana, Janus... even Tearn. All of them...*

"Maybe," she conceded with a smile, "but all the people I have met and tried my best to help have made it all worthwhile."

"Mm-hmm!" Kiwi agreed emphatically. "I never would have made it this far without Tearn and Janus." As she spoke, his ears perked up at the mention of his name. "Tearn was rough in the beginning, but now he's like my own personal guardian. And Janus..." she said, then paused briefly to smile, "...you really should have seen all the things he's done for me, and all the times he's forgiven and protected me."

Hiromi smiled knowingly as Kiwi continued. "He was pretty aloof at first, but even after all the misunderstandings, he was there to welcome me back." She looked left and right, then leaned in close to talk in a hushed whisper, which Janus overheard easily. "And just between you and me," the Faerie confided, "he's pretty stacked!"

Janus barked a laugh, then immediately played it off as an awakening cough. He groaned, and opened his eyes with convincing slowness to see a blushing Faerie and a surprised Hobbit in front of him. "What time is it?" he grunted.

"Almost sundown," Hiromi replied.

He exhaled a relaxing breath with an acting skill that would make even the most seasoned performer flush green with envy. "I'm gonna get some air," he said as he stood and walked towards the stairs. He holstered his guns and patted Hiromi's shoulder affectionately as he walked by. "Have fun with your discussion, girls," he remarked as he left for the top deck.

As Hiromi and Kiwi giggled amongst themselves, a shadow shifted near them. Content that nobody could see him as he silently mixed the last of his needed potions, Tearn settled down into a meditative position with his eyes on the smiling Faerie. He relaxed as his mind turned to the subject of recovering his lost

mana, with her happy and peaceful face reflecting itself upon his own.

The sun finally disappeared, and the sky began to darken above the ship. Lucciana gripped her Zatoichi Bo in her left hand, and leaned forward on the railing circling the bow of the ship with her right arm. For the past few hours, her mind wandered in several different directions, bringing her now to the task of wondering which of the stars above her was Llylgamyn's sun.

She heard footsteps come up behind her from the stairs below. It was probably Janus; only a being of a Dracon's size could make that kind of thudding noise. He slowly turned left at the top of the stairs, and walked towards the aft of the ship. She turned around slightly to see him lying prostrate on the deck, staring up at the sky. *Same idea, huh?* she thought.

Neither of the two approached the other for some time, content in watching the last of the day's light retreat into the darkness of space. Hours passed as Hiromi and Kiwi's voices floated up every now and then, but other than their muffled voices and the rush of the sea around them, it was utterly still and silent.

When the sky had darkened to its blackest, Janus came to her. The night sky was covered in every direction by a thousand stars of varying sizes and luminosity then. A small streak of sparkling purple washed over the western horizon, though what exactly it was she did not know.

A shadow slid slowly over the right side of the full moon on its month-long journey to devour, then release, the white orb from its grip. It was a view that she knew she would never forget for the rest of her life, here out on the ocean of sorrow...

"Hey," he greeted from behind her.

She looked back to see him standing there, claws at his side over his guns and staring out onto the ocean. He looked as though something could attack at any moment. "Hey," she replied, and gestured to the deck a few feet from her. Janus took another look in every direction, then slowly sat beside her.

They looked into one another's eyes for a time, saying nothing. With every passing second, the awkwardness built upon itself, and threatened to send one of them below deck before it could embarrass either one of them further.

Janus finally broke the silence, albeit ungracefully. "Where's your sword?" he asked.

Lucciana balked slightly. *What a clumsy guy...* she thought. Finally, she raised her eyebrows briefly in acceptance and shrugged. "I outgrew them," she told him. She looked him over, comparing the image of the Dracon she met on Llylgamyn to the one sitting before her. "Where's your bow?" she returned.

He hmphed. "Guess you could say the same," he replied.

Lucciana chuckled, and looked back up at the lights in the night sky. After a period of silence, she lay back and stared up with her right hand behind her head.

The reality of the situation hit her then, and she shook her head as she smiled, then chuckled in disbelief. "I just realized... we're sitting on a boat, wielding alien weapons on a boat built centuries ago, fleeing a city of several strange races, in pursuit of a globe of untold power on an alien planet," she summarized wonderingly.

Janus looked up at the sky with her. "...And me without my sketchbook," he commented. Lucciana smirked as he leaned his back up against the railing behind him, careful that it didn't break and send him sprawling into the freezing waters.

"But that's life," he continued. "No matter how dead set you are on keeping a path you chose, or walking the road given you, something always comes along to muck it all up."

He laughed grimly. "And all this talk of destinies and the right order of things," he said as he remembered

the words of the machine-man on Llylgamyn, and Bela's tales of the Cosmic Circle. "Nonsense, all of it," he dismissed with a wave of his claw. "Such random acts and unexplainable divergances cannot be the will of a divine being. Seems more like completely random chance."

"Hmm," Lucciana hummed in agreement. "You're probably right. I never went in for that destiny garbage, either. No divine being could allow what..." She stopped suddenly, and squeezed her bo. "Whatever the case, I've always made my decisions for myself, and that includes being on this boat.

"But you have to wonder," she continued, "if those sudden changes in our lives were actually the result of destiny, or the will of the Gods... a 'stroke of the pen,' as they might say."

Janus stayed silent for a few minutes, wondering if her words were true and that his entire life had been guided up to, and including, now.

Then, he started to laugh quietly. "What's so funny?" Lucciana asked.

He shook his head as he looked out on the dark waters. "Don't forget that for just a brief moment, the Cosmic Forge was out of the hands of those who script our universe's tale," he reminded her. "For that brief and dangerous time, free will, chance and chaos ruled the cosmos. My birth and life, your own, and any tragedies that have befallen either one of us... all of it was the result of an uncaring, indifferent world."

Lucciana sighed, realizing he was right. *It was inhumanity that led to Yamato's downfall, not a lack of foresight from any higher being...*

"In a way, you could say that everything that has happened to this planet, you, me and everyone else in the universe since the Forge was stolen was the fault of... the universe itself," he further mused.

And the Dark Savant is trying to change this by opposing the will of the ones in power, he thought to himself. *It's no secret that Llylgamyn suffered even before the Cosmic Forge was stolen, since the times of Werdna and the Sorn. The universe, too, with the war between the Umpani and T'Rang... If the ones the Savant opposes did nothing to stop this suffering, and he is truly fighting them for benign purposes...*

He looked out to the southern sea, where the distant clouds had suddenly gotten a lot closer to the boat. *...then I wonder if he truly is evil...* he finished.

"You better get below deck," Janus urged her. Lucciana sat up and looked around, but saw nothing but black water all around her. "We're coming up really fast on a storm," he further explained.

Though she followed his eyes to the south, she saw nothing in the distance that might denote rain. Nonetheless, she went downstairs to warn the others.

But that wasn't all he saw. As Lucciana roused Shss and Tearn, and the first raindrops began to fall upon the deck of the ship, Janus heard swishing in the waters around the boat. The most dense of the splashing came from a V-shaped spot in the waters about a mile ahead of them. With the speed they were travelling, they would be upon it in about a minute or two.

Sploosh! Something suddenly burst out of the water to the right, and a bright red streak flew through the air and latched onto Janus' neck before he could do anything. It was a fish, with fins that looked like wings attached to its neck. It was also two feet long, and its teeth were digging at his scales and trying to find something tender and vital inside.

The fish did not count on how tough Janus' scales were, or how acidic his blood was. As it found the merest trickle of red blood in its mouth and struggled in pain, Janus squeezed it around the body, ripped it out of his neck and flung it back into the ocean.

As it dropped, he unholstered his Blunder Buss from the belt around his waist and blasted it in midair. He watched in delight as it exploded into red mist before it reached the water, but his heart quickened when fish began to jump out of the water by the dozen to attack him. "Stay below deck!" he shouted to the

others.

He blasted his guns twice more, and several more fish exploded into mist, but a large group of them still made it through and latched onto various parts of his armor and body. By now, the others had awakened and arrived on deck despite his insistence, and Kiwi and Shss took turns punching and stabbing the biting fish off of Janus as the other three watched the waters hesitantly.

Once there were only a few fish left nibbling on Janus' back and feet, he approached the V-shaped sound of splashing that he had heard before. "Oh... hell," he simply said, just as a veritable wall of red fish flew from the water and flung themselves at the fresh game on the deck.

Tearn immediately responded with a cone of sharp Whipping Rocks that cut a noticeable swath through the flying creatures, but which left the top and bottom of the fish wave free to continue on. Next, he cast a green Armorplate spell just in front of the boat, and watched as another large portion of the fish wall impacted on the solid wall and dropped back into the sea.

As the remnants of the fish wall came upon them, he charged a Fireball to explode in their midst, but he knew he wouldn't have time to get it off before they arrived.

Shss and Lucciana jumped between the fish wall and their companions, brandishing their spear and bo. As the fish latched onto their bodies and flew past them, they swung, thrust and bashed quickly and violently, clubbing the fish with fleshy-sounding blows and sending them back into the water. Unfortunately, more fish bit into them than were sent back by their expert polearm and staff attacks.

Kiwi, having flown above the attacks by the fish wall and the swiftly moving boat, blasted furiously down into a second column of the snapping red pirannha. She plowed through a dozen of them and stopped at the bottom of the second fish wave as their bodies plopped into the sea below.

"Look out!" Hiromi screamed and pointed off the port side of the bow. Kiwi turned just in time to see the open mouth of a red fish jumping straight for her.

To everyone's horror, with a single bite, it swallowed her whole.

"No!!" Hiromi cried out.

Shss tried, and missed, spearing the fish to bring it back to the ship. Tearn roared in fear as he blasted the unfinished Fireball at the second wave of the fish, then desparately tried to quickly Levitate the one who ate Kiwi back to the ship... but he was too late. The fish slipped beneath the waters and swam away, and the second fish wave was upon them.

With tears in his eyes, he started to conjure a Nuclear Blast spell to eliminate every fish in the area, even if it cost them the boat and their very lives. As biting and jawing fish covered the entire party and made it impossible to move, he saw little choice.

Several fish suddenly bit into his paws and arms, and disrupted his spellcasting. As his arm bones snapped and the tears fell from his eyes, he could only think about the little girl who had entered his life so suddenly a few months ago... the same girl who was just taken from him without a single word. *It's not fair...* he thought, *not again...!*

All at once, the entire world went silent. Tearn looked on as a pirannha-covered Shss desparately plucked fish off a struggling Lucciana, and Janus stomped and smashed as many as he possibly could before they could overwhelm him. All three of them looked simultaneously angry, frightened and confused.

So this is what it's like to die... Tearn thought as he was driven to his knees under the weight of biting fish. *They never tell you your senses go one by one beforehand...*

Lastly, he saw Hiromi standing there, fish all over her body, her hands glowing bright yellow and white. Rain dripped down her face and body and clung her matted robes to her tiny body.

Suddenly, she pointed her arm straight out in front of her with her mouth silently open, and screamed a single, unheard syllable.

At once, every fish on the boat suddenly dropped off of their bodies by the score, hitting the deck with dull, fleshy thuds in sudden death. Those still in transit over the water thudded harmlessly against the rail of the ship and the party's bodies, and not a one made a move to bite or attack after that.

Hiromi's eyes closed after the powerful exertion, and she slumped forward towards the piles of fish as she fell unconscious. Janus was there to catch her, careful that he didn't let any of his acidic blood touch her unmoving body. Shss and Lucciana immediately ran to the railing of the ship and looked into the water, trying to see if they could find a trace of their lost friend.

"Kid!!" Tearn screamed into the water, as hundreds of fish bobbed lifelessly to the surface. He threw his robe onto the deck of the ship, causing the vials and bottles within to clink together, and jumped shirtless into the pounding rain and the ocean below to find her. His arms broken and his body bleeding, he knew he had little chance of surviving or even finding the Faerie, but without her...

His body prepared itself immediately for the shock of the cold water as he noticed there were still some fish alive below him. Anger over their continued existence mixed with his own fear for the Faerie's life, and one of the fish splashed out of the water to intercept his falling body.

Except... this fish was flying backwards.

A foot above the water, the back end of the fish exploded in a shower of blood and bone, and Kiwi emerged from it with a powerful cry. A second fish flew up to latch onto Tearn's falling, bleeding body, just before the Faerie wrapped her hands around the tail of the fish that swallowed her, then swung its body into the second fish's head.

There was a wet slap as fish met fish, and they both flew back into the water with a splash. That done, Kiwi caught Tearn's falling body in her tiny arms and flew the both of them to the deck of the ship, where she panted heavily and looked at the bodies of the fish around her.

"Is everyone ok...?" she started, then her face crinkled as the smell hit her nose. "Ewww..." she intoned as she struggled to wipe the smell of fish fluid off of her body.

Tearn grabbed her and squeezed her next to his bare chest tightly. "Kid, don't... don't scare me like that again," he pleaded, his eyes stinging.

"Oof," Kiwi called out as he hugged her tighter, then giggled. "You should know I don't go down that easily... hey, let me go!" she begged.

He finally released her when Shss roughly grabbed his arm and pulled him to the stairs. "More come. We must go under," she warned. Tearn nodded, and fetched his discarded robe.

Janus struggled to pick up Hiromi without burning her with his blood, until Lucciana finally approached him and took the very light Hobbit from him. He nodded in thanks, and when they all got below deck, Lucciana slammed the hatch shut.

After a few minutes, the fish renewed their assault on the ship. The sounds of their thuds on the wooden planks, followed by the squishy sounds of them devouring their own kind, continued for as long as the storm beat at the deck with fat raindrops.

"Is she all right?" Kiwi asked, while Lucciana set the fallen Priest down on a bed. Tearn dropped against the wall as the adrenaline wore off, feeling the pain of his many wounds all at once, and his face was twisted in pain. The Faerie reached into the open robe clutched in his paws and fed him the familiar clear liquid of a Heal Wounds potion.

Once his strength returned and he could walk again, he carefully brushed aside Shss and Janus with Kiwi

following close behind. "Move it, let me see her," he said. "Someone start handing out potions. I'll be with you all in a second."

Janus walked to his fallen robe and passed the clear liquid to the other party members as Tearn looked Hiromi over. She was breathing normally, but was unconscious and covered with bite marks. Of course, everyone else had the same wounds.

"Exhaustion," he surmised. "Whatever she did up there, it took a lot out of her."

Kiwi sat at her side and rubbed her friend's cheek gently as the others looked among one another, and tried to figure out what had happened. The squishy and thudding sounds of the fish on the deck above continued as loud as ever.

"What *did* happen up there?" Lucciana asked.

Tearn looked at her, then back at the peaceful Hobbit sleeping on the bed. "I don't know," he admitted, "but I think it's safe to say that our kind and gentle companion here has more power than she's willing to admit to."

The boat continued sailing forward under the hissing rain and the attacking fish when suddenly, the rain stopped. The squall had let up... and almost immediately, the sounds of the fish disappeared as well. Plops and splashes accompanied their return to the sea, and the stars were soon visible through the porthole once more.

Kiwi patted Hiromi comfortingly, then flew to the bow of the ship to look through the front window. Tearn followed close behind her, and she turned around to touch him lightly on the paw. "Really, I'm ok," she insisted with a smile. "But mix me up something to take care of this smell later, all right?"

Despite her assurances, though, Tearn stayed by her side... but his attention was slowly diverted to a sight outside of the porthole. "Hey, we're coming up on a lagoon," he said, then made a confused face as he looked back at the party. "And there's a house sitting on an island there."

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To the east and west, a wall of impassable trees and unclimbable mountains stretched farther than any of them could see around the small lagoon. Janus plucked the Powerglobe from the ship's power source, and stopped the boat just to the north of the tiny, grassy island. They dropped anchor, and finally got a good look at the house sitting quietly upon it.

It was a small brown shack made of logs that were probably cut from the trees around the island. Once Tearn and a quick Wizard Eye spell had made certain that the fish had gone and that the dwelling was safe, they all cautiously opened the hatch to the deck and climbed out.

Through a window on the side of the dwelling, Janus could see into what looked like a little kitchen, complete with a table and chairs. He carefully re-adjusted Hiromi in his arms before she could slip out of them, and Kiwi flew over the railing to join him. "I'll go and check it out," she said. "I'll be right..."

"Like hell you will," Tearn interrupted roughly. He pushed air out of his chest and into his legs, and levitated in the air next to her. "Not by yourself."

Kiwi gestured towards the house. "Lead the way!" she offered. They both flew to the front door of the enigmatic residence, and the Felpurr pushed it open before they disappeared inside.

Lucciana tapped her bo on the deck of the ship impatiently as Shss folded her arms and waited. She realized the noise she was making after a few seconds, and stopped. "Strange," Shss commented, and Lucciana nodded in agreement.

Ok, you guys can come in now, Kiwi's voice suddenly spoke in all of their minds. *It's bizarre, but it's safe.*

At her assurance, Janus and Shss jumped off of the front of the ship and landed on the bank of the island, leaving Lucciana by herself.

"Hey!" she called out after them. Janus went inside with Hiromi as Shss looked back sheepishly. The Elf rolled her eyes and pushed air to her feet, levitating to just over the bank when the spell gave out. "It's not easy being the only non-flea among us," she commented as she walked inside. Shss shrugged and joined her.

The inside of the house was... quaint. There was a room with a bed and a few trunks of Human-sized clothes in the back, a small kitchen with a table and chairs, and a room with a fireplace and plenty of space to sit. Nothing in the house gave a clue as to who it might belong to, but an odd, tall and white heavy box in the kitchen kept cool the many delicious foods within it.

"Nice," Janus said as he got a look at the assorted meats and fruits inside. "Think they would mind if we took a few things out of here?" he asked pointlessly, just before he began to paw through them anyway. Shss stood in the gathering room, taking in the sights around her. *"Very* strange..." she commented.

"You said it, wild child," Tearn replied.

She pointed at the cold box and the room with the bed in it. "Everything new, but no people smell in house," she pointed out.

Kiwi beckoned Janus to a spot next to Hiromi as he entered the gathering room with an armful of food. "Apple, please!" she asked with outstretched arms. "If nobody lives here, we might as well make ourselves at home." Janus tossed her the red fruit, and swallowed a piece of raw meat whole.

"Well, as you can probably guess from the reckless consumption of our good friend Janus here," Tearn chided as his paws dimmed, "the food seems safe to eat."

Janus nodded and set the armful of food down on the sparkling clean floorboards, when everyone began picking out pieces to munch upon.

"How's Hiromi?" Lucciana asked, while she roasted a piece of beef with a small Fireball underneath it.

Hiromi shifted and opened her eyes. "Fine," she said with a weak smile.

Kiwi swallowed her small bite of apple and offered the rest of it to her friend. "That was a neat trick you did up there, Hi-chan!" she complimented. "Why didn't you use that move a little earlier?"

She slowly sat up and took the apple from Kiwi, then bit into it with a satisfying, but weak, crunch. "Sorry I couldn't explain what was happening," she apologized to everyone, "but the fish made it a little more of an emergency than usual." She gave the apple back to Kiwi, then rested her hands on her knees. "That was the 'Word of Death,' a spell that taps into my entire reserve of magic to... kill," she struggled with the word, "anyone who hears it."

"Which is why I couldn't hear anything before you used it... right, shortstack?" Tearn surmised.

Hiromi nodded. "I deafened everyone before it went off," she explained. "It's standard practice, which a student learns along with the word that makes up the spell."

Kiwi bit into her apple once more, and asked with a mouth full of juice, "So what is the Word of Death?"

The Priest laughed. "If I tell you, you'll die," she teased. Kiwi winced... she walked right into that one. "When the higher echelons learn it, individual letters are given to us over the course of a few days," Hiromi said. "Putting them together on a single piece of paper sometimes has disasterous results..."

"Is this the first time you've used it?" Kiwi asked, between bites of apple.

Her friend nodded. "We were taught never to use our power to harm others unless absolutely necessary, and even then..." she said. "All my life, I more than anyone hated taking another person's life, for whatever reason... but recent events led me to believe otherwise."

Despite herself, Shss looked at Lucciana, who bit into her roast beef with a neutral look on her face. When she caught Shss looking at her, the Fighter respectfully looked away.

"Frankly," Hiromi said, "if God wants a world of perfect love but won't help any of His children reach that goal..." She trailed off then, the blasphemy on the brink of her mind and the tip of her tongue, before she gave it voice. "Then the children need to pick up the slack, with any tools necessary, to help others."

The room was silent; she had clearly touched a nerve that she believed only ran between her and Lucciana. In truth, they all had their own reasons for either doubting or believing her beliefs on the use of power and faith in a higher source.

How very true, Kiwi thought. *Couldn't have said it better myself,* Lucciana echoed in her own mind.

"We're not gods," she continued. "We will make mistakes along the way, but as long as we're all working towards something good in the end, I think it's worth continuing on."

The Felpurr looked up at the ceiling and traced back the steps that brought him here in the first place. "Means to an end," he mumbled, but more in reflection than to sound condescending.

Janus devoured another piece of raw meat. "Hey, lose that 'God' nonsense and I'm all for it," he cut in between bites. "We're doing the best we can for a good purpose. All this yammering is just giving the Savant and the others more time to find the Astral Dominae.

"I think finding the globe is just about the most bloodless way we can end this idiotic feud," he stated. "So if you guys are done with your meaningless self-evaluations and are ready to act, I say we heal up, pick up and press on. Leave the philosophy to someone with nothing important to do."

Kiwi scoffed as Shss and Hiromi raised their eyebrows in surprise. "You are such an ass," Lucciana said with a shake of her head.

Tearn chuckled. "Topknot's right... but he's got a point," he conceded. "We don't have a lot of time to waste. Once we're done here, we should make for the City of Sky. We can debate the would haves and should haves when we have a secure universe to think in."

He closed his eyes, then let a controlled flow of magic wash over his mind. His head glowed as his consciousness left his body, and his Wizard Eye spell shot him east over the treeline at incredible speed. "I'm counting on you to keep my body safe," he said softly, before it looked as if he had fallen asleep.

In truth, his mind had wandered so far from his body that he had little control over it now. Until he moved back closer to it, he would be entirely at the mercy of those around him. He marvelled at how he was able to scout this far today, when just a year ago he refused to travel even ten feet away from himself. Just one possible but unseen danger was enough to keep him firmly rooted in his body at all times.

He dismissed the thoughts; now was not the time for self-reflection, as Janus had said so poignantly.

Tearn's consciousness flew over a thicket of trees so closely cramped together, that nothing seemed to be able to traverse between them. The Sea of Sorrows seemed more like a giant lake from his position in the sky, with the cities of New City, Ukpyr and others distant dots on the faraway horizon. Civilization on the north end of the sea, endless forest on every other side.

He blasted past a massive waterfall leading from the great Dragon Mountains to the south, until he was flying over solid ground and another dense field of trees. Unlike the rest of the forests he had seen, the trees were less thick here and allowed passage for anything that might be living among them.

Descending into the forest, his invisible point of consciousness found itself situated in a gigantic, dark grassy field of the Undead surrounded by towering trees that cast long shadows. Skeletons of long dead warriors, animals and cattle wandered the land with undead birds above them. Some birds pecked at pieces of flesh still hanging off of the roaming corpses, but their meals did not seem to mind.

He flashed northeast through the trees and past thousands more of the Undead, when he came upon the peculiar sight of strange chimera creatures flying around him. The heads and bodies of women, the legs of a lion, the tails of a lizard and wings of a plumed bird... Tearn's imagined jaw dropped when he realized that there was a flock of Myxlmynx living in this forest.

They were gathered around a single pillar bearing intricate designs and markings, some whose hands were glowing as they chanted, and others who simply slept next to it. As he drew closer, though, several of the Myxlmynx surprisingly turned to face the spot where his consciousness hovered. Though they could not harm him in this form, Tearn still reflexively shot up into the sky and away from them before they started to rend and blast at his presence.

An amazing forest to be sure, but it was not what they were looking for. He snapped his mind back into his body, and opened his eyes as the others ate and spoke quietly amongst themselves.

"Mist leads to the City of Sky, right?" he asked suddenly.

Kiwi jumped at his sudden voice, and choked on a piece of apple. "Hey!" she sputtered. Shss patted her on the back while she laughed softly.

"Past the mists, in the south seas," Janus remembered. When he was sure the flustered Faerie would be ok, Tearn closed his eyes again and flew back out of the tiny house, this time to the west.

He saw the mist almost immediately, hovering over a large portion of the southwest sea. Unfortunately, it covered a rather large portion of the forest nearby as well as the water. Tearn decided to check the forest first, and dipped down into another clearing in the dense thicket of trees.

In contrast to the forest of the Undead, this forest was crawling with giant blue bugs and thraxes, whose segmented bodies skittered to and fro on tiny legs. Preying upon them were a few large, green Godzylli and other tall, carnivorous dinosaurs stomping through the mists. None of the creatures noticed anything as he flew above them, and he came to a strange clearing at the end of the forest.

Surrounded by a hundred foot road that circled on itself was a tiny clearing, marked by two stone pillars and some trees winding around it. The mists around the grassy hill inexplicably ceased to penetrate the calm area. There were no markings, no signs, nothing to denote exactly what this strange place might be.

However, try as he did to find any switches, holes or instructions on how to open a path to the City of Sky, he could find nothing. His consciousness stood in the middle of the pleasant, grassy hill for some time, debating on what he should do next.

A female Godzylli followed by her two pups slowly emerged from the mists, stomping around the road surrounding the clearing. The several dozen feet high, green and sharp-toothed beasts lumbered slowly into view, and sat with great groans into the middle of the field.

The mother dropped a smelly, bloody carcass of a bug before her, and her pups dove upon it and began to tear at it ravenously. From this grisly scene of familial bonding, Tearn shot up and away, and continued his search for the entrance to the Helazoid city.

A thought struck him as he rose quickly into the sky. One forest populated by the Undead and the mythical, and one by legendary beasts and insects, on opposite sides of the sea was strange enough... but every last creature he had seen was either conjurable or createable through the use of magic. Were they spawning points for the act of summoning? Rest spots for monsters who had been called to a magician's duty?

Or was it just coincidence?

Tearn pushed the thought out of his mind as he let his formless point of view take in the sight of all the mists below him. They spilled out from the forest, covered the Sea of Sorrows, and stopped just short of the Dragon Mountains just south of him...

He saw it then: there was a small, mistless area just next to the mountains in what appeared to be a dead end. In the night sky, though, the rocks facing him glowed brightly green like guiding lanterns.

What's more, as he drew in closer to look, he saw that the mist was not moving. In fact, it stopped against what seemed to be an invisible wall of force, in a perfectly straight line just to the north of the rocks.

As he moved closer to the light against the mountain, he was suddenly bounced back and rammed rather harshly into his body. He opened his eyes and gasped with shock, but his heart slowed as he realized that he was safe.

"Not this time!" Kiwi said, eating the last of her apple calmly and immune to fright.

Tearn shook his head after such a sudden return, and finally centered himself. "I found it," he told everyone. "Just west of here, a light in the mountain beyond the mist..."

Lucciana nodded. "Great, let's get going," she said, but he waved at her to wait. "Everyone finish eating while I get my potions ready, and give shortstack a chance to recuperate," he suggested, then paused for a second before he spoke again. "I have a feeling we'll be running into some serious trouble when we get there."

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Once they had finished tidying up inside the strange but welcoming house, the party got aboard Wikum's boat and steered it carefully to the west where Tearn insisted the mists lay in wait. Though it was difficult to see out the bottom portholes, they managed to find them exactly where he had described.

The wall of mist was just that, a literal wall. One second, they had been travelling through the darkness of the sea... and the next, the grey mists had obscured their vision. A party vote in favor of dealing with flying red fish as opposed to potential shipwreck was unanimously in favor of going up on deck, though the pirannha never made their scheduled appearance.

The mist was heavy and strange to breathe, but not seemingly dangerous. Shss manned the steering handle near the barrel-engine of the ship while Janus navigated them through the thick clouds hovering between them and the lights of the Dragon Mountains.

"Ok, steer her right... no, that's too much... ok, good," he directed her. They were now on a direct collision course with the light in the mountain.

All of a sudden, they broke through the vapor, and were now sailing towards the mountain in clear, mistless night air. "Cut the engine and veer left," Janus ordered.

Shss immediately pulled the globe out of the barrel and yanked on the steering mechanism. Slowly but surely, they drifted next to the glowing green light of the mountain until Janus saw what it was: phosphor.

In fact, they stopped perfectly parallel to the mountainside, with the phosphor so close to the side that Janus could easily reach out to touch it. He nodded with respect at the Fighter's sailing prowess, who responded with a smile, "I practice."

Janus turned back to the light and reached out to gently touch it... it was cool, not altogether unpleasant to the touch. When he pulled his claw back, he saw that some of the phosphor stuck to it and caused his talons to glow strangely. He shook his claw until he had flung the bulk of it into the sea.

Hiromi stepped up and took a pillow out of her green robe, and slowly withdrew the wrapped Serpent Coil from within. "I hope you're right about this, Xen..." she said, then held the brown coil out to the light with the pillow wrapped safely around the cursed thing.

She was too short to reach the light, so Janus grabbed her around the waist and held her out to it. She slowly reached the golden snake head to the phosphor...

Ka-THUNK, the wall grumbled as both it and the staff disappeared in a flash of light, revealing a dark and flooded cave within. Janus put Hiromi back down on the deck, and she walked back to join the others.

Kiwi raised her fist in cheer. "He was right!" she proclaimed. "Which means the Astral Dominae is not far behind! Let's go!!"

"Ok, turn the ship right and..." Janus started, but didn't bother to finish; Shss knew what she was doing. In just a minute, the ship turned slowly towards the mouth of the cave as the engine kicked in.

The cave loudly echoed every one of their hushed whispers and steps on the deck. Water dripped from the old ceiling of the cave onto the lake below in sporadic drops, occasionally striking the ship's deck. Janus saw the cave open up into a series of separate hallways dug naturally by the water in every direction around the great lake, and could only guess at how big the entire network was.

Unbeknownst to all of them, a large shadow silently dipped into the waters to the east and slowly approached the boat from beneath the dark, still lake.

Until She Had Been Taken

The boat slowly puttered through the underground lake as it gained speed towards the still banks to the southeast. Shss watched the water closely, feeling something slightly off.

And then she started to hear it: a song, echoing off of the walls of the cave... and it sounded very faint and distant. It was the muffled and sweet tune of a woman, humming a slow song with a calm tempo and gentle melody.

Even though she could not discern the origin of the song, it didn't keep her from feeling a prickling in her spine when she stared down at the water below. Her stomach twisted into painful knots as she felt the unfamiliar sensation of true, stark fear: a fear of the unknown dangers that were concealed beneath the darkened waters.

She was so intently focused on the darkened waters and the omnipresent song that she did not notice Janus approach her, until he laid a claw on her hand. His eyes were glazed over and he looked extremely out of it.

Before she could react, he gently squeezed her hand resting on the boat's power source, and pulled out the globe from the receptacle it was placed upon. He smiled eerily and closed his eyes as the boat slowly lost power and came to a stop in the middle of the lake.

The song grew delicately, peacefully louder with every passing second. "What the... hell..." Tearn started, when his voice trailed off, and he began to look onto the water with glazed eyes. Lucciana, too, was sitting on the deck of the ship in a stupor, and staring at nothing in particular with her mouth slightly open.

Kiwi flew off of Hiromi's shoulder and to Janus' face, and slapped him across the cheek several times. "What's going on?" she yelled at him. "Why are we stopping? What's this song?"

Janus paid no heed to the Faerie's strikes, nor did Tearn or Lucciana. As the song built to a crescendo just short of pain, but still full of all-encompassing bliss, Shss unslung her black spear while Hiromi tried every spell she could think of to remove the trance upon her friends.

Even briefly deafening them did nothing to shake them from their mystified state. The song, if it was

affecting them somehow, had already done what it set out to do. This was not a disease, or a poison, or anything else she was trained to heal. Every glow of her hands and fire of a purple or blue spell from her fingertips met nothing but the dumbfounded and calm gazes of her entranced friends.

There was just the slightest splash of water from off the port side of the ship, a sound so small that only Shss could hear it. She ran to the middle of the boat where Hiromi and Kiwi were trying to awaken their friends, and pushed herself in front of them. "Stay behind," she ordered, and pointed her spear to the railing in front of her.

Drips of water fell from something over the side of the boat, loud enough so that even Hiromi and Kiwi could hear them over the sound of the beautiful song. As more and more water fell to the lake below, the song suddenly burst into brilliant clarity all around them, though its volume remained just below the threshold of intolerance. Janus, Lucciana and Tearn were all transfixed on a single point at the side of the boat, unmoving.

Water droplets suddenly splashed to the lake below in greater numbers... and with only the sound of the song to accompany her, she was there. Floating at the side of the boat, singing her song of enchantment, Brombadeg herself rose from the depths of the lake.

From her long green hair to her blue skin, smiling through her harmonious singing, she was as alien as she was beautiful. Her body was slim, and her breasts were hidden under a brassiere of white clams. She would have been the perfect symbol of beauty, had her back not been strangely concealed under a giant yellow shell with brown stripes upon it.

Indeed, as she sang her song of haunting melody and passed her green eyes among the party with a definite spark of intelligence, all six of them found it was impossible to look away. This was her home, where the occupants of the arriving boat were the outsiders, the aliens...

Kiwi braced her quivering legs into Hiromi's shoulder as Shss breathed heavily and her heart pounded quickly. She slowly lowered her spear and spoke. "Who are you?" she asked simply.

Brombadeg let the last note of her song slowly calm in her throat, and the last echoes of her melody faded into the backdrop of the dripping roof of the cave, and the water winding its way down her thin body.

With that everpresent, welcoming smile still on her lips, she rose up another dozen feet to reveal the roaring, dark green squid that suddenly lashed its suckered tentacles at the party.

"Look out!" Shss screamed. She whipped her spear around and cut two tentacles on her right with a single swing, then kicked another on her right up and away from her two charges. Kiwi launched off of Hiromi and straight for the squid's large, wandering yellow eyes, and cleanly socked its right one with a single punch.

As the squid portion roared with pain and closed its wounded eye, the woman atop it continued to smile. She opened her mouth and continued her beautiful aria with renewed vigor, but with a tinge of high emotion to it now.

Shss noted that while her mouth had once looked inviting, as a host would look to her guests, it now seemed to be twisted into the grotesque and pleasure-filled face of a hungry creature who was just sitting down to a hard earned meal.

One of her many gigantic tentacles finally broke through Shss' overrun defenses and snagged Hiromi around the waist. *"Ugh!"* she cried out, as Brombadeg's grip got tighter and tighter around her.

"Hiromi, no!!" Kiwi screamed out. She quickly punched out the beast's other eye, then dodged another pair of flailing tentacles as she shot back to crush the tentacle holding her friend captive.

Lucciana stared at the scene with neutrality. Her mind was screaming at her to act, charge forward and

beat at the creature attacking her friends, but that part seemed distant, far outside herself. She felt nothing as a surprise tentacle whip lashed the Faerie across the back and drove her headfirst into the far railing of the ship.

As tentacles rained down on the besieged Fighter, Janus smiled and closed his eyes ever so slightly, and the chant of the beautiful woman carried him away. A tentacle rushed up underneath Shss' spear and slapped her up into the air, where another batted her sideways over the railing and into the chilly waters beneath them.

Tearn stared dumbfounded as she struggled to stay afloat above the icy surface, and felt a panic and rage somewhere in the back of his mind with his eyes stuck on Kiwi's unmoving body on the deck.

At the same time, Hiromi struggled, wiggled and bit at the tentacle drawing her forward into the squid's gaping mouth. She was on her own, she fearfully realized.

She nurtured air from her chest and out her wrapped fingertips to herself and her friends, and deafened them all for a few scant seconds. Then, with her eyes on the woman above the maw of the hungry beast, she shouted the Word of Death.

Brombadeg's song faltered as she closed her mouth in sudden surprise. She had heard it... it worked!

Lucciana, Janus and Tearn's blank gazes continued despite the break in song, and to Hiromi's great dismay, after a few brief seconds of composure, the smiling woman finally parted her lips and issued forth her haunting chant once more.

The three continued staring at the woman in a stupor, and as she brought the Priest closer to the squid's hungry mouth, Hiromi felt a depression wash over her that she had never felt before. It was a depression that robbed her of every last shred of spiritual strength that she had had just a second ago.

For all of her twenty nine years, she had been raised among the healers of Llylgamyn and had vowed to help anyone who was in need. Now, just above the scene of her grisly death and depleted of every last reserve of magic within her, she reflected upon her life in but an instant.

She journeyed with a man whose soul she could not redeem. She met her wonderful best friend, who she ended up not being able to protect. She travelled with another whose own inner demons proved stronger than her own ability to heal, which caused her and the ones she killed such pain. The Munk and the Dane would continue to war, despite her efforts.

Even her faith was a sham... spent in service to a God who refused to listen, refused to help... or simply was just not there.

As Brombadeg brought her closer to the open mouth of the squid, Hiromi reflected on the absolute, undeniable lack of a point to her own existence. Everything she had ever set out to do... she had failed in doing. Perhaps this was her just reward.

Tears streamed down her face as she closed her eyes and awaited the inevitable crunch of bones and spray of blood from the sea monster's horrendous bite. In her last moments, as her tears dripped onto the tentacles of Brombadeg and into the chilly water below them, her thoughts were filled with the images of every person she had ever met, all of whom she loved with a devotion that went beyond words. And through the slideshow of shining, smiling faces that melted into one another, Brombadeg's tentacle choked the very life from her.

Shss, kind and brave, came to her briefly, before her dark face melted into the withdrawn, but strong, face of Janus.

Tortured but resilient Lucciana... to the face of their new companion whom she had not the pleasure of knowing all that well. Her master's twinkling green eyes, and the long brown beard that she braided, fussed with and teased on a daily basis, followed.

Her classmates... Quinn... Smitty... Savior... and finally, their smiling faces retreated into the background, still visible but gently falling back to reveal the final figure. The girl smiled with her green eyes staring intently at her in her mind's eye, and reached out her tiny blue hand to grasp Hiromi's own.

Kiwi...

Every last face exploded in a blinding flash of red as Brombadeg squeezed her body, and sent blood rushing to her head. Red gave way to black, and before Hiromi blanked out, she had time for but a single thought...

So you did forsake us, after all...

"Hiromi!!" Shss screamed from the frigid waters, hearing nothing, and watched her limp friend dip into the monster's mouth like the whole world was a silent play.

A brilliant flash of light suddenly erupted from around her, engulfing her stupified and wounded friends, the monster, the boat and cave, everything. She briefly closed her eyes until the light had dimmed enough to see, and looked around to find its source.

Above her, she saw the light of the moon and the star-filled night sky in a hole in the cave ceiling, where there was no hole before. From the unexplained opening rushed a massive, transparent hand balled into a fist, plunging straight down towards the monster that had the boat's occupants so captivated.

Without a sound, it cut through the air and into the smiling, singing woman atop Brombadeg's gaping mouth. The woman was instantly crushed underneath the sheer force of the strike, and the body of the beast beneath her caved inwards.

For some reason, the mighty waves that rose up to overtake the ship were stopped several feet away, as if there were an invisible wall of force between them and the people aboard it. Under the strange protection, the ship barely even moved.

Hiromi's spell of deafness wore off of Shss as Brombadeg reflexively spat Hiromi's body up and out of the squid's mouth. Her lifeless form spun through the air and landed in the water with a splash amidst the roaring and screeching of the dying sea creature. The crushed woman's song continued in a cacophonous series of unrelated notes, finishing with a sad gurgle as the double-bodied creature slipped beneath the lake in a pool of her own red blood.

Shss tried to scream, tried to swim out and save her friend before her body could slip beneath the waters and disappear, but the icy cold lake had sapped enough of her strength to keep her from doing anything. Hiromi sank... as she helplessly watched.

She felt something slimy glide past her leg. She looked down to see what it was, when it suddenly bit into her thigh. The red fish from before were swarming her body from every direction. She struggled weakly to kick and punch them away, but it would only be a matter of time before...

The great hand, which had floated above the sinking corpse of Brombadeg, glided over to the powerless Fighter and gently scooped her out of the lake. It was warm to the touch, and with every passing second, she felt her strength returning. The wounds on her stomach and legs closed as it hovered over to the boat and laid her down upon the deck.

Lucciana, Janus and Tearn were still transfixed on the spot where Brombadeg had risen, showing no sign of ending the trance the creature had placed upon them in the first place. Kiwi, who was still unconscious on the deck of the ship, suddenly had none of the broken bones or cuts upon her that she had had a few seconds ago.

The hand rose up and away from the ship, and disappeared with a simple rush of air. Shss looked up at the spot where it had disappeared. "Wait!" she screamed. "Hiromi is in water!"

But no matter how much she pleaded for the hand to return, it did not do so.

Without a second thought, Shss dropped her Psi Rod and spear upon the deck of the ship, and dove into the frigid waters where she had last seen the Priest. The feel of the cold water shocked her to her very core. It bit at her chest, clutched at her heart, and ate at her reserve of strength with every passing second.

Nonetheless... Hiromi needed her help, and was in much worse shape than she.

Shss pushed all of the air out of her lungs to sink deeper into the water, and felt more of the fish swarming around her in circles. From the darkness of the water, one of them opened its jaws and bit at her nose with curved, sharp teeth. Without hesitation, she grabbed the fish around the neck and crushed it in her bare hands.

Down, down she swam until she could see nothing above or below her, nothing but darkness in every direction. If she had not been so focused on finding Hiromi at that point, she might have worried about what other unholy terrors might reach forth from the gloom to drag her into waiting, growling stomachs.

The lake wasn't terribly deep, and she finally reached the bottom. Her lungs were protesting from the lack of air, but her attention was focused entirely on the rocky floor before her. What she saw next made her stomach turn.

On the bottom of the pool of water, where she had seen Hiromi sink just seconds before, a school of the sharp-toothed red fish were wriggling around a particular spot. At her approach, the fish darted away and revealed the sight that would be burned in her memory for the rest of her life.

Hiromi's golden amulet and scraps of her tattered green robe were all that were left of her once smiling, kind and loving friend. Shss choked as she drank a bit of the sea water in sheer horror. She was outside of herself, seeing this disgusting sight with a stranger's eyes. *This can't possibly be...*

Instinct took over, and propelled the Fighter down to snatch up the amulet and break for the surface of the water. Memories of her friend's kind face and acts of heroism whirled around in her mind as light broke through the surface of the lake.

"I'll take care of everything, ok? I promise! I won't let any of you get hurt. God is here, all around us. I love you all. My sister..." Hiromi's words came to her in a disjointed collection of stinging memories that sent Shss' salty tears into the vast and infinite sea around her.

Just a second ago... we were together! What happened? Why?! she thought helplessly.

She broke the surface of the water and gulped greedily at the cold air of the cave. Using the very last of her strength, she scaled the side of the boat and plopped her exhausted body on its deck, still holding the Priest's amulet firmly in her hand.

Kiwi still lay unmoving on the wooden planks as the others continued to stare out onto the lake with glazed eyes. Shss held Hiromi's amulet to her heart as her tears spilled onto the deck of the ship.

The wind in the cave blew gently and whistled over their bodies as small waves lapped at the edge of the ship. Drops of water plinked one by one off of the cave's ceiling and into the lake, echoing loudly in the enclosed area.

Shss could only think then of her friend's final end, a life spent learning the art of healing and living only for the sake of others, to end up only as the meal of a creature, a victim of nature's indifferent brutality.

The rage that engulfed her then gave her the strength to sit up and look out into the water, as if she expected the Hobbit to appear at any time with a big grin on her face, bathed in the glowing light of a protective shield and with not a scratch on her.

Minutes passed without incident; she knew she was just deluding herself. She took a final long, sweeping look over the waters as her lip quivered in disbelief and sorrow. It all seemed like a dream.

At the same time, Lucciana blinked and moved her mouth, but no sound came out. Janus and Tearn seemed to react similarly, coming out of the trance that had bound them through the entire encounter.

Shss stood and went to the back of the ship, and took the Powerglobe from Janus' unmoving claw. Placing it in the slot of the barrel and pushing the steering handle forward, she directed the ship to the eastern bank of the lake and stopped the ship several feet out.

"Hi..." Lucciana whispered, then fell silent. Tearn recovered next, stood, and stumbled over to the fallen Faerie on the deck. He picked her up and cradled her in his arms as Janus held his head and winced.

Lucciana shook her head and stumbled to the edge of the boat. The entire world spun around her, but she wheeled a leg over the side of the deck anyway. Shss grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back, but the Elf fought her. "No, let me go!" she shouted, trying desparately to dive into the water after Hiromi.

Shss yanked her back over the side, then opened her hands to let Hiromi's amulet dangle by its chain beneath them. Her tear-filled eyes and the amulet's sad, pale rock back and forth told Lucciana everything she needed to know, but Shss began to explain anyway.

Janus listened silently as the girl explained everything she had seen, even though he himself had seen the unexplainable fist... only he had been powerless to do anything about it.

"Dammit..." Tearn swore, holding Kiwi in his robe where she would be warm. "I couldn't move when that wench started singing..." His cheeks flushed and pain gripped his chest when he saw the two girls hug one another, and the darker one began to shudder with sobs. If they took her death that hard, he couldn't imagine how it would affect Kiwi.

The pain gripped his chest ever tighter as he felt the Faerie stir next to his chest. *"Unnngh..."* she groaned painfully. "I feel like I've been hit by one of those Umpani ships..." Her face, scrunched up in pain, smiled briefly when she saw Tearn's face. *They're ok!*

She laughed softly. "So did you take a little something out of your magic robe to...?" she began, then trailed off when she saw Shss and Lucciana holding one another tightly as they looked out onto the water.

It took a second for the realization that someone was missing to hit her. Her lower lip shook as she struggled for the words that would possibly change everything about her life, here and now.

She worked her mouth, afraid to ask for fear of the answer she expected, but needing to prove she was wrong nonetheless. After several seconds of silence, with no information forthcoming, she looked up into Tearn's eyes and asked the frightful question as simply as she could.

"Where's Hiromi?" she whispered in a soft voice.

Tearn's body went weak when he saw the look on her face, coupled with those innocent but dangerous words. He bit his lower lip, unconsciously letting her know that he wished not to answer.

Lucciana and Shss parted from one another and walked heavily across the length of the deck. Kiwi flew out of Tearn's paws despite his attempts to hold her back, and flew in front of them. "Where's Hiromi?" she repeated, with panic now evident in her voice.

Without a word, her eyes slipped down Shss' face, red with tears, to the dim and dead golden locket and chain in her hand. Her wings suddenly refused to work, and she fell to the wooden planks of the ship. Tearn and Lucciana immediately reached out to catch her, but the Felpurr was quicker.

Janus watched her reaction, desparately wanting to say something, anything to ease her pain. When the words didn't come, he felt lower and more powerless than he had in his entire life.

Kiwi stared at the locket in a trance comparable to the one that had gripped her friends just moments ago. Her body did not move, and she did not blink. Her mouth hung slightly agape in silent horror, and her mind refused to work.

The Dracon struggled again to say something, but everything he wanted to say seemed unhelpful, trite, or at the worst... simply insulting. Slowly, he cleared his throat of the invisible grip nausea had placed upon it. "We should... get off the boat," he finally said, assuming the role of the leader for now. The very least he could do was watch out for the little girl's safety.

Lucciana nodded slowly after a time, and she and Shss walked to the edge of the boat's railing without a word. Kiwi watched the locket in Shss' hand, transfixed, until she had jumped over the side of the boat with Janus, and they had both landed on the banks beyond it.

Tearn walked beside Lucciana. "On my back," he stated. She wrapped her arms around his neck and they floated into the air, then he landed them next to the others on the rocky shores of the lake.

The caves proceeded east, winding in and around stalagmites and ending in complete darkness several feet away. Janus turned his back on the others with his guns ready to fight off any sudden predators, but the rest were transfixed on the lake in front of them.

Nobody said a word for some time. The entire journey ahead of them, Gods and globes and wars had fled from their minds, and were replaced with thoughts of the friend they had just lost.

Shss remembered how brave the girl had been, especially for someone so small... she had taught her much about caring for others and finding an inner strength within herself. It was almost laughable that she would never see the Hobbit's smiling face again.

In fact, she realized that she never really appreciated everything the Priest had done for them all, not until she had been taken from them so suddenly. All the knit wounds, the counsel she had given so freely and so effectively... all of it had saved them more than once, and she knew they would never see it again.

Shss' normally strong and able face was screwed up in complete misery. She bit her lip to keep from sobbing aloud. *This can't be goodbye, Hiromi...* she thought with saddening finality.

As strange as it was, Lucciana could still feel Hiromi there. She was in her mind, keeping her strong and honest with herself, still as giving in death as she was in her brief time with the former Samurai.

The lessons of self-reflection and atonement that Hiromi had taught her, and the ones of compassion and love that she reinforced, remained in her mind and were as strong as ever. She shook her head slightly... was that all the girl was to her? A font of ideas and support, a wellspring of healing for both body and soul?

No, she thought sharply. *She was my sister... I felt it as strongly then as I do now. She was more than my counselor, more than my healer, and more than my friend... She was my sister.*

Lucciana finally came to grips with something she had tried to avoid since she saw the locket only seconds ago: at the same time as her teachings remained with her, Hiromi herself was not there. She would never see her smile again, never be able to confide her darkest secrets with her.

She was paralyzed with true, numbing, heart-gripping sorrow... a hollow, choking, helpless sensation more powerful than anything she had ever felt, even after the death of her family, and the loss of her beloved hometown and adopted country. Her face was a mask of strength and faraway reflection, but the tears streamed unbidden from her eyes. Even the few spirits that still remained in her mind seemed to understand what had transpired, and kept a quiet vigil near her as she mourned the death of her friend.

Tearn and Janus shifted as the silence lingered. Kiwi still had not moved or taken her eyes off of the spot where the amulet hung. Her eyes were glazed over, and her mouth was closed.

As Shss finally turned away from the lake, she raised the amulet in her hands while she walked towards Kiwi. The Faerie's eyes did not follow, and were fixed on a point somewhere on the calm banks of the stony cave floor.

"I'm very sorry," she choked to Kiwi, but the Faerie did not respond, either verbally or physically. Shss slowly held the amulet up and out to Kiwi, thinking that she might want to keep the final possession of her dear friend.

She slowly withdrew her hand when the little one continued to stare, immobile. Lucciana finally found the strength to join Shss' side, and gently laid her hand upon the golden amulet.

"I'll protect this for you, Kiwi," she said softly. She took the amulet from Shss' hand after the Fighter nodded to her, and held it to her heart. "The second you want it, you let me know, and I'll give it to you." She was silent for a second, then blinked slowly. "I'm so sorry..." she consoled, but Kiwi continued to stare out into the lake without a word.

Janus beckoned into the cave. "We'd better get going," he insisted. "There may be more of those things out there somewhere." As awful as he felt for being the one to lead them on, he knew somebody had to do it. The City of Sky was somewhere beyond here... and the Astral Dominae shortly after.

Shss gently brushed Kiwi's cheek and walked past her and Tearn, while Lucciana put the amulet in her robe. She paused briefly next to the Faerie, then closed her eyes and bowed slowly. As she bent over, her silent tears ran down her nose and struck the ground with tiny plaks.

Tearn hugged Kiwi close to his body and walked backwards a few steps, giving her a few last seconds to herself. Then, he turned around and joined the rear of the party... and noticed that she was still staring fixatedly off into space.

As caves went, this one was big... and confusing. Tearn used his Wizard Eye spell to run over the length of the winding networks of wet walls and saw all manner of beasts lying in wait for them. There were more of those yellow Cruds, acid-breathing black birds, flying blue jellyfish and giant, insectal thraxes that preyed upon one another and waited for the next blunderous party to enter their domain.

Far to the south, a series of winding paths led to a very open area of cave, surrounded by mountains of gold and equipment... but patrolled by the emerald Dragons that had collected the treasure over the course of several decades, maybe even centuries.

And finally, a simple staircase far to the southeast led up and into the grassy City of Sky, where his vision was suddenly and confusingly split in several different directions. He cut the spell and led them towards the entrance.

Janus and Lucciana took point, with Shss in the rear to protect Tearn, who in turn was watching over Kiwi. As they walked through the dark cave where Xen Xheng had directed them, Tearn wondered offhand... *If the old codger knew so much about our path, did he foresee this turn of events as well?* If that was the case, he had a visit to pay the man soon enough.

"Turn right here," he told everyone, and Shss and Janus walked down a small path that was barely wide enough to let the hulking Dracon through. Tearn, holding Kiwi with his left paw, raised his right and conjured fire within his body. He blasted a red hot ball down the hall, which exploded and sent several lurking yellow dragonlizards flying in several directions. One particularly charred and blackened lizard hissed pathetically as Janus stepped over it, but made no move to attack.

Janus took point, when the sound of three successive shots of his guns blasted out and around the party, followed by the electric buzzing of Shss' Psi Rod in an unseen creature's body. Behind them, Lucciana thrust her bo into the exposed kneecap of a walking skeleton, then batted its head off with a follow-up swing.

Through it all, Kiwi made no move to act or speak as they continued through the wet and cold paths of the

cave. Tearn took a deep breath before he spoke. "I lost my family to war, kid," he told her in a quiet voice. "All three of them: my wife, son and daughter... all of them taken before my eyes, because I couldn't do anything to help."

Though she stared blankly at the floor, he continued speaking to her, and hoped she could hear him. "Whatever you feel right now, know that I have been there," he said, then paused briefly before he continued. "And in many ways I still am..." He walked in silence for a few seconds, then whispered so only she could hear. "You are not alone."

He squeezed her gently and kept her body close and covered, as comfortably as he could. Stepping over the body of the tall and mandibled thrax that Janus and Shss had downed, he used his free paw to fire a swirl of colorful Magic Missiles at a group of approaching flying jellyfish.

In silence they blasted, casted, thrust and bash their way through the multitude of attacking beasts, until they had finally reached the staircase. Janus waved his Musket behind him. "Stay put, I'll go first," he insisted.

The stairs were hewn out of the rock itself, and a breeze blew down them as Janus ascended. The night sky was clearly visible above, along with a wooden pagoda that served as the entrance to the City of Sky.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he saw an empty, grassy courtyard sprawling out all around him. He stepped forward, and almost immediately and painfully bumped his long maw into an invisible barrier.

At first thinking it was some sort of enchantment, Janus soon came to realize that the entire City of Sky was made up of a series of transparent glass panels that wound around in every direction. The moonlight reflected beautifully off of all of them, and threw its image and bright light in every direction.

He gestured behind him without a look for the others to join him. As they climbed the stairs, a strange blonde girl riding a flying, bright red machine descended from the heavens above like a futuristic angel. She wore a purple flight jacket with white shoulders and purple shorts, and was extremely beautiful. She smiled broadly, which made her fiery and attractive demeanor all the more magnetic.

"O'Haio!" she called out. "Welcome to the City of Sky, strangers!" As she neared the grass below her between two large plates of glass, her smile slowly fell into a scowl of disgust. "You," she practically spat, glaring down at Lucciana.

Lucciana said nothing. Jan-Ette roared her engine as she neared the ground, possibly as a landing procedure, but more likely in anger. "You are not welcome here, warmonger," the Helazoid hissed. "Any who would disrupt the peace of Guardia will receive no assistance from its most ancient and blessed of denizens."

"Fine, I'll wait here," the Elf replied without emotion, and descended the steps back into the cave. "Let me know how it goes, guys."

Shss turned her back on the Helazoid. "I go, too," she said. The two went to the bottom of the steps and sat on the lowest stair, and faced the dark and hostile cave together in silence.

Jan-Ette's demeanor visibly relaxed. "Now that that's out of the way, what brings you to the City of Sky, adventurers?" she asked.

Janus holstered both of his guns, and spoke over the dull roar of her rocket sled's engines. "We were instructed to come here by Xen Xheng of Munkharama," he explained. "He tells us you can lead us to the Astral Dominae."

The Helazoid's grin returned. "More aspirers to the great Prophecy of the Crusaders?" she asked happily. "Then you are most welcome here! Allow me to introduce you to our queen, Dame Ke-Li. She will tell you more of the Great Test!" She cocked her head to the side. "Strange though... the Prophecy said there were supposed to be six of you..."

She shrugged, then fiddled with a few buttons on her rocket sled, and the glittering, moonlit glass walls around them suddenly disappeared in a flash. They were now all standing in the crisp, beautiful courtyard with nothing obstructing their paths.

Beckoning to them, Jan-Ette throttled her sled up and into the sky to the east. Janus and Tearn, with Kiwi in his paws, followed her blazing lead.

The grasses of the city were surrounded by walls that wound around it in an odd pattern, something that may have made more sense from a sky view, but Tearn was too worried about Kiwi to bother looking.

In a small hallway to the south, several Helazoid women were talking amongst themselves. They waved and smiled kindly as the three approached, then returned to their conversation. Above them, new and experienced Helazoid pilots shot to and fro with squeals of glee and shouts of warning on their shiny red sleds. The entire city gave off a definite feeling of welcoming and happiness, a far cry from any of the empty, alert or openly hostile places the three had visited before.

The Queen herself was in an open courtyard beyond an empty hallway, guarded by unmoving and very serious women wielding electric polearms of obvious power. Jan-Ette, seeing the arrival of their three guests, bid her Queen farewell and blasted up and away from the courtyard to other duties.

Ke-Li's hair was cropped short, but still as bright yellow as any of her subjects. She smiled and beckoned them forward with one hand, but kept the other on a dangerous, blue-tipped staff in her hand.

When they approached, she laid her free hand to rest upon her muscular thigh below the tight black bodice covering her chest. The color of her large boots matched her flowing cape in passionate red, and her head was covered with a small circlet of multi-colored flowers. An enchanting green necklace hung from her neck, just above her breasts.

"Hail, Crusaders!" her voice boomed out as Janus and Tearn stood side by side in front of her. "The Prophecy is upon us, and we welcome you brave warriors warmly!"

Janus wasted no time responding. "We need help to find the Astral Dominae," he said.

Ke-Li pursed her lips in response. "Help... is something I cannot give, brave warrior," she replied.

So that girl died for nothing? Tearn thought angrily. *That blasted Munk, I swear when I find him...* He suddenly realized he was squeezing Kiwi in his rage, and immediately calmed himself; Kiwi remained silent.

"What do you mean?" Janus asked, his tone bordering on condescension and betraying his similar thoughts.

Ke-Li raised her staff to the sky. "The Great Test is to be undertaken without assistance from us, the guardians of the Higardi, of the Great Maker, and of their secrets," she proclaimed. "What we do offer is sanctuary while you are here, and guidance on the nature of the Test!"

"Wait... the Higardi?" Tearn interrupted.

"Our ancestors from the sky, the Higardi, left long ago on their divine mission to the stars," she explained with a nod. "The Prophecy states that when the stars are right, and the Crusaders come to Guardia, that we Helazoid will ascend to the heavens and join our forebears in the heavens above!

"And that time is now!" she finished.

Janus blinked and made a confused face. "So... you think we're the Crusaders?" he asked, to which the Helazoid Queen smiled. "Perhaps," she replied. "Such is the reason for the Great Test, to prove who among the many challengers bears the true mantle of the Crusader."

Tearn interrupted her with a snort. "Look, lady," he said rudely. "I don't care about any of this destiny or Ascension bunk. We're here to find the Astral Dominae, preferably before a certain dome-head gets a hold of it. Now, are you going to point us in the right direction or not?"

"To the point, are we?" Ke-Li replied diplomatically. "Very well, then. The Astral Dominae is located in the deepest chamber of the Isle of Crypts, in the middle of the sea north of here."

The Felpurr sighed impatiently. "We know that," he said in an annoyed voice.

But Ke-Li simply nodded with a stately grin on her face. "However, you do not possess the Key, which is most likely the reason Master Xheng sent you here." She dipped her free hand into her cleavage and took out a simple gold-plated key with the symbol of a Dragon upon it.

"The Dragon Key will allow you access to the Chamber of Gorrors, and the Astral Dominae beyond it," she explained, then handed the key to Janus.

He took it in his claw, and stared at it with disbelief. It seemed... such a trifling, stupid thing to die over. A ridiculously small and unimportant hunk of metal, in exchange for the life of the first person who was ever willing to die for him.

He felt like he should have been sad, or angry, or even morbidly amused at this nonsensical turn of events... but he felt nothing at all. The concept of losing someone close to him was utterly foreign; he knew not how to react.

"Though we are bound not to help you directly in your task, we offer you the guidance necessary to speed you on your journey," Ke-Li continued. "May the Great Maker, Phoonzang, always watch over you!"

That god guy again, Tearn thought. The Helazoid Queen waved her hand to her side, towards a wooden door at the back of the courtyard. Janus glanced at Tearn, then walked past the woman to the wooden portal and opened it.

Beyond it, a small garden of flowers surrounded the ominous, white marble form of the same bearded old statue at the church in New City, and atop the Munkharama ziggurat. As they approached, a voice boomed from its mouth: *"I am the Creator, the Builder, the Father, the Prophet, the Maker... I am called by many names, but only one shall I know."*

Janus shook his head in disbelief. "That's easy. Phoonzang," he answered.

The eyes of the statue glowed for a brief second, then the eerie aura that the statue had given off quickly faded, and returned to the soft and welcoming gaze that the three were better accustomed to. A door at the back of the garden clicked and swung open.

The next garden housed a similar statue with a wary look of skepticism upon his face. From the small enclosure, the doubtful statue spoke: *"Know ye the names of my children and theirs? Speak, then, if you would pass."*

Tearn screwed his face up in confusion, until the words of the previous test came back to him. If Phoonzang was worshipped throughout Guardia, and the races he created were his children... "The Helazoid, and the Munk and the Dane," he said aloud.

Janus understood and continued, remembering the stories the girls had told in the Marina and aboard the boat. "The Gorn and the Rattkin," he finished.

The statue didn't move, or make any sound signifying that it accepted their answer. Janus spoke again. "The Umpani and the T'Rang," he added, but still, the statue remained silent.

"'My children and theirs' it said," Tearn remembered. "Maybe it wants specifics..."

Janus nodded. "Xen Xheng of the Munk, Ke-Li of the Helazoid," he said.

Tearn picked up where the Dracon left off. "Barlone' of the Rattkin, and Galiere of the Gorn," he remembered from the girls' conversations.

Now, the Dane... "Belcanzor of the Dane," Janus remembered from Kiwi and Hiromi's whispered giggles as they discussed Shss' experience in the Dane Tower.

The eyes of the statue glowed and its face softened into a visage of a welcoming host, and the next door swung open in front of them. An identical garden lay before them as they entered the next yard, complete with statue, but the flowers were trampled and destroyed beneath them.

"Wha...?" Janus started, when he suddenly noticed movement in the shadows just ahead of them. Before the two could react, a giant beast the likes of which none of them had seen before rocketed from the shadows with its hand reaching for Tearn's throat.

It was a machine, covered with shiny yellow metal and a panel of blinking lights on its torso. Its head was a rectangular box, surrounded on either side by enigmatic tubes that led straight into its body. While its left arm was nothing more than a giant cannon, belching out a stream of white hot fire at the two surprised men, its metallic right had the palm, wrist and fingers of a Human hand. Now, the fingers were clutching for Tearn as the grass was set ablaze by its arm cannon.

Kiwi stirred in Tearn's robe and placed her tiny hands between the robot's grasping arm and Tearn's vulnerable neck, and stopped the machine from moving any closer. As she stared emotionlessly at the ground, she twisted the machine's arm in her hand and snapped it off at the elbow with a high-pitched, grinding shriek.

She flew out, wheeled around and smashed the side of the machine's head with its own arm... and it whirled through the air and exploded in a shower of sparks and flame as it crumpled against the wall from her forceful strike.

Without a word, she dropped the dismembered arm on the ground, and flew back to hide inside Tearn's robe, with her face buried in his chest. Janus patted her on the back as the next statue congratulated them on their victory, claiming that the final test was just ahead. Tearn rested his paw on her, and whispered so only she could hear: "Thank you, kid. I know that was difficult for you."

They entered the last area, a dead end of paved road that ended in a large enclosure to the northwest. In that enclosure was a grey sky ship of steel, much like the ones that had brought them to this forsaken planet in the first place.

Left here who knew how long ago, the ship was dusty and its colors faded, but it was still in fine condition. It was long and wide, with two pointed wings and a fin at its sides and back, and a transparent panel in the front looking into its very spartan and sterile internals.

"So this is Phoonzang's ship..." Janus remarked, just before a hatch at the side of the ship opened with a hiss and slid away to reveal an entrance inside. Tearn looked at him, then gently brought Kiwi out of his robe to offer her to the Dracon.

Janus shook his head and walked into the ship alone. "Take care of her," he insisted. "I'll go look around."

The ship was big enough to fit at least ten people, and several small rooms seemed fit to use as bedrooms as the occupants travelled the darkness of space. A small black box rested on the console of dead lights at the front of the ship.

Janus walked over to it and opened it carefully, hopefully not destroying whatever ancient treasure lay within in the process. Inside was a piece of parchment, wrapped in brown waxen wrappings and thankfully preserved for all the years it had been here.

Continuing his search, Janus located a simple button at the base of the control console, which when pushed, opened a small compartment beneath the dash. A sapphire ring tumbled out and struck the floor before he could catch it. With the metallic tinkling, a man's voice, identical to the statues', came from the console itself: *"This is one of several needed for the final puzzle. Guard it well."*

Walking back outside of the searched ship with the ring in his claw, and thankful that they had a way to escape this planet if they needed to, Janus opened the wrappings and read the simple sentence that the parchment within contained: "You are the key."

***

Lucciana and Shss were lost in their thoughts at the base of the stairs, and they knowingly shared the same sorrow. "Only the necklace and pieces of..." Lucciana repeated, but choked and stopped. She didn't want to finish the sentence, or have the image in her mind again.

Shss nodded, and said nothing. They continued to stare off into the darkness for some time, with a mixture of anger, sorrow and loss common between them.

After a time, Shss finally broke the silence. "Remember... she stop Dane and Munk with shield," she said.

Lucciana nodded with a small smile. "She really surprised me when she ended that entire battle with just two spells," she replied. "And then later with the fish... and then the sea monster..." She stopped, then shook her head. "How is it possible that a girl with so much power could be..."

Shss reached her arm around her friend and hugged her close. "She love everyone," she said softly.

Lucciana shook her head in disbelief. "And now... she's... I..." *Hiromi... why did you have to die?*

An explosion rocked the grounds above them and sent dirt and grass on top of them. "What?" Shss called out and jumped to her feet, her Psi Rod out in an instant. She drove up the stairs with Lucciana in hot pursuit... and were suddenly surrounded by carnage.

On one side were the Helazoid, on the ground and battling with their blue-tipped staves and from the sky on their rocket sleds. On the other and all around them were a mixture of T'Rang and Savant machines, whose metallic bodies were decorated red, instead of the usual blue found in New City.

Without a moment's hesitation, Lucciana and Shss charged forward in tandem to meet the backs of some of the Savant machines.

The Elf charged a Fireball spell and launched it into the machine in front of her, melting its backside before she drove her bo straight into the malleable metal. After prying the bo upwards into its internals, a mechanical grinding and the sound of wild electricity screeched through the air before the machine went dead.

Shss hooked her mechanical opponent in the back and flipped it behind her and over her head. After its flailing body struck the ground with a loud thump, Shss flipped forward and drove her heel into its malformed, brown face.

The T'Rang behind them noticed the new arrivals and cackled as they slithered forward, right before a lance of ice ripped through two of their bodies and pinned them to one another, then to the ground. Three explosions rocketed out, and three separate, hissing T'Rang were suddenly without heads.

Janus and Tearn pushed through the throng of advancing Helazoid amidst airborne dives and shrieks of hot lasers from the rocket sleds above them. But for every crowd of machines or T'Rang that were burned to death and exploded by airborne fire, or punctured, killed and destroyed by thrusting polearms, Helazoid were run through and beaten in equal numbers.

Lucciana saw one rocket sled in particular get taken down by a T'Rang net, which forced the girl and her

machine to the ground before the bugs advanced and attempted to run her through. She instinctively fired an Iceball at the three T'Rang Assassins and froze their robes to the grass below them. As they tried to tear themselves out of the icy trap, she threw her bo outwards and kicked it at the first of them.

Her bo struck him in the head and bounced back to her, and knocked him out with deceptively strong force. Grasping the rebounding bo, she whipped it around and into the next T'Rang's body, who crumpled to the ground soon after.

The final T'Rang ripped his spidery brown robe out of the ground and blocked Lucciana's thrust with a downward blow of his hooked Stun Rod, then whipped the shaft up and into her chin.

Lucciana bit her tongue and saw stars as the rod struck her, and she stumbled backwards. But before the T'Rang could close in for the kill, Janus lunged forward and grabbed the Stun Rod in his claws while Shss spun through the air and kicked him in his clacking jaw.

Tearn fired jagged Whipping Rocks and sharp Iceball lances into the opponents of the more beleaguered Helazoid ranks from his free paw. Every once in a while, when a Savant machine or T'Rang Assassin was able to close in on him, Kiwi immediately blocked their expert blow. She ripped weapons, and sometimes limbs, from the advancing creatures, but she seemed to be operating on instinct rather than being in conscious control of her actions.

The Helazoid Legions shot around the din of battle, unleashing streams of pink laser fire at T'Rang and Savant machines separated from their comrades. But as good as they gave, the T'Rang fired back purple clouds of Deadly Poison that choked the life from their airborne enemies and sent them crashing down to the ground.

Ke-Li suddenly emerged from her courtyard with her Laser Spear slicing through the air, and took several machines and T'Rang down with her every swing. With graceful twirls and flips she ran through and shocked to death any opponent in her way, with her Helazoid Legions atop their blazing rocket sleds firing support fire with every successive attack run.

Finally, after several minutes of hard fighting, the last of the Savant machines was reduced to scrap, and the remaining T'Rang disappeared in flashes of blue and white light. The battle was won, but at a heavy cost of Helazoid casualties.

Shss pulled Lucciana off of the ground, and held her as the Elf unsteadily stumbled forward to the netted girl. It was only now that she realized it was Jan-Ette, and after a slice of Shss' black spear, she and her machine were instantly free.

The Helazoid, chagrined and indebted to the one she had insulted just a moment ago, got atop her rocket sled and throttled straight up without a word. Lucciana saw the hint of a respectful nod as the girl shot up, but couldn't be too sure from the distance between them.

Ke-Li rammed her Laser Spear into the body of a twitching Savant Guard before she spoke. "They were looking for you," she explained. She approached the assembled party and nodded in thanks. "When I refused to give you to them, they attacked. Were it not for you, I'm not sure how many more of my people would be dead now."

She breathed deeply. "I am sorry, but this changes nothing concerning our stance on you who come from the stars. I am afraid we still cannot help you any more than we can help another. But if it is any consolation..." She paused, then nodded firmly, "There is no doubt in my mind that you are the Crusaders, and that the Dark Savant will fall by your hand.

"However," she continued, "your act of bravery this day, and the fact that you have passed the first part of the Great Test, is worthy of reward, regardless of who you are." She waved her staff among them, and Lucciana's injury and pain, Tearn's lost magic, and every other physical injury within the party was healed in an instant.

"Let Destiny prevail, brave Crusaders," she said. "May Phoonzang guide your way..." And with that, she walked to the first of the dead and injured Helazoid in the bloody courtyard, with glowing staff in hand.

The party began to descend the steps when a voice called out from above them. "Crusaders! Please wait!" Jan-Ette called down to them. They looked up to see her carrying several strange items in her right hand, while she brought her rocket sled down with the throttle in her left.

"As thanks for your help, and atonement for my prejudice," she said with a glance at Lucciana, "I offer you one of these four sacred relics to aid you on your journey." She looked among all of them. "Not as the Crusaders, mind you, but as the brave warriors who saved my life and the lives of many of my people."

She held up a tiny grey cylinder with a black button at its side. After pushing it, a green beam erupted from the end of it. She turned off her rocket sled and left it hovering above the grass as she stepped down to meet them.

"The *Light Sword* is a beam of energy that will cut through most material like it did not even exist," she said as she waved it in front of her. She pressed the button and withdrew the blade into the cylinder again.

Next, she held up a small piece of metal that glowed with the strength of a thousand suns. "The *Light Shield* will protect you like no other piece of armor will," she explained. "Any blow upon it will be rendered useless."

Finally, she retrieved two black pistols and a pulsing grey glove from her rocket sled. "The Frontier Phasers and the Cobaltine Powerglove both utilize energy to strike at your opponent from a distance, much more efficiently than the projectile weapons you use now."

She laid the items on the grass below her and stepped back. "I beg of you, choose one of these four relics to aid you, and accept my apologies for misjudging you..."

Shss and Lucciana stepped back; none of the items looked particularly appealing to either of them. Tearn, too, was quite content with his abilities in magic, and felt Kiwi would never accept a weapon, even if she were to speak now.

Janus, on the other hand, had his eyes focused on the energy pistols since the Helazoid had first showed them to the party. He looked at Shss and Lucciana, then Tearn and Kiwi with excited eyes, and met nods and "go ahead" hand movements that sent him straight for the Frontier Phasers.

He held them in both claws and pointed them towards the sky, then quickly aimed them in different directions, as if preparing to shoot invisible enemies. He nodded in satisfaction and uttered a simple, "Thanks," before the party returned to the depths of the cave below the City of Sky.

Jan-Ette watched them until they were almost gone, with Lucciana at the rear. The Elf turned and looked at her briefly, then finally continued after the others in silence.

The high of battle began to wear off as they battled their way back to the ship, and it was almost completely gone by the time they had boarded and sailed their ship out of the cave, and back onto the Sea of Sorrows.

With thoughts of their lost friend fresh and painful in their minds, the Crusaders, minus one, sailed out onto the choppy seas in the middle of a gentle drizzle, to the Isle of Crypts.

Tomb

"We're here," Janus announced to his sleeping comrades. His crew of sorts had segregated themselves into two silent and sleeping sides below deck.

On one, Shss stared at her black spear with memories of Brombadeg's sweeping, lashing tentacles. She

hadn't been able to stop the monster.

Next to her, Lucciana sat deep in thought, with memories of Hiromi running through her mind. Similarly, she could only think upon how she had sat there, doing nothing, while the life was choked out of the girl who had come to be family to her.

On the other side of the cabin was Tearn, who sat ever worried about the sleeping Faerie in his robe. She stirred at Janus' call, but otherwise refused to come out.

For the entire day that they had sailed upon the ocean, it was much the same. Everyone was wrapped in the same trauma, but nobody dared give voice to it.

The Isle of Crypts was actually a series of three small islands right in the middle of the sea. The two on the west, the smallest of the three, bore nothing but a single pillar of yellow stone upon each, and were dotted by lush green trees around them.

The final island was most likely the one they were looking for. Easily as big as the other two put together, an old but sturdy black structure sat in the middle of more of the thick forest that peppered the other islands so beautifully.

Nothing seemed to be living on either island, though the warnings of the machine in New City kept Janus' trigger talon near his Blunder Buss' and Frontier Phasers' triggers nonetheless.

All in all, it was not what he had expected from an island meant to house the dead, if the name was any indication; the Hall of the Dead on Llylgamyn was at least surrounded by life draining water. Janus cast a wary eye at the sea around the islands at the thought.

Tearn climbed up from below and joined him on the deck. "This is it?" he asked.

Janus nodded and pointed to the bigger island. "Looks like that one's the one we want," he replied. "I'll pull us around the front and see if we can find an entrance."

"Be careful," Lucciana warned as she and Shss joined them. "The Dark Savant has had several days since we left New City to find this place." She hummed in thought. "It was strange enough he hasn't made a move yet, considering he knew the Astral Dominae's location," she continued, "but given even more time, there's no telling whether or not we'll see him in there now."

Shss pushed the steering rudder in Janus' claws towards him, and the boat narrowly avoided a very shallow bed of coral that he hadn't noticed. "We should stop here," she said. "Trouble water."

Janus pulled Wikum's Powerglobe from the boat's rear engine, and the vessel came to an eventual stop several feet out from the main island. He dropped anchor and winced as it struck something much closer to the surface of the water than he had anticipated.

Good thing that girl's such a good navigator... he thought, but considering the situation, he didn't feel like burdening the others with news of the near shipwreck. Shss and him shared a knowing glance, then they all joined one another at the bow of the ship.

Janus and Shss went first, effortlessly leaping across the waters with extraordinary strength. As they had done before, Lucciana grasped onto Tearn's neck, and he ferried his two passengers up and over the water to the other side.

The monument was large, and a staircase led into its internals, conjuring up further parallels to the crypt upon Llylgamyn. Janus and Lucciana remembered their near death and suicide in the hellish place, but neither had the heart to retreat now... not after all that had happened to bring them here.

"The Isle of the Crypts..." Tearn said softly. He squeezed Kiwi gently, to let her know that he hadn't forgotten her. "Whatever happens down there, whatever we see," he warned, "remember that we cannot

fail until we find the Astral Dominae.

"If the Savant gets it first, the universe will be in far worse shape than a few deranged minds and scorched backsides," he pointed out. He steeled his will, and exhaled sharply. "I'm going," he stated. "If any of you want to stay behind, I'll understand."

Lucciana twirled her bo in her hands and jabbed it into the grass before the crypt staircase. "Hiromi will not have died for nothing," she said strongly. "I'll give my life to honor that girl's memory and protect what she fought to secure."

Shss left the Psi Rod on her back and unslung the more lethal black spear. It seemed appropriate to wield the weapon of the first Human she had ever killed, to atone by protecting an entire universe with its power. "I go, too," she stated.

Before Tearn could ask Kiwi of her feelings, he felt her hug his body with a grip that refused to let go; she was going, no matter what he had to say about it.

Without a word, Janus descended the old steps into the musty and rank internals of the Isle of Crypts. *Leading us all straight into death,* he thought grimly.

Ghosts were everywhere, transparent, smokey and wispy as they milled about in varying stages of insanity and personal agony. They were crying, laughing, shouting, huddled around one another and tearing at invisible Demons... that very likely might have been entirely real.

The entire dark, bricked room was so full of the colorless specters that the entire room rolled and flowed like an ocean of grey, wailing death. It smelled of dust and decay, but surprisingly more of desparation and loss.

One Ghost approached the party, the shrieking form of a female Gorn noble, who might have been a queen at one point in time. "Please, you have to help me," she begged them in a hollow and echoing voice. "My treasure is gone... have you seen my treasure? Please, help me find my treasure..."

Janus pulled away as she reached for him, but her transparent hands went straight through his arm... but even as the touch chilled him to the core, there seemed to be no apparent damage. The Gorn woman yanked her hand back, stared at it with sudden realization, then broke into sobs as she sank to the floor in sorrow.

Her body had been unable to come into contact with his, which made it all the more confusing when a key dropped from her body as she slowly disappeared. Janus picked it up... a grey key with a skull upon it.

As the Ghosts ebbed away from different parts of the room, Shss could make out more and more of the dark chamber. A hallway led far down to the left and to the right, but there was a gate to the south that the Ghosts seemed reluctant to near.

"Over there," she said, pointing at the barred portal.

Lucciana and Tearn pushed through the throng of wailing, clawing specters first. Their bodies froze as the pitiful spirits grabbed at them with pleading hands. "You have to kill him for me!" the Human Ghost of a man screamed. "Is my little girl safe?" another asked. "I'm so thirsty... I need a drink..." a female Dane in the corner whispered.

Tearn's body shivered as he plucked Kiwi out of his robe and held her high, out of the reach of the Ghosts, and held his other paw out to Janus. The Dracon threw him the skull key, and Tearn pushed it into the lock of the gate in front of him.

It slid upwards into the ceiling, allowing the party access into the next chamber. As Shss came through the gate last, they noticed that the open portal acted as an invisible barrier to the spirits, for not even a single hand or foot passed through.

Lucciana remembered the creature clawing at her in her nightmare long ago, shortly after she had disemboweled herself. "I hope to the Gods above this isn't where we go when we die..." she wondered aloud.

The train of thought was cut short as a pair of large, emerald green Dragons lumbered forth, one from a hallway on either side of them. In unison they opened their sharp-toothed maws and breathed two streams of red hot fire towards the party.

Janus was the quickest on the draw, and blasted both of his Frontier Phasers into the Dragon on the left. The pink lasers violently ripped through the Dragon's scaley head and out its other end, burying themselves far down the hall in the mortar of the crypt. The Dragon's jet of flames choked off in its now closed maw, and disappeared harmlessly in the air.

Shss and Lucciana jumped for the same one, but stopped short when the beast fell with a simple grunt and died on the floor. They looked at Janus with astonishment, and he looked upon the pistols in his claws with similar wonder.

The second Dragon roared loudly and shot a jet of fire at the one who had killed its mate, but the flames were partially stopped by a quick Fire Shield from Tearn's free paw. "Hey, the hell are you all doing?!" he yelled as the flames licked around Janus' body. "You want me to take him by myself?!"

Shss and Lucciana danced and flipped around the errant flames. The Elf held her bo behind her back, then whacked it straight down upon the Dragon's head as Shss piereced its flank with her spear. The Dragon roared and thrashed its tail out, and knocked Shss backwards into the wall behind her.

Lucciana suddenly felt herself being lifted up and away from the Dragon, then pushed backwards into Janus. She struck his body with a grunt, and soon realized that Tearn had flung his paw outwards to Levitate her away.

Finally, he held it up towards the ceiling, and it glowed briefly green. With a simple feeling of earth, soil and hardness erupting from his body, a massive boulder appeared above the Dragon, then just as quickly descended to crush it. Upon its death, another gate to the south raised into the ceiling.

Sweating profusely, Tearn wiped his brow, then went from person to person to make sure that everyone was uninjured. Strangely enough, after he had walked over to Shss and pulled her up, he began to feel hotter by the second. *Funny,* he thought, *it was ice cold when we arrived... must be the Dragon flame.*

"I can't believe she'd just give away something this powerful," Janus commented with his eyes on the pistols. He helped Lucciana regain her balance, and she brushed herself off. "Think there's a catch?" she asked.

Janus cocked his head to the side. "Dunno," he replied. "But it's weird how they're against war, and yet make weapons like these." He looked over at Tearn with concern. "Hey, are you all right?" he asked.

Tearn shed his robe as he fidgeted. "It's hot..." he said calmly, but with evident worry. Shss felt her chest and stomach, and noticed a similar warmth within her. "He is right," she commented, and after a few seconds, Lucciana and Janus began to feel it, too.

Shss looked around quickly. Behind them was the room of wailing Ghosts, now suddenly empty. They could run outside now and risk getting locked out or beset by the Ghosts again, try one of the two hallways where the Dragons had emerged and possibly face more of them, or run farther into the crypt and hope the sickness passed.

She didn't want to waste any more time, so she plunged farther in, through the opening and into a grand and empty hallway.

Suddenly, as she passed underneath the arch, she saw an image of herself... lying dead upon the ground, with ants and flies all around her, feasting on her dead flesh. She cried out as she slipped

through the archway, but the image and the sudden warmth disappeared as she entered the next area. "Come on!" she screamed, waving her hand towards her.

There was not enough time to warn them of the hallucination before they passed through. Each of her friends reacted similarly to the images as they joined her, from Tearn's angry grunt, to Kiwi's short and frightened scream. At the sound of her terrified cry, he gently squeezed her closer to him.

Lucciana looked all around her, from the fountain of suspiciously clear water on the wall in front of her to the grand hall leading east and west, lit by scant and distant wall-mounted candles. "Hey!" she screamed. "You think you're so strong, attacking and frightening people without the chance for retribution?!"

She pointed her bo to the east, then held it behind her back in a fighting stance. "Show yourselves, you damn cowards!" she yelled, then beckoned with her right hand. Her skin became paler before the party's eyes. "Come on! Fight me one-on-one! I'll kill you all again... and send you somewhere far worse than this pit!!"

"Lucciana!" Shss screamed at her.

Her shout was enough of a reminder; Lucciana inhaled sharply, then closed her eyes. As the seconds passed, her normally pale but healthy color returned to her face. *No, not this time...* she thought to herself. *I am stronger than this...*

She turned to the others with an apology on her lips, but the words did not come as she saw the horde of Ghosts approaching from the west. "Looks like you called them out..." Janus commented as he backed up a step and raised his Frontier Phasers to the approaching undead army.

"Run!" Shss yelled out, and they bolted down the eastern hallway where even more Ghosts suddenly awaited them.

Lucciana lept into the air, throwing a red Fireball into their midst that exploded and sent their spirit essences flying. As one tumbled towards her, she hit the ground, jumped up and spun her body and bo around, and cracked it across its ghostly head. The surprisingly physical Ghost struck the wall beside it and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Tearn, too, launched a much hotter and larger Fireball into their flying ranks, which exploded and flung them into the walls, floor and ceiling around them. They exploded in a thick, choking collection of smoke as Shss charged in.

One by one, she impaled the Ghosts of long dead Rattkin, Munk, Dane, Helazoid and others onto her spear, until there were several dozen of the grasping, wailing, weightless things lodged onto its shaft. Finally, once she had broken through their ranks, she whipped her spear out into the wall beside her, and the punctured Ghosts slipped off of her polearm and exploded one by one into puffs of smoke.

Janus pointed his Phasers down either side of the hall, and blasted several Ghosts with each pull of the triggers. When the others had cut and blasted a significant number of the Ghosts before them into mist, he turned both of his pistols on the ones remaining and burned holes through their approaching bodies.

The five burst through the ranks of remaining Ghosts and the everpresent cloud of ethereal matter, past alcoves of corpses and bone, and a private mausoleum for the crypt's more honored guests. The four sepulchers within it were large, and contained the remains of more of their shifting, undead hosts.

The final area was empty, for now, with a pair of fountains in two corners of the room. A single golden urn in a small chamber at the very south of the fountain room was all that stood out against the mass of Ghosts approaching from both the east and west, flying and moaning as they drew closer.

But there was something else... a gate to the north, framed on top by the image of a great black Dragon. Everyone looked at Janus, who waited only a second to run next to it and push the golden Dragon Key towards its lock.

In his haste, he dropped the key and it slid into the iron bars of the gate. "Damn!" he swore, and reached vainly for it between the lattices in the gate. Lucciana quickly joined him and tried to reach it with her bo, and though she succeeded in touching it, she wasn't able to pull it back to them. Shss watched in horror as the Ghosts drew closer, now fifteen feet away, ten...

Tearn pushed the Dracon and Elf aside and held his paw out to the key, which suddenly shook and flew into his grasp. He rammed it into the gate's keyhole, and pushed the two in as the gate rose into the ceiling.

Shss raised her spear to fight the Ghosts and buy her friends some time, when the Felpurr grabbed her shoulder and threw her into the room behind him. The Ghosts were nearly on top of him when Tearn withdrew a potion of red liquid from his robe, and flew backwards as he dashed it into the stone below him.

The liquid erupted in a blazing explosion that blasted the swarm of Ghosts backwards towards the golden urn and fountains. Once all five of them were safely through the Dragon gate, every last Ghost suddenly erupted into smoke and disappeared with a collective, frightening groan.

"Unbelievable..." Lucciana said, breathing hard.

Tearn sighed as he turned to her. "Could you not challenge the entire realm of the dead the next time you're given the opportunity, topknot?" he asked.

She made a face at him before speaking. "Hey, I said 'one-on-one,' so don't wig out on me because they don't fight fair," she replied.

"Shh!" Shss hissed to them, with her eyes facing the corner of the shadowy room. Janus, too, looked at something concealed there, though the other two could only see a staircase leading farther down into the accursed crypt.

But then, the shadows began to move. From the corner of the room, the black Dragon who had to this point been sleeping peacefully in the corner stepped into the light... and was now looking upon the party with terrifying anger. "Doom..." he growled with deadly intent, and rose to devour them.

Suddenly, the anger in his eyes softened. "My... my boy..." he rumbled with a voice that shook the very walls of the crypt themselves. He slowly padded forward, and Shss backed up to join Lucciana with their weapons pointed at the monstrous creature.

As Tearn prepared an Ice Shield to combat the expected spray of acid from the creature, Doom spoke again. "How did you... where did you go, my boy?" he asked with his eyes on Janus. "Your mother and I worried so, when you disappeared. It has been... so long..."

The pieces slowly fell together in Janus' mind: a child found upon the Isle of the Crypts, the blood of a Dragon... there was no doubt in his mind that he was looking at the father of the adolescent Dracon from Munkharama, who now followed the Holy Path of Munkharam.

He shook his head slowly as he spoke. "I am not he. But he is safe, and upon the mainland," he replied, to which the Dragon rumbled a laugh. "Come now, young man. You stand before me now!" he exclaimed. "I've waited so long to hold you once more... this is no time for foolishness."

Janus shook his head again. "Really, I am not your child," he insisted, to Tearn's shocked chagrin. "Boy... you better stop pushing this thing's buttons," he whispered furtively.

Without warning, Doom angrily stomped the floor of the crypt, and sent shockwaves strong enough to unbalance everyone throughout the room. "DO NOT LIE TO ME!" he roared, and opened his maw wide in a threatening display. Janus held his claws on both Frontier Phasers, hoping that this Dragon's scales were of similar thickness to the others'...

The Ghost of the Gorn Queen suddenly appeared between them, and cast only a glance at Janus, pausing briefly as she studied his face. Her mind seemed to be much more intact than it was at the entrance to the crypt. "He is not our son," she said softly, before she faced Doom.

"'Our' son?" Janus asked aloud, while the others were mindful enough not to voice their wonder. The Gorn Queen's transparent hand ran alongside Doom's maw, and penetrated his scales with just the briefest touch of her fingertips. The great black Dragon seemed to calm ever so slightly, but his eyes were still red with furious rage.

"You trespassers had better explain everything you know about our boy," Doom demanded with barely constrained rage. The "or else" threat was evident enough, as even the most hard of hearing adventurer could hear the flames broiling within his body.

Janus explained everything he knew, from how Xen Xheng had taken Harashen from the Isle of Crypts, to his alienated and shy nature, to the boy's obvious talent as both a Monk and a Dracon. Doom and the Gorn Queen listened quietly, never nodding, never asking questions, simply quiet and accepting the information he presented as a thirsty man would water.

Finally, he was finished. The Gorn Queen's ghostly eyes shone with invisible tears as Doom lifted his great head proudly, and the Dragon looked down his great maw at the intruder who had brought back such happy and painful memories. "Harashen," he said with a voice that shook Janus with its sheer power, "a handsome name for such an excellent child."

Far more than the Ghosts or the Dragons that had fought them on this island of the dead, more than Queequeg, Hiromi or Kiwi caring for him after a life of constant stealth and escape, the love of this proud Dragon and his doting Gorn mate shocked Janus.

Never in his entire life had he accepted his birth as anything more than an accident, the experiment of a sadistic Mage... or as the product of rape.

But seeing these two now, staring at him with hopeful and desiring eyes for news of their stolen child, filled him with an odd mixture of confusion, hope and disgust. Their faces showed that they certainly loved and missed their child.

Nevertheless, a sense of disgust filled the Dracon at their decision to procreate. *Who are they to place the burden of a world's prejudice on an innocent babe?* he thought.

Finally, with a sigh, Janus reached into his pocket, ignoring Doom's threatening growl. He withdrew the tiny scrap of red Munk robe bearing the picture of the young Dracon and him, and tore it carefully in half.

He stepped forward slowly, holding the half portraying the Gorn and Dragon's child in all of its smiling glory. "This is a self-portrait, drawn by your son himself," he explained, and placed it before Doom's eyes on the floor. He returned his own drawing to the pocket he had so safely kept it.

Doom ground his teeth together, lifted his head higher, and scrunched his jaws up in his best effort to cope with the mass of twisting emotions within his great chest. With his eyes firmly placed on the drawing beneath him, he spoke.

"You may pass," his loud and shaking voice spoke. "Let me and my mate be for the time being." The Gorn Queen nodded and gestured to the stairs, then sat next to Doom and looked down at the drawing with her beloved.

With the confusing emotions still broiling within him, Janus led the way down the staircase into a room submerged almost completely in water. A simple path of stone wound to the left and right and out of sight, as well as straight ahead to a great stone bearing the name "The Gaelin Stone."

The waters were still and clear, and travelled around several odd, floating chambers that were surrounded on every side by liquid. At least two of the Island Chambers barred entry into them with a

large metal gate... the others, if they were similarly locked, had their entrances turned from the party.

Beyond the mesh of metal bars, they could see shadows moving slowly about within the locked and secure rooms. They could only guess what kind of Demons would be locked up in the Isle of Crypts, if rampaging spirits and fire-breathing Dragons were allowed to roam free.

"'The Chamber of Gorrors,'" Shss read from a sign built into the stone at the foot of the stairs.

Tearn walked right along the strip of stone to the edge of the water, and squinted at the gate barring entry into one of the Island Chambers. The dim, distant lights within intrigued him. "The 'Beast of a Thousand Eyes?'" he read from the placard upon the floor near the gate. "Something tells me we should probably leave these things alone."

Kiwi suddenly stirred in his robe and flew out. She hovered for a few seconds before everyone noticed her sudden presence, then spoke in a wavering voice. "This isn't right!" she exclaimed.

Everyone looked at her with confused looks upon their faces as she shook her head and wiped tears from her eyes. "This isn't right..." she repeated, then looked at them all in turn. "Can't you feel it? This isn't how it was supposed to be! Hiromi's dead, and we're moving on like she didn't even exist!"

Lucciana approached her slowly. "Nobody thinks that," she assured her. "Everyone feels as badly as you do about her death, but we have to realize what she..."

"No, you don't!" Kiwi screamed, interrupting her. "Not one of you feels like I do! I lost my best friend today, and now I'm just as bad as any of you, pretending like she wasn't even with us from the beginning!"

She breathed heavily through the awkward silence. "None of you get it," she said at last. "This isn't a group without Hiromi, or Shss, or Janus, or any one of us missing. This isn't right." She shook her head in great pain.

"The Astral Dominae is the universe's problem, but to me, Hiromi *was* my universe," she said through her tears. "Every person who has ever been in my life is *my* universe! Maybe you all can go on without your best friends or your family backing you all the way, but I'm different!

"And that's why..." she trailed off, then flew to the stairs leading to the exit of the Isle of Crypts. "I can't do this anymore..." she whispered.

"Kiwi..." "Hey," Shss and Lucciana said after her, but the Faerie did not listen.

Janus, again at a loss for words, found himself struggling with his inability to help the one who had been his closest friend just days ago.

Tearn conjured a blast of air from within him, and blocked Kiwi's exit with a swirling wall of wind from a Missile Shield spell. "Kid, give me one second, then I'll let you go," he said. She eventually stopped before the wall, but did not look at him.

"I know very well how it feels to lose someone so close to you," he said softly. "Every person here has lost someone or something dear to them in the course of their life... and I know that it feels like you don't have anything now, and that you can't go on."

She shook her head in disbelief. He paused and breathed deeply. "But knowing that," he continued, "I think that nobody would possibly understand you better than we do... and on top of that, you know everyone here would give their life to save yours," he said firmly. "No matter what happens, all six of us, we're a team."

He waited for his words to sink in, then continued. "And you better believe that no matter what happened to that girl, she's with you now," he said. "Someone that powerful, and who cared for you that much, wouldn't possibly leave your side for an instant. Not even after death."

Kiwi turned her head slightly towards him, and Tearn cleared his throat as the emotion of the situation overwhelmed him. "I think you might know all that, but in case you don't, there it is," he said finally, when he was sure his voice would not crack from the strength of his emotions.

"But there's something else..." he said as he dispelled the Missile Shield, allowing her the chance to bolt from the room if she so chose. She did not, but instead looked at him with curiosity.

Tearn swept his paw in the general direction of New City. "Remember that machine back in the Forbidden Zone, that dispensed information with a word?" he asked. Kiwi blinked and nodded ever so slightly. "Think back to what it told us of the Astral Dominae," he prodded her.

Her eyes went down and left as she tried hard to remember what it said, but there was so much information...

Tearn gave her a few seconds, then stepped forward towards her. "'The power of Life...'" he told her. "The Astral Dominae contains the power of Life." Her face suddenly lit up as she realized what he was trying to say.

"Now, its a long shot, of course," he conceded. "The information came from the Savant, so it's immediately untrustworthy... and who knows what something as vague as the power of Life could mean. But..."

He stepped forward and put his paw on Kiwi's tiny shoulder, and waited until she looked into his eyes before he spoke. "Why do you think entire civilizations would go to war over some trivial trinket?" he asked. "Why would the Umpani risk the very man who leads their entire military, and thousands of their troops? For the fabled, protected and concealed *snow globe* of Guardia?" Kiwi laughed shortly despite herself, and a tear fell from her eye.

Shss spoke up behind her. "The T'Rang send a Queen here. For what?" she added.

"And the Dark Savant," Lucciana continued. "A being that strong, with his own warship and an army of thousands of machines to his name... trying to expand his power with some pathetic relic?"

Tearn nodded at the both of them. "Powerful galactic civilizations and superpowers have converged on this one planet to battle over this single artifact, a device that trumps the power of entire armies," he said. "Do you not think, that in addition to granting limitless power, that it could also raise the dead?"

Kiwi nodded as she bit her lower lip. "It might," she conceded.

Tearn let his paw slip off of her. "You're free to go any time you wish, kid," he said. "The four of us will continue on and get the globe, even if it kills us, and we do it of our own free will... but I'm asking you, as one of every person here who cares about you, if you'll come along with us. Not just for the universe's sake, but also for the shortstack's... and ours. Are you in?"

She looked up towards the ceiling, seeing an image of Hiromi's face recede into the stone ceiling with her usual smile on her face. She smiled herself as the image disappeared. "I'm in," she stated. *And thank you all for everything...* she spoke into each of their minds.

Janus watched with dismay and anger at himself as Kiwi sat down upon Tearn's shoulder, as he led them all towards the Gaelin Stone to the north. Just a second ago, he had been her closest ally, the one she ran to when she was in trouble.

And now, with a simple speech, Tearn was the one she now turned to.

And exactly what have you done to warrant any of her respect? a voice came to his mind. *Your forgiveness for her mistakes? You do one thing, and expect her to be indebted to you for her whole life?*

Janus silently joined the others as he spoke back to the voice in his mind. *I've been her friend for as long*

as this journey has begun, he replied. *On Bela's ship, on this planet, even now.*

But when it comes down to it, you really are powerless to help her, the voice answered. *Tearn, being older and more wisened than you, fills the role she needs a lot better than you could.*

Tearn walked around the giant stone, taking in the odd and seemingly random holes and symbols upon its surface. Temples, moons, eggs, men, devils, boats... so many strange pictures. *You're right,* Janus admitted to the voice. *And she really does look happy now, happier than I've seen her in days...*

But you've supported her well throughout the past few months, haven't you? the voice pointed out.

Yeah... Janus replied. Shss pointed at the picture of a Dragon on the western face of the stone, and stuck her finger in a hole positioned directly over its eye. A small compartment opened at the base of the stone to reveal a black skull key within, much like the key they found near the entrance to the crypt. She held it up triumphantly, and Lucciana and Tearn patted her on the back as they smiled and congratulated her.

So what's stopping you now? the voice asked. Honestly, he had no answer.

The others walked on without him, on the stony path around the stairs to the south, so Janus hurried to catch up with them. After they had gotten through the door adorned by a black skull, leading into the "Hall of the Past," the rest of the journey felt distant, an adventure he had little to no control over.

With a renewed and redirected party, and thoughts of Hiromi's joyous return never leaving Kiwi's mind, the other four seemed determined, even happy, to be exploring the monster-infested bowels of the Isle of the Crypts... except for him.

The internals of the tomb were a series of floors stacked one on top of the other, connected by chutes, tubes and teleporters that allowed access from one floor to the other. Each floor felt like a world unto its own, having some theme or another that led Janus to develop nicknames for each one.

They first dropped into a floor that he named the "Dark Floor." Everything was pitch black when they dropped down the chute into a black maze, until Tearn guided them through with a ball of light in his paw. He looked pleased as he led them through the darkened hallways to another chute that dropped them down a floor to a place submerged completely in water.

In this "Water Floor," Kiwi grabbed collars, shoulders and hands as she single-handedly flew all four of her friends through the swirling waters, all the way to a pit where they and several hundred gallons of water spilled safely into a dark stone room.

Janus walked after them, lost in his own thoughts. He was once again wrapped in his feelings as an outsider, a stranger, to this party of friends. The solitude welcomed him back like a warm blanket that had always been within arm's reach, one that only remained hidden until he had bid the others farewell.

The next he knew, they had ascended onto the "Demon Floor," or the "Pit Floor," depending on which of the two themes the floor impressed more readily upon the one who saw it. In a four-way intersection leading to bland and uninteresting hallways to the left and right, and a room filled with five large pits straight ahead of them, the Demons came.

They dropped from the ceiling in a never-ending rain of fire and roars, charging spells and slicing the air with their deadly black claws as they fell. Their bodies cloaked in flame and with skin as bright yellow as the sun itself, they were the very image of a fledgling party's worst, final, tortured and death-filled nightmare.

Before any of the others had a chance to react, Lucciana lept ahead of them and twirled her bo through the air, and knocked the horned and flaming beasts to and fro as effortlessly as if they were simply trash dropped upon them by a discourteous person in a tall house.

She flashed her friends a grin as she spun towards them, cracking a Demon across the forehead. "Feel

free to pass," she gestured briefly to the room of pits before she kicked and bashed another Demon across the jaw.

When they realized they would not be able to stop the intruders, the Demons stopped dropping in to reinforce their comrades, and left the others dazed and dizzy on the floor. Lucciana spun her bo in her hand and cracked the stone floor with it, then calmly walked into the room with her friends.

Finally, on the "Maze Floor," Tearn regrettably pointed out that his Wizard Eye spell was failing him with every attempt to cast it. It was no problem for Shss, however, who led them without error through the twisting pathways, over dropping pits and around sucking chutes where her nose took her.

The greasy, sweet smell of machine oil, fresh in her mind from the months aboard Aletheides' ship and her time in the T'Rang city, guided her to a stairwell on this final level of the crypt. The smell was so strong here that even her comrades began to smell it.

Kiwi laughed. "Follow your nose... huh, Shss?" She nodded and smiled as Tearn clapped her on the back. "Nice work, wild child," he congratulated her.

As they descended, Janus waited briefly. *So that's how it is,* he thought to himself. *The destiny of the Dracon, to remain alone to fend for himself.*

He slowly walked after them as the voice came again to his mind. *And even the loner managed to make it into their ranks,* it pointed out.

Janus nodded. *Yes. Even he belongs,* he replied. This level he named the "Machine Floor," if for nothing else than for the metallic yellow machines, much like the one he, Tearn and Kiwi had encountered in the City of Sky, who wandered the floor with unknown purpose.

The entire party stopped short of the first hulking beast they saw, swearing that if it even glanced in their direction, they would drop dead from its sheer power. However, that machine, and every one they passed after it, simply walked the Machine Floor in straight lines with no clear intention or goal.

Kiwi didn't doubt her ability to reduce them to scrap, should they even think to look at her friends wrong. If she could destroy one in the condition she was in before, she could take an army the way she felt now. "No worries, guys," she assured everyone. "They probably saw what I did to the other one, and they're shaking in their metal shoes!"

As if in response, the metallic internals of the nearest machine whirred and grinded as it walked by, sparking laughs from all but Janus. If they even noticed his lack of mirth, it failed to provoke any response from the jovial group.

The floor was very big, bigger than any of the others, and was a maze of pillars and hallways that took some time to navigate. The bluish-black stones of the walls, floor and ceiling provided nothing in the way of direction, though there were words written in gold and surrounded by circles scattered around the area.

Boat, Temple, Serpent, Sphinx... each of the many words was strangely reminiscent of a part of their collective journey. From the Munk's "Egg" Moonstone to the guardian "Dragon" Doom above, each word poignantly summed up in a single word a portion of the experience that they had all shared upon this planet. It was too creepy not to be ignored.

At last, after days of mayhem, months of travel, and personal trials that drove them all nearly to the brink of nervous breakdown, after the loss of thousands of people they did not know, a few they did, and one who meant the world to at least a few of them, they had arrived.

A massive yellow machine partially obscured the gate at the end of the hall, at sat silently below a sign that gave the party a collective sense of hope, relief and open happiness that stood in contrast to the trauma yet to come: "Tomb of the Astral Dominae," the wooden sign upon the gate read. They were finally here.

In response to their arrival, the machine slowly rose up in front of them and motioned with its large arm towards them. **"Halt-lt-lt,"** it intoned. **"I... am Cosmo-Bot, guardian *fzzt* of the Astral Dom-m-m-minae."**

Shss, Lucciana and Kiwi lined up for the inevitable fight, leaving the two ranged members of their party safely behind them. **"State your purpose, purpose, purp-purp..."** it stuttered. It was clearly having problems after centuries of little maintenance.

Tearn spoke up. "We're here for the globe," he said aloud, holding a stoppered Acid Bomb in one paw as he conjured an ice lance in the other.

The machine lowered its arm and stepped to the side, and everyone watched as the gate slowly slid upwards into the ceiling. **"Confirmed. You may... you may..."** it spoke, then repeated itself ceaselessly. After the tenth repetition, it went silent.

Shss had taken only a single step forward when the machine came back to life. **"Diagnostic mode: Re-affirm mission parameters,"** it said suddenly. **"Please wait."** A few seconds passed, then it moved to stand in front of the gate again.

"Mission: Protect the Astral Dominae from hostile forces. Warning: Scans offline. Unrecognizable hosts. Priority: Protect the Astral Dominae. Priority: Do not harm the innocent. Conclusion: Protection of Astral Dominae overrides safety protocol. Battle mode engaged."

The Cosmo-Bot lifted the gun for its left arm, and unleashed a large blast wave of blue plasma that engulfed Lucciana before anyone could stop it. She blacked out from the resulting explosion and dropped as Shss lunged forward with an ice spear blasting past her and into the machine.

It exploded harmlessly off of its metallic chest and into a hundred shards that pierced painfully into her body. Her Psi Rod's hooks fared no better, and the shock of both of the buttons that conjured forth the rod's electricity seemed to have little noticeable effect on the machine.

The yellow behemoth backhanded the Fighter across the face, and she cracked her skull on the hard stone beside the both of them. As she reeled with the shock and dizzying effect of the attack, it punched her in the gut and she slipped into unconsciousness.

Kiwi punched and kicked at its metallic body with all of her might, succeeding in denting the metal plates around its box-shaped head before she, too, was taken down by a blast of the machine's plasma cannon.

Her body was burning all over, though there was no noticeable fire upon her. She writhed and screamed as she fluttered through the air and hit the ground next to Lucciana, who was thankfully not awake to feel the plasma's effect on her body.

Janus dodged a third blast of the creature's plasma, though it wasn't aiming for him. The blue flames engulfed Tearn's body and exploded the Acid Bomb in his paw. It was all the Felpurr could do to twist his body and the acid spray away from the others before he, too, was overcome with injury.

The Dracon stood among his comrades, three unconscious and one in terrible pain, with his Frontier Phasers out and pointing at the machine in front of him. *Why... why have we come so far for nothing...!?* he thought angrily, and blasted both of the pistols into the Cosmo-Bot.

He fired them one after the other, never letting his clawed talons leave the triggers as he unleashed streak after streak of pink lasers into the machine's body. Every one of them exploded in small puffs of fire and sparks at different points on the Cosmo-Bot's body, but otherwise, there was no damage inflicted that he could discern.

And in the end, when it mattered most, you couldn't even save them, the voice said to him, more as-a-matter-of-factly than with any malice involved.

Shut up! Janus screamed back as he fired more of the ineffectual lasers into the Cosmo-Bot's head and chest.

Why? it replied. *Are you afraid of the truth, that you and all your friends are going to die here? ...Are you going to run away again?*

The pistols slowly went dead in Janus' claws. Whether they were out of ammo, needed time to recharge, or whatever else was the reason in shutting down futuristic weaponry such as this, he could not tell.

What are you talking about?! Janus yelled in his mind as he holstered the Frontier Phasers in his flak jacket, then pulled out his two Umpani firearms. He pointed all three barrels at the Cosmo-Bot and blasted them all out in turn.

The pellets plinked harmlessly off of its body with nothing more than a few sparks to show that they had hit, and the machine fired another round of Plasma towards Janus. He dodged in time to avoid it and holster his guns as the voice spoke to him. *All this time you've run from the world, and from yourself. Why?*

Janus picked up Kiwi and Lucciana in his claws, and ran them back out of the hallway and around the corner where they would be safe. *Why?* he repeated back to the voice. *People try to kill me when they see me, and you're asking me why I avoided them?*

Plasma exploded behind him, at the back of the hallway, as he left Lucciana and Kiwi on the floor there. The Faerie was still screaming in agony and clutching at her body, while Lucciana's chest, stomach and undergarments were clearly visible from the many holes that the plasma had burned.

Did you ever try to reason with them, or understand them? the voice asked.

Of course! I... Janus started as he ran back to the hallway.

Really? the voice interrupted. Janus ignored it and scooped up Tearn and Shss, and dodged another blast of plasma that streaked towards his chest and exploded on the ground behind him. *Life hands you a difficulty, and you brazenly call the entire world unfair?* the voice asked.

You don't know anything about me, Janus shot back. *How dare you pass judgement on me?* He picked up the Felpurr and the Fighter and dodged another blast of blue plasma.

How dare you pass judgement on the world? the voice replied calmly. *After all the times you refused to reflect on your own trauma, after all the times you refused to listen to me, how informed do you think you are to cast your aspersions on entire planets?*

Janus ran around the corner with plasma hot on his back. *I make judgements based on what I know,* he thought.

You make judgements based on what you have ignored, it replied.

The image of Hiromi standing between him and the Psionic on Llylgamyn came to him. She turned and looked into his face with pure love in her own, and soon took over the entirety of his mind's eye. *"I will die for you,"* she said.

Immediately, Janus shut the image out. He didn't want to see those lies... he wasn't worth...

As he placed Shss and Tearn slowly on the ground, he realized what he was being told. Kiwi and Hiromi smiled at him in his mind's eye, and Tearn nodded with respect. Shss and Lucciana looked up to him, admiring his strength and leadership. *This whole time...*

The loss of Hiromi suddenly hit him. All at once, tears welled up in his eyes as he realized the truth: he hadn't felt anything about her death before, but it wasn't because she had no connection with him... it was

exactly the opposite.

In truth, he felt nothing because he had stubbornly refused her gift of friendship, love and sacrifice. He had lost nothing... because he had accepted nothing.

And now, the ones whom he had summarily rejected despite all of their attempts to let him in, to allow him to be a part of them, were now just seconds away from a plasma-induced death that he had not the power to stop.

Just seconds after he had realized the truth about them... that they were as much his friends as they were Kiwi's, and would have sacrificed themselves as readily for him as they would for her... they would all be taken away.

The only one who refused to acknowledge his presence or purpose here... was himself. And all this, in the name of that comfortably choking blanket of solitude...

He jumped out into the hallway and breathed burst after burst of acid into the machine's body, and hope burned brightly within him as he saw the liquid slowly eat into the metal.

After a few rounds of the spray, though, his heart just as quickly fell. His throat closed up from the fiery burning of the constant rush of acid in his throat, and he soon found himself unable to conjure any more of the devouring substance. He couldn't breathe acid anymore, much less breathe normally at all...

The Cosmo-Bot marched forward towards him, undaunted, as Janus slipped behind the corner and out of sight once more. Plasma rocked into the wall next to him, as if the robot were taunting him with what it would do to his friends. Janus punched the stone wall next to him in frustration and anger, so hard that his knuckles split open and spilled his acidic blood on the ground. The blood ate into the stone, and created little holes that dug even deeper in a short time.

As the Cosmo-Bot slowly walked down the hallway to finish them all off, Janus looked with sudden realization at the blood digging into the stone below him; he knew then what he had to do.

Kiwi whimpered and writhed in pain as the plasma ate at her body, and heard the arrival of the Cosmo-Bot just as clearly as Janus did. Something made her open her tightly shut eyes and look up, where she saw the Dracon's face smiling with a warmth she had not seen on his face before.

He took off Vi's antenna device from behind his ear and laid it upon the ground. "I'll show you that I'm really your friend, Kiwi," he croaked from his ruined throat, then he walked around the corner to face the Cosmo-Bot. It blasted blue plasma into his chest, and burned his flak jacket into smoldering pieces on the floor.

Janus grunted in pain as tears streamed down his cheek. "I'll make amends for what I couldn't do before," he grunted back as another wave of plasma rocked his body and sent excruciating waves of pain throughout him. "Please, don't forget me," he hissed in pain, "and don't forget that you're my friend, ever..."

Kiwi flew up and looked down the hallway after him with extreme effort. "Janus?" she called after him, before another jolt of pain rocked her body. She made it to the corner of the hallway before she collapsed.

The Cosmo-Bot blasted at his body again and again, sending acidic blood splashing against the stone walls and floor, and melting them in mere seconds. With pained effort, Janus grabbed the Cosmo-Bot's cannon arm and placed it next to his stomach, straight at the spot where his acid sac lay.

With its inhuman strength, Janus knew that if he hadn't pressed its gun into a sure kill shot, the machine would have easily batted him away and finished him off from a distance. Standing just before it with his body exposed to the plasma gun, however, the Cosmo-Bot was only too happy to comply with Janus' supposed desire to die.

The Cosmo-Bot gripped Janus' neck with its mechanical arm and held him in place as its plasma cannon charged once more. However, with a strength that even surprised himself, Janus pushed into the Cosmo-Bot and tipped it over onto its back, with his neck still clutched in its great metal fingers, and his body suspended above it.

Whatever happens after this... I die a Dracon, Janus thought, just before the cannon exploded into his stomach.

Kiwi's eyes went wide as the burst of plasma pierced Janus' belly and exploded out his back, ripping into the ceiling above them. She screamed long and loud, in a voice pleading and desparate despite her wounds: *"No!"*

Before her eyes, her friend's body exploded in a mass of acidic red blood that splattered, splashed and hissed all over the hallway, the machine below him, and his own body. She ducked back around the corner as the blood sprayed against the wall in front of her and furiously ate into the stones next to her.

When there was nothing but hissing left in the hallway beside her, Kiwi frantically fell out onto the stone to see what had transpired.

The Cosmo-Bot and scraps of Janus' equipment and flesh sat in a foot deep pit of devoured stone, that was growing deeper by the second, in a veritable lake of blood... drowning, hissing and melting as the putrid smell of rust and death filled the area around her.

***

Tearn awoke to the sobs and wailing of the small Faerie, just around the corner and down the hall. The wall in front of him had been eaten into by something, several somethings, small and potently strong. He was alive, and healed, and wasn't surprised to see some of his curative potions missing from his robes. He looked around and saw nobody until he stood and turned the corner.

Shss and Lucciana were hunched over the sobbing Faerie, who was on the edge of a deep pit filled with twisted metal and pieces of flak jacket. They had their hands on her back in comfort, but no words were exchanged.

Tearn broke the silence. "What happened?" he asked. He looked around, to the small alcoves to the left and right of the gate, and saw no sign of who he was looking for. He met Shss' eyes and asked, deadly serious, "Where's Janus?"

She pointed into the pit of wreckage. "There," she said simply. Kiwi cried even louder and removed any doubt as to the Fighter's sincerity.

He began to breathe heavily and angrily. *It... that can't be,* he thought to himself. "He was alive when that thing..." he started. Anger washed over him as hotly as the day his family died.

Without thinking, he looked into the Tomb of the Astral Dominae for something that would give him the power to kill every last machine on this floor in the Dracon's memory. He had to draw closer to be sure, but his suspicions were confirmed when he was at the gate: the Tomb was empty.

"It's not here," he said, with no malice in his voice. "Someone..." *Beat us to it...* he finished in his mind.

Lucciana nodded grimly. "We couldn't find anything in there, no matter how hard we looked..." she said.

Shss bit her lip. "Hiromi and Janus are..." she started.

Fire suddenly built up in Tearn, and he unconsciously charged a Nuclear Blast spell in his paws, and threw it into the Tomb. "Goddammit!" he screamed and exploded the orb in the Tomb, rocking the entire island with its forceful explosion. "We came so far!!"

He fired another Nuclear Blast into the Tomb, flames licking the floors and ceiling of the large chamber and sending rock ships and dust flying out towards them.

But when the smoke cleared, Kiwi was still crying, Shss and Lucciana were still sitting there, helpless, and Janus was still dead. He slumped to the wall behind him. He was powerless after all...

"Wait," Shss said, then stood up and looked into the Tomb. Everyone perked up at the single word, following her eyes into the Tomb where the rest could see only debris. Shss bound over the pit and entered, and pushed aside fallen stones and boulders where she spotted the odd obtrusion just seconds ago.

The vision from the Dane Tower, of the black stand and absorbing black gloom that comprised the Astral Dominae, came back to her. As if in a dream, she cleared the rubble in the floor and unearthed the very same object, exactly as she remembered it, save the dirt and dust that covered this one.

She wiped the top of it with her dirty arm and smudged it even more before Lucciana, Tearn and Kiwi joined her. Lucciana, who was practically naked from the holes the plasma had burned in her robe, knelt unashamedly next to her friend. Tearing off a loose sleeve from her tattered and dirty robe, she wiped the surface of the Astral Dominae clean until the familiar blackness that absorbed everything around it returned to their sight.

"Beautiful..." Lucciana commented. "It's like it's taking in everything around it... the room, us, even my own words..."

Kiwi knelt next to it. "Let's not waste any more time," she told the Elf. Lucciana nodded, and gestured for her to proceed.

The Faerie stared intently at the Astral Dominae. "Please return Janus and Hiromi to life!" she beseeched the globe... but there was no response. Kiwi choked, but tried again. "Please return Janus the Dracon of Llylgamyn, and Hiromi the Hobbit of Llylgamyn, back to life!"

But again, the Astral Dominae was silent. "They died just recently, just a few days and a few hours ago!" she exclaimed. "Both on this planet! Please, I'm begging you, bring them back!"

While the globe continued to stare at her silently, Tearn stopped Kiwi's pleading with a snap of two of his digits. "The girl..." he said.

The three girls looked at him with puzzled eyes, and he waved his paw at them all. "No, not you guys," he said. "The dark-haired one... from the Forbidden Zone."

Kiwi's face lit up and she nodded emphatically. "She'd know what to do!" she exclaimed, and blasted back around the corner where Janus had dropped Vi's device. *Hang on guys,* she thought as she retrieved the antenna. *I'll bring you back, so just hold on...*

She pressed the button on the device. "Hello? Hello?! Vi, come quick! We found the Astral Dominae!" she called into it. The four looked around them, waiting for something to happen, but the Tomb was deadly silent.

Kiwi was about to press the button again, when a white light flooded the room in front of them. Within seconds, the familiar figure of Vi Domina appeared before them, in her usual and very revealing outfit. "Hey guys!" she called out cheerfully. "What's up?"

Shss picked up the darkened globe and held it to Vi, who looked at it with amazed wonder as it lit up at her touch. "You found it..." she said softly as glowing images of small points of light, possibly stars or entire galaxies, floated across the globe.

Vi slowly lifted her eyepatch to reveal the pupilless, veiny eye that swirled with bright colors, and stared into the globe at the message it contained. The deformity was uncharacteristically ugly for the beautiful

girl, but all eyes were now on the Astral Dominae.

"Life... energy and matter, the bridge between them... that is Life...!" she shouted. "This is... no wonder the Savant wanted it so badly! With this, you would have power over the boundless energy and malleable matter that makes Life possible! With this... you could make a superhuman! The perfect being! A god!!"

"I'm sorry Vi, but... I really don't care about that," Kiwi interrupted. "Can we use this to bring our friends back?"

Vi looked up briefly to see the other three. "Oh... where's the handsome one?" she asked, but their faces told her everything she needed to hear. She sighed, then nodded. "Of course you can bring the dead back to life with this!" she said cheerfully.

With a great smile on her face, Kiwi whooped and hugged Shss tightly. "But you do have the ring, right?" Vi asked.

All at once, the Faerie stopped her celebration, and her face fell. It was in Janus' pocket when he... he forgot to...

"You need the locket to open the Tomb..." Vi explained, "...though I can see by the little brouhaha you cooked up in here that it wasn't *that* needed..." She cleared her throat, hating to be the bearer of bad news. "But the ring is needed to activate the power of the Astral Dominae itself. Anything less is like reading the brochure."

Kiwi worked her mouth as she looked at Tearn in helplessness. He looked back, as unsure of what to do as she, when another flash of white light suddenly enveloped the room.

"Bringing pain upon yourselves, doing as you please..." the unmistakeable voice of the Dark Savant boomed out to them. Shss, Lucciana and Vi readied their weapons as Tearn charged an Iceball spell. Kiwi sat silently with her eyes on the twinkling, fading light of the globe.

When he appeared, he pushed a button on his gloved right hand, and Vi suddenly spasmed, as if being electrocuted by an unseen T'Rang staff. She slumped to the floor as the Savant pressed a second button, and they were suddenly surrounded on all sides by his most powerful machine guards, the Savant Kui'Sa-Ka.

"I offer you safety, happiness and health, and time and again, you spit in my face," his voice proclaimed. ***"Is it not enough to ask that you trust your god... and to not bring this trauma upon yourselves? I cannot tolerate this disobedience any longer."***

With a wave of his hand, the silent, red-draped guards of his highest ranking machines glided forward with their glowing red Pain Stick spears slicing out.

At once, Tearn waved his paw and pierced two of their bodies with a jagged spear of ice, and the two machines were impaled together into the wall behind them.

Shss dodged the thrust of a Pain Stick and lept onto the Kui'Sa-Ka's brown face, then wrapped her arms around its head and pulled the machine backwards. She fell to the ground and kicked its body into the air, where Lucciana thrust her bo into its chest, then jumped up and slammed it down into the ground.

The Dark Savant stood silently with his arms folded, and watched as his guardsmen were easily destroyed. Kiwi rose up slowly and stared angrily into his red eyes shining from his domed helmet. "It's all your fault..." she said calmly, her hands balling into fists.

She saw the barest hint of movement from his eyes to hers, but his body remained tall and prone. She flew up as her friends battled the machines around her, and he gave the barest hint of acknowledgement with a slight turn of his body.

It was your friends' choice to oppose me, and they reap exactly what they deserve for defying their god, the Dark Savant rumbled to her. ***I offered them peace, freedom, happ...***

Kiwi exploded into his body, punching into his armored torso so fast that her tiny hands split into dozens of mirror images of themselves. The Dark Savant unfolded his arms and swiped at her with his arm, but she dropped low and ripped straight through his plated kneecap with a single flutter.

Emerging from his leg amidst a shower of metal and black oil, Kiwi kicked and punched under his red cape and up his back with screams and cries of pure rage. The Dark Savant wheeled around and grasped at her, but with every turn of his body, she was there rotating with him, her fists and feet cracking and breaking the armor on his back piece by piece.

He spun one last time with amazing speed, whipping the Faerie with his cloak and blasting her body with his electric Chroma Glove. Kiwi spun backwards, past a Savant machine that Shss had impaled on her Psi Rod and rammed into the ground.

After a quick turn and a beat of her wings, Kiwi flew low to the ground and blasted back into his chest, pushing his body into the wall behind him. She renewed her punches and kicks up and down his chest plate, and dodged every attempt he made to slap her away.

With every successive punch and kick, her flurry of blows slowed more and more... but at the same time, each strike was clearly becoming more damaging than the last, until she struck him with open palms several seconds apart that nonetheless caved his body in in several places.

Each blow took longer to strike as she built up more and more qi into her fists, and ruptured more of the Savant's mechanical body, until his chestpiece finally splintered into a shower of shrapnel, and his exposed innards were laid bare to her.

Kiwi grabbed and ripped out wires, yelling a bone-chilling battle cry as she tore at his insides. The Dark Savant slumped forward, and she uppercut the dome around his head where it met his metallic body, and sent his body up and into the ceiling.

The dome cracked as she reared back and blasted his exposed chest, reared back and blasted him, over and over and with such quickness and ferocity that gravity had not the strength, nor the time, to take effect and pull the Savant to the ground.

Chips of rocks splintered out of the ceiling where he struck over and over, and Shss, Lucciana and Tearn looked up from the last of the defeated machines to see and hear the screaming fury of the enraged Faerie.

Finally, though, the Dark Savant got a lucky swat in on Kiwi and he dropped to the ground, blasting all of them into the wall with a wave of his glove. He clutched his hand, as if around an invisible object, and stepped forward... and the four felt their bodies being crushed against the dark stone.

"You do not understand how much I love you all to do this..." the Dark Savant said calmly, and his fingers clutched dangerously close together. Tearn, Lucciana and Shss cried out as the breath left their lungs. Kiwi stared at him with unyielding fury.

An explosion and a blast of sparks suddenly appeared from within the Dark Savant's exposed chest. The sparks travelled in a line across his chest and, before their eyes, sliced his body in half. The very top of his chest and his domed head fell backwards as his legs kicked and stumbled forward, and his entire body exploded in a brilliant flash of light.

When it dimmed, they were all on the cold stone, struggling to breathe. Kiwi immediately flew towards the spot where he had disappeared.

"Come back here, you son of a bitch!!" she swore in a piercing shriek, not caring what had cut him in half. "You coward! You goddamned coward!!" she screamed to the ceiling above her. "I'll kill you! I swear to

God, I'll rip out your beating heart with my bare hands and feed it to you, you bastard!"

As her unabated fury continued, her body grew increasingly purple, and then red. The kind and energetic Kiwi disappeared before everyone's eyes, replaced in seconds by the vengeance-seeking being in front of them.

She flew to the Astral Dominae and stood atop its darkened surface, shouting into the sky. "I'll make this thing work... I swear!" she shouted. "And when I do, I'll rip you and your ship to pieces! I'll kill you, your machines, your allies, your friends, your family, everyone who's ever even smiled when they saw you!"

The Faerie blasted furiously towards the ceiling, when Tearn's furry paw caught her leg. *"No!"* he shouted. She turned with rage on him to see his concerned and tear-stained face, desparately holding onto her and keeping her from flying away. He pulled her down to him and into a tight embrace. "Don't... don't give in to those thoughts..." he told her.

"It was always him!" Kiwi shouted as her heartbeat increased to unbearable levels. "He started this whole thing... it's because of him that..."

Tearn squeezed the words from her. "Stop! Just... stop, please, kid..." he pleaded.

He looked into her eyes. "You don't know where this thinking will take you... I do," he told her. Kiwi's breathing slowed and her skin color grew less livid as she listened. "It will burn you up inside... nothing will be left. Please, I'm begging you, don't let vengeance become your life..."

Kiwi shook her head violently. "But... Hiromi... Janus! They're... what am I supposed to do about this?!" she screamed.

Tearn hugged her close again and dropped to his knees, burying his head next to hers as his tears slid down his robe and onto her body. "I don't know..." he admitted. He sniffed, and said, "But we'll find out together. Don't let their deaths be all that drive you in life..."

From in front of the two, a surprising figure stepped forth, a person whose very existence here on Guardia turned Lucciana's world on its ear: Rebecca... and she was almost unrecognizable.

She now wore a dark blue duster than covered her chest and loins and dropped in a cloth tail behind her. She was barefoot, and her skin was pure white, instead of the green it was before.

On the other hand, her black hair was the same shoulder-length it had been on Llylgamyn, and she still wore the prominent diamond ring on her left ring finger, the Bane King's last reminder of their love together. Her wings were also no different... she flapped them slowly and glide-walked gracefully in front of Lucciana, shaking off metallic gears and wires from her hands as she approached.

"Do you recognize me, my love?" she asked in a silky, but concerned, voice. "When the Cosmic Forge was returned, I took the form of the girl I was before the pen changed me..."

Lucciana's consciousness dropped away, and her body moved of its own accord to embrace her. "I could feel you here, even from Llylgamyn, no matter the distance between us... something happened, didn't it?" Rebecca asked from the Elf's arms.

She watched herself stroke the winged girl's hair from outside herself. "The Mook brought me here," Rebecca explained. "When they said they were going to research the Astral Dominae, I knew it was my chance to see you. I came here with a few others, but I won't leave with them." She breathed deeply, enjoying her lover's embrace after such a long time of being by herself. "I still have a promise to keep..."

Her hip beeped, and Rebecca's face grew pained. "All these months I have been without you... and now I must go again," she said sadly, then moved in closely.

She kissed the Elf deeply and without a mind to Shss, who watched the meeting with confused eyes. The

kiss lasted for a long, warm time, and Lucciana felt herself push back into the Demon Child without asking her body to do so, touching the girl's fangs with her own lips.

Finally, Rebecca broke it off and put a finger to the Elf's lips. "I'll look out for my brother, as you asked me to," she whispered. The air around her body began to shimmer white, and she ran her warm hand down Lucciana's cheek one final time. "We're going to Dominus," she said, "to kill the Cosmic Lords, as you planned. A new order will be put in place over the stars... and we will reign together as King and Queen."

The white light began to pierce her from within. "I will always love you, no matter where you are," she whispered. "And I will always be there to protect you, somehow. Just call out, and I will come..."

And with that, there was a flash, and Rebecca was gone.

Vi stirred and sat up, knowing she had missed a lot since she blacked out. *So he bugged me after all, the snake...* she thought. "Everyone all right? Where's the Savant?" she asked. In the end, the confused look on the dark one's face, the dazed one in the Elf's, and the other two holding one another tightly and in tears answered the first question. A quick scan of the room, and the sight of the torn wires and bolts on the ground, answered the second.

She looked deep into the globe once more, sitting next to the cat-man and Faerie. After a time, she chuckled softly. "What's so damn funny?" Tearn growled at her as he held Kiwi.

Vi looked up with a smile on her face, and pointed into the globe. "Calm down, fuzzball," she chided him. "We won't need Guardia's ring to get your friends back after all! Now that we have the globe... and with the Savant no longer around to blast us out of orbit... we can go straight to Dominus and get another!"

Under her finger, a swirling galaxy blew up into a collection of thousands of stars, then a scant dozen, all the way to a single, bright yellow sun surrounded by several planets. The globe zoomed farther into the planet and the large sea and cities dotted about it, then winked into blackness.

"What is it?" Shss asked.

Vi pointed towards the globe. "That was Dominus... the birthplace of the Astral Dominae," she explained. "Phoonzang's homeworld... and if you like, the place we'll need to go to bring your friends back!"

Kiwi sniffed as her heart beat faster. "Really?" she asked the eyepatched girl.

She nodded emphatically. "Really, really!" she replied. "Phoonzang built the stupid thing, and one of his temples there has tons of those rings lying around!" She winked. "I should know... I grew up there."

Shss tapped Lucciana across the face to shake her from her trance. Together, they headed over to a more energetic Kiwi and Tearn, and made a semicircle around their exciteable interstellar guide. "Only problem is, we need a ship..." Vi said. "With the Savant gone, I should be able to sneak aboard the Dedaelis and snag us a shuttlecraft, but..."

Before she could continue, Tearn interrupted her. "Got a ship," he told her.

"Yeah?" Vi asked him, not sure if the technologically backwards creature knew she meant a spaceship, but he nodded in the affirmative. "Yep, in the City of Sky," he explained. "It's a bit beat up, but I think it might have belonged to ol' 'Zang himself."

The eye-patched girl snapped her fingers happily. "Xama-tama!" she exclaimed. "That's perfect! And probably much more roomy than one of those cramped transport junk heaps..." She stood and placed her finger over her wrist. "Let me go back to the Black Ship and get some things, and I'll be with you as soon as you signal me. I'd take you all with me, but my transponder only has power enough for one," she grinned sheepishly.

She nodded at the Astral Dominae. "Keep the globe safe," she said. "Even though only a few people can

work the troublesome little doodad, it could still be dangerous in the wrong hands. Got it?"

After a chorus of nods, she spoke one last time. "Good! Then I'll see you guys in a day or so, and we'll be on our way to bringing your friends back, all right?" she cheerily proclaimed, then pressed the button on her wrist. "Can't wait to see home...!" her voice echoed around them, then she, too, disappeared in a flash of light.

***

The ship was lonely without all six of them aboard it together. Sailing southward for the City of Sky, the four nonetheless sat together for the first time since they had first met one another, exchanging stories of their adventures on Llylgamyn, and memories of their two treasured friends.

"...So naturally, and with good cause, Janus comes out with guns blazing, and nearly blows my head off with those damn things," Tearn remembered, then laughed out loud. "Then this little bugger," he said as he patted Kiwi on the back, "beat us both down without a second thought..."

Kiwi tickled his paw with her wings. "Well, frankly, you deserved it!" she teased him. "And don't think I won't do it again, either!" Tearn laughed even harder as Shss and Lucciana joined them.

Shss shook her head. "Hiromi run to war to help everyone," she said.

"You should have seen it," Lucciana told Tearn and Kiwi. "Girl's barely three feet tall, and she runs straight into the middle of the civil war between the Gorn. You know, those big burly green guys."

Kiwi nodded as Tearn listened intently. "She heal both sides," Shss remembered. "She save many lives."

"And then, of course, there was that pillow in her dress..." Lucciana remembered, and Tearn laughed. "What was that, anyway?" "Padding?" Kiwi offered.

Everyone laughed. "She *was* complaining about being targeted all the time..." Lucciana added.

The boat sailed on, and the mountains and fog beneath it came into view. Kiwi looked up into the sky with a smile. "I'll get you guys back. I promise," she said.

Shss gently rubbed the globe in her arms as Tearn held his fist in the middle of the group, as he did with Janus and the others just days ago. The girls returned his gesture, and they all touched their hands and paw together.

"*We* do it," Shss added, while Lucciana looked at the cloudless sky. "I have a debt to pay back to that girl... and even if I didn't, I'd still be with you," she said.

Tearn nodded slowly. "Nobody stands in our way," he stated.

***

As she floated over the small airstrip that housed Phoonzang's ship, Kiwi let Vi's device fall to the ground in shock. *There is no possible way...* she thought. And yet, when the tingling white light disappeared, there he was, holding a bruised and bloody Vi Domina by her neck in the grip of his large and powerful glove.

"Foolish, stupid children," the Dark Savant said sternly. ***"Did you think I could be defeated so easily, when I am on the brink of obtaining power unimagineable?***

"I have watched you from the very beginning, letting this descendant of Phoonzang," he continued as he roughly shook her prone body, ***"fall into your hands. I knew she would not deliver me the secrets of the Astral Dominae of her own free will, so I let you all believe in your sacred duty to protect the globe.***

"In truth... you have done exactly as I planned for you to do. You have recovered and delivered the globe to me, and have given me the power needed to overthrow the apathetic Cosmic 'Lords.'"

Kiwi saw an opening and launched forward with a speed she had never even approached before. The Dark Savant, unflinching, backhanded the Faerie, and she tumbled through the air and into the wall beside him.

"Kid!" Tearn yelled while he charged a spell. At that instant, he knew that this being was the true Dark Savant... the other had not even come close to this one's speed and power.

The Savant raised Vi's body before him, and she gurgled painfully in her unconsciousness. The Felpurr immediately dispelled the magic from his body, and waved a paw towards Kiwi, bringing her over to him and nursing her with a clear healing potion.

"I am not without mercy," the Dark Savant said as he returned Vi to a more comfortable position on the pavement. ***"You have served my purposes, and I feel that our goals may not be too different. Learn to accept me as your god, and the favor I have always promised to bestow shall be yours. The globe... for the girl."***

Lucciana looked at him angrily. "Why don't you just take it, bubblehead?" she demanded.

The Dark Savant, unmoving, replied, ***"I wish to see if you have learned to obey,"*** he answered. ***"Did the loss of your friend and your many hardships yet prove that fighting your destiny is bitter and pointless?"***

Shss looked at Tearn and Lucciana, until all eyes settled on Kiwi. Having lost the most of any of them, it was truly her decision to make.

Kiwi, with Tearn's words in her mind and barely keeping her anger restrained, fluttered next to the Astral Dominae in Shss' hands. She nodded and took the globe from the Fighter, then turned to face the Savant. With a single motion, she painfully hurled the black globe at their tormentor, and felt their chances of bringing Hiromi and Janus back slip away with every inch it travelled towards the bio-mechanical terror.

The Dark Savant dropped Vi to the ground, but Kiwi shot beneath her and caught the limp girl before she hit the pavement. As she looked worriedly at their wounded ally, the Dark Savant knelt over the Faerie and leaned in to speak.

"Good girl," he said, as a father would to his child. ***"Obedience results in life, health, and happiness... disobedience in death. When you understand that I truly know what is best for you, you will cease to harbor these feelings of ill will towards me. Perhaps, someday, you may even thank me."***

The Dark Savant and the Astral Dominae then disappeared in a flash, as did Kiwi's hope of ever seeing her friends again.

The party assembled in the ship of Phoonzang, placing Vi gently upon the ship's floor. With a start, Shss noticed the trickle of blood emerging from the girl's eyepatch, and slowly lifted it to reveal the gaping hole where once her genetic deformity had been. The Savant had truly gotten all that he had come for.

They looked after Vi until she finally awoke. The very first thing she did was look around dizzily for Kiwi and say, "I'm sorry."

The Faerie shook her head. "It's not your fault," she replied.

The eye-patched girl sat up as if her broken bones and bleeding body had no effect upon her. "He got it, huh?" she asked. They all nodded, and she sighed heavily. "Help me up... we're going after him," she stated firmly.

Shss and Lucciana picked the girl up and helped her over to the control console of Phoonzang's ship, which lit up at her touch. "Strap in," she ordered. "Because the next time we're off this ship, we'll be on Dominus... and the Dark Savant won't be long after."

She looked back at the others as they sat and buckled into their seats, and the ship shook and roared as it powered to life. "What's your name, little one?" she asked.

"Kiwi," the Faerie replied from inside Tearn's robe, and Vi nodded. "Kiwi..." she repeated, "I promise you that I will not rest until we find the Astral Dominae, bring your friends back and give the Dark Savant a thorough beatdown."

The ship lifted up slowly, then pointed towards the sky above. Kiwi nodded firmly, and Vi returned her single-eyed gaze to the blue above the planet. "Here we come, you arrogant dome-head," she said, as the ship rocketed into the sky, and cloudy blue gave way to starry black. *I don't know how we'll stop you, but we will,* she thought. *You will never Ascend.*

Epilogue

Total War

Rodan Lewarx, Master Tracker of the IUF, kicked at the blank machine in the Forbidden Zone. Ever since the Dark Savant's ship left orbit around Guardia, every one of his machines had powered down. From the computers to the Guards, nothing was working... and all the data had been apparently purged.

That wasn't all. Recon reported that not only had the Mook arrived on Guardia, but that two ships were chasing the Dark Savant as they spoke. One was the ship of Bela, their informant from the stars, with an unknown passenger. The other was an unidentified craft bearing five occupants, whose identities was still a mystery.

The Umpani would be pushing out of orbit within the hour, once they had finished going over everything the Savant had left behind... and on the other side of the Sea of Sorrows, the T'Rang were in an uproar. Rodan smiled as he remembered the gleeful report that the burly Sergeant had given him. "Someone killed the T'Rang Queen," he said, with a contagious smile and cheer.

It was no wonder that the handful of resistance fighters in the jungles and mountains around Ukpyr were able to join up in New City to await pickup. With the T'Rang Empire crushed as it was, the bugs had no hope of mounting a successful assault against the most experienced the IUF had to offer.

"All right, to hell with this nonsense," he called out to the handful of survivors in the Forbidden Zone, and the others around the city over his radio. "There's nothing left here. Call the Horatha and tell them we need to dust off, now."

A jittery Private stepped up to him. "Mister Lewarx?" he asked.

On any other day, Rodan might have yelled at or punished the Umpani for his unsoldierly demeanor, had he not known what the greenhorn had been through. "Yes? Lay it on me, son," Rodan replied.

"Are we going to be better armed for our next mission?" he asked in a wavering voice. "Ukpyr... won't happen again, right?"

Rodan looked around him, then leaned in close. "Now, I'm not supposed to tell you just how many men we have lined up for the next one," he started, "but I will tell you this...

"The IUF will not get caught with its pants down again," he assured the frightened soldier. "Our next campaign is going to be a thousand times bigger, tougher and better equipped than the expeditionary mistake on this backwater planet. You better believe that we are not only going to come out on top the next time..." He paused and snorted. "But we're going to crush every last bug that stands against us."

The Private looked reassured at Rodan's confidence. The Master Tracker clapped the young man's shoulder, then led him outside to meet the others.

Umpani, the best and the brightest that had survived the carnage at Ukpyr, met Rodan with a guttural cheer. Nonetheless, Rodan shook his head and shouted out at them, "Hey! Quit standing around and get your asses on the Horatha! We've got a mission to carry out!"

One by one, the Umpani began to wink out in flashes of white light and roars of approval, when Rodan heard the faintest of metallic tinks to his right. He looked at the ground just in time to see the T'Rang explosive roll just feet short of his company of Umpani Grenadiers, Commandos and the elite S.S.U.F. officers.

"Bomb!" a Commando screamed out and kicked at the device with his massive foot, sending it flying into the air where it exploded. The many remaining Umpani turned their guns in every direction to T'Rang who were bursting out of every alleyway, with fiery spells and shocking Stun Rods their welcoming call.

The resulting scene was a chaos of roaring Musket fire, hooks being driven into tough Umpani hide, swords slicing through hissing T'Rang bodies and explosions that set New City ablaze once more. The city's denizens streamed forth to watch the battle with weapons in hand, opting to stay back until one side had decimated the other, allowing for an easy win over the wounded victor.

Rodan himself led the charge through the slithering T'Rang ranks, beheading and impaling T'Rang by the dozen as he personally took point. The T'Rang line faltered... until an impossibly tall and sinister warrior emerged from their midst.

Even if he hadn't been abnormally large for a T'Rang... or dressed in his unique black robes, or staring evilly at Rodan... wearing his father's Golden Medallion gave away Shritis' identity with a suddenness that made Rodan's vision turn red.

"YOU!" he screamed, pointing his Rhinablade at the T'Rang, who simply let his minions swarm forth as he watched with a sickening grin.

Rodan sliced through the T'Rang Assassin's ranks and cut them in half one by one, but was not able to push any more towards Shritis than the spot where he started; there were just too many of the T'Rang's lackies to deal with.

A white light enveloped Shritis. "Failed again, have we, Rodan?" he taunted with a loud cackle. He fingered the medallion around his neck. "Well then... I ssupposse you'll have to wait a while to get this back..."

"SHRITIS!" Rodan screamed at the top of his lungs, as the entire T'Rang troop disappeared in a sudden flash of light.

"Sir!" an Umpani Armsman ran up to Rodan with his hand on his ear. "The T'Rang Master Ship is pulling out of orbit and heading after the Savant!"

Rodan stomped the ground, strong enough to crack the stone beneath him. "Damn!" he swore, then turned to his subordinate. "Get our men on the Horatha, NOW!" he boomed. "I want us on the tail of those bugs ASAP, and I want every last one of their filthy heads on my wall!!"

"Yes, sir!" the Umpani saluted, and gave the order to dust off. In a flash of light, he and Rodan's men were transported to the battleship in orbit around the planet. Before he was likewise taken, Rodan swore that he would personally see to it that every last T'Rang would be tortured, dismembered and hung in his father's name.