Octopath Traveler; Echoes-Part 1
by thegreatheghehog

Summary

The continent of Osterra once faced a calamity in the form of Galdera. However, 8 heroes fought this ancient beast and sent him back into the pit the gods sealed him in. Every 2000 years since, he attempted to rise again, only for humanity to find a way to beat him back in. In 5 years, his fourth rising will occur, in the age of science. However, the High Emperor of the Balacruf Empire, Fionne Balacruf, has his mind on other things, like the Northern Invasion. Will humanity survive Galdera's rising, or will Humanity go quietly into the night?

Notes

Welcome to my Octopath Traveler fanfiction! I should get this out of the way, this storyline assumes 100% completion of the first game. 100% side quests, one of every item, all jobs, post-game, lv.99, all skills and support skills, etc. However, it does not take place in the first game, but 9995 years later.

Yes, the games culture is sort of modernized. However, some things do never change. You'll see what I mean. I do hope you readers enjoy it, and like the last fanfic, this will be written to completion. I won't make the mistake of promising a consistent schedule, life loves messing with me when I do. What I can promise is a completion of this fic.

Also, you don't have to have read my previous fanfiction to read this one. This one is being written as it's own story. With that said, I hope you enjoy this tale, a tale of the past and future entwined.
A man entered a classroom in the most prestigious school in Noblecourt, of the Nobles Kingdom of the Balacruf Empire, one that dominated much of the Osterra Continent. The school was called ‘Albright Academy, For Gifted Mind’s’. He was a history teacher there. The class quieted down as he entered. The school was for all ages, and this class was in it’s mid-teens, with one or two older kids who attempted to skip the class last year, but got caught in their schemes. Being nobility didn’t stop them from being made to take the class. The teacher cleared his throat and said “Hello, students. I am Ray Penbrook. I will be your teacher for the course of this class. We are here to learn the general history of the Balacruf Empire, our glorious home. From its founding to the current day” he said. He moved to write the word ‘Balacruf’ on the chalkboard, then asked “Tell me class, who knows the reason behind the name Balacruf?”. He scanned the room, seeing a forest of raised hands. He pointed to a girl in the back, a shy-looking blonde. “You young lady. You seem to know” he said. The girl nodded, the hands descending and quite a few students looking at the answer giver, sizing her up. She said “Yes sir, the name Balacruf comes from the founding family, the Balacruf family, whom have also held power as High Emperor of the Empire and the Council of Kings”.

Ray nodded and asked “Good, good. Now can you tell me why the Balacrufs have held power and respect so long, and how they accomplished making their empire?”. She thought for a moment, then shook her head. “Anyone else?” he questioned. No hands. He nodded and said “It’s because of the founding member. The empire technically started far before the official timeline would have you believe, and it predates the covenant of kings by at least 180 years”. He moved and wrote something on the chalkboard. ‘History of the Empire, Volume 5 by Walter Jackson’ wrote Ray. “This book” he said “Contains much of what will be discussed in this class”. He moved to the desk in the center of the front of the room and continued “However, I can explain some right now. The balacruf empire started when its true founding member, Liona Cruz, became the leader of the Arena Kingdom of the woodlands, and conscripted arena fighters and aspiring gladiators into the nations military. However, rather than wage war, Liona preferred diplomacy. The military was there as a deterrent”.

“The story is a long one, so to make it short Liona hatched a plan with the Scholar Queen Glinda Winsong and amassed the military of the realm to the gate of finis to fight Galdera. As the dead god came through the gate, they used the dragonstones to close and lock the gate, leaving the god sundered. She fought bravely on the frontlines and died there fighting for her people. They succeeded in killing the god and Kruz Balacruf, her son, worked to form the Council of Kings, and he and his kin worked on what has become the Covenant of Kings, the 10 laws we all follow as well as local laws of each kingdom. It was Mars Balacruf who formalized the covenant however, Kruz’s great grandson” Ray explained. One student raised their hand, which he pointed to and questioned “Yes, what is your question?”. The student asked “How did the kingdoms come about though? I’ve
heard talk already of the founding of our empire, but never the kingdoms that make them up”.

Ray smiled gently and said “A good question. The book I mentioned, but a volume back, mentions this. Essentially, each region had villages. Before the formation of kingdoms, they were more like separate tribes that cooperated. In each instance however, the common theme is some noble family or tribal leader decides to try to unify the tribes”. Another student asked a question, blurting it out really “Sir! I have to know, but what happened to Leona Balacruf? It’s not mentioned in the volume you mentioned!” Ray hesitated but responded after careful consideration “That’s because of what she died to. Due to the 4th covenant, writing about Galdera is tricky, especially during the time that was written, when merely mentioning him in text was enough for the King’s Courts to name a man guilty. Thankfully, we live in a more sophisticated time and I can mention it now. Liona after making her alliances and discovering the truth about the gate of finis moved to fight galdera. She was on the front lines and first to die. Anymore questions before we begin?” he questioned. He looked at one raised hand and asked “Yes young man?”.

“Sir. I’ve always wondered. What is the King’s Court?” the student asked. A polished lad, whom clearly came from nobility. Ray responded quickly “It’s the court that acts on behalf of the Council of Kings. They can’t see every case and so they instituted the system in 1500 DE. By the way, for any that don’t know, DE stands for ‘During Empire’, while BE stands for ‘Before Empire’. It’s an important distinction to make, as there are important dates during both times. Like Liona’s rise to power in Victor’s Hollow, in 55 BE. Now then. That’s enough questions class. Time for the lesson to begin”. With that, Ray turned, retrieving a book from his desk showing it. The textbook for that semester. From there he began lessons on the beginnings of the empire, recounting the legend known as ‘Octopath’.

Elsewhere, a man sat in his study. He lived in the once theatre, now his castle. He was the current High Emperor, Fionne Balacruf. He read the report before him. He sighed deeply. A knight he named personally and had been overseeing. The man was skilled with a sword and was a terror to fight even in the modern day of guns and explosives. He was also clever, being able to fight people who relied on guns. However, the report before him detailed the man going mad and killing the captain of Northreach. True, they decided not to press charges ultimately and chalk it up to him having a mental breakdown, but neither conclusion was favorable. Still, he wouldn’t intervene. As much as he saw promise, Fionne knew ultimately he could not baby his kingdom. Especially when Galdera was set to rise again in a mere 5 years. “What will you try this time, old enemy of ours? How will you attempt to break your bonds?” Fionne mused. After allowing his thoughts to wander for a few seconds, it was brought to focus as his landline phone rang. He turned and brought the receiver to his ear, saying “Yes, this is High Emperor Fionne”.

“Sir, the war council is about to meet. They’ve asked your presence. Can you make it, milord?” the man on the other end asked. Fionne absently nodded as he answered “Of course. I take the northern invasion seriously. What room?”. “The second floor conference room, down the hall from your bedchambers” the voice said. He merely nodded and replied “Alright. Thank you, I’ll be right out”. Fionne then stood and left. While it meant having to go to the other side of the castle, that was fine. It was how he laid it out when he remodeled it. The fortress had seen several renovations since it’s
inception. From a great fortress, to a theatre, to a coliseum, and then fortress again. He made it his
seat of power, while the king of the highlands settled in Stonegard. As for the war council, those
were made up of the highest military officials from each nation. He represented the unified might so
he was the ninth and the high seat of it. He didn’t need to attend, but he made a point to. He took
defending the empire and its people very seriously.

Which is why the northern invasion took more of his time than Galdera. He already had plans for
him and worked on them. Spreading knowledge of Galdera and how his power grew, and more
importantly of how Galdera used lies and half-truths to tempt, would keep worship of him down, as
most did so to fulfill a desire for the power over life and death. Knowing it would lead to nothing
more than betrayal would lead many of these types to abandon their pursuit. However, the
northerners were more dangerous. Humans like them, but all savage and ferocious, not stopping their
fights until they either passed out and died or just died. They had yet to capture a live one, so they
didn’t even know the reason for the invasion. No demands had been made so not even surrender was
an option. The problem, to Fionne, was a most vexing one.
Chapter 1-The Scholar

Chapter Summary

Here, I introduce the mysterious scholar to our story. what secrets does she hold?

Chapter 1

A Waking Question

She wandered the streets. Cold concrete and it was raining. She was dressed in a fine shirt and dress, complete with leather pauldrons and a cape. She wore her hair in a bun and had white silk gloves on and very old-style leather boots. She had a large leather satchel slung around her shoulder and hung at her side on the opposite side of her body. She clutched the strap for dear life, yet the expression on her face was completely blank. She shuffled as though she had just learned to walk. This caught a nearby officers attention, rushing to catch the woman as she fell. “Ma’am! Are you alright!?” the officer asked, very alarmed by the woman’s peculiar behavior. She was silent as her blank, distant gaze looked at him, focusing only for a second before becoming completely unfocused. The officer sighed deeply, feeling foolish for being concerned. He realized she must be on some kind of drug. She helped the woman to her feet and asked “Excuse me ma’am, but I am obligated to ask, have you been taking any kind of drugs tonight?”. The woman stared and then asked, he thought “Ti les?”.

This was unusual to him, and he pulled out a small guide. It was a guide to common Northerner words. While they could not get the northerners they captured to speak, there had been several accounts of language being spoken on the battlefield, especially in the presence of northerner mages. As such, they managed to pick up key words often spoken by them. As a result, they could use what they heard and with some deductive reasoning figure out what someone was either saying or at least understand someone is speaking the North Language. However, as he studied the manual he realized this woman wasn’t speaking northerner language like he thought she might be. He talked into his hand radio and said “Command, I’ve got an extremely odd situation. We have a girl here speaking a foreign language that is not northerner language. What do I do?”. A response came immediately when the voice said “Detain her. Could be a foreign agent from the unexplored south”. He nodded and looked at her.

“Pai kati strava?” the girl questioned. The officer stared and said “I’m sorry ma’am, you may not understand me, but I have to detain you. I can’t risk the safety of the citizens”. He then produced a pair of handcuffs. The woman’s reaction told him she at least knew what that was. However, it was delayed, which told him she was probably slow-minded or an actor realizing they were about to be arrest. She turned and ran for it. He was about to pursue, taking a step forward, but suddenly the woman spoke a language he didn’t known and said “Tsurara!”. Instantly, a spike of solid ice rose up
from the ground, breaking it and nearly skewering the officer. “Halt! You’re under arrest!” he shouted. He reached for his gun but the girl had already turned down an alleyway. Sighing, he put the radio to his mouth and said “All officers, be alert! A foreign agent wielding wild ice magic has escaped into the city! She is to be considered armed and dangerous!”.

The search was massive. 10,000 officers combing the city and all but placing it in lockdown. Riverford was a large city too, known for the massive population of at least 1 million lives in it. The police force numbered 100,000, with half of it being logistics officers and authority members. 40,000 were busy locking down the exits to the city, while the rest did the actual search. It took hours, but they picked up the girl’s trail. It led into the heart of downtown. There, they found her, passed out amid a bunch of trash. Blood was on the ground and she had a nasty wound in her back. An officer approached with a bottle of purple liquid, and tore the cloth away from the wound, and poured. It was a tincture made from crushed healing grapes and seeds free of impurities. The wound closed.

While such tinctures were common and effective at stabilizing fresh victims, they could not fully heal bad wounds, like this one. “Officer Dotey reporting in. The girl has been found. Dagger wound to the back. Bring in the doctors” he reported. The other officers began searching.

As they expected, they found another body. This one however was still alive. “Help me, please!” the cloaked figure pleaded “A woman nearby attacked me, demanding my things! She used vile ice magic! Please, stop her!” The officers looked at each other, then one pulled out their handcuffs while the other pulled their pistol, a mauser c96 and pointed it at the man. “You’re under arrest. We’ll sort you out with her and figure out what happened later” the officer said. The man yelled “But i’m the victim dammit! Help me!” The officer merely straightened his aim and the man grew quiet.

After a quick search, they found a bloody dagger. “Officer Riles reporting, we found a suspect in the stabbing of the female mage. Bloody dagger and everything. Bring the jailvan over” the officer holding the pistol reported as the man was led out of the alley system. Dotey carried the woman as they all left. The woman was put in an ambulance while the assaulter was put in the back of an armored van specialized in transporting armed criminals. After that, the woman was taken to a hospital, treated, and then cuffed to a bed to recover.

She awoke to pain in her back. She struggled and whined, not understanding why, until she remembered. She had been fleeing a strangely clothed individual who spoke to himself like a mad man who wanted to restrain her, when she suddenly was stabbed in the back. However, even after calming down, realizing that movement would worsen her pain, she was panicked. She saw the same weird metallic stockades the man from before held. She let out a shrill scream, struggling more and more. Then a white-clothed woman entered. She looked like a woman of the cloth. Then she spoke that weird language the man from before spoke. She replied “I don’t know what you’re saying! Just release me!”. The woman looked a bit afraid, but after a moment produced some cheap-looking paper and wrote on it, then turned it. She could read the writing, it was asking if she could understand the language. “nai, boro na diavaso ti grapti glossa sas, profanos” she said. The nurse looked confused, but then asked through writing what language she spoke. Realizing that the nurse wouldn’t understand her spoken language and that it explained why the strange-clothed man didn’t, nor she understand him, she moved to gesture to her head to the restraints.

The nurse removed one restraint and offered a pen, making sure it was already ready. She was a
foreigner and their knowledge on them was severely lacking. For all she knew the woman didn’t even know what a pencil was, nevermind a hospital. Luckily, the woman was observant and wrote the language she used. The Nurse nearly fainted upon reading it. ‘Greek’ was written. The language written was one used in ancient times. She wrote to the lady to wait there, then left. She told the doctor her discovery. “What?” the doctor questioned “Are you sure?”. The nurse nodded and responded “Yes sir. She can understand our writing after all and responded with an answer that’s legible”. The doctor nodded and said “Thankfully, we have an on-call greek translator. I’ll place the call now” and walked to a nearby landline phone. Within half an hour, a man in normal clothes with a broken purple sash slung over his shoulder embroidered with golden stars on them. He had a golden tooth that glittered as he smiled and said “Excuse me ma’am. Is doctor Marco in? I heard he had a difficult patient”. The nurse nodded and led him to the doctor.

Marco turned his attention to the approaching nurse. He held the new patients file. Sure enough, the words spoken that had been recorded were greek. He was by no means an expert but he had done enough studying to recognize the language. He smiled and nodded at the approaching man and nurse “Thank you nurse valerie. Take a break. You deserve it” he said. She nodded and left, leaving him and the translator to talk. “Well. What’s this I hear about someone only speaking the ancient language, greek?” the man said. Marco nodded and said “Yeah. The recording is solid. It’s the actual greek language”. The man laughed and said “Well take me! I’ve never held a conversation in greek, and i’m eager to try!”. Marco nodded and led the man to the woman. “Here you go. We need medical information and quite frankly if she’s a danger” Marco told the translator, standing by. While a doctor, he did have some hand-to-hand skill. The man nodded and said “Don’t worry. I’ll be able to tell her life story by tomorrow”. With that, he turned his attention to the nervous girl in the bed.

The man conversed with the woman for a whole hour in pure greek. Suddenly, the man spoke and said “Well, we’re in luck. The woman seems to have figured out our language just fine. A real scholar this one”. Marco stopped and stared, then asked “Is she from our kingdom?”. The man nodded and said “More or less. It’s an ancient version of our language, but through extrapolations she was able to update to ours. However, she has no memory. That said, she is willing to lead investigators to where she awoke, now that she’s confirmed she’s actually safe”. Marco nodded, listening then said “Alright but first, she has to recover. She’s no good to anyone injured as she was. That said I do need to make a report”. With that he left. He finally had news for the police and it was good news. No northerners, especially this far south and no new foreigners from the south. Just a girl with amnesia that somehow could only speak greek, an ancient language that also had a knack for ice magic. He wrote it up and faxed it over to the police department. After half an hour he got a fax back that read ‘Doctor Marco, thank you for the information. We are pleased to hear the results. We leave her in your care. Once she is capable of being discharged, inform us. We plan to monitor her until it is confirmed she holds no threat to the Balacruf Empire’. He made sure to inform the nurse to spread the word. After all, the girls recovery would be a while. The dagger wound was bad, whomever did it went down to the hilt. They tried a killshot and only failed because they were forced to retreat and the police healed her in time. She had a rough year of recovery ahead, but he was confident they could do it.

On the other hand, the girl sat there, thinking. She had woken up in a strange metal tube, and only after crying and wailing for hours did ice erupt around her, breaking it open. From there she navigated around cramped corridors and strange ornaments and lights and levers and buttons. When
she reached the outside through extremely strange doors, she was in a cramped alleyway that led to a road filled with strangely-dressed people. After that, she fled one man that wanted to restrain her with thin, metal stockades. She ran down the alleyways, somehow knowing they’d give her an escape. However, she was attacked from behind and in her pain from the stabbing passed out. Now she was here, and after all she’d heard and seen, and after talking to the man that could speak her language, even if broken, she had found herself capable of speaking the strange peoples language. ‘English’ they called it, while they called her speech ‘Greek’, She wondered what this meant, and even more she wondered who she was. A nurse came in and questioned her “Excuse me miss, we need a name for the report. What is your name or what shall we put down?”. She looked at the nurse as they were called and thought before answering “My name is Nema Cias, ma’am. Please thanks”.

Profile of the Amnesiac Vagrant

Name: Nema Cias

Age: 21?

Sex: Female

Height: 5 ft. 9 in.

Weight: 145 lbs.

Hair & Eyes: Blonde and Green

Clothing Preference: Ancient Scholar Clothes

Birthplace: Unknown
Skills: Unknown

Elemental Affinity: Fire, Thunder, Ice. Also seems to react to wind, dark, and light, though to lesser effect.
Chapter 2-The Merchant

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2

Merchant, Spy, What’s the Difference?

She was pissed. She sat in jail, being charged with crimes she didn’t do. Worse, she was certain that their evidence was drummed up and falsified. Her name was Lapena Sozella and she was a sales representative for a company working out of Stonegard in the highlands. ‘Stonegard Publishing Incorporated’ it was called, it was a famous publisher and book binding company that had published many famous novels and non-fiction that even scholars used, as it was extremely profitable for both parties. They had caught wind of an author in Grandport and sent her to find it. She had a knack for sniffing out potential clients and valuables and for getting good deals. She had nearly closed in on the potential client when suddenly officers approached her. “Excuse me, ma’am we’d like to ask you a few questions” the first officer asked. He wore the traditional outfit; kevlar helmet, kevlar vest over a black uniform, plastic pauldrons with 9 stars printed on the outside of them, black leather belt with a holster for their mauser c96 pistols, leather combat boots, and normal denim jeans. She turned, sized them up and then responded “Of course officer, but can we make this quick? I’m in a hurry”. The officers looked none to pleased with that, but spoke to her quickly out of respect, saying “Simply put we’ve heard reports of a woman in the area caught speaking with a northerner warrior hiding out in the grandport sewers, and you happen to match her description. Tell me, where were you last night at 7pm?”. She gave them a look of abject confusion and replied “My hotel room. I was resting after a somewhat stressful car ride here. A kingfisher decided my car must be a crab he has to try and eat”.The officers looked at each other and said “The Carlton Hotel, ma’am?”. She nodded and said, realizing what was up “Wait, you don’t think i’m the spy do you?”. The officers, looking at each other again, finally said “Ma’am, you’re going to need to come down to the station. We have… many more questions and I think you’d prefer a more private setting”. From there, she was questioned and when her answers didn’t appease them, the officers placed her under arrest as a spy. It infuriated her that this was happening, and right on the heels of a potential client.

Then her cell door opened and she looked up. An officer stood there, clipping the jailhouse keys to his belt who then said “You’re free to go. Your boss called and all but swore to humiliate us if we tried to pursue this with anything less than concrete evidence, which we don’t have thanks to that call”. She huffed and stood, walking out with a retort “Of course you don’t. I told you I worked for Stonegard Publishing Incorporated and that their lawyers would see me out by day’s end. Not my fault you didn’t believe me”. The officer sighed and said “Yeah well you were our last good lead. Guy you’re looking for? Henry C. Jack? Northerner warrior in disguise. In fact, thinkin ’bout it, prolly wanted to kidnap you and hold you for ransom”. She stopped and looked at him, then said “Did you inform my boss of this?”. The officer nodded and said “Yeah. In fact, gots a message for ya. He said to call when you were released”. She nodded and said “Thank you. I will”. With that, she was released in full.
She was not happy though. Her lead turned out to be a spy for the northerners. She returned to her hotel room and after ordering a white lobster dinner she placed a call to her supervisor. “Hello? Which agent am I speaking to?” her supervisor questioned, in a slightly annoyed voice. “Lapena Sozella, badge number C98T2009. I was searching for the rumoured author in Grandport” she replied. There was silence for several minutes before her supervisor spoke saying “Wait, you actually went!? Galderra’s bells Lapena, I told you it was a rumor!”. Lapena sighed and said “Well… not exactly ma’am”. A moment of silence before the voice demanded “Wait, what? Are you saying you found him?”. She shook her head and said “No. I heard about him. The officers tagged him as a northerner. After they arrested me”. Her supervisor groaned and then went silent for several minutes before she was put on hold. Right then, her food arrive, which she accepted. As she ate, her supervisor ended the held call and said “Hey! You still there!?”. “Yes” she responded. “Good, then I have your assignment. Meet the northerner, get his permission to pen and publish a book, get the details, then come back” her supervisor said. Lapena was silent for several minutes. It took her supervisor asking “Hey! You still there!?” before she responded. “Yes, yes. I am. Are you sure? They’re dangerous folk” she said. “Yeah, boss man gave the order himself” her supervisor said “If it helps, I said we should just send you to northreach for that, but he said a spy is much better”. Lapena sighed and said “Alright. I’ll do it. I value my job. I just need to prepare for the encounter”. Her supervisor sighed and said “Alright. I’ll forward you your reward, out of pocket. Pull out if it gets hairy and you’ll just owe me, got it?”. Lapena chuckled and said “Don’t worry Mary. I’m your best sales rep. I can talk my way out of a dragon’s stomach”. With that, she hung up and finished her dinner, then went to bed.

The next morning, she went downstairs to dine in the restaurant and then proceeded to leave in her rental car. She first went to the markets. She wanted to buy some protective gear before she went looking for this man. The flea market was her best bet. After all, it sold things of unknown value for dirt cheap, with only the occasional swindler trying to overprice something. Rarely did such people have real treasure. She parked the car outside the market district and walked in, navigating the swarms of people doing their daily shopping and eventually walked onto the place she was looking for; Market Plaza. Grandport’s flea market was different from others, in that legitimate merchants would sell any number of things. From experimental technology, to ancient spells. Sometimes, even the odd book could be found. However, today she had an eye for 3 things; A protective material she could wear under her shirt, a gun, and a magical focus so she could use magic. She wasn’t a practiced mage, but she knew the basics on using wind magic. She immediately found a plethora of guns being sold.

Most of the ones she saw were outdated models, made in the year 3640 DE. The year was 3940 DE. As such, many of the weapons shown were old. However, one caught her eye. “What’s this gun?” she asked the merchant attending the stall. The Merchant followed her finger and replied “Ah. This. Experimental civilian class gun. Called the Kronsberg M19. Want it?”. She thought and said “For the right price. What’s your offer?”. “9000 leaves. Take it or leave it” the Merchant replied. Lapena sighed and said “No matter. I’ll just browse elsewhere I guess. May need to do a custom order at this rate” and began walking away. After just a minute, she heard the merchant call out “Wait! 7000!”. Smiling she turned, walked over and said “Only if you include 10 days of ammunition”. Sighing the merchant said “Fine. Deal”. She pulled out her wallet and handed over the bills. They weren’t the actual currency, but were representations. Leaves after all were made from rare minerals and the
various mines around the area never stopped providing, a gift from Bilfegan. She was offered a box of ammunition and the gun, which she accepted. She moved onto the magic section of the flea market.

It wasn’t hard. Magical focuses were a dime a dozen and even specific elements barely phased such a search. However, she wanted one that had style. A wand perhaps. That’s when she found the glove. Wind-elemental focus, very stylish and it even had the perfect gemstone on the back, and quite large; a skystone. Smiling, she moved to the stall and asked “What is this glove?”. The robed man looked at her and responded with a raspy voice “It’s a wind-elemental focus. A new kind too, one that adapts to the wielder and adapts. Sadly it can only bond to one person in the whole world and if attempted to be used by another” the person trailed off before continued “let’s just say they are in for a lot of trouble”. Nodding she considered, then said “10,000 leaves for it”. The man laughed and said “Ma’am, I can’t in good conscience accept so much money. I’ll take a mere 1000”. Smiling, she offered him the leaves, which he accepted. She put it on and said “It fits perfectly. Almost like it was made for me”. The man nodded, counting the leaves “Yes, that’s it working its magic”. He confirmed the payment and said “Right. Good doing business ma’am”. She nodded and said “Likewise, good sir” and left. The man watched her leave.

Finally, she searched the clothing section. She was looking for some sort of protection shirt, like a kevlar shirt or something. At first, she found nothing. Then she saw it. A shirt made of metal links. “What is this?” she asked the vendor. The old, grey-bearded bald man looked and answered “Chain shirt. Mainly used for props but it’s good to catch bladed weapons with not a lot of ‘oomph’ “ He said. She moved it around and liked how it allowed for flexibility still and asked “How much?”. “400 leaves” he answered. She thought and then replied “Sure its not 300 leaves?”. Turning and looking he sighed and said “Right, right. Not my normal work. Yeah, it’s 300”. Smiling, she moved and gave him the leaves and took the chain shirt from the rack. “Thank you sir. Have a nice business day” she said. He nodded, hoping the same. She had all she needed to find the man. She returned to her hotel room for now. After putting the chain shirt on underneath her normal business wear, though she added a holster to her belt to house the gun she now had. Finally, she wore the glove. She didn’t intend to use the gun or magic focus, but it was there as a means of self-defense and deterrence of violence. She had heard the tales after all. How northerners were savages. Attacked on sight and only when trying to be cunning and maliciously devious were they civil. With that, she left the hotel and began to walk. She had an idea of where to start, based on where she was picked up by the police.

Profile of a Determined Merchant

Name: Lapena Sozella
Age: 17

Sex: Female

Height: 5 ft 2 in.

Weight: 122 lbs

Hair and Eyes: Red and Red

Clothing Preference: Business wear.

Birthplace: Flamesgrace

Skills: Haggling, Customer Service, Merchantry, Detailed Analysis, and Persuasion

Elemental Affinity: Wind

Chapter End Notes

Note: made minor fix regarding dates. also made a fix on character profile title.
He stood in the throne room of Everhold. He had been called there by his liege, High Emperor Fionne Balacruf. He stood before the man now, and the other kings. Each on their own thrones, flanking either side of the High Emperor. The high emperor, with his long blonde hair, piercing blue eyes, and grand fabrics sat on his throne and spoke “Sebastian Ciel. A knight of my court with a mind for warfare. I have a mission for you”. He placed a fist over his heart and stood tall, bowing slightly, keeping eye contact with his liege and responded “Yes, your majesty. I aim to serve”. Fionne nodded and said “I have received reports of the northerners making moves to invade. I am sending you to the frontline to survey our defenses on the towns there. Make sure they are up to standards. They may not use technology like we do, but even the ancient tech poses a danger”. Sebastian nodded and said “Of course, your majesty!”. Nodding, Fionne continued “I had my mages set up the teleportation circle to whispermill. Begin there. Do well, my knight!”. Sebastian did a full bow, saying with pride “Yes, your majesty!”. With that, he turned and left. He headed to his chambers.

Yes, his name was Sebastian Ciel. He was a knight in the court of High Emperor Fionne. He had been an officer before, assigned often to chasing particularly dangerous criminals, like would-be bandit kings and beasts that has torn down a town wall. The High Emperor recognized his talents and took him on as a knight for his court. After formal training, he was registered as a knight. He entered his chambers and walked to a nearby mannequin. From it he retrieved his kevlar vest and helmet, then put on the plastic pauldrons as well as combat boots. Then he put on the tabard all knights wore. This one bore nine 4-pointed starts around a single 9-pointed star. He then went to his weapon rack and retrieved his arms, a rapier and pike. The pike was from his time as an officer, when he hunted monsters and fought bandits. He was extremely skilled with it and once felled a Blotted Viper with it. The rapier was a gift from Fionne after his training ended, as an additional sign of his station. He fought with both, as he was skilled in both the Royal Fencing style and the pike he used. He then packed some basic necessities and headed for the mage’s wing of the Everhold fortress.

He entered the teleportation room and marvelled. It was his first time here and he was fascinated. Mage’s worked to inscribe runes into chalk circles, and then threw dust on them while speaking the words of power to open portals in walls, leading to the circles intended destination. While regular civilians could not use it, nobility could for a price. Only knights were permitted free, if limited, use. He approached a mage behind a desk and said “Excuse me, comrade. I believe I’m to head to whispermill”. The mage nodded and checked the logbook, saying “Yes. I have you down. Being a knight and have order from the High Emperor, your passage is free. It’s the 4th portal on the right, portal A4. Radio in with this portable radio when you’re ready to return and from where”. The mage pulled a portable radio system from the desk and put it on the desk for him to take, which he did. He set it up immediately and said “Thank you. I assume it can tune into local police comms too?”. The
mage nodded and said “Indeed. It can also radio the knights wing in case of emergencies, though I doubt it’ll come to it. Those northerners aren’t smart”. He laughed and said “Well I’m off. Have a nice day”. He went towards the portal, the mage only nodding to his well wishes. He stepped through and was met with the smell of fresh bread.

However he saw no baker in the room before him. Simple a group of mages, all lounging around. However, they wore the uniform. A simple hoodless robe with a wizard’s hat, with a single signet ring of the King of their kingdom that they served. In this case, these mages wore purple robes with a purple star-styled wide-brimmed wizard’s hat with a 4-pointed star on a closed book, a symbol of the Scholar’s Kingdom that he stood in. “Excuse me, fine mages. I am Sir Sebastian Ciel, and I serve his majesty High Emperor Fionne. I come to investigate the towns defenses, and I might as well start here. How fare the magical defenses?” he questioned. One mage turned and said “Fine enough, good sir. We have many protective crystals set up and running to project force fields at a moments notice”. The mage gestured to, Fied, turned and said “I have watcher eyes wandering the skies. I’ll get a mental ping if they sees a northerner. Then Bruno there turns on them there force fields”. He nodded and said “Sounds good then. Do the force fields prevent entry?”. Bruno shook his head and said “Only if they’re packing magic. Can’t do nothing about northerners with swords. That’s what the officers are for”. Nodding, Sebastian said “Right. Then that’s my next destination. Where can I find them?”.

It took him but an hour to get there on foot. Whispermill had always been a small, quiet farm town throughout history and even nowadays. Having only a population of 10,000, compared to, say, Riverford who boasted a large 1 million at any given time. However, the civilians here worked hard. With 9000 being farmers, 20 being mages, and the rest officers, the town was well protected. The town wall, that covered the main village, was extremely sturdy. The perimeter wall that protected the crops however was lacking. He ordered that minimum it be reinforced with protective magics and that they attempt to reinforce it with steel frames. Otherwise, the Northerners siege weapons could collapse it easily and then they can control the crops and just wait out the main village. However, he ordered a communication hub be made. He found out they had none and just used the police station for all wireless communications to other villages, which he found unacceptable. Even so, he had to move on. He used some of his pay from last week to rent a police car so he could travel to Northreach. As much as he’d prefer to travel on foot, it’d take him a week, and time was of the essence. So he put aside his distaste of automobiles and drove to Northreach. To make transporting his pike easy, he collapsed it. It wasn’t the traditional pike and was made to shorten if required. He left his rapier in the seat next to him, and the pike in the backseat. With that, he left Whispermill, heading for Northreach. “I hope the defenses there are better. It’s such a vital strategic point that should it fall, the entire northern front is in jeopardy” he mused to himself as he left Whispermill proper. With the car, what would be a weeks travel became a simple days journey.

As he drove in, the town was blanketed by snow. No surprise to him since it started to snow halfway through his trip. Thankfully, it was summer, which meant a blizzard, even in the frostlands, was unlikely. Further, when the roads between Northreach and Whispermill were renovated for cars, they made them wide and had sturdy guard rails in place in the event of a crash. Of course people being stranded out on the road in a blizzard was a terrifying thought to those who ruled both the Scholar’s Kingdom and the Kingdom of the Sacred Flame. He drove through Northreach, eventually arriving
at the police station. He parked in front and got out. Making sure to clip his rapier to his belt. Otherwise, he felt he wouldn’t need his pike. He approached the police station. Inside, he got the reaction he expected. The officers stopped, looked at him, then gave him the traditional salute. The station’s condition also reflected his expectations. Additional gear to give officers warmth during their patrols, as well as rations. “At ease” he said. The officers ended their salute and one walked over to him, asking “Might I ask why you are here sir knight?”. “I am here on orders of the High Emperor himself” he said “He fears an imminent attack and sent me to evaluate the defenses. I am Sir Sebastian Ciel, of his majesty’s court”. The officer nodded and said “Ah. Well. I’d be happy to help sir, but the Military Base in town might help”. He nodded and said “I’ll go there after I’ve evaluated your patrols”. With that, the officer led him into the police chief’s room, whom went over patrols with him.

As he expected, the patrols were good. Northreach for several thousand years after the ancient heroes was a den of thieves, until the rise of the Balacruf Empire. After the second rising of Galdera, Kruz moved the seat to Northreach, with no objections from the reigning Pontiff at the time. After that, Northreach became a proper city of the Empire, rivaling Riverford and Stonegard as proper villages, and then eventually cities. He told the chief to continue the good work, then headed for the military base. It stood at the northern edge of town, with a cathedral marking the southwestern-most tip. The ruins within served as the castle for Kruz during his reign, which he had taken from the thieves holed up there. Now, it merely was part of the emergency plans during an emergency. Transportation of goods and supplies during such a time, as renovations improved the structural integrity of the ruins. As he arrived at the gates near the northernmost hotel, the guards saluted and said “Sir Ciel, the commander is waiting to speak to you, sir”. He nodded and said “Lead the way”. Lead the way he did, with confidence and alertness. He observed their behavior as they walked. It was more than acceptable. Further, the base itself was of impeccable upkeep, which he valued far more than construction quality. Anyone could make a splendid or vastly functional base, but upkeep showed the true mark of a commander.

As he had hoped, the commander of the base was similarly impressive. Wearing iron pauldrons, a kevlar vest on top of a chain shirt but below a tempered steel chestplate with steel bracers and kevlar gloves along with kevlar pants and boots. Steel plates stood at the front of her legs for added protection. “Ah! Sir Sebastian Ciel, up and coming knight chosen and added to High Emperor Fionne’s court! How might I help you today?” the commander asked. She turned and was a sight too. She had bright pink hair and eyes and had full, red lips. A kevlar helmet sat on her desk at the end of the room, showing she was ready to act at any time. “If you could give me a tour, commander. I’ve been sent to ensure that defense on the frontlines is up to standards. His majesty fears an imminent attack” he responded. She nodded and said “Of course. Follow me”. With that, she moved around the desk and made her way out. Despite the heavy armor she wore, she moved as though none of it was there or impeding her movements. He followed, not showing how impressed he was.

The base he was shown was above standards. What made it impressive was the size. Double the normal base size, it was well equipped and sizeable, and for good reason. The commander reasoned that in the event of an emergency, they could evacuate the citizens into the base, burn the city down, then hold down the fort so to speak until reinforcements arrived. He now stood on the northern wall,
the wall furthest towards the northerners land. “That’s it, sir knight. The north. A couple hundred miles is the official, recorded, border. The border that divides the savage land that would pillage ours. You think this base can stop them?” the commander asked. Sebastian thought for a moment, before answering “I do think this base is certainly serviceable. I don’t think it could single-handedly stop an army, but under a good commander? Well, I’d say they have a decade’s long campaign before conquering it, not considering reinforcements. I believe the defenses need no critique, as anything I could say is no doubt on your mind”. The commander nodded, saying “Yes sir knight. The ruins are our weak point. Unexplored and holding more secrets than an ancient mages tome. However, not much we alone can do. We run weekly contests for explorers to explore and offer 1000 leaves to whomever clears the most out, in addition to letting them keep 90% of any loot they find”. Smiling, he turned to the frozen wastes to the north and said “Then I can with confidence report this base as more than adequate to the High Emperor”.

“Good” the commander said, turning to leave, then suddenly stopping. He heard it too. A northerner war horn. Something Fionne drilled into him during training. “Commander!” he cried out, but stopped as the commander had ran to the edge of the wall facing the base and yelled out “All men, man your battle stations! The northerners are coming!”. No panic was in her voice, but there was a sense of urgency. Instantly, the base came alive and men and woman ran around preparing for an invasion. However, it was not random, everyone was moving with skill and precision, avoiding others and reaching their destination, doing their task, then moving on. “Sir Knight! Would you mind lending your sword to our cause!?”, she asked, looking at him. His only response was pulling out his rapier and saying “On his majesty’s name, of course I will! Just let me get my pike. I fight better with it”. With a nod from the commander, he ran. Not from the battle, but to his rented car to retrieve his pike. After all, it was integral to his fighting style. If he lacked it, he would be fighting at half efficiency.

Profile of an Honorable Knight

Name: Sebastian Cell
Age: 40

Sex: Male

Height: 6 ft. 5 in.

Weight: 210 lbs

Hairs & Eyes: Black with Greys & Grey

Clothing Preference: Kevlar

Birthplace: Riverford

Skills: Fencing, Jousting, and Sleight of Hand.

Elemental Affinity: None
He sighed. He was sitting in his dressing room, listening to his manager drone on. He checked his watch and said “I’ve been waiting an hour. At this rate, we’ll need to reapply my makeup”. The manager sighed and replied “I know sir. I was saying the directors missing”. He groaned and questioned “Is he even still paying me? If not, I might as well leave, i’m wasting my time as it is”. The manager said “I’ll make some calls sir and if he doesn’t show up in an hour, we can leave. How does that work?” The actor nodded, saying “Fine. I can agree to that”. With that, the manager left. He sighed and looked out the window. It was less about the money and more about wasting his talent. He stopped thinking however. He was parked in the VIP parking lot yet he saw what appeared to be a bartender walking through it, looking through cars. He frowned. He was most displeased, as he thought better of the company that sought to hire him. He stood to leave his dressing room trailer, but then stopped short as he saw something than chilled him to the bone. He saw a tall, bleach-skinned man step out of one of the vehicles.

He watched the two converse. He had to, it was his civic duty. The bleach-skinned one was a northerner. The one talking to him didn’t appear to be, which meant he was a traitor. He pulled out his cellphone and made sure to record what he saw. Even from this distance, it was apparent that the 9 foot tall northerner towered over the 6 foot male bartender. After a few more minutes of discussion, the northerner reached into the car and gave the bartender something wrapped in some kind of fur sack, while the bartender handed the northerner something that glinted. He took a short, deep, shivering breathe. He was nervous, as he was spying on a meeting between a potential traitor and a northerner. If the northerner discovered him, he’d have little chance of surviving. They were known for their incredible strength and singular focus on objectives, and he was sure if focused on him, the northerner wouldn’t stop pursuing him for anything, short of death. He bent below the windowline, deciding to take the safe route. Thankfully, he doubted they’d have any reason to suspect him since they never turned his direction, and showed no sign of having seen him otherwise. Then, he heard a voice. His managers. His blood chilled instantly.

“Sir! Step away from him, he’s dangerous!” his manager shouted. He felt his heart stop as he rose and looked. His manager had pulled a gun out and aimed it. It was called a Weebly Bull Dog. One of only two guns on the civilian market. The military heavily regulated the circulation of firearms. The bull dog wasn’t terribly dangerous to well-armored individuals or monsters, or the undead, but it was fairly effective at punching down unarmed foes. That had been the common perception, until the Northerners stormed a frontier village and wiped it out, then promptly died. As such, he knew that his manager was dead now that he drew his weapon. He quickly moved his portable radio system as the roar of the northerner went off. He turned it on, plugging in the large, bulky headphones and said “Come in! Police!? Anyone! I have a situation outside my dressing trailer! A northerner is rampaging! He’s about to kill my manager! Please, inform the police!” He made sure to sound
panicked, to make sure they believed him. He also retrieved his handheld camcorder. It wasn’t very good quality, but with a northerner, it wouldn’t matter. He turned it on and pointed it to the window, just as the Northerner charged through the parking lot at his manager, tossing cars aside like they were toys, stomping on what was directly in front of it, crunching cars into pancakes. An occasional explosion would ring out, but the Northerner, true to their reputation, rampaged towards his manager unphased. He watched as shot after shot sunk into the northerner, in some cases going through him, and yet the northerner did not relent.

He was helpless as he watched the northerner, with a single closed fist, the Northerner punched the manager and sent him into a car, embedding him into it. Even if he survived, the internal injuries he was suffering from would kill him in seconds. “He just killed a man! The northerner killed my manager! Please! Anyone! Help!” he cried. He glanced out the window. He was thankful that his trailer was soundproof. He kept his eyes on the bartender, not wanting to lose him. The bartender was rummaging through the northerner’s car now, as the northerner approached him. Finally, he got a response. “Whomever is giving a distress call, I am Officer Lorner. What is the matter?” the officer asked. He responded “I am at the Destiny Film Studio’s parking lot in Everhold, and I just watched a Northerner kill my manager! I got footage! I know it is because of his 9 foot height and bleached skin!”. The officer gasped and immediately yelled “We have a Code Red! Northerner in Everhold, deploy all forces there immediately! Thank you sir, please, stay safe, we’re deploying all forces!”. He sighed in relief and said “Thank you officer! I will, but please hurry! I’m in my trailer!”. The officer paused and said “Noted. Stay safe”. The transmission cut then, likely to prevent him from making more noise. He muted the mic and removed the headphones. The Bartender and Northerner were talking now. The northerner held his manager in his clutches. He then tossed the body aside and looked at the trailer. He cursed and ducked out of view as quick as he could. ‘Curse my luck’ he thought ‘I pray to the gods he didn’t see me’.

He discovered quickly that the northerner had. That or he found a new victim. The northerners battle roar could be heard for miles, followed by the tossing of cars. He peeked and practically fainted. The Northerner was charging for him. He acted quickly though, recalling all the movies he had starred in. He ran to the front of the trailer and went into the driver’s cabin, which was empty. The keys were still in the ignition, which he turned on. After a minute of getting familiar with the controls, he took off. At least, he would have, but it wasn’t working very well suddenly. He barely moved an inch. As he checked the nearby mirror he had his answer as to why. A large meaty hand had crunched inward on the back and lifted it off the ground. Not very far, only 4 inches, but enough to make him panic. The northerner was displaying his insane strength by preventing the front-wheel drive automobile built to be a home-on-the-road from moving despite using the engine to its full power. It even lifted more, now having the back 5-inches off the ground. He then decided to abandon the trailer, not seeing it as worth more than his life. He threw open the door and made a run for the studio itself. He just had to survive until the military arrived, which was likely deployed.

Luckily for him, it took the northerner a minute to realize he was gone. Specifically, when it tossed the trailer aside, not feeling resistance anymore, then tearing open the drivers side of the front and seeing it empty. Unfortunately, it realized where he went because a calm, but cruel-sounding voice called out “He’s heading for the studio proper! After him!”. It was the bartender. He had climbed on top of the car. Growling, the northerner began his charge. It’d take him only a few minutes to reach him. Thankfully, he reached the studio doors and was able to use his key to get inside. However, he knew it’d barely slow the northerner down while he had been severely slowed down. However, it would provide plenty of hiding places, while the Northerner would rampage and collapse the place. He ran inside and headed for the opposite side. The moment he was out of the line of sight of the
northerner, he quickly ducked into a room, and then hid in the closet. He was in a dressing room. He could hear the roar of the northerner as he tore through the hallway outside the room, and then moved past. He was glad. That meant his ploy worked. When the northerner stopped roaring, he left and checked outside the hallway. No sign of the northerner, beyond the fact the hallway was ready to collapse. He quickly left and headed the way he came from. He intended to run completely, and let the military deal with the northerner.

However, the click of a gun stopped him, as well as the feeling of cold steel pressed against his head. “End of the line, Selim” the voice of the bartender said. He turned slowly, and glanced at him. “Why?” he asked. The bartender chuckled and said “Simple” he said “Money. Something you’re quite familiar with”. He laughed and said “Please. I don’t lend my talents to just any producer with a stack of cash”. The bartender glared and replied “Ha. that’s a load. I wasn’t talking about that. I was speaking of the loads of bribes you give regularly to keep police off the trail of your crimes”. His eyes widened and he glared now. “How… do you know about that?” he asked. The bartender laughed, backing up a bit, making sure the gun was still pointed at him. “Simple. I’m your old manager. The one that retired to spend time with his family” the man replied “The one you sent to pay the bribes. Sent me into a mental breakdown, that resulted in my family splitting off from me. Now, I have my revenge, for ruining my life so you can live your squalorish one”. Before Selim could respond, the gun rang out, causing him to cry out in pain and fall back. The last thing he saw was the ex-manager of his and the northerner standing over him. “Is he dead?” the large northerner grunted, revealing icy blue teeth, and showing eyes with light blue scalera. “Not yet, but he will. Now get out of here. I can’t be connected to you” the man said. Then, he passed out.

Profile of a Doomed Dancer

Name: Selim Deon

Age: 22

Gender: Male

Height: 5 ft. 3 in.
Weight: 118 lbs

Hair & Eye: Platinum and Grey

Clothing Preference: Designer Brand Clothes

Birthplace: Noblecourt

Skills: Persuasion, Acting, Dancing, and Singing.

Elemental Affinity: Light
Chapter 5-The Apothecary

Chapter 5

An Apple A Day

She sat in her lab. It wasn’t a massive lab, but it was large. It was made with function rather than form in mind. All the labs were in the west wing, with all the recreational areas in the east wing. The north wing was the administrative functions, and the south wing was for guests. She had set it up like this to help with efficiency in her research. Her team also synthesized rare cures and salves, but in general focused on researching cures to rare diseases or diseases considered impossible to cure. They did manage to create a cure for the long thought incurable disease nicknamed Bloodwort. It was a disease that would chill the patients blood during the day and heat it up during the night. Both would bring extreme discomfort, along with the usual symptoms and problems such issues would cause. The cure boiled down to using compounds from a blotted viper in order to synthesize a chemical that would counteract the disease as it spread through the patient's bloodstream. The only confirmed side effect was reduced stamina for the duration of the chemical purging their body of the disease. However, she hadn’t been the one to discover it. It was her assistant. True, she helped figure out the method of delivery into the patients system and helped the assistant test her product in the months leading up to human trials. However, her assistant discovered the compound in the blotted viper’s venom.

In fact, she had many assistants. At least 100. Some of them interns, some of them fellow but lower ranked fellow scientists. However, she owned the laboratory and was properly licensed by the King’s Councils to run, operate, and profit from the laboratory. Her name was Ristro Abraham. She had been born in Sunshade to a dancer mother and a tavern bouncer. She at first wanted to be a dancer, but when she fell sick and was cured by a traveling doctor, she changed her mind. She decided to become a doctor, though discovered that traveling medicinal practice was forbidden in most parts of the empire, if not nearly being the first law added to the Covenant of Kings, since it was founded in 170 DE. This did not deter her, and she tried her best to get into the practice. Training and study through her early schooling, then practical study for 9 years. Her parents, while they didn’t support her financially very well, were very supportive. They had the belief that one should forge their own fate. One would think to get into such a high-cost profession, and having no outside financial support, one would need to do unsavory things to fund such a venture, however she found a way to do so with her dignity intact. She simply found a doctor who frequented trips to Sunshade and with a little push from her mom got him to agree to train her. One that her mom approved of, of course. She did find such a doctor, a woman doctor no less. One whom had been looking to teach someone to lighten the taxes on her practice. Her asking to be taught and training was a blessing to her. So it was, she traveled Saintsbridge to be tutored in the ways of medicine by the woman doctor and trained in their application.
She put her equipment away for the day and began to get ready to leave. She had worked all day, made progress, and was getting tired. Unlike other labs, she didn’t have her employee’s work around the clock. She did have a night staff, but they were hired specifically for the purpose of treating patients sent to them. Being a medical practice, they did need to perform the function of hospital in the event no others were available, or the patient was critical and they were the closest medical practice. So, they had facilities around their practice for that very purpose and she hired doctors for the purpose of treating patients. She put the keys in her purse, hung up her laboratory scrubs, and locked up her spaces, and checked to make sure the others had as well. She was the last employee to leave aside from the janitor, whom remained behind for last minute day cleaning before the night shift janitor took over. She passed him by on the way out of the guest lobby, nodding and saying “Good evening Robert. Have a nice evening”. He nodded and said “Of course Miss Abraham… one quick thing”. She stopped and turned, asking “Yes?” “Payment. I know you’ve given me a nice, steady income, but I was wondering if I could have a pay increase. My daughters gotten sick and needs treatment for a few months” he asked. She thought about it and replied “Sure. That isn’t a problem. I’ll just notify the needed officials and it should go through before your next paycheck”. He smiled and said “Thanks miss Abraham. ‘Ave a nice night”. She nodded and left.

It was the morning that made things worse. Her door burst open, causing her to sit upright and alert. Before she could react, she found a gun in her face. A Mauser c96, which was the weapon of an officer. “Okay, okay. I'm not resisting” she said. “Good. We have serious questions, lady” he said. She was allowed to dress, though only in the presence of a female officer, and then was sit down in the front room by an officer. A man wearing a brown-rimmed black bowler hat nodded, seating in a chair across from the sofa, which had clearly been searched. He opened a folder he was holding, retrieving some photos from it. He placed them on the table. They were of gruesome-looking monsters. Like zombies from the movies, but disjointed and horrific. Less rotting flesh and more massively warped lifeforms with shapes vaguely resembling humanity and facial features that just barely could be called human. They all were tearing apart some kind of laboratory. “These photos were taken by your CCTV cameras last night. We retrieved them after an incident occurred with the help of your janitor. Your security is very good” the detective said “Which makes me have to wonder how such a monster made it in, in the first place without being noticed, but then managed to breach containment and rampage like it did”. Her eyes widened. “I never permitted such a thing to be in my facility! Why are you saying that it was there?!” she demanded. She didn’t stand, or raise her voice too loudly, aware that too high could cause them to grow violent, but she wanted to make it clear this upset her too. Then a thought occurred, and she asked with a somber voice “Is… is my staff okay?”. The detective looked at a nearby officer and said “Most are. It got two of your interns though, and 4 doctors. Plus your night shift janitor”.

She sighed sadly and said “I see... I didn’t know about this thing. I’ve never seen it before”. He nodded and asked “I see. Then let me ask this. Were you aware of Galdera Worshipping in your practice?”. She shook her head and he produced more photo’s. A candelabra lit with purple flames, a
book with a skull on its cover, and a severed human hand with a skull engraved on the palm. She nearly puked, and did when an officer offered her a bucket. The detective pulled out a small notebook and made a note, then put it away. “I’ve never seen any of this, except the candelabra. However, I’d never seen it lit… Now I know why” she replied “It was Becky’s. Becky Langsworth. A nobleman’s daughter who wanted to be a doctor”. The detective nodded and questioned “One last question. Do you remember signing off on research into this?”. He produced a picture of a bit what appeared to be human flesh, albeit heavily withered, and then a form she had signed a while ago. It was from one of her pupil, Becky Langsworth. She had wanted to research some intact flesh recovered from a ruin in Duskbarrow. “Yes. Becky Langsworth asked if I’d allow her to conduct research. I decided to trust her and signed off on it…” She replied, but her voice trailed off. The detective signed and nodded “I was afraid of that. I’ll spare you the details but that bit of flesh is a piece of Galdera from his second rising, sealed away for the world’s safety. The last remaining piece. It turned her into a monster when she began experimenting”. She nodded, concluding such. “She likely got it from connections to a recently rising cult here in Whispermill. At any rate, you’re innocent as far as I can tell. Your compensation of 10,000 leaves will be mailed by the end of the week. I trust you do not mind us taking her possessions in your practice?” he said, wrapping the interrogation up. She merely nodded. He stood and the officers that had looked tense, relaxed and left with him, apologizing for the ruckus.

She didn’t cry. She hadn’t known Becky very well but was still shocked to learn that she worshipped Galdera. Worst, it happened under her supervision. She had even seen an object of worship and never thought anything about it beyond its peculiar design. However, she needed to be strong. She took a shower, had some breakfast, and after a mental pep talk to herself headed to the practice. As expected, things were not orderly. Not chaos, but not as she left them. Her pupils and staff were running about, trying to fix things, while the police were trying to keep the situation under control. Additionally, there was a pile of burnt possessions nearby. She walked to a police officer and said “Doctor Ristra Abraham reporting sir. I was hoping to inquire about the situation?”. The officer turned and said “Sure. A woman named Becky Langsworth was experimenting with Galdera Flesh and got transformed by it. Rampaged after that. Our guys were nearby and got here fast enough to prevent major casualties. We’re burning her stuff now as Covenant 4 demands. In accordance, we’re also interrogating her family members”. She nodded and said “Thank you. Any leads on other members in my practice? I’m certainly no cultist sympathizer and I rather not let this besmirch my name”. He sighed and said “Yeah. Your second night shift janitor, a pupil by the name of Andrew Vilman, and Doctor Madar Runska. Less confirmed cultists and simply have vanished after the incident and their bodies were not recovered. We highly doubt foul play, as the beast merely killed them and moved on”. She thought and said “Understood. Thank you, officer”. He nodded and went back to work, and she went to work.

She began by first having everyone take the day off. The police would clean up their mess, once they were done. However, she would have to sell the property back to the High Emperor. It had been tainted by Galdera, and with the kindling still 5 years off, the first flame wouldn’t be available. Until then, the stain of the Lord of the Infernal Flame would not be able to be fully burned away and she wasn’t about to take chances and risk neither infection of her staff, patients, or god forbid guests nor
would she suffer a risk of more cultists infiltrating her practice and using it to their own ends. Such events always attracted them. It was likely she’d even have to leave town. After packing her documents, she left and returned home. As she reorganized and looked around for properties to rebuild, and also calling the official who sold her the original property, she had a visitor. She didn’t know whom, as she just heard the doorbell and when she checked, there was only an envelope. She checked the envelope and found it lacking any obvious danger and opened to find a letter. It chilled her to the bone. It made a very simple demand. Deliver a ransom to the village of Stilsnow. 100,000 leaves. It even showed a picture of Andrew Vilman blindfolded, gagged, and tied to a chair. He was also slightly bleeding from the cheek. It said she had a month to deliver the ransom and every day late would incur a cut and 1000 leaves extra charged. She considered informing the police, but then realized that wouldn’t do. Due to the 4th covenant, they likely labeled him a worshipper already, and worse they would likely just kill everyone involved because of it. If she was going to solve this, she was going to have to take matters in her own hands. She decided it was time to go on vacation anyway.

Profile of a Traveling Doctor

Name: Ristro Abraham

Age: 28

Gender: Female

Height: 5 ft. 4 in.

Weight: 127 lbs

Hair & Eye: Blonde and Blue

Clothing Preference: Lab Coats and Flip Flops

Birthplace: Sunshade
Skills: Researching, Questioning, Chemistry, and Medicine

Elemental Affinity: Ice, responds to Light
As time went on, the thief profession got harder and harder. Thieves would either quit altogether once they reached the age of 40, enter the workforce proper as locksmiths, their skills deteriorate, or they sell out their fellow thieves. The Marta Gang basically controlled the continent of osterra for a few thousand years, until the founding of the empire. However, the empire's first move of power was to mobilize their forces and deal with the Marta Gangs. While remnants of that initial move of force lingered for a thousand years after, those remnants eventually broke off, leaving the thief profession in massive disarray. That is, until the concept of a ‘Gentleman Thief’ began to become popular. After that, the thief profession, while small, became viable again. Not as gangs per say, but as simple groups of vigilantes, though even those eventually were stamped out by the empire. Despite all this, the empire never banned the sale or proliferation of pro-gentleman thief material. From their perspective, it was merely a nuisance at worst, and harmless at best. However, nowadays even that is dwindling with the empire taking the matter of internal corruption seriously. However, one thief does exist. One that made a name for himself, calling himself Master Thief Sir Lupone. At first, he seemed harmless enough, hitting robber barons that had managed to avoid the Empires scrutinizing eye which then focused after they were robbed. However, things became a problem when Everholds High Judge, second only to the Supreme Judge Reis and the King’s Council, was robbed and certain crimes came to light. The most egregious was the discovery that High Judge Silus Dormaine was a Galdera Worshipper.

His prestige, power, and wealth allowed him to hire mercenaries as his own private army which would handle matters when such secrets were discovered. However, it was problematic what occurred. The self-proclaimed master thief managed to sneak by them, steal an extremely valuable item, as well as artifacts of Galdera worship that had his fingerprints on them, and then turn it into police anonymously without them realizing the truth, nor the mercenaries noticing until the morning, during which time the police had fully mobilized and gotten authorization from the High Emperor to carry out a purge order. However, the High Emperor had been disturbed that someone could pull something like that off and demanded an investigation. Thus, the matter of Master Thief Sir Lupone became a national security issue. Immediately, they identified a few potential targets. Thus, traps were set and they had to play the waiting game.
It was a cold evening night, on the 4th day of the 5th month of the winter season, nearing the winter solstice, quite a while after the summer solstice announced the beginning of a new year. However, in Marsalim, the nights were not as kind as one might hope. Even though it was amidst a desert, the climate in a desert is not what it appears. It is brutally cold at night in the desert, only holding back during the end of the year, when it nears the summer solstice. As such, had it rained, it would have snowed in the desert that night. However, rain comes rarely to the desert and as such it would not be touched this evening. It did sparkle with showings of ice on the sand and pavement. A man walked down this road, amidst the beautifully sculpted architecture of the noble’s district. At the far end, at the center of town, stood the palace of the king, the man elected to lead the people. That was not his goal though. It was a mere half mile southwest of it. A house belonging to the police chief, Granger Vangence. This man had it on good authority that good chief had been secretly proliferating an underground black market and protecting the slave trade. Something he wouldn’t abide. Further, the man was described as slovenly and slothly when off the clock. Such a man, this man thought, had to leave something detailing his crimes, pointing to them, or proving them lying around. Additionally, while a noble and being paid on the sly, he wasn’t quite rich enough to own a private army, like a certain high judge he robbed and exposed.

Sir Lupone strode through town confidently in his usual attire, which had only briefly been seen once, a few years ago, and when publicly described key details had been made in error. For example, he did not use the color black. It was a deep midnight blue hue his tailcoat was colored and his jeans as well. He wore a sophisticated nobleman’s shirt underneath. He wore sport shoes and a pair of black leather gloves, as well as a mask and top hat. On his back he had a midnight blue cape. The mask he wore was a bit on the tech side, having night vision lenses built into the mask that he could turn on with a push of a button on the side. It was a simple plastic mask with midnight blue paint on it to add to the stealth aspect he was going for. Even amidst the browns, he would hide well from the elevation he was planning to infiltrate from. He was nearing the house, to it was here he elevated. He began by ducking into an alleyway, then using various parkour techniques to scale the wall. It was tight enough that he could do so with relative ease but not an easy feat to do without training. However, this was the easy part. After reaching the rooftops, he stayed low and moved across them. Using his nightvision, he kept an eye out for people looking out windows. Only when they looked away would he vault across a gap, or use a gadget he had. He soon reached the outer perimeter of his target.

He started by setting up his zipline. A harpoon gun with a grappling hook installed instead of a harpoon. After successfully setting it up, he ziplined across into one of the towers that outlined the property. From there he set up a quite climbing setup and went down to a window. Empty, as was most of the property. He quickly picked the lock with a personally updated thieves lockpick and opened the window and swung in, detaching himself. He scanned the room. As he thought, some magical sentries laid in waiting. Luckily, his coat was lined with the wing fibers of a certain kind of moth from the Forest of No Return northwest of victor’s hollow. These fiber’s didn’t make him invisible, but sensing his magic was a fruitless effort while he wore it. It in a sense suppressed it and with his low level it was basically nonexistent, which these particular models relied on sensing,
seeing as everyone had at least a modicum of magic in them. He moved down the tower, ducking into rooms quietly when he heard a patrol from hired security. Unlike mercenaries, security guards were usually unarmed aside from some kind of blunt weapon and short-range stun gun. In some cases, the baton would be custom made to be electrified. However, while they had the legal right to detain intruders, they could not function as police and enforce the Covenant of Kings, nor the individual laws of the kingdom or even local lord, unless such powers gave it to them, and even then only to the extent allowed. For example, a security guard could not murder him even if the King of Marsalim made a law allowing it, as it would conflict with the Covenant. He could however let security guards arrest caught criminals and escort/transfer them to jail.

Soon enough he was at the base of the tower. There were plenty of guards, but also plenty of openings. A lot of the shrubbery was decorative and as such he could use it to hide as he ducked from place to place. Even the guards to the back entrance were easy to deal with. A sleight of hand to make one move away, another distraction to make the other turn their head while he moved in and entered. As his information said, the police chief didn’t bother to screen the guards for quality, nor had he bothered to have anyone lock doors. As such, infiltration was easy. Once inside, he was in the dark. He scanned the room, turning off his lens. It was well lit. Likely, only the master bedroom would be devoid of light. He kept an eye out but saw no sign of traps, which was odd. He did spy CCTV cameras but those were easy to avoid. They had been installed professionally, but they had gaps in their defense. He slipped through those gaps and eventually arrived at the study. He used a tool police used all the time for his own purposes, a VPT, short for Variable Pole Tool. In this instance, he stuck a specifically framed mirror on the end and used it to look under the door. No feet inside. He retracted the pole and took the mirror off, then attached a hook on the end. The pole was designed to attach various tools and implements to help police efforts, from small mirrors to hooks. Right now, he was already plotting his brilliant escape route, which would cause a ruckus. This would allow him extra mobility on the fly.

He entered the study and saw a selection of treasures. A jeweled crown of Kruz Balacruf, an extremely old book that consisted of the tales of any who held it, from Graham Crossford and Tressa Colzione to the reigning Merchant King of the coastlands in 3000 DE. He decided without looking at the rest this would be his treasure. He looked further though. He wanted to see if there was anything he could acquire to prove the misdeeds of Granger. He searched the desk, picking any lock he could and found what he was looking for. A journal detailing transactions made on the sly in exchange for his protection from the police in Marsalim. Being the chief of the region, he was aware of any operation about to go underway. As he read, he realized that his opponent was a bit more clever than he thought. The man apparently had been wise enough to realize multiple failed raids would get eyes on him, so he would arrange for false-positives. Essentially, girls would be rescued and certain people sacrificed so the trade at large would survive. That said, it was restricted, as far as he could tell, to Marsalim and if the chief went down, a domino effect would occur and while it might not vanish completely, whatever was left would be quite similar to the thief trade; an extremely select few still in existence. Smiling underneath his mask, he moved and pocketed the journals and
even collected a few documents and put them in more easily accessible places of the desk. He did have to open the false bottoms to discover them and while he had no doubt that a proper police investigation into the infamous Sir Lupone would be thorough, there were a few that were especially tricky to realize were there; unless you were a thief.

Since he had what he came for, a rare treasure and evidence of wrongdoing, he left the study. Looking left and right, he confirmed he was still okay. He headed down the hall, avoiding the CCTV cameras and heading to the front door. It was unguarded, as he suspected, and left, keeping low and out of sight. As he neared the northwestern tower, he saw an instant path there. He took it, avoiding most of their sights. It was then that things went wrong. Light shone on him from the tops of the walls and the front gate opened. “Damn it” he cursed, and made a break for the tower. A loud voice boomed from outside the compound “Sir Lupone! Surrender yourself! The premises is completely surrounded! You can’t escape!” He growled in annoyance as he went through the door as bullets nearly hit him. “We have orders to shoot to kill if you resist! Don’t make this hard on yourself, kid!” he yelled. He glared out a window every time he passed one. He could hear the officers making their way up the tower. Once he was at the top he had to move fast. He scanned the rooftops, turning on his night vision. As he suspected, there were several filled with police, but one was barren. Likely in hiding. He picked that one. He pulled out a smoke bomb and set it off, putting a handkerchief over his mouth to filter some as he set up his grappling gun. He then proceeded to produce from his bag a second tailcoat, made specifically for this instance. He set it on the normal zipline and set it down. He heard gunfire ring out and that was his cue to jump.

He leapt out the window, and with his VTP he ziplined down the line. The hook ensured he’d stay on as long as he wanted. However, rather than hit the rooftop, he swung and had the VTP detach at the last second and smashed through a window. He then raced through the new nobleman’s house and headed for the another window. Using his skills at parkour and his VTP he reached the next building and from there navigated the noble’s district and led the police on a chase. Soon enough, he reached his goal; The commoner’s district. He headed into the district and began running through it. He navigated directly into the black market and vanished into the midnight crowd. Once he was on the other side, he headed back to the noble district. He looked back as he walked and as he thought the police decided to bust up the black market. Not the only one in the kingdom, nevermind the empire, but it was one of the larger ones and they couldn’t very well ignore it. He smiled, content with the results of the night. He snuck through the district and went into one particularly affluent house. He went into a bedroom and disrobed. He put the outfit into the hidden back panel of his closet and retrieved normal nobleman sleeping attire and went to bed. The next morning, he touched up his features, dressed as the heir to the second highest house in Marsalim should, and then left his room.

He was the heir to the family that managed to sell the police forces of the empire their new standard
issue guns, the Mauser c96. In addition, they had contracts for their factories to produce their armor and vests. Even a new invention, the riot shield. Like a tower shield, but made of tempered damascus steel. He had his breakfast with his parents, talked of his studies into economics and trade, as well as leadership. He then attended his morning classes, then went out and hung out with his equally wealthy friends. After this, and only after this, did he pay a random person on the street outside the police office in the noble district to take and turn in a journal. He of course wore a wig he had stashed along for this journey so he’d be unrecognizable. After this, he returned home and decided to read his journal. As he thought, it fascinated him. All the adventurers described in the journal were incredible. Tressa’s journey to discover her treasure, to the adventures of Leona Balacruf from her perspective. He smiled and decided to pen his own chapter in the book. ‘I am Thiesel Danford, first son and heir to house Danford, producer of the official empire police uniform, the riot shield, and the police forces standard issue gun the Mauser c96. This is my tale, as master thief Sir Lupone the dashing rogue of midnight’ he wrote.

Profile of a Noble Thief

Name: Thiesel Danford

Age: 16

Gender: Male

Height: 5 ft. 8 in.

Weight: 145 lbs

Hair & Eyes: Black and Red
Clothing Preference: Cotton Casual/Denim

Birthplace: Boulderfall

Skills: Sleight of Hand, Lock Picking, Social Hacking, and Swordplay.

Elemental Affinity: Fire
Chapter 7-The Hunter

Chapter 7

A legacy untapped

He sat down. He lit a cigar and began to smoke it. Less for stress relief and more to try to cover the heavy stench of death in the air. He currently sat in the forest north of Duskbarrow. As he smoked, he pulled out a rolled up piece of paper. Unrolling it, he read the contract again, as well as the license attached. It was a hunting contract for him to kill a particularly dangerous quarry. A beast known as a corpse eater. It was a canine-like being of large size that would stalk battlefields after the fact, searching for survivors and picking them off. While they never bothered settlements or even living people traveling, they were still sought to be killed for one reason. They were undead, an abomination brought to life by the power of the Lord of Infernal Flame. It did not need to eat to survive, but it gained power by culling life and it knew it. As such, if one managed to enter a battlefield, it would manage to gain immense power by killing off the injured survivors, of course assuming that it arrived within a days time of the battle ending. As such, it was common practice to bless battlefields with Aelfric’s blessing in order to ward them from it. However, apparently, in his case it was not good. This battlefield they had lost and been chased out. The army refused to let the clerics come in and ward the area. As such, the army opted to do the smart thing, hire a professional hunter from the town of S’warkii in the Gladiator Kingdom. He was the best the village had to offer.

That said, he was still worried. This battle had been awful, but he had found there were many more survivors than he thought. Countless bodies already had been culled by the beast and it moved northward. In fact, he doubted he was more than a mile away. The last corpse he checked was bleeding freshly. He moved and began to continue his pursuit with that final thought. Northward he moved, then when he reached the edge of the battlefield he moved west as the fresh trails of blood went. Even though a forest, a battlefield was easily recognizable, especially one where the northerners were victorious. Thankfully, there was still a base between this field and Duskbarrow, where the remainder of the northerner army sat in siege. By his estimates, they’d fail since they numbered only 500 and they were in the kingdom where fighting was a way of life. True, scholars lived in Duskbarrow for the ruins, but the fact remained that even they had battle experience. The worst case scenario was the base fell for a day then the army backed by powerful mages and gladiators would storm it, wipe the northerners out, then re-establish themselves at the border. However, the problem was attracting Corpse Eaters and preventing them from feeding, which this time they failed at.

He stopped cold and laid down. He could feel the murderous intent in the air. He wore camouflage
gear to help him blend in and was wearing the recently skinned fur of a brown bear. The reason so the smell of death would linger on him and camouflage him amongst the dead. It was then he knew his plan worked. As he lay on the forest floor, he saw the beast come through the woods. Standing at 6 feet tall on all four legs, and being 7 feet long and 5 feet wide, it stomped through the forest. It’s body a misshapen mass of various limbs and parts of canine creatures to create an abomination of an undead hound, it looked around and smelled the air. It was hunting for prey. It suddenly perked in his direction. He was afraid at first, until he heard the from next to him. He only glanced and could see it. A young-looking man, had to be no older than 30, on the ground. He had two bullet holes in his legs and the look as though he had woken up. The blood from the wounds had long since stopped bleeding, but it was clear he would not walk. Field surgery it looked like, and based on the body of the nearby doctor. Then the beast moved. Swiftly through the woods, at a speed almost impossible to follow, it was upon the young man. Before the man could scream, its jaws clamped down on the man's throat. Not so much as a gurgle was heard. However, it was his chance. He hated being morbid, but if he was then more lives like this would be lost. He waited for the creature to be a distance away before getting into a crouch position. He pulled his slung Mauser Model 98 from his back and aimed and without hesitation fired a shot. He saw half its shoulder slide off from the impact. It stopped then, and turned to him. He ducked behind a tree as he prepared the next shot, which gave his shoulder time to recover. He then turned and checked where the creature was. It was halfway to him. He quickly aimed and fired, hitting the head like he intended. Half its face and a bit of the chest fell right off as he hoped.

Tossing the gun aside, he pulled out an axe and readied himself, while also muttering an incantation under his breathe and preparing his fingers to be in the right position. The creature was upon him and it was then he acted. “Sandabado!” he cried, ending the incantation and thrusting his hand out. It retaliated in kind, but was stopped halfway as a jolt of electricity lashed out as a pulse from his hand! It wailed, its howl sounding like a wolf but going through incredibly heavy static interference. It then flopped onto the forest floor. He panted and walked over. He could see the twitching and knew it was just paralyzed. Wasting no time, he cut the legs off, leaving only the head. He then retreated swiftly, grabbing the legs and dragging them away. He also retrieved his rifle and readied it as the beast reconfigured its undead flesh to give it a functional, if smaller form. He then turned and took a few moments to aim, then fired. He aimed for the midsection, taking a huge chunk out. The result ended up leaving it with just the upper half and its exposed core. A single black onyx, engulfed in black flame. This time he watched as the claws and head sprouted into tentacle-like limbs with the body parts serving as tips instead. A gnawing maw and two paws tipped with deadly razor-sharp claws. However, the beast made a miscalculation. He merely prepared the gun again, aimed and fired, hitting the onyx jewel, severely cracking it. With that action, the beast went limp and became lifeless and the jewels flame dimmed considerably. He this time smashed it with an axe and finished the job. He picked up the remains, then went and picked up the head. A disgusting thing but it was proof of a successful hunt. He put it in his capture bag and stood, sighing deeply. “There. Contract done. Got my expenses sorted out for a year. Just need drinking money…” he muttered to himself as he trudged through the forest.

Several days later, he arrived at the base in question. As he expected, the Northerners that had encircled the base during the month he hunted the creature laid dead and clerics were already at work
to consecrate the area. One turned to him as he approached and said “Oh! Master Zem! You’ve returned!” He nodded and said “Indeed. I have slain the Corpse Eater that feasted on the battlefield. I have brought the required proof too. Is the base captain around?”. The cleric nodded, and said “Yes. He is helping us. Over there” and pointed. He nodded, saying “Thanks lad” and headed off. The man pointed too was quite the figure. A tall man, about 8 feet tall, clad in a cleric’s habits but wearing white-painted iron pauldrons and a kevlar vest underneath his habits. He also carried the church’s holy book on him along with a small lantern that was the symbol and magical focus for clerics of the church. He turned to Zem and smiled, saying “Ah! Zem! I’m glad to see you. It means you’ve brought good news”. He nodded, offering the contract and capture bag and said “Indeed. Proof and the contract. The beast wasn’t much trouble. However, that was only because I knew what to expect thanks to you”. The commander shook his head and said “No, no. I had to. Wouldn’t do to send you in without some knowledge. The fact it grows stronger from victims and doesn’t need sleep, sustenance, or anything else is something that isn’t well known. Then again, it’s a beast most normal folk never encounter”. Zem nodded and said “I’m here to make sure of it”. He was handed a bag and after opening it confirmed the leaves within. “Well then. I believe i’ll take my leave” he said. “Of course. Safe travels back home. I hear the forest gets dangerous this time of year” the commander said. “Sure does” Zem said on his way out.

Profile of a Hopeless Hunter

Name: Zem Kolint

Age: 49

Gender: Male

Height: 6 ft. 1 in.

Weight: 182 lbs

Hair & Eyes: Brownish Red with Grey Streaks and Brown
Clothing Preferences: Camo clothes and Furs

Birthplace: S’warkii

Skills: Tracking, Precision Fire, Archery, Enchanting, Blacksmithing, and Hunting.

Elemental Affinity: Thunder, though reacts to Dark.
Chapter 8-The Cleric

Chapter 8

The Burden of Faith

She sat in a dingy motel room. She currently wore a black tank top and blue denim jeans. She wasn’t
wearing her black cleric’s habit, but she had reason for that. It was related to what happened recently.
She had been given a holy mission by the head priest of her order. She had been chosen to acquire
the first flame and take it back to their order. She decided to check her supplies for the month.
Enough food for 5 days, 10,000 leaves, her personal spellbook, and finally 3 pairs of clothes. One
was a secondary casual set of clothes, the other was a backup set of black cleric’s habit, and the final
was her armor. A kevlar vest with iron gauntlets and pauldrons. She sighed, realizing she couldn’t
sell half of what she had for money. The 10k would last maybe a year, but then she’d be in trouble.
That wasn’t considering the task she had been given. The task that sent her from her home in
Cobbleston.

She was born into a family in the small village of Cobbleston. It was a village in the highland
mountains that had some farmland and was noted as the home of an ancient hero, but ultimately left
alone. It offered nothing for tourists or immigrants. That said, the Ancient Kingdom took care of it all
the same. Even so, it could not be denied that most there were poor. Her family was no different.
However, something strange was that once a month her family would go to a cave in the mountains.
They brought her every single time and each time the people that gathered did strange things, from
her perspective. It was only when she turned 9 she was told what happened, that they were
worshipping a benevolent deity named Galdera, whom lied sealed behind the Gate of Finis, because
his brethren betrayed him. From there, she was taught the inner workings of this small circle of
worshippers. How to use dark magic, how to heal using the blessings of Galdera, and much more.
Worst, she was elevated for her dutifulness, faith, and hard work at age 16. However, all that
changed when she turned 18.

Being a vestal of High Priest Kard Vallain, whom apparently led the current era of Galdera worship,
she had many responsibilities. She had to make sure the secret was safe, the meeting place secret, that
it was supplied with adequate dark artifacts, had to make sure any blood they gave was willing, had
to make sure this, and that, and those. One particular day he told her that he was demoting her.
“What!?” she cried “But why!? Have I not been faithful enough to Lord Galdera!?” He shook his
head and with his raspy tone said “No, child. It is adequate, nay, exceptional. However, I require an
errand ran, one that my vestal cannot”. He moved and continued to prepare the nights ritual as he
spoke “It requires focus and time. It requires discretion. Simple put, my vestal cannot do this task.
However, I have no other but you to trust. As such, I am having your mother replace you and you do
this most important of tasks”. She stared as he spoke, but feeling the cooling sensation he voice gave,
she nodded and said “Thank you, father Kard. What am I tasked with?” she asked. He turned and
offered an open book. Taking it, she looked saw a picture of a lantern, though quite the complex
design, with a burning blue flame inside. “That is the ember of the first flame, the flame the traitorous
Aelfric, lord of starlight, used against Galdera. While it is his mortal weakness, it can be warped to
his greatest strength. Its flame reflects the heart of those whom touch it. However, only Galdera and
Aelfric can benefit from this”. She smiled and said “So i’m to retrieve the ember and bring it for
warping to our lord's favor?”. He smiled gently and said “Yes my child. I will be supplying you
10,000 leaves, some protective gear, a weapon, and food for the road. Head north to Orwell and wait
4 years. Establish a new identity. You’ll need it to avoid bringing attention to our practice here in
Riverford. When you return, your life will be better for it”. She nodded eagerly and said “Of course
father Kard. I trust you wholly. When do I leave?”. “Tomorrow. Sleep tonight child, I can handle the
rituals. You have a journey ahead. The supplies will be in your room when you waken. Now go, my
child of night and with my and our lord's blessing, complete your holy mission”. She bowed in
respect, saying “Yes Father Kard. Thank you for this mission. I shan’t fail!”. She stood, turned, and
with a spring in her step left. That was her last night in Riverford. Telling her parents, they
understood and were happy she was chosen as the Flametaker for this kindling and told her they’d be
praying for her success. Thus, she left Riverford and dyed her hair on the way to ensure her new
identity would allow her to go unnoticed.

Her new identity was Delilah Softbrand. A devout follower of the sacred flame whom moved from
Grandport to Orwell, finding the capitalist society too much for a devout woman like herself.
However, she had been attacked on the road by bandits and lost her habits. Thus, she managed to
find lodging in the quiet town. Orwell was the westernmost town in the empire, and was part of the
Ravus Kingdom. The Ravus family ruled the kingdom with varying amounts of strictness throughout
the years and while they didn’t neglect Orwell, various local lords dislike it when Orwell tried to
expand into their territory and so Orwell eventually simply built downward. Into the chasm that
divided it. By now, it made it halfway down. It required much lumber, but the forests north were
happy to provide. The various nature monsters tended to the woodlands regardless, allowing
moderate loggers to do their job happily. She stayed at a motel at the bottom. As she stared out, she
watched the canyon. She still had a year to wait. It had been 2 years since then. She was due for
another supply drop in a month. Her cover worked well, with her helping the people. She didn’t use
any of her normal material for prayer and rituals, but she did pray still. She wanted this to work out.
The order gave her family so much and she wanted to repay such a debt. With this, she stood and
left, prepared for the days events.
Profile of a Misguided Cleric

Name: Delia Softbrand

Age: 20

Gender: Female

Height: 5 ft. 3 in.

Weight: 120 lbs

Hair & Eyes: White and Purple

Clothing Preferences: Cleric Clothing

Birthplace: Cobbleston

Skills: Persuasion, Willpower, Teaching, Magic, and Translations

Elemental Affinity: Dark
Chapter 9-Path of Nobles

Chapter 9

The Path Begins; Part 1

She began in the slums. It was where she first began her search for the Northerner, under the assumption it was a normal human whom had a story to tell. Now she sought the Northerner to get his story for her company. She was armed for the worst case scenario but was hoping for the best case. She began asking around. At first, she was met with cold stares or answers of ignorance. Then she asked a beggar near a run-down bar. “Excuse me sir, do you happen to know of any rumors about a potential author here in the slums?” she asked. The beggar shook his head, looking up at her, mouth half opened revealing most of his teeth missing. “Any idea about rumors of a Northerner in Grandport?” she asked. The man smiled a bit and held a hand out. She put 50 leaves in his hands, enough for a few days of life, a week if spent correctly. “Thanken yee, sistah. This is most kaind” the man slurred, putting them into a worn but maintained pocket, then continued “I dunna where ya can fiend the nawrthener, but I do know where you can find where he is. The bar here. I even dune seen the thing walk in an socialize like one a us!” She laughed and said “Thank you sir” before walking in. Heading for the bar, she knew the bartender would have some information. Sitting, she said “Two shots of whiskey and your best tale”. The tender raised an eyebrow at her as he continued to clean his glass, before putting it down and filling it with a bottle of whiskey he retrieved from the shelf behind him, then serving it to her. “Well. I've got a rather interesting one about a goddess walking amongst us. Though I bet the one about a Northerner so far South is more your speed” he said. Nodding, Lapena said “Yeah, sounds like it”.

The bartender sighed, saying “Unfortunately, the northerner is gone already. Got a ride out west. According to him, and jim, he’s heading to Quarrycrest. Gods knows why”. She gave him a quizzical look and replied “That makes no sense”. The bartender merely shrugged, saying “I know. Wish I could elaborate. However, I do know someone who hosted the northerner”. She raised an eyebrow and said “Who?” It was then someone sat, placing a gun on the table. He was dressed in very shabby cured leathers. All brown. The gun was the same as hers. “Well now. Who might you be missy?” the man said, having a strange drawl to his voice. “I'm Lapena Sozilla. I am a sales representative of Stonegard Publishing Incorporated. I seek to publish the story of the Northerner” she answered. Honesty was the best policy. Lies merely cost one time, and thus money. Especially when caught. Nodding, the man said “Well. Lucky you. I was host’in ‘im for a while there. ‘Till orders from on high wanted ‘im moved. So I arranged for the branch in Quarrycrest to ‘andle ‘im”. Nodding, she began to take notes when the gun the man held clicked. Glancing, she saw it pointed at her chest though at a distance just barely above point-blank range. “Sadly missy, we can’t have others pok’in in our secrets. I’ll be tak’in your secrets to the grave. If it at all helps, you got me sold on your idea” the man said, before pulling the trigger. Crying out in shock and surprise, she fell off the barstool and crashed onto the ground, groaning in pain. The man stood up, placing a handful of leaves on the bar saying “Here. For the trouble sir” before turning to leave. However, before he left, she rolled onto her hands and knees, and with shaky hands, pulled her gun out and aimed, turning.
The man heard the gun click and instinctively dived for cover as she fired. She stood fully, panting hard. Her vest had a fresh hole in it, but since it was made for small arm fire, it blocked the entirety of the bullet. She this time began to chant a small incantation, holding a hand out before saying clearly “Kaze Pusshu!”. A gust of wind surged forth, sending the table the man hide behind into a wall, breaking to pieces and knocking the man to the floor. She was about to warn him not to move, when he moved in a fast motion and fired at her. He missed however, scratching her cheek only. She fired back, sinking into the man’s shoulder that he used for his gun. Crying out, he dropped his gun, holding his shoulder. He stopped whimpering when he felt the gun press against his head as Lapena said “Well. you ruined my vest. In lieu of actual payment, I’ll accept information. Let’s begin with this group you’re apparently a part of”.

Sebastian panted hard. He held his saber in one hand and his polearm in another. It was a collapsible spear that was made when he became a member of the High Police, specialized forces designed to raid and otherwise deal with mobs of armed individuals. Polearm training was given as spears were a good weapon against most people. Right now, he was glad he had it. The Northerners were vicious. They came fast and hard. Their massive bodies lent them immense physical strength, allowing them to clear the walls with ease. However, he was waiting with the rest of the standing army. They were wearing special kevlar vests made with pockets for extra ammunition, wearing kevlar helmets and combat boots. They were armed with sabers and a pair of firearms; a handgun and a rifle. Specifically, the rifle was called a Enfield L1A1 SLR while the handgun was called a Makarov PM. The rifle was one of the first of its kind to reload extremely quickly, requiring no real action on the part of the one using it, while the handgun simply improved the accuracy over other models of guns available to police and civilians. He didn’t charge for the very reason that there would be many bullets firing once the Northerners began their invasion. Their light blue bodies began to pile up fast. For all their muscle, it didn’t stop rifle fire very well. However, he knew as did his brothers-in-arms, that handguns did little to their skin. Sure, it made them bleed but that was only because it broke skin. Not because it sunk into them. Soon enough the first magazine was down, which was when he rushed in. A single northerner charged at him. At his count, there should still be at least a hundred left, yet there was only one left before him.

It wielded a hunk of metal binded to a large stick in what could only be described as a poorly crafted greatsword with one hand. It swung it horizontally first. As his training dictated, rather than block this blow he angled his spear to intercept and deflect it, making it fly over his head which was the Northerners aim. Even though the things blade was dull, it probably had enough strength to simply cleave through his neck. After deflecting, he jumped forward, stabbing with his saber into the things neck. Before it could react, he used its own body to jump backwards into the snow, rolling head over heels and onto his feet, ready for the things next move. It attempted a vertical slash, but telegraphed it, making it easy for Sebastian to dodge. He then stabbed the wrist with his spear, aiming for nerves specifically. Crying out, it let go and stumbled backwards, bringing its injured wrist into a cradle. It growled and then roared, before pulling a bone horn out. It was royal purple in color. Blowing into it, a mournful sound played. Their retreat signal. He heard gunfire from other areas of the base die down as the one he glared at vaulted over the wall, vanishing into the snow. “Sebastian!” the commander called out to him. He turned and saw her approaching. “Yes? What is it?” he asked, a bit worried. “Not good news. We stopped the invasion, but our scouts just returned. Fresh Northerner tracks going south found 20 miles west of here” she replied “That’s not all. They apparently are
heading for Victor’s Hollow in the Champion’s Kingdom”. He looked out to the sky, thinking. Then answered “Makes sense. They’ve consistently come through for the empire. Them toppling would be a massive blow to it”. “What will you do, sir Knight?” she asked. He laughed and replied “What any knight would. Pursue and thwart their plot. They cannot be allowed to terrorize our great empire!”

He woke up in a hospital room. He heard a heartbeat monitor next to him. Looking over, he saw a silver-haired woman. He recognized her. His sister, Monica Deon. Seeing him awake, she sighed in relief and said in a low tone “Thank god you woke up finally”. “What do you mean?” he asked. “You’ve been recovering for close to a year now” she answered, a melancholy to her tone “After that northerner suddenly attacked the studio”. He stared more, then his eyes widened. “Wait… the bartender.. Did they arrest the bartender?” he asked, a hint of panic in his tone. “I… I never heard about any such thing” she said, before asking “Why?”. He sat up, saying “He was talking to the Northerner. It spoke our language. Before I was shot, they mentioned getting him out of… are we even in Everhold anymore?”. She shook her head and said “No. You were transferred to the Saintsbridge hospital” she said. Sighing deeply, he leaned back against the hospital bed and began thinking. He knew why the ex-manager tried to kill him, however he couldn’t understand why the northerner targeted him. He suspected that it was hired. However, the more pressing question was how did it get so far north. He looked at his sister and asked, deciding to think on it later “How are mother and father?”. “Well” she said “They are very worried, but are distracting themselves. You waking after your body recovering is excellent news”. He nodded and replied “Yes… that magic I learned in my youth came in handy… even if misused”.

He avoided thinking of his early years. He committed many crimes as a youth, only a year before his incident did he really walk the path of the straight and narrow. Really, it was thanks to a single man, by the name of Gregory Clemence. A man of the cloth, in no high position, but of extreme purity and faith. A man whom tutored him in light and healing magics, during which they bonded. The man left Everhold eventually, but the experience left an impact on him. He of course was an actor so not everything was straight and narrow, but he did the best he could. Until this recent incident. He shook his head, saying “Well. I’m better now. Give me a day with my magic and I’ll be fine”. His sister nodded, standing and saying “Then, brother, I’ll send a letter to mother and father. They’ll be joyed to hear you are well. I’ll be back soon” before leaving. Soon enough a nurse came in and asked “I understand you have healing magic?”. He nodded and the nurse said “Then in accordance with the 10th Covenant, I will remove the monitoring equipment, as well as your life support among other things. Do you consent to this?”. He replied “Under vow to the Covenants, I do”. The nurse nodded and had him transferred to a non-technological hospital bed. After this, she removed his equipment slowly, saving the life support for last. When she removed it fully, he began to whisper a prayer to Aelfric. As his words reached their end, and he felt himself slipping, he whispered “Iyasu”. Instantly, his body glowed brightly and he felt his internal mana turn into lifeforce energy. He sighed in relief as he felt the lifeforce expend itself to heal him. After 5 minutes transpired with no problems, the nurse said “It went well. That’s good. Then, i’ll bring you inspiriting juice to recover your expended mana. Please, wait here”. He nodded as the nurse turned and left. He decided the first thing he had to do while in Saintsbridge was to check the church. He needed advice on how best to proceed. Whether to put his career on hold to pursue a man he thought could be dangerous, or to forget about it and continue on with his life. He knew just the man to ask, he merely needed to track him down.
She had worked for over a week. Finishing up training with her pupils, making them full apprentices without cutting corners. Setting up someone to run her practice in her stead, training them. However, she managed it. Less because she was a good teacher, which while she wasn’t excellent she was competent, but more because those she chose were already smart and were extremely receptive to her teachings. Thus, while she barely managed she did complete all her preparations within a week. However she had done it because she needed to get to stilsnow. Sadly, this meant renting a heavy-duty vehicle. Trucks were a relatively new invention, having engines that had much higher horsepower, but required more gas to use and much more electricity. She entered the facility that rented trucks and walked to the counter. The business had no customers at the moment. “Excuse me?” she asked the clerk “I was hoping to inquire about the availability of your trucks”. The clerk looked at her, then opened a book, saying “Of course ma’am. It would seem we have one available. However, its rental is being contested. Do you wish to enter this process?” he asked. She nodded and the man moved to retrieve a pen and write her name down, saying “Done and done. Just down the hall and it's the 4th door on your left”. “Thank you” she said, heading that way. As she approached, she could hear the voices. A man and woman, both arguing. “I need it to move rubble off my property” the male voice said. “I need it for a trip south! My father in Wellspring is sick, and you know the roads in the desert are not kind to cars!” a female voice cried.

She took a deep, anxious breathe and stepped in, knowing it’d upset the two more. They both turned to her as she did. On the left side of a table, a man wearing a black leather jacket with metal spikes on it, a sleeveless t-shirt, and blue denim jeans and leather boots. On the right, a woman dressed for business. Both demanded at the same time “Who are you!?” before glaring at each other. “I am Doctor Ristra Abraham. I’m planning a trip to stilsnow and I was told the rental was in contestation” she said. The woman said “My father is sick and I’m the only person willing to go help him, so I must do so!” She looked between the two, thinking, and asked the man “Is there another business in town with a truck?”. The man thought about it and said “It’s pricey, but there’s a place that does yeah. Has a veritable fleet of them. The Welsh family. Cost 100,000 leaves per week. This place costs a third of that”. She thought and said “If I paid you the difference, would you go there?”. Seeing what was going on, the woman said “If you agree to take me to Wellspring, I’ll concede my claim”. The man nodded and said “Fine. I can agree to that”. Nodding, Ristra opened her wallet and pulled out 70,000 leaves, offering them. Astonished, the man accepted, muttering “Gods alive, you actually are paying… why?” he questioned. “I have a friend I must save. The police won’t be much help because of certain laws. I’m the only one who can while guaranteeing his life” she said. He simply nodding saying “Gods bless you, I hope you succeed” before leaving. The man said “I’m sorry for making you wait. If I had known…” he voice trailing off. She simply smiled and said “It’s not really that bad. I have a month. Wellspring by truck is about a week away. It shouldn’t be too bad”. With that, the two went to the front counter to rent the truck, with her paying the 33,000 leaves to cover the cost.
As the amnesiac slept, she dreamt. She dreamt of a laboratory. Very old fashioned, with many pipes. A medical facility much unlike the one she was sleeping in. She was standing in a particular hallway. She looked down and was wearing lab scrubs. ‘Where am I?’ she thought. “Hey! Get back to work! The hero will be here soon!” a voice shouted. She turned and saw a tall man in a white robe. He had pale, sickly skin and for a second swore he had a bad wart on his cheek before it vanished. “Sorry sir, but what am I supposed to be doing?” she asked sincerely. The man scoffed and said “Typical. You are the disappointment of theirs. You were supposed to be preparing the time pod for your sister, the real hero. Not a reject like you”. His tone was haughty, full of arrogance, and containing clear hatred of herself. She nodded and said “Sorry sir. I forgot”. He groaned and said “Probably forgot how to calibrate the blasted thing. Move aside! I’ll do it!” She did so, despite not wanting to. For some reason, she wanted to do it herself to spite him. However, she didn’t seem to have the courage. As she examined she saw the hallways features. It was a single grated walkway with handrails on either side preventing anyone from falling over, the walls lined by massive pods. A single one was at least 10 feet tall and 6 feet wide. The one she was at thought was double those proportions. It was enough to easily fit 4 grown adults. Each pod had a multitude of pipes and wires and cables, each a foot thick, coming out. In front of each was a stand with some cables and wires coming out and going into the tangle of wires, cables, and pipes below, all connecting a device with common letters and punctuations and numbers to the pods. Input controls as they were called. The man entered many things, and the pod beeped in response and opened. “Well, well! Color me surprised, the reject can actually calibrate worth a damn. Now, close it back up and finish your prep. He’ll be here in an hour” the man said, starting to walk away. Sighing, she walked over to do just that. She then woke up.

She was in her hospital room when she woke up. She saw the small portable desk next to her bedside. She changed the bed to sit up and once up properly retrieved materials from it. She had been studying these past 9 months and had prepared for being introduced to greater society. Mostly it was language studying, with some summaries on advancements in society. She was fascinated by the concept of cars, studying them whenever she had an excuse to. As for language, she still wasn’t totally fluent but she could hold a conversation easily enough. A nurse opened the door, and seeing her awake entered, asking “Excuse me miss, might we talk?”. She nodded and said “Of course” she said “It’s fine”. “I just thought I should inform you that there is a detective that wants to speak to you” she said apologetically “Sorry it’s on the day you’re being released from the hospital. With such a good bill of health too”. She simply smiled and replied “It’s fine, miss nurse Valenti. I’m happy to answer any questions I can”. The nurse nodded and said “With that, everything is done. I’ll leave the clothes provided by the hospital here” and put some clothes on the desk. “Feel free to leave when you wish, though do talk to the detective” she said. Bowing, she left. Nema put the casual clothes on,
finding them a odd but palatable. She left and as she entered the lobby, she saw the detective. She turned to her, looked her up and down, and said “You must be the amnesiac named Nema Cias. I’m High Detective Jody Rowe. I work with his majesties national investigation force”. Nema nodded, saying “Yes I read about that. The national forces outside the military, the high police, split between high detectives and police. It must be serious if you came here”. The detective nodding, saying “Simply put Nema we investigated the lab and found some disturbing revelations. Most disturbing is the existence of other labs”. Nema stared blankly, asking “What do you mean? Is that the place my…. ‘Testimony’ I think they called it led to?”. Jody nodded and said “We investigated it. Thousands of dead bodies, many of which mutated into monsters. However, that’s not why I’m here. I’m here to offer you a job, on behalf of his majesty”. Nema blinked, unable to believe someone in such a high position would bother. Curious, she asked “What would I do?”. The detective thought about her words, then replied “We want you to investigate the other labs”. She knew what was going on now, and said “So you want me to be the canary in the coal mine?”. Jody nodded, and Nema gave it some thought. “Fine” she said “Where are they? I also expect to be properly outfitted for such a journey”. She secretly hoped she’d get a car out of it. Jody replied “Of course. Compensated as well. Sorry if it offends, but with the war with the Northerners, we can’t risk our own men and woman. The other labs are in Wellspring, Noblecourt, and Atlasdam. Where are you planning on going first?” she asked. Nema looked at a nearby painting of an oasis in a desert. She smiled.

He was in his Sir Lupone attire. He was standing outside the back entrance to a noble’s estate. The gate opened and hooded figure looked at him, then gestured for him to enter. He did so, seeing a few other hooded figures. They followed him as he walked from the back gate into the main building, entering behind him. After the last one entered, one spoke and said “We are honored to host you Sir Lupone” taking their hood off. Juvia Salim of the Salim family. The youngest daughter in fact, his age. The other did too to reveal more of the Salim Children. “Indeed. I am happy you received my request. I hope our business is good” he replied with a scruffy dignity to his voice, straightening his jacket “So where is your father?” he asked. “He is working. If you would receive him in the study, he would most appreciate it” the oldest son responded. He nodded and headed there. He knew where it was. This man was one of his connections to the black market. The man didn’t care for it and only invested because it was simply too lucrative to ignore. He sat in the study, waiting patiently, admiring the arrangement. The farthest half having shelves flush against the walls while the first half was a luxury arrangement with art pieces, a fireplace, and a chair sitting near it. He turned as a large man entered the room. Rotund in size, but tall being 7 feet, he knew the man to be Louise Salim, head of the Salim household. “Sir Lupone. I am honored to host you this evening. Apologies. I was dealing with finances” Louise said, before sitting behind his desk. “I understand Louise. Your family is important, thus our arrangement” he said “You provide valuable information, and I act on it. Any valuables I find I pass 10% on. A week ago, I presented to you more traffic through your wares in the black market”. Louise nodded and said “I know. My calculations, what I just finished, show that you’ve increased my profits by 40% for the next 5 months, which then steadies out to an overall 20% increase”.

“So” he said “You know what I request. Do you have it?”. Louise nodded and said “Yes. There is actually a job available in Victor’s Hollow”. “What is it?” Thiesel asked. “Simply put, the local
bandit population has gotten immensely problematic. They’ve put a bounty for whomever solves the problem” Louise said. Thiesel laughed and said “Oh there has to be more”. Louise nodded and said, opening a drawer and offering Thiesel a manilla folder “Yes. Read the file. It’s what I scrounged through black market connections”. He did and my what secrets laid within. Betrayals, secrecy, and espionage. “Wow. A robber baron is capable of all this?” Thiesel asked. Louise replied “Yes and all behind the scenes, using a few single expert thieves to sneak about. He was able to acquire a legendary weapon, ferry it to the man he’d make into the bandit king, then profit from misery caused by the bandit uprising by selling arena time to the local military for drills and training, which does generate more profit than arena battles”. Thiesel added “It’s likely this so-called ‘Bandit King’ is in fact related to the robber baron directly”. Louise sighed and said “Indeed. Worse, because of the use of experts for messages and ferries, he won’t be caught. They’ll ingest cyanide pills when they’re caught. He never signs anything and learned an entirely new penmanship style to pull this off”. Thiesel nodded and said “Alright Louise, I’ll do it. I assume you want it for your collection? The weapon?”. Louise nodded and said “I didn’t want to impose. However, i’ve desired a weapon to mount above my fireplace”. He nodded and said “Then, my friend, expect me in about half a years time. This won’t be easy, but i’ll break the bandit ring up. First, the Robber Baron. To Victor’s Hollow, I go!”.

It had happened suddenly. A northerner ambushed him. Thankfully he was wise to it. Tracks that vanished and odd patterns in the wildlife informed him that a northerner scouting party had found him and decided to eliminate him. He intentionally sprung the trap, leaping into the pit and sticking his climbing axe into the side. As he expected, ice. His axe sank in, and caught, giving him a moment of reprieve. It would, had he not known what would come next. Moving fast, he pulled out a small red stone and sighed, saying “There goes 1000 leaves” before smashing it flat against the wall. Instantly, fire burst out. However, thanks to how he had done it, the spell morphed with his intent and melted him a tunnel through the earth, leaving support pillars. He moved slowly before swinging in right as a flurry of energy smashed into where he was, growing a tree of ice where it hit. Looking out he stared at a hooded 10 foot tall figure. A northerner mage. As he thought. He continued into the tunnel, tossing a light blue gem behind him. An ice soulstone. It released it’s icy magical energy, creating a wall of ice. “10,000 leaves” he muttered to himself, preparing a new fire soulstone. He waited a few minutes before tossing it upwards. Like before, a tunnel was melted upwards. He pulled out his climbing axes and affixed climbing pitons to his boots, and began to scale the wall. It was 100 feet to climb, so it wasn’t going to be easy, but he had came prepared for a Northerner invasion. After all, he was hunting a Corpse Eater beyond the border during a war.

After finishing his climb, he undid the pitons and put them and his axes away. He readied his rifle and waited. He turned and fired to his right, even though he heard a noise to his left and heard a scream. Quickly using the bolt action to load the next bullet, he ran forward, barreling into the woods. He was approximately 10 miles from Victor’s Hollow. They could sort out these Northerners. However, something unexpected happened. He could hear them gaining behind him, not insanely quickly, only gradually, but then it stopped. He stopped and turned, and saw them conversing. He stared intently, considering shooting one, but dismissed the notion when they roared at him suddenly, pulling a horn and blowing it, before retreating. He could hear noises around him retreat suddenly. They had initiated a full retreat, for some reason, despite having a numbers and strength advantage. He stared for a solid 10 minutes, focusing on that point and his surroundings,
before he was satisfied that the northerners had truly left. Turning, he decided to look into it once he got back home. There had to be a reason for their sudden retreat. It was when he reached Victor’s Hollow that he got his answer. An entire regiment of soldiers, all armed. Their leader or leaders, to him, unknown but they had begun cooperating with the local police and champions in protecting the city from invasion. “What’s going on? Why’s the army here?” he asked a guard as he walked in, stopping to ask. “Nothing your concern, sir. Please” the soldier guarding the entry staircase to Victor’s Hollow began replying, before stopping and giving him a once over. “Sir, might I inquire if you are in fact a hunter?” the soldier questioned after a solid minute. He nodded, showing his license and saying “Yes. Certified in Everhold even, by the Council of Kings”. The soldier smiled and said “Then a reputable one no doubt. In that case, the royal army might have a job for you, if you’re interested”.

She packed her things. The time had come. In a month, the Flamebearer would pass through Saintsbridge. Further evidencing this, she received a package with a letter from Kard. The letter ordered her to go now and intercept the Flamebearer, and take the ember of light for her own, then flee north. She’d head to Victor’s Hollow, hide there for a month, then head back to Cobbleston. He had given her equipment for the journey. Robes to ease in her dark magic spellcasting, a staff built to enhance her magic power, and a kevlar vest to wear under the robes as well as a single mask, depicting the visual of Galdera. She packed the contents quickly and secretly, amassed all the leaves she had saved up, and then promptly vanished into the night. She traversed up Orwell carrying her suitcase. She was planning to rent a horse and wagon for the trip. A car would leave paperwork, and a horse was cheap. She had 100,000 leaves for her trip and a package of 10,000 leaves waiting in Saintsbridge. She approached the exit to Orwell and walked to the rental store waiting there. She entered and walked to the counter, which was manned by a large portly man. He looked at her, setting his book down and asked “How can I help you miss?”. “I would like a horse and wagon. I’ve decided to take a small vacation and do some traveling. I just need it for a year” she replied. The man raised an eyebrow but pulled out his logistics and said “Alright. With our going rate, and the time of rental….. That’s 12,000 leaves”. Smiling, she paid and was told “Right. Wait outside please ma’am. I’ll bring it around” and disappeared into the back. 

She followed the instructions and in half an hour, from behind the building, a horse came out with a wagon attached, driven by the portly man. “Here you go” he said to her “Just return it to a chain store by the deadline. Have safe travels, traveler”. She smiled and said “I will. Thank you Paul”. With that, she left the building, put her suitcase in the wagon, got on and began to drive it out of town. The horse was well-mannered, so it went smoothly. From there she took the path the split from Quarrycrest to Boulderfall or Saintsbridge and took the Saintsbridge path. As time went on, more roads were made and remade. In this case, this path was one of the newer ones, being made just in 3000 DE. It took a month for the entire trip. She could see it in the distance. “I’m here” she said to herself “Galdera, mother, father. Give me the strength I need to do what I must!” As she approached the gate, a cleric standing guard stopped her and said “Halt. State your business and the length of your stay”. She replied “I intend to stay only a short while before moving onto Sunshade. A month I think works. I’m taking a trip around our beautiful empire sir”. The cleric looked at the other before nodding and with his nod the gates opened. “Then our enjoy our city. It’s got much to offer for both the faithful and faithless. We accept all and show our wonders to all” the cleric said with a soft, happy smile. She smiled and nodded, heading inside. Her first order of business was securing
lodgings for her stay, for when she’d steal the First Flame of Aelfric from the Flamebearer.
Intermission 1

Chapter Summary

An intermission chapter before we begin Arc 2. Intermissions need not be read to enjoy this story. This is purely for those of the inquisitive nature, that enjoy world building and exposition. If you don't like exposition dumps, this is best avoided. Now, enjoy the intermission and I'll see everyone in chapter 11.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Intermission

Ray entered the classroom, to a class full of inquisitive students. They didn’t ask questions, but he could see them burning behind his students eyes. He smiled and set his book on the desk and said “Well class. I see I piqued your interest with the last lesson, huh?”. They nodded. “Then, let’s continue. Any questions?” he asked. One came immediately; “Sir” a girl asked “You mentioned in the tale of Octopath 8 heroes. However, you previously mentioned that the high emperor during the 3rd rising of Galdera bred 8 heroes. Could you elaborate?”. He nodded and said “Absolutely. See, after the 2nd rising the royals realized how serious the threat of Galdera was to the world and worked to keep it a secret. At first, the various kingdoms prevented real research into the matter, essentially causing what we’d now call an information blackout”. He then moved and wrote 8 names; Eisenberg, Albright, Colozone, Clement, Azelhart, Greengrass, Therion, and H’aanit. “These were the names of the original 8. As you can see class, the last two are their proper names. They lacked proper last names. This is more due to their circumstances however, as they took their eventual partners last name as their own” he stated, moving and writing Hildaf after erasing Therion and Falk after erasing H’aanit. “When High Emperor Veral Balacruf began the program of what we now call eugenics for the hero bloodlines, he had the job of tracking down the living heirs to each. Thankfully, there was one for each” the teacher said, before he was interrupted by a teenager in the back of the room yelling “Yeah! The azelhart family is still around!”.

He sighed and said “Yes, they are. After finding vengeance, Primrose returned to Sunshade for a time, dancing for the tavern, which had a very ethical manager at the time. However, she moved on. Eventually, she met the man whom she’d make an Azelhart, that would revive the Azelhart house. Joffery Visroy, a foreigner of unknown origin with no memory of where he was from or how, and with a literal sack full of pure platinum bars” the teacher explained “After this a marriage happened, the motivations are debated to this day, despite the fact that Primrose herself told us through the biography she published of herself, and that made her descendant the easiest to track down”. He crossed the Azelhart name out and said “After all, as you all know, as William Azelhart back there knows, they are alive, well, and a very prominent member of the Scholar King’s court” gesturing to a
caucasian, blue-eyed and brown-haired teenager sitting in the back. He merely nodded in response. “Now. The others were not so easy. Each had done various things and while there is record of each marrying, many did move around. Especially Therion and H’aanit. However, his descendant, Alakart Balacruf, did it and began the program full force” the teacher exclaimed, continuing his lecture “Eventually, they birthed 8 heroes all descended from the original 8 with the strongest the kingdom had to offer. Any further questions?”. A hand raised. “Yes?” he asked.

“Sir. What happened to the new 8 heroes?” the student asked. The teacher thought about it before answering “We aren’t fully sure”. “Huh!?” the students exclaimed, confused. “Let me explain” the teacher said “After the 3rd rising was prevented, the heroes left and the gate closed. Then, the government lost track of most of them. The azalharts and eisenberg’s specifically were the families they could keep tracking, since both serve the empire”. He moved and pointed to the Colozone name “This is the only one that while we lost track of, we can say where they likely are. Out at sea. The original hero bought a fleet and sailed out into the ocean. He hasn’t returned since, neither has a descendant. It’s believed that the hero died at sea or found a new continent and lived there”. Another student spoke up saying “Sir. I heard rumors of secrets labs in the empire. Are these true?”. The professor stared seriously at the child, saying “Yes. At least partially. It is confirmed that one exists. His majesty is investigating the matter now. He has promised transparency on the issue, which I trust he will”. He straightened himself out and then said “Now, class, get out your textbooks. The intellectual discussion portion is over, it’s time for the lecture. Today, we’re going to go over the history of the eight kingdoms that make up our glorious, beloved empire”. With that, he wrote their names on the board. The Sorcerous Kingdom of Naaz; the Kingdom of Faith, Silva; the Kingdom of Champions, Halihall; the Kingdom of Riches, Rave; the Kingdom of Water, Aques; the Kingdom of Sands, Mars; the Kingdom of the Mountains, Moria; and the Kingdom of Merchants, Galia.

Chapter End Notes

Added the name of the northern kingdom that includes the cities Flamesgrace and Northreach.
She stepped out of the car. She had traveled here with some police officers. The High Emperor, while he valued the investigation, needed the army purely to focus on the Northerner invasion. Thus, he tasked the police forces to aid her in the investigation of the secret labs. Especially if they had other people in them from what appeared to be the long distant past. She now stood in the sandy grounds of the city of Wellspring. “We’re here, ma’am. We’ll acquire lodgings and let you know where they are, then join with the main force and continue our duties until your investigation here concludes” one of the officers said. They had been tasked with merely assisting her. She had to do the bulk of the work, which she was fine with. It had taken some time, but she had recovered fully from her experience and was now more or less adapted to modern society, not that she had anything to really adapt to. She had no real concrete memories. The only ones she had, if they were even hers, were in dreams, which were ephemeral at best and non-existent at worst. “Of course, I understand officers. It’s what I agreed to, after all. Leave the investigation to me” she told them, slowing her speech at times to find words. The current language wasn’t what she naturally spoke and so at times had to rack her brain for the right words. She had learned the modern language in time that shocked even the translator she spoke with. However, it became apparent why. She learned fast. She had studied the blueprints of a car and was able to understand the anatomy of a car instantly. She hadn’t been tested in application for many things she studied, aside from her language lessons which turned out to be promising. It wasn’t as polished but it was getting better.

She began to walk into the city proper. It was a large city, being a trading hub for the southern kingdoms. Everything flowed through it at one point or another, illegal or otherwise. The black market was so powerful here, that the king of Mars, the sand kingdom she stood in, could do nothing to stop it. He had tried many things. False relics to reduce trust, counterfeit leaves to devalue the market. He even attempted war only to end up calling a ceasefire with the leader of the black market, a man named Markus Rock. However, the black market had in agreement giving the kingdom a cut of money, though a pitiful 2%. A Testament to the king’s failure to reign it in. The High Emperor didn’t pursue actions partially because of this failure and because the market was smart enough to avoid items related to Galdera worship, which was the only thing the High Emperor or anyone in his court would care about. She decided to begin there. On her she was wearing clothes typical for desert travel. Baggy silk pants with a silk shirt, closed at the top but open at the stomach and lower back, and silk undergarments. All colored white. She wore a cape lined with astral moth wing fibers to absorb atmospheric mana that would allow her to cast her spells more frequently. She also held a small wooden rod tipped with a perfectly spherical ruby. The rod would improve the power of her spells. Finally, she had a portable radio, provided by the police.
However, for now, the rod stayed strapped to her belt. Instead, she held a small journal. She’d use it to help her investigations. She moved towards the black market district of the city and soon found her prize. A vast sprawling bazaar hidden behind impossibly high fencing with stalls showing various goods, varying from actual garbage to shining relics. However, today she sought information. She headed into the black market proper. She looked around the stalls, keeping an eye on them. She was looking for anything that looked like it might have come from the labs in her memories. Eventually, a voice spoke up, saying “Excuse me, miss. Do you happen to seek knowledge?” She looked into a stall on her left and saw only a frail old woman in front of a crystal ball. “I am. However, I’m unsure that you should provide the information we seek” she said. The woman chuckled, then said “Well, I can provide all manner of things. Future tellings, how to find your true love, and even guidance”. She raised an eyebrow and asked “How?”. “Simple midear, I use magic” the sagely woman said “I specifically can channel my power to gain insight from the god of knowledge, Alephan. Nowadays, I can give about 10 readings before calling it a day. I just so happen to have 2 left”. Nemu considered it, before nodding and asking “How much for a guidance?”. The woman smiled and said “a mere 100 leaves”.

The woman’s hands glowed with magic power. Even without a staff to enhance it, the power flowing from them made Nemu tremble. A single attack spell from this woman could probably ruin a city block. However, the woman sent the power into the crystal ball, which seemingly devoured it like a starving wolf. The woman suddenly spoke, saying “To find that which is hidden, find the place the dead walk. Search above as below for secrets untold”. Nemu stared at the crystal ball, when suddenly the voice continued “Inside the sanctuary of healing, you will find an ally in need. Hesitate not to assist, for your journey is just as dire. Alone you shall die. United you shall stand”. The woman’s magic power suddenly vanished and she gave a hard cough as she recovered. “I see. That was a wondrous display of force. Thank you, miss” Nemu said. The woman nodded, saying “I was paid to do a job and I did it. However, it’s rare he speaks directly through me”. Nemu stopped and stared, shaking her head a few times. “Excuse me?” she questioned “Shouldn’t that kill a person?”. The woman laughed and said “Please. If I died because a god puppeted me for a few minutes, I’d be no priestess of Alephan”. Nemu smiled, standing and said “Well then. Thank you for the assistance, priestess. I shall heed it. Good day”. The old woman returned her parting words as Nemu left.

She didn’t need much to decipher parts of the message. The place the dead walked was clearly referring to a graveyard, while the sanctuary referred to a hospital. She’d gain an ally that had troubles of her own that would need her assistance and that she should help to get the assistance. She decided to head for the hospital, since that was where her ally, whomever they were, awaited. She first headed back to the car. It was while she got in that a message came through on her portable radio. “We acquired lodging. It’s the Varity Hotel. 2 blocks west, 2 south, then 3 west from the car” the officer told her. She clicked the switch on the left and said into the radio she retrieved from inside her cloak “Understood. I’m heading to the hospital on a tip of someone in need that could also potentially help us out”. “Understood” the officer responded “We’ll be at the station when you find it. Remember. Report back when you find it and report when you finish sweeping. Any problems, call it off and report”. “Understood. Thank you, officer Juarez” she replied, then put the radio back in her cloak. She headed for the hospital in her car, one of 4 in Wellspring. The east district hospital. It stood, looming in the distance. It used be a empire nobleman’s estate that was built as a consulate to the king of Mars. However, after a series of unfortunate events, it was abandoned for some time. 200 years ago, at the height of the medical revolution, it was converted into a hospital.
Nemu entered and looked around. No one in particular stood out. It was then however someone else entered beside her. “Excuse me” the woman said as she walked in, wearing the white coats all doctors wore. Behind her was a pink haired young woman. She watched as the female doctor walked forward and asked “Excuse me. Do you have the lab results I requested for the patient? This girl’s father?”. The receptionist nodded and gave her a manilla folder. Whatever was in there irritated the doctor, whom said aloud “Are you serious? This disease? I thought it died out after the creation of the empire”. The nurse said “Well, we can’t fake results”. The doctor sighed and said “It’s alright. Thankfully most of these I can get. The problem will be getting Ogre Eagle feathers. Good day”. With that, the doctor walked away. The woman accompanying her asked her “So, what do we do? I don’t have much, but I can give 2000 leaves to help pay”. The doctor just smiled and turned, saying “Don’t worry about it. Just go see your father. My medicines have brought him from the brink, so he’s sociable. However, I need to work on a long-term cure, so if you’ll pardon me”. With that, the doctor began to walk away. She decided to try her hand now and said “Excuse me”. The doctor turned, looking at her. She said “Sorry, I’m a bit busy. Can it wait?”. She shook her head and said “I don’t seek that kind of help or request. I come offering trade. My help for yours. I just happen to be searching for a particular place that may hold many a wondrous liquid. However, the state it’s in is unknown and I’m not even sure if it’s safe. Help me to explore and investigate its depths, and you can keep anything you find. On the flip side, even if you find nothing, i’ll help you find these ‘Ogre Eagle Feathers’ that you seek for your medicine”. A simple trade of services.

The doctor looked her up and down, as if trying to discern her true motives before saying “The patient is healthy enough to survive for a week minimum. So I could help you. How do I know what you say is true however?”. She was right to be suspicious. However, she had prepared for this and said in her natural tongue “Den epidióko na sas paraplaníso. Miló álithiea. Tóra parakaló, me voithíste”. The doctor looked taken aback and in shock. Everyone in the room stopped to look. “I assure you, it’s not the language of these ‘northerners’ I have heard about, doctor. It merely is a an older dialect of yours, nothing more” she said, trying to assure the doctor she wasn’t a threat. The doctor, while she looked more suspicious, said “Well, that is a foreign tongue and it is as you claim not Northerner. Fine, you have a deal, though I’m watching you”. Smiling, Nemu offered a hand and said “I’m Nemu Cias. What’s your name, thine associate?”. The doctor offered her hand and said “I am Ristra Abraham. I’m a famous doctor back in Whispermill. A pleasure to meet you. Now where are we going?”. “The grave collection” she replied, before turning to leave, leaving Ristra completely speechless.

“So” Ristra said as she got into the car with Nemu “Can you explain what you need help with?”. “Now that we’re out of the hospital, absolutely” she replied. “See, I’ve been hired by the High Emperor to investigate secret labs that apparently were built under the empire’s nose. However, due to the war effort he won’t risk any officers or military forces. However, since I have magical talent and came from one, he’s leaving the task to me. In fact, my showing up exposed their existence. Though at a cost. I’m what they call an Amenisac” she explained, turning on the car and beginning to drive. “Amnesiac” Ristra corrected and then said “If I hadn’t heard your foreign tongue, and were I not desperate, I’d leave right now. However, you’ve proven your not normal”. Nemu smiled and said “I do appreciate it, miss Ristra. Now about these ogre feathers. Why do you need them?” she
asked. “Well… I come from a town up north, whispermill. I was a doctor. A pupil of mine’s dumb decision led to it being trashed. It’s operational now, but some people vanished during the whole event. One such person turned out to being held in Stilsnow for ransom. Needed a rental, but it was in contention. After reaching an agreement with a young lady worried about her father here in town, I got it. However” her voice trailed off at the end of her explanation. Nemu didn’t need to guess though. She knew why she remained.

As they talked, they had arrived at their destination. A large cathedral made purely of nephrite stood before them. “Ahhh… the oldest graveyard in wellspring” Ristra said. Nemu turned and asked “Really? What’s a graveyard also?” “A graveyard is where people bury their dead. It was an especially big thing before the founding of the empire” Ristra answered “The cathedral is a new addition, but the graveyard has existed since even before the first rising of Galdera”. There was that word again, Galdera. “Who’s Galdera?” she asked. “The thirteenth god, lord of the infernal flame. He desires to destroy humanity. He is well known as betraying everyone he supposedly ‘favors’. It’s against the 4th covenant to worship him” Ristra explained. “Well then. Makes the 4th Covenant make a lot more sense” Nemu said. “Well, let’s get this over with. If your lab is anywhere, it’s here” Ristra said, before opening the doors, which shuddered with a loud creak, the walls groaning as if threatening to crumble. Nemu walked in with Ristra, with Ristra continuing “After all. Why build such a large thing with such odd materials if nothing is here?”. Nemu nodded, it did make sense to her. However, their discussion was interrupted by movement to their left. Turning, Nemu whispered “Hikari” into her clenched first and it began to glow brightly. Suddenly, they were staring at a pair of gargoyles flanking them.

Barely registering what was going on, Nemu reacted instantly, retrieving her wand, waving it in an arc and saying “Tsurara!”. The gargoyle leapt for her, its claws outstretched, avoiding her icicle attack. However, before it reached her she muttered as she touched her feet “Janpu” and her feet glowed green and exuded a small amount of power. She jumped upwards, aiming her rod downwards as the Gargoyle was about to strike her and spoke aloud “Arashi”. The claw struck the ground, splintering it and forming spider-webbing cracks in the ground. However, before it could even turn, a bolt of lightning surged from Nemu’s rod and slammed into its back, forcing it into the ground. It cried out in pain as the electricity discharged into the ground and steam rolled off it. As it got up however, its body suddenly went limp. Nemu’s rod had been used to smash the head where most of the monsters magic lied, which gave it movement. After all, gargoyles were just animated statues. “That was too close for comfort” Nemu said to herself before looking at Ristra.

As Nemu fought, Ristra did too. She immediately dodged the Gargoyle’s first strike, reaching into her cloak and retrieving some vials. Defensive chemicals she kept on her. In this case, hydrofluoric acid. She threw them forward, the vials breaking on the gargoyle’s stone exterior. It turned and screeched as the acid steamed and burned, melting the animated statue. However, it was not enough. The gargoyle was barely affected. It rushed for her, and her only response was to pull out a gemstone this time and toss it. An icy blue gemstone flew and smashed into the gargoyles head, which had an icicle staked into it from the point of impact. It stopped moving after that, its magical core destroyed.
Sighing in relief, she turned to check on Nemu and was glad to see she was fine. “That was unexpected” she commented “A sign we’re in the right place?” Nemu nodded, pulling her journal out and noting the gargoyles. She then turned towards deeper in. “We need to watch our back. If not for my light spell, we’d have been ambushed” Nemu said, moving deeper in. Ristra checked her acids and was glad that her stronger stuff was still available.

Nemu meanwhile checked her rod. It was still standing and her mana pool wasn’t severely affected. “Are you fine?” Nemu asked. “Yeah” Ristra replied “More dangerous than I thought. I’m going to arm myself if that’s fine”. Nemu nodded and watched as Ristra produced some sort of glasswork and over the next 15 minutes used it to brew up some chemicals. She wasn’t sure what, but they were strong stuff from the smell. Once they were put into vials, the glasswork was put away. They then continued into the cathedral. They searched the place, finding no strangely placed monsters or anything out of place, until the bell tower. It was here Nemu noticed something. “Hikari” she whispered into her fist and held it up. “Well, well” Nemu spoke “This rope isn’t for the bell”. “Really?” asked Ristra. Nemu nodded and reached for it, to pull it. Ristra readied herself as Nemu pulled it. It was warranted, as suddenly a pair of large bats descended from above at the sound of grinding stone. Nemu reacted quickly, saying “Kakyu!” loudly. A small ball shot forth from her extended rod, and as it neared the twin bats, erupted into a small but powerful explosion of fire! Ristra took cover behind an open door as the bats were sent veering off course by the force of the explosion into walls. Not missing a beat, Nemu turned to one and shouted “Arashi!” which caused a lightning bolt to fly into a bat at it fell, electrocuting it instantly. Ristra meanwhile rushed from her hiding spot, tossing more vials of hydrofluoric acid onto the bat. The first two landed on its back and face respectively, burning and certainly maiming it, even rendering it flightless after a minute. However, even after a 20 ft. drop that didn’t kill it, it was alive and ready to fight. However, she had been prepared and tossed a final vial as it screech at her with an extremely high pitch, forcing her to cover her ears. It closed its mouth, crushing the vial that had been lobbed into its mouth right then, and swallowing the acid within as a consequence. It screeched more and more before its scream died down and with a final gasp fell over lifeless.

Nemu looked at Ristra. They seemed to be fine so Nemu decided to focus on the discovery that woke the bats. Heading for the door, she smiled big as her prize was uncovered. “Bingo” she said aloud, standing in front of an open trapdoor. Ristra walked over, straightening her clothes out and saying “A trapdoor. That was opened by the bell tower rope. This sounds like a mystery alright”. Nemu nodded and jumped down, clapping her hands together and whispering “Osoi Aki”. As she neared the bottom, suddenly a gust of wind surged around her, slowing her fall to a crawl, letting her land safely. She could hear Ristra above jump. She whispered, clapping her hands together in the process, “Kanojo o yukkuri taosu” and then held her hands out to catch Ristra. Like before a surge of wind slowed Ristra’s fall, though this time into Nemu’s arms, who then slid Ristra onto her feet. “Thanks” Ristra said. Nemu nodded and said “Of course. If’d be rude form to let my mally be harmed” with a smile, then walked down the hallway before them. Ristra stared for a moment before it made sense, then followed. As they continued, Nemu kept her light spell on to keep the hallway lit. It was then they truly made progress.
The brickwork gave way to tempered steel and a grated floor. Cable-like pipes could be seen underneath. Ristra looked down and asked “Why are there pipes here?”. “Simple” Nemu replied “Providing power throughout the facility… or perhaps magic”. “Isn’t mixing magic and science against the 10th covenant though?” questioned Ristra “Who could set up a facility with no one noticing that is blatantly against it?”. Nemu shrugged and said “I dunno. Could be a later modification, but I feel magic beneath and around us. The nephrite was warping my magic-based senses but not now”. Ristra looked around. She was far less magically inclined, working in a field that mostly relied on technology and mixing the two would cause her legal troubles since it’d fly in the face of the 10th Covenant, but she knew a small bit of magic and so had magical senses. Called the other senses. The first, called the 6th sense, was the ability to hear magic around you. All mages had it. The 7th sense allowed someone to actually feel magic, while the 8th sense let someone see it, and the 9th sense let the magically inclined directionally sense magic, since it incorporated all the other magic senses, though other senses could compensate for the lack of one. All the sensations caused by magic in the world varied from mage to mage, but the general consensus was there was something there that while natural was not part of what one could call the natural world. However, real study into it was stifled by the empire. The 10th covenant clearly stated that the mixing of science or technology was strictly forbidden and the punishment for the crime of doing so was a 4000 leaf fine and 20 years in jail. Thus, a facility like this was highly illegal and with the extent she suspected the Council of Kings would likely be extremely offended by its very existence.

As they walked deeper inside, the walls went from solid to grated as well, showing an expansive series of pods similar to the one she dreamt of. Ristra could only gasp and say “Gods, what the hell is this?”. Nemu wrote in her journal about it, then replied “I don’t know. Whomever made this is well connected to hide it. I get the feeling now the nephrite was intentional. It’s a mineral that inhibits magic and I have a feeling the steel we passed is lined with it”. Ristra said “This is too much. Whomever set this up is too dangerous…” her voice trailing off as they reached the stairs. “Then you can return” Nemu said, turning “I’ll get you back up and you can go on your way. I have a job to do though so I must remain”. Ristra visibly struggled internally, and was silent for several minutes before saying “Alright. Let’s continue”. Nemu nodded and descended the stairs with Ristra. Immediately Nemu stopped her and said “Magical defenses. This one is an alarm” she said, before kneeling down and placing a hand on the ground and saying “Maho o Mitsukeru!”. A wave of magic washed forth, and Nemu watched it carefully before saying “This is going to take a few minutes. These alarm spells apparently activate the magical security”.

Nemu was sweating a bit. The formulae involved in these alarm spells was complex for each and required stressing the right part of each equation in order to make them dissipate naturally. Anything else might alert the security. It would definitely alert the live element to the security if there was any, though based on the automation of all the magic around her, she was guessing that whomever made this facility was trying to cut back on using as much staff as possible. After all, she could sense the magical security from there. Gargoyles certainly among other things. She began with this first hallway of pods. She held her rod to the floor and a finger to the line and spoke “kyu seicho, shi chinbotsu, ni hangu, san hozon” silently. As she did line upon line of magical thread unraveled in the hallway before them before Nemu stood and said “We can proceed”. She stepped forward, nothing moving as she did. Ristra followed, asking “That seemed complex”. Nemu nodded and said “I had to flow specific mana shapes and types into the threads in specific locations. The previous spell provided me a cipher to get that information, but I still had to pull it off”. “Is all magic like that?”
Ristra asked. Nodding, Nemu said “Indeed. I would say magic is a science into and unto itself. It flows through our world and interacts with it very naturally”. She continued as she turned a hall and said “Frankly, it baffled me when I first discovered and realized the ramifications of the 10th covenant. I get how dangerous the two practices mixed could be, but still…”. Her voice trailed off as she stopped and looked into a pod. A live person was inside of it. She walked over and saw a monitor similar to the heart monitor she was connected to at the hospital.

The person's vital signs were all normal. Her eyes widened and she interacted with the provided input board. She recalled on dreams and some force in her head to use the technology as intended. “What are you doing?” Ristra asked right as the monitor displayed information. Nemu looked at it. “Huh… that’s an unusual amount of iron in their blood. Way too much. Moving would be impossible” Ristra commented. Nemu looked more and said “Their mana amount is exceptionally high” and wrote in her journal as, using the input board, she cycled through information. More anomalies showed up. The man, despite having a large mana pool, was a regular person, from Whispermill of all places. “Wait… this person. They don’t resonate with an element?” she said, talking to herself. Ristra asked “Is that important?” Nemu nodded and said “Even your average janitor has some resonance with an element. Not having one… I’d almost assume this is a flesh puppet of some kind”. She got a thought and asked herself “Wait. are all of them like this?” before moving on to the next pod and checked. Then the next. Her fears were relieved but more questions. Ristra said “A person with full resonance and a person with resonance with only light and dark, two contradictory elements… what is going on?”. Nemu stared at the monitor before her eyes widening, saying “Are they trying to manufacture monsters?”. Ristra looked and asked “Isn’t that impossible since human DNA and your average monsters DNA are inherently different?”. Nemu nodded and responded “Normally, but they are messing with the mana in people. That changes things”.

She then questioned “I’m guessing there’s no study about the relation between a person's genetics and their mana?”. Ristra answered “No. Forbidden, by the 10th covenant. Before the empire, they lacked the technology to do any kind of extensive DNA study”. Nemu sighed and said “I thought so. We need to finish our sweep and report this. If my fears are confirmed, then we have a major problem”. Moving quickly, Nemu and Ristra continued through, wincing at some of the sights. Some pods contained real monsters that had morphed slightly into humans, and some just contained floating bits of blackened flesh. Soon enough, they finished and had arrived at the research center of the facility. A room hanging above the center, about 100 feet off the ground, and 100 feet from where they first descended. Nemu opened the door and they both stared. Before them stood a man in a white lab coat.

The man turned at the door opening, alarmed and afraid. He was bald and only had a grey mustache on his upper lip and wore gold-framed glasses. “What!? Who are you people!?” the man demanded. “Well, well there is someone here” Nemu stated, writing in her journal. The man noticed this and with wide eyes asked “Wait, are you with the empire!?”. Nemu only nodded, putting it away. “Yes we are. I’m Nemu Cias. Sorry, but you’re under arrest” she replied. The man shouted, pushing the table over between them “Never!” and ran through another door in the room, that until now had been
cloaked by magic. “Dammit, get back here mister!” Nemu shouted, running to chase after the man. Ristra a bit dazed, followed after Nemu. She wasn’t keen on combat, but wasn’t about to back out of a deal. She knew there was a risk of combat after all and had stuck around thus far. They chased the man through his escape tunnel, which had more cables and wires, and came to a large table. 50 feet on all sides, the man stood before a table with many monitors and a few input boards. It also had a ham radio attached, which the man was trying to operate. In frustration he said “Dammit what was the damn channel!” Nemu shouted “Halt or I’ll use force!”.

The man growled, turning. “I have no choice” he said, before pressing a few keys quickly. “I mean it!” Nemu said, making her rod glow with discharging mana to show she meant business. “So do I!” the man retorted “I won’t die here! I’ll use our research to get rid of you and flee! I can always rebuild!” Slaming his finger onto a button, an alarm suddenly sounded. “Shokkusutan!” Nemu shouted, waving her rod in a circle, then flicking her wrist and sending a tiny bolt of electricity towards the man. He wasn’t able to dodge and screamed as he felt his body lock up. Nemu sighed and turned to the entrance, asking “Ristra, can you block that?” Ristra nodded, saying “Yeah”. She walked to the entrance and held both palms to either side of the entrance and said a single word as ice covered the entrance, forming a thick layer of ice “kotta kabe”. Nemu moved the man to his back and formed basic bonds with manifested mana. It was then both of them felt their hearts drop. A noise emanating from the room of a pod opening. Nemu in particular felt terror creep into her, while Ristra inherently knew from the sound something was different about the room she was in. Both Nemu and Ristra turned and saw the single pod that had been in the room opened. Something stepped out of it. Something humanoid but not human.

“Gods, please no” Ristra prayed, while Nemu could only stare. Before her stood a massive giant of a humanoid. 15 feet tall, brimming with muscle, tanned icy blue with smoldering icy blue eyes, and veins bulging and dark purple in color. The thing wore nothing but there was a peculiar oddity. The thing before them had an exoskeleton, though not fully. Parts of the skin had an extra layer of pure iron that while solid flexed and bent like skin. “What the hell is that thing?” Nemu muttered, unable to comprehend what she was looking at. “That… that is a northerner nemu. The things trying to invade the empire!” Ristra responded, then turning and glaring at the man in the lab coat and demanded “You! What the hell did you do!?” The man laughed maniacally and said “My servant! Destroy these trespassers!” The thing didn’t respond however. “My servant! I order you to destroy these trespassers!” the lab coat man demanded. Nemu turned and said “Quiet!”. “You be quiet wench! My perfect creation will annihilate all of you!” the man said. Suddenly, the thing jolted, as if suddenly awake. It looked around, and when it spotted them it stared, switching its gaze between them. Nemu stared back, barely able to contain her fear. She could see its mana with her 7th sense, it was massive. The mana pouring from this ‘northerner’ was as much as 50 men combined. “Ristra!” she yelled, turning “Run! This thing is too dangerous!” right as it roared.

The roar sent both of the girls into shock. They fell to the floor, shuddering and unable to move. The man passed out. After the roar, the girls scrambled to their feet. Ristra turned and ran out of the
The thing moved to follow, then stopped as a bolt of lightning struck its arm, electrocuting it. It gave a guttural groan of annoyance and turned. Nemu glared at it. She wasn’t about to let it hurt Ristra. “Kakyu!” she shouted, sending a ball of fire towards the thing through her rod. The ball exploded as it impacted with the thing’s hand as it swatted it away, burning it. However, it barely reacted to this. She glared and tried to discern its weakness. She twisted her wand and said “Sanda!”, after which a lightning bolt flew out. Unlike before, the bolt sustained itself for several minutes. She focused it on the giants head, which roared in rage. Despite her body going into shock, she managed to keep the bolt focused on the giants head. It moved to swipe away the bolt, but failing to until a finger of iron connected and changed the direction of the arc. It then flailed its finger, trying to remove it entirely. Then, the spell dissipated. She panted a bit. That was a heavy spell. She still had enough for a few more spells like that, but based on how the thing acted even after that, she wasn’t confident. She was running out of options. She stood up fully, her and it locking eyes. She then had a premonition. She was going to die there. “Heh…. wow. That’s sad” she said aloud, to no one in particular “Dying here, alone… with no memories. To this… thing no less. Ah well… at least she’s fine”.

She quickly ran for it. She headed opposite of the entrance to this room. She ran for the pod specifically. She had an idea. She wasn’t sure it’d work, but she needed it to. She looked at the thing, stopped, then pointed her rod and whispered “Buraindo”. A veil of shadows descended onto the things head as it turned and took a step towards her. It reached up to grab the veil but couldn’t. It tried again and again. Satisfied, she continued. She knew the spell would only last a few seconds, especially with that thing’s magical capability. It was then she realized it wasn’t just for show. With a great roar, it suddenly burst with great light. She covered her eyes, but continued. She needed to reach the pod. She needed the mana it could provide. She lowered her arm, realizing that the light had subsided. However, it was now running for her. It closed the distance easily, reaching for her. “Janpu!” she yelled in panic, tapping her rod to her foot and jumping forward. Even with the improved leap strength, it clipped her leg. She yelled in pain, feeling a great pain where it grazed her. Landing, she looked and was mortified. Just a simple grazing thoroughly bruised her leg. A full blow would have killed her and she wouldn’t be able to dodge forever. Thankfully, she was only a foot away from her goal. Running over and turning around, she dipped her cloak into the remaining liquid mana. She felt the effects of this action instantly.

She felt the mana flow through her cloak into her. At first, it merely topped her off, filling her with mana. Then it began to give her extra mana. She knew what’s come next. The symptoms leading up to mana poisoning. However she didn’t need to worry. She aimed her rod, willed mana through it and began to perform one of the strongest spells she apparently knew. She wrote a magic circle containing a complicated formulae and equation. She spoke as she wrote, the thing turning and approaching. “Kōri no chie, arashi no kanōsei, hi no ishi” she chanted, glowing as she did. She then said a single word and placed her rod in the center of the circle to complete the spell, saying “Suisei!”. Right then, a ball of pure energy formed and became cloaked in an icy mist, a blazing flame, and roaring electricity. It was then hurled forth at incredible speeds! The giant had no time to react and was blasted in the chest, forcing it to fly backwards into the far wall, denting it heavily as the spell exploded furiously. Nemu’s glow upon casting the spell went out and the liquid mana evaporated. Nemu panted heavily and felt exhausted, collapsing in front of the pod. She moved herself so she was sitting against it. “Heh… what a spell I pulled from my old memories…. Whatever remains” she mused “Still unstable though… a theory? Whatever it was, seems it did the job”. She
stopped however, and her eyes widened. She saw the mana aura still. It was now compact around
the giant but still there. The beast was bloodied badly, but not dead. Worst, it could still move as it
pried itself from the wall with a mighty shrug. “No… way” she said with a defeated tone. She then
laughed and wondered aloud “I wonder… if Ristra made it out in time…?”.

Suddenly, glass shattered at the giants feet. It stopped and looked down, seeing smoke rising. At first
it just stared, then ran away from it, and then it roared. Nemu looked over and saw
Ristra sitting near a wall, vials on the ground around her. She was happy to see Ristra had came back
for her on one hand, but dreaded what it meant in the other. However, Ristra’s words gave her hope.
“Don’t worry. He’s done. They hid a failsafe in the room that guy there was in. I just added a little
something to make it airborne” Ristra said with a smirk. Nemu smiled and replied “Thank gods, I’m
glad. You saved me”. The giant meanwhile fell over and began to flail angrily. As time went on, it
slowed and slowed, and its roaring died down until eventually it stopped moving and stopped
roaring. In fact, as far as Nemu can tell, the chemicals Ristra had used killed it. She slowly stood, and
nearly fell over, only to be caught by Ristra. “Wow there” Ristra said “Your body isn’t strong
enough. Your mana levels are too low”. Nemu raised and eyebrow, asking “I thought science and
magic was against the emperor’s law?”. “Maybe, but this knowledge was known far before the
empire” Ristra countered “It’s only been reinforced since”.

Nemu redid the man’s bindings and then used the portable radio. “Hello, officer Greg, do you hear
me?” she asked. She asked several more times before she heard a groggy voice ask “Nemu, do you
even know what time it is?”. “No, I don’t since I’m currently in a large, underground laboratory,
sitting next to the dead body of a northerner that’s been experimented on” she answered. At first
there was silence, then a gasp and shout of “Where are you!?” “The oldest graveyard. Inside the
cathedral and in the trap door on the ground floor of the bell tower. You may have to pull it to open it
if it isn’t already open. My associate will guide you to me and the body. I also have a prisoner”
Nemu reported. She could heard the scramble as the officer replied quickly “Understood. Thank you
very much. Officers are enroute”. Then the line went silent. Ristra sighed and said “You know, I
didn’t offer”. Nemu replied “I know, but i’m in no position to move. Doctor’s orders”. Ristra could
only laugh and say “Fine. Remember, you still need to help me!”. Nemu smiled as Ristra walked
away. She decided then to pass out from exhaustion.
She took her car and drove to Quarrycrest. It was a fairly straightforward route from Grandport, the seat of Galia, the Merchant’s Kingdom. She did have to pass through various other kingdoms, but this was fine. No paperwork was required, as Northerners were obvious to any empire citizen and there were no other races to speak of that looks like an empire citizen. Sure, there were the animalkin races, but they primarily were bandits and despite having lived through the creation of the empire, had not improved their intelligence or even societies since the time of heroes before the Empire.

Further, the main roads were well-patrolled and so she had no problems. At least until she entered the Rich Kingdom, Rave. The reason the path wasn’t as well-patrolled was because of the terrain. Ambushes were easy to pull off to unaware patrolman and so the police adopted a group policy. No patrols without at least ten officers in a group. As such, birdian raids were common on travellers at specific times. Which led to her current predicament.

She, against her better judgement, decided to drive through the cliftlands during times when raids were common. She was riding on a small chance she’d either not be attacked or she could outrun them. Unfortunately, the particular band of birdians that assaulted her were a bit more clever. They laid down crude caltrops that ruined her car tires, forcing her to bail or risk plummeting a few miles into a canyon. She had used the slow fall spell to ensure surviving the bail. However as soon as she hit the ground she used the spell ‘Sidestep’ and ran for it, gun drawn. She was glad as wind burst next to her, making her avoid a thrown spear. Turning, but not slowing, she saw the birdian swarm. 10 birdians, all of them flying and wielding spears. She whispered waving her arm from side to side “Wakimichi!”. Feeling a slightly breeze around her, she continued running. She knew their next attack wouldn’t be one spear however and had to find cover. Thankfully, she had studied the map for just this reason. There was a tunnel nearby that could serve as quick cover or even an emergency escape into the city. It was primarily used by service trucks hauling valuable minerals out of the Quarrycrest mining operation, but it could be used as an emergency escape from Birdian raids.

That’s when she felt the wind explode and side her into the cliffside, dodging a spear. She stopped and turned as one more that had been thrown grazed her cheek, stabbing into the wall next to her. Rather than dwell on her near death experience, she raised her gun and fired a shot into the swarm. She watched as one fell from the sky and plummeted into the canyon below it. The other birdians squaked in shock and surprise before flying down to aid their comrade. She took the opportunity to run ahead, knowing she’d only have a minute before the swarm recovered and attack with what they had left. Sure, she could try to fight them. She might even win. However, she was a business woman and knew the danger of taking high risk, low reward chances. It wasn’t worth it, nearly every time. She was better off running for it. Further, even if she did want to try fighting them, the cave provided
the best environment for it. Easily collapsible, cover, and she could make it a chokepoint. After a minute of running, Lapena arrived at the cave. She could hear the mad squaking from where she was and knew the swarm was back on the hunt. She quickly ducked into the cave and looked for cover, immediately finding a loose pile of rubble nearby. She ducked behind it.

The squaking got louder and louder as the birdian swarm approached the cave. They were searching near desperately for her, wanting revenge for their comrade. However they didn’t linger long enough to really search. They knew they were running on limited time and so spent a mere few minutes before retreating, at the sound of a running truck. She stood finally and rather than walk out turned and headed deeper inside. She ended walking a mile before she finally reached the service gates. A policeman on duty drew his pistol, though didn’t aim, merely asking “Excuse me, ma’am, but stop. Why are you coming in this way?”. “I was attacked by a birdian swarm. I retreated here after buying myself some time by injuring one of their comrades. Rather than risk discovery and damage, I opted to continue down the cave, knowing it was safe” she explained. The policeman stared but nodded, holstering his gun and saying “Alright. I understand. Even we get attacked every blue moon. Murph! Open the gate!”. With that, the gate slowly slide upwards to let her in. In she went, to Quarrycrest, the center of the Rich Kingdom Galia. All around her were merchants of various disciples, all peddling, bartering, and haggling for new minerals. One of the few commodities that could be applied to any field.

She herself however had other aims. She was hunting a potential story and she heard he’d been brought here by the gentleman from the bar back in Grandport. However, even after she used a little bit of hard knocks persuasion, the man refused to budge on the details of the chapter in Quarrycrest that handled the northerner in Quarrycrest, only that he was there and taken in absolute secrecy. It definitely had the makings of a good story to publish. It was simply a matter of getting to the northerner, getting his legal permission to print the story, then getting quotes and perspectives from the northerner to add to the book. Even if the northerner didn’t pen the book, she could find someone that would. Of course, there was the matter of locating the Northerner in the first place. Only by doing it could she get his permission, perspective, and quotes for the book. Further, she had to ensure that she’d survive the encounter if things went south, which based on stories she was confident she was, but a small part of her doubted it. Why she decided then to purchase some gem dust.

While not a practiced mage, she had by now interacted with several, whom while paying the company in leaves, would pay her with an unusual gift for telling their story from an unbiased perspective. They taught her a few tricks normals could use to use magic, even powerful stuff. While normal spells were well and good, they became better with gem dust. The grounded remains of a gemstone. Different kinds influenced different spells in different ways, but essentially every gemstone was associated with a particular element. Some were obvious, like Amber to Electric, Ruby to Fire, Sapphire to Ice, Jade to Wind, Onyx to Darkness, and Diamond to Light. However, some were different or not obvious. Jet would be thought to belong to Darkness, but it actually resonates with the element of fire. Likewise, one would think a Pearl would be light elemental for its color and purity, but it actually resonates with ice. Then you had the rare gems, like Orichalcum and
Skystones. Skystones with proper preparation could be used with any of the primary elements (Fire, Ice, Electric, Wind). Orichalcum was essentially a metal that resonated with literally any element. It could even resonate with multiple elements at once, something unheard of aside from the legends of heroes that fulfilled the Scholar role.

This was what she sought. Being of a windy persuasion one might think Lapena would go for jade gem dust. However, she had decided to do something unusual. She went for the unusual choice of going for the dust of a particular gem, specifically agate. Technically more a mineral than a gemstone, agate did resonate with magic and when dusted and used with assisting in certain spells and enchantments, it had to some mediocre results and for her purposes amazing results. Essentially it added vampiric qualities. It would drain one thing and add it to the wielder. In the case of agate, it would drain the mana of an enemy and add it to hers. Normally, it would not be particularly helpful, since mage’s had easy ways of gaining such abilities and not every enemy would have a particularly large pool. However, Northerners were known for their large mana pools, even if they never used them. For her, this was important as it’d allow her to cast her ‘Sidestep’ spells more frequently. Thus, it was best for her to get the agate dust.

As she suspected, finding agate dust was easy. A common dust type and often in low demand, it was also cheap. A mere 10 leaves to fill an entire spellbook or half a weapons locker of weapons. She bought 30 leaves worth. She knew what she planned to do. She then went about securing lodging to do her work. A motel in the center of town did well enough, 40 leaves for a night and being in the center of town and inconspicuous, it’d serve as a good central area to do her investigations. She paid for a month, not sure how long she’d be there. With tax, it was 1400 leaves, though it wasn’t an issue. Once she was in her room, she turned on the lights, closed the windows, locked the doors and windows, and prepared to do some dust application. She began with her spellbook, something all mages had. Less because remembering formulae was hard and more because in the heat of battle, remembering the hand motions, material ingredients, and mana outputs was very difficult to do and spellbooks were a reliable source of such information. Mages could use mana to simply levitate the books around and most trained themselves to read quickly so that spell books were usable on a field of battle.

In regards to applying dust to spells, in the old days, mages simply applied trial and error, as dangerous as that was. In modern times, there were catalogs that had the most up to date information regarding such things. Being of a magical persuasion, she did in fact keep such a catalog, though it was 4 years old and these released yearly with corrections, revisions, retractions, and sometimes additions among other things. She looked up agate dust and all the spells it interacted with positively. Finding what she wanted, she adjusted her formulae for her spells in her spell book to account and add the agate gem dust she had. After she was done, she closed everything and then stood. She needed to buy a new suitcase to replace the one she lost and other necessities that had fallen into the canyon during the birdian raid. She left her motel room to do just that. Luckily, the bazaar was open still and so getting most of them was easy. However, one thing she needed was the ability to contact her supervisor. As much as she’d like to think she could do this alone, she couldn’t. She needed someone to act as a voice of reason. She could also use a bodyguard, which made one interaction
As she shopped, she was going over offered guns, not finding anything acceptable, and came across an odd-looking man. He was dressed in a regular jacket and jeans, complete with leather boots and stuffy gloves and even wore what was called a hunter’s cap. However, what made him unusual was the large firearm slung over his shoulder and the fact his clothing had a camouflage pattern on it. The hallmarks of being a hunter by trade. One that likely could help her track the northerner. She approached the man, giving her best smile and asked “Excuse me, sir. Might I inquire about your trade?” The man looked at her, slightly surprised but overall calm. “I’m a hunter. Why?” he answered and then asked. She widened her smile a bit and said “Just what I’m in the market for. I have a particular quarry I need hunting. Not for dead, but I need something from him”. “A manhunt then. Not my normal trade” he replied, eyeing her now, almost with a suspicious intensity. She ignored it and continued, saying “In a sense, yes. I work for Stonegard Publishing Incorporated and I’m following a lead on a northerner with a story to tell. However, that’s all I have”. The man’s eyebrow raised in disbelief as he replied “The army has been very successful in keeping them up north. What’s one doing this far south of the border?”. His question hung in the air for a moment as she considered her options and responded with “That’s why i’m looking to hear and publish his story”.

She explained the situation and the hunter listened carefully. They had gone to lunch. After all, she was offering the hunter a job and from his demeanor he wasn’t against the job description she had given and her basic motivations. In the private setting of a conference room with room service at a rather nice restaurant, the hunter was more inclined to listen and she was more inclined to tell. “In a nutshell, I chased a rumor of an author, discovered through the police arresting me for looking for him that he was a northerner, and that he’s working with some secret order that’s ferrying him around. I just want to find him and get his perspective on the whole thing. If he pens the book, fine, but if not I can just find another author” she explained. “Well. If we’re going to work together, then we should know one another's name. I’m Zem Kolint” he greeted, offering a gloved hand. She shook it and replied “Lapena Sozella, at your service. I’ve heard about you. Best in your field. Bagged a grand wyvern when you were 20 right?”. He laughed and said “Nah. You must’ve missed the part where an investigation was done because my buddy alleged I’d stolen credit for the kill. He was right, but I was young, arrogant, and greedy. However, I was also stupid and didn’t realize we used different calibers and they shamed me in the papers”. She stared and then asked “Well. Even so, you have some repute no?”. Zem nodded and said “Yeah. Every hunt i’ve been a part of was in fact successful. Solo and team hunts. Only solo recently but still. My home has the trophies”. Nodding, she finished her meal.

Zem ate gracefully and with impeccable manners. He finished his meal likewise and she paid the bill. “So. I’ll agree to hunt the Northerner and get him alive. My rate is 1000 leaves per danger rating and that things at least a 12. Depending on the variant, could go as high as 24” Zem said. She nodded and said “I can pay that. If not, I’ll get a loan to pay you”. He nodded and said “Good enough for me. I’ll get to tracking. Once I find him, I’ll come to you for the hunting license, which I trust you’ll
have ready.”. Nodding, Zem turned and walked away, leaving her alone for the time being. Not wasting time, she paid for the meal and headed for the closest legal office. Thankfully, it was only a 30 minute walk. Once inside, she went to the entry desk and asked “Excuse me ma’am, does this office handle hunting licenses?” The secretary looked up and said “Yes ma’am, 3rd floor handles it. I can schedule an appointment with someone if you like. We have an opening today”. She nodded and said “Yes, I’d like that. I need to hire a hunter properly and I’d much prefer to do so legally”. The secretary nodded and told her “Alright. It’s an hour from now. If you prefer, you can wait in the waiting room on the third floor”. Lapena nodded and headed for the elevators.

It took an hour, as the secretary stated, before she was called into her appointment. A man in business clothes, with slicked back hair and a stunning complexion and deep blue eyes sat at a desk and gestured her to sit, which she did. “Miss Sozella, a sales representative of the Stonegarde Publishing Incorporated business, I find it odd you need a hunting license for a hunter you plan to hire. Might I inquire into the business of your planned transaction?” the man asked, then added “Also, the names William Felt”. She nodded and said “I can’t give too many details, business secrets and all that, but it’s more of a manhunt. I want the man alive, but I don’t know where he is. He’s being funneled around the empire by a shady group”. “Why would this group do this, miss? Any idea?” William asked, writing notes. “Absolutely. The man is a northerner” she replied. She smiled internally when she saw williams gaze snap to her, wide with panic, before dropping back to the dispassionate, stoic face she entered to. “Well then, miss Sozella. Normally, we’d call the police. However there are no laws on the books, except in the Faith Kingdom Silva, that we need to. So I will gladly process your license. However, I must inquire what you plan to do with this northerner” he questioned and explained. She smiled and answered “Get his perspective, some quotes, and have an author pen a book, then have my company publish the book”. William nodded, filling a form out now. He then stood and said “Then wait here miss. I’ll be back with your license shortly. You did say alive right?” She nodded and he walked off. 30 minutes later, he returned and offered a plastic card and a piece of paper, saying “Your contract and license miss. That’ll be 100 leaves”. Nodding, she paid and left.

When she returned to her motel, she found Zem waiting. Smiling, she said “Well, what a stroke of luck. I have your license and the contract”. He nodded and replied “Then let’s get the signing done and I can tell you what I found”. Nodding, she let Zem enter the room after her as she went in. She set the contract on the table and went to fix her hair up. Zem signed it and said “I found your northerner. He’s hanging out in the slums, near the mine entrance”. “I see. The group?” she asked. “Bad news” he said “Definitely have connections to the local nobility. They have police-class weaponry”. She sighed and said “Of course. I’m willing to bet that means that this goes deeper than I suspected”. Zem nodded at her in the mirror and replied “Yeah. It's worse with the northerner too. The thing was dressed really nice and conversing in the local tongue and knew manners. If I didn’t know any better, i’d say it was just one of us in a northerner body”. Lapena sighed a bit, finishing her hair and turning, asking “What are the chances of police helping us?”. “Slim to none, if you want him alive. They’re more likely to level the place than deal with an intelligent northerner” he answered. Sighing, Lapena said “Then lets get moving. That northerner won’t capture and interview itself” before moving to leave. Zem simply stared and asked “Wait, what? You’re still going after the thing?” with a tone of disbelief. “Absolutely” Lapena said “It’s what I’m paid to do. This job is just more hands-on than normal”.
An hour later, Lapena and Zem sat crouched behind a crate. They stood before a small warehouse in the middle of an empty lot. Crates were stacked everywhere. Most filled with gems, but other contents revealed their nature; magical necessities. Gemstones, curated wood, even some raw iron and skystones. In front of the warehouse stood two men. Both wore kevlar vests and helmets with face visors that hide their identity, and held Kalashnikov AK-47s, which normally were only held by police when conducting a raid on a place with armed combatants, like the estate of a drug dealer, or the house of a corrupt nobleman. “So. What should we do?” she asked Zem. He glanced at them from a small mirror he had on him. They were standing at the seemingly only entrance. “Well we could wait for the end beginning of the next shift of guards to take them out, which would give us plenty of time” Zem said “However, I already checked out the blueprints for this place at the local records office. It has a rather extensive underground facility. Such a place likely has a few entrances, especially secret ones”. “I see. All we need to do is find one?” Lapena asked. Zem nodded and said “Indeed. I even have a place in mind. The Quarrycrest Service Tunnel”.

“See” Zem said, as they walked down the tunnel “On a hunch I looked through the blueprints for this place. I found something strange. Look at the bend”. She did and found nothing wrong. “Look a it closer at the rock work. Notice how the pattern breaks?” Zem pointed out. When she did, she did find it odd. “See, the blueprints say the walls should be uniform. So why would such a glaring issue be overlooked?” Zem asked. She thought about it then her eyes widened and asked “Because the group paid off politicians to cover it up?”. Zem shook his head and said “What most people would assume, but no. Based on a contractors opinion I asked, who inspected it, it was likely done after the fact. Painted”. Her eyes widened and said “They did it after they finished, because they were paid to”. He nodded and said “Exactly. Thus, this must be a secret entrance”. “How do we get in?” she asked. Zem walked to the wall, placing a hand on it. He performed hand signs with his other hand and said “Shogeki, Parasu!”. Instantly, sparks came from the wall and suddenly a door that blended in with the wall became disjarred. Zem moved and pulled it open before turning and gesturing for her to go first, saying “Ladies first”. Nodding, Lapena walked in with him following.

The tunnel was as expected. Large and built to last. It had the signs of use one would expect from a trading company. She eventually stopped and inspected a piece of dropped cargo. “Wow! This is… Mithral!” she exclaimed. Zem didn’t say anything, just staring. She put the ore in her pocket and continued, musing “Who are these people? Is it possible that these guys are backed by a king?”. “If that’s the case, we’ve a problem. The High Emperor can’t take it lightly, but to execute a king would cause… problems” Zem said. She nodded and replied “Well we don’t know so it’s not quite our problem” before stopping. They had walked for about an hour and now came upon a door. Zem stepped forward and opened it slightly. “Two guards, asleep. Think you can take the one on the right?” Zem whispered. She merely nodded, readying some dust. Zem nodded and opened the door, rushing forward. Lapena followed suit, whispering “Kaze!” and holding her hand outstretched, palm facing the right-hand guide, letting dust fly outward. Instantly, the dust flew towards the man and the wind pressure slammed into his chest, slamming him against the wall. A loud cracking noise rang out as the man’s head slammed into the wall, knocking the man clean out. Zem meanwhile simply whispered “Sanda!” and sent a bird-shaped bolt of lightning into the man’s chest. The man didn’t die
from this, but he too was knocked out cold. Satisfied, Zem walked to the door they guarded and placed his hand on the keycode entry device and whispered “Shogeki, Parasu!”. The keycode went down and the door popped open slightly.

Inside they were amazed by the operation going underway. They hid amongst crates, avoiding armed patrols. However, it was all so precise. It almost made avoiding the patrols and security measures impossible. However, halfway into the underground complex beneath the warehouse, they realized something. The operation was far nastier than they anticipated. They expected a rebel group that the local police could quell and suppress easily, but now Lapena believed that the rebels might actually hold an advantage. In cages, some small and some large, were trapped monsters. Birdians, Ratkin, Lizardman, worms, wyverns, and even heaven birds were all trapped here. It was quite clear what their purpose was; war. This group planned to war with the empire and win, using the power of monsters. How, Lapena wasn’t sure, but it wasn’t anything pretty. However, the answer came quickly, as they neared the center they saw what looked like the entrance to an office. Before them stood two figures, a northerner in a dress suit with a tie and cloak and tophat. Next to him was a short man, no greater than 4 feet tall, that was incredibly lanky, almost bone-thin, with hair that waved and moved as if flame, yet not actually flickering like fire nor translucent like it. It was shades of red, yellow, and orange, sometimes showing white and blue. One finally spoke in an odd tongue, with a tone of inquiry “an d’fhuaire Sirius dràgon a chaidh a ghealltainn dhuinn?”. The northerner responded, saying “Chan e, tha an neach-malairt a ’gabhail ùine, gus dèanamh cinnteach nach tèid na h-uighean a ghaid”. The smaller one sighed, turning and saying “Tha mi a ’tuigsinn. tha ùine a ’ruith a-mach ge-tà. feumaidh sinn stad a chur air an aon bhreug mus tig dragh air”.

The northerner merely nodded, until an alarm went off. The northerner turned as a man approached, still armed, and said “Sirs, we have a problem! The secret entrance was discovered! The guards were out!”. The northerner responded, and shock against shock spoke fluent english, saying “Then hurry and get the escape vehicles ready. Gather every member and load up all the materials. Leave the dummy materials behind”. The smaller one piped up, saying “There’s some ruby dust amongst the dummy materials. I also managed to procure some unstable experimental chemicals. I think you can figure out the rest of the plan. Give this place until two days time before blowing it. We’ll leave first” and turned and walked into the office, the Northerner following. What struck Lapena was that while speaking his natural language, the Northerners tongue was far gentler on the ears, like listening to the sounds of a stream in the mountains at the beginnings of spring, while the smaller, red-skinned man spoke like a calm candle when speaking the northerners language, then had a booming bonfire tone when speaking theirs. It was very peculiar. If she didn’t know any better, they were using magic, but there was no such thing as language magic. Zem shook her and said “Come on, we need to go. They’re about to leave”. Lapena looked at Zem, then the office, then said “We can’t. I need to interview him. I need to know where he’s heading”. Zem asked “How do you plan to find out?”.

The plan was simple, they would disguise themselves. Her a new recruit, he a veteran guard. He didn’t know the mannerisms of a vet, but he knew how a guard acted. Thus, impersonating one should be simple. She would try to glean information on where they were headed by pretending to
be the recruit sent to ask where they’re heading. It wasn’t perfect, but it was a plan. Thus, they searched crates and eventually found what they needed. Dressing into them, they headed to do their posts. The office had been unguarded the whole time. As Zem pretended to have been assigned by a superior, she went inside, faking a shake and pretending to be skittish. There were some men in there, but so were the northerner and the stranger. “Who called you here?” the lanky one asked. “Not I” said the northerner. “We didn’t” the men said. “Th-the… other rookies uhh… sent me to ummm… ask you kind sirs where we uhhh… are heading” she said shakily. Her ploy worked and the short one sighed in exasperation, saying in the northerner language “Tha titania a ’toirt neart dhomh, leis na luchd-tòiseachaidh seo” to himself. The northerner merely reached down and with a large hand patted the smaller ones head and replied “ha fios agam, bràthair. chan eil sinn idir ge-tà, mar sin feumaidh sinn foighidinn a nochadh” before turning to her. “We were planning to go to Stonegard. We need additional information before we act against the false one. Go tell them that’s where the order is meeting” the Northerner said. She merely nodded, saluting, and turning to leave.

It was then she realized she made a mistake. “Wait!” the northerner shouted. She turned and asked in a shaky, shy voice “y-yes sir?”. He came around the table that had been in the middle of the room, only coming into focus now. It had a map on it, with a flag placed in several locations. Duskbarrow, Whispermill, Everhold, Boulderfall, and even Flamesgrace. However, one stood out to her in that moment. A flag for where the gate of finis publicly was, but also one in the middle of the Inner Sea. “That salute. Who taught you that?” the Northerner demanded, his voice toughening. “C-captain j-james sir!” she responded in the previous tone. The northerner growled and asked “bràthair, a bheil caiptean james san òrdugh againn?”. “chan e, chan eil sinne” the smaller one responded. She bolted. Zem had been conversing with someone when she did. “Hey, wa-” the person began before Zem smashed the butt of his rifle to knock the person to the ground, then aimed down to fire. “No!” Lapena shouted back “No time!”. Zem looked at her and without hesitating bolted as well, deciding to just believe her. It was a wise choice, as right in that moment, the northerner ran out, shouting “We’ve been infiltrated brothers! The intruders are there! Evacuate now!”. He and the others then fled elsewhere.

She and Zem bolted for the secret entrance. They were 2 stories down underground, and thus the logical route to take was the service tunnel. Because of the traffic, chasing them would be a bad move. However, they didn’t even make it that far. As they approached the entrance to the service tunnel, spotlights turned on and shone on then, then another painting a silhouette over them. They stopped, seeing many behind it. Zem turned and groaned, saying “Damn… they’ve got us outgunned”. She turned and spotted something truly beautiful. A man like a human, but with slender features, though not lanky. The man sported pointed ears that were a foot long, parts clearly more show than function. The hair was long, bent over the shoulders and going down half his body still. It was a leaf green color and the man’s eyes were a lime color. Yet, despite that they were still gorgeous. She felt herself grow a bit hot as she stared. His voice made her feel like her skin was on fire as he said in a serene, melodic tone “Ah, humans. I am Licmendi Lavon, assistant to my masters”. She nodded and he continued, Zem still holding the rifle. Licmendi said “Sadly, I must erase your minds. You must forget about us. Don’t resist, and it’ll go just fine and you’ll be on your way. Resist, and i’m sad to say it’ll hurt baby” with a seductive tone. However, one part snapped her out of her stupor.
“I can’t forget! I’ve been working so hard to meet him!” She said, backing up. Instantly, the others pointed guns at her. Zem likewise turned and rose his gun. “My lady, I do suggest not resisting. I must stress, resistance will bring pain, and not the pleasurable kind” Licmendi stressed. “I know” she said “I understand. Zem, put the gun down… I have a way out of this”. Zem didn’t, but Licmendi laughed and said “My lady, please, do not jest. We have you outgunned and overpowered. My kind is known for their extensively invasive magics”. “I know… but what if we could make a deal?” she said. “Ma’am, I don’t think they care” Zem said. However, Licmendi made a murring sound and said “Oh? I doubt you have anything of interest, but go ahead. With you captured, there is no time table to leave”. Zem stared, but then said “Fine. I’m going to put my gun down. Don’t shoot me”. He then crouched down, placing the gun down. Licmendi raised his hand, then lowered it, and the other men lowered their weapons. “Now then, little human, what would you like to offer in exchange for your memories?” Licmendi asked. “Memories, a meeting with the northerner, and transportation with you all” Lapena corrected. Licmendi laughed, melodious and like a symphony in and of itself. “My lady, that is a fine joke. If your serious, then you’ve got my interest piqued and my hopes high on your offer of service in exchange for such things” Licmendi said.

“Simple” Lapena said, straightening herself and saying “I’m a sales representative of Stonegard Publishing Incorporated. My company has published many a book in our time of operation for over 1000 years. I can’t promise many books, but with my connections, I can get specific titles. All for the terms I mentioned”. Licmendi stared, at first amused, then his face dropping into a professionals gaze. “I see” Licmendi said, the same smooth, melodic tone “Even if true, which i’m not convinced, it’s not quite enough. Need a bit more than that”. Lapena smiled a bit and said “If it’s just a bit you want, then I can promise to make the book we published based on the northerner’s story to be friendly”. Licmendi’s eyes widened a bit and he said “Wait. are you serious?” She continued “Absolutely. To prove it, I’d be willing to negotiate with my superiors to arrange harboring you and your order, provided your cause is just”. Licmendi stared, thinking. He finally said “You know what… I’ll do it on one condition. To prove you’re absolutely serious… both of you. Hand over every leaf you have”. Without hesitation, Lapena did so, walking confidently over, pulling her wallet out. Licmendi’s men raised their guns, but his raised arm made them not fire. She offered it to him, saying “That man was just hired. What he does is up to him”. Zem hesitated, taking several minutes before doing the same. Licmendi stared incredulously as he stared at their wallets in his palm. Now that she was close, she could see his light green skin color. He looked at them both finally and said “Alright. We have a deal. Guys, pat down and disarm the hunter. Girls, do the same to… excuse me madam, but what was your name?”. She smiled as she looked at him in the eyes and said “I am Lapena Sozella”
Chapter 13-The Warrior, Act 2

Chapter 13

The Brave and the Bold

He followed the northerner unit by car. He wanted to ensure they didn’t make it to the hollow before he could warn them. If they had knowledge ahead of time, he was sure they could defend themselves. Even caught by surprise, it wouldn’t amount to much, as the northerners would likely begin a siege, and reinforcements from the royal army would destroy them. However, he had a feeling there was more to this force than met the eye. An entire 500 man unit of northerners somehow crossed the border completely unprotected. It was unheard of. Thus, Sebastian had a theory that they used magic and rather than seeking conquest had a specific goal in mind. Though, what could lie in Victor’s Hollow was beyond him. It took him a week and a half to arrive, to which he was happy to see the city was fine. The officers saluted as he arrived in the military vehicle provided by the previous base. He rolled the window down and saluted back, asking “Hello sir. Might I make an official inquiry?”. The officer nodded and Sebastian asked “Have you seen or heard of any northerners in the area?”. The officer shook his head, responding “No sir, though I did hear about Northerners supposedly trying to take over a base north of Duskbarrow and failing”. Sebastian sighed and said “Thank you” before driving into the city proper.

Victor’s Hollow was one of the few locations that barely changed over the years, only growing in size and elevation. It expanded outward from the arena, with it being the center of the city. It served as the center of government for the champion kingdom, having been renovated multiple times. It held the champions office, the various legal chambers, and the arena and viewing stands. It also now held a military base within, towards the back. Soldiers were chosen from those that participated, though combatants could refuse. He was heading there now to talk to the high commander, one of four people allowed to interact with the king of Halihall, the champion kingdom he now stood in. The only other three people allowed to see the king without prior appointment or the kings initiative were the high emperor, the lawmaster, and the steward. He parked outside the arena and entered. It was his first time there, and he was partially in awe. He however suppressed his awe and focused on why he was there. He asked a nearby combatant that was preparing “Excuse me. Might I speak with the high commander? I am knight Sebastian, and I come on urgent business”. The combatant looked at him and said “Second floor, just follow the signs”. Nodding, Sebastian headed for the nearby stairs.

He sat in the office, waiting. He wasn’t feeling impatient, nor did he mind, but he did worry. Worry that the northerners would arrive and begin siege on the town. Not that they’d succeed, but such an act unawares would cost the city lives. It was then the door opened. He turned and saw a guard enter and say “Honorable High Commander is arriving! Please stand in reverence to her highship!”. He followed duty and did so, giving the national salute as a woman entered, who returned the salute.
She was quite different. She wore scholar robes and a kevlar helmet. What was unique were the gauntlets. They were made from mithril. A very rare metal that very few nations could get it, one of which was the only nation capable of acquiring it naturally, the next kingdom over. Specifically, Quarrycrest had numerous massive veins. Even with modern technology, they were still mining the veins found for now thousands of years. “Hail, High Commander of Halihall” he said, giving the cordial greeting of the empire. “Hail, brave knight of his majesty, High Emperor Fionne’s court. I am glad to see the emperor remembers us” she replied, dropping her salute. “Indeed. I came as soon as the commander of Northreach gave me some news” he said. “What news?” she asked, sitting at her desk after removing her pauldrons.

“That northerners slipped past the border. 500 total. They are enroute here. I came as fast as I could a week and a half ago” he said “Victor’s Hollow, she told me, was their likely target. Stilsnow is too unimportant and the trajectory makes for a poor flanking of the base north of Duskbarrow and even Duskbarrow itself”. The high commander stared at him for a moment before moving and working on paperwork, saying “Ah, is that all? Well, thank you for the warning. I’ll have the police prepare properly and our standing army”. He nodded and said “As expected. After all, Halihall is the kingdom of champions, and Victor’s Hollow its seat of government”. The high commander nodded and added “We also serve as the kingdom’s sword. We strike its enemies swiftly and with only the mercy the empire provides”. It was then an officer entered, looking flustered as he saluted and said “H-high commander Letrix! Urgent news!” in a panicked voice. “Yes?” Letrix asked. “There’s a northerner army outside our walls! They number 5000!” the officer said. “What!” sebastian yelled, standing “Are you sure!?”. The officer nodded and said “I swear it! I counted myself!” The high commander had stood and said in an authoritative tone “Send the order out! All forces, prepare for battle, take your stations! Spread information on sighted units!”. It was then he saw a ting of fear in the Letrix’s eye. “High Commander, that’s just it! It’s not just northerners, but other strange humanoids!” he said. Letrix moved and put her pauldrons on, then turned asking him “You coming?”. He only nodded as he left with her.

He had kept his polearm and saber on him since Northreach. The northerners had ramped up the war effort and actually crossed the border with a decent force. However, he never expected 5000. He and the High Commander were escorted to the city wall. A massive perimeter wall that was built using magic but natural materials. It was torn down and remade as the city expanded. Once on the wall, they saw it. 1000 regular northerners, 100 mages, but the rest were different kinds of foreigners. Using binoculars, the high commander clicked her tongue in frustration and said “I hate to say it, but we may be in trouble. There’s all kinds of northerners down there”. “What? But they’re only blue. I thought the rest-” he began when the commander cut him off, offering the goggles. He accepted them and looked, then gasped. The most human-looking one had large, foot-long ears. There were short, dark-skinned and lanky humanoids. There were 2000 of the tall ears and 1000 of the short ones. However, this only accounted for 4100 of their number. Standing at the front and making up an additional 900 were small floating creatures. They looked human but were slender and blue, and no taller than 1 foot. They clearly wore some kind of armor. The one at the front wore some kind of runed stone armor and flew with incredible ease. It flew up towards them, the high commander raising an arm to get the men to prepare to fire. They did and it stopped 40 feet away.
“Good day, my fellow mortals. I am one named Swinsie. I am the general in charge of this force” it said in their tongue. The tone and accent was like that of a crackling, busted light bulb. He frowned but Letrix demanded “What do you northerners want with our empire? Why do you war with us?”. Swinsie smiled and said “I have not received exact orders, but we are following a prophecy from on high, from our beloved council, the fates”. “Well, northerner, tell your fates that if they wish to fulfill it, they can do so peacefully or not at all. The Balacruf empire will not bend the knee to one whom is not our glorious high emperor of the Balacruf line” she responded, with a slight growl to her voice, almost animalistic. The small thing smiled a bit and said “I would like to resolve this peacefully, but we need one thing. Access to the arena. We wish to claim the holy relic there”. “No deal. There is no relic, and even if there were, we would not trust a northerner with it” Letrix said. “Then we war. Simple as that. Best of luck, lass” it responded before flying back to the army below, shouting in the northerner language “ mo chàirdean! ullaich airson blàr! tha an luchd-deasachaidh a 'diùltadh ar n-ìomhaigh cheart dhuinn! tha sinn a-nis a 'cosnadh cogadh naomh! airson urram agus glòir!”.

Sebastian stared down, watching the various kinds cheer their leader. He turned to the high commander and said “I think we misjudged the northerners”. “Why would you say that, knight? Have you turned coward?” Letrix spat. He shook his head and explained his thinking “No. that however was not just a northerner. It was a rational one, one that spoke our language. Have we ever really examined a northerner?”. She stared at him, then at the northerners below, saying “You make a fine point, something I seek to understand myself. I am going to order one be kept alive at all costs. However, they must be repelled. The hollow falls and Halihall falls”. She then turned and yelled to the soldiers on the wall, and soldiers below awaiting orders “Soldiers! Officers! Prepare for battle! Have the mages erect the barrier and let us repel the northerners! Keep one of the non-large blues alive at all costs though for interrogation!””. The soldiers all saluted and moved to prepare as directed. Within minutes he looked towards the sky and his eyes widened, asking “God's alive, is that the famous Victor’s Hollow Ultimate Defense?”.

Even from there, he could tell the barrier was thick. Likely 10 feet thick and shimmering with magical energy. It started with a single hexagon, then it formed another series of hexagons connected to each face of the original. This pattern repeated rapidly until it formed a dome around the city, some hexagons bending. The northerners, from what he could see through the binoculars, were shocked. “This thing could stop all the other kingdoms, and even the royal army for months. They will not siege us without being annihilated” Letrix said “All we need do now is wait for the royal army to arrive”. He stared at it, then the army below. He wondered what they had been speaking of. Turning, he asked “High Commander Letrix. I formally ask permission to discover this holy relic they spoke of”. Letrix looked at him as he did the national salute, saluted back, and replied “Permission granted with conditions. Do not interfere in any business and if you must go into restricted areas, do so with armed guard”. He nodded and said “I can agree to that” before relaxing his salute, and turning to leave. “Knight!” Letrix yelled out “Be ready. They aren’t feeling which means even with the barrier, they feel confident”. Sebastian only waved after her.
He entered the arena and saw someone in an odd ensemble. He wore the mask some wear during a masked ball, a midnight blue tailcoat, jeans, tophat, and mask. He also wore sport shoes and black leather gloves. He was reading a journal it seemed and carried a VTP. He approached, asking “Excuse me sir, are you permitted to be here?”. The man looked up and said “No. I am seeking help though. I was in town to meet a friend here but then the barrier went up. Ever since, I’ve been unable to get help”. Sebastian thought and said “Perhaps I can help. Whom do you seek? I can ask the High Commander when I next see her”. The man nodded and said “I seek the baron Varza Liro. His estate specifically. I am friends with one of his children”. Sebastian nodded and said “Then I’ll ask next I see her. Sadly, i’m busy at the moment. Where might I find you?”. The man was silent for a moment before responding “What are you busy with? I might be able to help”. Sebastian considered lying, but decided not to. He would not stain his honor like that. “A northerner mentioned this place holding a holy relic. I’m thinking we might be able to use it against them” he said. Under such circumstances, normal people would rescind their offer to help, even if they were up to no good. However, the man simply chuckled and bowed, saying “Good sir, dungeon delving is a specialty! Please, you must allow me to help. All I ask is your help in the matter discussed”.

Sebastian stared and tried to reason why he should refuse. However, he was the one that had presented it as a thing of common knowledge. To decline for the reason of it being an officer matter would at best look rude. He sighed and said “On one condition. You accept a knight’s brand”. He wasn’t serious this time either, though a bit more than his last offer. The knight’s brand was a serious issue for the shady. It was a magical implement offered to knights by the high emperor that when applied to someone acted as a sort of restraint. Essentially, the brand would burn whenever the bearer did anything against their verbal contract with the knight. It would kill them if they did anything violent against them. However, as the man stared, the man nodded and said “I can agree to that, though I would prefer we be precise on the terms of the contract”. Sebastian gawked as the man asked “Oh? Were you not serious in your offer?”. He shook his head and said “I admit, I did not think you serious but seeing you are… fine. Then let us make it simple but not vague. You help me acquire the relic and bring it and give it to the high commander. In exchange, I shall give you help in finding your friends location”. The man nodded and said “Of course. I, Lugris, Agree to these terms” before rolling a sleeve up to expose his arm. Sebastian pulled out an ink stamp and pressed it into Lugris’ upper arm. The brand glowed as it was applied, and stopped when the stamp was pulled away. It stayed there, a clear sign of their agreement. Lugris rolled his sleeve down and said “Our agreement is made”. He offered his hand, saying “I look forward to working with you… I never did catch your name. What was it, sir knight?”. “I am Sebastian Ciel, knight of High Emperor Fionne’s court” he said, taking Lugris’ hand and shook it. “Now then… shall we begin?” Lugris asked. Sebastian nodded and they began their search. It was boring at first, they asked around and checked walls. However, after an hour, Lugris asked something that gave him pause “Sir Sebastian. Have you ever heard of the terming ‘hiding in plain sight’?”. Sebastian nodded, and asked “How does it relate to this?”. “I’m just musing here, however, if I were to build a secret ruin to hold a holy relic” Lugris said “I would make the hidden entrance in the most obvious place, so it’s looked at last”. Sebastian stared, then his eyes widened as Lugris continued, Sebastian reaching the conclusion before Lugris finished “Especially since it’s always so busy. It’d be hard to examine and it has plenty of cover and plenty of areas to hide a hidden switch to open”. Sebastian headed for the arena proper, with Lugris following.
“Open the gate. I need to examine the arena” Sebastian said. The officers guarding it nodded and opened the gate, one asking “Might I ask why sir?”. “I think my associate here found the secret entrance” Sebastian said, stepping inside. Lugris followed, almost diligently, though it was definitely too lax to be that. The two of them scoured the grounds for what had to be an entire hour until finally, Lugris spoke up, saying “I got it! Right here!”. He was standing by one of the statues in the stands. It was of a lion with its mouth open. He walked over, stating “Impressive. Why put it here?”. “Simple” Lugris said “This is the noble’s section, specifically the royals. They likely know of this switch and know to press it in the case of an ambush siege, likely made before the concept of the ‘Hollows Barrier’. Those watching the arena could flee underground, while officers flocked people here underground”. He nodded as Lugris reached inside the mouth and pulled something. The center of the arena became disrupted as a trapdoor flipped open violently. Smiling, he walked over as Lugris leapt down and followed.

The inside of the ruins were cavernous. Completely open and filled with walkways and pillars, it was quite clear the reason for the design. It would take days to follow the path and even then it was maze-like. However, there were no walls. Thus, a smart delver could figure out an optimal path down. Lugris touched his mask and said “Yep. I see something down there. A glowing bell with runes on it. Definitely takes place during the creation of the covenant”. That was indeed old. Smiling, Sebastian said “Then we go?”. Lugris nodded and they jumped down together. “Boei” he said, crossing his arms as though he were blocking a blow. His body glowed grey after that and when he landed, he merely grunted, feeling his body strain from the impact. No real damage taken. Lugris meanwhile used his VTP to vault sideways and skid on the stone floor, making the damage from the fall he would’ve taken vanish completely. They repeated this numerous time, before Sebastian had to drink a plum potion.

“My, my. Well prepared eh?” Lugris said. “Of course” Sebastian said “I am a knight in the High Emperor’s court. I must be ready for anything”. “Indeed” Lugris said “Well I’m happy to announce we’re almost there. However, we have company”. Sebastian turned around, pulling his pike from his back and clicking it to fully extend, and pulled his saber out from his scabbard on his belt. Lugris prepared his VTP for battle by replacing the hook with a steel ball. Before them were a pair of Ratkin in leafy robes, waving around sticks with fruits hanging off them. Accompanying them were a pair of archer-type ratkin and 4 skeletons. “Necromancers” Sebastian growled under his breath. “Indeed. Luckily that makes them easy to deal with” Lugris said, rushing forward suddenly. The skeletons reacted immediately, lunging forward with outstretched claws. Spinning his VTP around behind his back, he lashed out instantly, a sweep turning the outstretched claws to dust. Sebastian followed up, leaping over and landing in front of him, shouting “Jishaku!” and holding himself extremely open. The enemies had been aiming at Lugris but right then their attacks bent towards Sebastian.
Sebastian reacted with amazing speed, moving and blocking the arrow by spinning his spear in the air. The necromancers had cast a spell to reassemble their skeletons, but this was their folly. Lugris stood quickly and tossed two soulstones to either side. Fire Soulstones. He then leapt forward, rushing the enemy as they prepared their next assault. Sebastian knowing about soulstones rushed forward too. While Lugris targeted an archer, he targeted the opposite archer, throwing his pike. It squeaked in surprise, leaping and screeching as the pike sunk into its chest. Lugris meanwhile thrusted his VTP right into the throat of the ratkin and followed up with a violent spin and smack of the opposite end to the ratkin's face, knocking it out. The soulstones then exploded in roaring fire, scattering the bones of the skeletons that had begun to advance on their position from behind. The ratkin necromancers, seeing how the battle was flowing, began to retreat. However, Sebastian ran for them, slashing at the left one’s back. He hadn’t relented since he tossed his pike. Meanwhile, Lugris pointed a finger, making some gestures and whispered “Hi no Boruto”. Instantly, a small ball of fire, no more than an inch in radius, shot forward at high speeds, slamming into the back of the neck of one ratkin.

Sebastian finished his ratkin off with a stab, and for good measure, make sure the other mage was down. He then retrieved his pike as Lugris said “I didn’t take you for a mage”. “I’m not” Sebastian answered “I’m a channeler. There’s a difference”. “Really?” asked Lugris. Sebastian nodded, explaining “Mage’s channel mana in themselves to cast spells, like the wildfire spell you just cast. Channelers merely channel mana through themselves to enact a physical effect. Even that taunt spell I used followed that logic. Rather than actually control the enemy, I just gave the right twitches and muscle spasms to make them think I was a bigger threat and that I should be targeted”. Lugris didn’t disagree, simply stating “Well, it is handy to have. Most warrior-types have no spells, whether channeling or casting”. “Thank you” Sebastian said. They continued downwards from there, stopping a few floors from their target. They could see their final obstacle.

A tree stood in the center of the platform surrounded by water, that had water filtering in from who knows where. The tree however stood out because of its features. The front of the tree had the features of a woman and the arms coming out like parallel twin branches on either side, forming hands and fingers. A head and neck stuck out 7 feet up the trunk and it was like that of a woman's, with hair as green as a forest in bloom. The figure in the tree could only be described as true beauty to both men. It was then they realized it truly was an obstacle. The tree twisted towards them and the head looked to them, the eyes opening to reveal bright red eyes that seemingly glowed through the illuminated dark. It spoke to them, saying “Bist du dein Meister, um hier deinen Preis zu fordern?” in a splendidly feminine voice, giving them a kind, gentle smile that faded when they did not respond. “Ist etwas los, Meister?” it asked, looking confused. “Can you tell what it’s saying?” Sebastian asked Lugris, whom responded “No, I can’t, beyond the fact it’s an ancient tongue”.”Ich verstehe das Problem jetzt. Du sprichst eine andere Sprache. bitte mehr unterhalten. Meine Magie wird es bald verstehen” it said, staring at them, a look of understanding on its face. “Its intelligent, at least” Sebastian said, looking at Lugris. Lugris’ mask obscured his facial expressions, but his body language said he was ready to engage in flight or fight at any moment.
Suddenly, the tree spoke in their language, if broken. “Speak. Magic. Language. Break” it said. They stared at it, highly confused. After a few minutes, Lugris asked “Sebastian, did it just imitate our speech?” “Yes, I believe it did Lugris” he responded, before it said more “Magic. Understand. More. Language”. Sebastian stared as Lugris snapped his fingers and said “Ah!” He looked and asked “What is it?” “Simple, Sebastian. I’ve figured out what it’s saying” He said “It’s using magic to try to learn our language. The more we speak, the better it understands”. Sebastian then looked back at the tree-being and stared before asking “Is this true?” “Maybe” it replied, before correcting itself “Yes”. With that settled, Sebastian struck up a conversation. Specifically, about their thoughts on the ruins. “I personally think these ruins are old” Lugris said “The architecture dates back thousands of years, potentially even older than the ruin that now holds the Grand Library, that once housed the library amassed by the headmaster of the Atlasdam Academy”. Sebastian nodded and replied “I don’t doubt it, but I noticed something. These ruins don’t follow any of the normal construction standards for the people of the time… I’m not wondering if we’re not looking back at what our ancestors would’ve considered the ruins of an ancient civilization”. It was then the tree spoke fluent english.

“So, this is the language your kind speaks now. How wonderful” it said, before humming a small tune. “Ah, so you can speak now” Sebastian said, looking at Lugris “Seems you hit right on the money”. Lugris nodded, turning to the tree and said “Midear, milady, a pleasure to meet you. I am Lugris, and cooperating with me on this delve is knight Sir Sebastian Ciel. We come regarding a rather urgent matter”. “Oh? What is so important you would delve into long hidden ruins?” the tree-person asked. “We are currently under siege by an invading force, consisting of large blue humanoids, small dark-skinned lanky fellows, slender tall-eared men, and tiny blue winged humanoids” he explained “Before they began, their leader told us she sought a holy relic we apparently had. I believe it’s this relic”. “I see… and what do you intend?” it asked. “Excuse me?” he asked. “You found it. This relic is indeed divine in nature. It is something prized by both fey and man alike. However, even if I gave it to you, what will you do with it? Destroy it? Use it as a weapon? Flee?” it challenged him. He stared at it, realizing he didn’t have a plan. Lugris interjected, asking “So you won’t give it to us?”. She shook her head, saying “I cannot. I am obliged to guard it from one whom is not named champion by the ruler of men and the ruler of fey”. “So we must use force?” Lugris asked. “You could. Please don’t though. I hate the taste of blood” it commented.

“This champion. Fey. what do these mean?” he asked. “You know not of the fey? What has transpired in the intervening years?” it asked. “Much” sebastian said, thinking. He sighed and said “I have much to learn it seems”. “Indeed” it said “Your people have forgotten much it would seem”. “Milady. Are there any entrances beyond the barrier we mentioned?” Lugris asked. The tree lady nodded and said “Yes. many”. Sebastian sighed and said “Then we can’t just leave. They’ll get in and get the relic and potentially even siege the city before reinforcements arrive”. “That would be troublesome. I’ve enjoyed the sounds of battle from above” it admitted. Sebastian stared into the water before jumping down. He tossed his weapons aside and approached the tree, saying “I’m sorry but I can’t leave without that relic”. “You’ll die here then, standing there forever” it retorted, a bit sadly though. “Surely there’s a way I can convince you to let me leave with the relic and flee” he said, questioning her now. It smiled a tiny bit and said “I am obligated to hold the relic for the champion, ordained by both man and fey. Traditionally, the rulers of each do this. However, I am both so I could do the ceremony of ordainment myself. It also helps I am a princess”. His eyes
widened and he asked “You’d do that?”. The tree-person nodded, but said in a low voice “However, my cooperation entails much. How much are you prepared to sacrifice, warrior?”. “Everything but my loyalty” He responded in a serious tone.

The tree smiled, suddenly the woman walking out of the tree, revealing a still wooden body, moving as though animated, or perhaps flesh made hard like wood. It said to him “Then, marry me. I cannot leave here, but you can return. Thus once your journey is done, take my seeds and plant me where we shall live”. “A political marriage?” Lugris mused. “Well, yes, if you must refer to it that way” it said, turning to sebastian whom stood before her, continuing “Though, I admit, I want our relationship to be one of mutual romance. Is that possible?”. He nodded and said “I’ve heard of stranger. Like a ratkin marrying a lizardman”. The tree-person laughed, and said “Then, we exchange names first. I am Emily Kringel. You are?”. Bowing, Sebastian said “I am Sebastian Ciel, Knight of High Emperor Fionne Balacruf of the Balacruf Empire’s court”. “A high position” Emily said “Then, shall we proceed with the ceremony? Lugris can be our witness. Once completed, you may take the relic and leave. Do as you wish. Remember however to return and bring the seeds to your abode”. Sebastian nodded and said with pride “Of course. A knight always honors his word!”.
Chapter 14-The Dancer, Act 2

Chapter 14

A Star is Born

He entered the church. He was still recovering, but was much better. It was the latest of his many visits. From what he heard, they were expecting a visitor of high import soon. As he entered, he was greeted to a slight spectacle. A tall, muscular man in cleric’s habits and wearing a papal hat with red hair and beard and mustache was giving orders to the various clerics in the area. He knew this man, and so approached, giving his usual greeting “Hello Sir Gregory. How are you this fine day?”.

Gregory turned, smiling and replied “Ah, Selim! I’m doing fine. I took your advice and decided to be bold and ask to be granted a chance to assist the flame bearer. So, he put me in charge of preparing for the kindling”. Selim smiled and said with an excited tone “Wow, that’s amazing Gregory. I told you, your faith was great enough that all you need do was ask and the gods would grace you with opportunity”. Gregory nodded and said “True, but I still must work. After all, opportunity is wasted if not used. Thank you Selim, truly”. “No, thank you Gregory. Your faith in me all those years ago helped me turn myself around” Selim replied. “Well, it was nice to see you but I have duties to attend to. Is there anything else you needed?” Gregory asked. Selim nodded and said “As we discussed, I have been seeking information on my ex-manager. Has the church heard anything?”. Gregory shook his head and said “No. I even tried the telegraph, but nothing. Everyone had no information”. Selim sighed but smiled and said “Well thanks. I’ll take your advice then and watch the kindling, using it as a blessing for my journey”. “Then I shall do my best to make it an excellent kindling. Good day, sir Selim” Gregory said, his voice filled with excitement as he went back to work. Selim likewise left the church.

According to the news through the television, the Flame Bearer was already in Sunshade. It’d only be 2 days before the flame bearer arrived in Saintsbridge. The television was a rather luxurious item that at first only nobleman could afford, with a single unit costing 5 million leaves. However, the High Emperor say the potential for prosperity in the kingdom and struck a deal with various kingdoms, allowing for the cheap but quality production of the product. Thus it sold for 500 leaves. Still a hefty price, but it was affordable for even commoners. As predicted, the television proved a net gain for the kingdom. Because of how many were purchased, the tax from it gave the empires coffers a massive boost. The theatre field at first waned, but then adapted, increasing creativity like never before. While papers were worried, they devised a scheme that allowed them to entrench themselves in the new visual landscape provided by the television and various other equipment. Most notable of all was the government's use of it. They used it with the papers to spread news on projects and plans to the citizens in short order, usually days in advance, which in turn kept citizens in the loop on issues and made evacuations run smoother. However, this was 200 years ago. A mere 50 years ago, the television was upgraded to show colored images instead of black and white.
Selim himself knew of it due to his career. He was a famous actor, starring in several feature-length films and series, and even had been interviewed several times. This however had no bearing on the present. Apparently, while people did hear about him being shot, the news of his survival hadn’t reached the local paper. Thus it hadn’t been reported and so there was no interview. He had been hoping for one so he could use the paper as an information gathering tool, but that wouldn’t happen until they caught wind of his updated condition. He was mostly fine, having only residual wounds. However, he was haunted. He knew his ex-managers morality was shot and feared what he’d do with a northerner under his command. That he was likely on a revenge quest. After all. 2 years ago, it’s what Selim would have done. As for how he was even going to find his manager, he didn’t know. It was then he had what he would later consider a miraculous encounter. He bumped into a strange girl.

To him she was a real beauty. White skin that wasn’t too pale but not too red, lips that were a soft pink that still stood out, beautiful amethyst purple eyes and hair white as snow. She wore black clothing at only accentuated her features, while also keeping her modest. It was also using sik, which was his favorite fabric. Smiling, he offered his hand and said “I’m sorry miss. I was lost in thoughts”. The woman took his hand and he pulled her to her feet. She reached down and picked up her suitcase, saying “It’s fine good sir. Though I must insist our meeting be short. I must find lodging for a month or so”. He chuckled and said “Likewise. Have a nice day”. The girl moved on and he sighed deeply. “Why” Selim mumbled to himself “Did my heart just flutter?”. He shook his head after a minute and headed through the city. He had a specific place in mind. The local paperhouse. The one he had in mind was somewhat small but the man in charge was highly connected. A former anchorman, he had made friends throughout the empire and industry. As such, it was easy for him to begin his own paperhouse and produce news broadcasts and newspapers without resistance. He knocked on the door and the man he spoke of answered, Whimble Bean Pendleton.

“Yes?” Whimble questioned “Who are you?”. “Selim Deon at your service, discharged from the hospital officially a mere five days ago” he responded “I’d like to speak to Whimble if he’s available. I’ve got a trade he can’t refuse”. Whimble glared, looked him over, then sighed and said “At your service”. Selim smiled and replied “We’d best speak in private”. Whimble groaned but nodded, letting him in. Soon, they sat in Whimble’s office, door closed and locked. “Make it quick” Whimble said “My patience for diva’s is slim these days”. Selim nodded and said “Then I’ll cut to the chase. I’m looking for my former, not the deceased one, manager. In exchange for that information, I’ll give you an interview”. Whimble stared at him, like he was trying to gaze into his soul but was coming up empty, then said “Interview first, then information. I know your reputation. Your ‘turn around’ isn’t fooling me”. Selim nodded and said “I find that acceptable. You were honesty-driven even during your young years as an anchorman. Why I came to you”. Whimble nodded and said “I’ll get things set up” and left. Selim took the opportunity to cast a small spell he knew of. He made gestures with both hands while leaning back and relaxed, then whispered “Unmei no ito, watashi no me o michibiku”. As he had hoped, his eyes turned and laid on a single painting nearby. It was of a pixie in the forest, green with twig and leaf clothing, floating through the air dancing with others, in an enchanted forest. This confused him as Whimble came in and said “We’re ready”. Selim nodded, giving the painting another glance and walking out of the office.
“Hello viewers, this is Whimble Station, reporting on local happenings. We have to make an apology now” the anchorman said, dressed in a business suit and tie. The anchorman was a local rising star, William Walts. William said “We failed to notice major news happening right here in Saintsbridge. Famous Actor, Selim Deon, was recovering right here in Saintsbridge. He’s here with my now to explain everything. Thank you Selim for coming on”. The large, bulky studio camera swiveled as the man turned it to encompass the full studio table to show him sitting a distance away. “Of course William, I heard about you guys through the grapevine, was in town, decided to drop on by. Go ahead and ask anything” he said, truthfully. William smiled and said “Then Selim, let’s start with the big question. What happened? We know the official story, but what’s your story?” Selim sighed and said “Well, the official story is mostly right. A northerner attacked my studio, and me, true. However, what wasn’t reported was that my ex-manager, Jermaine Wallace, was there”. “Really? Didn’t Jermaine retire 2 years ago, saying you two had a difference of opinions?” William asked. He nodded and said “Yeah. It was during a dark time in my life. I blamed him for my declining popularity, which was wrong”. “So, do you blame him now? And for this?” William asked. Selim tilted his head, resting it on his hand as he said “Not for my own poor choices. Those were mine to take, and he discouraged them best he could. However, I know cold steel when I feel it. He had it. He fired it”. “I see. Sad to hear. What about the Northerner though?” William asked. “Yes, he seemed in league with Jermaine, though it seemed less villainy, and more paid services” he responded.

The interview continued in that fashion. William asked questions and he answered. He was challenged on his questions and had to admit he had no evidence for his claims, but said that he was searching for answers himself. After the interview, William said, microphone off “Hey man, thanks. This is going to boost my career massively”. Selim nodded and said “Of course. Your boss and I do have a deal” before standing and leaving. Whimble was waiting for him, said “I’ve sent out telegrams. I’m awaiting a response”. Selim nodded and said “Well, that interview will stir the masses so more information will come in. I’ll be watching, Whimble”. He waved and left, Whimble nodding affirmatively. He returned to his temporary home, a small house bought by his parents. His sister at the moment was living with him. As he went, he came across the beautiful girl again. She looked… down was the only word he could use to describe her expression. He walked over, saying “Well, well. We meet again. Any luck on finding lodging?”. She shook her head and said “Most places are booked and the only places open are…. Not up to my standards”. He frowned and said “Really? Oh right the kindling. I forgot how busy Saintsbridge is during it. I usually watch from home”. He was silent for a few moment before he looked at her. While beautiful while sad, it tugged at his heartstrings. He finally said “I do have a spare room for people that need it”. She looked at him and after staring for a few moments, she smiled and said “If you are offering, I don’t mind”.

Selim began to lead her to his house near the church. “I’m Selim Deon” he said “Though you probably already knew that”. The girl nodded and said “I did. I’m a fan of yours. My name is Delilah Softbrand” with a smile. “So” Selim asked “What brings you here?”. “I came as a vacation. I lived in Orwell for a time after being attacked on the road. I originally came from Grandport” She explained. He smiled slightly and said “I see. Well I hope the road from Orwell proved more friendly”. She nodded and said “I figured I’d come here for the kindling. I’ve always wanted to witness one”. Smiling, he said “I can understand that. The church is quite busy though”. He thought about it in silence a bit, then said “I can however talk to a friend about seats”. “Really?” she asked. He nodded
and said “Absolutely”. He felt his face grow a bit red as Delilah hugged his arm. Smiling, he said “His names Gregory. He’s running the preparations. I’ll hit him up tonight, see what he says”. She nodded and said “Well, thank you Selim. You are a very kind, gracious person” as she smiled, looking at him. He smiled back as charmingly as he could and said “No problem. Just being the gentleman I was raised to be”.

Selim let Delilah inside and guided her to the guest bedroom. It was on the second floor, right above the master bedroom. It was about the same size too and roughly the same luxury level. Seeing this, Delilah said “Selim, I simply can’t accept this. It’s so lavish”. He replied in a soft tone “It’s fine. I’m not expecting anyone to stay the night and you are a guest. I won’t force you though”. She stood, clearly in thought, and after a few moments she nodded and said “Alright. I can handle the luxury”. He nodded and said “Use it as you wish. My family plans to sell this place when I leave”. Delilah nodded, turning on the TV as she sat on the bed saying “Alright. Thank you very much, Selim. You’re a very kind man”. Smiling, he turned and started to leave, saying “Well, I need to go. I have some things to do, talking to Gregory is one of them. I’ll be back tonight with front row seats”. “Good luck!” Delilah said to him as he left. He smiled. He was happy to make Delilah happy. He did of course harbor a modicum of caution. A beautiful girl strolls into his path, has a gentle personality, and seemed to genuinely not care about his riches? He knew fairy tales more often than not were just those, tall tales to enchant children. He was hopeful, but was going to be careful all the same. After all, with fame came people, seeking their cut.

Selim headed for the church first, deciding to get that errand done with first. As he entered, Gregory was sitting at a pew, wiping his forehead with a rag. He walked over, saying “Hello father Gregory. How are you this day?”. Gregory looked at him and said “Ah, Selim. I’m well, just taking a break. We’re nearly done finally. What brings you back?” he asked. “I need a favor. Is there anyway I could arrange for me and my friend to get front row seats to the kindling?” he asked. Gregory laughed for a moment, then his face became slightly serious as he said “Oh you’re serious. Well, for you sure. I’ve known you for a while and while you may not attend church regularly, you are a devout follower of the flame. Your friend though…” his voice trailed off as Selim responded with whispering into his ear “She’s a girl”. Gregory stared at him for a moment, then smiled widely, saying “Then, how can I refuse? I’ll talk to his excellency. I’ll send word to your house”. Selim smiled and said “Great. I owe you one”. With a nod to each other, they bid each other farewell and parted ways.

His next errand was to pick up groceries. He had a guest and so needed to prepare. He went to the local supermarket chain store, in this case Brander’s Grocery. He purchased ingredients for a dish he often had in everhold, filet mignon. A high class dish that used steak and sauce as a base but used incredible ingredients to really bring out the flavor. He bought such ingredients and used his card to pay for them. He then carried them as he headed to his next destination, the post office. He had sent a letter to as many contacts as he could and wanted to hear back. He walked to the clerk, setting his bag down and said “Excuse me, post clerk, I’m here to inquire about received letters”. The clerk looked at him and asked “Name?”. “Selim Deon, at your service” he said, producing his ID. The
clerk glared at it before pulling out a logbook for the day and saying “we have 2 letters in reserve for a Selim Deon, awaiting personal transaction between clerk and client. I’ll retrieve them now”. The clerk then went into the back and came back after 5 minutes, Selim waiting patiently. He signed off on the transaction and left, putting them in his bag, the letter compartment. It had been specifically designed to handle multiple tasks. After this, he went home, where he found more mail awaiting him.

He picked it up and deposited it into the letter containment portion of his bag and walked inside. He found his sister sitting on the couch in the living room to the left. To the right, the dining room was well-lit and prepared. He went further down the hall, passing the stairs and went to the right again, into his study. He locked the door behind himself and went to sit at his desk. He currently had 5 letters waiting. The first was one addressed to him by his friend in Atlasdam, a scholar by the name of Wendel Fronz. Wendel was a scholar that was studying to eventually begin investigating myths and legends and determine what is true and what is false, finding there may be a clue about the northerners in folklore. The letter explained his insight into the incident and what he’s heard about the incident, that the northerner stood to gain from something Jermaine had and Jermaine could get revenge. The northerner might have even had a sense of justice and found Jermaine’s tale a worthy cause to back. It went on to detail how there was legend of a blue man from the north whom was gentle and kind, but after performing a ritual before fighting a dragon, became a battlefield demon. Selim found it interesting, but ultimately irrelevant. He set the letter aside to be responded to later.

The next letter was from the bartender for a particular bar and grill in Stilsnow that a few years ago, 5 to be precise, he was close to. The man set him up with various demands, regardless of how outrageous and was capable of squirming out of his fury whenever he was unable to complete one. After he went clean and straight, Selim kept contact and found him good company. The man did say Jermaine began to frequent the bar for illicit services a mere 8 months prior to the incident with Selim and was even asked about if he could get Jermaine an obedient Northerner. This was good news as it meant there was a trail, and that based on the fact his friend responded at all meant that Jermaine hadn’t bothered to cover it. The next letter was one he picked up from home. It was his parents. They congratulated him on a successful recovery and were hoping to speak to him soon. However, they did say they’d be unavailable for a few weeks as they were meeting with the Danfords regarding the development of a new type of gun accessory. He was slightly curious, but not enough to inquire about it formally. He set it aside to not be responded to. Same for his other friends. He would write a formal friendship letter later.

The letter he held next was from the local police, warning him about rumors of a Galdera Worshipper in the city and to be vigilant and report any suspected Galdera Worshipping to the local authorities. He knew this already, the 4th covenant made that very clear. He put it aside to dispose of later while he went over his final letter. This was a letter from Whimble. Likely delivered via courier. What he read gave him a smile. It was solid information. Jermaine and the Northerner split from each other but apparently planned to meet in the town of Stilsnow. Further, the details were known to an associate, having hired and been in Jermaine’s confidence. He thought the man crazy and suicidal, but the man spoke of being spirited away to the land of the northerners after completion of their deal. Whimble added that it may be wise for Selim to simply let sleeping horses lie. Selim decided to
consider it, since Whimble had been kind.

He penned a response to his first friend, thanking him for the information and wishing him well in his research and that if he needed any help, to contact him. With that, he stood up after sealing the envelope and headed to the map on the wall. Stilsnow was quite a ways away, in a chilly environment. Preparations would have to be made. He left his study, then deposited a letter into the mailbox only to find a new one. He opened it and read it and felt his heart drop instantly. There was a single line and it made him cold and hot at the same time, with fear and anger respectively. ‘We have your sister. Give us 5 million leaves and she leaves alive and unharmed. You have 24 hours. We’re at the southern warehouse. Any police show up, she dies’ it said. He crumbled the letter up. He turned and slammed the door open, heading for his study again. He didn’t even register the door opening behind him a few minutes after he entered his study. He had his knife on the table, a Colt M1911, and some light soulstones he made. He was stuff leaves from his safe into a suitcase. He barely had 5 million and it was his emergency funds for the event that his families finances collapsed. “Excuse me” a familiar feminine voice called to him. He turned and saw Delilah whom continued, asking “Is something the matter good sir?”. He sighed and nodded, saying as he continued filling the suitcase “Thugs kidnapped my sister. They’re demanding ransom”. Delilah gasped as he finished, clicking the case closed. He stood and gathered the gun and knife as well as the soulstones and said “Stay here. It’ll be too dangerous for you. Sorry. I’ll be back soon with good news” and left before the girl could protest or say anything. He didn’t want her to see his face. Not when it wore the face of his anger, one he hadn’t worn in a few years. Not since Jermaine quit.

He walked personally carrying the suitcase. He wore his face for only 5 minutes before suppressing his rage. He needed to go in calm and collected. He needed to get his sister out first. Then he could wage his revenge. It took him 4 hours to reach the warehouse in question, and he walked to the man out front. The man wore a kevlar vest openly and plastic pauldrons. He had a hatchet on his belt and a gun slung over his back. “You got the money, pretendah?” the man asked in a rough voice. He had a crow tattoo on his face, clearly referencing the Obsidian organization in the old tales. “Yes, crow” he said, lifting the suitcase. The man nodded and opened the door, letting Selim enter. He did, the man following and locking the door behind him. He walked forward to the clearly lit table with the man sitting at it. The man was missing a few teeth, was generally armored the same way, and sported a mohawk. He had a crab tattoo on his shoulder. “I see your smart” the man said with a very slight lisp. Selim only nodded, placing the suitcase and opening it on the table. The man stood slowly, smiling greedily. He said “Yes, yes. This is good. Then your sister will be returned home. Now leave, little boy” reaching for the case. Selim slammed it shut and said “No. I get her now”. The man laughed, suddenly pulling a gun out and pointing it to Selim’s head, before Selim could pull his gun. “You ain’t smart, boy. Now sit down and let me talk to me boss. Maybe we will release her to ya now. Maybe not. I won’t mention your… episode”. The man said, turning and leaving, lowering the gun as the other held his hand out. “Gun. Now.” the man demanded. Selim reluctantly did so.

Suddenly, a group of men emerged from the darkness. He had heard the door open and the boots hit the floor before hand. He saw their leader, a man wearing a cloak fashioned after a bear pelt. He had
a pair of hatchets on him. He glared down at Selim with hatred and spoke loudly, in a booming voice
“Selim Deon. We will not be returning your sister. Your conduct was abysmal and quite frankly, you
were dumb enough to bring the money with no assurances. For your rudeness and idiocy, I, Bradley,
King of the bandits of the Aques Kingdom, sentence you to death by execution”. Selim stood,
planning to resist, but the crow tattooed man punched him in the stomach, hard. He felt himself go
limp and the man grabbed him, bending him over the table. Another man made sure his head was
flush to the table, and his neck exposed. A large axe was brought to Bradley by another man who
held the axe to his neck to help with aiming. “Sleep well, young actor. Maybe you’ll be born with
brains in another life” Bradley said, raising the axe. Suddenly, the door exploded, making many
cover their vitals as splinters and shard flew into the room. He felt the grip on him lax and he used
the opportunity to draw a dagger and stab an arm that was holding his head. The man yelled in pain
as he ripped himself from the man's grasp and shoved the man behind him away. He then retreated to
the door, wiggling his fingers and whispering “Koshi-sen!”, and with a wave of his hand, light
exploded around the bandits.

At the same time, Darkness swelled behind the bandits and exploded, sending them flying forward.
Selim’s eyes widened, turning and seeing Delilah. “Delilah! Why are you here?” he asked. “I cannot
look away from one in need. I’m here to help” she said, moving forward. She held a small wand
made from bone. An odd choice, to be sure, but he overlooked it. She waved it again, whispering
“Kurai seiun”. Instantly, dark swelled above each of the bandits, before exploding, slamming them
into the ground. Delilah stepped into the room, sighing deeply as she said “They’re knocked out.
Come. your sister is likely in the last room” before waving her wand and whispering “Kurai mofu”.
Shadows fell over both of them, but didn’t obscure their vision. “We can’t be heard now, though we
must be careful to not be sighted” Delilah said. Selim smiled and said “Then allow me to help with
that”. He waved his hands, wiggling his fingers too, bringing them down as though he were fitting a
robe onto a person, whispering “Raitomanto”. Small motes of light appeared around each of them,
circling them once and creating a small shimmering field around them. “There. We’re now
camouflaged. Movement should still be careful, but with still movement, we’re effectively invisible”
he explained. She smiled and said “Well, well. Light and dark mixing. That’s quite poetic”. He
smiled and felt a bit red, before saying “Let’s save my sister”.

The interior of the Warehouse was large, but not impossible to navigate. There were other bandits,
but they failed to notice anything. His sister was in the backmost room. Across was an empty room
which he went into in order to plan with Delilah, who had proven she could hold her own in a fight.
“So, any ideas? I’ve got none beyond blast them with magic and then fight our way out” he asked.
Delilah thought for a moment, and then said “We’re invisible. We can take the closest out in silence,
and then use magic to deal with the rest. Then we blast open a hole and run for it. The police will
deal with the bandits pursuing us”. Selim thought about it and said “Alright. Let’s do it”. He felt
confident with the plan. He readied his knife and snuck in. There were only four, though they were
well-armed. He snuck behind one, jumping and plunging his knife into the spinal column. He was
aiming to sever it. He wasn’t sure if he was successful, but he managed to drop the man instantly.
Using the knife as his focus, having been crafted for ceremony instead of function, he whispered as
he waved the knife “Teru-ten!”. Instantly light gathered at the tip in an instant then sped into the
chest of another, knocking the man to the floor. Delilah already acted, whispered “Kurai seiun” as
she waved her wand, making darkness swell beneath the other enemies guns that had been drawn
and then explode, disarming them. They both pointed their magical foci at the enemies. Selim said
“Teru-ten!” while Delilah said “Shadoubimu!”. Light sped from Selim’s dagger while darkness sped from Delilah’s wand into their enemies, knocking them to the ground out. Selim sighed and walked over to his sister, whom was struggling against her bonds.

She was tied to a chair at the ankles and wrists, and was gagged by a rag and ball. He removed it all, using his knife, and said “I’m here, my sister! Are you fine!” he asked. His sister responded “Yes, brother. Do you have a plan?”. He nodded as Delilah waved her wand and said “Kurai seiun”, making darkness swell by a wall. However, it didn’t explode and Delilah repeated this three more times before it did, making the explosion quite large. She did it on the far wall though, to avoid harming them. Even so, it was very loud. “Run!” Selim shouted, picking his sister up and running. Delilah followed to, turning and repeating the same motion four times and whispering “Kurai seiun” four times, which caused a large explosion of dark energy as the door to the holding room flew open, hitting the bandits full force. They then fled, running back to Selim’s house. He locked the door behind him, being the last one in. He panted and asked “Is everyone okay?”. Everyone nodded and affirmed that they were. Selim smiled and said “Good” before passing out. At first, his sister lifted him, then screamed. The gunshot wound while mostly healed, still hadn’t fully healed and he now bled from it. Not profusely, but enough to cause concern.
Chapter 15-The Apothecary, Act 2

Chapter 15

Miracle

She had driven quite a while to get here. Wellspring, the center and jewel of the sand kingdom, Mars. She had done so to honor a deal she made with a woman whom sought the truck she now rented. The woman was named Isabel Rockler. She was a resident of Cobbleston, but had been in Grandport looking for something to buy her father when she received the news via courier. Apparently he was sick and the local doctors had no clue with what and so slated him to die in a month. At first, she found the story incredulous, but as she heard about the man’s supposed symptoms it became more believable. Purple blotches not consistent with bruising, a terrible cough that practically choked the man, a constant headache, weakness in the body, and terrible bladder control overnight. It resonated with the memory of being told about an extinct, but ancient disease that ravaged the rich kingdom, Rave. She couldn’t remember the name or cure, but it didn’t matter. She wasn’t the man’s doctor and it was illegal for doctors to practice medicine without an established practice.

She sat in the truck as the woman said to her “Thank you miss Ristra. I hope you have a safe trip to Stilsnow”. The woman then turned to enter the hospital. ‘Don’t involve yourself’ Ristra thought to herself. ‘It’s not legal. They’d turn you away’ she thought mentally, trying to ignore the lingering desires in her. Desires to fulfill her dream. She started to drive away, when she saw an open parking spot. Many, really. Frowning, she sighed. She parked in the nearest one, got out, locked the truck up, then headed inside. She knew she’d regret this. She was fully expecting to be turned away and reported for practicing while travelling. However, her expectations didn’t match the reality. As she walked in, she saw it. A room full of sick patients, nurses scrambling to help them, despite clearly being full. She ran to the counter, next to Isabel. “What’s going on?” Ristra asked the nurse assisting Isabel. “Your father is on the second floor, room 247. Go” the nurse said to Isabel, who rushed off. Turning to her, the nurse said “The slums have been hit by a recent plague. The weird thing though is that each disease is different. I’ve got one patient with the bubonic plague, and another patient has measles”. Ristra raised an eyebrow and the nurse responded, saying “I’m not lying miss”. Ristra sighed and asked “May I see Isabel?”.

Ristra walked into the room Isabel’s father was being treated in. She saw the father sleeping. He was clearly 50. Isabel was crouched over onto the bed, crying silently. “Isabel. May I speak to you?” Ristra asked, quietly as she could. Isabel sat up straight, looking at her, and nodded. She stood and quietly left the room with Ristra. Outside, Ristra said “Sorry to do this but I can’t ignore someone in need. You, and your father by extension, look like you need some help. Please. Let me”. Isabel
stared for a few moments before moving and hugging Ristra deeply, Ristra returning it. Ristra was doing this to appease her desire to be a traveling doctor. However, her belief in helping someone that asks, even if not verbally compelled her to. After 5 minutes Isabel pulled herself away and said “I’ll talk with the hospital. Thank you, miss Ristra”. “Of course. I’ll even do it free of charge” Ristra replied. A few days later, Ristra was approved and allowed to practice. It turned out that owning a practice made her situation dubiously legal. Thus, Ristra was able to begin work.

She began by requesting lab work done. First for cancers, to rule out the worst, then the terminal illnesses. It took mere days for each and all came back negative. She then requested mages to come and examine the man for magical illnesses. They did and did report that he had one. Vorsythe, a disease that makes a person’s mana become poisonous. However, it wouldn’t be able to replicate his symptoms. So the man had something else, this just making it worse. She finally ordered a lab done on extinct diseases, hoping she was wrong. She still didn’t recall many details about the illness beyond visible and descriptive symptoms, but text said it was nasty. Further, it wasn’t the only bad, ancient disease to be around at the time. The worst case scenario was lycanthropy. Combined with Vorsythe, who knew what that would cause. Still, she knew it wasn’t the answer. The father hadn’t vanished unexpectedly and he was in his hospital bed all times. Even during the recent full moon. Sighing, she left the hospital that day after unsuccessfully discovering the disease. She went to the hotel she was staying at and used a telegram in the room, provided by the hotel, to do accounting. According to the local bank, she still had 20 million leaves in reserve. She had already spent 1 million on using lab equipment, hiring the mages, and alleviating the current symptoms. She sighed. Luckily, if the extinct diseases failed, then it meant multiple diseases interacting, and a blood lab would figure out the diseases by examining the man's blood. Another 30,000 leaves at most, and if she was lucky, it’d only cost her 8000 leaves. She finished balancing her accounts and went to bed.

The next morning, she approached the counter, passing by a traveler wearing a white dancer’s shirt, white baggy pants, and a white cape, and asked the receptionist “Excuse me. Do you have the lab results I requested for the patient? That girls father?” The receptionist nodded, moving and offering her a manilla folder. She took it and opened it to read the contents. The results were worse than expected. Not the worst case scenario however. The disease she had been thinking of was Mando, a natural disease. The medicine required particular ingredients but was easily made. However, two other diseases popped up. The flu and a magical disease called Varla. Varla was a magical disease that essentially stopped mana flow. To a normal civilian, the worst case scenario was the loss of helpful everyday spells and mild discomfort in mana-rich environments. However, in the man's case, combined with Vorsythe, that meant the girls father had a clump of toxic mana festering somewhere in his body. Worse, if it interacted with the rash, it could turn into cancer outright. Thus, she had to prioritize removing the rashes. “Are you serious about these results? I thought this disease died out with the creation of the empire” Ristra asked the receptionist, hoping vainly, she knew, that they faked the results. “We can’t fake results” the receptionist replied to her. She sighed and read the required items needed to make a cure for the various diseases.

“It’s alright. Thankfully, I can get most of these. The only issue will be Ogre Eagle Feathers” she
said, closing the folder and looking at the receptionist, nodding. “Good day” she said, and turned to leave. That’s when Isabel practically manifested from the ether and said “So what do we do? I don’t have much but I can give 2000 leaves to help pay”. Ristra barely reacted, being used to this happening, and replied with a smile “Don’t worry about it. Go see your father. My medicines have brought him from the brink, so he’s sociable. However, I have to work on a long-term cure, if you’ll excuse me”. She gave Isabel a small bow, then left. At least, she tried to, but the woman from before said to her as they passed again “Excuse me”. She stopped and turned to the strangely dressed woman, sighing. “Sorry I’m a bit busy, can it wait?” she asked. She wanted to get to work on getting Ogre Eagle Feathers immediately. It would help if she could cure the Varla too, since poisonous mana flowing would be easier for a body to handle than a poisonous mana clump. However, the woman shook her head and said “I don’t seek that particular service. I come offering trade. My help for yours. I just so happen to be seeking a particular place that may hold many a wondrous liquid. However, it’s state is unknown and safety cannot be guaranteed. Help me explore, and you can keep anything you find. To show good will, I offer my aid to you in finding these ‘Ogre Eagle Feathers’ I heard you mention”. The woman even gave her a curtsey. She sighed deeply, considering it.

Her options were not many. She was already considering the black market and while helping a stranger dungeon delve was not desirable, it was preferable to dishonoring her reputation by visiting a shady place for product that may not be in good shape. Further, she knew Isabel’s father was well enough to survive a few weeks. She stared at the woman, up and down, to try to detect any hint of falseness, but the girls body gave none away. Finally, she said “The patient is healthy enough to survive for a week, minimum. So I could help you. However, what assurance do I have that what you say is true?”. “Den epidióko na sas paraplanísso. Miló alítheia. Tóra parakaló, me voithíste” the woman suddenly said, in a tongue she didn’t recognize. This didn’t freak her out like it might some, but it did catch her attention. She knew for a fact it wasn’t northerner, the stuff was taught everywhere and everyone knew how to pick it out of a crowd. The woman said “I assure you, it’s not Northerner language. Merely an older dialect of the modern tongue”. She sighed and mulled over her options, coming to the conclusion that the woman was being honest and had the best offer. “It is as you claim, that was not the language of northerners” she said “Fine. You have a deal. Though, I’m watching you”. The woman smiled and said in response, offering her hand “My name is Nemu Cias. What’s your name, thine associate?”. She shook Nemu’s hand and replied “My name is Ristra Abraham. I’m a famous doctor from Whispermill. A pleasure to meet you. Now where are we going?”. “The grave collection” the woman said, before turning and leaving. Ristra stood there, speechless. She racked her brain trying to make sense before realizing the woman meant a graveyard. Then asked herself “Why does she want to go to a graveyard?”.

She got into the car with Nemu. She had to admit, it was a nice car. “So” she asked “Care to explain what you need help with?”. Nemu nodded and said “Now that we’re out of the hospital, sure. See, I’ve been hired by the High Emperor to investigate secret labs that apparently were built under the empire’s nose. However, due to the war effort he won’t risk any officers or military forces. However, since I have magical talent and came from one, he’s leaving the task to me. In fact, my showing up exposed their existence. Though at a cost. I’m what they call an Amenisac” she explained, turning on the car and beginning to drive. “Amnesiac” Ristra corrected. “If I hadn’t heard your foreign tongue, and were I not desperate, i’d have left by now. However, you’ve proven your not normal” she said. Nemu smiled and responded “I do appreciate it, miss Ristra. Now about these ogre feathers. Why do you need them?”. Ristra hesitated, but sighed a bit, saying “Well… I come from a town up
north, whispermill. I was a doctor. A pupil of mine’s dumb decision led to it being trashed. It’s operational now, but some people vanished during the whole event. One such person turned out to being held in Stilsnow for ransom. Needed a rental, but it was in contention. After reaching an agreement with a young lady worried about her father here in town, I got it. However” her voice trailed off at the end of her explanation. Nemu had a look of understanding as they continued their drive.

That was the start of her small adventure. They went to an obsidian cathedral in the oldest graveyard in Wellspring. She taught nemu briefly about Galdera and then fought with her. What shocked her was the lab. It was a veritable wonderland, and at the same time dangerous. She quickly realized the danger of it. It combined technology and magic, something that flew in the face of the 10th covenant. The shock came when it was discovered that the laboratory was operational. A single researcher was working when they came in and fled into the back, trying to activate something. After restraining the man, the worst happened. A massive northerner came out of a pod, that was roughly 15 feet in height. Nemu screamed at her to run and she did. She saw the things magical aura and it scared her. However, after getting outside, she calmed and collected herself. She then ran back in, checking everything. That’s when she found it, their failsafe. According to on-hand notes, it was actually a new magical disease that combined the effects of Varla and Vorsythe, and enchanted to specifically target northerners. Smiling, she added a chemical of her own that changed the diseases nature from liquid to gas, then headed back into the fray. She was just in time to witness Nemu’s last stand.

She awed as she saw and heard nemu cast a brilliantly glowing spell, glowed like a fairy, and said “Suisei!” She watched the thing fly backwards into the wall from the force of the spell’s explosion and noted the utter exhaustion in Nemu’s face. Then she frowned when the thing moved. She heard Nemu despair that she’d die alone, and then heard something that made her glad she came back “I wonder… if Ristra made it out in time?” Nemu asked aloud. Ristra acted then, using the chemicals she just made. The first toss landed at its feet, the gas burning its flesh. The second toss though hit true, its face. Its roar sent her to the floor, numbing her body to uselessness. However, she knew it was done. She saw Nemu look at her with a combination of happiness, despair, and hope. She decided to confirm Nemu’s happiness and hope, saying “Don’t worry. He’s done. They hid a failsafe in the room that guy there was in. I just added a little something to make it airborne”. She made sure to give a confident smirk. It seemed to work, as Nemu responded “Thank the gods, I’m glad. You saved me”. After that, she got up and walked over to Nemu, seeing how low Nemu’s mana levels were. Basically gone. Maybe a drop left. She caught her as she tried to get up, telling her to rest. After calling officer Greg, Nemu passed out.

She guided the officers to the room. They escorted the researcher out and mulled over how to move the northerner. They opted to simply create an opening and use a crane to lift the body out. It was then taken to a research facility outside the city to be studied. She was approached by officers and questioned. She told them most of the truth. That she rented a truck to take a vacation to Stilsnow, made a deal with Isabel, and helped Nemu to get her help in finding Ogre Eagle Feathers. The officers didn’t question her story and let her go on her way. She decided to head home, hoping Nemu would contact her soon. Once in her rented room, she began to send telegrams out to normal
places rare ingredients might be that were in the phone book provided by the hotel. Each one took mere minutes to respond and the consistent answer was ‘no’. However, one person responded with a slight variant ‘We don’t have that item in stock, but we can give you our restock location for 10,000 leaves’. A slightly pricey offer, but desirable. She accepted it and soon got an address. With that, she went to bed for the night.

Next morning, there was a knock on the door. Standing, she answered, slightly drowsy, asking “Yes, How can I help you?”. Putting on her glasses, she was relieved to see Nemu standing there. “Hi!” Nemu said “I’m here to fulfill my end of the bargain!” Ristra smiled, happy to see her. “Come in” Ristra said, moving and heading into her room, Nemu following. “I contacted some places around here yesterday, got an address. You recognize it?” Ristra asked, pointing to the address written in a notepad on the table by the telegraph. Nemu walked over, looking, and shook her head, saying “Nope. Then again, i’ve never bothered to memorize addresses. Geography sticks in my head more”. Ristra understood and said “Alright. Then let me just gather my things and we can go find it”. She then began to go around the room, collecting things. Her medicine kit, her portable chemistry set that really was just a few plastic tubes and some glassware, her set of homebrewed self-defense chemicals, and finally her wallet containing a bank card and ID among other things. She hadn’t been paying attention, but caught the tail end of a conversation Nemu had with Greg. “Alright, so here’s what the boys here say. That’s a black market. ‘Apparently it’s dubiously legal. Still can’t buy contraband there legally, without getting in trouble, but yeah, you could theoretically buy rare ingredients from it and be fine’ the officer said. “Thank you” Nemu said “I’ll be going now”. She turned and said “Hey Ristra, I have good news!”.

Ristra walked into the market with Nemu. It had been recommended by an alchemist in the town that worked on an order-by-order basis. Nemu mentioned “Oh, I’ve been here before. A fortune-teller I met led me to you and the laboratory”. Ristra knew then that they were in the right place. They walked through, asking around about Ogre Eagle’s. Eventually, someone told them about a particular stall that sells rare medicinal ingredients at a bargain, but it dries up fast. That even when they sold out, they accepted orders for the next day. Ristra hurried to get to the stall in question. Nemu followed closely behind. Ristra saw a massive line and sighed a bit. “What do we do now?” Ristra asked Nemu. She was thinking of going into the line, and when Nemu stayed silent for several minutes, moved to. Suddenly, Nemu grabbed her wrist and said “Actually… let’s stay back a bit. I’ve got an idea”. Nemu led her to another part of the black market, where they could still watch the stall, but were out of earshot of it. “Here’s the idea. We wait for him to close shop. Then we approach, asking for his Ogre Eagle Feather source. Then we go to the source and get some” She explained. Ristra nodded and said “A good plan. We even have some leverage, as insurance”. Nodding to each other, both waited. After a few hours, the line was gone and the man running the booth began to take the stall down.

They moved then, approaching it. “Hello there” Ristra said, greeting the man. The man looked at them and groaned, saying “I’m closed for the day. Come back in a month”. “Please, just a moment of
your time. I just want information” Ristra said. The man stopped for a moment and turned, staring. “Ma’am, I don’t share that info with just anyone. Now please, shove off” the man replied, returning to his work. “You wouldn’t even for Ristra Abraham, whom is desperate for Ogre Eagle Feathers?” she asked, showing a bank card. The man stared fully now, clearly considering the offer. “10k leaves, behind the nearby bar in 5 hours. Take it or leave it” the man said. “Deal” Ristra said, looking at Nemu. Nemu nodded and said “I can tell he’s being honest with his words”. “Then ladies, I’ll see you then” the man said, before returning to his work. Ristra turned and left with Nemu. She went to the bank and withdrew the leaves needed. As they approached the location, Ristra asked nemu “How is your mana?”. She smiled and replied “Top-notch and a bit overfull if i’m being honest”. Ristra smiled. That meant the bad feeling she had would play out fine even if it was true. That they were about to be mugged.

She entered the alleyway behind the bar. It was large and dark, but the local lighting and daytime served to bring some brightness to the alleyway. Ristra looked as the man from before entered the alleyway and asked “Got the leaves?”. She nodded and showed the small bag she had and said “All I want is the source of the feathers”. The man nodded, holding a hand out “Leaves first. Your friend will prevent me escaping with it” he said. Ristra nodded and gave the bag to the man. The man counted, almost fanatically, and when he was satisfied that he had been given the requested amount, he nodded and stood, saying “You’ve upheld your end. I’ll uphold mine. There are some ruins nearby. It’s the Ogre Eagles breeding ground. The forest is their nesting ground”. Ristra smiled and said “Thank you. I promise not to overhunt. I only need some” and turned to leave. That’s when she saw shadows at the end of the alleyway. “Ristra! We’ve got trouble” Nemu said, pulling her scepter out. “I never did say you’d leave alive. Of course you disappearing would be suspicious, so i’m just going to take your friend here and for another 10k, let her go” the man said, reaching for Nemu.

Nemu reacted immediately, tapping her feet and shouting “Janpu!” and then jumping. The man failed to grab her, as Ristra pulled out a chemical and slammed it at the guys feet before retreating. “Gah!” the man shouted, backing up and covering his mouth, his voice gaining a drowsy tone as he said “What did you put in that gas, woman!?”. The man stumbled onto his back and slowly fell asleep as Ristra turned, tossing another vial against the wall between her and the two men at one end of the alley, saying “Just the smoke of burnt sleepweed, that had been combined with something to make the smoke retain the sleep-inducing qualities”. Nemu meanwhile pointed her rod at the other combatants approaching and said “Kakyu!”. From her rod, a small ball of fire shot forth and exploded once it reached the combatants, sending them through the nearby stone walls. Ristra had begun running that way as Nemu touched down and jumped forward, her Jump spell still active. They rushed to their vehicle, only to find the cloaked figures there. “Damn” Ristra said “They’re serious about kidnapping you”. “Yeah. guess that’s to be expected from someone marketing in an illegal market” Nemu said “Come on. The car is tracked so it's no biggie. Let’s get your truck and head for the ruins”. Ristra nodded and they turned, leaving the cloaked figures to wait.

It took them an hour to reach the hospital, but they had good news when they arrived. The truck was still there. Ristra got in with Nemu, turning it on as Nemu asked “Why aren’t I driving?”. “Simple” Ristra replied “This is a rental and rental companies, especially automobile-related ones, get made
when people that didn’t pay for the rental operate the rented item”. “Ah” Nemu said “That’s odd but alright”. She then asked “So, these ruins. Any history?”. Ristra nodded and said as she pulled out of the hospital parking lot “It’s the location when Leona made a deal with the reigning king of Marsalim. He had the palace and town built specifically for that purpose. It would later become a test site for relations between immigrating citizens of the champion kingdom and the native peoples of the sand kingdom”. Nemu smiled and asked “Did it succeed?”. Ristra nodded and said “Yeah. There were problems of course, but in general both sides found common ground between each other. The troublemakers were your generic criminals”. “So, why is it abandoned?” Nemu asked, as they pulled onto the main road out of town. The ruins were a few miles outside of town, so it was a bit of a drive. Ristra sighed and explained “According to history books, it was always planned to be taken down, and to allow free immigration between the realms. However…. A sudden, strange attack by ogre eagles, 10 to be exact, sent the city into a panic and immediate evacuation. 1000 lives were lost and 5000 more injured”. “I see… that’s too bad” Nemu said, frowning a bit. “It is, but those injured recovered and the immigration happened anyway. The creation of the empire only smoothed things over” Ristra said, finishing the history lesson.

They parked outside of it on the sand. It was quite a ways off-road but with a truck it was possible to reach. She sighed as she locked the truck up and began walking towards the ruins. Nemu followed. Once they reached it, they heard it. The screech of an Ogre Eagle. Frowning, she looked up and saw them. An entire flock. “Wow!” Nemu cried out “Are those Ogre Eagles!?”. “Yes” Ristra said “Aggressive quadrupedal winged avians”. They entered the ruins proper. There were the skitterings of things but nothing jumped out to attack them. Ristra entered further and Nemu asked “Why are we going in? Why not attack one of the ones in the skies?”. “Ogre Eagles are well-known for their aggression, and during mating season the males are deadly to even experienced hunters. Further, despite competing, Ogre Eagles are known to gang up on tough prey during such a season. The females however are very docile. Getting a feather won’t be tough. It’ll be escaping that is” Ristra explained, Nemu following and listening. As they walked they could hear the coo’s and caws of Ogre Eagles. Even the occasional screech. Soon enough, they found it. The central chamber that they had chosen to roost in. Massive nests filled the throne room and the largest sat on a central table in the center. Ogre Eagle females sat in them, tending to eggs. They were slightly small, but still as tall as a human and as long as a horse. The males, when they came in to feed their mates, were slightly larger. Ristra eyed one of the closer ones and said “That one. It’s the closest and we can get out of sight before its male see’s us” Ristra said. Nemu nodded and said “Alright! Janpu!” and tapped both their feet with her staff. Their feet gained a green glow as Ristra jumped over to the female.

It sat there, looking at her as she landed and took a handful of feathers. However a screech alerted her that she had messed up. Peering down at her from the hole in the ceiling was a male Ogre Eagle and it had a fresh kill in its mouth that it had then dropped to screech. The other males immediately stood up, spreading their wings and screeching in unison. “Run!” Ristra cried as they both ran for it, Ristra stuffing the feathers into a small bag and then putting that bag in her pocket and zipping it closed. They reached the truck in minutes, the Ogre Eagles just barely not catching up do to them tripping over each other. Once they reached the entrance, Nemu turned and said “Kakyu!” pointing at the ceiling of the entrance. The small ball of condensed flame erupted and caused a small collapse of the ruin, blocking the ogre eagles from reaching them immediately. They’d have to go to a part
that was exposed to the sky and weak enough structurally to let them out. It took a minute to turn the truck on and begin having it drive away. Nemu sat in the back, tapping her back and then part of the truck and saying “Jishaku!” Sparks flew as she was magnetized to the truck. Removing her would not be easy. Ristra knew Nemu’s intent without even asking.

She knew getting to the city would add a measure of security, especially since Nemu used her contact with Greg to prepare them. The officers had guns and the eagles in general seemed to despise ranged weapons. However, as she feared, the eagles were not about to give up. From the rearview mirror, she could see the eagles rising into the sky and approaching swiftly. The wind was on their side, not hers. Further, driving in the desert made a large sand cloud for them to follow. It was then the worst happened. The truck jumped into the air. It not only did that but it tipped forward. Nemu screamed and she was speechless. She was horror stricken, as the forward momentum they had built up was causing them to flip mid-air. Further, the eagles would catch up. Her thoughts were cut off as the truck impacted with the ground on its tires, but the force launched her into the wheel, knocking the wind out of her lungs, and ripping her seatbelt off its hinges. She nearly passed out from the pain. Nemu’s scream of “Drive! Drive!” kept her awake. She slowly pulled away and put her foot on the gas, speeding away. She didn’t look back, but the screeching alert her that they were closing in. She could hear Nemu spellcasting behind them and hoped it was delaying them. When for 5 minutes they didn’t get closer, she knew it was working. She could see the gate getting closer and closer and beginning to open, and could see the glint of draw guns and police pauldrons. The truck barreled through the gate and she hit the brakes, not wanting to hurt anyone. She then heard a parade of gunfire ring out. The officers likely raining bullets onto the Ogre Eagles to scare them off. She took a deep breathe as the truck shuddered and suddenly lost elevation. She saw a tire roll into view and with a smile and laugh passed out.
Chapter 16: The Thief, Act 2

Chapter Notes

Edit: fixed a typo that I don't recall even typing.

Chapter 16

One Man’s Junk

He sat and watched the wedding ceremony between Emily and Sebastian. He was using the name Lugris. He only did so because he needed the knight’s help. The knight was a high-ranking official. True, it wasn’t high than commanders, kings, or other members of the High Emperor’s court, but the knight still had connections and political power that would be useful. He needed to get into the estate of the robber baron and get the evidence he required. He then would need the weapon that the bandit king in the area held, for Louise. He had a plan of course, beyond trying to trick the knight. He knew that once he moved, the knight would be onto him. However, he had a way to get the knight’s cooperation. Reveal the truth, reveal his mission, and then ask for help. The knight would have to agree to help, and accept whatever deal he offered. The ceremony itself was rather droll, though one bit was enchanting to watch. When they finished saying their vows, the tree leaves glowed and showered them with pure liquid mana. According the emily, they were enchanted to give the knight good luck. After that, it offered the relic and said “Here. As promised. Don’t forget your half later”. Sebastian nodded and said “I won’t forget. Fare thee well”. He then turned and leapt up to him and said “Let us be off Lugris. We must find your friend and then flee this city” as he put the relic into the bag.

As they approached the top of the ruin, using proper navigation of the ruin, he spoke to Sebastian. He said “I must reveal a truth friend, now that i’ve helped you”. “What is it?” Sebastian asked, curious. “I named myself Lugris. This was false. It was necessary however. For my secret would cause… issues” he explained as Sebastian's face went from one of curiosity to suspicion “Before I tell you my true name, I must also reveal my true aim. The noble I mentioned, I am not friends with their children. I seek to expose him and pay the man who exposed his treachery to me”. Sebastian stared at him, and he could tell by the suspicion on his face that the man didn’t believe him. He then decided to tip his hand, pulling a manilla folder from his jacket and offering it, saying “Here. It details his crimes”. Sebastian took the folder and thumbed through it. Eventually, he saw the look of shock on Sebastian's face and while he could guess as to what Sebastian was thinking, he wasn’t about assume. After all, Sebastian was a knight, an elite. Letting his guard down for even a moment would spell his doom.
“Where did you get this?” Sebastian asked, his tone betraying the slight anger he felt. “I have a nobleman who gets me info on robber barons. He has deep connections throughout our realm” he answered “I hope you understand I cannot divulge exact details”. Sebastian nodded, saying “I do” straightening himself. “Your true name. If you’re a criminal, you’ve acquired or given one” Sebastian said “If we’re to work together to destroy this bandit menace, I need you to trust me”. He nodded and said, taking the top hat hat off and holding it as he gave a full bow like a servant might, saying “I am master thief Sir Lupone, at your service”. Sebastian sighed and said “I had a feeling. No matter. I cannot turn a blind eye on those in need. Even if I must help a criminal”. “I do hope it doesn’t tarnish your reputation” he said, meaning it for the most part. Sebastian shook his head and said “No. I am of High Emperor Fionne’s court. Only he can deem my actions dishonorable. I doubt he will”. He nodded, glad, and said “Good. Then our partnership may continue” standing tall and putting his hat on.

They left the arena and headed into the city. He approached a guard and asked “Excuse me, might I make an inquiry into the whereabouts of the Lavinda estate?”. The guard looked at him quizzically and said “Yes. Southwest of here, the large spire”. Sebastian nodded and said “thank you” before leading Lupone away. “What’s the plan?” Sebastian asked. “Simple. Infiltration and searching for evidence. My friends payment is a legendary weapon, but our nobleman friend is making acquiring it easy by handing it to the bandit king” Lupone answered “As for the method, we go by air. Our colors blend into the night sky finely”. Sebastian merely nodded as they walked. Night soon fell and the barrier held. They headed to the tallest building in the area that was publicly accessible, a cafe. In the alleyway behind it, they found a way up, via a fire escape. Lupone used his VTP to pull himself up, while he helped Sebastian up with the same tool. They climbed up and saw the estate a mere 400 feet away. The central spire, the main housing unit Lupone assumed, stood at almost a mile high. It was surrounded by complexes and bunkers and guard towers. It was a veritable garrison. He put a telescope to the eye of his mask and sighed.

“Trouble?” Sebastian asked, staring down. “Yes” he replied, slightly worried now “The man has a veritable army. Private mercs no less, so with the backing of a confidant of the king….…” his voice trailed off. Sebastian finished his sentence, saying “In a kingdom where might mostly makes right, that man and his army are untouchable legally, beyond breaking a covenant”. He nodded. It was less because of the private armies strength and more what it represented. The man had political power, riches, and the ear of the right people to flaunt local laws all the way to outright ignoring them and doing as he pleased. So long as he didn’t draw the ire of the royal police, army, or High Emperor, the man was safe to do as he pleased. At least, he had until now. Now that Sir Lupone existed, he would strike at people like this any day, even at great personal risk. He said to Sebastian “Get comfortable. We’re waiting here all day, for night. It’s our best shot”.

As they waited, Sebastian decided to pry, asking “So why did you walk this path?”. “It’s sort of complex, but seeing the corrupt nature of the social elite, I had to act. However, my position lent me no aid, and in fact much to lose. So I adopted this facade to facilitate this” he answered, truthfully, though added “Well, my end goal will inflict personal harm, though I’m certain I will weather it”.
“Why would your end goal harm you?” Sebastian asked. “Simple” he answered, being serious “I plan to expose my own father and mother. However, I need time for them. You could say this is all…. ‘Practice’ for it”. Sebastian looked away, towards the lowering sun and said “I see. I’m sorry to hear that. I can sympathize with being of noble heart and having to watch villainy”. He watched Sebastian as it was his turn to pry. He asked “So. Why did you become a knight?”. Sebastian barely flinched as he answered “It was offered, and with it came benefits. Who would refuse?”. “Perhaps, but you don’t seem the type to consider that. I can tell from how you fight, it’s a mix of the royal fencing style, only taught by the royal family, and the royal officers, what some might call high officers” he responded, not fully buying it. Sebastians wince confirmed it. However, he sighed and said “Truth is… a multitude of factors weighed in. My ambitions, my desire to do good and being offered the power to do it, and… boredom”. That last part had a tinge of embarrassment. “I see. I admit, I didn’t take you for the type to let boredom get to them” he said, not trying to deepen the knight’s shame. “Boredom may be the wrong word” Sebastian said, glancing at him and letting him see a small glimpse into his mind as he continued “I felt stuck. Like I wasn’t moving, doing anything… that I was letting everything pass me”. Thiesel sighed and said “I can understand the sentiment. I myself felt it, though for less noble reasons. Though it is nothing to be ashamed of”.

It was then he stood to interrupt their conversation, bringing the telescope to his eye. He focused on the main gate. He didn’t have a perfect view, as they were south and the gate was on the western wall, but he had enough vision and could see it. The dozen or so police cars that showed up. “Damn it” he said. “What?” Sebastian asked, as he answered immediately, saying “The cops showed up. That means nothing good for us”. Sebastian stared down and said “Indeed. If he destroys the evidence…” his voice trailing off, thinking. Thiesel stared down and after a few moments said “No chance. We go now” and backed up. Sebastian stared and asked “Nightfall isn’t here. Are you sure?”. He nodded and said “Yeah. If he destroys the evidence, then I lose out on a big job”. Sebastian nodded and said “Alright then. Let’s do this”. With that, he set up the rappel line using the same grapple gun as before and used his VTP to zipline down. Sebastian used his gloved hands.

They touched down 100 feet from the main spire. He had 2 more grapple guns and he had bought a spare VTP. They had touched down upon one of the barracks from the looks of it, primarily the chimney. Him and Sebastian went flat on the roof immediately, him changing the top of his VTP to that of a mirror and peeked over the edge. Nothing. He waited 5 minutes. Nothing. He stood and said “Go”. They went to the edge and jumped to the first balcony. He checked the room it led to. No one was inside. They then jumped down to the ground level. After this, the two of them proceeded to use the long shadows provided by sunset and their dark coloring to slip past most of the mercs heading for the main gate. They heard bits and pieces of what was going on. Apparently, the army was planning to occupy the tower temporarily to have mages focus on siege spells. This was not good for them. They not only had to contend with mercs, but also the Royal Police. Further, they were working against the clock. Each moment spent not with the evidence, that was a moment the nobleman they sought to expose, Former champion and trade commissioner Juanes Lavinda, could get to said evidence and burn it. They had to hurry, and hurry they did. Soon enough they reached the tower.
It was quite large. Almost 500 feet radius, and only steadily losing size as it went up, it was
impossibly tall. How anyone navigated it was beyond his understanding, but they didn’t have time.
He had already come up with an idea on how to get in. He had Sebastian wait in an alleyway and he
went down the street. He looked for a pile of junk that looked flammable and then held two fingers
towards the pile, saying “Hakka Suru!” Instantly, the edges of the pile sparked to life with flame and
it began to creep over the pile. He turned and fled, parkouring up a nearby structure, using the
opposing fire escape to help. He then crossed rooftops, dropping down near sebastian and said “Now
we wait. In a few minutes, a full blaze will begin and they’ll rush to put it out”. As he predicted, a
siren alarmed and men rushed out and headed down the street, including the two guards. One yelled
“Get more men! We need to put out this fire as soon as possible!” Nodding to Sebastian they came
out of hiding and bolted for the tower. Thankfully for them, the door was unlocked, letting them slip
in unnoticed.

Inside was very different. 10 floors up, the ceiling lied there, with 2 openings for people to come and
go. Large staircases spiraled up the tower on either side. There was an additional opening in the
direct center with a pillar of pure light going up the tower. Thiesel walked to it and examined it,
pondering. Before he could think of what it was, Sebastian spoke up, asking “Gods, how in Galderra
did he get this?” “Do you know what it is?” Thiesel asked. Sebastian nodded, pointing to it and
trailing his finger up saying “This is what we at the military call a light elevator. It teleports anyone
that enters it to any point the light touches, unless otherwise restricted”. “Any other limitations?” he
asked, curious. Sebastian nodded and replied “Yeah. anyone that uses dark magic must resonate with
light magic as well, or they can’t use it”. He smiled and said “Then, we have no problems”.
Sebastian nodded and sunk his hands in, saying “I did neglect to mention that a magic user must
coordinate it before teleport. Otherwise, it will take people to the last known coordinates. Thankfully,
a breakthrough a few years back revealed that qi can manipulate the light elevator”. With that he
gave sigh and a groan as he pushed his life energy into the thing. “Then, we’re going to floor 498”
he said “My associate specifically said that’s the most used study. The others are floor 407, 405, and
173”.

He stepped into the light. Anyone else, save thieves or other people who practiced precision-based
trades, would not have felt what he did for a split second. For a singular moment that could not even
be called a microsecond by any stretch of the imagination, Thiesel felt himself split in half. It wasn’t
painful or unpleasant. It simply felt odd. The sensation only lasted that split second and then he was
at his destination. Floor number 498. Based on the environment, this was a study floor. There were
bookcases galore and the few books he spotted, they dated all the way back to before the exploits of
one person he found interesting in tales, Cyrus Albright. He turned his attention to above as
Sebastian stepped out, then turned and manipulated the Light Elevator. “Got it” he said “The idiot
labeled passageway through his mighty tower”. Sebastian laughed and said “of course. Such an
estate, even i’d get lost”. “True, but then you don’t have secrets” he countered, to which Sebastian
drew silent. Thiesel stopped, realizing that now Sebastian did. He turned and said “Apologies. I truly
did not mean anything by that”. Sebastian nodded.

They quickly realized it was the most used study in the estate. The entire floor, 120 feet in radius,
was itself a massive library. He found more and more ancient books amongst the near endless
shelves. There were no doors, but endless shelves. He soon grew impatient, using his VTP, light
weight, and skills in parkouring to ascend a shelf, making sure to not move too quickly and disturb
the large shelf, but also not too slow as to weight down for too long in any one direction. He reached
the top and scanned. Shelves all the way to the rim 80 feet away, the far wall. However, he spotted a
few curious spots that were essentially clearings amidst an orchard of trees, or in this case bookcases.
He smiled and gently climbed down, saying “I found them. A few clearings amidst the endless
bookcases”. Sebastian nodded and said “Lead the way. I’ll guard you as we go”. He then led
Sebastian through the forest of bookcases to the first clearing.

It was there they found not their prize, but still a treasure in and of itself. “Gods… these books. They
must be ancient. Around the World, by Teresa Colozine, one of the famous eight heroes from the
first rising” Sebastian said, picking up a book and staring at the cover, reading it a bit. Thiesel himself
walked to another shelf and said “A reference guide of the gods, by Ophilia Clement. You’re right.
How could one man amass such a collection all himself?” “I don’t know” he replied, pulling out
some paper and setting it on a table. He pulled a ballpoint pen out and used a nearby inkwell to write
a small letter. “What are you doing?” Sebastian asked. “Making a request to the police. To donate the
mans collection to where it belong, libraries. These are treasures not to be hoarded but shared” he
answered, finishing it and moving away “Come, we must continue. It’s all pointless if he destroys
any evidence”. With that, they left.

They came upon the next clearing of books. This time they had something. Law books and lots of
them. At first glance, nothing wrong with it. However, Thiesel knew better and went to one, pulling
it out. “I knew it” he said, flipping through its pages. He was seeing page after page notes made by
lawyers working for Mr. Lavinda, all making points on potential legal arguments should his crimes
come to light. All speculation but it was still noteworthy. Circumstantial evidence. “What?”
Sebastian asked after a few minutes “This is a legal library. Every noble has one”. He nodded and
asked in response “Do their books contain speculation on legal arguments to justify and get away
with crimes against high majesty?”. Sebastian shook his head and Thiesel continued, saying “Well,
these pages do. Like here. ‘If client Jaunes Lavinda was discovered and charged with defrauding his
majesty, could the argument be made that his accountant was defrauding the majesty and not Mr.
Lavinda himself if he could provide writings showing he ordered correct amounts paid?’ is written
on the side in this book, a legal analysis of the King’s Covenant” he said, quoting the book.
Sebastian nodded and said “Good point. Not supreme evidence of wrongdoing, but in a trial it would
most certainly be used to strength the court’s argument of wrongdoing”. Thiesel made another note
for police and they left to find the final clearing.

They found their prize and more. A large man, at least 7 feet tall and looking quite rotund, wearing
the latest fashion, a blue tailcoat above nobleman clothing, tight-fitting blue sweats and brown dress
shoes. The man had more golden ruby-embedded rings on each hand than should be possible and he
wore 3 ornate, gaudy necklaces. He was part on the top of his head and sported a thin mustaches that
curled on the ends and drooped a bit in the middle. He had beady black eyes and a toady-looking
face. He had several golden teeth. “Hurry up!” the man shouted “We must get these destroy! I will not lose all that I have gained!” Servants were gathering documents and stuffing them into suitcases, then putting them into various carts. It seemed they weren’t burning them on this floor. A good thing, Thiesel thought since the fire from such an act could potentially burn the many books on this floor. However he wasn’t about to let those carts move period. He looked at Sebastian, who nodded at him, and they both made their move. He got on top of the bookcases and stuck to the edges as he moved towards the carts while Sebastian stepped from the shadows into the clearing, saying loudly “Halt! In the name of High Emperor Fionne Balacruf!”. Everyone but Thiesel stopped moving and turned to Sebastian. He used the chance to jump down.

“I am Sebastian Ciel. I came, hearing of misdeeds done by the Lavinda family. I came across some interesting things” he announced, walking towards one of the servants whom ran “Ancient stories long thought lost, footnotes on potential legal arguments should certain crimes come to light. Now I find you mentioning you’re going to destroy evidence. What have you to say, Juanes Lavinda?” Juanes simply chuckled, saying “how foolish are you, knight? I am Juanes Lavinda, former champion and former trade commissioner. I know how to work the system, I used it so many times after all”. Sebastian glared and asked “Can I take that to mean you resist?”. Juanes shook his head and said “No sir knight. I am debating you. I know you can’t raise your sword unless properly resisted or challenged, but debates are allowed for delay. Until then, you must wait. Have you proof I did anything?”. Sebastian stared, his eyes flickering to him. He shook his head. He was looking for something concrete, that layman could understand, that no one could deny. He had to connect Juanes to the recent bandit king uprising. Sebastian then engaged Juanes in debate, humouring the man. He did it to buy Thiesel time.

It paid off. It took half an hour but Thiesel had it. A magical book containing the long-distance communications between a Robert Bueler and Juanes. It detailed the deal the two made and exposed things even he wasn’t aware of. Worst, it appeared that Juanes had warned Robert the moment the police showed up, to move east. Robert responded he’d move to the highlands, the landscape providing ample cover but not burdening his entourage. He growled. They had missed the bandit king. However, he had what he needed. He stood and jumped from the cart into the clearing. Juanes turned and was about to say something but stopped. He stared and then opened his eyes wide in fear, yelling in disbelief “Sir Lupone!? You- You’re real!?”. Smiling under his mask he said in a bombastic voice “Believe, for it is I, Sir Lupone! And Juandes Lavinda, I am most disappointed” holding up a book “Conspiring with a bandit king to not only terrorize the people and profit of their dismay, but to also fraud king and emperor as well as the people you swore to protect? Why, it’s probably the most dastardly thing i’ve uncovered, next the the high judge I exposed”. “What!? Where did you find that!? I thought I told my servants to destroy it!” Juanes exclaimed. “Ah. So there is hard proof of your crimes” Sebastian said, putting a hand on the handle of his saber “Then, I believe our debate is at a close and I can formally place you under arrest”. Juanes turned to Sebastian, his face contorted into rage and fear, asking “No! You’re going to believe this thief over me! One of the privileged elite!?”. Sebastian shook his head, walking over to thiesel and extending a hand, saying “No. I will see this evidence myself. If I conspired with a thief and was tricked, i’d sully his majesty’s honor”. Thiesel obliged, handing the book over. Sebastian looked it over and nodded, saying “My, my. This is damning indeed. Everyone of your lines is signed with you name. What have you to say, Juandes Lavinda?".
Juanes stared, his face now resting in a neutral position. Thiesel grew a bit anxious. He had pocketed another item, a series of letters between him and Robert before the book was made. It was then Juanes laughed and said “I guess you have me eh, sir knight? I admit it. I made a bandit king to profit. However, his majesty only knows if you leave alive, yes?”. Suddenly, Juanes pulled out a small iron rod and pointed it at Sebastian, yelling “Torappubaria!”. Instantly Sebastian was surrounded by a series of hexagons made seemingly of glass. However, Thiesel could see they were made of pure magic. “Sebastian!” he cried out, turning to Juanes. He pulled out his VTP, equipping the hook tool for battle.

“Hi no Bakahatsu!” Juanes laughed out as the heat in the barrier began to rise in the barrier. However, before it could finish the barriers hexagons shifted away from one another as Thiesel held a hand out, whispering “Maho o nusume”, drawing the magic that held the barrier together to himself. Sebastian quickly forced his way through, ripping it apart towards Juanes. An explosion rang out as Juanes spell went off, but the force sent Sebastian flying instead of doing substantial damage. Sebastian wasn’t able to pull his weapons out to make use of the trajectory or momentum, but was able to effectively shoulder tackle Juanes, who skid back a few dozen feet, crying out in pain. Sebastian groaned as he looked at his burnt boots. Sitting up, he pulled out a healing potion and poured it into his boots, then stood. Thiesel meanwhile turned and immediately rolled to the left as another barrier appeared. Juanes growled and yelled “Stand still worm! My barriers require precision, and changing variables on the fly is hard!”. Thiesel laughed and ran into the bookcases to cut off Juanes line of sight. However, Juanes reacted unexpectedly, and turned his attention to Sebastian, saying “I kill you, I can retrieve that tome. I get that tome, you have no proof of my involvement with the bandit king I set up!”.

“Kaze o hiku!” Juanes said, pointing his iron wand at Sebastian, then pulling his arm and the wand back. Thiesel didn’t see the result, but guessed it brought Sebastian to Juanes, as Juanes said next “Shokkutatchi!”. He then saw the flash of light from the around the bookcase leading behind Juanes. He readied his VTP and peered around the corner. His eyes widened as he saw Sebastian smoking and looking injured. However, he had his weapons out and there was some blood on the floor. “Damn you!” Juanes demanded “How did you do that, while in the midst of being electrocuted!?”. Thiesel didn’t let Sebastian respond, moving quickly and sinking the hook of his VTP into the shoulder of Juanes and forcing him backwards. Juanes let out a startled cry, but Sebastian moved quickly, leaping and kicking Juanes wand away from him and pointing his spear to the man's throat, saying “Surrender! We have you!” “Fine! Fine! I submit! Please, don’t kill me!” Juanes begged. Thiesel said “Your call, sir knight”. Sebastian nodded and said “He will be arrested and charged” before flipping Juanes over and restraining him with handcuffs.

It was fairly straightforward after that. Sebastian called in his arrest, and the evidence procured, and then made a show of trying to arrest him. Actually, he was sure Sebastian tried. However, taking an
electric spell directly affected his performance and thus he was able to get away this time. After that, he followed through his original escape plan. He headed to the 20th floor and used his VTP and one of his grapple guns to zipline down to a building. The high police caught wind of him almost immediately and gave pursuit, but it was pointless. A few blocks down, he knew of a sewer grate that led to the navigable portion of the sewers and one tunnel in particular led to the noble district. It was unfavorable and he had hoped to leave silently with Sebastian and part ways amicably, but with the events as they happened, it wasn’t possible.

However, he had a bigger problem. The bandit king, whom he now knew as Robert Bueler, had probably fled. With the northerner invasion still in swing, as noted by the barrier still being up, it was a perfect time for the man to move himself and his bandits to where they desired to go. To stonegard most likely, since it was the only worthwhile town in the highlands, aside from Everhold. As bold as Stonegard was, assailing Everhold would be foolish, as the High Emperor lived there and ruled from it, and it was the center of the royal police and army. Thus, he knew Robert planned to set up shop in Stonegard. He headed to an alley, changed into proper clothing, freshened up with some cleaning magic, then headed for his hotel. He still needed to play the part of aloof noble. He had a ball to attend, and a date to have. The girl? Why the princess of all people. He wasn’t sure why the princess took an interest in him, but he planned to find out.
He walked the road. Normally he would take his vehicle home, but it had been wrecked. Rather than waste money replacing it, he decided to upgrade his arms. Specifically, he bought 20 bullets made of mythril, all of them for his rifle. He wasn’t planning to use them now, but he planned to have the bullets enchanted later. He wanted the best enchantments and Atlasdam offered them. Victor’s Hollow did fine, but he wanted to be ready. He knew sooner or later he’d be asked to bag a northerner. It was a matter of time, when the war escalated fully. Until then, he would hunt whatever came his way. It was then a courier found him. They ran up, rather suddenly, exclaiming his name loudly. He sighed and turned, waiting patiently. He took the letter offered wordlessly and read it. Another contract. With a license provided. The contract wanted him to hunt a particular kind of monster in Quarrycrest. A beast known as ‘the Drainer’ had been recorded as active in the area. According to the contract, it was draining liquid mana supplies, which was putting a strain on the appraisal guilds resources and slowing Quarrycrest economy. Not drastically, but slowly. The beast, as described, he identified easily as what some would call a mana boar and others a mana bear. However, such creatures were rare and the descriptions of this beast had contradictions with official descriptions, and his own recollections of hunting such creatures. Regardless, while he didn’t doubt there weren’t hunters equally qualified to handle this, he decided to. It was his job, and in any other field, even someone like him would be fired for refusing to work without good reason, which right now he had none. In fact, he needed it to fund enchanting the mithril bullets he just spent 20,000 leaves on.

Thus he headed out. He had already passed Boulderfall and was now heading down the path to Quarrycrest. It’d be nightfall he’d arrive in the city. As for Birdian swarms, they were simple with his skill and magic specialties. However, walk went without issue. He was glad of that. At his age, fighting was getting harder and harder. For the job ahead, he needed his full strength. However, it seemed like he’d have to start work early. He saw an overturned truck, and broken open drums of liquid mana. Very little remained. Only one officer was on duty and he looked exhausted just seeing him. “Why are you here, sir?” the officer asked. “I’m Zem. I’m a licensed hunter and I’ve a contract. Might I ask what happened?” he replied. The officer sighed and said “Yeah we had an… incident. A strange bear-like beast with large tusks knocked the truck over while it was stopped for inspection. It killed several on-site officers, broke open and devoured the mana within the drums, and then fled deeper into the canyons”. He nodded and said “Sounds like my mark. I’ll be sure to kill it before the next shipment. Can you give me a deadline?”. The officer nodded very slightly and said “You’ve got till the day after the ‘morrow”. He sighed. “I’ll do my best. Thank you. May I enter?” he said, requesting entry. The gates opened and Zem walked through, into Quarrycrest.
He headed right for the closest place renting lodgings. He needed a place to operate from, and he found a hotel to do it. It was the third place he stopped at. He got a third floor room and the lifts were working. The room was spacious, featuring a bookcase that was empty, a desk with a working telegram, a study desk, a locker, and a bed. There was a bathroom, but it was a separate room. He stored his camping gear and rations in the locker and headed out, locking the room. He headed for the scene he came in on. He had a lot of work to do if he was going to stop the beast from raiding the next shipment in, now that it found a bottleneck point. Luckily, this meant the next shipment wouldn’t be intercepted until this point. It would expend energy for an unneeded risk. He examined the scene and found the tracks quickly. They lead out into the canyon. He followed them a bit, with the sun’s light slowly fading away. He got to the crossroads between Quarrycrest, Boulderfall and the rest of Osterra, and Orwell and Riverford. He was shocked to see it veer away from any of the established paths and to the west, up the nearby hill. Rather than follow however, he opted to return. It would be bad if he fought it or another creature at night, as it would limit his visibility which he relied on for his job.

The next day, rather than immediately head out to follow the tracks, he stopped by a hunting store. Not just any though, a hunting guild store. Most stores that sold hunting goods generally did so with casual sportsman in mind. However, the hunting guild serviced both guild members, freelancers, and official contractors of the crown. He fell into the third party, to his chagrin, and so could shop there, even if they didn’t like his type. He could feel the glares on him as he entered, but paid them no mind. He headed first the headware section. Helmets, goggles, and accessories were there but he found what he needed. Night-vision goggles. He decided to pick up a customizable kevlar helmet too. Extra head protection wouldn’t hurt. He also bought a flashlight and some spare wiring from another aisle. He bought an all-encompassing survival kit and went to pay. As they rang him up, he noticed a new gun for sale. However, he found the specs lacking so didn’t purchase. Simply put, the gun was a compact rifle-sized firearm with a pair of large barrels that were half an inch in diameter and apparently fired a spray of rounds rather than a pair of single, solid rounds. The clerk however noticed and said “You know, that isn’t meant as a primary firearm”. “Oh?” he asked “what is it meant for?”. “Sidearm, close-range. Good crowd control at medium range. It weighs about 40 pounds thanks to being made of an aluminum-steel alloy” the Clerk responded, saying further “Your total comes to 5765 leaves. Is that all today?”. He shook his head and said “1 pack of 250 calibur bullets”. The clerk nodded, retrieving them and adding them to the total “7154 leaves sir”. He nodded and paid, taking his items and putting them in his bag, and carrying the survival kit separately.

Now, he headed out. He returned to the crossroads. It was only 9pm. He had plenty of sunlight to hunt the beast and kill it, and bring its body back. He headed to the west, up a nearby hill. Around the top really. What he saw was interesting. A series of tiny walkways made from various hills. Northwest, he could see an opening, clearly man-made. He headed in that direction. After all, the tracks were leading that way. However, once he arrived he had a bad feeling. The place was a barrow. Something used after the first uprising. They were cave structures that held the deceased and was purified and sanctified by priests of the sacred flame. The daughter of the first clerical hero came up with a spell that could assign undead guardians in the event of intrusion. The spell would dissipate against the unwilling dead and the dead would be allowed rest beyond its duty. Further, if the cleric using the spell did not have the blessing of Aelfric, the spell would instead kill the caster. After the
second rising and the formation of the empire, the practice was banned for its similarity to Galdera worship, not wanting to give followers any excuses. The church followed without question, as they claimed Aelfric was okay with this as he was hesitant to accept the prior standard anyway.

Thus, he was worried he was walking into the den of an undead animal. It was rare, but sometimes when an animal wandered into such a place and set up shop, the magics that allowed the undead to walk with Aelfric's blessing would warp themselves. They would become much stronger and in exchange would defend the barrow to death. Such power of course required a lot of mana. Further, if the creature died it'd retain its lifeforce and simply begin rotting. It'd join the barrows enchantment. Thus he was hesitant to enter. There was no telling how many animals had wandered in.

Interestingly, he wasn’t worried about monsters. Aelfric’s power wouldn’t allow the enchantment to encompass humanoids or monsters, only animals. Thus readied his rifle and headed inside, ready for the worse.

Immediately inside was a hallway, with small openings in the walls on either side. He could see the wrapped skeletons from there. Though some were intact. He instantly looked with his 8th sense and saw three guardians lying in wait. Sighing, he readied his gun and checked to make sure his axe was ready to be easily drawn. After he had prepared, he stepped further into the barrow. For a few steps, nothing happened. It was the 5th step that caused a pebble to noisely clink forward across the ground. That was what woke the guardians up. Before they could move however, he aimed his gun at one and fired. He hadn’t aimed particularly well, but as long as he hit bones it’d be fine. Only corpses with plenty of flesh remaining were an issue. He bolted another bullet into place as the other two fully exited their resting places, weapons in hand. Blue flames were alit in their eyes. One held a slightly rusting shield and a one-handed war axe, while wearing rusting chainmail. The other pulled out a large 4 foot sword with an ornate but rusting golden hilt. The blade itself was quite rusty. It wore chainmail as well, but wore a horned helm. The horns however had very basic designs.

The axe-wielding skeleton rushed forward wordlessly, shield up. He instead aimed for the other, firing it as it rushed forward, dragging its sword. This time he aimed for the head, the easiest target with the shield taking point. He then dropped his gun and retrieved his axe, stepping backwards rapidly so that it gave him time to retrieve his axe. He blocked a swing from the things axe as it swung at him and retaliated with a strong kick to its spinal column. It fell in half and backwards. Not hesitating, he pointed forward and said “Supaku!” after which lightning jolted from his finger tips in thin threads of plasma energy and enveloped the headless skeleton advancing on him for a moment. It fell apart, the magic holding it dissipating in the presence of stronger magic. He then looked down to the skeleton attempting to reassemble itself. He repeated the action, destroying the magic holding the being together. He looked and noticed the third attempting to crawl over, using one hand to hold onto a mace. A rusted kite shield laid on the ground. He simply recast his spark spell to deal with the crippled guardian. He then proceeded to pick up his gun and reload a round. He then moved down the hallway about 40 feet inward. He was now at a 4-way intersection.
Each hallway held more guardians and a way out of the barrow. However, only one way led to his goal. Straight ahead. He could see the large aura of something ahead. Turning on his night vision however revealed a bizarre scene. Drums surrounded a small, crude structure that had been assembled at the far end. Inside, he saw a small humanoid shape. If he didn’t know better, it was human. He stepped forward. Much to his chagrin, the guardians had flesh. That meant the gun wasn’t useful. However, they lacked weapons. He slung his rifle over his back and retrieved his axe and prepared himself, backing up. The two flesh guardians ran forward, though it was more of a jog. As one approached, he whispered “Sandabado” and thrust his hand towards the one in front. Rushing forward, he stomped on the head to cave it in, ending the guardian there. He watched as another rushed him, reeling its arm back for a punch. He dodged it, being very careful, and swung his axe into its head. He then sidestepped and tripped the guardian, repeating the spell he used. He then retrieved his axe and placed a hand on the guardians back, whispering “Supaku”. Energy jolted from his hand into the guardians below and both stopped writhing. Standing, he turned and saw the human had stood up. It was facing him. It had long hair and a human face. However, something was wrong. It gave off the vibe of a predator found in its den. It was considering him an intruder. He reached for his gun and regretted it immediately.

He ran out of the barrow quickly. He held his gun tightly. He dropped to his butt and slid down the hill, turning and aiming. From the barrow a monster burst out. It was a massive bear covered in runes, mana pouring of of the things mouth and eyes. It wasn’t a mana bear, or a guardian bear, or even a were-bear. It was a rune bear. Whether it was a bear that had been trained in magic or it had been a human turned bear he didn’t know, but he knew he could not let this thing live. Rune bears were extremely dangerous, and one being so close to Quarrycrest was no good. Against predictions, the Rune Bear leapt from the hill the Barrow was on all the way to a hill behind him. He turned and saw it moving to intercept. “Sandabado!” he cried, thrusting his palm to it. It roared as it stopped moving its muscles and crashed into the hill, his feet hitting it, making him fly forward. He braced himself and yelled in pain as he felt his shoulder be forced out of socket. He moved onto his back to check the bear. It had already shaken off his paralysis spell. He held a hand out and said “Supaku!”, sending the electrical bolts forward. The bear simply jabbed a claw into a rune, which caused a mighty gale to send his spell off course and prevent it from connecting. He moved backwards, standing slowly. He did have one trick up his sleeve. Retrieving his axe, he waited for it to strike.

It was vicious. It raised a single, meaty claw and lashed out with all its might. He felt its claws rake past his sternum and ribs as its claw cleaved his flesh. He cried out, seeing and feeling the blood leave him. However, it was not a cry of pain. He reached deep within, and cast a spell he had been taught by his old master. “Desutoredo” he muttered breathlessly, and fell back. He could see him now. Death stood above him, a skeletal figure with pale, flickering eyes. It wore his teachers visage, a kindly old woman. It held a scythe. Long flowing robes that neither parted nor seamed together. It regarded him, then the bear, and nodded, as if approving. It traced its finger over each wound, closing them. It left all but 1 injury, his dislocated shoulder and a cut to his gut. A half-inch deep so not bad. The bear ignored its presence and turned to leave. Of course. The being he saw was nothing more than his mind playing tricks. Even had he not seen it, the spell would take effect. One cut. Two. then five and ten. The bear was minced in near an instant, like he was. It roared in confused
pain, crying out confused. “I’m sorry. I have no answers” he responded “I don’t know how the spell works. Just how to use it… my teachers… last curse”. He passed out.

He later woke up in a hospital. As he did a nurse waited and seemed happy when he woke. As she explained it, it seems like he was found because an officer had been tailing him, and when the Barrow was discovered the officer returned to get backup. They were shocked to see the dead rune bear and were concerned to see him in such a state. They rushed him to the hospital and seemingly had left behind some cash as a gift for his job. He nodded and said “Thank you. How am I holding up?”. “Good. The injury on your stomach required stitching but otherwise you should be fine” she replied. He nodded and said “Good”. It was then someone entered, a person that looked high ranking. Similar to cops but the man had multiple different kinds of award badges and badges on. “Excuse me nurse, might I speak with the gentleman?”. “Yes sir, he’s got a clean bill of health” the nurse replied, and left. “Why do you need to see me?” Zem asked the policeman. He replied “I’m Commissioner Reagan. I operate the police out here in Rave. I’m the one that hired you. The bear has been causing problems”. “I can see why. Rune Bears need a lot to eat to maintain their mana levels. A barrow is nice and all, but liquid mana is best” Zem replied, recalling what he learned about them “Rune Bears are exceedingly smart. One targeting a supply line can kill a town if not taken seriously”. The man nodded and said “I’m glad I hired the best. Anything less and i’d be in trouble” and walked forward, putting a small envelope on the table, saying further “You’re pay, with a 30,000 leaf bonus for it being a rune bear. Enjoy”. The man left after that.

It took him only a day to recover. He left immediately and headed out. His first stop was the hunter’s guild hunting goods store. They frowned at seeing him come in, except the one whom helped him before who smiled and said “Hello sir, how may I help you today?”. He walked to the counter and asked “How much for one of those close-range, spread-fire guns you mentioned last time?”, “4000 leaves for the gun sir, and 100 for ammo that’ll keep you safe for about a year, granting you aren’t fighting anything particularly dangerous like a rune deer”. He gave a chuckle and put the leaves on the counter. 4400 leaves. “Here” he said. The man stared at the leaves, then him, then the leaves. He merely nodded and walked to the shelf to get it. “Why are you so nice to me?” Zem asked the man. “Cause. You’re a customer” the man replied, retrieving ammunition. “Yeah, but i’m a contract hunter, the kind of hunter the guild hates. So why?” he pressed. “As I said. You’re a customer. Even if i’m with the guild” the man stated, putting the gun and ammunition boxes on the counter “I will maintain my civility. If I didn’t, I’d shame the guild. Plus, I don’t know you or what led you down this path, so I shan’t judge. Thank you for your business, sir”. Zem stared, smiled a small bit, and said “You’re one of the good ones. Keep doing a good job, and maybe you’ll prevent more folks like me” and turned, leaving the store.

It was then he went ate at a place he never expected to. Normally, he wouldn’t bother eating at restaurants. Fact was, he preferred freshly prepared, freshly killed game, locally gotten farm goods, and his own made beverages. However, there were some things he couldn’t get out in S’warkii. Specifically, coffee and pastries. As a result, he ordered a steak, some pastries, and a cappuccino. It was a new type of coffee and he was curious. As for why here, a woman wanted to meet over
contract details over lunch. She had approached him out of nowhere, wondering if he’d capture a northerner for her or guide her to one for an interview. Now he needed details. “So” she said, waiting for the food “In a nutshell, I looked for an author in Grandport after hearing a rumor, police kindly told me the man I was looking for was a Northerner, and investigations revealed a shady group ferried him here. I’m here because I want a story and a Northerners perspective on the whole affair is exactly the thing that will sell”. He simply stared, dumbfounded at her logic. It wasn’t stupid or nonsensical, it made sense. However, the sheer bravery needed to approach a being said to be able to rip titanium walls and made the ground shake and killed anything with a heartbeat. He wasn’t sure if she was crazy, stupid, brave, or all three. He finally spoke after a minute and said “If we’re working together, we should introduce one another. My name is Zem. Zem Kholint” and offered a gloved hand. The woman took it and shook, saying “I’m Lapena Sozella, sales representative of Stonegard Publishing. I’ve heard of you though. Best hunter in the empire. Didn’t you bag a grand wyvern when you were 20?”. He laughed, but not because of something funny. With a low voice he said “You must not have heard. It was revealed I stole credit for the kill. I was young, stupid, greedy, and arrogant. I didn’t realize we used different calibers. The papers didn’t let me live it down for 20 years”.

After some more small talk, they talked details. His rate was 1000 leaves per danger rating. Northerners were officially classed at 12, equivalent of a an entire barrows worth of guardians, guardian animals included though only assuming 3 small animals or 1 medium sized animal, like a boar. Depending on the northerner, they could go as high as 24, even with dragons. He would begin tracking while she would hammer out the contract and license with the appropriate agencies and bodies. She paid for the meal and thanked him, to which he only nodded and left, finishing his meal. It was quite delicious. The steak was Ogre Eagle steak. He headed out to begin tracking. While manhunts were not his specialty, he had trained a bit on the side on it so he could at least be adequate at such things. Normally, he’d refer to a better hunter that specialized in manhunts, however he knew well that all of them that publicly were skilled at manhunts avoided Rave. He began at a nearby bar. He had gotten the name of the group. They were a group called Aegis.

After bar hopping and using a magic flask to purify alcohol so he could do his job, he managed to confirm shady groups in the city and that they operated normally in the warehouse district, down by the mines. Since Quarrycrest laid at the second highest point of a series of descending canyons, the mines were very extensive, crossing canyon walls and going almost a mile downwards. Rave was called the kingdom of riches for a reason. It was the sole provider for the aluminum that leaves were made out of. However, the warehouse district was extensive, covering a massive area. No less that 50 deluxe warehouses sat in the district and all constantly used, both by shady organizations, the criminal underworld, and official channels. Thus, finding a particular group would be a very simple matter. He went to an officer on duty and said “Excuse me, I’m Zem Kholint, i’m on a manhunt. I need to speak to the shift manager. Would it be a bother to see him now?”. He did his best to keep his tone polite, as such requests could be perceived as demanding, and officers could ignore citizens if they deemed such things as a waste of time. Luckily, he succeeded and the officer said “Nah, this time of day he’s finished lunch and is seeing people. I can get you in after his first appointment. Follow me” and walked off. He followed and when they arrived as the ornate building that served as the logistical center for the center, the officer asked him to wait in the waiting room and walked deeper in. He did so and when he was called, he went inside.
“I understand you’re on a manhunt?” the manager said. He wore a nobleman’s outfit, complete with the tailcoat. Zem nodded, saying “Yes. I’m looking for a member of the group called ‘Aegis’. Well.. less a member and more live product. A northerner”. The manager sighed, saying “God’s dammit I knew that box was too big for a bear”. He collected himself and then said to Zem “I’m sorry, but I can’t just give you that information. The peace here would break if the police raided a warehouse on my information”. Zem shook his head and said “Not the client. A woman. Lapena Sozella”. The manager stared for a moment, then said “That sales rep from Stonegard Publishing? Really? Well. I suppose I can” and stood. He went to a nearby file cabinet and pulled a file out, thumbing through it and saying “Warehouse 49, the only one near the mines”. He nodded, left 100 leaves on the table, and said “Thank you for your business. I’ll be on my way” and left.

He headed right for the warehouse and observed it from a distance. Even in his old age of 49 years old, he still had excellent eyesight. From 200 feet away, he could see what they were carrying. Kevlar helmets and vest with visors, and Kalashnikov AK-47s. He snuck down and checked some of the already opened crates. Gemstones. Mostly. One he found contained some curated wood, raw iron, skystones, rocks from a river, and sun pearls. Items used to empower magical rituals or spells. He didn’t steal any though, not wanting to tip off whomever ran Aegis that something was up. He proceeded to leave, noting that their loadout for guarding the warehouse was a little more than required, especially for Quarrycrest. Most of the groups that came through here were civil enough to steal outside. Any that weren’t were so poorly equipped, even a civilian could handle them. Instead, he turned his attention back to the logistics center. He paid the on-site clerk 500 leaves to let him see the blueprints for the warehouse in question. In a private room was the condition and their meeting, the transaction, and the mere existence of their conversation never happened. He was fine with this. Manhunting often involved using dubiously legal things anyway. A conversation never happening was one of the things he learned about. As for the blueprints, he saw nothing off at first, until he glanced as some odd notes. First was about a tunnel leading from the main service tunnel into Quarrycrest. Another was noting the location of a trapdoor. He realized that he had found the location for sure. He also now knew a vector of entry.

As he was leaving, he saw it for himself. In the shadows of the warehouse, he saw the large blue northerner and a shadowy, robed figure. He snuck closer, getting low to the ground. He could hear their conversation halfway down the warehouse luckily, as his shoes didn’t make much noise in the dirt. “I’m sorry sir. I can’t get your dragon eggs yet. My merchant is travelling slowly” he heard a voice say. Another voice responded, though clearly the northerner as it had the sound of grinding ice to the tone “Fine. I understand. I’ll try to keep Groose happy” and sighed. “Thank you. With luck, he’ll be here in the cliftlands by weeks end. Remember. Have the escort ready” the figure responded. With that, he heard footsteps and saw the robed figure step out from the shadows and to leave the district. He walked forward, casually, and glanced down the way. The northerner was gone. Sighing, he continued back. He had confirmed the clients target. She hadn’t been kidding it seems.
Due to the fact the thing was mannerful, polite, and could fluently speak English, it made the target at least danger rating 13, maybe 14. 16 if it knew magic. Thus he was going to have to charge Lapena at least 13,000 leaves. Not a small price at all. She could likely organize a couple of novice guild parties to raid the warehouse herself. For just tracking, his rate was merely 100 leaves per hour and this took him maybe 3 hours. He was going to talk about it to Lapena, waiting outside her motel room when she returned. However, she said something that ended those thoughts. “What a stroke of luck” she said “I have your contract and license”. He sighed internally and replied “Let’s get everything signed then. Afterwards, I can tell you what I found”. Lapena put the contract on the table and entered the bathroom, leaving the door open for him to enter. He did and looked over the contract. Nothing off and he triple checked. He signed it and took the license, putting it in his jacket. “I found your northerner. He’s hanging out in a warehouse near the mines” he said. “I see” she yelled out, asking “The group?”. He sighed and said “Got police gear, so likely connected to nobility”. He heard her mumble something, then walk out and say “This goes deeper than I suspect”. He nodded and said “I got worse news. The northerner is more dangerous than I thought. Dressed well, spoke politely, well-mannered. If I didn’t know better, he’s just a human in a northerner body”. She sighed and asked “What are the chances of the police helping us?”. “Slim to none if you want him alive” he responded. There was silence for a bit. Then she said “Well, let’s get going. I have a book to get”. He looked at her and asked, only a hint of surprise in his voice “You’re still going after it?”. Lapena responded “Absolutely. It’s my job after all. This time, it’s just a bit more hands-on than normal”.

More hands-on indeed. He pointed out the heavy guard, but took her down what he thought might be a secret entrance, which panned out. With it, they got into the underground complex beneath the warehouse. They ambushed a pair of guards to get in however and had no good place to hide them so had to leave them behind. He knew then the mission was going to go ass up, but not to the degree that happened. They observed a small, lanky, fire elemental of some sort interact with the northerner when the alarm was raised, the guards they left passed out being discovered. The smaller one ordered an evacuation. However, Lapena wanted in and she had a plan. She’d imitate a rookie, and he’d imitate a vet. He did know how to pull it off, but wasn’t confident in the plan. He only went through with it because she was insistent on meeting the northerner and he still needed to be paid. They searched around and found disguises, putting them on. It took her 5 minutes to blow her cover and force him to nearly kill a man. However, she stopped him, yelling that they didn’t have time. They ran for it and were mostly getting away, until spotlights shone on them from behind and a rather effeminate male showed up and mentioned he’d let them go, but take their memories. He then heard the most incredulous thing he’d ever heard a person say. “What if we made a deal?” Lapena asked the man before them, who introduced himself as Lichmendi, whom laughed.

“Uhhh… I don’t think they’re interested” he said. However, he shut up when Lichmendi told Lapena to give him her offer. The two discussed things and a deal was hammered out. The only caveat was they needed to travel. Seeing as how she had just given Lichmendi all her leaf as a sign of good faith, he knew he’d have to as well, when Lapena says “He’s just a man I hired to track your group. What he does is up to him”. He stopped and stared. To him, that was a chance for him to bail. Except he could see Lapena’s eyes. They were their tough girl selves, but he could see it. She didn’t want to be alone. She was silently, maybe even unwittingly, asking him with her eyes to come. Not even for protection. Just as someone she could confide in. Sighing, he walked over and placed his wallet in Lichmendi’s hand, wordlessly. Lichmendi nodded and said “Right then. Guys, disarm the hunter. Girls, disarm the girl. We have guests with us today and for the foreseeable future”.

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Chapter 18-The Cleric, Act 2

Chapter 18

Hope is Suffering

She walked the roads of Saintsbridge. She had arrived a bit earlier than expected, by five whole days. The church was busy enough that casing it was no option. Further, everywhere was booked against expectations. Saintsbridge had developed with having room for tourists in mind. Sure, watching the kindling from home was fine, but to people there was nothing like seeing it in person. It was then she had a chance meeting. She bumped into someone and fell backwards, dropping her suitcase. She looked up and saw a handsome man before her. Wearing silk fabrics, a vest, and what were clearly designer shoes. He had excellent form and posture, and had a smooth-looking but masculine face. He had nice platinum hair that was expertly styled and he had nice lips. What was most alluring to her though were the eyes. They were like staring into a deep grey fog. She could feel herself getting lost in them. He offered a hand and said “I’m sorry miss, I was lost in thoughts”. She accepted the hand and was helped to her feet. She retrieved her bookcase and said “It’s fine good sir. I… must be going now. I have to find lodgings for the… month”. The man chuckled and said “Likewise. Have a nice day”. She moved on, but couldn’t stop thinking of the man for several minutes. She turned around to see if he was there, but saw he wasn’t there. Sighing a bit in disappointment, she continued her search.

She found nothing. It was looking like she would have to sleep in the streets. She could defend herself, but she still didn’t want to risk it. She had more concerns than just robbers, she had to be concerned about the police response to her worship. It was blatantly illegal and she’d be executed immediately. It didn’t help she was benevolent or kind, or that Aelfric was the traitor and not Galdera, the Police only cared about the laws put down by the High Emperor. It was then she heard a familiar voice speak to her. Turning, she saw the man from before ask “Well, well. We meet again. Have any luck finding a place to stay?”. She shook her head and said “Most places are booked and the only places open are…. Not up to my standards”. He frowned and said “Really? Oh right the kindling. I forgot how busy Saintsbridge is during it. I usually watch from home”. She simply sighed, wondering what she was going to do. Remembering their prior conversation, she was about to ask if he wanted to stick it out in the streets with her, that it would elevate the only places opens standards some. However, what he said next made her quite happy. “I do have a spare room for people that need it” he said, staring. She looked at him and smiled when she realized he was serious. “If you’re offering, I don’t mind accepting” she said, accepting his offer. He motioned for her to follow and she left with him.

The man, as they walked, introduced himself as Selim Deon. Her eyes widened and she replied “Ah… I knew that. I’m a fan of your work. I’m Delilah Softbrand”. It was true, she always watched
his acting as a child and was amazed that a teenager could perform so well. She continued to follow his work as she grew up and him by comparison. She learned more about him too. The Deon family was a very prosperous studio company. Sure, their kids worked there but they hired outside talent and treated them just as well. They made small talk as they walked. She half-lied about her reason for coming, wanting to see the kindling. She left out her desire to take the first flame. He offered her front row seats, which she accepted. When she saw the room she’d be staying in she felt her blood rush a bit. It was very luxurious and was so nice. She said “I can’t accept this, Selim. It’s so lavish. I’m…” but she was cut off. Selim responded “It’s fine to use. I’m not expecting other guests and you are a guest. I won’t force you though. Just thought I’d lend a helping hand”. She smiled and said “Alright. I can handle some luxury”. He nodded and said “Use as you wish. My family will sell it when I move on”. She nodded and sat on the bed, turning the TV on and saying “I will. Thank you very much, Selim”. “Well I have to go run some errands” he said “I’ll be back tonight with two front row seats”. “Good luck!” she called after him, then laid back in the bed. She sighed and said to herself “Why is my heart fluttering so…? He’d never go for a girl like me…”.

She watched TV. She was keeping track of the Flamebearers progress. She was staying in Sunshade and restocking on supplies. It meant she’d be there in a few days at most. While she hoped Selim would be willing to accommodate her for that long, she knew she would need to contribute. Thankfully, she knew how to the best. She did have a talent for cooking. She left the room and headed downstairs, seeing a platinum-haired girl. The girl turned and said “Oh, hello miss. I’m Monica Deon, Selim’s sister”. She gave a small bow, saying “I’m Delilah Softbrand. Your brother kindly offered me the guest room while I stay in town for the kindling”. She saw Monica smile and say “That does sound like my brother. Well, I hope you enjoy your stay”. She nodded and asked “Well, is there anything in particular he likes to eat? Or you? I was thinking of making dinner during my stay as a way of thanks”. Monica thought for a moment and asked “Can you make a chicken roast?”. She nodded and got to work. Thankfully, the Deon’s had the ingredients to make it. After getting side dish opinions from Monica, she opted to make rice and beans as a side dish.

Halfway through she realized something was happening. She had heard a door slam open. She turned and ran out into the hallway leading to the living room, but saw Selim close the door to his study behind him. She walked over, opening it. On the table she saw a runed dagger, a small firearm, and Selim stuffing handfuls of leaves into a large suitcase from a nearby open safe. “Excuse me” she asked “Is something the matter good sir?”. Selim stopped for only a second before continuing and answering “Thugs have kidnapped my sister. They’re demanding ransom”. She gasped as he clicked the suitcase closed. She felt devastated she never heard anything, but felt that feeling vanish as he turned. His face terrified her. She could see the rage on his face. Not because of contortions or anything. However, it was because of how unusual it looked. It was completely blank. Devoid of any real emotion or even human qualities. Like putting a mask that perfectly replicated a neutral human face on a puppet. The only thing that betrayed Selim was still even human was the twitching of the eyes. How they moved. It scared her the sheer depth of rage she saw looking into those grey eyes. He put some soulstones she had missed seeing into his pockets and stood, pulling the suitcase from the desk. He walked towards her and said “Stay here. It’ll be too dangerous for you. I’ll be back with good news” and left.
She stayed standing for a solid three minutes. Her mind was in fight or flight and it was flighting. It apparently did that by having her remain perfectly still. She knew Selim’s wrath wasn’t aimed at her but it still scared her. Finally, when the front door clicked close, she ran to the guest bedroom. She stood in the doorway, unsure of what to do. Eventually, she took a deep breathe. She decided to fight. She walked to her suitcase and unpacked fully. She left her garbs at home, deciding that outing herself as a priestess of Galdéra would only endanger Selim and his sister. However, the black iron gauntlets and pauldrons wouldn’t. She attached a belt accessory to the belt that sat around her waist that let her carry her book and retrieve it quickly, though it was already enchanted to stream spell information to her head when she needed it. She retrieved her bone wand which was her focus. She took nothing else. Looking in the mirror for only a moment, she wondered what Selim would think of her before leaving. Turning, she whispered “Rokku” and a shadow went into the keyhole and locked it. She then ran into town, waving her wand some and saying “Shadotoresu”. Shadows deepened in area’s to serve as markers for where she needed to go to find Selim.

She could hear the commotion inside when she arrived. She recast her prior spell but focusing on Monica. She was in a room at the back. She then pointed her wand at the door and whispered “Kurai seiun”. A mass of shadows swelled but she held it and added another casting. Then she fully cast the spell, the dark mass exploding and sending splinters and wood shards into the room as if a shotgun had fired. She stepped inside, examining each bandit’s injuries. They were fairly injured, with only a few suffering no injuries. Selim made his move, stabbing one in the arm with runed knife she saw before and retreating, waving his fingers around and saying “Koshi-sen!”, which made light gather around the bandits and create an explosion within its boundaries. She meanwhile cast the same spell, choosing to have it come from behind the bandits, making them fly forward into the various bits of things around the room, effectively knocking the out. “Delilah! Why are you here?” Selim asked, looking genuinely shocked to see her. She replied “I cannot look away from one in need. I’m here to help” and moved forward into the room, waving hand subtly and whispering “Shadotoresu” and focusing on anyone hidden. Luckily, there wasn’t an ambush waiting. She waved her wand in an arc above her, saying “Kurai mofu” and having shadows descend on them both. “With this spell, we won’t make a single sound anymore” she said “unless desire people to hear us”. The shadows around them didn’t obscure their vision. “Let me add to that” Selim said, smiling a bit. He waved his fingers, moving his knife like one might a wand, and said “Raitomanto!”. Light shimmered around them and she saw them vanish from sight for a second before her vision corrected and he was visible again. “This spell will camouflage us. With still movement, we’re effectively invisible, but movement will make us… ‘shimmer’ for lack of a better term” he explained.

She felt her heart flutter again and felt blood rushing to her head. “Well, well. Light and dark mixing. How poetic” she commented, genuinely impressed and curious. She saw him blush and was about to ask, very curious now, but he said in a tone suggesting fluster “Let’s save my sister”. She nodded, agreeing. The rescue operation from there went well. The few that guarded her were defeated, Selim and Monica had a touching reunion, and she quadruple casted her dark nebula spell as they left, after exploding a wall leading out of the warehouse. As they rushed through the streets, she drank and inspiriting plum potion to restore her spent mana. Soon, they were back home. However, all was not well. Selim passed out, and when they examined him they discovered a horrifying fact; his gunshot wound had not healed fully. It had reopened due to the nights events. She acted immediately, saying
“Get him to my bed, immediately”. Monica nodded and hurried upstairs. She followed. Luckily, her garbs were under some clothes so with luck she wouldn’t notice. After Selim was on the bed and shirtless, she examined the wound properly. It was fully reopened, meaning he was losing blood. “Go down to the store, get some Agate dust and some Onyx dust…. And jet dust. Don’t forget a healing grape potion” she told Monica, who nodded and ran. She waved her wand once Monica was out of sight and said “Watashi no kage, watashi no kage, watashi kara hanarete watashi no soba ni tsukae nasai”. Her shadow ripped itself from her, making her gasp and bleed from her back, and it crawled through the light and followed Monica.

Meanwhile, she referred to the information about the recent spell she made. She began to wave her wand around, shadows stalking where it went, forming a small magic circle over the wound. At the end, she placed her wand on Selim’s chest and placed a hand on the magic circle after donning her clerical garbs which unfortunately were required, whispering “Garudera no megumi ni yotte, kuroi yoru made ni, watashi wa shi o meijite kon’ya hoka no dareka ni shinobiyou”. She could feel a breathe on her neck, and cried out in pain, feeling a stinging pain in her arm. A hole, similar to Selim’s right on her arm. She used some healing grape potion to close the surface wound, and whispered while waving her fingers over the wound “Kizu o iyasu” which made a dark shadow close the deeper wounds. She panted now as she moved to a chair and sank into it. She had expended a lot of mana and was out of inspiring plum potions. She ate one as she waited, rejuvenating her mana as she did. Monica entered soon after, with a small bag. She wore a green cloak which she pulled off and said “I got it now-” and stopped. She sighed and said in a slightly weak voice “Don’t panic… I know how it looks… but he’s fine for now. Death has been halted this night”. She stood up slowly and said “Bring the bag over. I need to use some spells to complete his treatment”. She knew Monica was internally panicking, wondering what to do. She wanted to help but didn’t want to force the issue. “If you rather, you can take him to the hospital. Just tell them what happened. I’ll leave and they’ll cure Selim. He… doesn’t know”.

She waited a full five minutes before moving. Not to the bag but to her suitcase. She put 1000 leaves on the table. Compensation for the ingredients. She began to put her armor in and her wand. She was sad she couldn’t help but knew it’d happen. The country had an iron grip on Galdera worship and until her order righted the wrongs of the gods, it’d remain that way. A grip on her wrist shunted her thoughts and she saw Monica glaring at her, to her face. She felt her heart sink then, thinking she was going to have to defend herself, when Monica said “Help him. Do that and I won’t turn you in”. It took her a moment to register and longer to believe Monica. “Well!?” Monica yelled “Help him! Or can’t you!?”. She could see Monica’s tears. She looked at Selim then her and nodded, saying in a shaky voice “Thank you, I will” and took the bag, retrieving her wand, and walking over. She opened her spellbook and began working. She had to readjust some of her spells to account for the dust. She could record the results later, but right now she needed to work. She only had until sunrise. Otherwise, her wounds would be meaningless. As she worked, she wrote notes on the dust-altered spells.

She began by sealing the deeper portions of the wound. She dipped the tip of her wand in the agate
dust and said “motto iyasu”. Her wand glowed brightly as the dust turned into blood, but she watched the wound and saw the deeper parts close together, basically as though it never happened. Smiling, she moved and poured healing grape juice which finished the wound closing. However, his life force needed to be replenished. She had a spell for that though. She dipped her wand in the dust of the onyx and jet dust. Onyx dust effectively acted as a substitute for an ingredient or cost for a spell, whether it be mana, lifeforce, injury, etc. The jet dust however was special. Different element bases caused different effects, but for shadow-based spells, it empowered them. Made them do more. Thus she waved her wand, recreating the magic circle and placed her hand on the circle and saying “Garudera no megumi ni yotte, kuroi yoru made ni, watashi wa shi o meijite kon’ya hoka no dareka ni shinobiyoru”. This time, she used the onyx in place of taking the wound on for herself. With the normal spell, she can choose the location of the wound. Empowered however, she knew she’d lose that privilege. However, she forgot about the mana cost. She finished the spell and it hit immediately. She felt her body begin to lock up as though it was going to sleep and she fell to the floor. “Wait, No!! Did it work!?” Monica cried out. She had begun to cry, clearly unsure if Selim would be safe or not. Before she lost total control of her body, she said “Y-yes. The spell…. Brought him back from beyond. Read my… new notes” and promptly fainted.

She woke up in the morning. She laid in Selim’s bed. She could tell, as the ceiling was the same floral wallpaper. Selim wasn’t there. She sighed, seeing her spellbook gone. Likely turned over to police. Not that she could blame them. Galdera worship was strictly forbidden and anyone harboring or helping a worshipper would be killed and their stuff burned. She sighed and decided to wait for her fate rather than fight, closing her eyes. The door opened, though to her shock she heard Selim and Monica. “What are we going to do? We can’t help her!” Monica said. “We can’t just abandon her. She saved my life” Selim countered. “Sure, why we haven’t turned her in!” Monica said, clearly in a panic. “Monica, the girl is clearly misguided. Look at her magic! Could a real Galdera worshipper be capable of that? You’ve heard the stories!” Selim said, clearly intent on helping her, though she was mystified why. She was grateful still. “Yeah, and the stories say Mattias tricked Ophelia by looking like the same kind of person!” Monica countered. It was now she chose to sit up. Breathlessly. The two continued to argue, but she ended it, saying “Thank you. Truly. For not turning me in”. Monica stared for a moment, saying “Delilah… I…”. She cut her off though, saying “I’ll leave. I understand the strain i’d bring. It’s just the way of this empire” before getting out of bed. Both were speechless as she began to pack. She did stop though and turn, deciding to ask something. “Was my chicken roast any good?” she asked. Monica stared and sighed, nodding and saying “Yes… it was… good”.

It was then she got another shock, Monica saying “Fine Selim, we’ll let her stay” in a tone that suggested exhaustion. She stared, completely shocked, and it showed as Selim smiled and said “How could I kick out the one whom saved my life? I’d be… no better than worshippers in the stories”. Delilah stood, fully, and after a few second nodded, saying “Th-thank you Selim”. He nodded and said “Of course. Just… you do understand that I can’t have you practice in here, right?”. She nodded and he continued, saying “The only other I want is for you to explain to us, when you’re ready, why you worship”. She nodded, saying “Of course”. With that, the two left and she collapsed into her bed. She didn’t faint but her stress hit her like a wave. They were accepting her, a Galdera worshipper, into their home knowingly, knowing the trouble it could cause. She pulled her wand out and considered praying to Galdera, thanking him, but stopped. She put the wand away, remembering
the terms. She wouldn’t sully Galdera’s name by breaking a vow. Aelfric may have convinced the world that Galdera was evil, but she and her order knew the truth and they would not stoop to Aelfric’s level. It’d only prove him right.

An hour later, after confirming her notes, making corrections, and checking her luggage, she went downstairs. Selim and Monica were having tea and had been talking it seemed. They turned and she said “I’ll explain now if that’s fine”. Monica nodded, seeming the most interested. She walked over and sat across from Monica. Selim sat on the side of the small, round table. She then divulged most of her childhood to them. How she noticed her parents going out late at night monthly. Taking her when she was 9. Explaining Galdera and how benevolent he was and how the others were jealous gods and liar, Aelfric devising what the order called ‘The Great Lie’. A lie that tricked humanity into helping the gods to seal Galdera in the afterworld away. While he desired to be free, he accepted his job as caretaker of the afterworld. However, he wanted justice. He wanted not to hurt the gods, but to shame them. Entranced by the story, Kard gave additional details when she was order, mentioning that the first flame was actually a poisonous flame, dulling a person's mind when glowing with Aelfric’s light. That she worked hard, became vestal, and then was sent to gather the first flame to use in a ritual that would deliver Galdera his justice.

After her story was over, Monica sighed and said “Damn… got you as a kid huh…?”. Selim nodded and said “Yeah. My question is, what does this Kard really want?”. She frowned and said “Kard only wants to fulfill lord Galdera’s justice and reveal the ‘Great Lie’ for what it really is”. Selim shook his head and said “Sorry but… I don’t believe it. I’ve heard the stories. He betrays everyone he helps. He’ll use you like he used Mattias”. She blinked and asked “Who’s Mattias?”. She blinked again and then asked “Wait… how long was I out? There’s condensation on the windows…”. “The 3rd day of the 4th week of the 4th month of the summer season. Why?” Selim answered, then eyes widened before closing and saying “I see… no. It’s happening tomorrow”. She sighed and said “I’m sorry, Selim, but…” her voice trailed off as he said “No. It’s fine. I understand”. Monica asked, clearly trying to talk her out of it “Delilah… are you sure? Are you aware of what’ll happen?”. She shook her head and said “Kard has placed so much trust and money in me. I must not disappoint him… or my parents”. Monica hung her head and said “Alright…. I won’t report you. Please, do not let it link back to us”. Delilah nodded and said “I won’t”.

The rest of the day was melancholic. She never saw them, even after making dinner. She made steak with ogre eagle eggs that they had and some corn. She left stuff out for them to eat and ate in the dining room alone. She sighed, knowing why. They knew they couldn’t get her to abandon her faith, and she knew she couldn’t convert them, because of ‘the Great Lie’. After dinner, she confined herself to her room. She prepared her gear. Her clerics habits, her armor, her wand, spellbook, dust that they left in her room for her while she was out, and luggage. She sighed and laid down in the bed. After updating her spellbook to account for the dust she had, she shut the light off, deciding to try to sleep. Thankfully, the dark comforted and lulled her to sleep. She woke up and got dressed and ready, and had her luggage ready too. She left in in the room, as her shadow would later retrieve it.
and bring it to the forest. However, she gasped in shock, as Selim was standing there, moving to knock. “Oh. Hi Delilah” he said to her, his shocked expression returning to a neutral one. “Hello… Selim” she returned the greeting “Did you need something?”. He nodded and said “I… have front row seats to the kindling. If your interested that is”. Her eyes widened a bit and she said “Selim, are you sure? Your reputation…” and was cut off as Selim responded “Considered and handled. I’ll handle it. Just one thing. Before you return home, go to Stilsnow. Please.”. She blinked and asked “Why?”. “I need help there. I was nearly killed before by my ex-manager. I’m not seeking revenge, but to save him and I can’t do it alone. Will you help?”. She nodded and said “Of course. I cannot refuse to help someone in need”. Selim nodded and offered her the cloak Monica wore last night and said “Then wear this. It’ll cover for Monica”. She nodded and did so. She then left with Selim, whom had brought nothing, not even his runed dagger.

As expected, the church was busy and there was a massive line. However, the moment the clerics saw them, they walked over and said “Ah! Selim! Gregory told us about you and your guest. Come right in”. Selim nodded and she let them guide them to their seats. She sat in the front row with Selim. As things quieted down, she prepared herself mentally. She was about to do something very bold, and very brash. She needed to act fast once the kindling was complete. It was then the church doors open and the bells rang. She turned and saw them. The flamebearer and her companion, a large man in wearing a series of runed straps over his chest and leather trousers, again runed. He however had no weapons. The woman went to the flaming altar and began her prayer. The rest of the church began it as well. She took this opportunity to ready a soulstone she’d prepared beforehand. She also dipped her wand in jet dust for good measure. She had, after all, updated her spellbook to account for the spells and their effects using the dust. It was then the altar flame and the first flame reached their zenith of brightness, the flame in the church renewed. She then dipped the soulstone in onyx dust and crushed it.

The effect was instant. She had put the formulae for the ‘blind’ spell she had, but the dust-accounted version. As such, after she crushed it, with the dust on it, the spell became stronger and rather than blinding just the flamebearer, blinded everyone in the room. However, to her dismay, it deprived everyone of their brains ability to communicate with the body, making them unable to really do anything. She moved fast though, ignoring the pain her heart felt at putting these people at such risk, rushing to the front and yanking the first flames lanthorn from the floor. “I did it!” she said to herself, when she heard people from the front doors. “Hey! What are you doing up there!” she heard some clerics that had rushed in, hearing the lack of cheers, say. Rather than speak, she pulled out her bone wand and with a wave of it after dipping it in onyx dust said “Kurai seiun”. Darkness appeared and moved through the wall, erasing its very existence. She started to leave, but stopped and crushed a new soulstone. It was a translucent one. It held the ‘cancel’ spell in it. Essentially, the spell cancelled out the effects of any spell cast by the caster in the last 10 minutes. The wall appeared along with the fact that everyone inside was screaming visibly. She turned and waving her wand a few times said “Shadou-oku”. The shadow of the church stretched over the artificial aqua channel behind the church and she confidently strode over it. Despite the panic spilling into the streets, she knew ultimately that people would be fine. She only had the spell active for 10 seconds, not long enough to kill anyone. She put her hood up and fled into the city proper.
She used her ‘shadow self’ spell to have it go retrieve her luggage back at Selim’s house. She headed for the edge of town near the forest. She stuck to the alleyways and eventually made it to the wall. She purposefully went to the back entrance as she knew the police would try to outsmart her, which they did. Guard there was extremely lax and so she had an opportunity. Dipping her wand in onyx dust again, she cast her dark nebula spell and erased a segment of wall and rushed out quickly. She could hear the police say “Wait! Stop! Freeze! You’re under arrest, Galdera Worshipper!” but she didn't. She used the trees as cover to prevent them from getting a clear shot, and took cover when they started firing indiscriminately. When they ran out of their bullets, she ran on. They never ran after her beyond the wall. She still carried the Lanthorn, which now glowed a bright lavender color rather than a pale blue shade. However, she didn’t stop. She couldn’t stop. She had just made an enemy of an entire empire in one move. She only prayed that Selim was okay.
Chapter 19 - The Heroes Journey

Chapter 19

Path of the Hero

She sat in the RV. It was a large, bulky thing. Rectangular and devours gallons of gas to make even a day's journey. That was merely the disguise though. It was actually a large carriage driven by two eight-legged horses that they called Sleipnir. The northerner and what he called a 'gnome' sat with them as they rode through the night. She held her notepad and finally began her interview, asking “Let’s begin with your name”. “I am called Froiki in your tongue” the northerner answered “And I am a Jotun”. “What about your name in your tongue?” she asked. “Abhainn” he said “May I ask questions?”. “Of course” Lapena said “The point is to write a book, so any questions you have will contribute and i’ll answer them best I can”. Abhainn nodded, asking “Then why is it your so desperate to get my story?”. “Simple. I work for a company that makes money printing and selling books. A book from a northerner will sell hotcakes, even if temporarily” she answered, then elaborated “As for the how… I didn’t know you were a northerner until I got arrested in Grandport for looking for you”. The northerner nodded and said “I see. Interesting. Then proceed with your questions”. Lapena smiled and got right to work.

A few hours later, she was sitting off to the side and going over her notes. Apparently, the Northerner came from a vast and bountiful kingdom with very advanced magic, named Tir na Nog. He was born to a farming family but showed talent in merchantry, proven when he sold a batch of chicken eggs to an alf that ran a large-scale grocer service. The alf later accepted Abhainne as an intern and was elevated to a manager position at a location in northern tir na nog, his former region. He was successful for a number of years, improving the alfs profits and providing convenience and quality to the region. However, it was then the titania and the oberon entered a formal civil war and a formal war on the southern kingdom the nation had been weary of for a while. Turned out, there was a legend about a kingdom of darkness swallowing their kingdom if left unchecked and that only 8 heroes guided by 8 of them could stop the coming darkness. As for the titania and horned king, the twin rulers of the kingdom, they were having a spat over, funny enough, how to go about handling the issue. The horned king wanted to go to war, conquer the kingdom while the titania wanted to use diplomacy to assist the ruler. Turned out, they had leverage. They knew for a fact that the pontiff was a galderas worshippers, doubling as a man named Kard Vallain. They just needed proof beyond magic, knowing the pontiff would use his power to muddy their magic. With this information, a story brewed in her head. Abhainn showed no interest in penning a book and left it to her, and she was going to make use of it.

Meanwhile, Sebastian sat in the opening to the back of an ambulance. He had taken heavy damage and only survived thanks to defensive qi techniques. He saw the high commander approach, with a look that suggested displeasure. The barrier was down now, meaning that the enemy had been
defeated or beaten back. “Sebastian Ciel. What the hell happened here!?” the high commander demanded to know. “I received a tip from the famous criminal Sir Lupone. I looked at his evidence. It was solid. Testimony from one various nobleman who attested to being told of Juanes Lavinda’s crimes. Unable to ignore it, Lupone offered a way to acquire real evidence that he can’t handwave away in exchange for cooperation. I accepted, as Lupone never said anything about not arresting him after the fact. After a brief confrontation, I arrest Juanes, attempted to arrest Lupone but failed, and he escaped” he told the high commander. She groaned and said “That was foolish! Do you have any idea the shame you’d bring upon yourself if you had been tricked and helped him rob an innocent man!?”. “Only the High Emperor can consider my actions dishonorable, and I could not ignore the evidence provided. What would you have me do? Do nothing as Juanes propped up a bandit king to slaughter the people of Halihall?” he retorted, raising his voice a bit only to remind the high commander of his position, duty and of hers. She sighed and shook her head, saying “Not here. Boss wants to see you. Now”. His heart dropped.

Kings could not control knights outside their kingdoms legally without good reason. This especially applied to knights belonging to High King Fionne’s court. Someone like him was basically an agent of the High Emperor. However, that didn’t eliminate certain political and legal actions for the kings. For example, this summons the high commander handed him. The queen of Halihall was demanding he have an audience with her. He could not refuse, despite his station. While she could not arrest or detain him, she could report him next council and risk his station. He stepped into the arena, the throne having been brought and set. In front of the woman in extremely heavy looking steel plate armor sat a round table and a chair for him. He walked forward and sat and more chairs were filled by various cabinet members assigned to handle various tasks. “So” the queen said “I hear you conspired with Lupone to undermine a man I personally was friend with”. “I did no such thing your majesty. I received evidence of wrongdoing, investigating with the criminal Lupone, concluded he did in fact violate the King’s Covenant, and arrested him. I tried to arrest Lupone, but failed” he answered. The queen stared at him. He felt like she was staring into his soul as she did. Scoffing, she looked away and said “Pity. The Lavinda family has been good to Halihall. Advanced the state of our medical care. If they leave…” her voice trailed off. “You’ll survive or perish. It’s the way no?” he replied. The queen looked right at him and raised her hand as someone stood to speak. “Indeed sir knight. I guess the evidence was real. Then we have a problem. The entry about anti-magic is real” the queen said. “Anti-magic?” Sebastian questioned. She nodded and said “Yes. the letters mentioned a shipment of something called anti-magic dust. It supposedly came from Gold Shore”. Sebastian stared and nodded, saying “You want me to go”. His only confirmation was the queen nodding and shooing him off.

Selim walked into his house. Monica stood there, looking furious. He just stared a moment and sighed. He went to go up the stairs when Monica said “Not this time, brother”. He sighed and said “I didn’t-” and was cut off as Monica yelled “You helped a Galdera Worshipper steal the first flame! Do you have an inkling of an idea of what you’ve done!?”. “It’s fine! Gregory will cover me and the police, even with their truth magic, didn’t get my involvement out of me! We’re good!” he replied. She just yelled louder “Oh! Great! Well you didn’t know you were helping a Galdera worshipper! I guess I can rest easy, except oh wait, that just means now they’re watching you like you’re a fucking plague!” “No, because Gregory-” and he was cut off again as she said “Have you learned nothing!? They might pinch Gregory because of it! Gods sakes Selim, have you not even considered the ramifications beyond just protecting the family? What others will think!?”. He sighed and asked “Well what do you want me to do? Hmmm? Kill her?”. Monica glared at him and said “Hell no, and
don’t try pulling that shit with me, Selim. You are going to get the first flame back and beg the Pontiff to spare us and if he’s feeling generous you. Understand!?”. Selim stared and then looked away, out the window, and said “I already planned that. We’re meeting in Stilsnow. I plan to prove the truth of things there. I won’t just get the first flame… I’m going to save her from them”. Monica’s expression went from one of pure rage, softening into one of understanding.

“You love her” she said “Of course, that explains it all. Even why you had the idiotic idea to help her take the first flame”. He hesitated, not fully sure, but finally nodded and said “Yeah. I tried not to. I tried to be cautious and not fall for ‘love at first sight’. I didn’t, but I still ended up falling for her”. She sighed deeply and said “Well. Even so, what you did was incredibly stupid and your plan is stupid and you owe Gregory an apology”. Selim nodded and said “Yeah…. I’ll apologize soon. I need evidence of Galdera’s evil after all and Gregory will have it”. With that, Monica let him by. He headed for his room and throughout the day, prepared to leave, packing various luggage by the door. It was as he put the last suitcase down that the door knock. He opened and saw Gregory standing there with a neutral face. He sighed and moved aside, saying “Come in. We need a talk. I owe you an apology”. Gregory nodded and walked in, sitting on the couch. Selim fetched them some coffee and offered some. Gregory accepted, sipping his. “I’m sorry” Selim said. “Is that all” Gregory asked. He shook his head and said “No. I’ll make it right. I’m going to get the first flame back… and save that girl from Galdera”. Gregory nodded and sighed, saying “I’m glad that’s it. I was worried you know”. Selim nodded, saying “I understand. Galdera is not to be trifled with”. “Where are you meeting?” Gregory asked. “Stilsnow” he answered “Want to come? The woods are beautiful this time of year”. Gregory shook his head and said “I have to… work. To keep the peace. Thankfully, I’m not being blamed… just one thing Selim. I hope she’s worth it”. He stood up and excused himself, leaving. It was then he noticed Monica placed suitcases with his. “Wait… why are you…?” he began to ask when she answered “I’m coming with you. I’m due for a vacation and you can’t expect me to stay out of this”. He stared a moment and then just sighed, accepting that he wasn’t going to convince his sister to go home.

Ristro woke up. She was in the hospital. Nemu was nowhere to be seen. He had her arm in a cast. She sat up and pressed the telegram nearby. It was used by nurses as an alert system. All of them were completely internal, with only one separate from the internal system going outside. Telegrams were still used as a sort of emergency alert system as they had been updated to broadcast wirelessly. They were great for secretive communication and emergency broadcasts that radio and phone jamming couldn’t stop. She alerted the nurse using it. It took only a few minutes for one to enter and ask “Yes miss Abraham? How can I help you?”. She replied “A diagnosis and if you don’t mind do you know what happened to my friend, Nemu?”. The nurse nodded and said “A sprained arm and various cuts and bruises, all treated. Nemu has checked in periodically and has said she’ll need to leave soon for Noblecourt”. She didn’t show her expression but she was a bit disappointed. Even so, she knew it could happen. Nodding, saying “Thank you. May I be discharged?”. The nurse smiled and said “Of course. Follow me” and walked away, leading her.

She found Nemu waiting for her outside, with a new truck. “Hello Nemu” she said “I’m glad I found
you before you left”. Nemu nodded and said “Same. It was nice working with you. Sadly, I must move on. I have a job to do after all. Here’s a replacement truck. I used pay from the police to cover it so it’s fine”. She stopped and stared at Nemu. “How much did you spend?” She asked. “About 55,000 leaves, why?” Nemu responded “Is that a lot?”. “Yes!” she screamed “That’s my monthly pay! I’m a high-cost doctor!”. Her tone wasn’t angry but more shock. Nemu understood this and just laughed, saying “You forget. I’ve got amnesia, so I have no concept of money”. Ristra just sighed and said “That’s right. I forgot”. “Well. I’m glad you’re fine. I wish you luck on your quest. I have to get going” Nemu said. Ristra nodded and said “Thank you. Good luck on your quest”, returning the sentiment. Nemu nodded and walked to a police car waiting for her. “Nemu!” Ristra called out, walking over and reaching into her doctor’s bag. She handed Nemu a few vials, saying “These are special acids I made. They are labeled as to their intended effects. Use them to defend yourself”. Nemu nodded and said “Thank you Ristra. I will. Let’s work together again someday, alright?”. Ristra nodded and said “Absolutely”. She watched as Nemu got into the car and it drove off. With that, she got into her truck and drove off herself. Her destination? Stilsnow, to save her pupil.
Chapter 20-The Villain's Fall

Chapter 20

Path of the Villain

Nemu had woken up in the hospital. After the truck crashed and barely made it into the city, she passed out. Partially from continuous casting high cost spells, but the impact of the crash had ended up giving her a concussion that ended up lasting the entire week she was in the hospital recovering. She did recover with the hospital's help and since she was able to communicate this time, she was able to get treatment that she actually needed. She did slip into speaking Greek every now and again, but usually towards the end of the day or the morning. Eventually, Greg walked into the room.

“Hello miss Nemu” he said. She nodded as she ate some pudding and country fried steak, saying “Hello officer Greg. What brings you to my room?”. “It’s simply a question about what your plans are after you discharge” he said. “I plan to leave for Noblecourt” she said “After I say goodbye to Ristra. She saved me and it was nice working with her”. He nodded and said “Alright. Just wanted a time table. Also, thought I’d give an update about the giant we found”. She looked at him as he said “He’s dead and the remains… did something strange. Turns out, when it died, it formed a leyline”.

She rose an eyebrow and he explained “According to the mage boys, a leyline is like a natural magical flow of energy in the country. Can’t tame it, can’t control it. Can harness its power though. This thing though literally made one and they’re freaking out”. She nodded and said “Sadly i’m not knowledgeable about ley lines so I can’t offer any input. That said… it’s interesting”. Greg nodded and said “Well. I’ll leave you to your recovery” and left.

Some odd days later she was released. She checked on Ristra and managed a bit of a talk but realized it was pointless. Ristra had gotten a concussion too and much worse. She kept passing out and waking up. She decided to wait until she discharged to greet her. She got paid by Greg for her work with 100,000 leaves. “From the High Emperor. Says the next lab will bring double that. It’s your pay for the work you’ve done. He also already paid out your bills for the next month” he said. She nodded and said “I’ll pen him a letter later, thanking him for his kindness”. Greg only nodded. She decided to buy a truck for Ristra. While it took over half her pay, it was fine since the empire was paying her trip around it to investigate the labs and it wasn’t like she had any desires at the moment. She also knew Ristra needed to get to Stilsnow and wanted to help. Having a truck would at least give her a mode of transportation after she paid the company she rented the first one from. Eventually she found out Ristra was going to be discharged and headed over. She got a bit of a lesson on the value of leaves and after a goodbye was exchanged, Ristra left. She got into the car with the other officers. Greg asked “Everything good?”. She nodded and said “Yeah. Let’s get to Noblecourt”.

Thiesel himself sat in a room. He sipped on tea as he visited with his associate/friend. Their name was John Razelfort. The Razelfort family were responsible for the banks of the country, having developed the systems that ran them. They had a massive team that worked logistics at their estate in
Quarrycrest which kept track of every account of every single citizen of the empire. Further, it had been rumored that they kept accounts for some non-citizens. “So” John asked “Have you heard?”.

“Heard what?” Theisel asked himself. “Sir Lupone struck again” John said “Has the whole town in a tizzy”. Theisel sighed and said “Man, that’s the third one this year. How many before he’s satisfied do you think?”, “Dunno” John said “I do know that I need to speak to him”. “Why?” Theisel asked.

“Well… I can tell you. I have info to pass on. Well, that and the fact the police are paying me to cap him” John replied. Theisel shifted and thought about it, asking “What info do you have?”, his tone suggesting playful curiosity. John chuckled and said “Well.. I can tell you. Juanes isn’t the only one involved. In fact, he wasn’t the ringleader. Some dude in Cobbleston arranged the whole mess. Juanes just handed off the weapon and passed on orders”. “How do you know?” Theisel asked. It was then he felt something enter his neck. His eyes widened as he looked down at it. A syringe, pumping a liquid into him. “Simple. Louise croaked about you. Took a bit, kidnapping his wife, making her talk. When he saw the light, he folded and sold you out for them and some cash” John responded, standing and saying “I've been at it a while. When they put that bounty up, I knew it'd increase sooner or later and all I had to do was give Robert 40%. A sweet deal if you ask me. Now sleep, Theisel. Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of your inheritance” and flashed Theisel a grin that’d make cats shiver. He passed out after that.

He woke up again in a cell. He was in prisoner fatigues, orange and blue jumpsuit with the word “Prisoner #” and then the number assigned to him by the prison on his back. He couldn’t remember what happened. All he could remember was vague. However, he did know that a trial happened. He very specifically remember the judge at sentencing. Unbelievable sideburns, salt and pepper coloring, purple robes with a white trim, and the kings insignia on his judge’s cap, the emperor's on the front and back of his robes, and the plastic pauldrons with the 9 stars. He remembered nothing of the trial and only now was conscious and felt coherent. “Where am I?” Theisel asked, to no one in particular. “In Victory Prison” a guard down the hall said, the chair creaking loudly as he stood. He came into view soon, wearing normal police attire. “Finally caught you, Lupone” the officer said “I knew you’d slip and I knew you couldn’t get those fancy tools without noble support. To think you’d actually be a heir…. Well. guess not anymore since the parents disowned you and named someone else heir…” the officers voice trailed off. Theisel’s eyes widened and he asked “Who!?”. He knew the answer before the officer answered, before he even asked. The officer shook his head, saying “You know who. The same that turned you in. With your buddy”. Theisel nodded and said “Can’t blame that. Still, you got caught”. Theisel nodded and said “I know. I’m done for. How this works. Thrown in the cage and the key forgotten”. The officer still stood, looking around. He turned away and said “Rumor has it you’re planning a breakout. Slipped some psychotics into the officers coffee as he passed and was talking to a buddy. Knew officer freaking out would trip the open cells button of the several he has available” and slightly banged his coffee cup on the bars. An officer walked over, watching him with a straight face. The eyes though. They had hope. “What does Lupone plan to do, good sir?” he asked. The partner answered, saying “Punish the warden. For treating officers assigned like personal slaves”. Lupone smiled and felt around his body, finding a small packet that was factory sealed in his pants leg. Pulling it out, he dumped the contents into the other cops coffee and said “Then that’s what he plans to do. Just one thing. Where are we?”. Both cops answered in unison “Stilsnow”.

He sat in the RV as it drove through the streets of the Empire. Sometimes one of the human members
Lapena was loving their stay, but he stayed on edge. The third night in, the small fire man approached him finally, saying “You’ve been quiet ever since you came, friend”. “My job. Watch her, make sure your friend doesn’t rip her to shreds” he replied bluntly. It was mostly true. They were clearly different from humans and he inherently distrusted them. Further, he knew the rumors. “Aye, that is a smart move ta make. ‘Owever, you miss out on opportunities. Men need every one they can get” the small man responded. He looked away, and replied “Nah. I had plenty and I squandered them. Don’t deserve any more”. The small man laughed, and said “Friend, everyone deserves opportunity, if only ta grow as a person. Here. sit and drink with me. Got nuttin else ta do nay?”. Zem stared the man and asked “What’s your name?”. Durg answered “Durg Dansan at yer service. You’re name, stranger?” “Zem. Zem Kholint” he answered, accepting a glass offered to him. He didn’t recognize the bottle but could tell it was authentic. He took a sip and regretted it.

The world around him blurred. “The afterworld you put in this?” he asked, taking deep breaths. His lungs felt like they were on fire. Durg whistled and said “I was right to approach you. Knew I pegged you as a man who could ‘old ‘is liquor”. Zem looked at him and yelled a bit drunkenly “That ain’t no liquor, it’s damned poison!”. Durg laughed and slid the bottle over. Despite his buzz, he could read it. “The hell is ‘Baunita Honeydew?’” he asked. Durg explained “It’s mead made like wine, from honeydews, honey, and various other ingredients made in Lower Avalon”. He coughed and said “Why…?” and was cut off as Durg answered “Aye mate I furgot that your people down here make yer mead and alcohol differently than us fair folk. We use magic”. His questioned answered he just sighed and asked “Is it always hard the first time?”. Durg laughed and said “It usually knocks an alcoholic Jotun on ‘is arse first time ‘e tries it. Common prank of the Pyxl ta switch their liquor out when they least expect it”. Zem smiled a big and said “Question. Is this how your kind make friends?”. Durg chuckled and poured another glass, downing the whole thing and giving a loud burp, saying “Friend, the ume made whiskey from the fires of Mount Voldan. A nume has a friend after sharing 100 drinks with ‘em”. Zem laughed a bit and said “Then let’s get started”.

She had ran most of the day. Eventually she was too tired to run. She used her ‘shadow self’ spell to summon her shadow and had it scout the nearby woods. When it found now threats, she had it climb to the highest tree. It confirmed that they in fact were nowhere near the road. She had it scrub their tracks the last 10 miles. It did so but took all night. She used healing magic to heal her wounds from the shadow tearing itself from her. She then began to devise a new spell. She calculated everything about the formulae. The amount of mana, measured in kites (1 kite=1 watt of electrical energy, though mana is elementless. Just raw energy), needed to acquire the desired effect, the effect of doing said desired effect on reality, the mana required to fix anything that could strain its fabric and cause tears, ingredients to make the spell more natural, the method of casting (spell or enchantment or conjuring), and the words required to bring her spell into reality. Her current spell cost 14 kites and she calculated that the new spell would cost 15 kites of energy. If she hadn’t made some changes to the effects of the spell, she calculated it would have cost 30 kites of mana. She called her new spell ‘Shadow Pets’. With the guesswork done, she decided to put it into practice. She first used shadow self to gather firewood and then started a fire. After that, she got to work casting it.
Forming a magic circle behind her on her shadow cast by the fire, she chanted “Shadoupetto”. While not necessary for spellcasting of any kind, magic circles provided a safer way to cast magic. It essentially formed a small barrier around a spell so that if backfiring occurred, the spell would not harm the caster. She cried out in pain as her shadow ripped from her and what little bled from it was used as part of the casting. After a minute, she turned around and saw them. Two small foot long, foot tall rat-like shadows sat there. She had them go out and hunt. It took them only three hours and afterwards she had them rejoin. Against expectations, she cried out in pain as she was re injured and this time she simply bled. She used healing magic yet again to heal it, but logged the note in her formulae. She’d have to be more careful casting that particular spell. She cooked her food and then ate. Afterwards, she laid down in a small tent she set up to sleep. She stared at a map and was trying to decide. Whether to head for Sunshade and return home or head towards Boulderfall and head for Stilsnow. She sighed and decided to head for Stilsnow. Kard hadn’t put a time limit on delivering the ember and so a small detour wouldn’t kill the ritual he planned. Even so, she needed to get word to him. She knew exactly how to. They had a small courier system set up and she knew how to find their courier in each town. She’d send a message in Boulderfall and let things go from there.
Intermission 2

Fàisneachd

ann an làithean a dh'aois, nuair a choisich fir agus iad a 'coiseachd taobh ri taobh, nuair a bha an
abhainn òg, agus a 'ghrían a' losgadh sinn beò, nuair a rug na seann chraobhan na coilltean agus na
craobhan, bha co-chòrdadh ann.

chan eil cùisean ge-tà gu bràth. chan eil cùisean a 'mairsinn gu bràth. chan eil e gu bràth do dhaoine
agus gu dearbh. mar sin thòisich fir agus fey air gluasad. sàbhailte agus a 'siubhal a rinn iad, a h-uile
duine a' fuireach air falbh. mhair síth agus dhuilich trioblaidean.

gus an do thuit Dia na dùthcha bho àrd, bheir e bàs agus sgrios far an tàinig e. na daoine a bha iad a
'sabaid agus a' sabaid. tro ghràs agus diomhaireachd bhuanachadh iad agus bhuanachadh iad. airson
mîltean agus mîltean bhuanachadh iad agus ghluais iad. cha do shoirbhich leis an dia dhùthchannan
cèin.

g-e-tà, thig an latha nuair a dh'fhàillig an duine. air an latha sin, tillidh an dia dhùthchannan cèin agus
sgaoilear an dorchadas air feadh an t-saoghail. 'S e an aon dòchas a th' againn an ochdnar ghaisgich
air an stiùireadh le ochdnar fhìcheadh. a dhol gu deireadh saoghal agus a 'faighinn na cumhachdan
cadail.

leis a 'chumhachd an sin, feumaidh iad tilleadh, chun na rioghachd a chaidh a dhubhadh leis an dia
dhorcha. le cumhachd ann, feumaidh iad streap. gu siorraidh, chun a 'mhullaich. le cumhachd agus
claidheamh agus draoidheachd agus feòil, cuiridh iad às an dia dhubh, agus cuiridh e sìos e. bidh sìth
soirbheachaidh, bidh an t-slighe air a shuidheachadh ceart. bidh co-chòrdadh a 'riaghladh, mar a rinn e
ann an laithean aosta.
She sat in the car as it drove. It had to stop, occasionally, but for the most part it continued its travel unharried. The biggest incident was when a truck that was clearly transporting valuable resources north was overturned by a birdian swarm. She stepped in and with her magic easily overwhelmed them. She refused pay, though didn’t object to the officers accepting pay. However, they refused the amount offered. Soon enough, they saw the town of Noblecourt in the distance. Its spiraling structures and imposing fortresses shone brightly in the distance as the town lights were on. As they passed through the gates, the officers identifying themselves, she awed. She had read about how Noblecourt on her way there. She was intrigued that it was the home of many noble lineages, including the Azelhart families. They had two of their ancestors already fight Galdera and help beat him back. They still continued strong to the modern day. However, the family she was most interested in were the Albrights. The family that were descendants to the Cyrus and Regal Albright, and both being scholar heroes. Both wielded magics surpassing their peers. Cyrus supposedly acquired even greater power, but Regal proved himself Cyrus’ equal, according the fellow heroes and the soldiers that marched through the gate of finis with them and returned attested to.

As she reminisced on memories of reading about the heroic 8, Greg spoke up, saying “Alright miss. We’re in Noblecourt. Remember the rules and the lab is actually in the basement of a nobleman’s house”. Nemu nodded, asking “Which one?”. Greg turned and said “the Azelharts”. Nemu stared for a few moments, then smiled and said “Then, I can also visit the family of some renowned heroes. The officers nodded as they left the main town and headed to the noble district. Soon enough, they parked the car at the front of the main building of the Azelhart estate. The estate was an amazing 1 square mile in all directions from the main building, which itself took up a quarter of a mile. This was because the estate used the rest of the property as plantation grounds. The Azelharts would hire workers, whether debt slaves or regular workers, and give them 100 leaves per days work, food and board, and a letter of recommendation at the end of their work, whether they were brought in through the Azelharts purchasing their debt, or through them being hired for their future aspirations. Normally, debt slaves, while they were well-cared for and had basic freedoms, were expected to do reasonable work for no benefit beyond the freedom not being indebted brought. The Azelharts found the practice to be questionable at best and sought to reform it. They thought paying off one's debts should have actual, tangible rewards.

As they got out, she gazed out to the crops. It was sunset and the workers were coming back in. Other works, whom had canteens they drank from themselves, were handing out water bottles to workers whom had been working, and yelling “Dinner is almost ready! Go to the mess hall to eat! If you are tired, there will be another meal at midnight!”. “Why is debt slavery allowed?” she asked a
nearby officer, this one being named Mark “I thought the 8th covenant forbade it”. Mark nodded and said “Well…. Calling it slavery is a bit harsh. They don’t work exactly for free. They work to pay off their debt. Further, room and board cannot be charged of them by those that ‘own’ their debt. Even so, you aren’t wrong to call it for what it is, as some aren’t like the Azelharts. Some give the bare minimum, some abuse them, and worse, some use them for nothing more than entertainment”. She frowned and was about to say something, when Mark said “The law is clear though. Such things are not allowed. I myself have killed two slavers whom purchased debt and proceeded to abuse those whom held it. After dealing with them, I purchased their debt, then forgave it”. She nodded and understood now. As she walked in, she smelled it. Delicious food. Steaks being grilled, cooked in melted butter. She was about to follow the scent, when she spied a well-dressed man walk down the stairs. None of the workers paid him mind beyond nodding to him that their days work was done. Another man nearby took note.

“Ah, Nemu Cias. Fionne gave me word you would be coming. Quite the job you’ve taken, eh?” he said. She nodded and asked “How deep in have you investigated?”. He shook his head and said “Not at all. When we found it, I sent a letter to Fionne immediately, whom informed me he would have someone formally investigate it, and until then it was too dangerous to investigate ourselves. I complied and then he sent word about you”. She thought about it and asked “Then, any records?”. He nodded and said “Yes. My ancestors did give a large amount of leaves to a ‘Portman’ and I found notes on a ‘Vitality’ project. The notes essentially mused about how to prolong someone's life while staying within the covenants”. She frowned and said “More like mutate life. Anyway, if you wouldn’t mind guiding me, I’ll have the place investigated and made safe so the space can be cleared”. The man nodded and said “Thank you miss. I never did catch your name. I am Reginold Azelhart. You are?”. She curtsied and said “I am Nemu Cias”.

She climbed down the stepladder that was lowered. It was 10 feet down, fairly decent in length. This meant she was already 50 feet down, as the Azelhart basement, including tunnels, was 40 feet deep at most. The police followed her. They had decided that because Nemu had been paying out of pocket for most of the things on their trip thus far, they could call in a personal day and help Nemu. Only one stayed behind, but that was to go hire additional help. Regardless, she pressed on. Less because she was confident in their fighting capability and more that she was confident in their capability as a group. The officers kept their mauser c96’s drawn as they walked and kept their towering iron riot shields handy. Greg took point while Mark walked behind. “So, what can we expect to find down here, miss?” Mark asked, watching the cords. “Nothing really, if everything is intact like the last place. If something broke in, or a monster was released… well” she replied, examining the pods they passed every so often. It was strange however. “Why experiment on the kin races?” she mused “They may look and function like us, but they’re genetics are so incompatible. You might as well compare us to treants”.

“Eventually, they found a side passage. The chamber they were in led to rooms outside this one, observation chambers, and most were on the upper floor, with stairs leading to catwalks above. However, off to the side at the far end of where they entered, there was a passage leading out. This
setup of pods had 2 sets of 8 pods, facing away from each other in one block, and 16 blocks total with walkways between each. Cords traveled between them and the walls. Though with her expanded vocabulary, tubes might have been more apt. Entering the side passage, they walked 5 feet and saw the way split into two different ones. She chose for them to go left, as it was closest, being only 5 feet. It was more diagonal left-straight though. They soon entered a fairly large chamber with 8 identical, and very elaborate pods. “Wait” she said “This design… I recognize it” and walked forward. She traced her hand on one and said “Yes, this was in the last lab… and the one I emerged from”. She moved to each one, then the nearby series of crystals. Tapping one on instinct, magical energy sizzled between each crystal and formed a holographic screen.

“Wow!” Mark said “How…!? What is that?”. “I don’t know” Nemu said, moved and touching the screen, it suddenly shifting. “What’s it saying?” Mark asked. “théma, Halie Azelhart. Sex, Gynaïka. Ýpsos, πέντε πόδια εξί ιντσές. Város, ekatón exínta enniá kilá. Grammí, Eisenberg. maζíκι συγγένεια, Qi kai astrapí. óπλο, spathí tou erhardt” she answered then stopped for a moment. She realized this wasn’t english. “Mark. This is Greek” she answered. “Really?” he asked “But isn’t that language at least fourteen hundred years old?”. “Wait” Greg said, turning, white as a sheet “Did I hear Azelhart?”. She nodded and said “Yes. Halie Azelhart… pod number 4”. He was silent and Nemu turned around, asking “Why?”. “Nemu. That’s the name of one of the heroic eight. Halie Azelhart. Her sister’s name was Mary Azelhart. They were sisters. Halie was the warrior and Mary was the dancer” Greg answered. Her face went pale and she stared at him as though she didn’t believe him. “Then… that means… that means this place is… wait a moment!” she stuttered, moving to the computer. Working on pure instinct, she manipulated the magic device.

They were all there. She verified with the police. Halie and Mary Azelhart. Regal Albright. Renald Colozine. Jules Ravus. Marco of Duskbarrow. Harriet Clement. Bryan Greengrass. Each of them was there and in the same health condition logged as before. Further, it seemed like they had been here since 4 years after the battle. It was then she discovered the logs. According to them, whomever made these facilities built the others to experiment and test if suspended animation was possible. After they were proven successful, the heroes were each lured there and captured. She gasped at what she read. Essentially, the people who worked here broke down the enchantments on the weapons of the heroes and funneled them into their respective pods to literally enchant the heroes, over the course of a thousand years it would seem. They were to be used in the battle against Galdera. Further, the information came from someone called ‘the Acolyte’. She relayed this to the officers, whom wore looks of disgust. They radioed in their findings, and was told they were going to send a full unit. She turned and stared and had a bad feeling. “There’s something else” she said “This place isn’t lined with nephrite….. Why wasn’t it discovered sooner?”. She got her answer.

Instantly, a shot rang out. Mark screamed and fell against the table, before slumping to the ground, crying in pain and trying to cover the wound on his back. Greg instantly pulled out the field issue healing grape potion and pour the contents into and onto the wound, being careful. “Mark!” Greg screamed, turning to the door to question the assailant but his voice fell short as he simply muttered
“Mr. Azelhart…?” She was in shock too. Standing before them was none other than Reginold Azelhart. “Hello, guests. Terribly unfortunate that this was discovered. Also terribly unfortunate that those that came to investigate, ended up being killed by the released, mad heroes” he said, cycling the chamber to the next round. He held a revolver of some kind, and not being a gun expert, she couldn’t determine which kind of revolver. She held her hands up, Greg doing so as well. “Insane heroes? What are you talking about?” Greg said. Reginold laughed and replied “Please, don’t play dumb. I heard it all. Everything. Though what I didn’t expect was someone who could speak Greek. I thought I could just release them after killing you while you investigated”.

She then decided to make a rather risky move. She moved her hand up and like she thought, the man shot at her. Rather than cast a spell, she tried something else, channelling some mana into the palm of her hand and letting out a burst of it. It sent the bullet’s trajectory off, sinking it into her foot. “What!?” Reginold cried, moving to turn the chamber again. She reacted quickly, calling upon her quickest spell. Sweeping her hand up, she cried “Tsurara!” and instantly, an icicle shot out from the ground. It didn’t hit him but it shocked him enough to get him to drop his gun. She quickly reacted, pulling her rod out and whispered “Shokkusutan!”. A small electric bolt traveled from her focus into Reginold, who had ducked for the gun. He screamed and then stopped as his body locked up. Greg had rushed forward, moved and picked up the gun, emptying it as he pulled his own out. “Nemu! Are you alright!” he asked. She nodded, turning to Mark and sighed, saying “He’s fine. His mana is still flowing fine”. She turned back and stared at Reginold, then after a few minutes, moved to the console and manipulated it. She wasn’t sure what she was doing, but she knew what she wanted to do. “Wait, what are you doing!?” Greg asked. “Releasing them” she said “They’re healthy and according to this, they were basically forced into this. We owe them” and hit the final button to activate the release process.

It went fairly fast. The pods drained the cocktail of healing grape potion mixed with liquid mana and inspiriting plum potion. After that, some awakening potion was pumped into the heroes bodies. Following that, the pods stopped and disconnected all the pumps attached to the heroes, the liquids they were full of closing the wounds instantly and preserving their blood and lifeforce. After this, the pods opened, each of the heroes falling out, but each catching themselves. Nemu moved to check on them, but yelped in pain and fell forward. Her foot had slipped, as the adrenaline that let her ignore her foot injury had thinned too much and now her body felt the pain from it. Greg walked over and asked “What do we do?”. Nemu looked at him, then looked at them and said “Just help them to their feet, and point me out to each” as she pulled herself to a nearby wall. She pulled her boots off, feeling their enchantments fade from her. She then moved and used her socks as wrapping. It was then a shadow fell over her. She looked up and saw a woman in the hospital-like gowns whom spoke in Greek to her.

“poios eïsai? ti einai auto to meros? giatí mas évala se aftá ta prágmata?” the woman asked. She had black hair and green eyes. The hair went all the way down to her mid-back. It was clearly unkempt and she had defined muscles, despite being in a pod for thousands of years. She could see from here
that the woman before her had defined curves, but nothing outrageous, simply attractive. The eyes glaring down at her were filled with fury and fire, and while she feared the woman’s wrath, she spoke and said “Den éícha típotá na káno me aftó to méros. To erevnoúme gia ton ypsiló aftokrátor. Ímastan schedón skotoménoi apó ton idioktí tou akiñífou pou mas éplixe”. The woman looked at her foot, and her expression softened, and looked to the man on the floor, now recovering.

“Damnedable woman! I’ll make you a toy for this!” Reginold exclaimed, pushing himself to his feet. Greg was occupied helping a noble-looking gent to his feet. However, the woman moved quickly, landing a fist square into the man’s stomach. Her fist crackle with electricity and the man screamed, falling over as he was electrocuted. Not to death however, as though he had a seizure, he simply passed out.

One of the heroes, whom had recovered, walked over and healed her foot. She was grateful, and conversed with each. She already warned them that the officer would not be able to understand them, and explained who Regionold was. Halie, the woman who knocked Reginold out, and her sister, Mary, were disappointed but accepted it. Eventually, the heroes had all gathered and she had explained the situation. They definitely were apprehensive in accepting the truth of things. Mary and Halie took it at face value, only because they saw the man's actions. The rest had begun to distrust her. She expected it however. She stood up, putting her boot back on as someone asked “adelfí? esý eísai?”. She turned, her eyes widened. Before her stood Regal Albright. A genius of a scholar, rivaling Cyrus from ancient times. However, his words shook her. Sister? Sure she didn’t have a memory, but she wanted to believe she’d remember something like that. It was then she recalled her previous dream. “ísos. Lypámai, allá den écho kamía mními. Xéro móno ti káno me ti meléti” she replied. She stood, staring at him.

“Eísa sígouros, vasilikós? an eíste adelfí eínaí zontanós, tóte ti simaínei aftó?” one of the males said. Regal, a man who stood at 6 feet, had short, blonde hair and a goatee, and black eyes stared down at her. He nodded slightly and said “Échei ilikía ligo, allá eínaí i eikóna pou fýnei i agapiméni mou mikrí adelfí”. She sighed and turned away, towards the exit, saying “Oneirevómon énan ántra pou anaférei óti ímoun adeferí se énan íroa ... tóte me ésproxe se éna kormó. Xýpnsa se éna méros parómoio me aftó. Epoménos, o ischyrismos sas boreí na énaí alithinós. Epísis, tha prépei na anaféro óti i graptí glóssa den échei alláxei”. They nodded and headed that way. Greg said over the radio “Be advised. Reginold is under control and… ancient heroes are enroute. Have writing stuff ready. Trust me”. He was about to carry him when a man that looked a bit on the older side moved and picked him up for him, nodded, and headed towards the exit. Nemu and Greg followed them.
Chapter 22-The Merchant, Act 3

Chapter 22

Money, Money, and More Money

She sat in the RV with two others. She had gotten her interview and finished writing her notes. What a story it was. False pontiffs, deep organizations with political ties, and a secret kingdom of highly magical beings? It was almost too much but she kept up. What she found fascinating though was the society they had. You’d think in such a society, that it would be a society of might makes right. However, it wasn’t. Simply put, it was based around two figures. The Titania and the Oberon. Each held different offices of political control. The oberon held the military offices and handled trade routes while the titania oversaw the financial institutions and trade laws. As for how each were picked? One simply needed to get a certain flower to bloom. There was a garden that was well managed, and whenever one requested it, they could try to get the certain flower patches to bloom. They need not approach, merely exposed the flowers to their magic. If the flowers bloomed, they were named the Oberon for their lifetime. The same applied to the Titania, though different flowers.

Both however also held power over religious functions. Each were the head of their own churches. The Oberon was the head of the ‘Church of the Horned King’ while the Titania reigned in the ‘Order of the Great Mother’. While some Oberon’s and Titania’s married, some didn’t, and some even became enemies. However, what she thought was most fascinating was Abhainn’s description of Avalon. The capital city of Tir na Nog, Home to the Baun and Genai races, the city had a total of 3 layers. It was here both rulers ruled. The titania lived in the upper layer, a place exposed to near constant light with maybe only 4 hours of night falling on it, and the lower layer was the domain of the Oberon, which only ever saw 4 hours of sun. According to him, the two races that lived primarily in Avalon were incredibly gifted with magic and both were also physically flawed. The Baun were a dark-elemental race that could see perfectly fine in pitch darkness but were blind in anything above normal room lighting. Even in normal lighting, a Baun had sight problems and often required glasses. Additionally, the Baun were incredibly gifted at regulating their mana flow and pulling off complex spell formulae. Meanwhile, the Genai had huge mana reserves and were better at casting spells quickly, while similarly being blind, though instead in any sort of lighting below room-level lighting. They needed brightness to see.

Lapena of course wasn’t planning to write this herself. She wasn’t an author, she was simply a sales representative. However, Stonegard Publishing Incorporated had no less than 1000 authors on call to write a book if needed. Last she checked, a month ago, they had 54 authors available for requests, or as the business called it, commissions. She had been interviewing Abhainn on and off throughout their trip through the country towards Stonegard. Finally, after a week and a half on the road, stopping only once in Cobbleston to top off on gas and supplies, did they arrive. Stonegard had
changed over the years. A town of pure stonework, famous for many things. However, as time went on, it became recognized for one thing; the fact it was a mid-point between the empire and the rest of the Coastlands. With this in mind, Stonegard capitalized, focusing on improving its allure to tourists. As one might expect, it ended up working and many that were traveling to Gold Shore or Grandport were happy to spend a night in Stonegard. It also invested in its book binding industry, not just expanding some to encompass publishing and authoring but making certain other companies vital for the whole process. These investments made Stonegard the metropolis it was, having a population of nearly 900,000.

Stonegard Publishing Incorporated itself was massive. The whole business had a miles worth of property and it used basically every inch to its fullest advantage. It had designed it so cars could navigate to its several parking garages easily, and calculated each garages size to make things efficient. However, they did not go here immediately. She had them stop near a pay phone. She walked to it, putting 4 leaves in and punching her supervisors number in. She heard his voice on the other side as he answered, saying “Yes this is Stonegard Publishing Incorporated. Are you requesting a special print of an officially published book, are you seeking a publishing deal, or are you seeking to fill one of our 20 positions that are open?”. “It’s me, Lapena. I need some help” she answered. She heard him sigh and then ask “Depends. What is it?”. “Well. Remember that northerner I was chasing? I caught up to him. He’s amazing” she replied. “What” her supervisor said, confused. “Yeah. He’s well-spoken, knowledgeable, and best of all, he’s got this little fire imp buddy” she replied. Her supervisor groaned and sighed. She continued “I’ve got all the notes. All we need is to find an author. However… I need a favor”. “What?” the supervisor asked, voice filled with dread. “I need access to safe house 39. I kinda promised them in exchange for not wiping my memory about then and interviews on our way back… that i’d give them refuge and access to copies of all the work we’ve done. They’ll be able to narrow the list down when they call…. Oh yeah, I need you to have an agent ready” she explained.

“Are you fucking insane Lapena!? I wondered when you literally hiked in the mountains for 6 months chasing a lead, but this is a new level! You’re literally asking us to commit treason against the High Emperor!” her supervisor roared in anger. “Actually… they don’t want him. They want the pontiff. Apparently, he’s a Galdera worshipper” she answered. The line went silent and then dead. She panicked a bit and entered more leaves, but the line was rejected each time. It was then the phone rang itself, after 10 minutes. She answered and heard “Code is 1293. Do not make me regret this. Agent Fonz will help you”. She blinked and asked “Really?”. “Do not repeat this conversation to authorities and you don’t know who called with this information. If something happens, we didn’t know we had a northerner mole and we didn’t know a break in occurred at the safehouse and we didn’t know that humans had defected to their side” it said. She nodded and said “Understood, sir. I’ll have my notes submitted tomorrow, once I’ve got them in”. “Wait. get notes from the other one… and have him visit” the voice said, before the line went dead. She sighed and hung up, heading back to the RV. “Any luck, lass?” Durg asked. She nodded and said “Yeah. I’ll direct the driver to our safehouse… though you’ll have to call the agent. I have his number”. Durg nodded and followed her up front as the RV headed towards the location. It was a small shack at the edge of town. It was owned under her companies name and listed as a vacation house.
She went inside first and activated the hidden elevator. A part of the floor rose as a small elevator revealed itself. It held about 5 people per ride. She was expecting more of course, but that was fine. The safe houses were inherently connected and she gave him the locations of the others, as well as which tunnels led where, so Durg could direct his friends where they needed to. The tunnels could be used by his friends to transport goods and personnel as needed. She asked at the end of informing him “Just make sure you don’t let anyone know about them. I’m serious. The government barely knows about this”. Durg nodded and said “Of course, of course. I already guessed it isn’t just your publication using these tunnels. I’ll tell the boys to not let this leak… in fact, I’ll retrain our low-level members to be torture resistant”. She nodded and said “Thank you. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to turn my notes over to my supervisor”. Durg nodded and said “Of course. Thank ye kindly, Lapena. I’ll make sure we survive so there’s a sequel” and then turned and walked away. She turned and left, stopping to turn and look as she spied Abhainn and Zem talking. “Yes. I’m certain you are one of the eight” Abhainn said. “Why? I’m a washed up old hunter that’s given up on doing anything beyond surviving tomorrow” Zem asked, surprise in his voice. “Simple. Your aura. Mortals can’t see it, but us feyfolken can see it. The strands of fate. Each telling a story. One of yours is the golden thread of heroism” Abhainn said “Just like I have the yellow thread of the muse”.

She approached as Zem was about to say something, when Abhainn simply said “Just live your life. You will meet your muse and they will give you a path to walk. However, don’t forget. Just because fate exists does not mean it is your master. You must choose to walk the path it asks you too. You can choose to resist and walk another”. He turned as she approached and stared, then sighed and said “Not you either huh… well. I’ve got time. 3 years… excuse me, Zem, Lapena” and left. Zem stared when Abhainn had been standing for a few more seconds, before turning and saying “Hello. Well, you have your interview”. She nodded and said “Indeed. Thanks to you” and offered a card. He stared and asked “What?”. “Your pay” she said “I don’t have 206,400 leaves, but I do in my account. Use this credit card. It allows up to 250,000 leaves exchanged before requiring payment”. “How much?” Zem asked. “275,000 leaves. Don’t worry. I’ve got enough for a down payment that they won’t give me a hard deadline, and if this book gets made… well. I’ll make more than a pretty leaf” she answered. He nodded and said “I normally don’t take cards as payment. However… I’ll trust you” and held his hand out. She was confused for only a moment, before smiling and taking it. “Good doing business with you, ma’am” he said. “Likewise, Zem. I wish you have a long story” she replied, smiling at him. He nodded and turned, walking away.

She left, after that. She headed for the main office of the company she worked for. Stonegard Publishing Incorporated. One of the rebel members that was heading for the safehouse with his squad approached, handing her keys. “Orders from Durg. This is the spare set of keys to the RV. Use it as you need them. We’ll have a secondary vehicle ready by sunset so return it then” the rebel said. She nodded and headed for it. She then drove to the company and parked in her spot outside the main offices. As she got out, a security officer greeted her. He had his baton drawn, but he put it away when he saw her “Ah, miss Sozella” he said with a soothing accent “I didn’t know it was you. Rvs weren’t registered under your name after all”. She nodded and said “I understand. Sadly, my car is at the bottom of a ravine. However, seems some friends are replacing it”. The officer nodded and said “Well, i’ll just register it real quick in the office. Have a nice day miss”. The officer turned and left. She went inside. The receptionist said nothing as she stared a bit, only pointing to the elevator and nodding. She needed no other invitation, and took it up.
She left the elevator. It was the supervisor floors. Floor 4 to be specific. She knew where her bosses office was. She navigated various hallways, dismissed the cat calls, flinched at a few that caught her off guard, as they came from newly hired females, and finally stood before her bosses door. She sighed and knocked calmly. “Come in” a feminine voice called out. She opened the door and walked in, closing it behind her. “Ah. Lapena. How nice to see you” her supervisor said, greeting her. She looked similar to lapena, fair skin, smooth lips, green eyes, curly hair in a bun-like style. However, what differed was the rich black skin the woman had. She wasn’t sure what about it was alluring, but something about it called out to any whom saw. “Ma’am. I’ve returned from my assignment. I completed it” she said, keeping her composure. “Ah. I see” her supervisor said “I assume then you bring notes?”. Lapena nodded and set them on the desk, walking to it “I do need to make some conditions. I promised them the author would write favorably of them” she said. Her supervisor nodded and said “I understand. I’ll see what I can do. At the very least, we’ll be objective. You may go”. She nodded and turned to leave.

As she left, she made a call the the safehouse. Each one had a phone number, an official one and a hidden one, known only to the one attending it. A man answered the phone, asking “Yes? Who is it?”. “It’s me. Lapena. They’re looking for an author now. You may want to give it some time” she said. “Huh? What… oh! I know you… alright. I’ll pass it along to Durg. Thanks” the man said. She nodded and said “Take care” before hanging up. With that, her obligations were handled. She decided to celebrate her success with a trip to a local restaurant. She had a nice lunch of steak, eggs, and a side of cinnamon rolls. As she dined, she overheard a conversation. “Did you hear? I heard that the Pontiff is going to the ravus family” one woman said. “Really?” the other asked. The other responded “Yeah! I heard he’s planning to hide the dragonstones in a secure location”. She frowned slightly but continued her lunch. However, what she heard disturbed her. It was then she heard something that made her stop and listen. “According to my friend, they’re heading on his private yacht out to Cerigos Island” one woman said. “Cerigos Island? Where is that?” the other asked. “Oh! Right… only the high-ranking religious members of the church and my friend know” the other said “It’s in the center of the Inner Sea”. She blinked. She’d never heard of this place. She finished her lunch and left.

She headed back to her place of work. As she discovered, they were just sending a shipment into one of the tunnels to be delivered to Durg. She could tell because the last box was one they used to deliver book script copies. She headed inside and asked for requisition paperwork. She was given it and she filled it out and turned it in. She wanted anything that mentioned the word ‘Cerigos’.

Normally, book titles were the only filter available for someone searching copies for book scripts. However, in the case of unique words, like Cerigos in this instance, a record was made for it before publication even happened. All authors consented to this. Of course, not just anyone could request a copy of the original or revised scripts. They had to have good reason, a representative present, proper paperwork, and they had to pay a rather hefty fee of 400 leaves per script. She was told to return the next day. With no choice, she decided to head home.
Sometime during midnight, she was awoken by her phone ringing. She answered it, asking “Yes?”.
“Ma’am. We called to tell you that we found 2 books with the word ‘Cerigos’ in it. One book relates
 to it completely, the other mentions it several times but is not the focus” the voice said. “Right, right.
Hold them for me and i’ll pay double” she responded, tiredly. “Understood ma’am. See you in the
morning” they said and hung up. She went back to sleep, making a note to do that in the morning.
After she woke up, she gathered her things and left. She headed to the office and was greeted by the
receptionist. “Welcome back miss Sozella. Here are the book scripts” she said, pushing them to the
other side of the desk “That will be 800 leaves”. She nodded and paid, picking them up. One book
was a horror-mystery called ‘The mystery of Cerigos Island’ by a ‘Womble Pinchton’ and the other
was a book titled ‘Relics of the Past; a Catalogue of Ancient Ruins and their notable relics’ by a
‘Arthur Forsythe’. She headed out to return home and read. She wanted to dive deep into these
scripts and see what was up. Unbeknownst to her, a shimmering haze followed her out.
Sebastian made preparations before leaving. Based on the information provided by further evidence uncovered in the Lavinda estate, he was walking into a cult. He had to be prepared. Thus, he made several moves. He took some time to call the high emperor personally. He received the man’s secretary instead. “Hello?” he asked “Whom is calling his grace?”. “Sir Sebastian Ciel. I call to make a personal request to have my arms and armor remade and enchanted, include my coat of arms” he said. He heard some shuffling and then heard “Is this number expected to be a constant?”. He affirmed it would and heard the answer to his request “Then I shall file the request. Expect the answer in a day. What reason shall I put down?”. “I’m hunting a cult. Not a Galdera one, but likely a northerner cult. It is slightly related to my prior report regarding the northerner princess I formally married in their traditions” he said. The man replied “Understood. I will call when an answer has been supplied” and hung up. He stood and left, to make orders for the required arms and armor. He planned to use orichalcum lined steel and make his saber out of mythril. As for his coat of arms, he had an idea. If what the dryad, as it called its race, said was true then Northerners of other types than, what she called the Jotun, would be troublesome.

They had talked a bit after the ceremony. He was curious and she was all too willing to tell. According to her, the cause of the war was a prophecy, in the form of a poem. The prophecy essentially said that 8 heroes with 8 muses would be the ones to defeat Galdera after he finally succeeded in rising from the Afterworld into their world. How Galdera would manage with such a weakened cult, he knew not, but the Feyfolk believed it. It’s two rulers, the Titania and the Oberon, had vastly different approaches on how to handle the situation. The Titania, a woman baun named ‘Flur Fuilteach’ wanted to try at diplomacy, strengthen ties between the empire and Tir Na Nog, the kingdom the Feyfolk called home. The Oberon however wanted to infiltrate the Balacruf Empire, examine as many people as possible, and kill this era’s ‘Daughter of Darkness’. The Oberon was an Alf named ‘Cogadh Ceothach’, whom had been caretaker of the misty forest in the eastern quadrant of Tir Na Nog. Flur had been the heiress of a noble baun family that had a monopoly on dark magic goods. What had been a shock was the Alf’s warhawk-like ways. Alf’s, forest folk in Tir Na Nog and all around extremely creative types, apparently were even at their most extreme gentle people, only killing if absolutely nessecary, preferring to use their magic to steal memories.

A day later, he got a phone call he didn’t expect. He answered the phone in the morning, expecting it to be the secretary. “Hello?” he greeted. “Ah. Hello Sebastian. How is Victor’s Hollow treating you?” Fionne asked. He was silent a moment before remembering himself and answered “Just fine, sir. Though, I could do without the northerner siege”. “Yes. I read your report. Quite interesting
things. I am having the scholars of Atlasdam doing research. I have also sent a small envoy beyond the border via boat. With hope, they’ll make it” Fionne commented, before saying “About your request. I’m approving it and funding you a budget of 500,000 leaves. I take the matter of national security seriously, and I want to make sure your investigation into this northerner cult goes smoothly”. He nodded and answered “Understood, sir. I’ll be as thorough and detailed as possible. I’ll uncover this ‘anti-magic’ material”. Fionne sighed and said “Thank you. It would be helpful to have. Godspeed, Sebastian” and then hung up. He put the phone down and sighed, though relieved. No criticism which meant the High Emperor at least felt indifferent with his actions. Further, he had much more than simply 30,000 leaves to work with. He got to work. He called each business he ordered from to confirm his order was ready, then headed out.

Today he simply wore a badge to signify his station. He took his tabbard and his pike with him, in a single suitcase. He first went to the tailor. He had special-ordered a cape and gloves. He had them made from a very special material. Spiders, specially cultivated in laboratories that emulated the harsh conditions of the Forest of No Return. Silk born from the spiders of the experiments was said to be as tough and durable of steel, yet just as flexible as regular clothing. At first, he figured it was nothing more than a tale. However, holding it now, it was true. He couldn’t tear it apart, even with genuine effort. If he tried, he might, but he wasn’t going to test it. Especially since he had the tailor spend some of the kingdoms precious orichalcum to have them lined with it, so that enchanting them would be easier. The gloves alone cost him 10,000 leaves, being made from the hide of a dragon, while the cape was 50,000. He paid for the gloves and cape and packed them away, and continued to the the smithery.

He walked in. Most smitheries had a front store with recently done goods, a storeroom nearby for custom orders, and a large factory in the back. The man at the front was an older gentleman, though he lacked visible wrinkles. He had a small green cap on, and had a thin suitors mustache thick with grey hairs. He had a two tufts of hair sticking out the sides of his head, with the cap clearly resting on a bald head. The hair had shock white hair with black streaks, clearly the last remaining non-grey hair. “Hello sir” the man said “How might… wait. You’re Sebastian. I assume you’ve come for your order?”. He nodded and the man said “Thought so. Only one man would request a mythril saber and silver spearhead” and proceeded to the store room. He prepared his funds. The man came out from the storeroom 5 minutes later with several cases. He put each on the counter and put other items down. “Pauldrons, made from tin, chainmail made from a steel-aluminum alloy… saber made from orichalcum lined mythril, an iron-silver alloy spearhead, and boots, made from the hide of dragons and with an unusual addition of steel plating on the soles of the boots and the rims at the top” the man recited, looking at the order list and opening each case. He could guess the price. The boots, 12,000 while the chainmail might cost 4000. As for the saber, it would clearly be 40,000 at least. The pauldrons thankfully would likely only be 2000 leaves. “The total today is 67,500 leaves sir. Will that be in cash or check?” the store clerk asked. He wrote check, as he had only brought 30,000 leaves. The clerk nodded and said “Then, sir, enjoy your wares. I pray they serve on your mission for our glorious emperor, whatever it may be”. He nodded and left.
He put his items in his suitcase with his pike and tabbard. He now had to get them enchanted and he knew the perfect place. Normally, court mages were well enough. They were reliable, always helpful, and knew when to back off. Guild mages however were the place you went when you wanted extreme. The Magic Association was a collection of magic guilds that worked third party to the government in magical duties, research, and practices. They abided by the covenants, but refused to work for the government. For 4000 years the empire has abided and allowed this practice, though initially out of disinterest. Now, they are a valuable resource, one the empire requests help from, using official means. Each major city had an association hub and Victor’s Hollow was the capital of Halihall. So, it had one. He entered and walked to the receptionist, someone in a long, flowing, purple robe. “Welcome to the mage’s association. How may I help you?” the receptionist asked, a male tone emanating from the dark folds of the hood. “I’m here to have my appointment with the enchanter. I have some items I need enchanted by the end of the week” he answered. The receptionist nodded and waved their hand, opening a portal next to him and said “Go through. He’s waiting for you”. He nodded and went through, and sat in the chair in front of the portal. In front of him was an ornate desk. Behind it, a young man with chestnut brown hair and eyes sat, wearing formal businesswear. “Sebastian Ciel, knight of the Court of High Emperor Fionne Balacruf, Former member of the Royal Law Enforcement Force…. Arriving precisely 5 minutes before scheduled time, without request. How might I serve you today, sir?” the man asked.

“I require enchantments on various items. I lined as much as I could with orichalcum. I have prepared-” he began and was cut off as the man said “Sorry sir, but I’ll be deciding what you need. I merely need to know three things. What do you desire in terms of power, what do you expect to encounter, and how long will you endure such a journey?”. Sebastian was taken a bit aback, but recovered quickly, answering “I simply desire the ability to evade my foes and deliver justice, I am going to encounter northerners of various types, all highly potent with magic, and I doubt my journey will be shorter than another half-year”. “I see. Understood. I can complete your order. With the orichalcum at least. That will also reduce your bill. Have 200,000 leaves change ready by then. You may go, but leave your items here” the man said, standing. Sebastian nodded and said “Understood. Thank you” and left. A week later, the same mage arrived at his doorstep of the hotel he was staying in, with his suitcase. He handed over the leaves and was given it. He opened it on the bed and found his items, and a letter. It went over all the enchantments.

His cape got an enchantment that simply improved his capability to dodge attacks and added an early warning system of unseen attacks by billowing when one was coming. The pauldrons emitted a forcefield around him that while it could not stop rifle fire, it would stop any handgun in its tracks. The chain was reinforced via magic and thanks to the orichalcum lining, the enchanter was able to reinforce it enough that it could withstand its structural integrity after a could of rifle rounds. The gloves were enchanted so he couldn’t be disarmed unless he wanted to be and they also would retrieve his weapons if they were within 30 feet of himself. His boots tripled his speed, while his tabbard gave him two abilities; a passive regeneration and an immunity to fear. However, saber gave the most important enchantment of all. It allow him to manipulate any mana it came in contact with invisible to trick attackers. With these enchantments, he was certain he could do what he needed to. He took the holy relic he acquired from the ruins beneath, put it in a specially designed case, and headed out. He paid the receptionist for his time there, 500 leaves. He then left in the car provided to
him by the queen. A truck, specifically. Nothing fancy. Ran on the market at 30,000 leaves. Plus, according to her, she expected him to bring it back, meaning he’d likely owe that much. Even so, he didn’t argue. He was not about to debate with a king, or in this case, queen. Especially when they ruled the kingdom of champions.

He drove for a while. Even under monsterless conditions, a journey to goldshore by truck would take roughly 8 days from Victor’s Hollow. However, since he had to deal with them every so often, it took him 14 days, or two weeks. He got to test his new enchantments however. It would seem that they were stronger than he thought. The Mage’s Association used gemdust to empower each. The cape after having dust added tripled the speed at which he dodged and restored his stamina by converting airborne mana into chemicals that would store his stamina after it circulated for a second. The gloves gave him telekinetic abilities within 30 feet, manipulating anything that weighed less than 20 pounds freely. He could even launch objects weighing 20 pounds at rather concerning speeds. His pauldrons actually projected different kinds of forcefields that required a mere spoken word to change. ‘Mana’ for a barrier that defended against magic and ‘physical’ for a barrier than blocked physical attacks. The chain also regenerated damage over time, though he wasn’t sure on it’s limit. His boots also improved his jumping capabilities, while his tabbard could regenerate him, given time, from even grievous injury, though fatal wounds, removed organs, and severed limbs were beyond its power. Further, it sharpened his thoughts in the midst of terror. His saber also had vampiric qualities, while his pike could also instill itself with an element if it desired it.

He got out of his truck and headed inside the hotel, carrying his suitcase. He had made a reservation. He expected to stay around a while. It would cost him 600 leaves for a month, which he took. After unpacking and securing his belongings in the safe provided by the hotel, he headed out. He began his search where the information the queen forwarded him to pointed, the Courier’s Guild. While third party as well, the Courier’s Guild made it a point to remain friendly with the empire. They made their rates higher than the empire’s postal service, but offered premium services like ‘expediant delivery’ or ‘secure delivery’ or ‘fresh delivery’ or any combination of those. He walked in, wearing his tabbard. The clerk at the counter looked up from his comic and said “Ah, hello sir. How might I help you today?”. “Simple” he replied “I require your logbook. Specifically, a shipment on the 5th day the first month of summer”. The clerk laughed but stopped when Sebastian produced his knight’s badge and sighed, moved to pull it out from beneath the counter. He set it on the table and opened to a page, looking through and then turning it to him and saying “Entries 20 through 25. I hope your search is fruitful” and returning to his comic. Sebastian found what he wanted immediately. However, he found more than he expected.

“John Lice, age 25, single, lives at 256 Clarise Way in Gold Shore, Rave. Occupation, listed as a mage of the Emerald Order, and he ordered a ‘special package’ be delivered…. But he had other, separate deliveries” Sebastian said, reading aloud, but noting the other entries. A delivery of ham spiced with cockatrice blood, a shipment of love potions, the recieval of magical supplies, and finally delivery of an enchanted flag. This was important information. “Who is John Lice?” he asked. “Ah. John Lice. He’s part of the local druid order, the Emerald Order. One of the few around that focus on both sea and land” the clerk responded “Lives in town. The liason between them and us town folk.
Been real helpful too. Just yesterday, he reinforced our buildings structure”. He nodded and said “Thank you. You’ve been most helpful” and turned, leaving. The clerk put the logbook back away and finished his comic, before putting in an order for the next issue.

He found the entries odd for one reason. The same day, the same person. Further, cockatrice blood was known to be extremely caustic and toxic. Not only was it a neurotoxin, it also had properties akin to sulfuric acid, making it dangerous. Spicing meat with it, while possible, is extremely idiotic. As such, he knew John was his man and the entries were correct. He left, swinging by the hotel to prepare only his gloves and weapons, holstering the saber and collapsing the pike and holstering it. The address was on the other side of town, so he took his truck. Thankfully, it was near the Sacred Flame church. As he approached, he really knew he had the right address. It was a two story house, the kind you’d find in the outer cities, like Riverford, or Northreach. Being only 15 feet wide, 25 feet long, the house wasn’t all that big compared to most, whom usually were 20 feet on all sides. It also had narrow 2 feet wide alleyways on either side to squeeze to the backyard. However, this house had an addition, which while it likely would not pass most building codes, likely fell under the magical exceptions. It had a mage’s tower attached directly to the top, giving it an additional five stories to work with. He approached the front door and knocked three times, stepping back. He had his badge ready. After a minute, the door opened.

A man wearing a longcoat answered. He had a tophat on, with a white stripe where the top met the brim, and wore what appeared to be a green wool sweater underneath the coat. He had a cane on him. “Mr. Lice?” He questioned. The man nodded, staring at him with black eyes. He had grey hair, meaning he was older. “Are you John Lice, age 25?” he questioned further. The man nodded. “Where is he then?” he asked. The man simply opened the door, moving aside to let him in, and pointed up. “I see…. He’s upstairs. Alright. I’ll go talk to him” he said, and went in. He walked up the stairs nearby and headed up to the second floor. It was a large, empty space, with only another staircase to ascend to the tower proper. He passed by various labs and eventually happened upon a door at the top. He knocked. “Who’s there?” a gruff voice called out. “Sebastian Ciel, knight in High Emperor Fionne Balacruf’s court. I’m here on official business” he stated. As expected, the door opened and revealed a rough-looking individual in pajama’s. “Yes?” the man asked “what makes you disturb me as I nap?”. “I am investigating rumors of a cult. A shipment of anti-magic made its way to Victor’s Hollow, by way of the Courier’s Guild. They were made under your name. Have you anything to say for it?” he explained. John nodded and said “well, first off, I never deal with deliveries. I just have my servant do it. Has a legal document that lets him use my name for them and everything. Second, I’ve never once left this tower in the past five years, beyond heading to the local Mage’s Association to renew my membership”. Sebastian frowned for a moment, then his eyes widened and he said “Thank you sir! I must go” and turned, hurrying down the stairs. However, he was too late. He couldn’t find the man at all. “Dammit!” he shouted, standing in the street. It began to rain, and he trudged through the city. He used the closest payphone to call the police, saying “Put out a search for man in a longcoat, wears a green wool sweater underneath… had a tophat and cane. Last seen 256 Clarise Way. Wanted on suspected Northerner Cult Activity”.
He was eating his lunch when the call came. It had been 2 weeks. A waitress at the diner informed him of a call coming in for ‘a man wearing a tabbard bearing the High Emperor’s insignia’. He accepted it and used the booth’s phone to answer. It was common practice to allow customers of establishments to have a phone available as they dine, for important matters, rather than have customers wade through the crowd of tables and people. “This is Sebastian Ciel, whom am I speaking to?” he asked. “Ah. Yes. Good. I have news. My servant is preparing to leave town” the man said. “How do you know?” he asked, knowing full well to whom he spoke. John Lice. “I’m a highly talented mage, sir Sebastian, how do you think i found you? I used magic. He’ll be preparing all day. He plans to go to stongerd with some friends. They’re apparently going to war with another northerner faction” he said “Just a heads up, there are multiple northerner types it seems. I’m staring at a light blue insect-winged humanoid, a tall pale woman in black clothes, and your average northerner”. He nodded and said “I know. I was at the siege on Victor’s Hollow. I’ll move immediately. Thank you”. “Don’t mention it. I don’t want trouble and any servant that does is fired immediately. They’re at the docks” the mage mentioned and hung up. He quickly finished the last of his meal, country fried steak and eggs, and headed out. He swung by his hotel to retrieve his gear and put it in his special steelbook suitcase. He then rode out towards the dock district.

Normally, it would be hard to tell where in the docks a cult would be. The warehouses and many ports made such a task impossible. However, there was a way he devised. He simply had police come in, then watched the people whom were nervous. Quickly, he found what he sought. From his perch above a warehouse, he could see whom moved faster than others. As suspected, only a few ships had dubious goods. Using his hand radio, he directed police to those three boats and had them seized. Now was the real test. Pirates would comply, preferring to play dumb and surrender cargo than risk losing trial and their ship. On the other hand, cults would rather risk trial and their ship than play dumb. Thus, when police did officially seize the vessels with the intent to search and discharge them if there were no illicit materials, it became clear which it was. The last boat on the dock, at the very end. He headed there, using his boots jumping and speed enchantments. “Officers. What seems to be the trouble?” he asked. “You! Sir Knight! Please, help me! These fake police hooligans are trying to strongarm their way onto our boat!” the man in rough sailor’s attire yelled. He looked over the officers. Their gear was indeed fake. However, he suspected magic. Lacking any real proof he decided to make some. “Well, sirs, just so happens that real officers have hand radio’s of a particular brand and frequency, and they’re custom made” he said, then spoke into the radio “All units, respond with your badge number”. As expected, everyone responded, including the officers before him, and not one police officer questioned the so-called ‘new voices’. This was because magic hadn’t been made yet that could mess with technology.

Their reaction was instantaneous. They ran for the boat, flinging spells, primarily fireball. He jumped in front of the officers, using his forcefield enchantment to defend against their magic. Soon enough they stopped and started to sail out of the harbor. One might think it over, as whom could outrun a ship? He answered that by running full speed, reaching 3 miles per hour easily and more, and chucked his spear, having it catch aflame, though no one could see. He waited, and as he saw more and more smoke, before it exited the reach of his ability, he grabbed his pike with his gloves power and pulled it back. It took a solid 5 minutes before smoke began to literally billow from the back and the mages realized their boat was on fire. Soon enough, the navy was dispatched to seize the boat, the flames slowing down its escape. Unfortunately, the navy wasn’t ready for the northerners. Nor
was he. Suddenly, the entire bay froze. His eyes widened as he rushed to the edge, speaking into the radio “Report! What happened!” He couldn’t believe his eyes but he watched as the ice froze the navy ships in place. They were large battlecruisers, designed to flow through ice floe’s in the northern region. They had taken 20 years to develop and now they were stopped dead in their tracks. He didn’t hesitate.

He leapt onto the frozen bay. If he had fallen through, he knew he’d be fine for a simple reason—the flash freeze of water wasn’t nature and as such the water likely hadn’t had its heat sapped from it yet. Further, he knew he wouldn’t fall through because of the boats. It took a lot of ice to make modern navy ships immobile. At minimum 20 feet of ice on all sides. Thus, all he had to do was navigate towards the boat. The footing was bad, being ice, but he had been trained to fight in many environments and so was able to navigate the icy sea before him, even with triple speed. As he approached, he saw it. The figure that had caused it. A 9 foot tall slender figure, wrapped in velvet robes and black iron armor. Upon its head was a helm horned by two large ram-like horns, carrying the visage of an angry monster. It turned to him as he approached and leapt towards it, and pointed a single finger, saying aloud “Hogo”. Suddenly, a dense barrier of raw mana appeared and blocked him from reaching the man. He bounced off of it onto the ships deck. He stood up and questioned “You! Who are you!?”. He needed to know the identity of the person whom froze the entirety of the bay. “Is mise an t-eun” the being said. He looked at it quizically, and it sighed, saying “brônach. chan urrainn dhuinn bruidhinn ri chèile. fàgail e bhon bhàta e. Bidh mi a ’faighinn a-mach às an àite seo”.

He heard magic words being spoken and dodged left immediately. However, despite that, a lightning bolt still struck his magic-resistant barrier. He looked around and saw it. A small blue being with insectoid wings flying around. They wore minimal clothing and he only caught a glimpse as they suddenly vanished the next instant. He pulled out and spoke into the hand radio, saying “All men! The northerners magic will keep the navy ships in place! However, they have a commander on this ship! Forgo movement and focus fully on shooting this ship! Don’t let it sail!”. A second later, the cannons on each ship came out and pointed towards the one he was on. However, the figure stopped, turned slightly, waved its hand and said “Hyoga no Kabe” and suddenly, ice rose on all sides. The cannon fire was blocked completely, as the ice walls were at least 20 feet thick. He then said “Tha mi a ’faicinn gu bheil iad a’ cumail orm a ’tarraing orm sa fhàinne. Fionn. mo chlann uile. cuir às don ionnsaigh. Feumaidh mi sìth gu obair”. He couldn’t understand. He wished he could and he was angry he couldn’t. It was then he heard a whisper in his ear. “ruith. chan urrainn dhut sabaid a-nis, mo ghaol. ruith, agus a ’sireadh cumhachd ann an coisrigeadh an tàirneag” he heard. Without realizing what he was doing, he turned and leapt to the ice wall. He looked behind him, and was shocked. Lightning bolts, five of them, and they were following him. However, through careful footwork and attempting to dodge, he discovered an important fact. They were being controlled. As he watched them, he would catch glimpses of the beings responsible. However, soon enough, the lightning bolts dissipate along with the flying northerners vanish.

He landed back on the docks. He turned and awed as he saw the entire ship lift out of the frozen bay
and begin flying into the sky. The cannons attempted another volley, but magic blocked their attempts, and then began to sail northeast. “Sebastian, What the hell is going on! Why is that ship flying!? A voice came in over the radio. He put it to his mouth but found no words. Another series of whispers and he said “I don’t know… get the mages here and start thawing the bay out…”. It took hours. He directed what he could but it was a slow process. Mages were powerful but not miracle workers. Thawing an entire bay would take hours for even well-trained mages, and the army spread their mages out. As such, the bay took days to thaw out. It was then he heard about it. Flamesgrace was under siege. By a flying ship. He knew he had to go. He stayed one more night in the hotel, called the High Emperor to confirm his plans, and packed his things before heading out. However, he remembered the words spoken to him before. ‘Seek the power of the Thunderbrand’, it had said. Last he knew, the only known shrine was west of Stonegard. 3 days journey from Gold Shore.
Selim stepped out of the armored car. Armored may not be the right word though. It didn’t use special metals to improve its overall defensive capabilities, it didn’t have extra metal to add to durability. It instead had enchantments. Specifically, it had the enchantments ‘Defense Barrier’ and ‘Reinforcement’. The former projected an invisible barrier and the latter reinforced the metal framing the car, making it more durable and studier. It was very expensive to rent one, costing 100,000 leaves a week, and roughly 1 million leaves to own one, but it was well worth it. Normally, such enchantments wouldn’t be able to stop heavy rifle fire, but the ones put on the car were lined with gem dust. Specifically, it was common to use Jet dust to provoke mutations in the defenses, Agate to absorb some of the kinetic energy from attacks to soften the blow and retain some integrity. As a result, nothing short of a direct mortar round would be capable of stopping a car enchanted in such a way. Even cannonballs specifically designed for siege could not penetrated the heavy defenses employed.

Next to him, getting out of the passenger seat was his sister, Monica. His older sister. He was concerned for her safety, but she insisted on coming. He was heavily against it, but after his recent actions, he wasn’t about to say no. After all. He had basically committed treason. Endangered himself and his entire family, and the man he looked up to. He was here to make things right. Thankfully as he left, Gregory flagged him down and gave him something. A location. Apparently, there were ruins outside Stilsnow that were the site of Galdera sympathizers during the initial age of heroes. He said, in his words, ‘Show her this place. It’ll convince even the dumbest brute that Galdera is bad news’. Thus he planned to. All he had to do was find her. “Go on ahead brother and begin your search. I’ll secure a place to stay. I’ll send your manager” she said and got back into the car. The car drove off, and he walked into the tavern. It was a bit loud but as one might expect, busy. Luckily a stool was available and he went to it. “Raspberry schnapps” he said, sitting down. The bartender nodded and began preparing it, saying “You’re a familiar face but not for the right reasons. What brings Selim Deon to Stilsnow?”. He chuckled, heads had turned. “Well, honestly? Waiting for a girl” he answered “Fell in love and we agreed to meet here. She had urgent business to attend to”. The tavern gasped and everyone began asking questions. He gave vague answers like ‘Oh yeah, a beaut’ or ‘i guess it was love at first sight’.

After a few hours, he sighed and said aloud “Seems the girl I wanted to meet has stood me up. Guess i’ll take my leave. Please. Leave me to my sorrow” and hopped off the stool, walking to the door. He swayed very occasionally, due to be slightly inebriated by the four to six glasses of schnapps. As he left, the bartender turned and called out “There’s a call for you, Selim! They say it’s your sister!”.
stopped and walked towards the phone, which was near the entrance. He picked it up, immediately after which the bartender hung up, and said “Yes, this is Selim”. “It’s your sister. We’re staying in the Fortune’s Wind Hotel”. He nodded and said “Alright. Thanks… see you there” and hung up, then left. No one followed, much to his chagrin. At least, not the one he expected. Instead, he found himself trailed by something in a black cloak. However, based on the facial structure he caught glimpses of, it was a man. He eventually made it to his hotel and walked in. Before he spoke, the receptionist said “Floor 4, Door 2 on the left from your left”. He simply nodded and headed up the stairs. Eventually, he arrived at his door. He knocked and the door opened. “Ah. You’re back… and I see you’ve been drinking” his sister said, being the one that opened the door. “Only a bit… to blend into the tavern” he replied, stepping inside as Monica moved to let him in “My plan did work… Not sure if it’s whom I’m hoping for though”. “Indeed… one can only hope” Monica replied, moving and offering something in a vial “Here. I bought this on the way in. Knew you might drink so I got you something to sober up with”. He frowned. He knew exactly what it was.

“So Selim now had to experience it. He already had, but he never liked it. He opened the vial and drank the contents. He felt his vision blacken, his mind shutting down, instantly as though he had been punched clean into unconsciousness. Then, suddenly, his mind flared with activity, waking him up and making him very alert. He stumbled right into a chair Monica put behind him and panted heavily. After a few minutes a knock was heard. Monica walked over and answered, asking “Yes? Who are you?”’. The voice replied, feminine “I… saw Selim at the tavern. Is he here?”. He saw Monica nod and ask “Yes, what do you want with him?”. He turned. It was the person with the black cloak that had followed him. “I… we need to talk. Sort of privately”. They said, in a concerned tone. Monica moved aside as the person walked in, closing the door behind them. He was ready as he watched the cloak figure. Instantly, the cloak faded away and revealed whom he’d hoped had followed him. He smiled and said “Well. Didn’t know you knew illusion spells”. Delilah nodded and
said “Of course. We’re a mere 4 days journey on foot to the Church of the Sacred Flame, and a day’s drive. I had little choice. Thankfully, because of this town has always been sort of seedy and so illusions that lack real magic power are overlooked”. He stood and said “I’m truly glad to see you”. She looked away and said “I owe it to you. You helped me, putting you and your family at risk. It’s the least I could do”.

“Hey. Sorry I left in a hurry. I’m better now. I came here for another reason I didn’t mention in the bar” Selim said into the phone. He had called the bar again, asking to speak to the manager “I’m looking for my ex-manager… the one I publicly stated was involved with the northerner attack on my studio”. There was silence for a long time before a sigh. “Yes” the voice said “I recall that broadcast. I also recall the man at the bar when it happened. Looked nothing like the real ex-manager, but I knew it was him. He looked at me. I looked at him. We said nothing. I just went back to cleaning glasses. He went back to drinking. He left last. Haven’t seen him since”. “Any idea where he went?” he asked. “Yes. I know exactly where he was planning to lay low. The Obsidian Parlor. I know, ‘cause I ship a shipment of goods out weekly. He sends pay back with the driver, and a large tip to ensure it makes it” the bartender said. He sighed and said “Thank you. Have a nice day” and hung up. “The Obsidian Parlor? What is that?” Delilah asked. He was hesitant to say. He didn’t want to reveal anything, as it was the place he intended to take her. On the other hand, he couldn’t have her go in blind. That’s when Monica spoke up and said “Well, this kills two birds with one stone, eh Selim?”. He nodded and said “Yeah. Shall we go Delilah?”. Delilah nodded, turning to Monica and saying “I know you’re upset by my presence, and I’ve no right, but can you watch the lanthorn for me? If you need to, make up an excuse and turn it over. Say I cursed you or something”. Monica nodded and said “Absolutely. I won’t turn it over though”.

They set out after that, heading for the mountains. They first rented a truck, which he had no issue since Stilsnow had them in droves and he was an actor that had a lot of disposable income, and from there it was a simple matter of driving through the snow there. While it was a blemish on the Church of the Sacred Flames reputation, in the 20th Pontiff’s words ‘Tis better to be besmirched than to be guilty of sin. By admitting the truth, we can work to remove the sin that place put upon our holy institution’. Soon enough, they arrived. It stood before them, all 10 stories. A veritable palace. He got out as did Delilah. “This is the place” he said, looking at her “The Obsidian Parlor. Ancient home to the group known as the Obsidians”. He moved forward, Delilah following. He himself readied his knife. “Be careful. It’s been abandoned for thousands of years. Monsters have likely made it their home” he warned, as he opened the front gate. Instantly, it happened. A trio of white lizard man jumped from the snow towards him. Delilah reacted immediately, pulling out her bone wand, waving it in an intricate pattern while saying “Shadoupetto!”. A small cry and suddenly Delilah’s shadow became two large rat-like monsters that raced forward to intercept the lizardman. Selim leapt backwards to try and avoid them, and while he did, he only did so barely.

The shadow pets lunged immediately, biting into the necks of the lizardman, and forced them to the ground. However, the third stabbed one, dissipating it, then swung its pike, slashing the other and dissipating it too. However, he reacted fast, swinging his dagger, and saying “Kageyaku hoshi!”.
Light gathered in front of him, and as he jumped away, the third lizardman rushed for him. However, the mass of light exploded, sending the lizardman flying back. Delilah waved her wand, saying “Kurai seiun” and created a mass of darkness in the same spot, exploding it when the other two lizard man approached. A few more rounds of this, and the lizardman rather than fight fled. Delilah waved her wand and said “Subete chiyu”, darkness washing over both of them, closing their wounds. “You can heal?” Selim asked. “Yes” Delilah answered “I was the vestal of the cult I was a part of”. He didn’t frown but internally he was. He began to hope what he was going to do wouldn’t strip her of her power, but he doubted it. Magic didn’t work on a faith basis. At worst, Galdera would try to meddle with her magic, and while he might succeed in slight alterations, none of the gods had the power to outright make magic backfire. Only Dreisang, the god of magic, titled ‘the Arcmagus’ could, having created the systems and energy for magic.

Inside was a shock. It was dark lightless, yet they could make out everything. Even after entering, the doors closed of their own accord. “Hikari” Selim muttered and his dagger began to glow like a torch, though shown with white light rather than red and yellow light. They then walked through the parlor. It was just as spooky as the parlor, with doors opening and closing on their own, candles light and extinguishing with seemingly no rhyme or reason. He was quite spooked, but he needed to find where his manager had either gone or find him if he was here. They found signs throughout and it was clear he was still with the northerner, as they found some things written in northerner language. Eventually, they reached the top floor. Another staircase, a small landing, then the top room. The penthouse. They walked inside and found something truly wonderful. A mage’s laboratory. While most mage’s kept their in the city, being able to enchant the building to ward off intruders, the ones that became reclusive were always cutting edge. Inner city mage labs did have regulations to follow, so they couldn’t always grab the newest magical item. In this case however, it was more. They had scientific equipment, magical equipment, and even astrological equipment. The entire room, once home to the Parlor’s owner, a man named Rufus who used it as a brothel, had been converted into a multi-leveled lab. From the entrance, they could see the balcony the person had made on the third floor of the lab, to look down at guests. Standing there was a sight Selim remembered very well, from what happened a year ago.

“How. You live” the northerner said is a gravelly voice, like ice cubes scraping against a chalkboard “I’m quite surprised. You took a gunshot to the neck”. “Yeah! I did and I survived, so I can stop that man from doing whatever it is he plans! What is he planning!?” Selim demanded. “Hmmm” the northerner muttered, mulling over the demand. Selim was about to yell again, when Delilah spoke up and asked “What is all this? I’ve heard of mage’s laboratories, but this is… it’s so different. One of the covenants expressly forbid the mixing of technology and magic”. The northerner laughed and answered “You think I’d listen to the laws of those my liege is at war with? Nay, I think not”. Selim frowned and said “So you are an enemy spy!”. The northerner mage nodded, saying “In a sense”. He readied his dagger, when the mage said something that made him stop. “Are you sure fighting is the solution? Wouldn’t you rather talk?” the northerner said. He stopped and stared, clicking his tongue in annoyance and considered it. “Selim” Delilah said “It might be better. He could have information on your ex-manager”. He had turned to listen and looked down. He finally looked up and nodded. “Come in then. I’ll brew tea” the northerner mage said.
He gasped. The tea was amazing. The temperature was just right, the taste was absolutely incredible, and the presentation was amazing. They were each given a slice of crumbled coffee cake in a bowl, and had lemon slices offered on a plate on a table between them. Delilah enjoyed her tea, cake crumbles, and slices, and he, while he enjoyed the tea, barely touched the crumbles or slices. “I can see you wish to get to the heart of the matter” the northerner mage said “So first, introductions, then we get to business. I am the mage Madadh-Allaidh Gaeth a Tuath, or in your tongue, Fenris North”. Selim nodded and said “I am Selim Deon. I’m an actor”. Delilah bowed slightly and said “I am Delilah…. I am… a mage”. Fenris raised an eyebrow and asked “Oh? What’s your title”? “Errrr….. Daughter… of… Darkness” she answered, hesitantly. Selim turned slowly as did Fenris, before Fenris turned to Selim and said “You’re Galdera worshipper?”. Selim finished his tea then, and was ready for what happened next, pulling his dagger out, grabbing Delilah’s shoulder, and saying “Pansadansu”. Delilah wasn’t expecting it but instinct made her jump away, the spell increasing her jump distance and speed, as the spell slammed into him. Fenris had stretched his hand out slowly, saying “Kitakaze” and sending a horrendously cold wind forward, strong enough to send him flying into the wall. His back frozen to the wall, and an elbow. He was low enough he could still stand fine, but he couldn’t move without risking ripped skin. Fenris used both hands, waving them in intricate patterns, speaking some new spell. Suddenly, Delilah waved her wand, saying “Kihon boei!”. Instantly, a barrier surrounded him as Fenris finished his incantation. At first, the barrier became encased in thick ice that formed a semicircle of hexagons that fused into the wall. However, it began to melt.

Fenris turned to Delilah, wiggling both fingers rhythmically saying “Aisuookami”. At the same time, Delilah said as she waved her wand “Kihon boei!” and created the magical force field she gave to Selim around herself. From Fenris’ hands, two wolves made of icy mist shot forth, rushing through the air and slamming themselves into her barrier, cracking it. He frowned, and moved to recast it. By now, the barrier melted the ice holding him to the wall, allowing him to fall to the ground. He landed on his feet, and seeing that both were preparing new spells, he waved his dagger in an enticing way, and started to dance as he whispered “Kujaku no Shichu”. A purple aura shone around Delilah as she waved his wand, saying “Kurai seiun!” and having the dark mass explode right away, sending Fenris skidding back, but interrupting his spell casting. He danced a bit more, and this time said “Towaku Suru!”. Instantly a mist filled the room, but only for a moment, as when it cleared, a large figure stood. It was covered head to toe in rocky armor, and purple flames flickered inside, seen through various ventilation holes. The light glowed purple as it stood and roared with rage and fury. “By the horned king, you fool! Why would you summon a Beinne here!?” Fenris screamed. “A what!” Delilah shouted, asking. He turned, growling, and said “A golem! It'll destroy this place!”. However, Selim had a plan.

He used the mist as cover. He used his bright star spell to break open a part of the icy shell that held him, it being sufficiently melted by the barrier, and then moved beyond it. He moved so he was behind Fenris. The golem meanwhile roared and reared a fist back to punch Fenris. Fenris cast a defensive spell, one strong enough to block the attack outright. After that, the mist and creature vanished, and he worked fast. Delilah saw what he was doing and moved in unison. “Teru-ten!” he said while Delilah said “Shadoubimu!” and they each fired beams at Fenris. His was light elemental, and hers was dark. Fenris had no time to weave a new spell as the old one dissipated and he cried out as they each slammed into him. Smiling he said “Well, well. Feel like listening?” and began to walk
forward. Delilah had smiled too but then looked concerned and said “Wait, stop Selim!”. Suddenly, a light glowed from beneath him. He looked down and saw it. The symbol of Galdera. His world was then wracked with pain and he cried out. It lasted for a full minute, before he felt his world grow cold and dark. He felt himself flowing through a sea of souls. He was sad. He was fairly certain he was dead.
Chapter 25-The Apothecary, Act 3

Chapter Notes

It's been a while and I apologize. Took a break to finish up chapter 3 of my other fanfiction and then focus on schoolwork and Shadowrun, a game I got into recently. However, I'm back and while I expect to not make much headway into Chapter 26 this week, it's my last week of really hard work. I expect to be back on track next week.

With that out of the way, let's begin Chapter 25!

Chapter 25

Life of the Fullest

She drove. She had wasted time and now was risking the life of her pupil. Thankfully, through rushing, and nearly running into other cars head on, she arrived in a mere 3 and a half days. She searched around Stilsnow and quickly found a hotel to stay at. The SS Varsity. A hotel chain founded by a retired admiral of the high emperor’s navy. She went to her room after paying for it and being given the key, and went to bed without even unpacking. The next morning, she began brewing coffee, unpacked her things, and informed the hotel she’d be staying longer and likely need to leave in a hurry. She gave them her account info so they could charge her bank account than bother her and prepared for the day. A button up shirt, a purse, packed with some essentials, a first aid kit, and then some defensive chemicals like saline in vials. She put on a heavy coat, a wool headcap, and heavy gloves. She then left to begin hunting for her friend.

She knew couldn’t be obvious. Too obvious would reveal that she’s here to break him out, not give them leaves. Too little though would get her nowhere. What she needed was a someone to investigate the underbelly of the town. Thus, she knew exactly what to ask. She headed for the police station. Inside, a single officer attended the front desk. He looked up as she walked in. “Ah. Welcome to the Stilsnow Police Department. Your business?” the officer asked. “Yes. I seek some information… information only the underground could provide” she answered. The officer hesitated, but then asked “What would Ristra Abraham need with criminals?”. She simply looked around and whispered to the officer “I can’t go into detail but I have an issue and it needs to be handled delicately”. The officer stared at her for few minutes before sighing and saying “Lemon Square, a few hundred feet north of here. Lots of criminal elements gather there”. She nodded and said “Thank you” before turning and leaving. Lemon Square being her destination. She could tell when she got close too. Instead of the normal long coats, musket hats, and heavy gloves, there were full cloaks, hoods, and face masks than normal attire. Her attire itself was rather standard for the northern region. While cloak and hoods to an unobservant eye wouldn’t arouse suspicion nor clue someone in that they have entered the bad part of town, someone like her, someone who was trained to pick up on
small hints and body language, absolutely realized where she was. Especially since straight ahead was the location.

A small lake sat in the center and 4 wooden bridges led to a small island with a beautiful white rose garden with paths, benches, and fencing to compliment it. Despite the nice upkeep, she could see the signs. People passing off items, people pickpocketing. She saw a few eye her before choosing others. She knew however that these men weren’t what she truly searched for. Instead, she walked into the rose garden and sat at the nearest bench, and waited. Admiring the roses, she could feel the magic around them. Likely, they were shielded by life magic to retain their vitality and survive the cold winter. After some time passed, she thought she spied something white in the distance. It continued to happen, until after a half hour of torment she turned to her left and saw him. A man in all white, wearing a tailcoat, a specialized bird mask, a top hat, silk gloves, springheel jacks, and dress pants of a clearly high class brand. He had a VTP on him with a hook cane attachment equipped and his mask was also high-tech, as she could tell its voice changer was active as it whispered “Ristra Abraham, born in Sunshade, Mars in the year 3961 DE, and has a doctorate in chemistry and medicine, and has a bachelors in biology, specifically got high marks in classes that covered human anatomy and did fair enough in classes regarding general biology”. It turned as she sat, shocked it knew so much about her and asked “Why, oh why, would Ristra Abraham visit the infamously downtrodden and shady town of Stilsnow after her medicinal practice was torn to shreds?”.

She recovered with that question, and whispered after a woman passed by, saying “My pupil was implicated as a Galdera Worshipper, because another one experimented on flesh from Galdera. However I received information that he has been kidnapped and being ransomed… from the kidnappers themselves”. The man nodded and said “I understand the situation now… you came here, to seek aid from a thief. I’d be happy to help”. She responded with “All I need is to know where they would take a kidnap victim for a month”. The thief responded with “Only place like that is either the Obsidian Parlor, or the abandoned Hunter’s Guild Cabin deep in Whitewood… though i’d place my bets on the Cabin”. “Why?” she asked “The Obsidian Parlor is a famously defensible location… perfect for a band”. “True” the thief responded “Though if rumors are to be believed, it’s property of one Jermaine Wallace and a mage has made it their tower with his permission… if public documents are to be believed. What’s rumor is that it’s a northerner”. She frowned and said “Well. That does narrow it down. Thank you” and placed a small sack of leaves and began to leave. “Wait!” the thief said, asking “You aren’t going to ask for further help? You’re going alone?”. “Yes” she said “I have no time to waste and I haven’t balanced my accounts in a while, so i’m not sure I could pay you. I only have 50,000 leaves on me”. The thief stared at her silently for a moment, before saying “That’s fine. I rarely work for pay anyway. Master Thief Lupone, at your service” and with that, bowed, tipping his hat.

She stood in shock. Before her stood the infamous thief that had humiliated several high-class nobles and was sought after by the empire. “You… you’re lupone?” she asked. The thief nodded and said “Indeed. I can see you need help. I will not accept pay… instead, I’ll seek an item in the location and I want no protest on the item I pick. Agreeable?”. She nodded and said “Of course, Sir Lupone!”.
Smiling, she walked over as he said “Then, we need to prepare. The wood has become home to many a drake over the years. The Hunter’s Guild kept such knowledge limited but its a fact”. Ristra nodded and followed Lupone. Drake’s were dangerous creatures even if they weren’t dragons. Dragons were creatures of intense emotions, predatory power, and divine intellect. They were said to be forces of nature given a soul. Drake’s on the other hand lacked the intense emotions and intellect their draconic brothers claimed. Further, their power was a mere shadow to the splendorous power a dragon held. Even so, Drake’s were considered extremely dangerous to the common man. It was new knowledge to Ristra that a breeding ground laid so close to civilization, mere miles from it. However, it meant that the Hunter’s Guild did a good job suppressing them and keeping them confined to the whitewood, or at least away from Stilsnow.

They bought some basic supplies. She bought a series of throwing axes and a box of drake repellent while Lupone bought a canister launcher attachment and drake repellent himself. He also bought them some proper protection: kevlar vests and mithril chainmail. Where he found the money for mythil chain, she wasn’t sure but she wasn’t going to ask. Instead, she urged them to move onto purchasing supplies. 50 doses of healing grape juice, 50 doses of inspiriting plum juice, and plenty of food, fresh water, and gem dust for improved spells. Specifically, Jet and Agate dusts. Though she noted that Lupone bought some Onyx and Pearls. After this, they set out to the whitewood properly. However, Lupone had them go in unusual transport. An ox-drawn carriage. The ride was… difficult, but she persevered. He was helping her out of pocket and bought them supplies, and all she had to do was let him take an item from the cabin and not object. It was quite frankly an unbelievable deal. So, they marched through the whitewood.

They used their repellent immediately. Rather than risk a drake attacking and hurting them before they could implement guild tactics of coating attack methods in drake repellent, they opted to keep the creatures away regardless. Drake Repellent was made of the blood of a creature that evolved specifically to deal with drakes; the Gormandown Toad. It was a large, bulky, and slow creature but they were strong enough to normally be top predators with tongues strong than 10 men and with the flexibility of gum all the way to the tip. However, as of 1050 DE, the Gormandown Toad developed two new abilities that allowed them to survive; a venom-coated tongue that paralyzed its victims and was a contact-based venom, and its body secreted a poison that was specifically designed to turn mana poisonous that also absorbed through the skin. Gormandown Toads however had no mana and they were already immune to venoms and poisons. Thus, the toads had evolved to counteract the drake infestation. Thankfully, the path they took avoided the watery areas of the whitewood, which were where most of the Gourmandown Toads resided. Being ambush predators, the toads generally stayed motionless beyond entering the water to sleep and leaving it.

Ristra and Lupone arrived at the lodge early at night. They set camp a quarter mile away, using some magic to keep themselves warm through the night. In the morning, they put everything up, then hiked through the woods to the hotel. “Hold on” Lupone said “There’s a guard out front… and six people inside. One is in a chair”. She gasped and said “That’s him! That’s Andrew!”.
nodded, examining the rest. “There’s a basement” he said “I’ll check it out. Position yourself by the front door. When you hear a woodpecker, break in. Oh, and here. For self-defense” and handed her a handaxe. She nodded and Lupone walked off. She walked towards the lodge slowly, getting ready to cast First Aid. It was a single-target heal spell, perfect for her purposes since they’d likely attack him full force, which would give her and Lupone time to deal with the others. She waited and waited for what felt like hours, before finally she heard it. The rapid knocking of wood. She moved and with her offhand weaved an ice spell, saying “Kurodo!” and blowing the door open. Instantly, Lupone appeared on the other side. He used his VTP to snag the shirt of one of the kidnappers and shoved him into the wall. “Yama kaji!” Lupone spoke out, sending a gout of flame from his hand into the man in the wall. Meanwhile, she pulled out her handaxe, using it to block a strike from another axe, doing hand signals, saying “Kurodo!” and sending the man through the ceiling with an ice spell, this one sending a burst of cold wind. One of the men, realizing who she was, moved to attack Andrew. Andrew screamed as the axe raised and shifted so he fell over. The axe fell into some ropes, cutting him partially free.

“Kurodo!” she shouted, creating an explosion of ice-cold wind on the side of the fallen chair that wound simply push andrew and not directly affect him. As expected, Andrew was pushed forward a few feet while several of the bandits were launched to the walls, only one near andrew was unaffected. That one attempted to strike at andrew, but Ristra used her First Aid spell to heal the damage he inflict, then retaliated with her Cold spell. He screamed as Ristra used another ice spell to launch him over andrew and through the wall. Lupone meanwhile had finished the one and then another, and moved on to the last three, saying “Surrender, and we may spare you yet!”. The three stared at him, then her, then andrew, grunted, and dropped their axes. “Fine” one said “We surrender. Robert never said nothing about sacrificing our lives”. “Robert?” Lupone questioned “What’s your connection?”. The bandits spilled how Robert had been hired to kidnap a few individuals and hold some for ransom, some for other reasons. Andrew was a cash grab, while the janitor was a retrieval mission.

“Who authorized it?” she asked now, freeing Andrew “Who asked you to do this?”. “Pontiff Vidkar Lane. We swears it” one of the kidnappers responded. She really took them in now. They had a unique look. Hard black leathers, spiked wristbands, all wielding axes and pistols similar to hers. She sighed and looked at Lupone, asking “Well? What now?”. “Now” she said “I have to turn over everything to the police. They broke the 4th… but they didn’t directly. If they can convince the police, judge, and high emperor that they were just following orders, then they might be spared”. Lupone nodded, saying “Then I wish you luck. I have my own things to attend to” and left the room. She treated Andrew, using her first aid kit. Normally, it couldn’t give the care Andrew needed, but since most of it was infection caused by untreated injuries, and she had prepared for it long in advance, she was able to at least ensure he’d survive the trip back. Standing, she turned to the bandits and said “Take my advice. If you don’t, you’ll be labeled worshippers. We both know how that will end” and helped Andrew to his feet. Lupone returned, holding a small book. “Got your trophy?” She asked. Lupone nodded and they left.
Once in town, she split from Lupone. He said “If you need me, alert the slums. I’m staying there and while i’m busy, I can be reached for the next month. For now though, goodbye”. She nodded and said “Of course. Thank you again”. With a returned nod, Lupone departed. Meanwhile, she went to the police station, basically abandoning the cart and ox, only taking 20 leaves for both from someone random on the street. As she entered the clerk looked up. His eyes went wide and she raised a hand and said “Wait! Please!”. The officer stopped, looked at her, and asked “Why should I?”. “Because” she said “It’s not what it seems. I promise”. She then turned over the envelope, letter and picture included, and Andrew gave a statement. It was then the bandits from before entered, weaponless, and said as well “We’re turning ourselves in. We had a run in with a well-armed doctor saving her pupil and made us see we were… doing things ‘against his majesty”’. They were taken away immediately, and Andrew too. After an hour of tense waiting a policeman left with a grim face.

“Count your lucky stars” He said “Since the story checks out. His label has been removed. One of the bandits arrested had handwriting that matched the letter. Further, a mage confirmed with a truth spell Andrew’s account. He’s been transferred to a hospital for now, to be treated. Thank you, miss Ristra”. She nodded and said “I couldn’t abandon my pupil, knowing he was innocent… I’m sorry to-” and was cut off, the officer saying “No. I normally don’t speak out of turn, but I agree with your actions. Any of us get it? Disregard, capture everyone, burn ‘em for galdera worship. You did right”. Nodding and standing, she said “Then I’ve everything. I’ll send fund when Andrew is ready to return… if he chooses to”. She began to leave when the officer cleared his throat. Turning, the officer said “There is the matter of the bounty. Each of Bandit King Robert Bueler’s bandits gives a leaf reward of 400 per head. You got 3. I need you to fill out paperwork to accept the reward”. She hesitated, but did so, getting 1200 leaves in the process. She left and that’s when she ran into a rather distraught looking girl. “Apologies” she said “I wasn’t paying attention” and stopped. The girl was dressed in all black. The girl, looking at her, had the same look as the woman she drove to Wellspring had. “Help me” she asked, voice filled with desperation “I need a doctor. My friend… he’s… almost dead”. She frowned. She needed more details, but she couldn’t ignore someone in need. She couldn’t if she wanted to be anything like her childhood hero, Alfyn Greengrass.
Chapter 26-The Thief, Act 3

Chapter 26

Another Man’s Treasure

It happened quickly. The cop’s gun rang out, and several minutes later, more shooting, screaming, and metal clattering. The door to his cell jumped open. He knew what it meant. The prison, while adequately powered, did not manage it well. He smiled. He left the cell cautiously, and noticed other prisoners leaving. They headed in one direction. He slipped into the crowd and followed. They managed to get through the metal bars that blocked the rest of the prison and this cell block, as it was opened with the other cells. The officers sat against the walls, detained. A single black man held a pistol, clearly officer-grade, and was telling the other how instead of killing them, they’d show them what being a caged animal was like. That they were taking over the prison. He then heard it. The loudspeaker system. Another sign of a high-power facility, something he needed. “To all prisoners of Cell Block C” the voice said “This is the warden of Victory Prison. Return to your cells, and Class C beatings are the worst punishment you will get”. “You can’t touch us” the man with the police-grade gun said “We’re armed and we have your men as hostages! Now release us!”. There was a long silence. All the prisoners stopped, staring at the man. It seemed he became their voice. Though they all looked astonished when the warden replied “All officers note, Officers Mendez, Latrino, Grol Zack, David, and Pulski are hereby traitors and are to be killed on sight, so say I, Warden King Goldman”.

He felt his blood boil hearing that. “What the hell!?” the voice shouted “You can’t do that! They’re your men! Our hostages!” “No. They are traitors to my small prison kingdom, for failing to be strong enough to control vermin like you. You all shall die for your transgression against me” the warden spoke, then the loudspeaker went silent. “No… no man! This… this wasn’t the plan!” one prisoner shouted, a slightly tan man with a thin, but long mustache “We… we weren’t even going to hurt them!” “This is how it is” one officer said “You weren’t here last summer. He executed 900 people for merely speaking up about the warden keeping them over the allotted time, then forced officers to falsify records. Any that defied him… were killed and covered up. It’s been like this forever, apparently. He rules with an iron fist because he’s the son of the local lord, whom is friends with the Pontiff”. He headed for the exit. “Where the hell you go’in!?” a shirtless tattooed prisoner demanded “You go out there, we all die!”. “We die either way. You heard him” he said, turning. “Wait… I know you! The Danford heir! Why the hell are you here!??” another said. “I’m here because I got caught being Sir Lupone” he answered immediately “I can get us out of this. I’ll even share a tale. You in?”.

He was honest about his capture. These men were much more experienced and hardened to the criminal lifestyle and would see through his lies. He instead refused to answer who gave him information. Instead, he revealed who betrayed him, a friend that threatened the family of his contact
and used the information acquired to launch a surprise attack; a drug-filled syringe. Likely, while the trial hadn’t happened, the equipment found in his hotel room would be proof enough and he’d be found guilty. Why he was in prison, instead of a holding cell in the courthouse. The prisoners decided that since he hadn’t gotten caught by a cop, he could be trusted. Further, they decided to arm the police with them. They were going to die like them, they might as well die fighting. He himself got his hands back onto his VTP. He lacked his techniological mask, but he would do without.

Holding it, his first job was to cut power. “What’s your name?” he asked, pointing to the man who had stopped the prisoners from killing the guards. “Samson” the man answered. “Samson, be so kind and shoot the wires here” he requested, putting his VTP right where he needed the bullets. Samson didn’t hesitate, aiming and firing. As soon as the bullets connected to the wires, a massive spark of electricity, and minor shocks to himself and the lights went out. Really, the power went down as the loudspeakers sparked and went out.

“Wow!” the prisoners exclaimed. “How’d you do that!?” another asked. “Simple. Used facts to determine the wiring is faulty and would short circuit if metal it doesn’t use is introduced. Fun fact, lead is never used in wiring” he responded with a confident smile. “Well, well!” Samson said “I guess you truly are Lupone”. He nodded and said “That said, you know my position. I’m willing to help you up until we reach the warden. After that, we walk away and stay out of the others way”.

Samson nodded and said “Guys! Sound good to you!?”. The prisoners and guards cheered. “Then we have a deal. Sadly, I have no plan. I need blueprints of the facility and knowledge of the security” he responded. Samson smiled and said “Don’t worry lil’ guy. We’ll get it!”. He watched as Samson had an officer and a few prisoners arm themselves with batons, with the officer and him having guns, and left. He got to work himself. He patched the wiring. Not all of it though. Especially not the power. As he thought, they had back-up generators based on the chatter on the radio lines announced. However, the power outside the prison was effectively cut off. By order of the Warden no less. He didn’t want police to investigate the state of the prison. The power outage would instigate one even with his connections and he didn’t want to risk it without assurance from his father that no trial would be had. Further, he didn’t want to risk losing Lupone to another prison. He accomplished this hack by pulling apart an officer’s radio and apply the wires to certain parts. He knew this because his father tutored him personally on it. The Danfords had provided for law enforcement since their inception in 2010 DE.

“Don’t forget” the warden said “Fail me and my father will execute you and ensure no one asks why, maggots”. He growled. The prisoners did too. “How the fuck dare he!” one shouted. He could tell as he looked some didn’t care. However, he could tell most here did. It was then Samson returned, not with what he needed but what he could use to get it. “Sir Lupone, Tharius. This guy knows this place inside and out” Samson told him, gesturing to the old, wrinkled man in rags. He now had 2 other officers and 5 new prisoners. He nodded and said “Then, Tharius, mind helping me make a map of this prison layout and security?”. Tharius nodded and smiled, revealing he lacked teeth… or a tongue. However he didn’t flinch. His upbringing steeled him from reacting to such things. It took them an hour, and Samson and the officers fending off a wave of guards, but he had it. With his he began to think as they retreated into the cell block. He then got an idea. He shared his plan with the others. They agreed and began it. They pushed back.
As he suspected, there was a full-scale riot. The officers weren’t overpowering them, merely holding their ground around the Warden’s Office, next to their cell block. They assaulted them because they hadn’t put up much of a fight beyond when Samson’s crew left to retrieve Tharius from Cell Block A, two cell blocks down and away from the police. They returned during a time the prisoners returned fire. They were also now in on it. Even so, they were outnumbered. 5 to 1. The only thing that tipped things in their favor was the fact that the prisoners had access to the armory. Even so, things wouldn’t last. The warden would get desperate and call in backup when the risk outweigh the reward for keeping the local officers unaware. Thus, they need do only one thing; Cut the main communication lines outside, storm the warden’s office and shut down communication from there, and then open the main gates from there. Being so egotistical, He explained that the Warden would trust no one but himself with most of the prison’s main functions, and thus the control center was likely also his own office. Thus the plan was that the riot would continue with no real push, and in some cases some give, while he, Samson, Officer Mendez, Tharius, and a few other prisoners would head for the radio lines that left the prison and cut them. He retrieved a single VTP attachment. His iconic hook and attached it. “Now gentleman” he said, turning to the prisoners and guards of Cell Block C, and additional recruits “Let’s have ourselves a fine prison break”.

Things went as planned. The prisoners continued to take hits and retreat, then pushed and gained territory and then retreated. Half an hour into this first act of this routine, they snuck out. He directed them towards Block B. Right next door. However, once inside, they ascended the tower stairs. The prisoners still held it, and were taking cover at that moment, with some at the top taking pot shots with AK’s. He headed for the opposite side to the side facing outside the prison. He spotted the precise wire they needed to cut. He held a hand out and said “Would one of you be so kind as to offer me a gun? Line up as we planned and fire when you feel confident after Tharius confirms the wires”. Samson, two officers, and a prisoner nodded and took position, another giving him their gun. He aimed his offered Mauser c96 and when Tharius said “Yes, those are the wires” he fired with the others. It took 10 minutes but every wire was severed. Only five minutes later, a prisoner came up, saying “Sir Lupone, we’ve confirmed! The Warden is calling for help and getting angry at failing! We cut his communication!” , He nodded and said “Now for the final point. Capture the warden’s office. Make it a priority!” . He rushed with the others, two prisoner’s staying at the top to provide cover. None of them had radio’s but they didn’t need them. They had effectively leveled the playing field. The other officers still loyal were counting on reinforcements if it got too hairy. The warden would likely take a secret escape and run now that he realized they were capable of truly escaping or even capturing his office. He of course wouldn’t tell the officers, knowing they’d abandon him immediately. He had his own plan.

It took only 5 hours. He walked in with the group that made the push. Him, Samson, the block leaders, and Tharius. A few officers helped, but they were injured and being treated. For aiding a prison break, they were in the same boat as the prisoners and Samson made it clear. As he entered, he looked around and saw the controls. Left of the desk were a series of levers and buttons, all perfectly labeled. “Yes! You were right Lupone!” Samson said “We have this place!” . “Indeed. Enjoy your freedom” he said “We part ways”. “Wait, what? You joshin?” Block D’s leader said. He was fully tattooed, white, and slightly portly. However, it was mostly muscle, with some of it being
“No” Lupone responded “The warden has fled. I plan to pursue him. You all can flee, or follow. Either way, I have corruption to root out, starting with him, then his father”. The other leaders deliberated but left it, deciding escape was better. Samson waited for the others to leave after Lupone threw the lever and broke the lever to open the main gates. “You sure about this? Your crusade?” he asked. Lupone nodded and said “Yeah. I started this to fix the corrupt nobility. This is just a setback. Thank you. I couldn’t have escape without you”. Samson smiled and asked “Then, I suppose you wouldn’t mind another?”.

He cursed his luck. He had ruled his prison for a solid 20 years, had a solid reputation as the most secure prison in most of the country, and even had the ear of the emperor through a chain of connections. Now, thanks to that damned felon Sir Lupone, aka Thiesel Danford, everything had gone to hell. He had to flee to get reinforcement to recapture the prison and subjugate the rioting maggots. However, he would be fine. He could call his father first through the stations phone and begin talks to have the Pontiff cover things up. Then, the Pontiff would make his move and when the High Emperor’s court looked into things, the Pontiff would ‘guide’ the investigation to conclude that while he had slipped up and allowed the riot, that he ultimately was blameless. That it was all that damned Lupone’s fault. Yes. He’d get accolades for surviving such a bloody riot. No doubt many of them were dead. Suddenly, a shot rang out. He cried, clutching the wound, a hole in his shoulder. He turned and growled with rage. It was sir fucking lupone! The maggot found and followed him through his secret passage! How had he!?

“Ah, mister warden” he said “A pleasure to meet”. “Fuck you! How dare you maggot! You hurt me!” the warden cried out, rolling around in pain. Lupone held the smoking gun and prepared the next shot. “Indeed. I’ll do it again” he said, and fired another shot, this time aiming for a knee. The warden cried out and stopped moving, just screaming. He put the gun away and moved over, muttering a small incantation, predicting the wardens next move. “Hitometaru” he whispered, his hand flashing faintly red for a moment. Instantly, the warden screamed again, metal clanking on the ground, the warden’s hand steaming even in the darkness. He kicked the gun away, Samson used a shirt donated by a prisoner to retrieve the hot, smoking gun. He walked by, the warden screaming “You maggot! Where are you going!? Don’t you need evidence!?”. “No. On the contrary, you’ve provided it. A stack of documents, a band of unloyal, mostly dead guards, and you, merely wounded here. Samson. You know where to meet” he said. Samson nodded and patched the warden up after knocking him out with a solid, hard punch.

Thus his plan succeeded. Through sheer luck. If the prisoners had lost the armory at any point during the riot, the police would’ve quelled the riot using the rifles and automatics within. If the prisoners pushed too hard, the warden would’ve ran sooner and faster. Really, it all hinged on the prisoners trusting his reputation. Thankfully, it helped he had a few fanboys in the prison. Turns out, 30% of the prisoners were political prisoners, their charges mostly trumped up. Thanks to this, everything went fine enough. There was far, far more blood than his liking but he couldn’t have anything perfect. Soon enough, Samson caught up, putting away the last of his medkit. “So you truly wish to follow me” he said. “Yes… less because I want to and more because I have to” Samson replied.
“Why?” he asked, then stopped as he felt a shadow go over him. He turned, alarmed but stopped. Before him was something spectacular, otherworldly. The tall black man had stark white hair and eyes, wearing red robes and tan, baggy pants and springheel jacks. He wore a small turban with a single feather on his head. He stood at 9 feet tall and had pearly white teeth. “What… what are you?” he could only ask. “I am Solas Sith! A Genai of the kingdom of the feyfolken Tir Na Nog!” Samson proclaimed “Apologies for the deception! I was captured at the border and had to hide my true self. You see, I meant to be an emissary of her royal grace, the Titania Flur Fuilteach. She wanted to create diplomatic relations with your empire and I was to be the envoy of peace”.

“But your people are at war with ours” Lupone responded, very on guard and also dazed. “Perhaps, but that is not all our peoples fault. You see, our government is split between the heads of two churches, chosen by the flowers of the gods. The one behind this war is actually the Oberon, head of the church of the Horned King, Cogadh Ceothach!” Solas responded. He just stared as Solas said “I can explain more as we walk. We have much to discuss!” and with that continued. Lupone only followed, preferring to stay ahead of police. As Solas explained it, it seemed like there was a prophecy behind the northern nations actions, as the nation took premonitions and legends seriously. It predicted the rise of Galdera and 8 heroes assisted by 8 muses, fey heroes, would defeat the raised galdera and send him back to the afterworld. The rulers of this generation each had different ideas on how to bring about or fulfill this prophecy, or in the Oberon’s case, against tradition, circumvent and prevent it. Cugadh wanted to find and kill the daughter of darkness before she could orchestrate the rise of galdera. The Titania wanted to work with the empire however and find the heroes and unite them with their muses. Of course, Flur’s efforts were harassed by Cugadh’s own war effort.

“Luckily” Solas said “Muses know whom they are at birth. Extraordinarily gifted with resonance with an element and a piece of reality! I myself am connected to ‘luck’ or ‘fate’ as some say. Further, each of us acquired a spell to find the hero we’re fated to meet!”. “I see” he said. He wasn’t trusting this northerner quite yet, but had a feeling he could “Then, what now, if what you say is true?”. Solas paused and said “I could find out. However, I think it best you decide. Fate is better served with free choice. Telling you your destiny, while it would help prevent disaster now, could invite it later… potentially by making you reliant on fortune-telling”. He nodded and said “Then prove what you say is true. Cast the spell that lets you know in front of me”. Solas frowned for a second, but sighed and nodded, saying “I can’t say i’m surprised. Cugadh did a number on the empire’s trust in us. Very well! Watch and be amazed!”. With that, Solas began to write. He created runes, lines, formulas and incantations with pure light energy being etched into the air by magic. Solas and spoke the language of magic, saying “Idaina hahaoya no hikari no moto ni, watashitachi o shibatte iru unmei no chōseki ni yotte, un no megami o watashi ni michibikimasu”. As the cocoon of magic enveloped them, in front of Solas, a perfect, spitting image of Thiesel stood, clad in noble clothing and his charming noble smile. Then, the next instant his alter ego, Sir Lupone, torchbearer of truth and destroyer of secrets.

“Satisfied, Sir Lupone? Thiesel Danford, Thief of Virtue?” Solas asked. He only nodded. “Good” Solas said, transforming back into the human he knew as Samson “Then let us proceed. You have things to do and I will prepare for a journey, any journey”. Lupone only nodded, turning and leaving
with his new compatriot... no. His new partner in crime. Before they split, Samson cast a spell that gave him his old Lupone attire. “However” Samson said “This is only an illusion. For both you and others.... So make sure to get proper replacements, okay? Also… ditch your identity. Stick with the alter ego for now. That’s advice from your muse of luck” before dropping a leather sack into his hand and leaving. Nodding, he went another way. He decided to contact the underground of the city. He asked a few cloak-holding people passing by, before eventually coming upon a freshly changed Mendez. Approaching, he said “Well. I didn’t expect you to make it so far”. Mendez looked and nodded, saying “Indeed. Every man for himself. Some went to their old haunts, others are heading south. Me personally? I’m heading for atlasdam. Gonna become a damn good scholar so I can protect myself if they come for me”. He nodded and asked “Then mind giving a bit of friendly advice? Where might a miscreant go for supplies?”. Mendez stared at him, then turned and pointed saying “that way 10 blocks, right 4, left 2, then straight until you get to Lemon Square”. He nodded and said “Thanks Mendez… and a bit of free advice. Marsalim is amazing this time of year” and walked off. Mendez nodded and left.

He entered the square and got to work. Everyone recognized him as his illusion and was generally kind. While a gentleman thief, not one for profit, infamy, or anything nefarious, and in fact a sort of problem, he was ultimately a thief and those of nefarious nature always respected master thieves. Therion famously, after the events regarding the Gate of Finis, famously ran the black markets in secret, with the approval of his wife, Lady Cordelia Ravus. It was even rumored that ultimately, the Ravus family still controlled the black markets today. The fact of Therion Ravus was only discovered when he confessed to such on his deathbed, after his wife had passed, though he never mentioned whether she knew or not. Regardless, he was in the present and needed items. His first was acquiring a new mask, with proper lenses. Luckily, the black market always had experimental technology on display, in no way tested by the proper authorities. Getting junk was common, but a man like him could spot such a mile away. Thus, he purchased a new mask. Rather than the bland ballroom mask he once sported, he now had a brilliant long curve-beaked bird mask made of pristine material and the lenses show spectacular tech. It featured night-vision, thermal, it could magnify sight by about 3 times, and it could tint the lenses. All used different buttons on his mask, but that was fine. The best was the voice changer that it came with, a button on the chin activating it. It warped his voice into electronic static, understandable, but not able to pinpoint the exact identity.

Next, he purchased new clothes. A white tailcoat, springheel jacks, and dress pants, a suit of chainmail coil underneath, and gloves to prevent fingerprints. His identity was known by police, of course, but they would never admit to losing him, thus his work was unhindered, for now. He further purchased some additional items. New attachments for his VTP, some gem dust, and most importantly, a spellbook. While not a wizard, he did have some spells written down for later use, and had lost them. He only had four; Fire stream, Lockpick, Mana Thief, Heat Metal, and Restrain, memorized. He decided he would spend some time fixing his repertoire as he waited for his ally, when as he can only describe as fate, hit. He was going to leave when he saw a woman entered the hedge maze. He watched her a moment, noticing her sitting on a bench. He ducked into an alleyway, and changed quickly, his illusion masking his temporary nudity, and left his old prison clothes behind. He headed for the woman and sat next to her.
The following adventure could only be described as pure and unadulterated luck. An altruistic doctor had been roped into an extortion scheme involving a potential cult and her pupil. However, rather than deliver ransom, she wanted to rescue him with force. He assumed she came with a plan or reinforcements, but she lacked either. She was going to go it alone. At first, he was going to scold her for such a brash move, but the fire in the doctor's eyes stopped him. However, he decided instead of scolding, he’d correct. He accompanied her on her trip, buying her some fresh equipment, a cart with Ox so that they wouldn’t have to use a truck and alert the kidnappers, and headed for the only place thieves regularly talked about being a good hideout, he had asked while they were shopping, the abandoned Hunter’s Guild Lodge. Buying drake repellent, he had them set off, following the instructions he divined from various conversations. After a tense 5 minutes of combat after a pincer attack, and following through on her end of the bargain (letting him take whatever he desired without question) he found something amazing. Apparently, before he left, Robert had been working out of this cabin and had the whole north in a grip. He left when Juanes alerted him and was heading for Rippletide. From there, he’d catch a ship and head north along the coast, far enough away the empire’s navy would miss him, but that he’d know where they were. He frowned but pocketed the book, knowing that he’d need it. After helping Ristra get Andrew into the cart and heading back, they returned at night to Stilsnow. He parted ways from her afterwards.
Chapter 27-The Hunter, Act 3

Chapter 27

Hunter Becoming the Hunted

He stood in the office of the local police chief. He had been sent here by a local officer who had been sent to retrieve him. “Zem Kholint. It’s been 20 years since you last stepped foot here” the chief said, putting out his cigar. “Yes. I have not had the courage to return” he replied. “Well. I’m glad you got enough to. I need help” the chief said “In the past 4 months, I’ve been following a case involving dead men and woman, their blood drained. At first I thought a beast, but recently… I don’t know”. He raised an eyebrow and responded “If you don’t mind elaborating, that’d help”. The chief nodded, offering some photos. They were disturbing to say the least, but Zem was cursed with a keen eyes and noticed three things. “The ‘bite mark’ widths are inconsistent, the injuries are more consistent with needles than fangs, and all the victims nails have breaks implying retaliation… and not a clear power difference, like there would be with a monster” he answered. “Indeed. I want you to investigate. If the ‘monster’ is human… well. You did register as a manhunter. Your pay is as normal. Dismissed” the chief said, standing and leaving. Zem sighed. He had hoped to go home, but now he was roped into a new hunt. He took the license offered and left.

He began by examining the bodies personally to confirm or detract from his suspicions. However, they didn’t. The wounds on the body were mostly inflicted post mortem. As the coroner described it, most of the killing blows were blunt trauma; either strangulation, a high fall, or in the case of the fifth victim a bullet wound. They were mostly human injuries. That made it a manhunt, which thankfully the police chief of Stonegard was insightful enough to make the license cover both. He asked the coroner “Anything to help me point in a direction? Beyond needing to go to the crime scenes and investigate”. The coroner thought and said “Well, I did notice one woman was found in an area she’s never seen in… the fifth, she lived in Stonegard Heights, and yet was found in the slums the night after her estimated death”. He nodded and said “Thank you. I’ll get to work and leave you to yours”, giving a tip of his cap and turned, leaving. He headed right for the slums, wanting to get the job over with. He did not envy whomever his mark was. Especially since the most recent victim was only two days old.

His first visit was to a hunter’s guild. They always had good equipment for both hunters and manhunters. As such, it was a simple matter to find what he needed; A pair of mana goggles, a set of kevlar that used mythril plates instead of sheer iron, and enchanted grip gloves. He also got silenced boots while he was at it. This of course cost him nearly 40,000 leaves. The mythril plates used in the vest made it worth 7,000 leaves, while the boots and gloves enchantments cost 13,000 leaves total. The mana goggles were a top of the line magical item and the last in stock, so they cost 10,000 leaves. Then, there was the fact that he was shopping in a store that hated contract hunters. Many
don’t understand the hatred, or where it came from, but he did. It didn’t start with him, but the guild was determined to make it end with him. There was a history of contract hunters using their employment with the empire as leverage to steal credit on kills that rightfully were the hunters. He was just the most brazen and in his case the glory-stealing was the worst offense; stealing credit for the kill of a dragon. While good dragons existed and generally were left alone and in fact were on friendly terms with the high emperor, there were ones that allied themselves with Galdera. The one he, his friend, and others killed was the last known dragon allied with Galdera. Ever since that hunt, the Hunter’s Guild made their disdain and hatred for contract hunters clear, obvious, and encourage discrimination against them in their stores and halls. After purchasing his goods, he left without a word, even as the clerks spat in his direction and said “Get out of here contract punk. Don’t need your filth in these parts, scum”. After this, he used some of the remaining leaves from his pay to rent a motel room and kept some things there. Specifically, his Mauser Model 98, his camo gear, and all of the dried rations he carried.

It was painless enough to find. Even as he descended Stonegards perfectly carved stone stones into the slums district, he could see the cordoned off crime scene. An alleyway smack dab in the middle of it. Likely the best meeting spot for lowlifes in the city. It was quite wide, a full 10 feet in width. Sure, a lot of businesses received new goods from back here, but all the trucks made it easy for a deal to go down, or better to smuggle things. Even so, that wasn’t his concern. He entered the crime scene, showing his license coming from the chief himself, and headed for the site of the murder. As expected, lots of blood. However, he noticed something. He bent down to see if he was right and he was. Some of the blood was drier than the rest, meaning some other wound bled before the others. He checked the outline and confirmed it was about where the neck met the body. He was guessing that she was shot elsewhere and dragged here. Frowning, he stood and turned on the thermal goggles. Blood, at least in his experience, always carried magical residue due to the fact that mana flowed with blood. It also was much more resilient against the elements, taking a full week to vanish fully. Thus, unless his quarry was an especially skilled mage, hunter, or bother, he could follow the signs of magical residue from the blood. Since mana goggles were specifically used to help investigators track blood trails, all he had to do was let the magic in the goggles lock onto the blood, and then show any magical residue like it as well.

He hit the mark and saw a trail heading the opposite way he came in, and around the corner into a primary street. Standing, he got walking. He already suspected this, but this confirmed them. She was killed in Stonegard Heights. However, what he had hoped and found, was that the killer forgot to ditch his clothes immediately. As a result there were two blood trails. One from the bleeding wound, extremely dried and likely untraceable by now due to heavy traffic through Stonegard, but also one from the blood that splattered onto the killer, airborne no less. Further, while he likely disposed of the clothes safely away from his hideout and haunts, it would shrink the search area. Especially since it went right, to the only district before the Spectrewood, the Arcane District. It was where the mages of Stonegard relegated themselves, for the better of the town. Their towers, while they didn’t reach the peaks of the surrounding mountains, one did. It was where the ancient sage Valerie Fuus lived, a mage that had mastery over the elements of Fire and Water, known as the Master of Clouds.
He entered the district and was shocked to find that it didn’t lead into the Spectrewood proper. Instead, it lead right to a dumpster outside of a particular mage tower. He looked around and saw no cameras, though wasn’t shocked. The 10th covenant strictly forbid the mixing of magic and science. While technically Mages could use science and its results so long as they never used magic on them or used them to study or empower magic, most mages, especially Sages, refrained from doing so in their towers, the places they legally were allowed to study magic and where they lived, barring a few particularly rich mages, or ones that had family or friends that were well off. However, he knew one person that would know where to look. The Master of Clouds. He began his trek towards the tower surrounded by a continuous funnel cloud. It was the landmark of the region, the place one could use so long as they had a clear line of sight to the horizon facing Stonegard. It was an amazing sight from afar and even more impressive up close.

He knocked multiple times. It was his fifth time trying. He was about to give up when finally a voice rang out “What do you want? I’m busy”. “Master of Clouds. I am a contract hunter. I seek the murderer responsible for the deaths ending in drained blood. I followed the mana trail of the victim’s blood on him to a dumpster 400 feet southwest. I’m hoping you know something” he responded. He waited several minutes, hearing nothing. Eventually, the door opened however. “Come in” the voice said “I have tea brewing. I know what you speak. We must talk… privately”. He walked in, hand on his axe handle. He was led by an imp-looking creature up some stairs. He was shocked to find such a beast willingly serving any kind of mage, even a Sage. As he entered the Sage’s laboratory and saw the man immediately. He gazed at an illusion of some sort of arrangement of stars and balls. As he approached, the man waved his hand and turned. Before him stood a man of seemingly youthful appearance, but anyone who lived long and paid attention knew the truth. The Master of Clouds was at least 200 years old. “Hello, young contract hunter. Tea is over here, with some choice appetizers” the Master said, gesturing to his side, walking that way. He followed and gawked. He couldn’t believe his eyes. Drake cutlets, complete with Reuben Tomato sauce. He sat down, though made sure to mind the manners he knew.

Drake meat was extremely hard to come by, even for nobility. Drake’s after all were as strong as young dragons and just as rare, even if there was a place all flocked to during mating season. In fact, hunting during such a time was foolish at best. Even assuming one killed a drake in the Whitewood during mating season, the chances of being happened upon enroute back and being ambushed was basically guaranteed. As such, being given the chance to eat Drake cutlets, with some high quality tomato sauce dip and tea by a Sage was not an opportunity he was going to pass, or disrespect. “Glad to young folk with manners. A rarity nowadays, barring his majesty’s grand court” the Sage said, settling into his seat on the other side, gesturing “Go ahead. I’m glad you can appreciate the opportunity before you”. They helped themselves but still talked. He asked about Zem’s life to this point, after his disgrace, and he asked the Sage about anything in particular, making sure to pay attention. “Thank you for humoring me. Truly. However, I know what you really care about. I didn’t see anything. Not personally” Valerie said, waving his hand. Multiple round balls made of lime green flesh, sporting a single massive eye floated in. “These did. My watchers” Valerie said “I have over 200,000 active at any time observing the skies, and about 70 watching the district from above, and 10 from the ground level on key spots”. With a wave of his hand, the others vanished and one floated forward. He retrieved crystals from a desk, picking a few, then tossing them towards the
They stopped mid-air, righted themselves so the longest distance between two ends was of vertical alignment, then began to spin horizontally. Valerie put a hand on the giant eye monster, and light shone from the eye into the crystals. The crystals in turn shone an illusion above the table.

“Imagery Magic. I thought it myth” He said, amazed. “No myth, I assure you. We simply don’t advertise it. We’ve always been capable of this, but many would misunderstand it and the mechanics” Valerie responded. The image showed a man approaching a dumpster, disrobing of his tailcoat, then putting it in and leaving. The man was well-dressed and clearly well-groomed. He wore black clothes and a white shirt with white frills. “I knew of this because this was peculiar. The Watchers can easily see magic as well as you or I, and yet it picked up no mana trail. Further, he vanished after this. I checked personally” Valerie continued “He only gave some off while wearing that coat. I intended to get around to picking it up but now…” and trailed off. Zem nodded and asked “Could you trace him using it?” Valerie nodded and said “Yes. For a price”. “Name it” Zem retorted. After agreeing upon 105,000 leaves, he left and began his mission. Tracking down the tailcoat and hoping it wasn’t burned.

Zem had a somewhat difficult time tracking the truck that took the contents of the dumpster. Every city had a center that used mages to dispose of trash. To ensure compliance with the 10th covenant, the centers would have trucks take the trash to a specific part of the site and then have workers bring the trash to the center properly. From halfway between the dump site and the disposal site to the disposal site, all workers used mage methodology to work. Like scrolls for inventory, enchanted clothing for sanitation, and so on and so forth. Because of this method, disposal took some time as every item had to be logged. Since it happened recently and the pickup was that morning, he was in luck. He arrived before they logged it and because of his status as a contract hunter on job, he was allowed to search for it. Unfortunately, he had to search for it, through garbage. He was grateful the several battlefields, sewers, and other generally unpleasant area’s had killed his sense of smell. It still took him a few hours before he finally walked away with his prize. He stopped by the motel to show and change into fresher, more casual clothes before heading for Valerie’s tower. He was let in before he even knocked.

“Well, well. It seems our culprit is something of a mystery” Valerie said, gazing at the mist as it covered every inch of the tailcoat disposed of by the murderer. “What do you mean?” Zem asked. “I can still track him. However, he’s in an old mansion. In fact, legally speaking, it is one I purchased a few dozen years back. I only never used it because I found Galdera artifacts. It was only 5 years ago the police finally cleared everything out” Valerie replied “What makes it interesting is that despite lacking mana, the man was able to elude my every trap”. He knew it was already strange. Even those with no talent for casting had a modicum of mana in them. Someone lacking it was, for lack of better words, a freak of nature. “I suppose we must investigate this now” Valerie said, dispersing the fog with a wave of his hand “I have an intruder and you a quarry”. Zem only nodded as they left. He again swung by and Valerie kindly eliminated the filth and odor from his previous equipment. He then equipped it, including his new Browning Double Automatic. After that, they headed towards the manor in Stonegard Heights.
It was fairly large. 2 floors of basement, 2 floors of building, all built with pristine materials that even left to decay lasted thousands of years. “Still pristine” Valarie said, walking towards it. A wave of his hand, suddenly a flash washed over him. “Don’t worry” Valarie said “I merely gave you clearance to enter. Come, the murderer awaits”. He stalled a moment to make sure his Browning was loaded, nodded, and walked forward after Valarie. Inside was as expected. Nature had more than begun to take over. A tree stood in the center of the house, growing through the walls and spreading its leaves throughout the roof nearby. Animals aplenty thrived in here, as he spied a pair of rabbits in the shadows. Valarie waved her hand and covered the floor in fog, spreading it quickly. “A moment please. I’ll find him with my “Fog Stalker” spell” Valarie said. Soon Valarie’s eyes lightened up and she stood, saying “I found him! Follow me!” and began walking briskly. He followed, pulling his Browning out. They descended into the basement, and she led him through its elaborate, laboratory-like design. Soon enough, they came upon a library. He entered cautiously, saying “Back me up”. Valarie only nodded, and prepared a spell. He kept aim as he glanced around. He then dodged to the side, spinning and saying while making hand motions with one hand “Shakkuru Teki!”. Instantly, shackles appeared and binded Valarie hands as a gout of steam stormed past where he had been. He frowned, his worst fear was confirmed. He aimed his gun and fired, frowning further as Valarie dissipated into a burst of steam, a grin of pure mania on his face.

He stood behind a bookcase. He kept his gun aimed skyward, close to him. His eyes stayed closed as he focused, listening and seeing through his spell, Eyes of the Pack. He turned and fired his gun, opening them to see the steam retreat. “Dammit... Why, Valarie!? Why kill people? You’re at the top of society, who could threaten you!?” he asked. “Threaten? Me? No sir, I was seduced! In exchange for killing my subjects, he gave me the formula to create bloodstones! Gems of pure, raw power!” Valarie responded, his voice everywhere. He turned and aimed at the top of the bookcase, pointing two fingers as he said “Supaku!” and sent energy bolts up there as Valarie manifested. While he hit Valarie, Valarie ignored the attack, letting both electrocute him as he began to cast. He quickly ran around the corner as a gout of steam nearly boiled him alive. “Come on Zemnest! Let me boil you! I’ve always wondered what steamed human tasted like!” Valarie taunted, appeared in front of Zem. “You’re insane” he said, leaping into an aisle as Valarie sent another gout of steam at him. “Maybe, but so what!? I’ve never known such joy!” Valarie screamed, this time walking into the Aisle as Zem moved into a crouch. However, as he was about to run, he turned and saw a watcher and screamed as light flashed brightly in his eyes. He screamed in pain.

Valarie straddled him. He was unable to move anyway from the headache he had but Valarie did it. “Oh Zem. Poor, poor pitiful Zem. Don’t worry. I won’t kill you. I’ll just extract your blood, heal you, then extract more, and make a bloodstone. I’ll then take your memories and frame some poor individual and we’ll live ever after” Valarie sing-songed as he began to weave a spell, clearly preparing the process as arms and hands made of steam began to retrieve vials and vial holders and tubes. Zem went through his mind on tactics. His mind went to the spell his teacher taught him. The spell he was taught to get revenge on those that had oughted him as a liar and glory-stealer. Seeing his eyes, Valarie smirked and said “What is the little ant planning? A spell? You are a mage in some regard, you can see mana after all… perhaps you plan to use a spell to fire your gun? Or maybe you
plan on trying to use ‘Paralyzing Touch’ to render me immobile for a few seconds while you grab your gun and shoot me?” Valarie mused more and he began the incantation, when suddenly he screamed as steam engulfed and burned his hands. Valarie’s face was contorted in rage as he screamed “You little shit-stain! Don’t you dare think you can do anything other than squirm in agony!”. However, he continued, stopping only when Valarie gave him more pain by blasting various parts of him with steam, stripping most of his equipment of their enchantments in the process. “Fine!” Valarie said “Use your magic! Not that it’ll do any good! I’m a sage, I’ll counter any spell you cast, maggot!”. “Desutoredo” he muttered, the air leaving his lungs. This time, the woman knelt next to him. Her pale skin. Black eyes. Long flowing black robes. Black hair. The scythe she held this time was merely a twig with growing leaves. He could feel the searing pain of his burns leave him. He could feel the life he had slip from him, save for two breathes.

“You have only two castings of this spell left before I must take your life. Remember, each casting brings you closer to me” the figure said, the twig now a branch the size of a staff, full of life. His life. Valarie however, looked like he was staring at a ghost. Valarie looked down at him and asked “What the hell did you-” and suddenly began to scream in agony. “Sorry… don’t know how it works… just what to do to make it-” he stopped. “Wait” he asked “you can see her too?”. His answer never came as Valarie soon stopped screaming. Healed but exhausted and hardly able to move, he sat up and saw Valarie. “Dammit” he said. Valarie was dead. He waited a few minutes before forcing his sore, aching muscles to stand. He abandoned his gun and trudged through the laboratory-like basement, and eventually walking through the streets properly. It was the dead of night. Based on the position of the moon, likely 10:00 pm. “Hey!” he heard an officer call out “Get home! No drunks allowed on the streets after 9!” “Not… drunk. Tired. Just… captured a mark. They’re dead. In the basement” he sputtered out before collapsing in the street.
She cried out. She tried to save him. She cast her Dark Nebula spell, hoping that it’d push him away from the far deadlier spell. However, Galdera seemingly wasn’t with her. Her spell was slower, sending Selim away as the trap spell activated and stole Selim’s soul. ‘Soul Stealer’, a forbidden Galdera rite even among her circle. “It’s far, far too evil for the likes of mortal man. Only Lord Galdera should be allowed to meddle in the affairs of man and soul” her master, Kard Vallain, said to her early on in her Vestal training. She was taught the signs but never the method of casting it. It was to inform her of a blasphemer, a false prophet. Now, that knowledge let her watch someone she held feelings for die. “Selim!” she cried, rushing over quickly. She instantly called on the spell she used last time, and began to invoke it. A mighty fist slapping her with the back of it stopped her. “Fool!” Fenris yelled “You’ll just doom him!”. The mighty Northerner pushed her aside, saying “Let a professional death stopper deal with this!”. He began to wave his hands seemingly erratically, waggling and wiggling his fingers seemingly randomly. However, towards the end of the spell, she saw the pattern. She knew it was magic but she didn’t recognize the pattern. She knew this because like before, Fenris used the language of magic. “Kōri no seirei, kitakaze no tatsuji, anata no shukufuku o motomete, kono shisha no jikan o tome nasai!”. Suddenly, Selim was inside a block of solid ice.

“What did you do!?” she screamed. Panic had begun gripping her mind. As she pulled out her wand to attack, Fenris waved his hand and said “Ochisuita”. She stopped as instantly, her emotions stalled. Her mind was clear and while she knew she was afraid and panicking, some force filtered the emotions and let her think rationally. “I froze his time. Death will not reach him until I or a more skilled northerner dispel it” Fenris said, standing fully. “Why…” she began, slowly. Even filtered, she was overwhelmed. “Your spell, with each casting, links him further and further to Galdera, and by consequence, the Afterworld. It diminishes his life force more each time” he responded to what would have been her question. He turned and said “Galdera is evil. Tainted by jealousy and hate”. She glared at him and was about to protest when Fenris pointed to Selim and said “If what you are about to say is ‘That’s a lie, Aelfric is the jealous one’ then let me point out the truth. Your friend’s soul was just claimed by Galdera. For no reason other than you strayed from whatever path he laid before you. How can you deny this?”. She simply stared. She had no real rebuttal than it must’ve been him, but the reality of things contradicted that thought. “You must’ve miss it or not known! That’s the only explanation!” she said, clinging desperately to her faith. “Ma’am. Do you really believe that?” Fenris asked. She, through tears, took only seconds to answer with “No… I… don’t”.

After dispelling his calm spell and letting Delilah cry her heart out, he said “Even as strong as I, we don’t have time. Even in a place rich with ice magic, I can hold this spell for 3 days maximum. You
have until them to find a doctor. If she can remove the infected internal organ from him for
disenchanting, then we can save him”. She looked at him, asking “Wait… but he’s frozen. How will
she be able to?”. “That is merely aesthetic. The spell itself can be immaterial and still hold his time
hostage. Which reminds me, pick up some Pearl powder, agate dust, and ground jet. Oh, and a
chipped sword” he answered. Delilah, while confused, just nodded and accepted a satchel. It was
filled with strange gem coins. Touching one turned it into a handful of leaves. Closing it, she rushed.
It was less she believed him and more she didn’t know what to do. Her only other hope was Soul
Stealer, but that was a horrible, forbidden spell and she didn’t have the mana to stall death long
enough to find it. This was truly her only, real, hope.

She wandered. She purchased the gem dusts, the chipped sword. However, none of the hospitals
would help. Even though they had authority to go to the obsidian parlor, no matter her pleading or
even bribing, they refused. One hospital even had the gall to take a bribe of 20,000 leaves and then
refuse her. Cursed, they called it. Steeped in Galdera’s stench. She had noticed the feeling of death in
the lower levels, the kind that taint a place but she never guessed Galdera would be the cause. She
then saw it. A doctor. She knew from the bag of the legend of Alfyn Greengrass. The only hero
Galdera ensured lived a good afterlife. Modernized, of course, but the bag type was unmistakable.
She rushed to the woman holding the bag, nearly running into her. The woman noticed her last
second and moved aside to avoid her, saying “Apologies, I wasn’t paying attention”. After a few
tense moments of silence, Delilah said “Help me. I need a doctor. My friend, he’s almost dead” with
a voice of pleading. The woman’s fact softened considerably and after a few moments, the woman
asked “Alright. Lead me to him”.

It took them half an hour, the woman trying her best to get there through the snowstorm. Eventually,
they made it to the Obsidian Parlor. To the woman’s credit, she only hesitated a moment before
heading in properly. They had taken a few hours, partially due to the walk there, and partially due to
the woman, whom she came to understand was named Ristra Abraham, going to the hospital first to
get supplies. She had told the woman in an alleyway what happened and now was leading her. She
didn’t have her wand, wanting to make the doctor feel more safe. While mages could use magic
without a focus, it wasn’t smart to. Focuses allowed them to concentrate power, while unfocused
casting could lead to shifts in mana output and thus make spells either underpowered, overpowered,
fizzle out, or backfire. Soon enough, she entered Fenris’s laboratory. “What the…?” Ristra said,
amazed “Who made this is truly spectacular! Only the pictures of Valarie’s lab are as splendidous!”. Fenris
gazed down at them over the side, staring and saying down “Ah! You’re back! Good! Get her
up here, and quickly. The quicker we do this, the more likely—” and he was cut off as Ristra yelled “a
Northerner!” and reached into her bag. Delilah quickly said “Wait, don’t! He’s not dangerous!”. Ristra
had pulled out a vial but stopped, looking at her. “He’s a mage. He’s just here to study. He’s
not on active duty” she explained. “Yes” Fenris said “Nor was I. I was hired for one job, did it, and
am living in my payment. I’m a Starseer, you see”. Ristra stared and then asked “Do you know
anything about a secret lab in Wellspring?”. Fenris shook his head. Ristra put the vial back in and
said “Just show me my patient”.
She could see the shock on Ristra’s face. Selim sat, body perfectly intact and still. Ristra bent down and asked “What do I do? I can see this is magic related” with a tone suggesting trepidation. “Simple. I’m going to be try to wrest his soul from Galdera. You just need to keep him alive during this process” Fenris replied “After all, Galdera will use the soul to damage his body”. Ristra nodded and said, opening her bag “Then give me a minute to set up. If i’m going to break the law and do this, i’m doing this right” and got to work. After a few minutes, Ristra was ready. “Then, let’s begin. Delilah. You are in charge of healing magic. Here is the spell I prepared. Use it as describe” Fenris said, offering her the page with one hand, weaving a spell in another. Thought, staring, she realized the truth. He was merely adjusting an existing spell. In this case, his time freeze spell.

The ice vanished and Selim laid there as Ristra got to work, putting tubes into Selim, and pumping medicines into him. She meanwhile used the spell she was just given to regulate the medicine itself, ensuring it didn’t overdose him, but that it was doing its job as efficiently as possible. Meanwhile, Fenris used the gem dust and sword she brought. He was muttering an incantation, holding the sword out and adding dust to the blade every now and again. She eventually realized what was going on. Fenris was literally bringing Selim’s soul to the sword. She continued her work, focusing as was Ristra, moving to inject something to calm or relax muscles that were about to spasm, when finally, the damaged sword Fenris held had full runes on it. He stopped and said “That’s enough. Purge the body”. Ristra nodded and Delilah began to use the spell to push the medicine back through the tube. Ristra put the spent medicine into empty vials. Fenris, after they finished and she use ‘heal wounds’ to close all of his wounds, put the sword on Selim’s chest. The runes instantly vanished, and with a cry of pain and a gasp of air, Selim shot awake. She smiled and hugged him, relief washing over her.

After a while, and a hot meal, Selim was asleep. Even revived, he was exhausted and would require rest to recover. “He’ll be out for a few days. Revival always takes a lot of energy from a person. Sorry to occupy your time, miss” Fenris said, turning to Ristra at his side. Ristra shook her head and said “It is fine. It’s not like I particularly had any plans. I just need to find out what happened to my janitor and my associate, Doctor Madar Runska”. She perked at hearing that, looking at them from across the way. She knew that name. “Are you certain that’s his name?” she asked. Ristra looked at her, nodding. She frowned a bit, then sighed. “I… met him at a meeting once. He had brought… a sacrifice. A small goat” she said. Ristra’s face went from a neutral disposition to one of sheer terror. “Last I heard, a few years ago, he had a summer home in… Riverbrook” she said. Ristra stared at her, though before she could say anything, Fenris asked “I take it you’ve changed your ways?”. She nodded very slowly. “Not completely” she admitted “I was raised much differently… but I… I can’t look away from reality. Poisonous as it is for my soul, to look away would be to deny everything I believe in. It would be… to deny Selim’s kindness”. Fenris nodded and said “Then… you know what you must do. Go. You have something to do, no?”. She nodded, standing fully. “Yes. You are right. Thank you, Fenris” she said, moving around the bed towards the stairs “I have to disband my old cult”.
Chapter 29: Life

Chapter 29

Life

She had been preparing. Her Kronsenberg M19, her wind-affinity glove focus. Her mithril chain shirt underneath normal business attire. 4 satchels of dust; Agate, Jet, Diamond, and Pearl. She had the books ‘The Mystery of Cerigos Island’ and ‘Relics of the Past; A catalogue of Ancient Ruins’. She also had 2 bank cards that allowed for transactions of up 100,000 leaves before requiring payment. It was then someone entered her room. “Well, well. What ‘ave we ‘ere?” the voice asked. No, she knew who it was. “Durg. I didn’t expect to see you in my actual home” She said, turning. She had rented a room initially, but she owned a house. “Well, ‘pologies for intrud’in but I cuna wait. I needed to speak ta ya” he responded, moving and sitting on her bed. She simply finished packing, saying “Alright. I have time”. He then said something she didn’t expect. “Your a hero lassie, and I’m your muse” he said. Before she could asked, he clarified “Ya see, an ancient prophecy says that 8 heroes are gunna do Galdera in, with the help an powah of 8 muses, heroes of the fey. I’m a muse, cause I got this spell that finds people i’m linked to. The purple thread of fate, the muses thread, ties me ta you. So, where ya go, I go”. “I see” she said “I’m heading to Rippletide to charter a boat. I plan to try to catch the Pontiff unawares”. Durg simply smiled and said “‘aye lassie, and I reckon that’ll be a right wonderful time. When do we go?”. She smiled and said “Soon”.

It was that night in fact that she had a rather prophetic dream. She dreamt she stood on the shores near Gold Shore, Galia. She turned to look at Gold Shore and saw nothing there save a much smaller port town. Likely from the time of the first rising. Turning around, she saw the eastern sea and to her right a path around the cliff into a cave. Curiosity overtook her and she stepped towards it. She wore her normal attire, though lacked her gun, chain, or even wallet. As she stepped into the cave, she hoped her magic would be enough. Dark, darker, yet darker it got as she walked, moving vines hanging from the ceiling aside when they blocked her path, avoiding them when she could. However, that’s when she saw it. The cave’s true purpose. She came upon the end and found a room, sculpted of pure marble, lined with gold. Some books laid strewn about, some empty potion bottles, but the pedestal in the center had the real treasure. A single rune sat hovering in the air. She didn’t know what it meant, but she approached it. Not to take it. It clearly belonged here, but to admire it more. Bask in its light. A voice then spoke to her, saying “Mortal. You came. I am pleased. This means well for your world. Take my gift, and please, be gentle with my brother when the time comes”. Suddenly, the rune glowed brightly, shifted about, and became something new before suddenly surging into her. She passed out after that.

Sebastian had managed to arrive at Stonegard. It had taken him 2 days by truck, but he managed. He refueled and rented a motel for two days. He was only passing through, but he couldn’t ignore the information he had received. A second faction of northerners. He already knew of them, the Titania
faction, but cult activity was still cult activity. He proceeded towards the slums. While he was a man of the law, he knew exactly where to go when he needed information about underground things. Further, it was why he turned a blind eye to the actions of Sir Lupone. Fact was, he was once one of these lawbreakers. He didn’t make it policy to go easy on them, but he was one that recognized the difference between malice and desperation. As he walked he stopped in front of another. A man clearly not a man. Dressed in greens, a pale green tint to their skin, and ears he could cut butter with if they had an edge. “You must be a northerner” he said. The man laughed sing-song like and said “I am. What of it?” He looked the man up and down and asked “The Titania or the Oberon. Whom do you call liege?”. The man’s smile faded then grew two times its size as the man responded “I am called Lichmendi. We should talk. Titania, by the by. My friends do too” and gestured for him to follow as he left. Sebastian noted that this ‘Lichmendi’ was carrying a bag of groceries.

He sat across from a small, lanky individual with fire for hair, and nearby a woman sat recording. He did not recognize her, but he recognized her demeanor. The woman was from a publishing company. Likely, taking notes for someone to write a book. “I ‘ear that you bumped inta me pal” the small figure said. He nodded and said “Yes. Quite lucky, as I was searching for your group”. The man nodded and asked “I also ‘ear that ya know a’bout our governmental style. So, my question is, why were ya look’in for us?”. He responded “I am a knight of the high emperor’s court and recently I discovered a powerful enemy in our kingdom. He’s clearly a northerner, as he froze the entire bay that housed Gold Shore’s harbor. I need information-” and was cut off as the northerners both gasped. “Mate. Are you absolutely sure it was freezin’? Not some illusionary business?” the small one asked. He nodded and the small one groaned and said “Baskets and barnacles, by the Great Mother’s Hen! Gun do bhris e a ‘chreach-chogaidh air falbh aig a h-uile duine!” and continued to tirade, flailing as he did. “Durg! Durg!” the tall one said, moving and restraining the small one, who calmed down “Remember yourself”. The tall one looked at him and said “That… good sir… is the Oberon, Cogadh Ceothach”. He felt his heart drop. He stood and began to rush. He had to get to Flamesgrace, now.

He awoke. He was still in the laboratory. He couldn’t remember anything after feeling the coldness of death. He felt like he had met someone, no, a group of people, but nothing came to mind. He sat up and groaned. His stomach. It was empty. He looked and found something to eat. Cheese melted onto bread, fresh, with some soup. He moved and started eating. He was so hungry. “Glad to see you awake” a voice said from ahead of him. At a desk sat the northerner from before. It was turned to him, wearing gold-rimmed glasses. “S-sorry, Fenris. I was just-” Selim began but was stopped as Fenris replied “Its fine. I put that there for you. Enjoy”. Selim nodded and did. Fenris continued “Your ex-manager is in Sunshade. The stars say that. It is there you will meet your fate”. Selim hesitated, but nodded, looking at Fenris and said “Thanks”. Fenris waved his hand and said “Don’t. I am merely doing my job as your muse. Think nothing of it”. Selim stared and asked “Muse?”.

Selim finished packing the truck. Fenris, disguised as a broad-shouldered, blue-haired man asked “Ready?”. He nodded and got in the passenger side, while Fenris got in the drivers side. He turned the truck on and waved his hands, saying “Horudo” and their luggage flashed. “So. You’re sure
about this? He did employ you” Selim asked. Fenris nodded as they began to drive out of Stilsnow and said “Yes. You paid me, and he paid me as well. I am fine with this arrangement”. A few hours of silence passed, the snow their only companion, when he decided to make some conversation “So. What are Muses exactly? I know you said they’re heroes in fey culture, but then why play a support role?”. “Well. ‘Hero’ isn’t the right term for your people. ‘Guides’. ‘Motivators’. That sort of thing. Most heroes in our culture are people who inspired the masses to fight back against corruption. We do have traditional human heroes, but they’re called Champions” Fenris explained “However, even in those tales there was a Muse whom would spur the champion into action”. Selim nodded and asked “So this tale then is one of those but on a grander scale?”. Fenris paused, paying attention to the road and being careful on a particular turn and replied “That’s actually quite the apt description. I believe my initial impression of you being little more than a pretty face with some tricks was wrong”. Selim smirked and said “Like they say. Never judge a play by it’s opening act”.

Ristra stood in a payphone. It was a piece of technology every kingdom had. Every city, even a small town like Riverbrook. It allowed for citizens to make calls for a simple price of 1 leaf per minute to any other phone in the empire. The only thing was that either the citizen knew the number they were trying to call or they had to use the phone book provided and hope the number was registered on the official empire phone number registry. There was a benefit to registering, 75% of all money made on calls to a registered number were given to the owner of the number. Ristra herself called her old practice, depositing 5 leaves into the slot. After a few minutes, she got an answer. The janitor answered, saying “This is the Abraham Medicinal Practices and Research Center, we are closed to business due to legal issues caused by various members of the practice breaking contract and covenant. We will send a newsletter out when-” and she cut him off saying “Robert, it’s me”. There was silence, then “Ah, miss Abraham! What do you need miss?”

She confirmed the summer home address and asked Robert not to say a word to the man. She then went to the bank and transferred 1000 leaves to his account. She normally paid him 750 leaves weekly, and it seemed that even with her signature his raise had been denied, so she took matters into her own hands. After this, she returned the truck, and paid the 150 penalty fee for damaging the vehicle, a consequence of the events in Wellspring. True, the damage was repaired but the contract was specific in that there would be a penalty fee for it happening in the first place. After this, she rented a simple car to head down to Riverbrook. One with good turning and she received. She got in and began her journey. She needed confront the doctor that ran. Doctor Manda. She had a feeling he was in deep and his actions caused the fiasco that began her journey. However, revenge did not fuel her. How many other practices did the doctor infiltrate? How many other people had their lives irrevocably changed? She needed those answers and if he was aware and causing them, she knew. She had to be the one to end them. She wouldn’t be able to look at herself in the mirror if she stood by while someone exploited their medical knowledge for their own gain.
Nemu sat in a hospital bed. She had left her leg injury untreated long enough that the wound had become infected. Thankfully, the hospital had a healer on site whom used healing magics to cure her wound of infection, then left her to the doctors who treated the injuries. After a few days of recovery, the injury had closed up for the most part, with the top layer of her leg not closing together properly. She decided to sleep again. It was then she was graced with another dream. This time she was in some sort of house. It was familiar and homely. She stood outside an ornate, gold-framed door. She entered, not even bothering to knock. She wondered why she did that, and then really wondered when she saw the study she walked into. The study of Regal Albright. She knew it because of the man sitting behind the study, Regal Albright. “Yes?” Regal asked her, looking up at her “Do you need something, sister?”. She stared and words came out of her mouth before she even thought of them “Yes. I thought I’d inform you that I’ve been hired as a researcher”. Regal looked up and smiled, saying “Ah. Wonderful. Taking after me eh?”. She nodded and said “Yes. I can’t divulge anything, but it looks promising”. Regal smiled and said “Well, good luck sister. Keep in touch alright?”. She nodded and said “Of course big brother” and then she turned and woke up.

She sat there, and saw Regal watching here. She sighed and asked “esý ti theleis?”. Regal spoke in English, saying “I’m under the effects of a translate spell, so we can communicate normally. I’ve been… learning”. She nodded slightly and asked “I see. What have you learned?”. “That us heroes were cheated. That we’re near the next rising of Galdera… that there’s a kingdom north apparently that wants our land” Regal responded. She only nodded, saying “I dunno about the last part… but I’ve surmised the same. Difference is, you remember who you were, and I guess me, and I lack those memories”. Regal sighed and said “Well… I have an idea to restore your memories. We just need to go to Atlasdam”. She sat up instantly and asked “Wait, why? That’s where I have to go next to finish my job”. He turned to her, and said “Simple. My laboratory is there…. Wait… job?”. She nodded and said “Yes. High Emperor Fionne Balacruf has hired me to investigate a series of laboratories found around the empire. I’ve investigated two, the one I was found in was already explored and cleared out, and one in Atlasdam is the last one”. Regal stared and said “I see… guess I wasn’t the only one breaking the 10th covenant”. She stared at him, asking “Wait… what…?”. He chuckled and said “Oh… you wouldn’t know in your state… the lab in Atlasdam? That’s mine”.

He sat on the back of a cart. The very cart he had bought for Ristra. She had abandoned it and his muse confirmed she was at the Obsidian Parlor. He had no idea why but Solas said that she’d be fine and they could take this cart. He only nodded and got into the back, while Solas rode them out. “You sure you want to leave her though? She could be a good ally” Solas said, the town around them
turning into white plains slowly. “Yes” he said “She has her own path to walk, and me my own path. I will defeat Robert and deliver his axe to my contact”. Solas nodded and asked “Then you’ll help her and the others to fight Galdera, right?”. He nodded and said “Of course. It is what fate wants from me, and I don’t see anything objectionable about such a fate”. Solas smiled and said “I’m glad to hear that. I will be here, providing my aid and power to you”. “That reminds me. What exactly do you mean by that?” Thiesel asked, moving and removing his mask after being eyeshot of the town. “Well, a Muses job is to channel their powers into the hero they are meant to aid. In my case, I will teach you my spells, and channel my powers of luck into you” Solas answered. He chuckled and laid down in the cart and fell asleep.

He dreamed that night of playing a game. Chess. A favorite past time of certain kings, specifically Redania Balacruf, Crucine Grace, Ragnar Colozine, and Fionne Balacruf. He had apparently lost 3 pawns, but claimed a knight and bishop. Checking the board, things were fairly even. He moved a pawn forward one. “Interesting” the figure before him said, cloaked in shadows, moving and moving its other knight in position to be captured. He saw it for what it was though. Bait. He moved another pawn and responded “Thank you. I am Sir Lupone after all. I can see 5 steps ahead of-” and paused as another pawn was taken, by a rook he failed to account for. “Your enemies? A good philosophy to live on. What if you meet someone smarter with the same though?” the figure asked. He stalled and stared, then moved his rook forward and answered “Then I merely fall lockstep and wait for a chance”. The figure moved its queen to capture the rook, saying “A good strategy…” and continue playing. They played for what felt like hours. Eventually, he lost. He had a few pawns and the figure still had a bishop and two pawns. He had been effectively cornered. “Man… good game. I didn’t expect that queen to be bait” Thiesel said, offering a hand. The figure shook his hand and light stretched from the shadowy hand into him, and he gasped as he felt power enter him. “Thank you, Thiesel Danford. You’ve been most entertaining. Continue to entertain and put my gift to good use” it said, before vanishing.

He walked the road. Alone. Why? The answer was simple, he deserved it. He had lived his life for no one but his own. He looked to his left and saw his younger self. Young, and eyes full of life. He held the newly released Mauser Model 98. The rest had Gewehr 98’s. Guns that were mostly wood and used 57mm caliber bullets, while the Mauser Model 98 that he had and used used 64mm caliber bullets. Not better, but heavier. He continued walking, watching the kids walk alongside him. He knew this was a dream and he couldn’t change the outcome. He watched himself and his allies rush ahead to where the dragon was entangled. They took cover and began firing, taking turns. He watched as his younger self, thirsty for glory, came out of cover and fired on the same turn as his friend… and both of them paying the price. A wide fan of flames blew out, setting fire to their very skin. If not for their friends, they would have burned their faces off. “What do you think?” a voice behind him asked. “Sad” he responded “We scarred our faces and I will soon disgrace myself”. The voice chuckled and said “Good answer. You’ve learned. Not something many mortals do” and he felt a hand on his shoulder, a feminine hand. He could feel that they belonged to an old-fashioned huntress though. “Take my gift, and go in peace. You aren’t forgiven yet, but your journey is acknowledged. You’re nearly there” the voice said, and he felt power flow into him. Everything went to black as he watched his younger self try to shoot his dear friend, all because the friend disagreed about who gave the kill shot.
He awoke on the side of the road. He groaned a bit. He sat at a campsite he set up for the night in Galia, the coastal kingdom of merchants. He sat up and tossed a small red soulstone onto the partially burnt firewood pile, reigniting it. As its warmth spread over him, he settled in and thought about his dream as the sky began to turn pink. After an hour of resting, he slowly stood, putting his shirt on. He still had bandages covering half his body from the event. Valarie had managed to give him 3rd degree burns, the kind that the Revitalize spell couldn’t fix with one casting. It took them 5 hours to fully rehabilitate him and even then claimed he needed a weeks bedrest. He decided to sneak out and rebuke treatment, hitting the road. He needed to return home with his prize. A completed contract of a high profile serial killer that was also a highly respected mage. He even stuck around for the confirmation, the whole process taking 3 months. He checked his pack and confirmed the papers were still there. As he stood to walk the path home, he unpacked the campsite, packed it up, put out the fire with a small blue soulstone, and headed north. His next stop was Atlasdam, the city of scholars. He wanted to see if he could rack up one final contract before returning home. Hopefully, reach the 200,000 leaves he needed to re open the Hunter’s School in S’waarki, Halihall.

Delilah had finished her preparations. Transportation via horse and carriage out of town, a refill of dusts, updated her spellbook. She had to return home, to Cobbleston. She needed to confront Kard and if her suspicions were true, disband the cult entirely. She checked the first flame. It now glowed white. She found that odd, as when she first touched it, she felt it glow a baleful purple flame. She found it curious but didn’t question it because of her blindness to the truth. She would say she still was blind. She didn’t know what to believe. However, she knew she could no longer deny something was wrong. That the cult wasn’t all smiles like she thought. She sat in the carriage, looking out the window. She then began to count stars. She wondered what the future held as she dozed into a deep slumber.

Before her a man with a flame for a head sat. Tea was before them. She recognized the figure instantly. “Aelfric…?” she asked. The flame nodded. “Why?” she asked “Why are you… talking to me? Aren’t I an enemy?” The flame tossed a cracker into its flame and after a few seconds spoke. “Enemy is a strong word. Especially among gods. I would use ‘Minion of a god I often disagree with’” Aelfric responded, tossing another cracker into his flame. “Well… would you still say I am?” she asked. He stared at her, and after a minute said “No. Though I would not call you aligned with me. Though that’s fine. Frankly? I’m fine if you stepped back to his side”. She was shocked at that statement and asked “Why?”. “Simple child. I do not care for the squabble between he and I. Sooner or later, one will receive a defeat so resounding that they will be forced to concede they were wrong” Aelfric said, his flame growing a bit brightly “I do care about however is you mortals making your own choices, regardless of what fate we’ve weaved for you. It’s far more exciting when mortals exceed our expectations and prevent a fate that had their tale end poorly”. She looked at her tea, taking a sip and sighing, asking “Then…. Can I ask a favor?”. Aelfric’s flame merely nodded. “Could you grant me some power? I’m about to potentially defy Galdera… whom I received power from. I doubt he’ll take that lying down” she asked. Chuckled, Aelfric said “Of course… i’ve already done just that. Your power is your own now… except that one spell. I can’t do anything about that… though I doubt you’ll need it again”. She smiled warmly and said “Thank you. From the bottom of my heart”. She looked up and saw herself, but in white. “I know. Now go. Find your muse, and
defeat the ritual leaders. I believe in you” Aelfric said, smiling and waving as she faded back into sleep.
Intermission 3: Special Chapter

Chapter Summary

For the third intermission, I decided to do something unique. I've decided to make a chapter dedicated to the previous 8's struggle against Galdera, the undead god, master of the afterlife. I hope you all enjoy!

Special Chapter

The Eight Heroes

A man sat in a room. Well. It couldn’t be called a room properly. It was more of a section of a large war tent. He sat at a desk that he had brought. He was putting the final touches on his spellbook. Grounded gem dust sat in various sacks around him. He wrote with a ballpoint pen and had impeccable penmanship. He wrote quickly, doing calculations as he wrote. It was then he stopped. A spell alerted him to the presence of a person who intended to interrupt him. He merely turned and asked “What?”. He wore a small blue mantle with a gold-colored trim. He had green hair and blue eyes, and had a green goatee. He wore a small necklace with the symbol for Alephan on it. He wore white gloves, a blue tunic and blue breeches. He wore square-toed shoes.

The soldier wore a steel plated chestpiece over a chainmail shirt, steel plated bracers. He wore blue breeches and combat boots and a tricorn hat. He saluted and said “Sorry to disturb, Sir Albright, but high majesty has asked for you. It’s to finalize the plans”. The man nodded and said “Thank you soldier. I’ll be there post haste. You are dismissed”. The soldier nodded and left, presumably to pass on the message. Albright sighed and finished up his calculations. They took minutes, as he was almost done. He stood, taking his spellbook with him, and headed for the High Emperor’s tent. They camped upon the hill overlooking the plain that fed into the ravine that’d lead to the gate. He watched the soldiers stationed there chat as he ascended the hill to the tent.

He stepped into the tent and saw them. His comrades. People whom had allied with him, that had been bred for this. The eight heroes as they’d be called, like the heroes of old. He was Regal Albright, fulfilling the role of the Scholar. The Warrior had Halie Azelhart taking up it’s sword. The one to fill the purse of the merchant was Renald Colozine. Nigel Greengrass concocted potions for the role of Apothecary. Marco was the hunter of the eight heroes. The cleric’s role was filled by Harriet Clement. Jules was the thief of the group, while Mary Azelhart fulfilled the dancer job of them. These were the 8 heroes that would fight Galdera.
Hallie Azelhart was a woman. Black hair with green eyes, curvaceous to a point. However, she had muscles like a warrior and her hair was curly but unkempt. She wore iron pauldrons painted red, an iron chestplate, bracers. However, she left it at that. She wore no chainmail, and only heavily padded clothing. She held a single long curve-edged sword. It was roughly 3 feet long. Her sister, Mary Azelhart, took the role of dancer and was more diminutive. Looking less like an adult and more like a tall tomboyish girl, she wore denim overalls and a plaid shirt underneath. She wore her hair in a pair of ponytails and wore leather gloves and leather work boots. She had beautiful brown hair and bright grey eyes.

Renald Colozine was very much a businessman. He wore a white tailcoat with a gold trim, black silk pants with black leather dress shoes, white silk gloves, a gold framed monocles, and a black top hat. He had blonde hair, a blonde gentleman’s mustache, brown eyes, and a somewhat fair composition. Nigel Greengrass was quite the man to take in. Large, muscular, yet every movement graceful and careful. He sported blond hair and green eyes, wearing a green jacket over a white tank top and blue overalls. He had plains brown boots and gloves. He had on him however a pure golden axe that seemingly was crafted in the sun itself with how it shown. Marco was an enigma however. Having chestnut brown hair obscured by a red bandanna and face-mask, the man wore a brown cloak over black kevlar armor, a prototype light armor said to be as good as plates. Gloves and boots of kevlar adorned him, as well as a few crossbows and a gun.

Harriet Clement was the pontiff of the church of the silver flame. She had kept her official robes on, for good reason. They were heavily enchanted as to protect against the Cult of Galdera. Despite being hunted and outlawed, they were a veritable army. She also kept her staff, ‘The tooth of Aelfric’ as it was called. Jules on the other hand was less dignified. He wore denim jeans and a black mantle. He wore a black face mask and a black tank top. He had salt and pepper-colored hair and wore regular brand shoes. He had brown eyes. These were the heroes the man was working with. One finally spoke and said “So, your majesty, the terms are we defeat Galdera and we get the freedom to choose our destinies?”. It was Jules.

“Not quite but to the best of my abilities. I’ll overlook legal transgressions, within reason. I’ll not bind you to non-essential covenants, like lifting you of your tax responsibilities. You’ll gain political power by just being heroes” the high emperor of the time said, his name being Karl Balacruf “Finally, I’ll personally reward you each with a 5 million leaf reward”. Jules nodded. Some seemed shocked, but some didn’t. Regal himself was neither. Regal had expected a reward, what they were promised, but a monetary reward seemed odd. Even so, Regal kept his composure, bowed and said “Thank you, your majesty. I am grateful”. The others followed suit. The emperor nodded and said “The new year will strike in 24 hours. You go now”. They nodded and the emperor said, standing and saluting “Good luck, heroes of eight! Go forth for the Balacruf Empire and slay the darkness!” They saluted back and said in unison “Yes, my Emperor!”.
Regal left first. He was packing his focus, his dust, and most of all equipping his magical armor. A cloak that was runed heavily to protect against magic, bracers that increased his reflexes by 10%, a circlet that tripled his mana capacity, 20 plum potions, 10 grape potions, boots that doubled his speed, and gloves that drew in mana from the environment. His amulet doubled the power output of his spells. His focus was a branch of the first tree fashioned into a staff, which regenerated his body and lifeforce by 3% per second, and was topped in a gem that allowed for atomic pinpointing of spells if gazed through. His shirts and pants were made from the same materials as his gloves and so they helped recharge his lost mana reserves. In total, right now, he had 520 kites of mana. He also readied an axe he had, that could double as a magical focus. It tripled the output of any spell cast through it. He performed the final thing to ensure his victory. He added the might of a prior hero to his own. A dear friend of Cyrus Albright’s, none other than Alfyn Greengrass.

Hallie herself was mostly ready. Her pauldrons and chestplate were enchanted to generate a forcefield that reduced the kinetic force of incoming attacks, her bracers improved her reflexes by 10%. The chainmail shirt did the same. Her boots doubled her speed, as did her pants. Her sword itself was a powerful weapon, unable to break by mortal means and held the ability to add an elemental force to its swing. However, this was not all she had. She put on a pair of golden earrings that once per hour slowed down time around her, while letting her move at full speed. She also put on a winged tiara that granted her the ability to fly. Further, she put on a cape that not only granted her immunity to fear, but gave courage to any who gazed upon it. Additionally, she an axe made from the sharpened bones of a dragon and a bow made from the bones of a dragon and the string of a dryad’s hair. Both items had unique abilities. The axe would inflict injury regardless of resistances, while arrows sent from the bow would always hit her intended mark. For her final preparation, she took some power into herself. The power of a mighty warrior from back then. The might of the hunter Ha’anitt.

Renald decided then was the time to prepare. He had his watch that stopped time for everyone but him. He hadn’t however properly equipped his other magical gear. A cane tipped in silver smithed in moonlight by a lake, the wood carved from wood from the tree’s of duskbarrow. It allowed him to redirect any spell he cast on a moment’s notice. He put on a bowler cap that could turn leaves into mana. He put on a black set of clothes that together improved mana flow and made spell costs cheaper by 15%. His shoes could once per half hour teleport him out of the path of an attack. His monocle improved his perception by 10%. He also carried a dagger that could double as a magical focus like his cane, and if used together they allowed him to manipulate any spell in his line of sight. He also carried a silver blunderbuss that used silver musket balls. The final thing he did was take power into himself, calling upon the might of Therion the thief.

Mary had prepared ahead of time. She had a dress supposedly crafted by Sealtige herself for
Primrose that when worn improved the magical enhancements she could grant allies. She adorned herself with two rings, one to improve the power output of her spells, and the other doubled her magic capacity. Her shoes doubled her reflexes while her earrings improved her mana flow. Finally, she wore a circlet that had a crystal that had 500 kites of mana stored in it and drew in more all the time. She had a dagger equipped that further increased her body’s mana flow and a spear that on its own was simply a sharper stick than a normal spear, but the flag gave improved speed when she waved it in the wind. Before heading out, she took power into herself like the others no doubt were. She brought the power of Sterroza the Starseer into herself.

Nigel himself had quite a bit to pack. An apothecary bag enchanted to triple the potency of any potion or ingredient within. A brown vest that created a forcefield when he was in danger, but only 4 times every hour. The shirt replenished his mana supply once every hour by 20 kites. The pants regulated his blood flow for his mind, giving him more processing power and giving him more stamina to work with. The gloves improved his physical strength and he wore a bandanna that improved his life force. He also wore a single ring that improved his perception. He held the divine axe once wielded by his ancestor, Alfyn Greengrass. An axe that not only tripled his defensive capabilities, but also made him immune to toxins and disease. However, it’s true might was its ability to charge all his mana into a powerful strike. With all that done, he called upon and brought the power of Balrog the Runelord into himself.

Jules prepared his gear. For some reason, he had been chosen to receive the blessing of Dreisang, the Archmagus. He was unsure why but didn’t argue. He put on his turban that regulated his temperature, rendering him resistant to fire and ice. His cape would reduce wind damage, while his rubber boots would reduce electric damage. His hematite ring and pearl earrings would reduce light and dark damage respectively. He put on a shirt to improve his mana flow as well as pants. For gloves, he wore fingerless gloves that doubled his low mana capacity. Finally, he held his prized possession, a single dagger. It was made from the tooth of a dragon and covered in pure metallic magic. Its power was that it allowed him to charge a spell and then unleash it in conjunction with another spell. Considering what Dreisang taught him, that was an impressive feat. With that, he was ready.

Harriet herself needed little preparation. She held her staff, which doubled the power of light magics, with the central gemstone being enchanted to double healing magics. Her cleric’s robes essentially kept a constant forcefield that also doubled as a mana battery around her, that allowed any she deemed not a threat through without hassle. She wore a pair of rings, one that improved mana flow through her, the other that gave her body regenerative powers. For her final act to prepare, she accepted the power of Cyrus Albright, allowing his might into her body.

Marco was the only left to prepare. He put on combat fatigues that improved his stamina and
improved his blood flow, giving him even more. He equipped guns to give him steadier aim while equipping earrings that improved his perception. He wore combat boots that gave him a forcefield that slowed the kinetic force of incoming objects and wore a mantle that furthered this effect. He held his trusty musket, but brought his ancestor’s bow along. It had no name, and it’s power he wasn’t sure of. He simply knew it was magic. He brought various implements made of dragon bone which made dealing damage easier in some ways. The spear dispelled defensive abilities and enchantments, the dagger doubled the damage dealt, and the staff always gave the one hit a concussion. Combining these with the power of Winnehild the Warmaster and he was sure he’d be fine.

Thus, the heroes met before the gate. A small army of 2000 soldiers, all armed and prepared with siege weaponry waited with them. Regal looked back and asked Halie “So. What do you estimate our chances to be?” She scanned the soldiers, then the gate and said “If the legends are to be believed, 54%”. He nodded and said “About the same. I reckon 55%”. She laughed and said “Well! It’s better than 40%, and a great deal more than 0% chance!” with a loud voice. The soldiers stopped, gazing upon the flag that Halie held and felt its power. They cheered loudly as Renald said “Impressive. They’re ready to go”. Halie nodded and asked “Are we?” Everyone nodded in unison as she turned and said “Then let’s go! All forces, Charge!”. All at once, the soldiers from the empire and the heroes rushed in as the ravus family above used the rite and the dragonstones to open the gate.

Inside was abysmal. It was dark, but not impossibly so. From nowhere yet everywhere, a red glow bathed them even if dimly and the landscape around. They were on a raised platform of hard cobble, with hard bone fingers reaching above the platforms as if to grasp it, but not quite. Before them stood two layers of raised platforms, then one square raised platform above the rest, and it was bathed in an ethereal red light. Halie walked forward first, looking between the pedestals before them and the red glow. Everything's dimensions were a mile wide, which made the fact they could fathom them amazing. The soldiers, however slightly demoralized by the enormity of the place, pressed on and pushed their cannons forward. They too moved. Then, the enemy showed itself.

10 large dragons appeared. They were in various states of decay. A couple dozen Ogre Eagle flocks appeared as well, not to mention countless rotting kin races. Halie pointed her sword and said “Everyone! Aim the cannons at the dragons, but wait until they’re in point blank range! Soldier’s, use your guns to kill the Ogre Eagles! Use your sabers for the kins! Go!” in a loud, commander-like voice. The soldiers roared a battle roar and rushed forward. Their enemies followed suit. The soldier’s might’ve lost, being outnumbered 3 to 1, but the kin races were on average weaker than humans and so, the trained, elite soldiers of the empire were able to defeat them more times than not. Further, the heroes got involve, and while they refrained from using wide-range attacks, even Regal’s staff could easily hurt an enemy.
Eventually, the dragons approached. Before the Ogre Eagles, against expectations. Further, they did so mid-combat. As a result, 4 cannons fired prematurely, the soldiers manning them unsure how to react. A dragon’s back was obliterated, coming out its front, and causing it to fall apart. However, the rest immediately wised up and headed to the cannons. Realizing the danger, Regal turned and whispered, doing some hand gestures as he did, “Kori!” Instantly an icicle formed above him and flew forward, somewhat like a missile. He targeted the forward most one. The icicle didn’t penetrate, as he expected, but it did smack it into the ground near the cannon. The dragons turned temporarily, right at the moment the cannons fired. Only the one way left, and the soldiers ganged up on it, blowing its neck right off.

The Ogres immediately attempted a dive bomb. The soldiers were caught off guard and Jules was the only one able to react fast enough, sweeping his hand above and saying “Shirufu, tōrinukete issō!” A flurry of wind whipped from nowhere, sending Ogres directly into the floor, reducing them to dust. After that, it was a simple matter to sweep the remaining kins. The soldiers panted, exhausted from their struggle. Regal stepped forward and said “Soldiers! Rest! Simply reload the cannons and prepare! We shall go forth, and slay Galdera!”. The soldiers cheered, and while they rested, it seemed they fully intended to join. “Inspiring speech” Mary said “Have you been practicing?”. He nodded and said “At your advice, I did. I find it… not easy, but not as difficult as I thought, being sociable”. Mary smiled and said “Told ya!” and continued on when urged by her sister.

The heroes walked up the steps. Unlike what they thought, the stairs themselves were small. It took them mere minutes to scale to the top. The soldiers below suddenly appeared next to them with the cannon, blurring up the stairs. “Wh-what!!?” one asked, shocked. Regal examined the stairs, bending down as he examined them. “They’re enchanted” he said after a moment. He placed his staff over them and said “Fukai densho”. His staff glowed and displayed a hologram with information written on it. The heroes awed and the soldiers asked “Wh-what's wrong?”. “Nothing” Regal said “It’s a distance shortening enchantment”. The soldiers sighed and one waved their rifle in the air. He turned and looked at the others, with Harriet adding “This proves this realm belongs to Galdera. Only a god could pull off an enchantment like this. Even the entire empire’s magical talent, with all the magic items within, could not achieve this”. Regal nodded in agreement.

Their conversation was interrupted as a laughter filled the realm. “So! The humans have come! Much earlier than expected! I hope you don’t mind playing with these first, I need more time!” the voice said, before the far end was bathed in a baleful red light. 4 shadows were cast as 4 foes appeared before them. One was a large, hulking being, 15 feet tall, grey skin clung to intense muscles and red eyes peered through the darkness of the afterworld at them. Another was a 9 foot tall red skinned figure wearing a hooded robe. Two black horns curled out from the hood, and radiated a lot of magic. “If that’s what it takes to get an audience, Galdera, then bring it! We aren’t afraid! Soldiers! Prepare the cannons while we take care of this scum!” and rushed forward. Regal sighed, but prepared as well. These were tough enemies they were about to deal with.
The grey one attacked first. With a bellow, he rushed for Hallie, meeting her challenge. It attempted to attack with a straight punch, but Hallie was incredibly fast, dodging to the side and counter attacking within a few second, fire enveloping her blade. The blade cut but not deeply, only 2 inches of the beasts 2 foot wide arm. She retreated instantly as the being swung its massive arm, attempting to hit her. However, Hallie proved too fast. Mary did a small dance and said “Raion no odori” and changed Hallie’s aura to that of a lion. Additionally, Nigel pulled a potion out, downing it and glowed red. Harriet made some hand signs and pointed her staff, saying “Kageyaku hoshi”. A mass of swirling mass of light gathered behind the grey titan and exploded towards it, forcing it to take a step away. Hallie, noticing its moment of weakness, leapt forth, covering her sword in light energy and slashing.

Jules himself moved, heading past the large man and for the red being, whom responded by pointing its hand and saying “Shokkusutan”, sending forth a tiny bolt of electricity to him. Thankfully, Jules was agile and dodged the spell, waving his hand and saying “Sanshō, watashi no teki ni anata no ikari o tōchi” and suddenly a whirlwind of fire erupted from beneath the red being, enveloping him. It retreated backward, but screamed as silver musketballs tore through him, one after another. Renald smirked, clicking the stopper on his stopwatch and suddenly being 5 meters away, whom began to reload. The being began to weave a fire spell, when suddenly a bullet sank into his head, dissipating his spell. It wasn’t silver, so his skull only cracked, but it still hurt and bled. The being growled, pointed, and said “Kakyu!” while Regal said “Doko, kori” and made the spell fizzle out. Renald suddenly appeared, aiming his silver blunderbuss upwards and firing, lodging more silver musket balls into into the red being. One lodged into its chest, as Regal pointed and said “Shokkusutan”, sending a small bolt of electricity forth. The distraction allowed his spell to connect, paralyzing the red being as Jules appeared and stabbed the beings throat, and twisting. It was only allowed a gurgle before being silenced forever.

While the slash didn’t kill the being, it gave it a massive weak point that Harriet and Nigel with their weapons exploited it. Within minutes, the thing was cleaved in half. Harriet used her Radiant Sun spell to burn away the remains with holy light. “Well!” a voice cried out from below “I did not expect that my pawns would fail to buy me the time I needed! Very well! I shall fight you early! I will absorb the rest of these souls, after I kill you and that army!” Just as the heroes were about to order the rest of the soldiers a hand slammed down onto the platform and a massive being shifted itself upwards. The heroes looked at each other and nodded. “Nigel, Mary, and Harriet you’re with me. Regal, you go with Jules, Marco, and Renald and take care of that eye! We won’t be able to keep up with the main body if he has it!” Hallie said. Regal nodded and ran back to the stairs with the others, shifting one floor before and heading through the caves towards the lower half of Galdera, which contained its Omniscient Eye. The source of its power. An eye that saw all possible events within the next 10 minutes and let him know the tells for which future would be followed, allowing Galdera to act accordingly.
The lower heroes were assaulted immediately. The eye saw them coming and summoned a soul to begin its assault. The soul summoned blades of dark mana and launched them at the heroes, forcing them to take cover. “Heh. Easy stuff” Renald said, turning to Jules “Have a light spell ready”. Jules nodded and said “Fine”. Renald clicked the stopper on his stopwatch and time froze for all but him. He held it, and his blunderbuss, as he rushed out of hiding. He could see the flurry of dark blades flying, but immobile avoiding them was like moving through a sea of standing people, except everyone was minimum of a foot apart from one another. He weaved through, walking right to the soul which held its hands out, each behind a pair of magic circles, lifted his blunderbuss, aiming properly, then let go of the stopper and dropped it so he could hold the blunderbuss and fire its silver payload. The stopwatch was connected to a chain and so he wouldn’t lose such an artifact so easily. However, he barely avoided a single dark blade that it launched in retribution, but screamed as a swarm cut him up. That was what Jules needed though.

“Tenshi, arawarete anata no kagayaki o hanachimasu!” and twisted his hands into circles and put them behind him, completing the spell, while also holding 1 ounce of snow that evaporated instantly and a pair of dove feathers that burnt up. Components for the spell, that made the taxing mana cost lessen considerably. Instantly, blades of light formed above the eye and soul and rained down, the soul taking the brunt of the damage. The soul was unable to respond, which gave Marco and Regal all they needed to retaliate. Coming out, Regal made his staff make certain motions and said “Raiu!” and formed a thundercloud over the Omniscient Eye that rained lightning bolts onto it and the soul that acted as its barrier. Marco rushed forward, holding both a dragon bone sword and axe, and began a series of fast, furious, devastating blows. Each one made a deep cut into the flesh of the soul, before finally it was severed and dissipated into the howling wind. Regal moved fast, waving his hand towards Renald whom had finished reloading and saying “Okyu sochi!” . “Thank you master Regal” Renald said, standing and wiping blood off his suit with a handkerchief. It was enchanted to clean anything it touched instantly. Regal nodded as Marco continued his assault on the eye, while Jules made more hand motioned after retrieving dust and components and said “Sanshōo, anata no ikari o fujō sa sete fukidasu!”, and an instant later fire erupted inside the being.

The eye looked at each rapidly. It suddenly formed three souls! Instantly, the one from before moved and punched Marco away, causing Marco to grunt as he flew 40 feet away. Jules barely avoided a strike from its other hand, but was unable to shrug off the force of the scream the topmost one gave. He formed more hand signals and said “Nōmu, okiya te kaminari o hanatsu!” . Instantly, storm clouds formed below the cavern and suddenly a tree of pure lightning rose up, sending millions of volts of electricity into all three! Renald was about to stop time when Regal stopped him, used his staff and said “Mo fubuki” and suddenly ice mana expanded and swirled around the beast, threatening to freeze it solid. That was when marco struck, pulling out the staff and striking the only one unaffected. He proceeded to turn, tossing the dragon bone staff and smacking the first soul in the head, making it hold its own head. Renald, seeing his chance, stopped time, approached, released time and fired another shot. It was then the eye retaliated. Suddenly, the left soul, despite its concussion and disorientation, grabbed renald’s arms, while another screamed in his face, forcing intense pressure on his body. He screamed in pain, and then some when the right soul grabbing his face while they were engulfed in purple flames. Jules screamed “Renald!” and made hand signs, saying “Nugi, araware, watashi no teki o nomikomi nasai!”. Instantly, icicles formed and shot into the souls and the eye, then formed more and repeated three times. Marco meanwhile pulled out his sword and cut the left souls arms and then used the eye to kick away, turning and tossing it.


“We’re losing here Regal, what do we do!?” Marco yelled. Renald was barely alive. Regal nodded focusing his mana, turning to Jules. He pushed his rod into Jules head, not forcefully, nor in a way that would harm, and said “Pen no chikara de, Are fan no chie ni yotte, anata no shimo be-tachi no kenkyona denwa ni kotaete, kono hito ni keimō o atae nasai”. Instantly, Jules glowed with a brilliant blue aura. Jules nodded and placed his knife to his forehead, saying “Dreisang, Mana no masutā, sōsarī no kannisha, watashi wa anata ga watashi ni anata no kihon-tekina chikara no ichibu o ataeru koto o kongan suru!”. His aura changed to a rainbow of red and purple auras. Marco himself stood, moving quickly to retrieve new weapons. Dragon bone items. He said “Winnehild, ude no misu sutoresu, soshite sensō no tattsuji wa, watashi no teki o korosu chikara o watashi ni ataemasu!” and rushed forward, orange enveloping his mana aura. The left soul reached for him but he responded with 4 quick slashed from his sword, before turning and tossing his dragon bone dagger into the throat of the top soul. He spun and pulled out his staff, slamming its heavy end onto the head of the right soul. Spinning around, he clubbed the left’s chest in, making it dissipate. He then tossing the sword up to the top one horizontally, cleaving its head off. He quickly rolled forward, avoiding a blast of energy from the eye below him. He turned and tossed an axe, hitting the right soul square in the head, dissipating it too. It also exposed the eye to damage! “Now!” Regal screamed. “Sanshōo, anata no ikari o fujō sa sete fukidasu!” screamed Jules, releasing his fire spell inside the eye. Guts and blood flew out, engulfing them all. Regal immediately moved and began to cast First Aid and Revitalize over and over again, clearing possible infections from the blood and guts spilled onto Renald and healing him.

Hallie panted. She was bruised heavily. Mary and Harriet were looking a bit rough themselves. The forcefield did protect from Galdera’s assaults, but that didn’t mean the ground wouldn’t scrap her as she rolled. Likewise, Mary sometimes got smacked by Harriet’s forcefield, hurting her too. Then there was Nigel whom was fine, but only because he was a genius chemist and knew how to order his body to heal and had magic to help it. It was then Galdera made a mistake. Nigel had fully charged his axe with his full mana pool of 700 kites, and charged. Galdera raised its blade high and swung down full force, to Nigel’s left. However, Nigel moved right instead, then used his incredible strength and the Jump spell to leap over the arm and slash into it, cutting deep as the mana basically severed the blade off. Galdera screamed as it pulled its arm away, saving his hand, but not the gigantic hunk of metal called the ‘Blade of Galdera’. “Hahahaha!” Nigel said, looking up at Galdera, smirking “Guess you got ‘cut off at the pass’, eh ya false god!?”. Hallie ground and yelled “Nigel Greengrass! This is a serious fight! We’re staking our lives on this!”. Mary suddenly said “Pansadansu!” and changed Nigel’s aura to that of a panther’s. “Wow!” Shouted Nigel, leaping backwards as the arm that once laid inside the blade smashed into where he once stood.

“Insolent mortals! I need not my omniscient eye to defeat you! You only delay the inevitable!” Galdera yelled, standing fully and tilting its head back. “Harriet!” Hallie yelled, as Nigel and Mary retreated behind her. Harriet leapt over and stood in front of Hallie right as it unleashed a torrent of black wind at them! Harriet’s forcefield spiderwebbed after several seconds, but held as the wind stopped. It also parted it, preventing any front touching the heroes. “Now!” Hallie yelled, Harriet
dispelling the forcefield and pointing her staff at Galdera and saying “Koshi-sen!” and made a large explosion of light by Galdera’s maw. Mary began to dance, and said “Raion no odori!” and changed Nigel’s aura to that of a lion’s. Nigel pulled out a runestone and tapped it to his axe, saying “Raitorun”. His axe began to glow with light, as did his allies weapons. He then downed a large plum potion. Harriet used another Radiant Sun spell to misdirect another breathe attack from Galdera while Hallie ran for Galdera. Yelling, she leapt and cut the soul attached to the front of its chest. She then dashed around avoiding its magical attacks, which created wind, ice, fire, and lightning explosions. Meanwhile, Nigel finished charging his axe and rushed himself. “Harriet! Need a lift!” he yelled. She nodded and used a few ounces of Spessartine powder to delay the casting of her Bright Star spell, saying “Kageyaku hoshi!” Once Nigel was ready, and leapt towards Galdera, the spell went off, it’s explosion propelling Nigel towards the main body. “Rūn no tatsu jindeari, kodai no yarikata no ban’nindearu barurogu wa, watashi ni shōrai e no michi o shimeshite kuremasu!” and fired a beam of pure elemental energy. It wiped away the maw and before Galdera could recover, he landed on the head. It was then the soul Hallie had been fighting was finally cut to pieces thanks to the Light Rune from Nigel and her swords natural ability to become wreathed in an element.

Nigel smirked down at the broken Galdera, who screamed at him “Wretch! I will consume your soul last and make you watch as I tear and chew the others!” He raised his axe, wreathed in power, mana, and light, and said “That’s what you said to the first group! Get real!” and slammed it down, the potion from earlier still active and making a blow so powerful it left a crater in Galdera’s hide. Another blow created a thorough tunnel through Galdera. “Ga… aah…. How……?” Galdera croaked, barely hanging in there. Hallie jumped off to join the heroes below, while Harriet approached Galdera. “Wait… wait, wait, wait…. Your souls… I recognize them…. Those heroes!” Galdera said. “Yes. We are the descendents of the first eight. We were born and bred purely for this. In exchange, we are going to take destiny in our own hands!” she said, triumphantly and raised her staff. Galdera suddenly began to laugh manically. “Your own hands? Oh you stupid child! You really believe that nonsense! Fine! Kill me, and send me back to darkness! I’ll just be back in 2000 years, and I’ll laugh at your misery!” Galdera taunted. Harriet glared, and fired a single spell. Radiant Sun, the spell enveloped Galdera’s exposed, bleeding-from-the-mouth head, turning it into melted flesh. The body reacted instantly, flopping onto the platform and falling to the pit, scraping along the way. Hallie and the other heroes luckily were far enough away to no longer care.

After hours of marching back to everhold, healing, and tending to the dead, wounded, and sick, they stood in the throne room. All eight. They wore casual clothes, as their first act of promised freedom. Regal himself wore a brown, tan-patterned poncho over a shirt and pants and black dress shoes. “Heroes! You have done well! Galdera raised but was slain before he was properly able to empower himself on souls! Like the first heroes, nay, sooner than they!” the high emperor, Juane Balacruf, proclaimed “I will hold a feast in your honor. I pray you attend. Further! Your reward!” and waved his hand. His stewards approached, holding badges and papers and then briefcases. “Those badges mark your status and that the guard is to ignore minor crimes you commit. The paperwork, which all offices will have a copy of, allow you to ignore certain covenants. Specifically, the 2nd, 6th, 8th, and 10th covenants. Finally, the leaves promised” Juane said loudly. Regal checked his and was satisfied. He had 5 million leaves, the papers specifically forbade the police from interfering with anyone associated with the heroes that broke the mentioned covenants, and the then the badge was likely in public record. He placed a curled fist over his heart, three fingers in a salute over his left eyebrow.
and said “Thank you, your majesty! I am forever grateful!” Juanes merely waved his hand, dismissing them.

A few years later, Regal received a letter. He was in the middle of searching for his missing sister, Veda Albright. She said she had gotten a job in Riverford, and the next day vanished. He opened the letter and read it. It was from Hallie and Mary’s father, Jonathan Azelhart. He was inviting him to discuss something private, something he didn’t wish to reveal over letter beyond the fact that his daughters have vanished and he knows why and what caught Regal’s attention. That Jonathan thinks it's connected to Veda’s disappearance. He wasted no time and practically ran out the door with little luggage to get a horseless carriage headed for Noblecourt. It was only 5 days away from where he lived now, Atlasdam. He paid 400 of his last 200,000 leaves he had left. He had invested much into a research laboratory, secret of course, that studied many things related to magic, using technology developed by science to help. It flew in the face of the 10th covenant, but he was legally allowed do. He even still had his papers. He arrived 5 days later, thanking the man who brought him and entered town, heading for the Azelhart estate. It was technically also the Eisenberg estate, since it was common knowledge that Primrose Azelhart needed help establishing the Azelhart family and that Olberic Eisenberg was happy to help. It was never known if there was ever romance, but he personally felt there was at least a mutual friendship. He entered the estate and Jonathan greeted him wearily, checking if he was followed. He had not brought his implements, feeling he could return home to arm if need be. This was his greatest mistake.

He awoke in a pod. Around him, liquid drained somewhere. He felt various… things detach and retract. He landed on his feet. Stone. Brick, specifically. He could hear some talking, and the heavy panting of someone. He looked over and instantly he felt like he had fallen. His little sister sat against the wall, wearing clothing far different from what he recalled she was reported wearing when she vanished. Hallie stormed over and spoke to her, when another yelled. The man stood, yelling about something. It was then he noticed other figures. Some sort of officer, one on the ground, one standing, and a noble-looking fellow. He frowned but let it go as Hallie rushed forward and struck him in the guy. What he didn’t expect was the lightning to leap from her fist and into the man. Hallie looked genuinely shocked, but his sister showed now. It was then he noticed other figures. Some sort of officer, one on the ground, one standing, and a noble-looking fellow. He frowned but let it go as Hallie rushed forward and struck him in the guy. What he didn’t expect was the lightning to leap from her fist and into the man. Hallie looked genuinely shocked, but his sister showed now. It was then he noticed the blood. Frowning, he stood finally. He needed to talk to her. To see if she was her. “Sister?” he asked “Is that you?”. The woman, whom he suspected to be Veda, stared up at him. She stared for a few moments, before she answered that she wasn’t sure. That she had amnesia. After a few minutes and tense conversation, she said something to another and then said to him, in their language “Language has advanced, but the writings the same. You’ll get it down, eventually”. He held his tears in. He didn’t want to look like he was crying over a potential stranger to others. However, he knew it was her. Only Veda could be so kind in such a dire situation.
Chapter 31: the Scholar, Act 4 - For Memories

Chapter Summary

Nemu, with Greg, Regal, and Mark, head out for Atlasdam, seat of the Kingdom of Sorcery and Scholars, Naaz to investigate the final lab that the empire royal law enforcement found. They discovered it was the old lab of Regal, built after he acquired a waiver from certain covenants from the high emperor of his time, for the service of fighting Galdera. He also reveals Nemu's past, that she was his sister once upon a time. What awaits Nemu at Regal's laboratory? Will she ever recover her memories?

Chapter 31

For Memories

She finished packing the car. Today, she was heading to Atlasdam. It would be roughly 4 days of driving. Regal was inspecting the vehicle. Apparently, back in the day, they were far different. More blocky and used heavier engines and steel. However, he had finished mere seconds after her, waving a few fingers and saying “Hon’yaku”. An aura of magic flashed on him and he said “Another benefit to using the spell, it helps me learn the language better… which if i’m going to live in this era, is valuable”. She nodded and asked “What about the others?”. “I’ve given them items to use for that purpose. Same effect really. Double-way translation, while making them aware of it all mentally” he responded “Now, let’s get to my lab… based on what you’ve told me, I fear the worst”. She nodded. Papers that gave him the legal right to break the 10th covenant, among other ones, because he was one of the eight heroes. Nicknamed collective as “The Eight”. This was because the first heroes were usually called “The Eight Heroes” and while not much difference between the two, it proved enough to allow for normal conversation.

She got into the car with Regal and the two officers that were to accompany her and began their trip. “So… Atlasdam?” Greg asked. Regal looked at her as she simply said “Atlasdam” and turned the car on and began to drive. It was silent at first, when Regal said 2 hours into the drive “Osterra really hasn’t changed much”. Mark replied “Yeah. There’s a theory floating around that it takes years for nature to visibly change, that most of it is extremely gradual”. “I see… interesting. If I obtain my waivers, I shall look into it” Regal replied. Greg thoughtfully looked out the window, then commented “I really hope you can disarm the security… be a tough ride if you can’t”. Regal looked into his palm and counted the callouses. “I’m not certain sadly. I used my staff as my key…. Granted, the magical energies inside, which i’ve absorbed seemingly, but still… I can’t guarantee that I can unlock my labs security” Regal explained “However, my little sister here may be able to” and he smiled. Nemu, feeling a bit uneasy, just smiled sheepishly too. Regal ceased, seemingly sensing her discomfort. They eventually stopped for the evening at a roadside motel, between
Stonegard and Cobbleston. “Huh” Regal asked “Finally did away with taverns?”. She shook her head “No, though those have become unpopular lately” and headed inside.

After 2 more days of driving, they finally arrived. They got rooms so she could recover from driving fatigue and Regal explored the city, with escort from Greg and Mark. By the time midnight rolled around, she was fully rested and away. Based on the fact that none of them were outside when she left her motel room, she guessed they were sleeping. She took this moment to restock on gem dust, getting 5 ounces of every kind. She wanted to be prepared, since it was uncertain whether Regal would be able to disarm the lab’s security or not. After returning home, she recalculated her formulas to account for the new dust she had. After this she noted the actual amounts she had. 5 ounces for most, having restocked on certain ones she lacked, but she had more than she thought on some. She had 20 ounces of Agate Dust and 10 ounces of Grounded Aquamarine. She smiled, since more dust meant more powerful spells. Especially the aquamarine. Agate dust would add a drain quality to spells, healing her with her opponents lost lifeforce, but aquamarine, for a few more kites of mana than normal, let spells be cast in a third of the time. For example, her strongest spell, which she decided to name ‘Comet’, took 24 seconds to cast, incantation and the magic circle. However, with Aquamarine powder, she could cast it in 8 seconds, the incantation bringing the magic into reality faster and the magic circle creating the magic faster.

As she finished, she heard a knock and stopped. She stood up and checked through the peephole and opened the door. Regal, Greg, and Mark stood there, waiting. “Glad to see your up miss Nemu. Shall we depart?” Greg asked. She smiled and nodded, saying “Absolutely” and stepped outside, her gem dust bag on one side, and her general goods bag on the other. It took only an hour to navigate the bustling scholar metropolis to reach the school. Albright Academy, for gifted minds was the most prestigious academy in the Balacruf Empire. It was founded by Cyrus Albright after his adventures past the Gates of Finis and he made academic paper after academic paper regarding his findings. They were suppressed a few hundred years after the second rising of Galdera. Their destination however was an underground lab, supposedly 10 floor deep, and as wide as the administration building, which while compact by modern standards, was massive for its time. It originally held some classrooms, but in modern times these rooms were storage rooms for the personnel files the academy had on staff. She entered the building and approached the front desk. “Hello?” she said “I’m here to speak to the headmaster”. The secretary looked at her and asked “Did you have an appointment?”. She shook her head and said “No, but I have two officers interested in a matter of national security”. The secretary stared at them for a few seconds before picking up the phone and dialing a number. “Hello? Sorry sir but the police are here. They need to see you about a national security matter. Alright sir, i’ll tell them’ and she hung up, turning to them and saying “He’ll be here in 5 minutes. Go to his office, second floor, first door from the left”. She nodded and began walking, Regal staying behind while the officers followed.

“So, it’s true then. These labs… they’re connected?” the headmaster asked. She nodded and said “Yes. I believe so. The technology is similar between each. However, I believe their developments recent. They’re mostly active”. The headmaster sighed and sunk into his seat. “Whatever will we do?
If magical technology is discovered beneath the academy, we’ll be ruined” the headmaster complained, his light brown mustache wiggling with every lip flap. “You did report it when it was discovered and if you’re truthful about not using it, not liable. The academy’s legal troubles are none. Reputation wise, I only see promise” Greg said, reassuring the headmaster who replied “Understood… don’t have a choice either way. I’m foggy on the details. Talk to Ray Penbrook in the library. He holds classes in one of the rooms about Empire History and Legal Law”. She nodded and said “Thank you for your cooperation headmaster. I wish you a good day and good fortunes”. She then turned and left, the officers following. “We trusting him?” Mark asked after a few minutes as they descended the left hand staircase. “No. After last time, I’m hesitant to trust anyone in a position of power I’ve just met” she replied, Regal approaching, holding a book. “Hello. How’d it go?” he asked. She nodded and said “Let’s talk as we walk. We have a professor to meet” and began walking. Regal walked alongside her, the two officers following.

She approached the classroom and could hear the professor. She was only a few feet away from the open door, so that made sense. She turned the corner as the professor said “Now students, spend the next half hour reading pages 20 to 30 regarding Leona’s efforts to unite the kingdoms” and turned to her, asking “Can I help you?”. She nodded and asked “Can we talk in private?” the professor nodded and stepped out of the class with her, closing the door. “How can I help?” he asked. “I seek the underground lab and I was told you were the best person to talk to. Could you lead us there?” She asked. Ray nodded and said “Of course. I have half an hour to spare” and headed towards another part of the library. Unlike before, there was a proper basement. “You see, a few dozen generations after Cyrus, the Albrights decided to improve thoroughfare in their school for staff that needs to get quickly from place to place while not dealing with the traffic above by creating and installing a series of tunnels connecting to various basements of various buildings. All are manned and guarded, but the basements themselves are never thoroughly checked” Ray explained as they approached the cellar doors. He pulled out a golden medal and said to the guard “Excuse me. Ray Penbrook, Professor in Imperial History and Legal Law. His majesty has sent an investigator to officially investigate the strange lab we found”. The guard inspected the medal for a moment before handing it back, saying “Alright sir. Checks out” and proceeded to open the door with his partner on the opposite side. “How did you happen upon it?” Nemu asked, stepping down the steps with Ray and her comrades. “I was looking for a particular book and when I found it, I saw a strange lever. I pulled it out of curiosity and a secret door opened into a strange spiraling, descending corridor” he answered, moving to a door in the cellar “It’s located in the back of the lab of a Hasphalt Reimen. He’s a researcher of magic, studying it as much as he can”.

Ray was quite the well of knowledge she discovered. It was less because of the fact he was smart and more because he took the time and energy to memorize more or less anything he read, and he read a lot because he loved learning. It was admirable, to her at least, that he could remember so well. Within half an hour, they stood in the lab. It looked as though it had existed for ages, yet whoever dwelled here had maintained it very well. She gawked as she went over the various potions she saw. Standard healing grape potions, inspiriting plum tonics, even a distilled soulstone. Eventually, Ray cleared his throat and said “Right. The entrance is here” and pulled a lever, revealing what he described. A 5 foot wide, 8 foot tall opening to a corridor that spiraled downward. The corridor was lined with rhodolite dust, a material that rendered mana invisible. This of course applied to spells too. It allowed the secret lab to remain that, secret. “Normally, I’d be chivalrous and let ladies enter first.
However, I might suggest the large officer first” Ray said. She nodded and Greg stepped forward. They hadn’t brought their riot shields like before, but they were armed and they had their kevlar vests and pauldrons on. Following him was Regal, followed by her and then Ray, ending with Mark. After 5 minutes of descending, they arrived. Before them was a small room, large enough for them all to comfortably fit. On the other side, a great 20 feet wide and 20 foot tall door stood. Regal took point and began to chant in the language of magic. After a few minutes, a ball of magic appeared and he slowly inserted his hand and said a single word “Maho”. The ball turned a bright purple and faded away. Regal smiled, turning and saying “I got us inside. Let’s go” and opened the door. Inside was a lab that was certainly not inactive. Chemicals moved through the various tubes, she could hear the hum of electricity in the laboratory, and she could see the pods on and filled with magic. “Regal, this lab is operating. What is it doing?” She asked, stepping forward. “It shouldn’t be doing anything… and this is very different. I had only a few pods activated when I left” he said. Ray looked very confused and asked “Miss… Nemu if I’m remembering correctly, who is this?”.

“He’s Regal Albright, and yes, that one. It’s a long story, trust me. So, do you have a spell to tell if anyone is in there?” she asked. He nodded, holding his hands out, and said “I’ll cast a life detection spell. The creatures in the pods should have not enough of a heartbeat to pick up”. Regal then chanted, while channeling mana forward, “Jinsei o saguru”. The mana coated his body, covering him in a slight pink aura. Regal opened his eyes and said “20 humanoids. All adults, 8 females, 10 males, 2 unknown.”. She nodded and asked “Then… Greg, Mark? Mind doing your job?”. They shook their head, Greg saying “Nah. This is such a blatant violation of the 10th covenant”. Both walked forward, drawing their mauser c96’s and making sure they were loaded as they advanced. She was about to go forward as Regal said “Wait here a moment. I’ll be the mage of their group. You be reinforcements alright?”. She stared at him, was about to say something, when Ray said “I would have to agree miss. If the royal investigator dies, then no one can report what happened. Plus, if he’s really Regal, him and they should be enough”. Regal nodded, and continued.

She waited, patiently, then snapped to Ray and asked “Why in the Afterworld did you say that? Do you think i’m helpless?”. Ray shook his head, looking to see until Regal was out of view and said “No. I don’t. However, I needed to speak to you, privately”. “What about?” she asked, a bit baffled. She slowly reached for her rod, but stopped as she saw Ray’s eyes look at her hand, then at her… yet his posture did not change. As if he was going to let her. “It’s about another job of mine. Tell me, what have you heard of the north?” he asked. “Not much. Bunch of large, light blue humanoids rampaging. Why?” she answered, then questioned. She wanted an answer and was a bit nervous now. “The northern kingdom, Tir na Nog, have their own heroes, called Muses. I won’t get into it now, but basically we inspire heroes, empower them. I casted a spell subtly, one I discovered, that would let me find the hero I’m to inspire. It’s you” Ray said. She stopped and stared for a few seconds before being unable to help asking “Wait, you’re a northerner teaching humans?”. Ray nodded and said “Yes… to say i’m a northerner in nationality is technically incorrect. I was born and raised on empire soil. However, my parents hid everything from everyone. Spells weaved into my mana streams, the local mana that flowed around me to obscure my identity. I only discovered I was a muse when the Titania of the northern nation contacted me via a dream, informing me of it”. Nemu had so, so many questions. “Are you being honest?” she asked, since if it was a joke, 99% of her questions would vanish. Then, before her eyes, Ray’s skin turned a deep green shade, the man’s hair turned a bright green color, and his eyes turned green. “I am what is known north as an alf. The race in the eastern region that cares for the great forest. Specifically, my family helped care for the
“So why reveal this now?” she asked. “Because it’s going to get dangerous. I was able to snoop and they’re into deep experimentation. I wanted to give a lesser form of my muse’s blessing. However, I need your consent, as with all casting” he said. Nemu thought about it, then sighed, pulling out her rod. “Fine. The moment I detect dangerous magic, I’mcountering it and attacking, understood?” she said. He nodded, and with a flick of his hand, a magic circle formed under her. “Kono shujinkō ni watashi wa kioku no okurimono o sazukemasu” he chanted, the magic circle elevating. She could feel its mana melding into her, invading it, yet not. It discarded decayed mana and used itself to replenish heres. It then went into her mind. She could feel something happening. A memory. A thought. An idea had formed. She gasped as a single, clear memory entered her head. “A spell… I invented a spell…. In the old lab…” she stammered, trying to not become overwhelmed. She saw what she was writing. The spell name was ‘comet’. Its incantation translated meant “wisdom of ice, possibility of storm, will of fire. Comet”. She knew exactly what she needed to help with the casting and make the mana she needed to provide to bring it into reality less, and how many kites of mana she needed.

She pulled her spellbook and flipped to a blank page, pulling some mana to her hand and pressing on it. Instantly, words filled the page, filling with the exact spell she remembered. “How…?” she asked, slowly looking at him. “I am the muse of memories. A rare role in stories. Most help a hero with no past remember themselves. I am rushed so that’s all for now. Now go! Before it’s too late!” he said, already having shifted back to his human disguise. She thought a moment, then nodded, turning and running into the lab. She had remembered something else, unrelated. She knew now what her brother was studying. The relationship between blood and magic. She rushed through the lab, following the sounds of battle. What she saw could only be described as dire. She saw Greg pouring healing grape juice over a burn on his hand while Regal maintained a barrier spell defending them. She ran over and asked “What’s the situation?”. Regal turned and said “They’re all mages… and hid it well. When his back was turned, a mage slammed him with a fire spell. I led a retreat and tipped this pod over”. She nodded and peeked over, then ducked back behind. “So. What’s the plan?” she asked. “I don’t know” Regal admitted “There are enough mages to overpower even me, and the few that aren’t mages have mausers. We’re pinned”. She thought for a moment, checking the other side. They were preparing a spell together. They were using fire mana. “Kasai” she chanted, pointing to the spell. It fizzled out and the mages began shouting. “I have a spell” she said. “You do?” he asked. She nodded and said “Cover me. Maintain the barrier for a few more seconds. When you hear ‘Suisei, drop it’ and stepped into view. With her rod, she formed the magic circle. She tossed some selenite dust onto the circle and held her rod up. She began chanting as Regal maintained the barrier. The mages launched highly offensive spells. ‘Fireball’. ‘Blizzard’. ‘Lightning Storm’. ‘Ignis Ardere’. It taxed his magic reserves heavily, especially since he didn’t have the mana pool he used to. “Kōri no chie, arashi no kanōsei, hi no ishi. Suisei!” she chanted, a mass of fire mana, ice mana, and electric mana swelled in the center of the circle, each trailing their element behind them. The barrier dropped and the mass sped forward like a bullet formed of magic!
The blue trail of pure power it let behind was brilliant for the second it existed. Pure perfection she gathered. The moment it impacted, the force of the impact knocked everyone off they feet, implanting their opponents into either the floor or various pods. She panted, the mana having left her to fuel the spell. 100 kites of mana. She was also wondering if she hit her head wrong, as she felt light-headed. Suddenly, she was drinking a healing grape potion and felt better, and was helped to her feet by Greg. “You alright?” he asked. She nodded and said “That spell… took a lot of mana, that’s all… and I might’ve hit my head”. Greg nodded and offered “Well, we’ve got some Inspiring Plum Potions if you need them”. She shook her head and said “Save them, in case we encounter more enemies”. Greg nodded and said “Shall we continue? I estimate only 10 more enemies or so, assuming this was full scale and not over scale”. Nemu gave him a quizzical look and he replied “A general medical practice of this scale would have 15 staff members. Based on that, and the nature of this operation, i’d assume only double the staff to keep it small”. “How do they get people in?” she asked. “Simple. They have a mole in the academy that has access to both researcher labs and staff-only areas” Mark answered. She thought about as they continued, heading for the deepest part of the lab, lead by Regal. Eventually, they came upon what was clearly the office, with a gold-plated label and everything. Greg and Mark flanked the door while Regal prepared a spell. As the tiny magic circle floated over the door, he whispered “Bureku” and the door splintered inward. Some screaming was heard, but Greg and Mark rushed in and pointed their guns, screaming “Freeze! You’re under arrest!”. 4 mages and 2 armed guards and 4 technicians whom did immediately. Greg misfired a shot into the ground near a guard to illustrate he wasn’t kidding and the guards disarmed themselves. The mages likewise surrendered after that, knowing they couldn’t protect against bullets.

Nemu scoured the area. The equipment was still operational and was updated to english. The immediate, accessible, currently in use data had horrifying implications. On the short, while magic was not genetic, giving an ounce of blood from someone capable of magic to something that lacked it gave that thing magical powers. Further, they had begun extracting blood from captured northerner mages and then using them for experiments. She relayed this to the police, on of which immediately fled to retrieve backup. “This is horrible” Greg said, looking over his own console “So much experimentation. Both on live victims and the dead. Whoever is running this operation is completely devoid of morality”. She had nearly thrown up four times. Once because she found the record regarding the northerner she fought. He was being pumped with blood from magical monsters and the liquid magic of golem-like creatures. Another, they pumped liquid magic and the blood of a northerner mage into the dead bodies of buried soldiers they got their hands on, only to realize they created terrifying creatures. Finally, the current entry, went over the creation of a blood crystal. While perfect in design, it was found to be stronger if made from the blood of northerner mages. They had a stock of 50 crystals and had managed to catalogue and categorize 10 different types, each with varying strengths and weaknesses. It was horrifying.

It was then she heard Regal say “I’m sorry… this is horrifying. I had no idea my research would be used like this…”. She responded, she wasn’t sure why, “You couldn’t have predicted the malice of our own kind. All we can do is fix it”. She heard Regal pause for a minute and then say “Veda! I have info on the head scientist!”. She turned and walked over, asking “Yes? What about them?” and looked. The head scientist was a member of the schools board of directors and according to the record they were a northerner, a mutated one. Something called a Genai, and they had mutated due to absorbing dark mana from a Baun graveyard. It was then something happened. Suddenly, a series of screams emanated from the laboratory. Turning, Greg rushed forward, then screamed “She’s
killed them!” and pulled out his mauser, before ducking to one side of the door as a magic bolt flew through. It looked somewhat similar to her ‘comet’ spell, but it was purple and white. She rushed to the other side and looked out, gasping. Before her stood the head scientist, who’s name was Vigor Vase. She had deep purple skin and platinum blonde hair, with eyes a misty grey color, both the sclera and iris. She stood at 9 feet tall, and was quite curvaceous. However, this was off put by the dead bodies of the mages, guards, and technicians they had tied up outside. In Vigor’s hands was purple ash. “What the hell happened!?” she demanded. “Simple” Vigor said, with a slight growl to her voice “I took their souls and blood to make a soulstone and blood crystal… something wrong with that…?”. “Is something wrong with that!?” Nemu screamed “You just killed people! Don’t you realize that!?”. “Killed? You can’t kill tools. You just recycle them after use” Vigor responded, moving a hand over the soulstone and saying “Jōshō shi, shōhi shi, fuka-sa no kurayami, soshite teki o jōka”. Dark energy seeped from the hand and was absorbed into the soulstone. She felt sick. After nearly throwing up a few times now, she moved to the side and collapsed onto her hands and knees, and began to puke. “Are you okay!?” both Regal and Greg asked, concerned. After a minute of retching, she pulled herself to her feet, and clung to the nearby metal table that was bolted into the floor. Greg, looking at her with a bit of pity and concern, looked at Regal and asked “Can you contact anyone from here?”. Regal, whom was using a healing spell, looked at Greg and said “Doubtful. I used the public telegram, which according to you was dismantled 500 years ago with the advent of the telephone”. Greg frowned and said “Then we’re in trouble”. Regal stared and sighed, moving towards the door and whispered “Burokkubaria” and instantly a slab of pure, hardened, solid mana filled in the doorway. “Ohhhh? What’s this supposed to be? A spellllll?” Vigor asked, tapping it. “Yes, and it’s a rather complex formula. It’d take any mage years to crack, and even me a couple of weeks. Reinforcements will arrive before you break through. So surrender! Or you’ll regret your life choices!” Regal yelled out. Nemu, while still feeling a bit weak, looked around for windows. She saw none. She looked through a nearby console. Nothing immediately apparent that would be helpful. Just more disgusting stuff. Apparently, they applied the method for making blood crystals and applied it to people’s souls. Same result, except it was a familiar item. A soulstone. Normally, soulstones were gemstones treated and curated by mages and mana. The empire had a very lucrative business selling soulstones. According to the console, soulstones made from actual stones are 250% stronger than regular soulstones.

She frowned and stepped away, then got an idea. She looked at Regal and Greg, then said “I have an idea…. This research… despicable as it was… I can use this”. She then reached to one of the cabinets under the table and opened it. “What… what are you saying? We can’t use these things! They’re evil!” Regal stated. She pulled out one of the blood pumps and began setting it up, ignoring Regal, until he grabbed her arm and said “Stop!”. “We can’t! We’re in a corner and we risk losing more! Mark is on his way and he has no idea of what he might face! Further she could break in any second. We need something and we have it right here” she retorted and before he could counter she said “Don’t worry, i’m not forcing you. I’m not monsters like them. If you don’t want to, I will”. She turned to greg and inquired “You said you have healing grape potions, no?”. Greg nodded, but said with a tone of apprehension “Yes but ma’am, are you sure? Isn’t using methods related to Galdera worship-” but was cut off. “Cyrus Albright, 2006 BE, ‘Knowledge itself cannot be good or evil-only those that would use it’. Yes it comes from Galdera, but we’re out of options…. It isn’t evil if my methods are ethical. I’ll use myself and anyone that donates. After that, I’ll baptize the blood crystal
“You actually did it… with your own blood…” Regal said, aghast. “Yeah” she groaned out weakly. The machine began to form the crystal, using mana charged in a tank. She down the last of their healing grape potions and sat on the floor, slumping against the wall. “What will you do with it?” Greg asked. She stared at the machine, saying “Mana flows through us via our bloodstreams, specifically our blood” and pulled her rod out. She took the ruby and detached it, using some gem dust and mana, and waited. Greg and Regal’s eyes widened and Regal said “Veda, that’s crazy! It’ll never work!”. Nemu looked at him and asked “Was that… my name? Before I mean”. Regal stared and nodded, saying “Yes…. it meant wisdom”. She chuckled and said, moving and using her rod to help her stand, then Greg helping her “Well… I named myself Nemu Cias. To mark my rebirth. I was given purpose and granted trust. I will survive this and get the truth to his majesty”. She moved to the table and picked up the now completed blood crystal, placing it where the ruby sat once. It was misshapen, odd-looking, and not at all asymmetrical. However, she was going to change that. She held her rod out as Greg moved behind her and held her, saying “I’ll be your brace in case this pushes back…. Or to pull you back”. She nodded, looking at Regal and saying “Veda Albright… it’s a nice name. I would’ve liked it, I think… now stand back. Please”. Regal nodded, sighing in defeat and walking towards the barrier. He pumped mana in it, trying to repair it.

She began to chant, instilling ice, electric, and fire mana into the crystal. “Watashi no chi ni yotte, anata wa umaremashita. Watashi no ishi ni yotte, anata wa katachidzukura rerudeshou.” she chanted “Watashi no Mana ni yotte, anata wa junsui ni narudeshou. Watashi no kangaede wa, anata wa chōkoku sa rerudeshou”. She changed the types into the other forms. Wind mana, light mana, and dark mana. “Watashi no chi kara tsukura reta, watashi wa anata o sonzai ni yobikakemasu. Jōka sa rete irunode, watashi no hikari wa anata o tōshite kagayakimasu!” she chanted, finishing the purification incantation. The blood crystal, during this had been filtering the mana through it, becoming less a crystal and more a mass of blood with tainted bits being ejected and crystalized outside, while the real blood crystal shaped itself to perfectly fit inside the rod. The elemental energies remained inside, changing the structure of the crystal itself to create a perfect sphere. Regal awed as he watched, eventually saying as it ended “That sphere…. If i’m not mistaken it’s perfect isn’t it?”. Nemu concentrated a few more seconds, finishing by using mana to fix it into place on her rod. She opened her eyes and stared at her new rod. The crystal was perfect, like a mirror. She turned to Regal and said “No. It isn’t” and walked over, holding her rod out. “Open the barrier when you hear Suisei” she said. She used no magic circle this time and drank the potion Greg offered, as he prepared his mauser c96.

“Kōri no chie, arashi no kanōsei, hi no ishi. Suisei!” she chanted, forming the mass of fire, ice, and electric mana. Regal dropped the barrier and her spell launched itself. Vigor looked shocked, then
cried out as the spell punched through her gut. She dropped to her knees, then hands, then her side, her soulstone and blood crystal falling onto the floor. Nemu gasped and felt the crystal take more mana from her and then begin the glow. Then the glow vanished. However she sensed what it was doing. It was storing the spell for another use later. “What… what was… that spell?” Vigor groaned out, barely moving, clutching the stones she made. Greg walked over, holstering the pistol. “Comet. It's called Comet. I made it myself” she said. Vigor chuckled, and said “It’s beautiful… I'll have your soul teach me it” and with a swift motion that made her guts spill out, jammed the crystal into her mouth and pumped mana into it. “No!” her and Regal shouted. Regal, realizing what was going on, grabbed Greg and pulled him back in as Vigor’s body began to change. Nemu herself retreated, her mana supply exhausted. Vigor’s body seemed to become even more curvaceous than before and she grew wings, scales, a tail, and a pair of black onyx horns. In fact, all of the growths seemed formed from onyx. Vigor stood slowly, the wound completely gone. The purple in her skin went from dark to a rich purple color, and the eyes became purple while her hair became a misty grey color, and in fact started to emit mist.

She reactively turned and held her rod out, willing the comet spell she used before to surge forth. With great fury, her stored spell surged forth and rocketed at Vigor, slamming into her. Unlike before, it didn’t punch through her. She was instead pushed and tore through pods and laboratory equipment as it pushed her into a wall far, far away. She panted, staring for a few moments when she was shoved by Regal who screamed “Run! We have a chance!” Greg began running and she followed behind Regal. However, as they turned the corner to leave, a pillar of darkness rose from the far side of the lab and continued to as they ascended some stairs to get to a higher part of the laboratory. She stopped and eventually turned to Greg, saying “Greg, let me have the rest of the plum potions. I'll hold her off”. “You can’t!” Regal exclaimed “She’s got the power of a blood crystal in her and she also has a soulstone! You’ll die if you try fighting her!” She shook her head and said “It’s not a fight to win, but to survive. If you get backup here that knows the situation, she’s toast. If however she follows us, she could escape and then what? Terrorize the empire for years to come? Go. I can handle this”. Regal just stared, and was about to respond when she said “Things are different now. They’re nothing like 2000 years ago. We have to accept that”. Regal stared, and the pillar thinned. Regal glanced over, then to her and said “Fine, but you better be alive when we get back, got it?”. He then turned and ran. Greg went to her, and handed her a bag saying “Inspiriting Plum Potions, plus a few other surprises. Knock her dead, kid” and ran off. She turned to the pillar and said “I will. I still have a job after all”. She then said “Janpu”, tapping her shoes and leaping forward, magic letting her leap an entire 10 feet.

It took her 10 leaps to reach where Vigor crashed. The pillar of darkness had subsided and she narrowly avoided Vigor as they attempted to blast her with a beam of concentrated dark mana. She gritted her teeth and pulled out some selenite powder, and used it to cast another comet spell. Like before, her rod absorbed a charge of it, but because of the selenite power, both times mana outside of her was used. Specifically, she watched mana from the pods flow out and into her spell, changing their type as they flowed. She immediately fired her charge as well. She aimed for above the last one. As she expected, Vigor flew straight up, avoiding her first casting, and the second smashed right into Vigors side, sending her towards another wall. As she fell, having jumped straight up the last time, she tapped her boots with her rod and said “Osoi Aki” and her boots glowed a mixture of green and purple, both influenced my magic. She landed and pulled out a potion and drank it, watching as
Vigor, surviving that blast, rushed towards her. She finished and barely ducked under a straight punch, but was forced flying, albeit at a slow pace, by the air pressure emitted from the punch. Vigor wasn’t able to turn on a dime and arced her path so she’d intercept her while she fell. However, she knew this and prepared more selenite powder and recast the comet spell where she’d try to intercept, deciding to save the next casting of comet. Vigor, against her expectations, curled into a ball as she turned, taking the blast full force, yet continued to curve. She frowned and cursed, guessing she must’ve cast some sort of flight enhancement spell. She flipped and leapt away on a pod, but did this to reposition and give her a few more minutes to prepare. She prepared some garnet dust, some lazurite dust, and some peridot dust in a handful, held her rod out where she estimated Vigor would approach from, and when she saw Vigor, still curled up like a compact cannonball, curl upwards towards her, tossed the handful of dust and fired the stored comet spell.

The spell once it passed through grew almost double in size and not only forced Vigor to uncurl, but sent her flying directly to left left and into the pods under them. She grabbed another handful of selenite powder and alexandrite dust, and chanted “Raiu!”. Storm clouds gathered over where Vigor crash landed and some of the mana condensed there, formed by mana drained from surrounding pods, transferred into her rod. Multiple lightning bolts crashed down, but all focused directly onto the spot Vigor crashed at. She immediately recast the spell, and launched another flurry of bolts. She landed and sighed a bit. She hoped it was over. She had 42 kites of mana left, and only 2 ounces of selenite powder that would let her cast 2 spells using only local mana, 4 thanks to her new rod. She growled as she saw Vigor ascend from the crash site, though was glad to see at least she cracked the woman’s outside shell. “So you’ve turned into a bug, exoskeleton and all, huh?” She asked “What else did people’s death give you?”. Vigor laughed and said “A lot. After all, I have this organization no? I have these results no? I have the north and south warring, no?”. Her eyes narrowed and she questioned “What? You? I don’t believe it”.

Vigor laughed and floated down to a pod opposite of Nemu, saying “It’s true my dear. I guess I’m not solely responsible, but my organization is. Being part of it does give me something to put on my resume, even if it’s embellishing”. She frowned. “What organization?” she demanded. Vigor smiled as she stared at Nemu, then said “Fine. You’ll die anyway. Why not have fun and fill your last moments with dread. See, my organization is made up of corrupt fey folk. Folk whom belong to one race, but somehow got charged by mana from an opposite element. Like me” and gestured to herself. “I got charged by dark mana from a baun graveyard as a baby. Turned me into a purple genai and I became an outcast instantly” she explained “Our boss is a man that goes by many names and faces, however one face you should know all too well. Pontiff Vidkar Lain”. Her eyes widened and she took a step back. “Oh it gets better. He doesn’t just have one ruler’s ear, but two! Why do you think the north would war with the south, when everyone knows Galdera is approaching?” she revealed.

Nemu felt a bit sick again. The implications were massive. “Yes, yes! That look! That despair! I live for that! Ah, if the Oberon weren’t such an idiot, then we would’ve failed, but no! The stupid loner actually listened to our obvious lies! The south will never listen, they know only force. Their heroes vanished, clearly their gods need help and who better than the master of the war?”. It was too easy!” Vigor gloated.
She continued to, but Nemu tuned her out. She was worried but had to focus. Vigor had dropped her
guard. She was completely open. All she had to do was time this right. She kept her staff where it
was, and slowly reached into her gem dust bag. After a few minutes, she tossed up some selenite
power and chanted “Kōri no chie, arashi no kanōsei, hi no ishi. Suisei!”. The ball formed, and then
shot forward, giving her rod a spell charge. She then aimed upwards, reaching into her bag and
tossing some rhodolite dust around her, and casting it, aiming far above. As the second spell flew a
minute after the first, Vigor ascended rapidly, laughing and saying “You idiot! You still think you
can win! I’m a perfect lifeform! Only a god is above-” and tried to scream, but was cut off as her
invisible comet spell smacked into her neck, though the spell was large enough to hit that, plus the
bottom of her chin as well as a bit of her chest. She flew backward, crashing into pods far away. She
could hear them coming. She smiled. Backup had arrived. She began leaping that way. She then
heard the sound of flying from behind her, and turned, then screamed in pain as she was slammed
into a pod, practically breaking through a pod in the process. Vigor’s hand laid in the middle of her
chest. She coughed, and saw blood come out. She was certain she had internal damage and a broken
sternum. “Damn” Vigor said “That was supposed to kill you”. She moved away a bit. Nemu laid
there, unable to move. She could hear someone spellcast from a distance. She realized it was Ray.
She heard shouting and gunfire. As she felt her life slip away, she felt something tug her. It propped
her up, repositioned her to face the entrance, sitting. She coughed more blood. A small puddle had
formed. Her arm jerked and faced the exit, about 4 meters to the right. She realized what she had to
do.

Painfully, she retrieved gem dust and put 1 ounce of jadeite dust, selenite dust, rhodolite dust, and
rubellite dust. 4 ounces of gem dust total. She then launched her comet spell, using her rods ability to
fire a second copy of the first casting of the comet spell, though aimed elsewhere, where she’d be
thrown after being hit by the first. She wanted to pass out but forced herself to stay conscious. She
watched as Vigor arced and flew right for the entrance, moving to curl up. Instantly, her invisible
comet spell slammed into her side, sending her careening down towards the pods, but the second one
clipped her side again and send her face first right into the ground. She could heard the steel tearing
apart, and the earth rumble and crack apart. The entire lab shook from the impact. She had no doubt
people above felt a small rumble. Laughing, she laid back finally, coughing up a lot of blood. She
closed her eyes and slept.

She awoke in a void of black. Nothing was here. She looked around but knew it. However,
suddenly, a bright light shone. Then, before her, was Ray in his fey folk form. “Good work” he said
to her, walking over “Vigor has been captured and… not maimed but crippled until they can figure
something out”. Nemu sighed and said hopefully “Good…. I hope she didn’t kill anyone”. Ray
shook his head, walking to her side, saying “No. Your last attack sent her off course. Long enough
for me to dispel the magic around her. She was still strong, but a rain of gunfire, even on her steel-
like skin, was enough to get her to surrender”. She smiled and said “Good…. Then I succeeded in
stopping her. I’m just sad I can’t make my report…”. She sighed and looked to him. She had likely
died. She already was bleeding internally and coughing up blood. She coughed up quite a bit. She
knew based on him saying a battle occured, that they had taken a bit to get to her. Long enough for
her to bleed out. He shook his head however, and said “Not quite…. One absolutely gem-coated
batch of healing grape potions later, and while not right as rain, you were guaranteed to survive a trip to the hospital. Sadly, I used your gem dust. I had none of my own”. She laughed and said “If you saved my life, I think losing a gallon of dust is worth it, easily…. Thanks though. Really”. He nodded and said “I’m your muse. It’s poor order to let you die”. She looked around and said “Then this is my mind huh…? Hey, how are you here?” Ray smiled and said “Muse of Memories. Used a spell I have called ‘Dream Dive’. Let me go into people's dreams”. Before she could speak he said “Someone is coming though, so I have to leave. I’ll see you when you visit me” and then vanished. She sighed and sat down, waiting to wake up.

She woke in the hospital. She wasn’t sure how long she had been out, but she knew the dream wasn’t just some hallucination before moving on to the Afterworld. She looked around and saw Regal sitting and waiting. “Regal…?” she asked weakly. Regal awoke, startled and looked around, alarmed. His eyes drifted to her and he sighed with relief, stumbling over. “Veda… you’re alive…! The doctors, they said…” he stammered out, looking ready to cry. She laughed and said “I know, I know… I’m alive” then yelped and sighed, saying “Sorry. Guess it hurts to laugh”. Regal nodded and said “Rest. I’ll tell your friends. Just recover okay?” with a tone of relief and joy. She nodded, and laid back to get more rest. It would be months from that conversation that she fully recovered. Vigors attack apparently did far more than just break her sternum and do some internal damage. Her entire body besides limbs were bruised, most of her bones were broken, save her spine, and her heart even had shut down for 4 solid minutes after she casted her comet spell. The potion preserved her body, sure. However, that’s all it did. It took doctors weeks to fix her completely and they only could when Regal presented a waiver that allowed him to disregard the rules and gave it to the director of the hospital. After that, they brought mages in and only then was she brought back from the brink and even made a full recovery.

As she left, Greg, Mark, and Regal were waiting. In the lobby, of course. After signing some paperwork, she turned to leave. Apparently, she didn’t need to worry about payment. The High Emperor had personally heard about the incident and paid it for her, in full. As she walked to them, Greg nodded and said “A full recovery…. Regal’s waiver really pulled through. Checked it myself. It’s legit, if old. It had a clause that stated it’d persist till the splintering of the empire. A very specific clause so no court will rule against the hospital”. She smiled and said “Then, his majesty is expecting my report. I’ll have to return soon…… however I still have one task. Greg, Mark, will you accompany me?”. “Of course” Greg said “We’ve been in on this from the start. Why change that?”. Mark himself just nodded. “What is it you need to do?” Regal asked. “Simple. I need to talk to my muse before we leave. Come. I’ll introduce you” she said, a small amount of playfulness in her tone as she walked away.

She walked in Ray’s office. Greg, Mark, and Regal followed and had looks of confusion. They stayed silent, since Nemu had promised them a proper explanation once they got there. Ray sat there, a pile of papers to grade waiting. He looked up and said “Ah! Nemu. I didn’t expect to see you. What brings you back?”. “You can trust them. They’re friends and Regal claims i’m his sister from 2000 years ago. Just… can you keep this conversation private?” she explained. Ray nodded and
began to sing a small lullaby, energy covering the walls, ceiling and floor, then stopped. Her friends
became nervous but didn’t make any moves. “Nemu… you sure… about this?” Mark asked, clearly
shaken. “Yeah. Just… keep calm alright?” She answered, then turned to Ray “So. I came because
you wanted me to, but also… because I want my memories. All of them”. Ray nodded and stood,
saying “Sorry gentleman. I must apologize for the startle I’m about to cause. Please, remain calm. I’m
no enemy” and shifted to his natural alf form. Greg reached for his gun, as did Mark, but stopped.
Regal remain calm. “I am Ray Penbrook, an Alf from the tropical sector of the Great Forest of Tir na
Nog, an alf. I moved here 15 years ago after I desired to learn more about our southern neighbors
and assumed a false identity so transition would go smoothly” he explained, moving around the desk
“I discovered my muse status 5 years ago, when I had a dream about the Great Mother granting me a
gift. The ability to bestow a blessing, and a new strain of magic spells, all related to memory. She
then named me the ‘Muse of Memories’. When I awoke, my spell book had been updated, as though
written by my own hand”.

“Wait… so you can manipulate memories?” Regal asked. Ray nodded, saying “Technically, all alf
have a spell or two that let them. However, those spells lock memories rather than erase them. The
only other spell simply acts a heavy-duty hypnosis, specifically designed to bring certain ones to the
surface”. “Then… Nemu wants you to unlock hers” Greg said, figuring it out. “The Great Mother…
is that your leader?” Mark asked. “Nemu does seek that and I can give it. It’s my job to. I’m to
support, assist, and lead her in her fight against the coming bane, known as Galdera. As for the Great
Mother, no. She’s one of two gods responsible for the creation of Tir na Nog 8000 years ago” Ray
explained. “Thanks to him, I finally got a spell I apparently created while I was working in that lab
you found me in. I get the feeling it was 2000 years ago, but it’s hard to say” Nemu said. “Then,
imady. Let’s get started. Gentleman, please, stand back” Ray said, ushering them to the wall, then
turning. He poured mana through his arms and willed them into a magic circle in front, behind, to her
sides, above, and below her. He then made sure to write the incantation he would use inside the outer
rim of the magic circles, and then added the necessary elements; wind, water, and light to the center
of the circle. He then poured those kinds of mana out of him and into Nemu, through the six circles
he prepared, and chanted “Watashi no muses denwa de, idaina hahaoya no kokoro no naka de,
watashi wa nagaiai ushinawareta to omotte ita omoide o yobimodoshite, modotte, oikakete, modotte,
kono hito zentai o tsukurimasu!” At the end, the circles and Nemu began to glow a brilliant light
blue light.

Nemu felt right instantly. For a few moments she felt absolutely overwhelmed. She felt true insanity.
However, as her mind settled, she found herself the same person she came in as. Then she realized
why. She hadn’t truly acclimated yet. She needed time. “Did it work?” Regal asked. Greg and Mark
stayed silent, but they stared at her, curiosity clear in their eyes. She nodded to them and said
“Yeah….. I just… need time to go through my head so to speak”. Ray himself said, moving and
sitting at his desk as he returned to his human guise “Yeah. Minds are not fragile things. However,
they aren’t flexible either. Give her a week. She’ll either change or not. Hard to say, frankly”. She
nodded, and said “Thank you, Ray…. I’ll be back later to discuss what’s next”. Ray said, as he
began to grade papers and dispelled his own privacy spell “Of course miss Cias. I look forward to
talking history and law with such a learned scholar like yourself. Good day”. Nemu nodded and
began to walk out. “So… it’s all there?” Regal asked, as he followed by her side, looking down at
her. She nodded and said “Yeah. I remember everything… sadly I can’t call you brother yet.
Doesn’t….. Feel right. Like he said, give me some time. I need to process everything”. He nodded, sighing in relief. “It’s alright” he said “It’s enough that they’re back. Even if you can’t, i’m alright with that”. She smiled as she left the building, and headed for the parking lot. “So then, gentleman. To everhold?” she asked. “Yeah. After these last few months, I could use a good, long vacation” Greg said. “Didn’t we get one while she was in the hospital?” Mark asked. “It ain’t a vacation if your friends dyin, and no one is going to convince me otherwise” Greg answered. Mark sighed and agreed.

A week later, she stood in the throne room of the royal palace. It had taken them 5 days to drive from Atlasdam, Naaz to Everhold, Moria. Then, it took a day to arrange an audience. Apparently, Fionne himself had great interest in the matter, and had been planning to hear it himself. She was given a pamphlet to prepare herself to testify in an official manner on her findings and generally how such things went. It was fascinating as while it was a bit unusual for this to happen, there were instances. The cited one was of Cigrus Albright, headmaster of the academy during the time Regal was training to become the Scholar hero. Now, she stood, ready to give it. She wore a black button-up dress shirt, with white lace frills, black silk dress pants, dress shoes, a white silk undershirt, and black gloves. It was the standard to wear for official events. She wore her astral moth cape however, feeling that not wearing it in an official capacity would be insulting and she didn’t feel comfortable without it. She could tell the various servants getting things ready as they shuffled in and out didn’t approve, but it wasn’t their opinion she was concerned with. She took the moment to search her feelings regarding her memories. She hadn’t changed much, since her old self while far more shy and far more socially awkward was essentially just a repressed version of her current self. However, her feelings towards Regal had changed. She still idolized him as her hero, and found it nice to be around him again. However, where before it was like meeting a celebrity actor, now it was that but also a family member that she appreciated and liked. Aside from that, she felt incredibly sad that she had lost family members. Her father, Cigrus Albright, and her mother Olivia Albright. She still recalled how her father managed to get the academy through a scandal caused by the previous headmaster. It was then she heard someone call “Nemu Cias? Is there a Nemu Cias here?”.

She looked up and saw a woman in similar attire to hers, minus the cape and wore gold-framed glasses. She looked around, holding a clipboard with paper on it, and a calligraphy pen, and an inkpot on her hip. She stood and said “Nemu Cias, reporting”. The secretary looked at her, nodded, looked at her clipboard, dipped her pen in ink, and crossed something off, then looked at her and said “Right. Come this way”. The secretary turned around and opened the massive pair of doors behind her. Walls of stone, and a pair of massive iron doors separated the throne room from the entrance hall of the castle. The doors on either side led to other parts of the castle, like the royal library, the high emperor’s study, and servant facilities. She walked over to the doors leading into the throne room as they opened and walked in behind the secretary. When she moved to the side, the doors closed. The secretary stayed for when it was time to call in the next one. Before her was the throne room. On an elevated platform at the bottom of a slight incline, and a foot away from said incline, at the front sat a large, elaborately made throne. It was decorated with the coat of arms of every major kingdom. It was made of gold, iron, the finest silks of Mars. It was a truly elaborate king. The man who sat on it, the only one permitted to, was the high emperor himself, in this case, Fionne Balacru.
Draped in purple robes like that of ancient toga with a golden colored trim, wearing a general’s jacket and undershirt underneath them, with a golden tiara shaped like leaves on his head, and sandals clearly woven from the first tree. He had a collection of rings on his fingers and wore a heavy-looking amulet with a depiction of the first light on it. A veritable miniature lantern. Golden hair and amber eyes. Skin like silk but tanned from the suns of mars. He worn dress pants like hers, but made by a true seamstress and not a designer brand. He had muscles, that much was clear, but they were not like one whom dedicated themselves to body building, but of one whom trained for combat and balanced a slim body and muscle growth. Nobles from around the empire sat in attendance and watched her carefully, all wearing custom-tailored clothes in the fashion she wore, with various kinds of hats, sashes, and capes to signify they were of his court. She was in the high emperor’s court.

She approached the throne, giving a deep bow as custom demanded, and said “Your majesty, thank you for your time”. Fionne nodded, sitting upright and with a posture one could only call dignified. “You’re welcome, Nemu Cias. I take great interest in what you have to report. Listening is far more engaging and I have questions outside your investigation. Do you mind answering those?” Fionne explained and questioned. Nemu shook her head and said “I do not, your majesty. There is much I discovered that is not directly related to the investigation that I have discovered”. Fionne nodded and said “Then let us begin first with the investigation. Business before pleasure and all. You were to investigate three laboratories that we had no record of on file but had discovered through various means. Did you accomplish this?”. Nemu nodded and said “I did sir”. “Then, my next question is very simple. Describe to me the purpose of the laboratories” Fionne asked, leaning back a bit. Nemu answered “They were laboratories that were experimenting on humans, monsters, animals, even insects. One I went to tested what would happen if you injected human blood into a northerner, yet another housed the eight heroes, and the final one was researching ways to improve the blood crystal and soulstone creation methods. However, it held a purpose. To give Galdera soldiers, weapons, and information when he arose. Vigor Vase’s confessions to me in the midst of battle stated such”. All the faces around her contorted to disgust and outrage. She continued however “However, I have reason to believe these were not their original functions. I found some evidence in the second laboratory that the experiments were originally attempting to discover a means to artificially preserve someone while they lived, then awaken them at a later date. As I said, the eight heroes were found, but they were not dead. They live and breathe. My… Regal Albright accompanied me to the last laboratory, since he originally owned it”.

“I see. Fascinating… this Vigor Vase. I did read the report about her arrest, however, it did not state affiliations and such. Can you enlighten me to such matters?” Fionne asked, a secretary having brought the police report to him and him reading it to confirm what he remembered. She nodded and said “Yes. A member of a vast Galdera cult. One that extends beyond both borders, sire. At least, according to her testimony. She made very bold claims”. Fionne nodded and asked “What claims?”. She became slightly nervous. She was about to accuse, even if indirectly, a king. It would not go over well and she had no escape route. She could tell Fionne noticed her hesitation as he tapped his finger. After another few seconds, he said “You are anxious. They must be serious accusations… Then, by my order, I will ask my court to take these accusations as such from an anonymous, but trusted source nonetheless. Now, ma’am of anonymous origins, please. Whom did Vigor claim
worked with her?”. Nemu felt better, knowing Fionne ordered that the origin of them be kept anonymous, protecting her if they leaked and turned out false. “The pontiff of the Silvia, Vidkar Lain, and someone close to the Oberon of the northern kingdom, one of two rulers that rule the nation” she answered finally. The entire court gasped and began to gossip immediately, as she expected. The implications were massive, and if mishandled dangerous.

“Calm down!” Fionne yelled, everyone silencing immediately. He sighed and looked down at her, and said “I understand now. Indeed, no one here shall speak of your identity. As for my final question, did these places break any laws of the empire?”. She replied “Yes. All of them violated the 10th covenant and none of them were made before the covenants were made. However, the last one began to violate the 4th covenant after Vigor Vase took ownership of it”. Fionne frowned a bit and asked “Any other observations regarding your job?”. She nodded and said “While Regal Albright did build and operate an illegal laboratory that violated the 10th, he did so because the high emperor of his time awarded him a waiver. The document is in his possession now. Additionally… I must confess to a crime myself, though it’s a bit complicated”. Fionne raised an eyebrow and said “I see… then let’s move to the testimony outside the scope of your job. Explain your guilt. I may relieve you of it without punishment”. She nodded and said “I should begin at the beginning then. I recently regained my memories sire. My real name is not Nemu Cias. It is Veda Albright”. Murmurs erupted throughout the room, Fionne's eyes widening. “2000 or so years ago, I sought to become like my brother, a great figure in society. However, I felt I could not equal his greatness in magic, even without his implements. So I sought the next best thing, discoveries. I sent letters asking for jobs to mages seeking assistants. One responded, and I packed up and left, eager to make my mark” she explained “However, what I found was… dangerous. I still followed through. What they said made sense. Put the heroes in suspended animation, preserving them until the next rising, with their permission, then release them so they can fight. I did not see the snare waiting for me. After getting the first pod made, untested, the head mage shoved me in and activated it, saying I was useless and just hired for extra brain power and a test dummy. We both know how that ended”.

Fionne stared at her, then said “Normally, a trial would be held, then punishment or innocence meted out. However, I doubt the other kings would disagree that regardless, you have paid for your crime of breaking the 10th. There will be no trial, and you are forgiven officially by me”. She smiled and bowed, saying “Thank you, your majesty”. “Now. Did you uncover any other information?” Fionne asked. “Yes” she answered “I met my fated ‘muse’. I also discovered not every northerner is against us. Further, with the role of muses, likely they will not take action against the empire, even at the behest of the Oberon, unless the fated ‘hero’ does so”. Fionne sat there, staring as she continued “He has asked to stay anonymous, and I request that be so. He is not involved in the conflict and moved here before it began. He is also the one who gave me my memories”. The nobles were outraged. She could hear their cries. ‘How dare someone defend a northerner’. ‘Northerners are savages, how could you trust them over us!?’. Fionne eventually raised his hand, then lowered it when his court quieted and asked in a low tone “Miss Albright. Are you willing to privately disclose his identity and take responsibility for any crimes he commits?”. She nodded and said “For what he did for me, I would accept your majesties offer without a second thought” and bowed and retained it.
“Then it shall be so. Based on your testimony, he likely is factioned with the Titania. They are the northerners opposed to the Oberons warhawk actions, but are not willing to get violent over it. Is that all?” Fionne asked. She nodded and said “Yes, your majesty” and retained her bow. Fionne stood, and his court did too and his court bowed to him. He gave a courtesy bow, tilting his head only, and said “I call this audience to a close. Thank you, Veda Albright, for your time and service. Your reward is waiting outside. Do not worry about divulging your muse’s identity” and sat down, his court doing so too. She stood fully, turned and walked out of the throne room. A secretary outside approached her, handing her a card and said “The bank authorized leaves to be used up to the amount of your reward. After that, they will freeze the cards access to their logged leaves. We will be billed for it”. She nodded and accepted it, saying “Understood. Thank you”. The secretary simply walked away. Another name was called, but she ignored it and left.

She walked into the room Regal had rented. He had let her in. They needed to talk. He sat on a bed and she sat on the other side, backs to each other. “So. How’d it go?” he asked. “Fine” she said “He didn’t press on who my muse was and forgive me for working in that lab”. “Mmmm” Regal hummed, glad. “He also gave me my reward. A card with 2 million leaves allowed” she said. “I see” he replied. “I’ll repay you. You helped me after all. Least I could do is donate some to-” and was cut off. “No need. Being an ancient hero, I should be able to pull some funding from the academy, especially with the waiver clearing me of 10th violations and since i’m not responsible for 4th violations” Regal said “So use the money for yourself. You deserve it sister”. She sat there, thinking. She smiled warmly and said “Alright then. I’m gonna head out. Might see you later, might not. I’ll find a mage to message you when I decide something” and stood. “Alright” Regal said, standing too, and following her out, using magic to open the door. As she stepped out, she turned and hugged Regal, nearly knocking him over due to catching him off guard, and said “Big brother… thank you. For everything”. She couldn’t see his face, but she could hear the quiver in his voice as he hugged her back and said “Of course, little sister. Take care”.

She wasn’t sure what to do next. After all, she had 3 years before she needed to meet up with Ray to deal with Galdera. She shrugged and said to herself “I think i’ll just travel. I’ve never traveled the empire on my own two feet after all”. On her way out, she came across a stall at the entrance to Everhold, selling diaries. She stopped a moment, then walked over and asked “Excuse me, how much for a diary?”. The old man smiled and reached under the counter, pulling one out with a picture of a crescent moon with a single, sleepy eye on it and said “This one will cost you 30 leaves. 4000 pages”. She still had 100 leaves on her. She pulled out some and put them on the diary. The man took them, then slid the diary to her. She picked it up. “Enjoy. After all, memories are who we are. Without ‘em, we can’t know misery and joy” he said. She nodded back and said “Yeah. I agree”.
Chapter 32: the Merchant, Act 4-For Trade

Chapter Summary

Lapena Sozella travels with Durg to Rippletide to try and stop the Pontiff from setting off to take the Dragonstones. However, a development reveals that it is more important to stall them and let the rebels defend the Ravus Manor. Will they be successful? Or will Lapena fail and have her reputation tarnished as a rebel?

Chapter 32

For Profit

She had intended to leave for Rippletide immediately. However, Durg informing her that he was a muse and intended to join her meant they needed to travel in the RV. Durg got a few of the elites and would have them join. They brought weapons, but civilian class. Durg had gun parts melted down and the material stored in various containers. They were blacksmith enthusiasts as their cover story. She herself was recording their adventure for her next book as her cover. Once everything was ready, they set off. She sat opposite of Durg in a booth, saying “So. Why melt the guns down, may I ask?” she asked. Durg nodded and said “My muse powers. See, we muses get some spells from the gods, that we can use to help the hero. A few of ‘em give me the ability ta create things, provided I know the item and ‘ave the materials, in this case the liquidized, even if cooled off, form of the guns themselves”. “So then, what kind of muse are you? If you’re classified at all?” she asked. He nodded and said “Aye laddie, muses can be. Four types. Creatives, Inspirators, Production, and Schemers. I’m a production, cause i’m the muse of creation” Durg explained “praductives tend ta be people that actively ‘elp their ‘ero, rather than skulk in tha shadows and do subtle things”. “Then I take it you’ll be spell slinging with the rest of us?” she asked. Durg nodded and said “Well, when I ain’t givin ya blessins”.

It took them only a few days, even in the RV, to reach Rippletide. She stood and moved to leave, making sure to leave last. It was the dead of night. The elites secured motel keys and Durg went straight to the room, her following behind. They all began to set up for Durg to recreate the guns they brought, while she went to the bed to sleep, yawning. “Go’in ta sleep lass?” Durg asked. She nodded and he said “Understood. I’ll keep it down then. Sleep good” and got to work. When she awoke, one bed was covered in various weapons. Apparently, they had brought more than just guns. Weebly Bulldogs, Kalashnikov Ak-47s, combat knives, kevlar vests. It was a practical small unit armory. The elites were storing the items in a nearby safe. Durg himself was asleep. She stood up and went into the bathroom to get dressed. After fully dressing, she left the room and headed for the docks. She was planning to find the Pontiff and knowing the man, he’d leave from there. After all, Rippletide had a reputation as the centerpoint of the inner sea trade routes, and if the Pontiff was heading to another kingdom in an official capacity, then she had no doubts he’d come through here.
True, the pontiff could’ve taken land routes, as dangerous as those were, but the rumor cited Rippletide and the only reason would be a ship. She stalked the docks a bit, the early morning sun giving good visibility, and letting her see all the ships. She approached a sailor that was lounging.

“Excuse me” she said the sailor, asking “I was wondering how much I’d need to give for information”. The sailor laughed and said “Depends on what you wanna know miss”. “Which ship is the Pontiff’s” she answered. The sailor hollered, laughing a lot. After a minute, he stopped and said “Ahhhh.. Yer serious lassie…. Well. Lucky you, I happen ta wanna jab about that… 10 leaves. I’m feelin nice today”. She handed over the leaves eagerly. “Thank you lassie… yeah. He’s in town. Picked the SS Argosa for travel. Comin with a small unit of elite priests” the sailor said, pocketing the leaves. She nodded and said “Thank you. Good day” and then headed into the docks properly. She retrieved a small tablet and wrote some things down. The ship name the pontiff was taking, that the pontiff was slated to go, that he had his personal bodyguards with him, and he intended to work with the Ravus family to hide the Dragonstones, items that were key to opening the Gate of Finis. She stopped and looked around, eventually finding what she wanted. The SS Argosa. It was a massive, 4-sail dreadnought class ship, noted by the various runes inscribed on the side, maintaining a constant spell. The runes were large enough that even 5 meters away, she could see them glow on the massive ship. She was shocked they existed. For most, dreadnaughts were a legend, fantasy talk of sailors. Galleons were still the rage among most, as a dreadnaught was rumored to cost 60 million leaves, 10 million for a rental. Staring, she then saw the man himself. Vidkar Lain, Pontiff of the kingdom of faith, Silvia.

Vidkar stood at 7 feet tall, and had a wizened face, one hardened by experience, yet the eyes held a caring, compassionate gaze at first glance. She could tell however, that they were cautious, calculating. The man moved as though he were 30, despite clearly looking 90 years old. He wore white robes that despite dragging somewhat behind him on the ground collected an ounce of dust. A ornate tabard hung on his shoulders over his front and back, illustrating various depictions of Aelfric, the god of starlight. He used a golden staff with a ruby serrated ring circling at odd angles around the ball at the top roughly the size of an apple. On his head, a tall white hat with the sun sewn in stood. The man wore an amulet that at first she thought was an amulet to Aelfric, but then she saw it. As it bounced, she glanced the underside and saw purple gemstone on that side. However, there was an unusual woman with him. Draped in purple business clothes, with slicked back black hair, and black gloves and dress shoes, the woman was clearly engaged with the Pontiff, and clearly either a guest, as she didn’t recall there being any living relatives to the Pontiff. Rather than follow, she turned away, writing what she witnessed into her tablet. She left out the description of the amulet however. This was because Vidkar had his bodyguards with him, 4 knight ardante’s. They wore heavy plate armor and mythril chain where gaps existed, a heavy tower shield, and either a SACO m60 or a magical focus, usually a weighing scale with two gemstones or a wooden staff made from a magical tree. They were highly observant people and would sniff her out at a glance. However, with her position, she knew she could get away with this scouting expedition of hers if she told most of the truth.

As expected, after five minutes, she felt the cold metal of a gauntlet and heard the rough voice
coming past the plate helmet that said “Hold it. I saw you looking at the Pontiff. State your business, citizen”. She turned, smiling her saleswoman smile and said “Sorry, sorry. I work for the book publishing company Stonegard Publishing Incorporated and I heard a rumor about the Pontiff being in Rippletide. I just had to confirm it, ya know?”. The knight ardante stared down at her, silent for a solid minute before he nodded and said “Apologies. Understood. If you have any questions, i’ll take them. I cannot confirm I will answer them or that you will receive answers”. She nodded and began, asking “Well to start, what is he doing here? It’s a bit unusual to see a king outside their seat of power, beyond the King’s summit every 10 years”.

“A simple answer, the Pontiff is on a mission of national security. I cannot divulge much, but he is worried about the coming of Galdera and has taken it upon himself to take matters into his own hands” the knight answered. She nodded, jotting it down and then moved on “The SS Argosa. Why that ship?” she asked. “A simple answer. We came across information of a secret cult in our great empire, and fear they may attempt an ambush while on the inner sea. With this vessel, we’ll be able to ensure that their ambush is not easy” he answered again, crossing his arms, clearly wanting to go. She smiled again and said “Alright, last question. Who’s that woman with him?” with a tone of curiosity. His casual tone vanished, and for a second she could’ve sworn she heard a rattle as he responded in a stern, demanding tone “Top secret, classified. Leave. You’ve overstayed your welcome”. The knight then turned and hurried off. She likewise turned and left, knowing she raised suspicions.

As she walked into the room, she took a deep breathe. “Somethin’ wrong lassie?” Durg asked. She looked at him, and shook her head, saying “Not really. Had a run in with a knight ardante, but I talked him down”. “Good, good” Durg said “Anythin’ else?”. She nodded and said “The pontiff had a guest. A woman in purple robes”. Durg stared at her, before asking “What did she look like?”. She described the woman. Human, slightly tan skin, green eyes, looked to be in her mid twenties. Durg turned to her, blinked, then went the phone and made a call. From what she could tell, it was a call regarding her information. She could hear Durg talking about books and woman, and her suspicions were confirmed when she heard Durg gasp and tell whomever was on the other line “Get mobilized brother mine. It’s begun. Dunna come ta Rippletide though. Make for Ravus’ manor” and then hang up. “What’s wrong?” she asked. “Everythin’. The prophecy…. I thought it applied ta when Galdera would rise, but the dark fey are here! The pontiff…. He’s goin for the dragonstones, likely with a small army!” Durg replied. Her eyes widened and she asked “Are they going to make it in time?” with a tone of slight worry. He nodded “Should…. Fast as boats, especially on tha inner sea are, my boys have a 4-day head start and are gonna to book it, so ta speak” he said, moving the bed with armaments and armor “In tha meantime, we need ta stall ‘em. This is no longer a mission ta stop the pontiff. We need ta cripple that boat somehow”.

She thought about it, then said “Engines. Engines are always a weak point for a boat. A boat like the SS Argosa has to have multiple engines… especially one regulating the mana needed for the ‘slow fall’ enchantments used to keep it afloat”. “Yeah” Michael said “If the goal is to just slow it down though, then increasing output of that might actually work”. She nodded and said “I agree… put it’ll be heavily guarded. It’d take a lot to draw the entire force out”. “A distraction then” Kevin said “Lesson #5. If your target is heavily guarded, staging a terror attack will always draw attention”. Durg nodded and said “Aye, that’s gonna do it”. “Wait! Isn’t that dangerous!? What about the innocent people!” she pointed out, though kevin chuckled and responded “Clearly, you dunno the first thing about rebellion! Lesson #6, from Durg himself, ‘A terror attack need not harm innocents, simply
make a commotion’”. Michael and Durg nodded, Durg turning and saying “Then, all we need to do is stage it near the SS Argosa…””. Kevin spoke up now, saying “Sir, I did some recon earlier, after Lapena left… I found out that there is a ship 2 boats down that is a merchant vessel carrying gem dust, liquid mana, and lots of gold”. Durg looked at him and nodded, saying “Aye. A fine target… turquoise powder as a threat, merchants for the hostages, an the police wouldn’t dare attempt a raid, as that would risk damagin the boat”. She nodded as Durg said “You boys can handle the boat right?”. Michael nodded and said “Yeah boss. We’ll be fine. Guessing you’re heading into the SS Argosa with Lapena?”. He nodded and said “Aye laddie. I have a duty ta support her, and I’ll be damned if I humiliate my people”. With that, they began to plan in earnest and how to coordinate their assault.

It took two days to prepare but they were ready. At night, they moved from their apartment to the docks. As thought, the SS Argosa was under lock and key. She stayed behind a few boats back, unzipping the duffel bag she held to let Durg out, while Kevin and Michael, disguised, moved forward. She prepared her rifle while Durg prepared his weebly bull dog. “So, lass, ya ready?” he asked. “No” she admitted “I’m about to raid a ship with the Pontiff and… someone else on board. Who is that by the way? Why are you upset?” Durg was silent, then admitted “I didna reveal everythin’ about the group we’re fightin’ miss. I told the man that interviewed us but na you… didn’t know you were tha heroine I were destined ta support”. She listened as he continued “The pontiff is an agent of a group that worships Galdera. They were workin’ secretly…. He’s got the ear of both the high emperor and the oberon… the woman is his boss… ‘an the group's boss…. Bean a Cheo in your tongue”. “I see” she responded after taking a few minutes to consider “Then she’s the big target?”. Durg nodded, saying “Aye. I suspect she’s come to hypnotize the Ravus family head inta given ‘em the Dragonstones”. She stayed silent, then asked “So we’re going after her?”. Durg shook his head and said “Nay. Not the time…. We need ta focus on our job. Take out tha engine. Then we can reconvene with our forces at Ravus Manor”. She nodded and said as an explosion sounded “Then let’s get this done”.

She watched from behind a crate a few boats down as at least a hundred knight ardentes rushed from the SS Argosa. She gave the signal and stood, rushing. She could hear Durg behind her as they ran for it. As expected, the gangway was unguarded, letting them board with no resistance. However, she doubted they had long. Durg placed his hands on the deck and whispered “Meiro sukyan” and green energy washed over the deck and then vanished. He then stood and said “Got it. All tha magic in this here ship is flowin’ inta and outta room in tha middle a tha ship”. She nodded and began to head down with him. It took them half an hour but they made it. A room with a domed ceiling, with artwork depicting the 13 gods. Runes covered the artwork, but were not drawn over but woven into the artwork naturally. On the ground, gem dust, etched magic circles, and all of it stretching across the entire room. In the center, a pedestal stood and an orb of pure mana sat on it. “What… is that…?” Durg asked. Recalling her early education, she recited from memory “The ‘Mana Engine’, a series of intricate incantations and spells are used to craft it, and enchantments in its room along with environmental magics keep it active. The mana engine is responsible for controlling the mana flow throughout the Dreadnaught, a massive ship that relies on wind power and magic instead of a steam engine and mechanical controls, so that the ships are in compliance with the 10th covenant”. Durg looked at her, then at the orb and said “I see…. Tis a wonderful thing that was made then. If I didna know better, i’da thought that a fey made it”. “You’d be right” a slightly coarse voice spoke from behind. Turning and backing up, both of them turned and saw them. The woman and the pontiff.
“Welcome aboard the SS Argosa. Not my ship, but i’ve rented it from its owner for the next month” Vidkar said. “Month? Why?” she asked. Vidkar laughed, approaching closer, which made them back up more. “Simple. I needed it to reach Cerigos Island, after I acquire the Dragonstones…. Yes. I know you know. Why else would someone from the business sector affiliate with a northerner, nevermind a muse?” Vidkar monologue. Her eye twitched and she looked at the woman. Durg said “You knew the attack on the other boat was a diversion”. Vidkar nodded and said “It was so cute, I had to humor you. I ordered them to take their time, so we have, oh…. 20 minutes before they finish up with your friends”. She smirked and said “20? My, you must be generous…. It’ll be 10 and they’ll be gone”. “Indeed…. Another 10 for a grand chase… and 5 to mull over their choices before deciding to return. Thus, Vidkar was incorrect in his estimation and we have 25 minutes to entertain you” the woman said, staring at them with dull, grey eyes. She shivered but sighed in relief. Michael and Kevin would escape at least. Durg asked “Then…. You’re here to ensure the ringleaders ‘o tha resistance get beaten eh?”. The woman nodded and Vidkar said “Don’t say it like that, that makes this sound barbaric”. “Ressurecting Galdera is barbaric!” she shouted. Vidkar glared at her, then said “Well then. Talk is over. Time for you to go to our lord’s side” and tapped his staff onto the rooms magic circle. Instantly it turned red and mana formed on the exits to block them in. “If you thought we’d actually deign to fight you, you’re mistaken. I prepared this room just for you. Ta-ta!” Vidkar said, his and the woman’s footsteps heard walking away.

“Broinean togte! I knew it!” Durg yelled “This is a summonin’ circle! Not a regulation circle!”. As the circle it wanted to summon appeared. A tree formed against the doorway they entered from, and 3 flowers bloomed to reveal maws in the center of the petals. Dark mist poured from the maws, but dissipated into nothingness a few inches into the air. “le falt nam màthraichean mòra! That’s tha devourer a men!” Durg said loudly. She glared, pulled her rifle up and aimed as she continued to back up. Durg looked at her and said “Don’t!”. “Why!?!” She asked, a bit of fear creeping into her voice “That thing is dangerous! The faster we kill it, the better!” She said. “Ya, but attackin’ it will attract its ire…. And that there rifle ain’t enough ta kill it now” he responded “So, let’s prep while it’s figurin’ out its surroundin’s”. She stared at it and nodded, letting Durg begin. “Tenso run” he chanted, forming a magic circle and writing a character in the air, the language of magic “Kasai” and then another character “Wakimichi” and another “Saisei suru”. Instantly her rifle glowed red, her clothes white, and her aura green. Durg’s armaments and self underwent the same changes and he wrote another character, chanting “Daburu” and the weapons glowed orange now. “There” he said “I’ve completed my prep. Double Attack, Regeneration, Sidestep, and Fire enchantments ‘ave been applied. What about you?”. She thought and nodded, touching her shoe with her glove and said “Janpu” and they glowed green. “I’ve activated jump. The spell tends to be more mobile than walking”.

Durg nodded and said “Understood. Then we attack now” and aimed his pistol while she aimed her rifle. They fired their guns, their bullets becoming veritable fireballs as they flew through the air, though to them it appeared they were firing lasers. The beast cried out and with tentacle-like vines began to snuff the flames forming out. They didn’t relent though and noticed its strength slowly
sapping. While Durg had to reload after 6 shots, she had a somewhat large magazine size, 30 bullets, and so was able to keep firing until Durg finished and reload. However, after the second barrage, there was a 4 second window where neither of them fired, as Durg had to reapply the fire rune. It was this moment that the devourer struck. Each maw tilted and suddenly fired a series of dark beams at them! She screamed as one slammed into her shoulder, dislocating it and sending her to the floor. “Lapena!” Durg screamed, turning. The beams had missed him completely, but he was still worried. That was when Durg’s regeneration rune activated, contorting her shoulder into place and healing the damage. She still screamed as it hurt even more, making her roll around a bit. Durg continued to fire, aiming for the flowers this time. However, it still fired off a series of beams. He yelled out in surprise as one beam slammed into his midsection, launching him into the wall. She, being on the floor, avoided the two aimed at her. She stood finally, looking. Durg’s regeneration rune healed him, but he looked out of breathe. She looked at it and stared. She could tell it was heavily burned, and weakened, but not severely harmed. “Durg…. It’s barely injured” she said. “No surprise, ‘onestly” Durg said standing, reloading his gun as the flower drank in more mana from the circle “Damnable thing was summoned from the afterworld”.

Before they could converse further, it began to emit a black smoke from the flowers. She raised and eyebrow as Durg groaned and said “Dammit all…. The thing ‘as given up on kill’in us wit magic and is try’in ta choke us ta death”. She frowned and moved to aim her gun. Durg chanted “Tenso run, kasai, saisei suru”. After she glowed green and her weapon glowed red, she opened fire. However, she didn’t full automatic the beast. She pulled the trigger a few times, unleashing a small flurry of bullets each time, aiming for each of the flowers. Each time, the flowers screeched in pain, but did not stop emitting smoke, until finally all 4 were stunned and on fire. Durg smiled and said “Aye lass, that was a smart move. Where’d ya learn that?”. She smiled and said “One of my favorite childhood stories? ‘Tressa, the the Man Eater’, by Tressa Colzione”. She then pulled out on of the two grenades they brought with them and tossed it towards the thing. The blast from it caused its front part to rupture completely, exposing the plant monsters insides. It screeched and screeched, before using its tentacles to cover itself. It was unable to completely, but enough that taking advantage would prove difficult. Further, she was certain. It was about to unleash a devastating attack.

“Aye… a good move” Durg said, dusting himself off, checking his gun before aiming. “Tenso run, hikari, daburu” he chanted, creating characters out of mana in the air that then vanished, changing properties of certain things. In this case, their weapons now glowed a bright white colored aura. “Now, open fire on that open’in! Sooner or later the blasted thing’ll-” but was cut off as suddenly it sent a large wave of black smoke at him. His sidestep rune activated and teleported him on the other side of her. She aimed and opened fire, aiming for the tentacles. Again, her shots looked like miniature lasers, sinking into the tentacles. Durg aimed and fired at each head as it prepared another cloud of black smoke, stunning it before it could try whatever it tried again. Durg this time tossed the grenade in the air, then chanted “Nerai, nagetsukeru”. The grenade became encased in a bubble of mana, then sped at the exposed opening in the beast, the bubble dissipating before impact. The explosion normally would break the creature to pieces. However, instead, the thing exploded into a brilliant flourish of mana particles. Further, it dented the floor enough to disrupt the circle, lifting the spell that boxed them in. “Run for it!” Durg shouted, turning and running out the door. She nodded and did so as well, reloading her rifle as she ran.
Once they were on deck, Durg casted his scan spell. They had 5 minutes left, their fight taking them roughly 8 minutes, and taking 7 minutes to get to the deck. Durg suddenly said “There is no regulation circle”. “What?” she asked. “Yeah…. Heck, there ain’t any mana flowin anywhere on this ship!” he exclaimed “I… can’t even sense ‘em!”. She stared at him, then her eyes widened as a ship horn sounded. “They planned this. They duped us!” she said “Of course, why didn’t I see it coming!?”. “What do ya mean?” Durg asked. “I dunno much about ships, but what I do know is that to fully man a Dreadnaught and prevent problems, you need a minimum of 1000 men, not including the magical support to keep the ‘mana engine’ under control” she explained “Further, their line about preventing ambushes is clearly false, since pirates don’t operate on the inner sea!”. Durg’s eyes widened as she concluded her explanation and then said “So, while we were fightin’ for our lives, they were arrangin’ and boardin’ another ship!?”. She nodded, then thought and said “Doesn’t mean we’re out yet”. Durg stared and asked “What do ya have in mind?”.

The ship captain stared at her. She had found him in a tavern near the docks. He wasn’t drinking, but arranging for a keg of whiskey and was having a meal. She had approached and asked if she could speak with him. “Aye” he said “I see no reason why not to”. She nodded and sat on the stool next to his, ordering a glass of whiskey. “So. I heard your ship let off its horn. Any reason for that?” she asked. “Nay… prolly that Pontiff. He hired me and me crew for a voyage ta Boulderfall. Offered 1 mil up front. Ain’t about ta ask questions” the captain said “I’m guessin ye got objections?”.

“Whatever makes you think that?” she asked innocently. “Simple. Yer the first ta ask. Most folks just go about their business”. She gave a giggle and said “Guilty as charged. Though less objections and more…” and stopped, looking around. The captain sighed and said “Lass, if yer worried about be’in hauled off fer speak’in outta line, don’t. No one ‘ere that wants ta keep their tongue will wag it to tha authorities”. She nodded and said “I wish to delay their trip by about 2 days”. The captain looked at her and said “Aye… that could be reasonably arranged…. 400 leaves, an the nights drinks”. She smiled and downed her glass, holding back a series of coughs. After a few minutes she stood and said “No problem. Just lemme visit the bank real quick to get your 400…. As for the drinks, just tell the barkeep to put it on Lapena Sozella’s tab”. She then left to withdraw 400 leaves from her account.

As she returned to the motel room, she saw durg getting his ribs bandaged by Michael, while Kevin finished dismantling their equipment. “Any luck?” Durg asked. She nodded and said “The ship captain is going to delay for 2 days”. Durg chuckled and said “Guess you were right. Leaves greases palms better than a good cause”. She moved and laid down on a bed, as Durg said “Well. My boys are on their way. I’m gonna head to join ‘em… what about you lass?”. She thought about it and said “I think… i’ll return home. This was fun but its definitely not the life for me”. “You really think you can return to a normal lifestyle?” Durg asked. She nodded and said “I may have hung out with northerners, but that’s not exactly illegal. If you mean tonight, I can just claim northerner illusions”. Durg laughed and said “Aye, sellin me out then eh?”. She shook her head and said “It ain’t selling out if I know you’ll evade them”. Durg smiled and said “Aye, true that. Then… our business, for now, is concluded”. She nodded and said “Yeah. Thank you Durg… this was enjoyable… except
the monster”. “Oh yeah, that blaggart was right horrible” Durg agreed. “One last thing lass. I’ll be seek’in ya in Stonegard in three years time, so if ya don’t mind, stay there during the month a Steorra” Durg said. She nodded and said “I’ll take a vacation that month then… which is timed right, since summer begins that month”. With that, she went to sleep.

The next morning, she withdrew more leaves and arranged for transportation to Stonegard. Durg was already gone, with a simple note of ‘see you later’. Luckily, a trader was moving materials to Stonegard to set up a bookshop. It was leaving that evening. She decided to sightsee a bit, Wandering the edge of town and eventually the docks. She heard sailors talk about how the captain she spoke to, Captain Zirc Targo of the High Tide, had angered the Pontiff by showing up dead hungover and he ordered the ship departure delayed until the captain got himself together. Further, apparently the Pontiff had sequestered himself to a manor on the northside of town. Satisfied, and happy at the view of the sea from the end of the docks, she headed for the trader’s truck. As she got in, she handed the agreed upon sum of 100 leaves for the trip to the trader, whom responded “Well, well. I’m going to be honest, I didn’t expect you to pay…. Most sales reps try to haggle”. She smiled and said “I thought about it but it’s a fair price. You could’ve gone higher easily”. The driver laughed and said “Perhaps, but I’d prefer to leave a good impression, and what better way than to give a good deal?” She nodded and said “Good business strategy… but don’t forget yourself”. “Hmmm?” the trader mused, raising an eyebrow. “Simple” she replied “Many people say money makes the world go round… but i’ve learned that’s wrong. What use is money if there are no merchants? Without merchants to trade and sell, money is meaningless, trinkets with no real value. We must treasure ourselves as much as our customers, lest we find ourselves lacking and fail to serve our customers”. The trader smiled and said “A good point. I’ll remember that… and make sure to teach it to my employees”.
Chapter 33: the Warrior, Act 4-For Honor

Chapter Summary

Knight of the court of Fionne Balacruif uncovers a terrorist cell in Gold Shore, but fails to stop their departure to what seems to be Flamesgrace. He rushes there to stop the invading force. Can he successfully do it? Or will he die trying? Either way, he will try to save the day, for there is nothing less honorable than standing by and letting innocents die.

Chapter 33

For Honor

He stared at the road ahead as he drove. A hand on the wheel, a foot on the gas pedal, and the wind in his hair, he drove. However, it was no luxury joy ride. He was in a race against time. He had left Gold Shore the moment he had his things together and his car ready. Some officers wanted to come, but they needed time to prepare which they didn’t have. As such, he set off only an hour after the ship took flight. Now, he left Moria, the kingdom of mountains, and entered the inner empire side of Galia, the kingdom of merchants. Rugged mountains and highlands gave way to sandy beaches and seawinds. Eventually, night fell and 7 hours after that, he finally stopped at a roadside motel to sleep. As much as he wanted to just drive, he knew that he was better rested than dead tired. He payed with leaves and feel asleep as soon as he hit the bed. He had odd dreams, about a sword resting in a mountain cave, about a great god bestowing power, about a beautiful woman waiting in a home. However, as the morning sun draped into the room, these dreams faded and were replaced with silent sleep, and eventually, sunlight. He gathered his things and left after making sure to check out, stopping only at a convenience store to grab some snacks and cold meals for the road.

It took him exactly 3 days. Only 3 days to go from a mile away from Rippletide to Flamesgrace. Exactly 4 hours before he arrived, could see the smoke in the air. He also saw his target. The flying galleon raining magic fireballs onto the city below. Frowning, he drove to the gates, then through seeing them open and abandoned. However, he only got 4 blocks before wreckage blocked his path. He stepped out, grabbed his equipment, and went into a nearby home. “Hello!?” he called out. Silence only greeted him. “I’m using your house to change! I will be gone momentarily!” he cried into the house, hoping it was truly empty. He then began changing, putting on his magical armor, cape, boots, and other things. He holstered his saber, held his collapsed pike, and left, heading further into the city. He could see the damage was severe and that the ship above wasn’t done. What shocked him were the troops in the city itself. He ran right in the middle of a all out fight between a unit of royal soldiers and a small unit of 10 northerners. However, like in the siege to grab the holy relic from Victor’s Hollow, these were varied. Two were long eared northerners holding ruby-tipped
staves, 4 were the classic large, bulky light blue northerners, 2 more were bow-wielding fairies, and the last two were a pair of lanky red-haired folk whom were operating a ballistae, with the help of one of the light blue northerners.

He rushed over to the small unit that were taking pot shots with their weapons. They were draped in mythril chain, and wore kevlar vests and helmets, and held mythril framed riot shields, though those had been tossed aside in favor of cover. “What’s the situation?” he asked. “Nothin’ good knight! That damned ship showed up 10 hours ago on the horizon and we prepared best we could… then it started lobbing fireballs and their soldiers fell onto the streets and started rampaging!” one responded. “From there it’s just been bad. We had less than 500 soldiers here in the first place, and the police headquarters for Silvia fell 5 hours ago. We’re trying to recover, but these bastards are everywhere!” another shouted, coming out of cover and emptying a whole magazine into the enemy's position. He peeked and saw the northerners take cover, which didn’t shock him. The royal army infantry, lacking heavy guns, used Beretta AR70s for their main source of firepower. It fired quite a bit stronger than police-issued Kalashnikovs and civilian class Mausers. He asked “That ship… has anything major come down?”. “Nothing reported. Just troops and fireballs” the third soldier responded, hiding behind cover as a few arrows no longer than an inch long whizzed by. He sighed and asked “Evacuations?”. The soldiers nodded and said “Began an hour after it showed up on the horizon…. Got most of them under the cathedral. However… that’s the area they’re trying to breach. Far as we can tell, the rest of this is diversion and division tactics”. He sighed and said “Then… i’ll clear this problem for you. Make your way there and help the defense effort. Understood?”. The soldiers nodded and said “Sir, yes sir!”. With that he pulled out his saber after extending his pike and prepared.

He moved right after his allies barrage. The same time the enemy northerners decided to advance. They came out of cover and began to charge in his direction. He saw what made them feared, bloodshot, piercing blue eyes, glowing red veins beneath skin that looked like flexing ice, and enough girth and muscle to make even grown men cringe. “Junshu suru, boei” he whispered, manipulating his qi into his muscles and skin. The first approached in 2 minutes, bringing its large fist to him. It was roughly the size of a basketball and likely much denser. However, he didn’t let it touch him. He dodged to the left side of the fist and cut into the wrist with his saber. He was thankful for the sharp edge, as it cut fairly deep, though only an inch into the 7 inch diameter wrist. Pulling his saber back, he leapt backwards as the northerner’s fist slammed into the ground and he attempted to hit Sebastian with the back of it, though his pre-emptive dodge avoided the attack entirely. He activated his pikes invisibility and used an underhand toss to lob it into the northerner’s throat, making it try to cry out in pain, but failing. He rushed forward fast, using it being distracted by pulling his pike out to his advantage, and stabbed his saber right into its throat where his pike had been, or at least close enough. His speed and the force of his stab caused him to hilt his sword into and through the northerner and make him fall backwards into the snow covered ground that was quickly becoming red. The other two charging had ignored him initially, but now turned to him.

He pulled his saber out and his pike, bending his body to avoid a strike from the first northerner. It
used a broadsword, though for its size it was more like a claymore. He then stood upright and rushed towards it, leaping as it moved for another swing. As this happened, his pauldrons anti-projectile forcefield enchantment activated and protected him from arrows. He landed in front of the northerner and with his weapons stabbed into its knees, aiming between the joint bones. Using his increased speed he retrieved them before the joints bent enough to damage his weapons and ran backwards, avoiding the northerner falling forward. He screamed however as the third slammed him over the northerner in front of him after hitting him with a massive club. A building stopped his fall and he slammed into the ground after bouncing off. He tapped in his qi reserves and flooded his body with it, using it to patch his body up, whispering “Hiringu”. After a minute he rolled to his feet, using his glove enchantments to at least grab his weapons. He saw one only a few feet away, but the other was a good 12 feet. He used his left glove to fling his saber into its side as he rushed forward, the other glove pulling his pike into his hand. He skidded as he positioned his feet and leapt to the side, avoiding the northerners club that attempted to smash him into the ground, and he then leapt up and sunk his pike into the northerners throat. He felt the northerner grab him and toss him, slamming him yet again into a building. This time, he felt himself sink into it slightly.

He still fell and groaned in pain. He looked up to the sound of thundering footsteps and saw the other one charging. Using his right glove, he wrestled his saber from the northerners body and pulled it into his hand and prepared. It was then he heard it. The ballista the lanky northerners were operating fired and while his pauldrons protected him, it didn’t fully deflect the shot. It simply redirected and slightly altered the trajectory, which caused it to whiz by his head and sink into the wall. He grunted as he stood fully, using his pike to help him stand and readied himself. By now, the archers had given up on hitting him and had begun to focus on the other soldiers, though were upset when they found he was long gone. He avoided the attempted tackle of the charging northerner by dodging around the tackle and slashed at the exposed ankle of the northerner, then leapt away so the northerner couldn’t retaliate easily. He turned his pike invisible, aimed and tossed it, aiming for the jugular of the northerner as it turned to him. Instead, his pike sunk into its shoulder, making it cry out as it sunk 4 inches into the shoulder. He then used his glove enchantment to retrieve it, letting it bleed. That was when he realized something. The wound wasn’t bleeding as much as it should have. He glanced around and saw the alf mages muttering under their breath, hands outstretched. He sighed and focused back on the northerner as it reared a hand back to throw something. He decided to take initiative this time and charged.

His pauldrons enchantments protected him from the thrown rock and his boots ensured that not long after it hit, he was upon the northerner. It attempted a left hook that he ducked under, then a right jab that he leapt to the left away from, and after the left jab, he simply sidestepped and stabbed into the elbow with his pike. He held on as the northerner pulled away, and using that momentum launched himself off his pike and towards the face of the northerner. It had no time to react as he sunk and slashed his blade through its throat. He finally noticed that as it died, the red veins and bloodshot eyes vanished into hazy blues eyes and ice-like skin. He was thrown off as it slammed into the ground back first, and he landed roughly on his butt. Rather than dwell on the pain, he stood and recalled his pike to him and turned to the mages and archers remaining, as well as the ones handling the ballistae. “Retreat” he said clearly “You clearly are outmatched. I’ve dispatched your vanguard”. He could see the mages look at each other and converse a bit, before turning and leaving, the lanky northerners abandoning the ballistae. The archers stuck their tongues out and blew raspberries at him, like angry children, but retreated too. He turned towards the ship in the sky nearing the cathedral. He
glared and got moving. He had little time to waste if he wanted to defend the city.

He had spent a few hours sneaking through the streets of Flamesgrace, avoiding the many enemy units that wandered the streets and guiding royal soldiers he came across to the cathedral. He himself was heading to the belltower near the cathedral, as it was the tallest structure in Flamesgrace and the ship was heading there, likely to dock between it and the cathedral. He arrived before they did and so was able to reach the top of the spiral staircase that lead to a raised platform showing the great bell itself. On each side in the direction of the four cardinal directions the walls were removed, though cleanly to give an amazing view of the cityscape under normal circumstances, though currently he was looking at a city in ruins. He glared at the ship as it lowered and hovered between the bell tower and cathedral, and it dropped its anchor over the side and into the cathedral. He backed to the edge, readied himself, then dashed for the other edge and leapt for the ship. He aimed and stabbed his weapons into the side of the ship and with his feet and legs kicked into the closed cannon port and flew into it. He skidded to a stop inside, landing on both feet. He had let go of his weapons but used one hand to keep the cannon port open remotely and the other to retrieve each weapon individually. He stood in an empty room. Confused, he began to explore the ship and realized the problem. They had left to invade the cathedral. As he rushed to leave, he turned and saw another one of those short flying northerners. They stared at him as he stared at them and as he took a step forward, it shrieked and began to fly away. He was too fast however and had a sword in front of it quickly, making it stop in its tracks. “Hold it. Who are you and why aren’t with the invasion?” he questioned, keeping his sword pointed at the individual.

“mas e do thoil e, tha mi dìreach mar an comhairliche! Cha do thòisich mi an cogadh seo, tha mi air a bhith a ’comhairleachadh an-aghaidh sin!” it cried, in a pleading tone. He stared and repeated “Who are you and why aren’t you with the invasion?”. The northerner got the message it seemed and said “I’m just an advisor! I’ve never supported this tactic! Please, spare me!” . He nodded and said “Fine” and turned his blade away, turning to the stairs leading up to the deck “Then I guess I need to take this up with the Oberon himself” and began walking. “Wait! You’re actually going to try fighting him?” the advisor asked. He nodded and said “Of course. I’m a knight of the court of Fionne Balacruf. I’d dishonor his majesty if I ignored the invasion of the enemy”. As he walked the advisor, stunned, asked “Wait! Can I… check something?”. He stopped and turned, nodding. He had his saber ready if the northerner tried some funny magic. However, all the northerner did was cast a scan spell and then gasped. “What’s wrong?” he asked, a bit worried. The advisor simply smiled and said “Nothing, nothing… I’ll explain at a more opportune time. Hurry. He’ll join the invasion personally soon”. He nodded, turned away, and ran up the staircase. At the top, he turned and saw him. The Oberon of Tir na Nog. “Halt!” he yelled “I am Sebastian Ciel, knight of the court of Fionne Balacruf! I challenge you to a duel!”. The figure, which was turned away, turned sharply, tense and hand ready to cast, then relaxed. It turned fully to him and asked “Boy. Do you have any idea who and what I am?”. 

His black armor glistened as though light shone on it. Despite the fact that the storm clouds above billowed thousands upon thousands of snowflakes a second onto the barely lit city below, the only
light of which were the various fires that had started. The dark armor looked as though it were made for a necromantic knight of galderea, with a skull adorning the face plate and bone-looking spikes made of iron. A tattered cape flowed behind the Oberon, clearly ripped by the heavy winds from flying from Gold Shore to Flamesgrace. Where the plates were not, black chainmail laid there to defend exposed parts. He had to admit, the metal work on it was expert. He barely noticed where the chainmail ended and the plate began, and vica versa. He simply took his normal stance. Legs slightly apart, not enough to leave an opening. His pike under his arm, secured by his folded shoulder, pointed at the Oberon. His body tilted 15 degrees to the right of him, and his saber held behind him and 45 degrees to the right of the Oberon. The Oberon stood before him, seemingly staring at him from behind that black, horned helmet. He turned to another who had been there, another of the long-eared northerners, and said to them “mo chlaidheamh draoidheil. mas e do thoil e, thoir leat e”. The northerner nodded, made some hand motions and chanted “Ō no katana o motte kite, aitemutepōto”. The oberon grabbed as a sheathe with a sword in it appeared and with his other hand grabbed the hilt and pulled the sword out. It was a large broadsword with circular raindrop patterns on it, with runes etched in intermittently. The pommel had a circular gem in it that shone like it contained a rainbow. “Then, boy, you face the Oberon of Tir na Nog and the Commandant of the Horned King. As they say in your tongue, have at you!”.

He reacted instantly as the Oberon charged forward, attempting a straight stab. He knocked the sword to his left and attempted to stab him with his pike, though the Oberon dodged this move, moving as though his armor weighed nothing. He freed his pike from his armpit and used it to parry the next sword strike, an overhead one. He then attempted a slash, but the Oberon leapt backwards avoiding it. He saw the oberon’s hand glow and make some hand motions, and heard him begin chanting, so he filled his body with Qi and whispered “Sokudo”. He could feel his body react faster and move faster. The oberon chanted “Hi no hebi, akuma to shōhi” and thrust his hand towards him. He barely saw it but his body reacted, dodging left. He turned and watched it, seeing a snake made of fire turn and come back to bite. He spun fully and held his saber forward. “Foolish boy. You cannot slay fire with sword” the Oberon said. He smirked as the snake touched his saber and stopped mid air. He turned and said “Well, that is true… but I can tame it!” and flung the snake at the Oberon. He oberon sidestepped the fire snake and pulled his hand back, making the body pull towards him. He ducked down and launched himself backwards, watching the Oberon as the snake retreated and wrapped around the Oberon's arm. He stood quickly and turned his pike invisible. “Enchantments” the Oberon mused “I see... that’s why you did that. Interesting approach. You cannot defeat me with your own power, but with the borrowed power of another, you might yet win”. He asked“And you aren’t?”. The oberon shook his head and said “No. This blade? Personally forged and enchanted. Armor forged. The only part i’ve borrowed were materials and tools, and I paid for those”. He glared and asked “Yet I did the same with more, What’s the difference?”. The oberon stared for a moment, then nodded and said “You provide a fair point. I concede, I am borrowing some power then”.

“Even so, that changes nothing, knight. You cannot, as you are, beat me” the oberon stated and prepared openly. “Junshu suru, Boei” he chanted and pumped mana into his muscles and skin. The oberon then leapt at him, dispelling the fire snake mid-leap and chanted with hand motions “Mizu no kame, anata no ō o mamore!”. Instantly, a large turtle made of seemingly tranquil water appeared on the oberons right side. He slashed down at him, using the momentum from falling to strengthen his
blow, but he was wise to the oberons tactic and leapt away, giving his pike an underhanded toss as he went. However, he was shocked when the turtle reacted instantly and flew between the oberon and his pike, taking the blow. It didn’t merely deflect, it sunk in and the water inside the turtle roiled and raged, swirling and vortexing to keep hold of the spear. He tried to retrieve it, but realized it was holding on far harder than his glove could pull. “Having trouble?” the oberon asked “You could still surrender and i’d spare you, you know”. He replied “It’s fine. I’m not just some brute. I can plan and execute strategies in the heat of battle”. The oberon chuckled and replied “Well then. Come! Prove your station worthy, sir knight!” and charged again.

He avoided the first few strikes. A straight, horizontal slash, a vertical double spin slash. It was hard since he had to his his saber to parry, but he managed. He was waiting for a single opportunity. It was then he received it. As the oberon retreated after a flurry of slashes, he saw that the turtle was about to be completely behind the oberon and he just regained his posture and footing. He pushed forward and made a cross slash with his saber. He made sure to have his intent to strike be felt, but made sure to intend to control mana. At his trajectory and angle of attack, he’d likely cut into the oberons armor, either going completely through, or causing damage to it. As he thought, the turtle sped to intercept and he caught it with his mana-controlling saber enchantment. He quickly reached for his pike with his off hand and pulled, willing the mana in the turtle to disperse, which occurred. It caused it to fall into a puddle on the ground. He then leapt back, gritting his teeth as he felt a cut from the oberons sword form on his chest. “That was… a false opening..!” he grunted as his feet landed. His pike returned to the visual world, as he deactivated its invisibility enchantment. “Indeed… I’m a bit surprised you fell for it, knight” the oberon stated, prepared for another series of attacks. “I admit, I was more focused on retrieving my pike” he admitted. The oberon rushed at him, starting with a horizontal slash from his left. He ducked under it, and then rolled to the left as the oberon quickly changed it into a downwards cross slash aiming towards him. Sparks flew however as the oberon shifted his weight to his other foot, continuing his swing so his sword would be behind him, and went for a palm thrust right at his face. He was barely able to dodge the attack, and realized his mistake. The slash didn’t stop behind the oberon, and continued to move around him until he was poised to make another cross slash, this time upwards. He quickly raised his weapons to block and took the attack head on.

“Good defense, knight. You now have my respect, you’ve proven to be competent in battle” the oberon said. “I do not seek your approval… though I must admit that and more. Your a fierce opponent” he replied. He leapt backwards at that, seeking to make some distance. The oberon returned to his neutral stance and stared at him. He then held a hand to the side and said “Since I have deemed you worthy, let us fight in earnest”. His eyes widened as he asked “Wait… you were holding back!??” in a tone suggesting some disbelief. “Knight…. Did you really think I couldn’t use a sword and magic at once?” the oberon asked him and then chanted his he made hand motions “Kaze no taka, watashi no teki o kari nasai!”. He rushed forward, making a vertical slash as a hawk made of pure wind flew out of his outstretched right hand and curved in its flight path to attack him. He moved to parry the sword but realized he had to attack the bird too. He successfully parried the sword, but as he swiped at the wind hawk, it spun around his blade and went behind his back, digging its beak into him for but a second, but at its speed it made a 1 inch long cut. He cried out in surprise a bit, but the oberon gave him no quarter as he went for another slash, a cross one this time. He barely avoided it with his increased speed but grunted in pain as the hawk landed on his chest
and pecked his neck before retreating from his attempted stab. Thankfully, the peck missed vital organs.

Again, the oberon did not relent, going for a vertical slash, this time the hawk going high, clearly coming in for a dive bomb. He then decided to use his strongest qi technique, one he knew would drain his mana supply. “Yamete, a jihikai jikan!” he said, pumping the rest of his mana directly into his eyes, brain, and the nerves connecting them. Instantly, time slowed to a crawl. He could see the blade, and the hawk. It hadn’t dived yet. He could tell from the look in its eye it was waiting for him to dodge or parry. It’d attack in that opening. He could tell he could dodge or parry the attack, that regardless of the result, the oberon would leap backwards to avoid his counterattack and let the hawk do the damage. A dodge would likely result in a continued assault. He weighed his options while his qi technique let him perceive and think so incredibly fast. Then he remembered the oberons word and realized there were additional failsafes. Likely, if he pressed an attack, anticipating his dodge, he’d dispel the hawk for the turtle. However, to his current, wounded situation, that was much more manageable. Plus, that failsafe exposed an option for him. He let the effect fade, taking in environmental factors and checking his immediately vision for anything coming to interfere, and as it faded completely, moved to parry the attack and rushed to counterattack the oberon. As he thought, the hawk began a dive bomb the minute he parried, but because of the fact he kept pace and thus ensured a strike on him, the oberon dissipated the hawk spell and suddenly chanted “Mizu no kame, anata no ō o mamore!” and made the turtle appear to block his saber strike. However, this was planned, and he used his sabers enchantment to dispel the water turtle. He then yelled as he thrust his pike forward. The oberon was unable to dodge and yelled as it sunk in through his armor.

The as tough as mythril was, against mythril itself it was like fighting steel with steel. Enough force, the attacker will win everytime. Sebastian stood there, gazing into the helm of the oberon. He then looked at the pike. He could see the blood beginning to come from the wound. He grunted as he pulled it out. The oberon made a slight cry of pain and fell to one knee. He then pointed the saber to the oberons head. “Surrender. You’ve lost” he said, in an informative tone. The oberon barely responded, clutching his wound with one hand, bracing himself with his other on his knee, his sword abandoned. Eventually he looked up and stared back. After a few tense minutes, the oberon said “Fine… you have won. I surrender” and bowed his head. Sebastian then said “Then order your troops off. After that…. We’ll escort you to everhold”. The oberon looked up at him, clearly confused. He answered the oberons confusion with “What? You are foreign royalty. It is only proper. You can discuss compensation, reparations… and most importantly your true motives”. The oberon stared then nodded and answered “Yes… that is true. Are you sure he’d listen?”. Sebastian nodded his head and answered “He listened when I told him about the northerner beneath victory hollow. I don’t see why he wouldn’t listen to you”.

It didn’t take long after that. The oberon ordered a halt on the invasion and ordered surrender. He kept an eye on the oberon, but had a feeling he wouldn’t pose a problem. From there, the cleanup op was fairly simply. Detain all the northerners and transfer them south to Everhold. They would stand trial under the court of kings and sentences passed down. The oberon however would instead enter
diplomatic negotiations and interrogation without torture tactics in order to discern intent and if alliances could potentially be made, and what might’ve started the war. However, he needed to know. As he waited for soldiers to arrive and occupy the ship, he turned and asked “So. why this? Why do this?”. The oberon looked at him. He had by now removed his helmet and revealed that he was a long-eared northerner, though unlike them he had pale skin and silver hair, with platinum eyes. “Simple” he answered “I need to stop the Galdera Cult from succeeding in poisoning the mind of the high emperor. My intelligence suggests that the Pontiff of the Church of the Silver Flame is a member”. He stared at the oberon and asked “Wait… are you serious?”. The oberon nodded and said “Not personally. The only reason I believed it was because the intelligence forces of the titania corroborated these findings”. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. The Church of the Silver Flame was the ruling party of the Silvia kingdom, and its pontiff had a seat on the Council of Kings, the lawmaking and ruling body of the empire. The high emperor had a lot of political, legal, and military power, but, the Council of King’s minus the High Emperor could overrule the High Emperor in nearly every category. One of their number being compromised and part of the Cult of Galdera was terrible, bad news. Thankfully, soldiers had arrived by then.

A week later, the transfer was complete. The oberon wasn’t arrested formally and had changed into far more formal robes. Red with gold trims on it. He talked little with the oberon and focused on a safe transfer. Luckily, their 20 man unit scared most monsters off and the few that bothered were killed in short order. Once they arrived, a meeting was arranged immediately, with the trial of the invading forces to be decided later. He was requested by both the high emperor and the oberon to attend. He did so, wearing his formal attire himself. Black silk dress pants with black shoes, black satin gloves, a white cotton undershirt and black tuxedo with a red tie, his tabard, and his saber. His hair was slicked back and clean, and his skin was washed to a gleam-like complexion. He sat in the audience while the Oberon sat at a long desk. Opposite of the oberon sat a long table with ornate thrones facing the oberons table, and in the center stood a tall throne. Fionne sat in this throne, while the other kings took their thrones. There were a few kings absent, but this was fine. It was no trial, simply a meeting. A negotiation specifically. Fionne looked at him and gave him a nod. He did not react but understood. Fionne was silently praising him. He watched as the meeting began.

“I am Fionne Balacruf, high emperor of the Balacruf Empire. We were invaded by the northern armies, for the past seven years, and only now are we speaking to the ruler of that mysterious northern nation. Before we begin, I ask we show him that we are not barbarians and that no matter what strange matters he speaks of, we do not ridicule or mock him. Now, enemy ruler, state your name for the record, please” Fionne said in a tone fitting of his position. The other kings simply nodded in agreement. Sebastian frowned slightly for a moment. He didn’t like that the pontiff wasn’t attending, but he disliked that even more, that the king of Galia wasn’t in attendance. The oberon drank the glass of water he had and spoke. “I am Cogadh Ceothach, the oberon of my home nation, Tir na Nog. I come from a line that cared for the misty forests of the great forest in the eastern region of our fair kingdom. I am not the only ruler, nor the one with sole power. I do control the military and matters of national security, as well as head the Church of the Horned King, and I also control the offices that map trade routes in Tir na Nog” he stated. The court recorder made sure to keep the camera rolling. Fionne nodded and said “Then for now, we’ll begin the Q&A portion. Our side will ask a question, you answer, then you get to ask a question. We will move on after a number of questions have been answered. Is this acceptable?”. Cogadh nodded and one of the kings, one that Sebastian knew, began.
“I am the champion-queen of Halihall, Letrix Santoria. My question is why did you invade our kingdom? To my knowledge, none of our people incurred on your land” Letrix questioned. Cogadh nodded and said “Not entirely true, though incursion isn’t the word I’d use. Immigrated is the correct term that our people use. Regardless, it isn’t a problem. As for the reason for the invasion, the intelligence networks both me and the titania control confirmed that the Pontiff of the Silver Flame Church is a member of the Cult of Galdera”. The room gasped. He only didn’t, as he had heard this before and after recent news, the robbery of the Dragonstones, it was likely. “Do you realize-” Letrix began, but Fionne interrupted, saying “Champion-Queen Letrix. I trust you remember what I said in the beginning?” in a strict tone, like a parent might a child in trouble. Letrix glared at him, clearly wanting to start something, but after a few tense moments, Letrix simply sat, her large pauldrons making a heavy clattering sound. Fionne gestured to Cogadh and said “Apologies, you may ask your question”. Cogadh nodded and said “I would like to ask about the whereabouts of the good pontiff”. Fionne nodded and said “I do not know at this time… instead, a court mage will begin scrying for him. In the meantime, might we continue?”. Cogadh nodded. “Then, sir, I would like to ask if you would substantiate the claims that the pontiff and king of the snowlands is a member of the Galdera Cult” a robed figured asked, his nameplate in front of him designating him as the king of Naaz, Norman Bates. Cogadh nodded and said “They are not with me and you would need to speak to the titania but I am willing to give this board access to my information network. Is this acceptable?”. Norman nodded and said “Of course”. “Then, my next question I suppose is…. How is your anti-galdera plan?” Cogadh asked. The room went silent, though people murmured. The kings looked to one another, silent, before Fionne spoke and said “To be honest, we don’t. We hoped free knowledge on Galdera along with truthful propaganda about his nature would be enough”.

“I see. That is unfortunate” Cogadh said, looking down and sipping some water. After a few minutes of silence, the king of Mars, Brausha Danja, asked “How do we contact the titania of your nation?”. Cogadh answered immediately and said “Normally, through a diplomat, like in ancient times. However, after one had to disguise themselves and go into hiding as a bandit, she’s had everyone here go radio silent. Though with this meeting, she may send one over. Make sure your soldiers on the border aren’t trigger happy and are mannerful. Her troops are always so soft and weak”. Brausha raised her eyebrow and sat, pursing her black lips together in a quizzical, questioning manner. Cogadh spoke and asked “My final question I suppose is have you done anything to stop the Galdera Cult?”. Fionne nodded and said “Yes. We investigate reported cultists and kill them if we find them guilty and burn their belongings…. And anyone that aided their behavior”. Cogadh stared, but nodded. It was then the king of Aques, Harold Royes, asked “Cogadh, would you mind informing us what made you aware of Galdera?”. Cogadh nodded and said “Absolutely. It’ll take a bit though as its somewhat of a story. Do you and the audience mind?”. Silence pervaded and Cogadh said “Alright. Then let me begin with the formation of Tir na Nog”.

“At the start, Tir na Nog was a barren wasteland with a crater that only saw light at high noon. Two gods wandered the land, searching for a place to call home. The wastes were perfect, as all it needed was life. The horned king used his powerful, aggressive magics to whip up a storm, while the great...
mother seeded the earth. Eventually, Tir na Nog formed into a paradise and they left, naming two of
their children the titania, high bishop of the order of the great mother, and the oberon, high priest of
the church of the horned king” Cogadh explained, and paused to take a drink of water, then
continued, “They also left a prophecy. In basic words, it predicts that Galdera will eventually
succeed in rising and that only 8 heroes guided by muses can defeat him with the power found at…
wherever world’s end is”. The kings and Fionne stared at him incredulously. However, Fionne
gathered his composure and said “I believe a new inquiry has come up…. But is there any more to
this legend?”. Cogadh nodded and said “Not legend…. More history followed by prophecy. It’s a
poem they left and has been passed down. It tells of ancient days when we were allies, how we
drifted apart, and how only through union will his new attempt be stopped”. Fionne stared but slowly
nodded his head and said “Then this concludes the Q&A portion. I’ll have some men investigate
some claims made here today…. For now, we begin negotiations. I assume you know how that
goes?”.

Cogadh nodded and Fionne began, saying “Then let me lay down these terms immediately. 500,000
leaves worth of wealth as compensation to the families affected by your invasion, an immediate
cessation of said invasion, and the right to occupy at least one province of each region in your
kingdom”. Cogadh’s stare, which he saw later when the meeting was televised, granted it was grainy
quality and black and white, sent shivers down his spine. “Balacruf, I trust that was a jest, as I simply
cannot accommodate that” Cogadh responded “For the return would require occupation in a city of
each of your regions, the rights required to conduct a search for the heroes the muses are destined to
guide, and a seat on your council”. The kings became furious, shouting at him. Things about how he
began the war and deserves nothing, how he’s just a barbarian. However, Fionne yelled “Quiet!”
and their shouts ended. “Compose yourselves. We are negotiating or did you idiots forget that!?” he
demanded to know. “No sir… we didn’t. Sorry” Letrix said, looking away. The kings gave small
apologies but remained silent. “Then, let’s lower our demands. I won’t budge on the leaves, but I am
willing to simply build bases in your regions” Fionne said. Cogadh had a thoughtful expression but
sighed and said “That’s still too much. My people, whom have had no contact with yours, would be
intimidated, greatly. That said, I can lax my demand for military presence in your nation. I trust you
won’t try an invasion”. Fionne nodded in agreement as Letrix asked “How about a single military
base and an embassy in each major city on both sides?”. Fionne nodded and said “A good idea… if
all you ask is for embassies and the ability to search for heroes, and pay the 5 million, then I think the
council will find those terms acceptable”. Cogadh nodded and said “Then we have our terms for
surrender”.

“Then, I, Fionne Balacruf, bring a vote to the council. Do we accept their surrender, or do we deny
and re-enter negotiations? I vote aye!” Fionne declared. “Aye” declared Letrix, Norman, and Retra
Herald, Queen of Moria. “No vote” declared Letrix and Maria Ravus, Queen of Rave. “Nay” voted
Harold. Sebastian smiled a bit as Fionne said “Then, let it be known, we accept the surrender of the
oberon of Tir na Nog, Cogadh Ceothach. A week from now, we will hold an intelligence meeting, to
share information and evidence regarding to the threats brought up here. For now, let it be known.
The war is over and I welcome the Titania to contact and send diplomats”, standing up as he did.
The king’s each did and Cogadh did as well. The kings and Fionne gave a slight bow of respect to
Cogadh, and Cogadh gave a bow of respect to them. He was then escorted elsewhere by soldiers and
the kings and the high emperor were escorted somewhere else as well. However, he saw Fionne
make the gesture for him to follow, like he had been taught when he first joined the court. Understanding, he began to head towards the high emperor’s personal study.

He stepped into the study and saw Fionne already waiting. Fionne was leaning against his study desk and was staring out the window onto the view of the empire his study had. He gave the national salute and then bowed on one knee. Fionne gave a small chuckle and said “Sebastian, you don’t need to bow to me”. He stood and responded “I must at least once, sire, for I am your knight and it is not proper conduct to not bow”. Fionne gave a small laugh and said “You always were like that. Prim and proper… full of honor and pride” and moved towards him, saying “Even now, you put your pride and honor on the top of your priorities”. Sebastian shook his head and said “I must respectfully disagree sire. I put you and our friendship at the top, then my honor”. They both smiled, Sebastian relaxing a bit as they walked to their seats. “How was your journey? I hope not too dangerous” he asked. Sebastian sighed and said “It was a bit harrowing, but ultimately good. How about you?” Fionne replied while beginning working on paperwork “Fine. I’ve been investigating what he called Tir na Nog. I knew a few things, like the gist of his prophecy, though not the bit about Galdera successfully rising, and the general style of government”. He sighed and leaned back, saying “Well… you read my report right? I hate to say it but you may need to get a detailed report on their style so I can give it a read”. Fionne nodded, chuckling and said “Indeed. Congratulations by the way. I’m happy to hear you finally found a girl”. Sebastian laughed and said “Indeed…. It’ll be interested, being married. I hope it doesn’t end like most political marriages”. Fionne smiled warmly and said “Friend that i’ve known since we were babes… I know it won’t. You’re full of honor and your station high. Unlike other men, you use words first instead of fists. You’ll do just fine”. Sebastian simply said “Thanks Fionne…. Hearing that from you, it means a lot”.

He left after that, to return to his home. He had a room in the castle, but after his first paycheck he arranged to own a small plot of land in an area of the mountain that they had just cleared for house building. It was large enough for a medium one-floor house with a decent yard. He was making payments and this month was the last payment. In fact, as he arrived, he saw the letter in his mailbox. He retrieved it, among other things, and went into his house to make some calls. First the payment. The first thing he heard was “Your behind two months. However, I’m not charging late fees simply because your a knight and you’ve been up to date on your payments”. “Thank you” he replied in an appreciative tone, saying “I’ve been away on a quest. I have payment for those months and this month however”. “Understood. Just have it in by the end of the week” the voice said before hanging up. From there, he had the matter regarding his political marriage settled and had a license being mailed to him. It’d arrive soon. All that was left was to take the trip back to Victor’s Hollow to get the seeds. Further, he was curious about these muses, and Emily Kringle sounded like a perfect source of information. However, he wouldn’t try any deception. He’d be honest about his intent. Deception was dishonorable after all, and it was his personal philosophy to be honorable at all times, if for no other reason than he’d be able to live a regretless life, though he was an altruist. He looked at a picture of his grandfather and said “After all. It was his wish I become an honorable knight, a dream snatched from him by both his own vices and those around him that valued it little. As I had no dream and he gave everything to raise me, I saw and still see no reason to deny his dream. I hope i’ve made you proud grandfather”. He then dusted the picture and moved to his room. The picture depicted a man from the chest up in full plate, lacking the helm, wearing a cloak parted in the middle by arms. The man had a young face, 18 years old, and the man was painted as though having blue eyes and black hair. He had the beginnings of a blonde mustache and beard however. He also had a
small mole on his nose.
Chapter 34: The Dancer, Act 4-For Responsibility

Chapter Summary

Selim Deon returns to the root of his fame and fortune, Sunshade, where supposedly the ex-manager that tried to kill him hides. Seeking not revenge but to try to bring sense to the man, he searches for Jermaine. However, shadows of his past begin to haunt him. Will he escape the city alive? Or will he become another number in its history?

Chapter 34

For Responsibility

Selim walked out of the gas station holding a paper bag. It contained their lunch. A pair of burgers with no vegetables, small fries, and chips. He walked over to Fenris, whom was refilling their car with gas and offered it after retrieving his chips, fries, and burger, saying “here’s lunch. My treat. Sadly, all I can afford until we hit a bank”. Fenris pulled the pump away from the car, put the cap on the tank, closed the cover, and then accepted the bag as he climbed into the driver side and said “Well, then it’s a good there we’re a few hours from the next town. We can stop there… and thanks”. Fenris then opened the bag and pulled out the burger and began eating. He got into the passenger seat and closed the door. Fenris started the car and began driving as he ate. Selim himself began eating, using his lap to prop certain things. They were currently leaving a gas station an hour from Boulderfall in Rave, heading for the city of Sunshade in the sand kingdom Mars. They’d likely stop at a motel at either the city edge or close. After all, Sunshade was at least 15 hours away, while Riverbrook was 5 hours.

Even so, the bleak landscape of craggy ravines and orange tinted rocks gave way to green pastures, flowing blue rivers, and beautiful waterfalls as they descended the area known as the cliftlands and eventually passed the roadside sign signify where on that road the border between Rave and Aques lied. They had officially entered the riverlands, denizen to the kingdom of water and the once famous heroes of Alfyn Greengrass, a master apothecary that traveled and healed people, and Nigel Greengrass, a man who while not as much of an expert chemist as his ancestor, acquired the right gear to make him the strongest member of the eight heroes of the third rising. He himself always favored Primrose Azelhart out of all heroes. He found her story moving. “Have you heard of the eight?” he asked fenris, as he stared out of the window. It had been silent for sometime, and he figured he’d make conversation. “I have… it’s a famous story even in Tir na Nog” Fenris replied “Eight people of various backgrounds went on quests and through cooperation and guile completed them and then discovered the evil lurking in the background trying to control their destinies. With the help of the gods Dreisang, Winnehild, Balrog, and Steorra, they fought this evil and sent it back into the pits of the Afterworld”. He nodded and asked then “So, anyone you particularly favored?”.
Fenris nodded and said “I found Azelhart and Therion to be interesting folks to be honest”. He chuckled and said “Then we have similar tastes?”. Fenris nodded and said “To be expected. Very rarely do muses and their charge have conflicting interests”.

More conversation followed. Mostly about their plans, which they already knew about. He had already received the full blessing of his muse. The blessing of the stars as his muse called it. His mana became more potent, flowed faster, used itself more efficiently. He himself gained an ability to sense danger 5 seconds ahead of time, preventing more than one traffic accident, and had found out he could teleport 100 feet once in a single day without expending any mana. Further attempts resulted in a massive drain of mana. According to Fenris, it measured to 200 kites, which if his health records were to be trusted was little under double the amount of mana he had in his system. Even so, a single teleport would prove helpful no doubt. Further, Fenris had taken it upon himself to mentor him in spellcasting, which he appreciated. He had learned a few helpful spells. Further, Fenris took it upon himself to personally enchant several of his items and replace some. His suit had been enchanted with a shielding spell to help defend him against attacks, along with his pants. His shoes had a reflex enhancement enchantment added to it, and his knife was broken down and with some other things remade into what Fenris called a ‘Rune Knife’ that channeled mana far better than his old arcane dagger.

The next day, they arrived in Sunshade. It was the late afternoon and they stopped at a diner going to find a hotel to stay at. Sunshade had a variety of names. The ‘Den of Pleasure’, the ‘Sanctuary of Joy’. It’s most famous name however was ‘Entertainment Metro’. It had over 1000 5-star hotels, and minimum 5000 hotels total. The lower grade hotels were decent quality and particularly cheap allowing for the less fortunate to enjoy their time in the city as well, as well as the workers that made sure the city ran, like the dealers in the casino’s, to the men who worked the plumbing system. The diner was an older style one, a large trailer turned into a place to sit down and enjoy good home-cooked style meals. They drank pepsi’s while deciding what to eat. “So” Fenris began, asking “What do you plan to do?”. He sighed and sipped his pepsi and replied “Not sure… try to talk Jermaine down? I rather not have to call the police…”. Fenris sighed and said “If it turns out he’s a threat to us?”. Selim looked at him and asked “What do you expect? Stall him and wait for police. I’m just an actor, I can’t fight”. Fenris shook his head and said “No. You’re destined to fight and save this empire… nay, both our nations. You need to learn to take action and I think this is the best moment to”. Selim shook his head as he saw the waitress approach and said “Fenris… thank you, but… I’m just a guy. What can I really do beyond some support magic?”. Fenris smiled and said “That’s what I’m here to try and help you discover”. The waitress stopped by the and asked “Hi. May I take your order?”.

He had ordered a fully cooked kingfisher for them to share. Wings, legs, everything. Of course the guts were taken out but the rest of the meat, the stuff most people ate, was left. He had gotten a side order of fries with melted swiss cheese on it while Fenris had a garden salad coated with a layer of goat milk made into a vanilla cream. They had gotten refills on drinks and at their meal in peace. At first, they stayed silent. Eventually, Fenris spoke, asking “So. What’s the plan? How are we finding
him?”. Selim swallowed what he was eating and said “I was thinking of checking the seedy spots of town. As I am, i’m too obvious but a little clothes shopping and I can handle myself”. Fenris raised an eyebrow and asked “You can act suspicious?”. Selim nodded, commenting “Acting is basically playing pretend on a grander scale… each role is a different face, a different mask… a different person. I’ve had a few roles as a ‘pauper’ as some would call it, so I can pull it off”. Fenris ate some more and said “Well then, you can do that… I think tonight I shall consult the stars. I might be able to divine a hint from them”. Selim smiled and said “Thank you, Fenris. You’ve been very helpful in all this”. Fenris nodded and said “Of course. You’re the hero and I your muse. I must take my role seriously lest I do disservice to it”. They finished their meal after that and left, Selim paying the bill and leaving 5 leaves as a tip.

Heading into town, finding a 5-star hotel was easy. Getting in, being Selim, was easy. Getting a room for himself and then Fenris? Not so easy. “I’m sorry sir. We only sell rooms to stars. If he is your guest, he must stay with you” the clerk said in a tone that had a sort of droll to it. He sighed and asked “Are you sure? Nothing you can do?”. The clerk nodded and Fenris said “Sir, I don’t mind sharing the room. Might work better that way actually”. Selim looked at him and nodded, turning to the clerk and saying “Alright. How much for a room with two beds?”. The clerk replied, opening something below the counter they couldn’t see “For Selim Deon, and a bodyguard, we are to charge no more than 400 leaves minus applicable fees… so sir, with the taxes the empire demands, it is 440 leaves sire”. He nodded and gave the leaves, emptying the last leaves of his wallet. He then accepted the key he was handed as the clerk said “Room 430. 10 doors to the right from the elevator, on the right” and gestured to it. He nodded and said “Thank you sir. Have a nice day” and turned to head there as Fenris grabbed their suitcases and followed. After they entered the elevator, he looked at Fenris and said “Well we have a place to stay…. I think I’ll take a nap before heading out”. Fenris nodded and said “I think that is a fine idea. After you wake, I should be able to divine if the stars hold anything for me tonight”. Selim merely nodded, still unsure how Fenris’ make worked. It worked like their magic but unlike most, some of the abilities Fenris used had the mana dissipate midair.

He had slept very well. The hotel beds were made from premium materials gathered from monsters and creatures that were plentiful but strong, like kingfishers or birdian kings. He looked at the balcony and saw Fenris staring at the sky. He decided to head over to see if the starseeing was going to pan out. “Hey” he said, approaching and asked “Any luck?”. “Yes…. nothing yet but the stars are talkative. Not about us and our quest exactly, but they speak still” Fenris responded. “About what?” he asked, somewhat curious. “They speak of many things…. Like the emissary of the horned king being defeated…. The release of ancient heroes… of coming tragedy” Fenris said. He was concerned now but didn’t want to risk knowing too much so he said “I see.. Well I’m gonna head out. Follow when you’re ready unless this takes a while” and turned to leave. Fenris said nothing as he left. “Now the question is… how will Selim handle the ghosts of his past…? Will he let them swallow him or will he fend them off…?” Fenris said aloud, asking no one in particular and kept star-reading.
He walked the streets of Sunshade. He had not told Fenris everything about Sunshade and his connection to it. It was more than acting. It was more than just being the hive of entertainment. He personally had walked its streets for years. He still remembered those days. He had come against his father's wishes and wanted to make it big. With only 2000 leaves to his name, he went from audition to audition trying to land a role. It took him 4 years but he landed a minor role, the performance of which garnered the attention of a major actor. One that was old, dying, and retired. He was abusive after he accepted the mentorship, but his desire allowed him to endure it. After he died, he sent word to all his contacts about Selim and while he wasn't a star overnight, he had effectively entered the entertainment industry. In exchange, he kept the abuse silent and only spoke the actors praises. In fact, it's how he met what was now his enemy. Jermaine had worked for Rain Gore and after his death had jumped from actor to actor until he himself hired him… then abused him like Rain had himself. “Funny” he said to himself as he walked “Things have come full circle huh..?”. He saw a clothing shop soon enough and walked in. He bought a set of tattered clothes to begin his operation. Tattered pants, tattered longcoat, tattered shirt, tattered wide-brimmed hat. 30 leaves total, which was no issue. He had 4000 leaves on him. He went into the dressing room to put it on and kept the rest in his pocket. He then headed out and headed to where he knew he could get info. The catacombs of Sunshade.

The catacombs of Sunshade had been utterly taken over. The black market was in town and the catacombs were its home. They ran everything here, from fake licenses to illegal arms even to exotic monsters. He wasn’t sure how much they pulled in, but it was enough that even even when it came to slavery, the police turned a blind eye. Only the royal forces, whom worked directly for the empire and the high emperor, would do something. He personally knew as even at his worst at the height of his career the police bailed him out because he was so popular and so connected. He hadn’t truly cut contact but he limited it. It was now he was going to call on a favor from one of these contacts. The man he knew owned this branch of the organization that ran the black market. He walked through the market towards the location the office of the branch manager would be. As he walked up a small amount of stairs into a cramped house, the guard at the door stopped him and said “Password” in a thick accent, one he recognized, caused by an accident. He himself paid the manager to have this guard sent to a hospital to be treated. He smiled and lifted his hat and said in a slightly stereotypical hero voice “Sir, you can’t just let a simple fella like me in?”.

The guard smiled and said “There’s a face I haven’t seen in a while. Of course. I just need to get the boss man’s permission. You understand, no?”. Selim nodded, keeping the voice and said “Absolutely. I’ll even keep watch”. The guard, whom he knew was named Joe Chill, went inside and locked the door. He then leaned against the railing and looked out at the market. Everyone was staring but moving carefully. Not coming closer, though he knew why. They were suspicious of him. However the tension vanished when joe opened the door, moved aside to let him in, and said “Please, sir, come in. My boss is happy to see an old friend”. He nodded and moved inside. Joe gave him a pat on the shoulder and went outside to resume his duties, while he headed upstairs to the study. Last door of three on the left after turning the corner from coming upstairs. The walls were painted blue, a color that in psychology, according to the branch manager, meant calm, something that the manager wanted. He knocked on the study and head an almost innocent, sing-song voice sing out “Come in! The doors open!” and he did. As he did, he saw the branch manager herself, Angelica Lorenz, heir to the Lorenz family estate, the family that control the flow of trade for
magical goods. He gave a bow as he walked in, removing his hat. “Hello, Angelica, it’s been a while”.

“Oh! Selim!” Angelica said, standing “I didn’t think I’d see you again!” He chuckled and said “Nah, I knew I’d see you when you retired or if you got bored enough you’d call”. Angelica smiled at him and said “Silly, I’m in charge of Sunshade’s black market and affiliated fronts! Visiting you would bring that darkness with me and you said you wanted to go straight!” He smiled a bit and said “True, but when you in particular want something, only the royal army can really stop you…. Still remember when you robbed that bank on 5th and Malberry just because they supposedly had an ancient pillow from a man south of the empire”. “They did and I’ll have you know you were part of that” she stated, reminding him of his involvement “You needed to money for those drugs you liked. What were they again at the time? Malsense?”. He slowly nodded, his smile fading “Yeah… made me hallucinate other lives and when combined with Grolar, my body is paralyzed so I won’t hurt anyone”. Angelica nodded and said “Yes… you always were the black markets most lucrative customer, aside from your mentor…. Oh and Mr. Vallby”. He nodded as he remembered Vallby. Son of the mayor and big into weapon collecting and drug use. He looked out the window onto the black market and said “Which brings me to this. Has Jermaine contacted you or an info broker?”. Angelica looked away a bit but sighed, saying “Yes. He came here personally in fact…. At first spun a lie about you wanting to walk with us again, but Joe straightened him out and he admitted he wanted to go underground”.

“I see…. And?” he asked. “Selim, please… you know I cannot disclose such business dealings… even to you of all people” Angelica said “It’s not like before. I’ve got eyes on me and mounting responsibility…. Did you know? The high emperor mailed me yesterday. Nothing serious but he did and that has me worried”. Selim closed his eyes and said “He shot me, Angelica. In the back…. Near my spine”. He could hear the gasp, then the tightening of her jaw. He opened his eyes and saw dusk settling onto the market as it began to prepare for the night crowd and turned to her, saying “Of course, I know how this works”. He walked to her desk and put a small satchel filled with the rest of his leaves on it. He even included a few white soulstones filled with basic light spells, still worth 100 leaves each. “He’s going to do something else… I have to stop him” Selim said, looking at her and requesting “Please, help me Angelica”. Angelica sighed, her blonde hair bouncing to her shoulders as she walked to her desk and sat, scooping the leaves to her. He could see the darkness in her eyes and felt a small ping of regret but squashed it quickly. His life with her was past, he had moved on. He could see her pink dress with white laces wrinkle slightly as she moved to remove her silk white gloves. “Wilshire Street. You know where….. You’re lucky we run an information racket. Any info, for the right price and you paid it” Angelica said. He bowed and said “Thank you, milady. It was a pleasure” and turned to leave. “So that’s it then…? No meetup later, just pleasantries and goodbyes?” Angelica asked, her voice a bit callous. “Angelica” he began but stopped short as he turned and saw Angelica holding her personalized flintlock pistol that she valued greatly, his eyes widened. “What…?” he said and she stood, saying “Selim…. Did you really believe that Jermaine was unaware you were alive, even after you made that radio interview?”.
He turned to run, but saw Joe standing behind at the top of the stairs, facing him. Joe shook his head and said “Not this time buddy….. Real sorry”. He turned back to Angelica and said with a strained voice “Why…”? She sighed and said “It’s just business…. And sooner or later, I had to stop letting my feelings for you get in the way of how I conduct business… but as long as you’re alive, I can’t” in a tone that was colder than the stone that surrounded them, the last bit of daylight slipping from the black market “Goodbye, Selim… my old love. I’ll never forget” and pulled the trigger. However, Selim had learned and as she spoke the last words leaped the railing. His actions caused him to get hit still, but only his left arm. He landed uneasily, but the handrailing let him steady himself. “Stop!” Joe yelled and began down the stairs. He wasted no time, ignoring the pain and ran out the door. He ran into the market proper, ducking between buildings and stalls. He knew he wouldn’t escape into the city but he knew of one exit that even the black market never bothered guarding beyond a locked gate. The exit leading to the desert. He lost Joe within 30 minutes and headed for the exit. He sighed and said “dammit… I should’ve known…” in a tone of sadness. He approached the gate and pulled his knife out, slashing it in the air and saying “Kagayaku hoshi”, which converted some of his mana into light mana and sent it forward in a torrent at the lock, destroying it. He walked towards it and opened it, staring up the unworked cave leading to the dark desert night sky. He could feel the chill drifting down.

He walked towards Sunshade and all its splendor through the desert. He had escaped the black market. He tapped his cheek and whispered “Raitomanto”. Light bent around him, rendering him imperceivable. The entrance was open of course, and the guards while vigilant were relaxed, which made it easy for him to walk in. He stayed invisible as he ducked into an alleyway and disrobed, putting his old clothes on, and ditching his old ones. He proceeded to head out of the alley and once in the street and down it into the main city disengaged. He sighed again as he was back in the main city. He was safe for now since the black market and the organization that ran it made it a point to leave Sunshade, the city proper, alone with its business. Unfortunately, that meant that once he left it, or went back, he was fair game. Further, because of circumstances, he knew full well Angelica may ignore the rules and come after him. He wasn’t sure though. After all, love did crazy things to a person. He knew from experience. He finally stepped into the hotel they were staying at. He went to the elevator and looked at the elevator operator and said “Floor 4, please” in a somber tone. The operator nodded and used the hand crank used to lift the elevator to get them there. He sighed and left the elevator when it arrived.

He entered the room at around 11 at night. It had taken him that long to get from the desert back to his hotel. As he walked in, he saw Fenris standing on the balcony, still staring up. “Any luck?” he asked Fenris as he sat at the foot of his bed. “A bit, yes. I cannot say exactly where Jermaine is, but I’ve divined how long we have. A week. Further, he’s meeting someone” Fenris responded. He looked at him and asked “Can you tell who?”. Fenris turned and said in a grim voice “No. However, the star of Galdera hovers where the answer should be. It means he’s interfering with my divinations. Even so, he cannot block all of them”. Selim sighed deeply and asked “What else?”. Fenris walked to his bed and sat on it, saying “Yes….. Delilah. Her star meets yours in the future”. He looked at Fenris and asked “I see…. Is it a… good arrangement?”, hoping he was using the right terminology. Fenris chuckled as he removed his shirt, revealing an upper body that resembled the body of a researcher that took immaculate care of themselves, and said “For the most part. I see turmoil but it seems it will be a good reunion”. He simply smiled, moving and removing his shoes and setting them aside, saying “Well. Then I had better make sure to survive the coming trials”. “Trials?” Fenris
asked. He nodded and said as he got under the covers and said “Yes…. the organization that runs the black market has been hired by Jermaine to kill me…. And I know where he is because I paid its branch manager for Sunshade for the info…” and let his voice trail off. “Well then… we should finish our business and leave before trouble starts” Fenris said, laying in the bed and pulling the covers over himself “Namely… there is a star that worries me. It strays close”.

He got up early, 7 am specifically. He did so because he wanted to handle Jermaine alone. He put his shoes on, used a spell to freshen his clothes, and left a note before leaving the room. He hailed a taxi and had it go to Wilshire Street, the bar known as Dancehall Pub. A building that had existed since ancient times and had expanded into a large 5 story building built purely for the entertainment of others. It used to be his old stomping grounds. He walked in and looked around. That’s when he saw him. Jermaine Vilkas. He stood on the 4th floor staring down at the dance floor on the 1st. The inside had a large dance floor in the center and the upper levels had large pathways that led into halls and rooms and stairways. He headed for a nearby stairway, keeping his eyes on Jermaine. He reached into his shirt and whispered “Raitomanto” and vanished. He saw Jermaine look over to him, stare, then look away. He walked up the stairways to the fourth floor and headed for him, keeping his eyes on him. He saw Jermaine walk away and into a hallway. He followed, keeping a good distance and making sure to not bump anyone, which was extremely difficult. He followed Jermaine for 5 minutes before seeing the room he entered. He walked to follow and heard a gun click behind him. He sighed and dropped his spell, saying “I should’ve known you’d do this… why hunt me when you can just stalk Jermaine and wait for me…”.

It was then he heard Jermaine, in the room, say “Bring him in, Angelica”. The gun poked his back and he sighed as he went into the room. It was a lavish room, pinks and blues covered it. He saw him right there, standing between the bed and the desk in the corner, messing with something. The smoke that rose told him it was a cigar. What he saw when Jermaine turned proved a bit more, that it was not just any cigar, but a S’waarki special. “Ah… my former employer, Selim Deon, actor since age 14, mentored by Rain Gore, then debuted in several popular radio commercials before hitting big on stage” Jermaine said, recalling from memory, then speaking directly to him “It’s been a few years, no?”. Selim nodded and said “Indeed…..” hesitantly. Jermaine walked to the desk and poured some alcohol into three glasses and then picked up the tray, keeping the cigar in his mouth. “Take a glass, sir. Your final drink, i’m sure you know. One for the lady” Jermaine said, though it was more an instruction. Selim obliged, since Angelica had her gun in his back. He picked two glasses and held one out behind him so Angelica could take it, which she did. “I’ve always wondered Selim, did you ever really care for anyone? You did all this against your parents wishes, abused basically everyone you were involved with that you could, and you then abandoned those who proved worthless” Jermaine said, in a questioning tone “I mean… why did you dump Angelica again? You were at the height of your lawbreaking so it couldn’t have been guilt or morality, she was putting out quite a bit if what she says is true so that can’t be it, and she was such a sweet, caring girl when off the clock so she tended to your emotional needs… so what was it?”.

Selim frowned and sighed, getting what Jermaine was doing. Humiliating him before killing him.
Not that he could blame him. He looked behind him at Angelica, whom had downed her whole drink. He then looked at Jermaine, whose elderly, wrinkled face filled with fake respect and manners stared at him. He could see that Jermaine, while trying to appear successful, was anything but. The clothes were designer brands that every celebrity wore when they had no idea about fashion. Black silk button ups, white silk undershirt, black silk pants, black leather shoes. He answered “I got bored”. He cried out as he felt the butt of the pistol smash him in the head, causing him to fall over, dropping his drink. He reacted instantly, saying “Teru-ten!” and pointing at the flintlock. A beam of light shot out, piecing the main mechanism for firing and rendering it useless. He then whispered “Morudansu” and felt his mana fill his skin and form a layer of defensive mana. He then spun while crouched, staring at both Angelica and Jermaine, and slowly stood. “Well, well. Still the slick tongue, eh?” Jermaine said, downing his drink and throwing the glass aside, making it smash onto the floor. Even though he had removed the problem of the gun, he still had Jermaine whom no doubt was armed and Angelica whom he knew was a powerful mage. “Still… how could you? To an ex no less” Jermaine said, looking at Angelica “Especially one who loved you so”. He frowned now, looked at Angelica and said “She knows that I’ve changed. I’ve been straight for two years and she knows-” but was cut off as Jermaine asked “Are you sure it's more because you found a new lover?”.

His and Angelica’s eyes widened and he looked between them. He saw the hurt feeling form in Angelica’s eyes and he said “You bastard, I’ve done nothing of the-” but was again cut off as Jermaine said “Oh, but master Selim, we shouldn’t tell lies. I heard about it. How you gave that girl the means to steal the first flame”. Angelica looked at Jermaine and gasped, asking “Wait, how do you know this!?”. He looked at her and said “Oh a young priest working at the church mentioned that he had seen them together and the church knew she had been staying where he resided while recovering”. He growled a bit and said “That has nothing to do with this!”. “Oh, but it does Selim!” Jermaine said “You’ve been living the high life, while I’ve had to scrap by! Only through the grace of Galdera and my own works have I returned to a position where I can be comfortable!” . Angelica’s eyes widened and she turned to Jermaine, saying “Galdera!?”. Jermaine looked panicked for a moment, then sighed, saying “Well. damn. I let you get to me again, you brat” to him specifically. He looked at Angelica and said as his eyes glowed “Sleep”. Angelica was about to cast something but her expression turned blank before she passed out. His own eyes widened and he stood, then said “You….! You’re no longer human!”. Jermaine laughed and turned, saying “Idiot, how long did that take you to figure out? Of course i’m not!” and turning to him before stopping “Right… you use light magic now, thanks to your buddies at the church”.

He smiled and said “Yeah…. What? That’s your weakness?” in a questioning tone that made Jermaine flinch ever so slightly. He whispered under his breathe “Pansudansu” and felt his legs and arm muscles get mana pumped into them. “It doesn’t matter… you don’t stand a chance! Die, Selim!” Jermaine yelled, moving and rushing at him. It was almost imperceptible, but he managed to dodge to his left and reached into his daggers sheath and retrieve it, slicing in the air towards where Jermaine would land and yelled “Kagayaku hoshi!”, sending a flurry of light mana towards his targeted location. As he thought, Jermaine turned and screamed as light mana seared his flesh. He didn’t hesitate however, and whispered “Raitomanto” and vanished. He then dodged left, and whispered “Kujaku no shichi” and felt his blood vessels and veins transport mana through his body faster. His eyes widened as Jermaine turned right at him and with great speed shoved him towards
the opposing wall. He yelled out as he crashed into it, cracking the wall. He quickly ducked and said “Koshi-sen!”, sending light mana in all directions, slamming Jermaine into the bed as Jermaine attempted to rush him and slam his fist into, missing and being blasted back. Selim stared and then slashed his dagger in the air a few time, saying “Taiyō no hikari de, shibararete!” Instantly, light mana shot out from the various lights and bound Jermaine. He turned to Angelica and sheathed his dagger, then ran over and picked her up. He then ran out. “Dammit… I hate to abandon my quest but… I can’t let her get hurt…” he said aloud to himself. As he held her, his invisibility spell spread over Angelica, making them both invisible. He had to return to his hotel room. Fenris was powerful enough to keep them safe.

“So, you have a history with her?” Fenris said, checking her over. He was applying regeneration spells to key parts of Angelica’s body. He had already set up traps around their room, and enhanced the structure several times over. “Yeah… we…. We used to date” Selim admitted, hesitantly. Fenris sighed as Angelica slowly awoke, turned away, and said “Well, she’ll live… we need to worry about Jermaine. He’s turned into a Varghile”. “A what?” Selim asked and said “Ah… she’s… awake”. Fenris looked at her as she sat up and said “Hello. I’m Fenris Northwind. Sadly, we have little time for pleasantries. Jermaine will be arriving shortly, and your help would be appreciated”. He could tell based on her facial expression that she needed answers before she’d help. “What’s a Varghile?” He asked. “It’s the word we use for corrupted fey folk that require blood for sustenance instead of food” Fenris answered, then turned to her and continued “I don’t know how a human became one, but it’s not good. He’s got the body of a monster and the mind of a human”. Angelica stared at Fenris, then him, and finally sighed, saying “I see…. So he’s an enemy of the empire then?”. He nodded with Fenris as Angelica asked “Are you two?”. “No…. Nor is he. He’s a muse… apparently, i’m a hero… go figure huh?” he said, a bit sheepishly. He knew Angelica was still angry about the past. He was hoping this would at least get her to delay enacting it. “Selim, I am a businesswoman. Our squabble can wait until after. For now, as citizens of the empire, and as per the High Emperors request, I shall help eradicate Jermaine” Angelica said, looking right at him “After, we can settle our differences”. He nodded and began working to improve everyone’s abilities with his enhancement magics.

Enhanced speed, strength, magic power, and defenses. He had also used his light spell to make multiple points of light so he could bind Jermaine if needed. Further, he made Fenris invisible. Angelica was an unusual mage. She didn’t cast magic spells into the world and instead would cast them through items. A fireball spell through a lightbulb, a lighting storm through a car motor. So long as the material and spell were completely incompatible, she could cast. This included gems outright, though according to her they disintegrated upon being used to cast spells through. She had prepared herself that night for a double-cross from Jermaine and brought 1 pound of small gems and various other trinkets for battle. She filled most items with an initial charge and only left her primary weapon uncharged, a 2 foot chain with a t-shaped metal symbol with the mark of Dreisang on it. He himself had downed some inspiring plum potions to restore his lost mana after his small scuffle with Jermaine. Now, they waited.
It wasn’t until midnight it happened. The door burst open and Jermaine shot through. Instantly,
Jermaine froze mid-air, his time frozen. They came around the corner and fired spells. “Teru-ten!” he
said, pointing his dagger at Jermaine, sending a beam through his shoulder, while Angelica spun her
necklace and then channeled lightning mana down it, and into the pendant, then at the right time
launched it in the form of a ball at Jermaine. They then side-stepped and avoided Jermaine as he re-
entered their time and landed in the center of the room. That was when Fenris acted, multiple magic
circles activating and sending a flurry of elemental mana at him. Jermaine moved swiftly to the
ceiling, avoiding the strike as he slashed his dagger a few times, saying “Koshi-sen!” as Jermaine
then launched himself at him. The explosion of light mana launched him out the window where
several several spell traps activated, launching northwind spells like what Fenris had tried to cast on
Selim when they first met. However, he didn’t freeze and in fact used the mana as footfalls to leap
back towards the room. However, a diamond Angelica had placed erupted, launching Jermaine into
the room as Selim yelled “Kagayaku hoshi!” and fired light mana towards Jermaine, whom screamed
in pain. Fenris said from the corner “Kaze no hoshi,-kō no hoshi, kage no hoshi, watashi no teki ni
oriru!” and above him a portal opened, sending a balls of wind, light, and dark mana respectively
into Jermaine.

As the dust settled they all saw his condition. Jermaine was heavily scarred and burnt and his features
were warped beyond belief. Pointed ears, black eyes with glowing green pupils, nails sharpened to a
point, fangs like a monsters. Parts of his skin were completely missing, and the bone in his forearm
on his right arm was slightly exposed. Frowning, he pointed his dagger, but Jermaine suddenly
spoke, saying “Do it”. He hesitated. “What?” he asked. “Do it” Jermaine said, looking at him with
hatred and malice “Add another death to your bloodied hands”. Selim stared, having no idea what he
spoke of, and Jermaine laughed, asking “You really don’t remember?”. He shook his head, affirming
he didn’t. “It was five years ago. You were really in deep. Hang out with marketers…. One said
something about your sister and you cut his throat before anyone could correct him. You then
threatened the rest with lying to Angelica and then went back to your drugs” Jermaine explained
“When the police got involved, you called me, like normal, and expected me to just bail you out, like
that… I did but you yelled at me for my method and cut me… again”. He frowned as he now
remembered… the haze of that night. “I see… from my perspective that night is a haze. I have no
idea what happened… I’m sorry to hear I screwed up again” he said. Jermaine scoffed and said “If
you felt that way” but was cut off as he said “I do. I’ve fixed my life. I walk the straight and narrow
now…. I have the church to thank… I’m sorry for what I did Jermaine. I won’t let you kill me… but
I want to make things right. Please, let me…”.

Jermaine stared at him, looked away, and said “You can’t. I’ve already become a monster”. “How?”
Selim asked, saying “Maybe I can help”. Jermaine stared at him, frowned, looked down, and said
“The 10th covenant…. You’ll risk everything… and for someone with nothing…”. “He’s kind like
that, dumb as he is…” Angelica said, looking over to Selim “Back in the day, it was buried
underneath his ego and drugs”. Selim sighed and said “Plus, it’s not like I have no plan… I have a
friend in the church… real nice guy. Angelica can hide you while I find a cure… please. Let me
help”. Jermaine looked at the ground as Angelica said “I never agreed to anything, Selim… though I
would for a price”. Jermaine’s head snapped to her, as he said “You’d risk the wrath of the empire,
just to help me?”. “For a price. I am the manager of the Sunshade branch of the Black Market”
Angelica said “2000 leaves. Take it or leave it”. He nodded and said “Done”. “Then we have an
arrangement Jermaine. He’ll research your cure secretly and i’ll keep you nice and hidden and safe for 2000 leaves a month, his treat” Angelica said, smiling and turning to leave. “Wait a month!?” Selim asked, shocked. However, Angelica’s laugh gave him the information he needed. “Sly woman…. She tricked me” he said to himself as she left. He turned to Jermaine and asked “Now…. can we be civil?”. Jermaine nodded and stood, and Selim gasped as Jermaine healed before his eyes, mana pouring over the wounds, missing skin, and even missing flesh and became said pieces.

Jermaine sat across from him, Fenris beside him. He began, saying “My friend lives in Saintsbridge, His name is Gregory. He is quite knowledgeable as he’s dedicated his life to the church. He may know a way to reverse the effects of a transformation brought on by a Bloodstone”. Fenris nodded and said “I’ll help his research with my divination abilities”. “Meanwhile, I’ll stay here and hide out until results come in… not a bad deal frankly. I accept your offer, Selim Deon” Jermaine said, offering a hand. Selim took it, shaking it and saying “Thank you, Jermaine. I won’t rest until you’re cured”. Jermaine gave a tired chuckle and said “No… make sure to take care of yourself… but thanks for the help. I’m… glad to know someone cares” and stood, turning to leave, but stopped and said “Just so I’m clear… I’m being civil and do appreciate your effort… but i’ll withhold my forgiveness until your side is cleared”. Selim stood and nodded, saying “As I’d expect… I did… a lot of wrong to you, and others. I don’t expect forgiveness. I’m just taking responsibility and making right the wrongs I’ve done”. Jermaine stood for a second before continuing, saying “Your girlfriend lives in Cobbleston. Make sure to stop by…. She could use some comfort” and left. He stared where Jermaine had left, and sighed, saying “Responsibility, huh?… Yes. I’ve done a lot of wrong. I’ve worked to right wrongs… but I have such a path to walk before I fully atone… and I have to start with her. The things people do for love, huh?".
Chapter 35: The Apothecary Act 4-For Dreams

Chapter Summary

Ristra Abraham travels to Riverbrook, home of the hero she looked up to as inspiration for her dreams, to confront Doctor Madar Runska. She doesn't know what to expect, but she knows it will be dangerous. What secrets does the famous Doctor Madar hold? What darkness lies in Riverbrook?

Chapter 35

For Dreams

Ristra had driven out of Riverbrook and taken a 3 hour drive. The summer home was built atop a small hill with a cave system below. The cave of Rhiyo sat beneath the supposed manor. She had no idea whether it incorporated it, whether it was closed, or if it was left alone, but it would be a point of interest for her. However, she had a more simple plan. She wasn’t a thief after all so going through the caves was dangerous. However, she could stop by for a surprise visit under the guise of meeting with a colleague about the future of their employment. It was a legitimate concern of hers, especially if the information about him she had was true. She hoped it wasn’t as she finally pulled up to the front gate of the estate. It loomed in the distance, like a castle dotting the landscape of its kingdom at all times. A pair of armed security guards flanked the car soon after, carrying Mausers openly. One tapped the glass of her window, which she rolled down. “Good day gentleman” she greeted pleasantly. “Good day. For what reason do you approach?” the guard asked her. “I’m Ristra Abraham of the Abraham Medicinal Practices and Research Center. One of my employee’s and associates might be here… Doctor Madar Runska. I need to speak to him”. She produced her IT which the guard looked over and nodded, saying “Give us a few minutes ma’am to see if he’s seeing guests”, gave her IT back, and left.

IT’s, or Identification Tags, were issued by the empire for free to citizens of particular import. Primarily, positions that the empire depended on for stability, like bankers or doctors or mage’s with groundbreaking research. They acted as identifiers and granted them certain privileges, like extra scrutiny when being investigated to ensure innocence, and if on trial, extra time to assemble a defense. Further, it could be used to access some classified material. For example, a mage about to do an experiment on a citizen can use their IT to access the citizens medical records. After a few minutes, the gate opened and the guard walked back over, saying “All cleared. Proceed ahead. Your parking spot has been marked by a spell. He is expecting you”. She nodded and said “Thank you” and drove onto the estate. She parked where the spell designated, which manifested as a pillar of light that glowed brighter as she approached, and got out. She then headed in through the door ahead. She noticed immediately the low light level. It wasn’t pitch black, but it was fairly dim. She
could also see that what lit the place was mainly torchlight.

She turned as she heard footsteps a mere 5 feet ahead and from what seemed like darkness, a maid emerged. She was quite pale and had black eyes and black hair, perfectly ebony color. The costume was the traditional rather than modern style. A long dress with a bonnet and apron, lace fills, and the primary dress and apron made of cloth and colored black and white. The maid bowed and said “Ma’am. The master is busy at this time. Please, follow me to the study where he will greet you when he is ready” in a monotone. She nodded and followed the maid as she guided her through the manor. It was three stories and she was led to the second, and to a room deep inside. The maid bowed and said “The good doctor will be along soon. Please, wait here until then, and call if you need something”. The maid began to leave as she turned around and asked “Vocally or with a telephone?”. The maid stopped, turned, and explained “Vocally. The master dislikes phones and has none. He does have radio’s, but he keeps them out of his studies. Anything else?”. She nodded and asked “What kind of study is this? You mentioned multiple so I’m sort of curious”. The maid shook her head and said “Sorry ma’am. I am not permitted to speak of such matters. You may ask the master himself when he arrives. Anything else I can help you with?”. She shook her head and said “Nothing else. Thank you”. The maid curtsied and left at that, leaving her alone in the study. She began to investigate immediately. She started with the main kind of book found. At first, it seemed like a library about history, but then she found geography books that were rather basic, and then some that were extremely detailed about specific locations. Then, she found bestiaries about various kinds of monsters, from dragons to the kin races.

She decided after what felt like 10 minutes to sit down on one of the couches in the room. It was similar to most studies, bookcases on the far side from the entrance, lining the three walls on that side, a large study desk in the center with research materials and important documents on hand, a small greeting area near the entrance consisting of a decorated table and couches on either side parallel to the door to enter, and in this room there were display cases containing what she could tell were magical items. A chandelier with candles lit hung from above lighting the room to an adequate but dim degree. On the walls above the display cases sat portraits, one of Madar Runska himself, clearly commissioned, and one of him and his family as children. It was unusual for nobility to put family pictures in their studies. Normally, they would put art from a particular artist to illustrate their tastes. “Though I suppose he could be a family man... he is a doctor” she said to herself, pondering. She knew what he was accused of and how likely it was, but she couldn’t help but think there had to be more to the story. At that thought the door opened and Madar Runska entered.

The man had gentle grey eyes and hair, his mustache was rounded to each side to a tip, and his beard jutted out like a sort of grey hairy shovel. He had the beginnings of balding but it was still magnificent short, wild grey hair. He wore a white lab coat with her practices insignia on it and a single black rubber glove. He wore a pair of rubber boots and silk pants underneath the lab coat. He smiled and revealed a golden canine tooth and said “Hello miss Abraham. To what do I owe the pleasure?” as he walked to the couch and sat down on the other couch. A maid followed, setting a tea tray on the table. She looked almost identical to the other maid. However, as she went to prepare
their tea, Madar said “No thank you. Go about your normal duties… oh and let the others know we aren’t to be disturbed”. The maid stopped but nodded, stood, bowed, turned, and left. He moved to make himself tea, then gestured and took a sip, saying “Please, help yourself. The tea is great here”. She nodded and moved to prepare some. She kept a nose on the scents, making sure to see if she could detect any poison. She could detect none and the silverware didn’t react as she stirred the tea with the silver spoon provided. Satisfied, she leaned back and took a sip, sighing at the delectable taste. “This is… tasty” she said slowly, with a small drawl to it. Madar smiled gently and said “So, why did you stop by? Surely not just for a social exercise”. She nodded and said “Yes… I came to speak about the future of my practice” in a slightly sad tone. She saw Madar pause and consider his response for a second before sipping his tea.

“After what happened I’m not sure where to go… so I came, seeking your advice” she said. It was a sort of truth, at one time. However, with what she knew, she wasn’t being honest now. Madar nodded and asked “I see…. Because of my reputation?”. She shook her head, saying “Yes… and that I know you care. You picked to be subordinate to me despite being such a famous doctor…. “Miracle Man” as they called you”. Madar chuckled, smiling, and said “Ahhhh, thank you. You flatter me. It wasn’t easy, accepting your offer, but I figured it’d give me a chance to pursue my immortality research” and finished his tea. He prepared more for himself and said, continuing “I admit, I did feel disrespected at times… but I stayed because I could tell your passion, and felt I needed to see you down the path of medicine and science”. She smiled and finished her tea, saying “Thank you… I appreciate that”. He nodded and said “Of course. I’m always honest… now. About your practice” and got comfortable, drinking more tea. He then said “Unfortunately, there will need to be a lot of PR work to bring your reputation back to where it was”. She frowned and looked away, saying “I thought so… I mean, they found galdera flesh in my practice…”. Madar nodded, and said “Why I suggest this… I take responsibility. I’ll say I signed off, gave it to you, and seeing my signature you signed it off without question. Thus, the blame comes to me and your practice can regain some rep”. She looked at him, and then said “I can’t do that… your reputation will be tarnished”. He shook his head and said “True, but it’s large enough to take a blow like this”.

She finished her tea and set the cup on the tray and asked “Well… then I assume you’re willing to return?”. Madar nodded and said “After my extended summer, of course. It should only be a couple of months”. She smiled and said “I’m relieved to hear that. You made the whole thing tick very well”. Madar chuckled and responded “My, that’s the first real compliment I’ve heard… the rest was usually ego-stroking. You’ve really grown”. She nodded and said “Yes. I had to… I took a sort of personal quest recently. Our associate, nurse Andrew, was kidnapped in the confusion and taken to Stilsnow… and while I had to detour, I rescued him because… well…” and trailed off. Madar nodded and said “I understand. The 4th covenant” and sighed. She glanced and saw a look of trouble on Madars face. Madar asked “Well, he’s safe now I assume?”. She nodded and said “Yes. I treated him, reported everything properly, and then discharged him to the hospital. After treatment, I’ll ask he return to service”. Madar gave a slightly fake smile and said “Good, good. He was always such a sweet boy”. She concurred, saying “Indeed. The talk of his co-workers. Always giving money… and he’ll hopefully rejoin the practice”. Madar stood and said “Well, I’d like to continue chatting but I did have plans today… I need to get ready for an affair in town. Please, make yourself at home. My studies are open”. She nodded, standing and said “Thank you. It saves on a hotel room. What studies do you have?”. “This one is me trying to make general travel guides for each region. I
have another one on astronomy, and another on various religions through the years… oh and one in the basement is medicine, but that ones private. Apologies” Madar said. She nodded and said “Thank you doctor. I think I shall look up your astrology texts” and began towards the door. Madar followed and they went their separate ways, a maid guiding her.

It was an interesting experience. The maid insisted being inside the room with her, and other maids brought drink and snacks when requested. They accepted tips but did not solicit them and never once broke character. She was studying astrology from an interests perspective, but she was doing something else. Searching for clues. Clues to the purpose of Madar’s betrayal. She wanted to understand. There had to be a reason Madar would do what he did. What she wanted to know was if it was a good reason, like research the applications of Galdera Flesh or its potential weaknesses, or if he was up to something nefarious. However his astrology study at first revealed nothing, but one book caught her eye. The stars of the gods. While they moved, they were always seen above Osterra every night it seemed and each had a name. The language used to name them was unknown to her, which was odd to her. The only languages she was aware of were the language humans used 2000 years ago, Greek, a few other languages before that, the language of magic, nivon, and the northerners language, simply dubbed ‘Northspeak’. Thieves did have their own method of communication, but it was rudimentary at best and this was not it. She frowned and checked other books, but nothing came up. Even so, the book had english in it, so she could read it well enough and guessed the names of the stars were the titles of the gods. Like ‘Master of Coin’ for Bilfegan, or ‘King in the Shadows’ for Aeber. She decided to move on to the next study.

Here, she dug into the tomes on religion here. She didn’t have extensive knowledge on religion, and she didn’t have a particular interest, but she wanted to find what interested Madar. Eventually, she found something. A book called ‘From the Far Reaches of Hell’. She put it back, then began to check out books that showed wear. That’s when she found it. A light blue book with green trimmings on it. She pulled it from the shelf and it read ‘An Explorer’s Guide of the Heavens, by Kit Crossford’. She opened it and began reading it. She was amazed. It described things she never thought of. It didn’t describe traveling through the heavens but it did describe Kit as he explored ancient ruins across Osterra. What he found, experienced and discovered in all of them. According to the book, he’d enlist the aid of the Eight in order to do this. It was amazing stuff. Then she saw it. A small note in the book. ‘Lyblac lives’. She didn’t hesitate and moved on, pretending to not have read it. She knew the maids here likely answered to Madar and she didn’t want to risk what might happen if he discovered she knew. Not while she was in the heart of Madar’s home. However she was starting to form a theory as to why Madar betrayed the practice like he did. If she had to guess, Lyblac had something to do with it, with the note about Lyblac living. Likely, they talked and she seduced him with her words. She walked to the maid and said “Excuse me. I’d like to retire for the night, please”. The maid nodded and said “Follow me miss” and left the room. She followed.

That night she awoke hearing a scream. She shot up into a sitting position and looked around. She slowly got out of bed and into her slippers, and lit the nearby kerosine lamp with matches that were provided. She then headed for the door, holding the lamp up. She kept her glasses on as she did. She
looked up and down the hall as she left and saw nothing. She heard the scream again. It came from the first floor, at least, that’s what she thought. She was about to run there, but decided to grab her doctor’s bag and axe. She needed to be able to defend herself. She then rushed out the door and towards the first floor stairs. The scream echoed out again. Deeper down now, likely the basement. She was still half-asleep so she didn’t think much on it and simply raced down the stairs and towards the foyer. She stopped and looked around. Then she saw it, blood, streaked across the floor. It streaks towards a hall between the stairs that curled around a door towards the 2nd floor master bedroom that had a landing before the door to it. She walked down it slowly, being careful and lowering the light level of her lantern. She didn’t want to get caught by whomever was assailing the woman being assailed. As she approached, she stopped as a load crash came from nearby. It was a heavy iron door. She cut the light instantly and ducked down. She was in the hallway under the master bedroom, and could see a 4-way intersectional hallway 50 feet ahead. She stopped moving because she saw it. Someone else’s lantern light.

The figure was Madar. However, he was completely different. Emitting a black mist, with piercing red, glowing eyes, Madar held a lantern in one hand and a woodcutter’s axe in the other. The doctors clothes were covered in blood, and blood leaked from his mouth and eyes. A maid followed, asking “Master, are you sure you should wander the mansion with such blood on you?” Madar turned, chuckling, saying “It’s fine… tomorrow night she’s next. I’ve arranged with our friends to have an ‘accident’ occur for any who come looking for her… we’ll have plenty of time to deal with her and clean up”. The tone of his voice clearly displayed Madar’s mania. It wasn’t the normal, random mania though, she could tell this was a deep-seated, but controlled mania. Yes, he was insane, but he was fully aware of his actions, surroundings, and could think logically andrationally. She shivered a bit, due to fear. Madar was the perfect combination of things to make him a true threat. Madar continued, and walked down the hall, saying to the maid “I’m heading to bed. Lock up for me…and do check on our guest”. Soon enough his lamplight faded and she headed back the way she came. She turned to head back to her room, when someone said from behind “Is something the matter miss Abraham?”. It was a maid, she could tell from the monotone. Turning, she said “Yes… I’ve gotten lost… I needed to use the bathroom, and got lost, found it, then got lost trying to find my way back”. She kept her composure, as the maid responded “Understood… please follow me” and began to guide her back. As they walked, the maid suddenly said “Might I inquire as to why you have an axe?”. She nodded, saying “After I left the room, I heard a scream. Fearing the worst, I grabbed my axe so I’d have a means of defense… in case I came across whatever harmed one of your friends”. The maid stalled for a single moment. Not enough to break her stride, but Ristra saw the hesitation as the maid simply kept walking, explaining “Makes sense. Thankfully, you need not fear. Us maids are… cursed with nightmares. What you heard was one of our fellows waking up from one such nightmare… and the subsequent ones were likewise”. Soon, they arrived at her room, the maid turning and bowing, saying “Here we are. I trust you’ll be fine from here”. Ristra nodded, saying “Yes, thank you. Have a nice night”. She headed into her room, and the maid left.

She did sleep, but very lightly and intentionally so. Before coming, she prepared various medicines, ingredients, and chemicals in case of an emergency. She hide some hydrofluoric acid on herself, but left her axe behind, knowing it was dangerous. As insane as Madar was, she was banking on one tick of his that he always had not being an act. Madar always had a penchant for being punctual and skipping to schedules, to a supernatural degree. The man was so perfectly timed, that he’d begin closing shop for lunch break with only a few milliseconds margin of error. With this in mind, and
finishing her preparations, she heard a maid knock and say “Miss Abraham. Master Madar wants to see you in the dining hall. He has had use prepare a special breakfast”. She called out, though gently “I’ll be along soon! Thank you!” and after finishing her makeup, she left and followed the maid to the second floor dining hall. As she entered, Madar sat at one end, and some maids stood in attendance. Madar sipped a red liquid as she entered and he stopped, turning to her and saying “Ah! Miss Abraham! Welcome. I wasn’t sure you’d accept”. She shook her head, saying “Why wouldn’t I doctor?” and sat at the place the maid indicated. “I heard they found you wandering the halls lost, and that you were afraid for your life, hearing my maids wake from their nightmares” Madar answered, sipping the liquid again. She knew it wasn’t wine, the liquid moved too slowly to be that. It clung too much too. If she didn’t know better, the man was drinking blood openly. She said “Yes. However, they are just nightmares and not some beast, so I was fine leaving my room this morning”.

She ate politely, not eating too fast, though not eating too slowly. She accepted a glass of the red liquid from the maid and asked “Isn’t it a little early to be drinking Dr.Runska?”. Madar shook his head, and said “It’s not wine. It’s a family speciality drink. Try it. I’ll tell you the secret after”. She hesitated but played it off as thinking about what the drink could be. She was afraid to, but knew refusing could cause problems right now. She shrugged her shoulder and took a sip. She was thankful in that instant, as she did not taste anything resembling blood. However, neither was it wine. In fact, it was nothing like she’d ever tasted before, as a drink. On the one hand, it had a flavor akin to a nice cherry tea, but it had the consistency of a rich hot chocolate. It also had tones of a very well blended spanish coffee mixed in, though they were very subtle. “My, oh my… what is this drink? It tastes… interesting” she responded, looking at him. Madar had finished the glass and responded “We have a kind of livestock in our basement you can’t find anywhere else. ‘gobhar a bhios a ’dol nan gaothan’ they’re apparently called. Also known as ‘Goat that ride the winds’ in the tongue of the northerners”. She stopped cold and stared at Madar, then slowly at the maids. The tension thickened instantly and she felt worried. Were these northerners…? She thought they were blue though! Madar spoke, saying “I can understand your confusion. How could I receive livestock from a nation hostile to ours… I’m afraid midear, I’m sort of in league with them. I’ve been trafficking drugs and painkillers for months” and held his glass out to be refilled and continued “The meat is said goat, prepared by people accustomed to preparing it. The drink is a combination of a berry called ‘draoidheachd a ’toirt sìol’ mixed with a pinch of ‘cadal searbh’. It’s a delicacy in their capital city, Avalon”.

She had so many questions swirling in her head. She expected him to be a mad Galdera cultist. Instead, it turned out he was in league with the northerners. He had supply lines from the capital city to here! Madar said “Don’t be so shocked. You are in the company of friends. These maids were owned by the Titania, a woman named ‘Flur Fuilteach’. She wants diplomacy… but that oaf Cogadh and his warhawkish ways make that near impossible”. She stared at him, for a full five minutes before sighing and saying “I see… then what I saw must’ve been a mistake?” and stopped short, looking alarmed and looked at him. Madar looked alarmed and said “Wait… what did you think you saw Ristra?”. She was silent for several seconds, looking away, worried. Her hand passed over where she had the acid but she had no idea if she was safe or not. “What were you doing in the basement?” she asked plainly, keeping her hand over the acids and looking at Madar in the eyes. However, Madar relaxed and said “Ahhh… that. Well, if we’re being honest, those screams were not the screams of my maids…. It was the sheep I slaughtered. The sheep has the ability of mimicry
and apparently this one had heard the grisly murder of a woman”. A maid walked forward, bowing and saying “Yes. It is pertinent to note that the ‘gobhar a bhios a ‘dol nan gaothan’ is a carnivorous animal, using mimicry to lure victims in”. Another maid spoke, saying “We apologize. Normally, the mimicry only emits animal noises… we did not expect it to have heard a woman”. Ristra stared, but nodded slowly, and said “Then… what did you mean by making sure people who come looking for me would have an ‘accident’ until you could clean up and how ‘you’d take care of me tomorrow’, doctor runskä?”.

She then became worried as Madar flat said “I never said anything like that. I hoped you hadn’t been woken or frightened by the screams and that I hoped you enjoyed the breakfast and would listen to my proposal”. “B-but…. I heard it” she said, now very concerned “If you didn’t say that… then who?”. Madar eyes narrowed at her, then he turned to a maid and asked “Revia. Where is Lidia?”. The maid curtsied and said “She has gone into town on leisure activities sir”. “Why does she matter, sir?” she asked. Madar’s response chilled her to the bone as he responded “She’s one of my elite maids, one skilled in illusionary magic. One of my personal guards…. I fear she either took matters into her own hands… or is a double agent”. Her eyes widened and she fell silent, her hand going limp. She felt a maid stop near her and ask plainly “Miss, do you have weapons on you?”. She only nodded. The maid asked “May I confiscate them?”. She didn’t resist. “I’m sorry Ristra… truly. I did not intend to drag you into this…. Seems rumors of that cult in Tir na Nog are true…” Madar muttered, looking at a maid. She knew the expression. It was worry. It confirmed her fears, that she had been tricked. She however asked “Cult…?”. Madar looked at her and nodded, waving a hand. A maid set a glass of golden liquid down as Madar explained “Yes. A few months after my contract, an attempt was made on my life. My maids defended me and we quietly cleaned up the body…. They then told me about everything…. Including where the galdera cult disappeared to”. She questioned in response “Wait… they were vanquished, I thought?”.

Madar shook his head, and said “No… i’ll let Larie explain” and enjoyed his own meal. The maid next to her cleared her throat and explained “Yes… the cult showed up around the time your records claim they were vanquished. At first, they were accepted due to their miracles… but eventually, the twin rulers caught on to their game and attempted to quash them themselves. They thought they succeeded but the truth was that the cult found a niche… in our society, there is a type of feyfolk that is unwelcome due to their mental instability. The Galdera Cult took advantage of this shortcoming and swelled their numbers with these ‘diseased’ individuals… from there, the cult has gained the ear of both countries rulers and begun operations to secure the fourth rising… all in secret”. Ristra listened patiently but hesitantly. She wasn’t the person this should be told to. She looked at Madar who seemed troubled but not surprised. She looked back at Larie and asked “Then… your roles?”. “I myself was handmaiden of the Titania, transferred upon request for reinforcements after an attempt was made on Madar’s life”. “Beyond that, I mean” Ristra clarified. Larie stared at her for a moment, then said “Ah, I see…. Madar at first was skeptical, but when we explained what we did to you, he understood and agreed to help… to that end, he’s working to turn this place into an embassy for Tir na Nog”. That’s when it clicked and she said “You fled then because you feared being exposed”. Madar silently nodded and said “Yes…. I’ve already spoken to the police. I’ve proven my innocence”.

Ristra sighed. It was a lot to take in and process. The man she thought an enemy turned out to be a friend. She then spoke, asking “So. Even with your work here, you plan to help me?”. Madar nodded, saying “Yes. Once it’s ready, I won’t be needed much beyond signing paperwork”. She stared at him, then asked “So, the studies… what are you really studying?”. Madar perked up, smiling and saying “You noticed huh?”. She nodded and said “Hard to not notice. Themes and generally consistently marked books. I’m just curious though”. Madar nodded, and said “Well, I’ve been working to reverse engineering things of Galdera to other gods…. His stuff is monstrous in nature, but what about the other twelve gods?”. “Surely, they’re works would not be monstrous… I see. Logically, it makes sense… your problem is that because of how monstrous it is, the actual mechanics are obscure and unknown” she finished, getting Madars logic. Madar nodded and Ristra said “I admit, that is pretty amazing… imagine the medicinal applications of some potential items… like a stone of pure healing power”. Madar smiled and said “My thoughts exactly… I doubt the balacrufs would let us use them unrestrained, but at the very least they’d be able to use such items for the betterment of the empire”. She nodded as maid walked in and went to Madar, whispering into his ear. He looked alarmed and stood, looking at her saying “We have trouble”.

They left the car. She had taken hers and madar was driven by a maid in his. The entire town was in panic. It was a fairly decent sized village, having a population of around 10,000 or so. What made the town effectively shut down was that people were raiding places… for medicine. Madar approached someone about to enter an untouched corner store and asked “Excuse me, what happened? I’m a doctor, perhaps-” but was cut off as the man answered “A doctor? Quick! The hospital! They need everyone! A plague has befallen us!” and then ran inside. They re-entered their cars and headed for the hospital nearest to them, one of the only two in town and the smaller one. Instantly, they could tell something was wrong. People flooded in with supplies, then left with none. All were clearly able-bodied. Some brought other people whom were clearly sick. She knew this well, it was the first lesson all citizens learned when they were educated through the school system. The ‘Plague Doctrine’, a plan that all citizens were to enact in the event of a plague breaking out. The plans were as followed: take anyone showing symptoms officials describe as part of the plague to the nearest hospital. Then, shut all businesses down and mark the next month as a total loss for revenue. After this, Wait for word on the severity of the plague. If not above a grade 3, simply assist the hospital as best, but legally so, as you can. If above, acquire the medicine/ingredients by any means necessary and all members practicing medicine are to report. Mages with healing magic are to report as well. It’s one of the few exceptions allowed to violators of the 10th covenant. When “Plague Doctrine” is initiated by a kingdom, the town basically enters in damage control/plague extermination.

When they walked in, she gasped. Most of the patients showed horrible symptoms. Warts, boils, lesions, hacking and coughing accompanied by malcolored flm, and glazed eyes. The nurses were in full hazmat suits as were they. They had no choice. Madar’s maids accompanied him in their own suits. “This is horrible” she said, watching as someone died before her very eyes “How did this happen?”. “I don’t know” Madar said, walking to one “All I can say… nurse! Has a magical analysis been taken yet?”. A nearby nurse said “Yes. These diseases are natural but were induced magically”. “Meaning even if we dispelled the magic holding the disease in them, it would run rampant” Madar concluded “I can tell you’re still doing it, which is good… but we need to cure the disease. Do we
know what it is?”. The nurse shook their head, replying “No… we can treat the symptoms though…
but…” “However, there’s more than were seeing…. Increased heart activity, potential brain
swelling…” Ristra said, looking around “If this continues, adrenaline spikes”. “Gods” Madar
muttered “If that happens…”. Ristra nodded, turning and saying “Let’s get started. We have no idea
how long we have”.

After a day of work, they joined each other outside and collected their thoughts. Specifically, they
discussed what they learned. “So” Madar said “I’ve identified patient zero. Perfect specimen…. 
Healthy, average, male… an adult. He’s still alive”. Ristra sighed, slightly in relief, saying “Then that
means those of even average health will be mostly fine… with what I assume in general treatment?”. 
Madar nodded and Ristra continued “Then I’ve nothing to worry for now on that front, assuming
you came to the conclusion I did…. You likely would’ve also sensed the magic casted”. Madar
nodded, saying “Yes. I informed detectives and they’re investigating for the source… I will note, it
had hints of feyfolk magic”. Ristra sighed and turned to a maid, asking “Any ideas?”. The maid
looked nervous and she hesitated, saying “Wait.. you know?”. Madar turned, curious now, as the
maid said in a nervous tone “I shan’t speak its name, for doing so brings misfortune… but there is a
creature of legend said to bring disease and plague wherever it goes… supposedly, it was slain long
ago, by the hero-oberon Bavulf”. She nodded, saying “Well…. Hmmm. This is problematic. That
means its a powerful creature…. “. Madar turned to the maid, asking “Any notable weaknesses?”. 
The maid nodded, saying “Yes. Freshwater… it has an allergy to it. Bavulf, after exhausting all other
weapons, with a whisper from his muse, used his everfull cauldron and splashed it with a gallon of
water. Using its agony, he plunged a knife into its weakened throat and finished it”. “Water…?”
Madar pondered, then turned and said “I’m going to treat the patients… go find the detectives. They
need this information”. She nodded, understanding what Madar was thinking. She then turned and
began her journey, a maid accompanying her on Madar’s order. He was going to douse everyone in
water. Normally, this wouldn’t prevent a mage’s spell, you had to instill the spell while it was being
formed. However, he mentioned fey magic, which was unknown to her, and thus it might actually
work.

She followed a maid through the woods outside the city limits of Riverbrook. She had been walking
for around 2 hours. It was then she found it. The detectives. They were currently in a makeshift
camp, packing it up. She approached, as a detective said “Halt!” and pulled out his mauser c96,
aiming it at her “What do you want!?”. She stopped and said “I thought you’d be interested in some
information… that’s all”. The other detectives gathered and one said “Alright. What is it?”. “The
creature causing this… it’s from a legend this one heard. She claims its weak to freshwater” she said.
“How do we know she ain’t lyin?” one especially hard accented detective asked. “She’s employed
and trusted by Madar. I am Ristra Abraham. Please… I know it’s hard to believe, but despite
circumstances, they’ve tried to help with the plague…” she answered. The detective stared at her,
before finally holstering his mauser and said “Fine. However, you come with us… insurance if you
will”. She nodded, saying “That’s fine. Madar is skilled. He can handle my absence. Defeating this
thing will prevent re-inducing of the sickness”. With that, the detectives finished packing and left.

Thankfully, the detectives had a bit more firepower than just their mausers. One had a mauser m98,
while another had a kalashnikov. They each had one F1 hand grenade. With this equipment, they headed deeper into the woods, one of the detectives following tracks of something he didn’t recognize. Something that, according to him, was unlike anything known to inhabit the woods around Riverbrook, or even all of Aques. Soon, they came upon a cave and the detective said “It’s inside… I know this cave. It’s the gravesite of Alfyn Greengrass. One way in, one way out”. She nodded, pulling her axe out and said “Then it’ll come out or we’ll go in”. The detectives shook their head, one saying “No. I’ll toss a grenade in. The noise will bring it out”. The detective then pulled his grenade out, pulled the pin, and tossed it into the cave. The noise rang out of the cave and they all hide, lying in ambush. It took a few minutes, but they heard it. The heavy footfalls of something approaching from within the cave. What she saw she’d never, ever forget again. The creature was at least 15 feet tall, towering over them, the top half that wasn’t equine was hunched over and at least 8 feet tall on its own. The lower half was 7 feet tall and 7 feet long. The creature was rather large, looking to weigh at least a ton. It’s arms while 8 feet long were ripped with muscles. Unlike normal arms with 2 joints, this one had 5 joints and its fingers, which it had only two primary fingers and a thumb, had 4 visible joints and claws for nails. It had no discernable skin, being a sickening dark red color and dripping black blood constantly. On its head two curled horns sat, giving its height an entire extra foot of height. The equine half had an exposed horse skull for a head, complete with eyes and a tongue. The feet were less feet and more like lizard paws. The tail was actual horse hair, but out of it came a whip-like bone akin to a spine but it moved around as though it had muscles and as though it were a tail. The eyes though were horrifying. Bloodshot and pure white, the pupils were either pure red or non-existent and what they saw were a mass convergence of irritated blood vessels.

“Kill it!” a detective shouted, before firing his kalashnikov at it. The shriek it uttered stopped them cold. It had paralysis magic weaved into its scream. “Dammit, why didn’t you wait! I was about to say we should get behind cover!” the maid shouted. It started to stalk towards the source of the rifle fire. She could only watch as one of its large, meaty hands grabbed the detective, lifted him as though he were a misbehaving puppy, and turn and stalk back to the cave. Presumably, to devour the man. Thankfully, the paralysis wore off and the man began to scream bloody murder. “It’s burning me! It’s blood! It burns!” the detective screamed. “Don’t fire!” the maid said “Not until I sing!”. “Why!? He’s gonna-” a detective begun, but stopped and said “I see…. Boys! Listen to her! She was right about this!”. The detectives, while hesitant, nodded and prepared. The maid began to sing, and they opened fire. The creature, that had begun to turn to enter its cave, screamed and dropped the detective it held. It turned in fury when the gunfire didn’t cease and made a charge, straight at a pair of them. They dove out of the way, but in a show of unnatural strength, the beast slammed its left hind leg into the ground, pivoted 245 degree, and licked one of the detectives in the back. Blood poured from the detectives mouth, and a sickening crunch sound was heard. She finally acted, casting a spell she had been saving. She chanted and with her hands and gestures directed the spell into the air “Onēsan ame”. As the spell was cast, clouds gathered and rain began to fall. She continued however, weaving more magic into it, saying “Shimai ame, watashi no teki o yowame, soshite watashi no teki o iyashimasu”. The rain, which had been a dull white color became a clear light blue color. The man that had been burnt by the acidic blood of the creature began to soften his cries and the creature screamed in full fury. The maid kept singing, abating its paralytic effect. However, it was still incredibly loud and forced them to cover their ears.

The mauser rang out, the detective taking a chance and firing it while it screamed. He missed his mark but still tagged its neck, silencing it. It moved and groped its neck where the hole bled fresh
black blood. “Gods dammit this thing is repulsive… no wonder its spreading a plague” the detective said as he chambered the next bullet. Another detective fired his mauser c96 into it with another, filling it with more holes. It growled, still capable of low vocalizations, and turned waving its hand. Instantly, a spray of black blood flew out, dousing the men. They screamed and fell backwards in agony. By now, the detective that had held the kalashnikov was much better and healing, and military crawled to his weapon. Meanwhile, she crafted a new spell, chanting “Kurodo” and sent a condensed ball of cold gas right at the creature. It wheezed as the gas slammed into its back, freezing it, seemingly solid. It turned to her, glaring with a hatred she thought impossible, and turned to charge. She quickly ducked behind a tree as the detective that held the Mauser m98 tossed a grenade right then, timing it so it’d explode next to it mid-charge, sending it right into a tree. It worked and while it tore through a few trees, a branch impaled it on the third and withstood its rampage. It wheezed loudly, trying to scream, but failed. The damage to its throat affecting its ability to make loud vocalizations. The maid, realizing it was effectively silenced, stopped singing and prepared a new spell.

The creature meanwhile freed itself from the tree and wheezed loudly and bent its arms in preparation to attack. The maid finished her odd chanting and moved he hands while they were outstretched towards the creature. Instantly, two large shadows leapt from her shadow and grabbed the creature itself. In fact, the shadow had became a creature itself, while retaining its shadow properties. The creature fought back, and was an even match seemingly. However, she could tell it wouldn’t last forever as the maid began sweating visibly. She ran over to the detectives, pulling out some rubbing alcohol and quickly mixing it into a cup she had with some water. She then dumped the contents over the detectives, one each, and used a rag to finish cleaning the acidic blood off them. She then whispered “Okyu Shochi” and used her healing spell on one, then the other. She held some healing grapes as she did, and they burned away as she cast the spell in place of her mana, which was dwindling with each spell she used. She turned, hearing the maid yell and saw her fly into the forest. The shadow was gone and the creature looked particularly weak. Her rain spell had worked. “It’s working! The thing is weakened! Quickly! Finish it off!” she yelled. She heard a kalashnikov fire out, pumping the thing full of lead. It turned and began a retreat, but she reacted, chanting “Kotta Kabe!” and made a thick wall of ice rise in front of it. It slammed into it, and wheezed audibly as it tried to punch its way through. The gunfire ceased and it continued trying to break through as the detectives flanked it. They then used their grenades and aimed right beneath it. It wheezed more as the force of the grenades explosions launched it into the air an entire foot and it fell to the ground extremely weakened. She quickly acted, rushing forward and sinking her axe into one of its legs and retreating before the blood spurts landed on her. It wheezed louder, clearly injured.

Eventually, it stopped moving. The bloodshot eyes lost their red, becoming pale whites. The horse eyes ceased moving, and just lulled. It was dead. “We… we did it! We killed it!” One said, pumping his fist into the air. To make sure, the one with the mauser m98 walked to the heads, aimed, and fired two shots directly into them. He then turned to the maid, who nodded that it would’ve been a kill shot. “Indeed gentleman… and we do owe thanks to these two. We would’ve died were it not for their help. Thank you, ladies. Let us return to town… it’ll be night and we can see if this plague truly is abatable” the detective said “Which reminds me. I’m CJ Meyer. The one with the kalashnikov is Tyrone, those two are Rendel and Randall, and the one that’s stayed out of the fight is Jerry”. She nodded and said “Nice to meet you. As I said, Ristra Abraham”. The maid stepped forward and
The detective raised a hand, stopping her, and said “It’s fine. You’re a doctor and plague doctrine had been invoked. We can easily, easily overlook this lapse of reporting. Let’s just get back and help… as for the maid, it’s fine. That’s the high emperors domain, not a mere detectives”. With that, they returned to town, taking a few hours to do so. Night fell and the detectives went their own way, while she and Lilivan returned to the hospital. Thankfully, things were much better. Madar was still working in the waiting room, but looked a bit better. He turned and said “I assume it went well since you look like you’ve been through the ringer and yet have an air of optimism?”. She nodded and said “Yeah. The creature… it’s been destroyed. The plague won’t reinduce itself”. Madar nodded and said “I know. I just finished fully curing some patients”. She blinked and asked “Wait… how?”. Madar hesitated and then said “I used to be an adventurer, you know. There’s always been one venture I considered particularly successful despite ending my career. The twin falls venture. Got to the end, fought the Monarch that lied at the highest point in the cave… and then fell into its ravines”. She gasped and covered her mouth, but then realized the problem and asked “Wait.. how’d you survive?” and then gasped as Madar showed her a glowing rainbow-colored bottle filled with rainbow liquid, the source of the glow. “I found this. Called ‘Panacea’ in the language of magic. It was on a skeleton with a near completely eroded leather bag….. Drinking it healed me. However, the experience had me give up. From there, I used the liquid to heal the impossibly sick and healed what I could through normal means” Madar explained. She slowly realized something and said “So… your fame…?”. Madar nodded and retorted “Yes. A sham… but so what? I became a famous and respected doctor, and while I hid my use of Panacea, I replicated it. The replications aren’t quite as strong but are no less miraculous compared to even today’s medicine. I fulfilled my dream of fame and respect… and i’ve never misused or forgotten why I am famous”. Madar stood, turning to her, saying “The mansion has more. I have enough to cure the hospital on me and then some… if a few vials vanished, I’d never notice” then began serving other patients. She began her duties as well, though Madar’s offer lingered in her mind.

As morning rose, she and Madar claimed a hospital room so they could rest. No one stopped them nor complained. They worked themselves to the bone to help the town. When they woke, Madar was alarmed at first, but then was relieved when he discovered why his vials were missing. Nurses had figured out how he had been curing people and used them themselves in his absence and now let him take over. She helped as well, but also used practical medicine first. As the day drew to a close, she left silently, Madar treating the last patient himself. She thought about his words and then her dream. She wondered which she desired. As she thought about it a maid approached. Not Lilivan, this one didn’t have the optimistic eyes. “Miss Abraham” the maid said, to which she replied “I am she, yes”. The maid then held out a bag. She looked at the maid with a puzzled expression, then one of understanding as the maid said “Normally a maid does not take initiative, nor does she take action on her own beyond what routine demands… but I heard my master’s desire and saw your expression. Though it held some disappointment, I do believe I saw some hope… like a little girl being given exactly what she wanted to fulfill her dreams”. Ristra stared at the bag, understanding now. She held a hand out and said “I cannot take that…. I…” but was cut off as the maid, in a stern tone, said “I never said to use them. Research them. Find out what of the ingredients makes them work… submit your findings… and fulfill your dreams in a way you can sleep at night with”. Ristra
was speechless as the maid put it in her hands, curtsied and then walked away. She stared for a while, then looked into the bag. She sighed even as she wore a smile and said “Guess... those blank faces are just masks... huh?”.

Ristra walked towards her car, Madar at her side. “I’ve already handled the paperwork. The agency was fine with giving the car to you, with my name on the agreement” he said. She smiled and said “Thank you, doctor”. He nodded as she packed her things into the trunk. “So. You’re really going to do it, huh?” he asked. She nodded and said “Yes... as much as the practice meant to me... it wasn’t my dream. Just a... pale reflection”. Madar laughed and said as she got in and rolled the window down “Poetic... just as you were as you grew up. So what is your dream?” “To be a traveling doctor” she answered. “You know that most kingdoms forbid it” he retorted, though playfully “How do you plan to stay in the shadows?”. Ristra smiled and said “I’ve got some friends. They can keep me nice and hidden... Besides. I’ve got some unofficial support here, right?”. Madar laughed and said “Indeed... I’d help you, the maids, and this town... You’re their hero. A secret is the least they’ll do”. Ristra smiled and said “That’s all I ask for... I want to accomplish my dream of being a doctor... like Alfyn Greengrass”. Madar got a shocked expression at that. “What?” she asked. Madar was silent, then got a kind, gentle expression and in a tone a proud father would use with a daughter he was proud of said “I see. I truly wish you good fortune in fulfilling that dream... take care, Ristra Abraham”. He then turned and walked into his mansion, leaving a confused Ristra.

A maid, the same one that shoved the Panacea onto her, said “Forgive him... you simply reminded him of his younger self. He wanted to help people for no reason other than they needed it... Like Alfyn Greengrass”. She stared then smiled and said “Then... i’ll fulfill my dreams... for his dreams. Tell the good doctor I look forward to when we speak again”. She then rolled the window up and began to drive away. Ristra pondered on a question as she sat in the car, alone with only the landscape to accompany her. “Is it... right to encourage one to chase dreams...? Or is it better to encourage realism...? I’ve struggled with that question since faced with reality... only now have I had the courage to face it... And my answer is... Neither. It is better to let one decide. For dreams or for reality... either way, dreams drive humanity. They’ll always be with us... no matter what”. With that statement on the wind, Ristra went north, deciding to begin at the place with the most victims, the front line. After all, of all places that could use a traveling doctor, there could be no doubt that the frontlines would have no shortage of demand.
Chapter 36: The Thief, Act 4-For Justice

Chapter Summary

Thiesel returns the place he was born in his pursuit of the legendary axe and the bandit king Robert Bueller. While there, he discovered all the parties that have wronged him and others are gathering in one place. He plans a heist with his collaborator, Solas Sith, Muse of Luck. The prize? A girl he and John once fought over and the Green Axe. Will Master Thief Sir Lupone, the Dashing Rogue of Midnight steal the heart of the bride, or will he finally be captured once and for all?

Chapter 36

For Justice

For all his life, he had everything given to him without question. A pair of shoes? No problem, master. A tailcoat made from the entrails of a luna moth found only in the Forest of No Return, west of Victor’s Hollow and is coveted by mages and physicians alike? Just a moment, sir. You want an item that only nobility and the police are aware of and is extremely useful? Along with several questionable attachments that do not serve the VTPs original purpose? No problem, sire. Everything had been handed to him, no matter how outrageous, so long as he was patient. At first, he loved it and loved punishing those that disobeyed his desires. However, after a talking to from his father, he realized the error of his ways. His next question to his father bred his revulsion to his so-called ‘family’. “But what about you papa? You hire people to kill people that speak out against you” he asked as a child. The slap from his father's ring hand taught him that for all his father's preaching, it was all hollow and for those that listened, not himself. He had learned that his family lived on lies and blood, not honest work. It was that day that he decided to revolt and bring them and others to justice. It simply took him a year to decide it. After he officially, in his mind, did so, he began training. He claimed he was planning to add ‘Honorable police officer’ to the list of titles his family held, but nothing could’ve been further from the truth. He used the training to hone his body for what would be his night job, thieving. Specifically infiltrating highly guarded places, taking some valuable documents, and absconding with them while turning them into the police.

Eventually, he’d have turned his family in. Of course, that didn’t happen… yet. A wrench was thrown in recently, one by the name of John Razelfort, heir of the Razelfort family, one that basically controlled the banks in the empire. Him and John had been friends since they were kids, their summer homes near each other. After 2 years of friendship, their families decided to move their primary homes closer so the friendship could flourish. Flourish it did, until their teens. He had drifted away, focusing on preparing to become Sir Lupone and doing more and more activities fitting the heir of the Danfords as his cover. He could even pinpoint the exact moment their friendship truly
ended. Not when John had him stuck with a needle and sold off to police. It was when he stole the girlfriend of John. A sweet girl by the name of Emilia Frenzel. She was just a waitress but she was beautiful and graceful. Him and John were smitten. They had a small best of three tournament of three different games to decide who would date her. He beat Danford in a game of horseshoes, but he lost the games of chess and octopath, a board game where two players would pick pieces resembling the Eight and use dice to move them along a board down the path of that piece. First one to the end, or the one that didn’t fall to an enemy tile, won the game. It was multiple players but that day just him and John played. He didn’t choose to steal her then, but later when she confided that John was utterly unsatisfying as a boyfriend, he secretly began to date her. He knew it was wrong, and to that day regretted it. He wasn’t sure if she did, he hadn’t spoken since he, out of guilt, ended the affair and admitted the whole thing to John. For his part, John accepted the apology after beating him near to death, and their friendship continued. Until that fateful night a month ago.

Now he had to fight the man he once called friend. John Razelfort. A man that was his superior in games of chance and intellect, and while not as physically adept as him was no slouch. John could throw a mean punch if he wanted to, because he knew where to hit and how in order to make it really hurt. This was the enemy he was fighting… no. His enemy was larger. The Danford family was now his target. The man whom was only proud of him so long as he could brag. The woman who drank herself into a stupor then raged at any around her and used men like toys. The brother whom was a terror to any woman who crossed his path. Now, John, a man whose mind was a terrifying foe. At first, John was simply an unfortunate victim to what he was about to do to the Danfords. However, recent news made his blood boil. Emily, the woman that he once had affections for was adopted by his father and was set to marry John, whom would then be named as heir to both families. Further, Emily had leaked to friends her dissatisfaction with the whole affair. As a result, she’d been shunted from the public eye. This was all the motivation he needed to act. However, he was a man of his word and would get Robert first… which made the information he acquired in Victor’s Hollow important. Apparently, all the players he planned to strike would be in the same place at the same time at the same event. It was truly a aligning of the planets opportunity. He decided to take it and strike.

Unfortunately, the event was not in Marsalim like he expected. Bluntly put, it wasn’t even happening in the same kingdom. Instead, it seemed like it would be happening in Boulderfall, a few months from today. He had to give his parents credit, they had taste. Rave was called the kingdom of riches for a reason, it was the primary source of wealth for the empire and all economy and wealth occurred solely because of the riches the kingdom had, all of it controlled by the nobles of the kingdom, the strongest and most wealthiest of which was the Ravus family, for which the kingdom took its name from. He once upon a time was inclined to investigate them but never found anyone willing to rat on them so assumed either they’d covered their tracks too well or were clean. Boulderfall, the seat of power for the kingdom, was a magnificent city, rivaling even the likes of Everhold, the capital of the empire. I consumed the entire mountain range it sat in and even built a bit into the main thoroughfare slightly. A wedding there was perfect. All he needed to do was case the event. Thankfully, Solas had an idea, or perhaps unfortunately.
“I’m telling you” Solas said, assuming his human guise as they approached boulderfall “Going in as bakers is not the worst idea”. He groaned as Solas brought the topic up again. “Sure, but going in as groomsmen is a better idea. One of the ones listed matches my description almost to a T, and you can just magic your way in”. Solas sighed and said “Yes, I have incredible reserves and potent power, but i’m mortal just like you and have a finite amount!” “Okay, but you can still disguise yourself! You could be a baker!” he retorted. “Yes, but then we’ll be separate and I can’t improve your luck!” He sighed and said “Fine, fine…. Bakers. I’ll do it…. Just make sure to work your magic so i’m a dishboy?” Solas smiled big and said “Of course, master. It would be my pleasure!” With that, they entered boulderfall proper… or would, had a small unit at the gate not stopped them. He approached, saying “Stop! In the name of the emperor!” Solas stopped the ox instantly, and replied “Yes? How might I help you, officer?”. “By order of the Ravus family, all travel is restricted through the city. You are allowed to travel through, but if you plan to stay, you must be inspected. If you are passing through, you do so understanding you are not permitted to stay. So which is it?” the officer explained. Solas nodded, saying “I understand officer. I am Stan. Stan Lana. I am merely passing through, though with how late it is, surely it would be fine if I stayed now?”. The officers nodded, saying “Then you consent to an inspection?”. Solas shrugged, saying “Sure. Got nothin’ in the back. We ate it all”. The officer raised an eyebrow as the others moved forward, flanking either side, asking “We?”. Solas nodded, saying “Yeah. Me, my boy, and my trusty ox”. He looked at them and waved. He’d already hidden the gear. Well too. He hopped out, at first alarming them, but they relaxed when he said “You need me out to inspect properly, no?”. Nodding, the officers moved forwards and began inspecting the cart.

“Alright. Everything checks out” the officer said, turning from his companions “I trust you remember kingdom laws?” Solas shook his head, saying “Sadly sir, I am not. I am familiar only with Silvia law and the Covenants”. The officer nodded, saying “Well, then the only 4 rules you need to familiarize with are these; First, the one with the most wealth between two individuals is the superior. Two, under no circumstances are you to harm those superior to you. Three, robbery is a crime punishable by death. Finally, under no circumstances are you to enter the premises of the Ravus family uninvited. The penalty is death”. Solas nodded as he got back into the cart, asking “Anything else officer?”. The officer shook his head, saying “Nothing important… now move along. There may be others coming along”. Solas nodded, and whipped the reins and headed in as a car drove up behind them. “Tight control” he said “Think…” but was cut off as Solas said “Don’t… we’re here for the Danfords, the Razelfords, and Robert Bueller. The Ravus’ can wait for another time”. He sighed and said “Yeah…. Robert is more dangerous”.

The next morning came. Solas and him left the hotel and made it a point to be seen leaving the city, then snuck back in. They did effectively abandon the cart, but freed the Ox and sent it down the road. Solas changed his guise to a different human but was still black with white hair, but his age now. He put in new contacts and dyed his hair midnight blue. After that, they began to case the place they’d infiltrate, as bakers. Solas for his part was invaluable. Solas showed that he had a large pool of mana to work with and had magic that manipulated the mind of people he talked to subtly. Unlike some social mages, whom had to weave magic words into their speech or onto themselves beforehand, Solas was capable of the influence from a distance. Therefore, Solas became the one to get them into the nobles district, the one into the specific venue, and the one to get them hired. Him as a simple dishboy, and Solas as a baker, as apparently he was really good at cooking. Not as good as the head chef… or perhaps he was holding back for the sake of the mission, but either way, Solas
took the position of subordinate in the kitchen. As they worked, he would take breaks and explore
the venue, getting eyes on all the good spots to sneak through and still be out of sight. The biggest
find was a storeroom right near the altar and a sewer access grate right inside. It was a defunct pipe,
but it hadn’t been filled and while sealed, there was another grate it led to. The led directly to the
back alley behind said venue. All in all, perfect for his purposes. Further, it was an ideal place to
store his outfit for the heist. Further it was an ideal entry path, as there was a nice, large vent in the
storeroom. That night he stored his outfit and throughout the next few months, continued casing and
preparing. By the time the wedding was about to start, he was ready.

The morning of, he woke before dawn. Solas entered from a bedroom to the apartment they rented.
“He called us in for work… I said I haven’t seen you since you walked off with a girl last night”
Solas said “So you’re cleared”. He nodded and said “Thank you… I trust you can do your job?”. Solas
nodded, and said “Of course. I am your partner in crime… now. Go steal the axe. The
evidence… And the show”. He simply smiled, nodded, and headed out, half an hour early from
Solas. He headed for the grate, using his talents to blend in and be unnoticeable as he ducked into the
alleyway. He opened the grate using the thieves tools he had bought from the local underground, and
then upgraded, and then leapt in. He headed for his outfit and donned it fully, including the hi-tech
mask. It really was hi-tech. Night vision, thermal, and zoom functionality existed, all at the press of a
button. He kept the settings off and opened the grate above, climbing into the storeroom, using a
ladder he stored down there. He of course had 3 rope ladders as well, but they weren’t needed. As he
approached the door into the primary wedding hall, he turned on thermal vision. Luckily, only rats in
the walls. Smiling, he opened the door and entered, then quickly climbing some of the decorations
onto the second floor, then some more into the rafters above that. He stared down, surveying the
whole area, redoing his previous calculations to ensure he was correct. The mistakes he found were
minor, requiring minor changes to his plans. For example, sidestepping before using his grapple hook
to ascend to the rafters. The stain glass windows leading into separate rooms requiring the VTP hook
attachment to break instead of jumping through. Nothing major. In an hour, the people began to
enter, and the titular cake as well. If Solas completed his job, the show was about to begin.

The cake began to enter the room. It stood behind the priest of Sealticge, the order that handle
marriages in the empire. Most of the religious orders fell under the authority of the pontiff of Silvia,
since the silver flame church acted as the religious order for Aelfric, the leader of the 13 gods.
However, most still were distinct from one another in function and hierarchy. For example, the order
of Sealticge generally handled matters of marriage and family, while the order of Aeber regulated the
black market, albeit in subtle ways. This was important, because his plan involved using this
sealticge priest. Smiling, he checked his surprise. He had been lucky to find it, really. A 18 karat gold
ring with a diamond as the gemstone. He worked hard but managed to personally engrave it with a
slightly altered heat metal spell that read “To my old flame, will you stay lit for me, now and
forever?”. Turned out, Solas did have one power that was rather miraculous that normally was
forbidden in Tir na Nog, but not being there he had free reign to. He could copy any rare metal he
held… down to the shape. He could alter the size of the copy too, though ultimately it would have
the same properties just condensed. He accepted and now held a smaller ring that matched the ring
the bride was to wear… such dimensions were discovered thanks to a talkative underling.
Guests began to enter and take their positions, groomsman ready themselves to speak about the
groom, the bridesmaids speak about the bride. Then the flower girls would spread flowers blessed by
sealticge priests, then the ring bearers would present rings to the priest. Finally, the groom would
wait by the altar, and the bride’s father would guide the bride to the altar. Objections would be
heard, then vows exchanged, then final confirmation of the wedding. If all went according to plan,
Emily likely had all resistance worked out of her, likely through torture, though nothing that would
scar. Magic could only do so much after all. He smiled as he knew none of them would expect what
was coming. He glanced at the cake and saw the icing Solas was to apply to make the whole thing
come together. He pulled his VTP out affixed the foothold to the bottom, while sinking the grappling
hook into the rafter proper. He wasn’t concerned about it breaking under two peoples weight, as it
was made of wood from the Forest of No Return, a forest that wholly rejected human ways. While
he could secure the grappling hook, the wood would not even bend or splinter from it. He tested it a
bit and satisfied he nodded to him. He then looked down, turning thermal vision off and waited.
Waited for the bride to make her appearance. He did frown however as the groomsman spoke of
John as though they knew him. “An honorable man, that’d have your back till the bitter end”, “John
would never cheat or steal, but he’s enough of a heart throb he doesn’t have to try”, “John is
amazing. He’s rich, handsome, charitable, and most of all the kindest man you’d ever meet”, and his
personal worst “John is a paragon of good and just. To say anything else is a sin”. The brides spoke
of emily of course, though still weaved praises of john in. “She’s a perfect match for such a
handsome man”, “She’s lucky he noticed her”. The flower girls flew flowers and then the moment
he had been waiting for. The groom took position and then the bride entered.

In a dress of white, wearing a full veil that didn’t really hide anything, Emily walked down the aisle,
guided by none other than his ex-father, Frederick Danford. He could tell that while the arm hold he
had on emily’s arm was likely painless, a slight movement would change that. It was a threat of
physical pain if she resisted. He could tell by Emily’s hopeless, blank face and eyes that she had
given up all hope. Now, he was going to add an element of chaos to not only bring it back but also
back his former family and john into a corner. As the priest called for objections, he said loudly “I
do, your holiness!” and leapt down, a foot on the foothold of his VTP. It held as he hung between
Emily and John, and addressed the priest, saying “Your holiness. I cannot allow this marriage to
proceed while the bride is spoken for!”. The reaction was immediate. His former father stood,
bellowing “What gives you the right, you reject!?”. He smiled under the mask and stated “Simple.
Me and the bride held a flame once. I never extinguished it truly. I know not if the bride did. What I
do know is that she loves the groom not! Those eyes! Priest of Sealticge, goddess of beauty and love,
can you look at her in the eyes and then tell me that she loves the groom in the name of your
goddess!?”. The priest looked between him, Emily, and John, then gazed into Emily’s eyes.

He sighed and said “I admit I had doubts… she had the face of one whom gave up… your presence
returned some hope to her. Your words”. He took advantage and produced the ring box, clicking it
open as he turned to Emily and said “Emily. I know not if you still love Thiesel Danford… or if you
could love Master Thief Sir Lupone…. But I cannot sit by while a maiden is in distress. Please…
agree to marry me and let us abscond!”. “I will not allow this!” John shouted, producing a knife.
However, he was one step ahead, turning, reaching, and pinching a wrist nerve that forced him to
drop the knife. Emily was still silent, staring at the rings before her. He shoved john away, turning
and saying “Sadly madam, time is ticking. I need an answer”. Emily was silent for another second
before saying “Sir Lupone, please, save me! I’ll marry you if I must!” loud enough for the guest hall to hear. “Arrest that traitor! Now!” Frederick screamed, as if possessed. He smiled and said “Then milady” and wrapped his arm around her and said “Simply say ‘Yes’, if you will!” She nodded and said “Yes, Lupone Sir!”. The effect was immediate. The cake let off a bright flash as he spun her away from the flash, blinding all including John and Frederick. As his VTP retracted and pulled them up, he said “Good day gentleman! Remember this day as Lupone’s greatest heist!”. Once they reached the second floor, he swung them to the landing and detached the grapple hook and attached his normal hook. He set her on her feet and said “Come milady. Freedom awaits!” and ran with her towards the stained glass, using his hook to smash it. He then set her up on the zipline.

“Wait, Thiesel! Aren’t you coming!?” Emily asked, a bit afraid. He shook his head, saying “No. I’m sending you to my associate across the way. From there you’ll both flee the city with his magic. I’ll escape on my own… plus I made a promise to a friend I have to keep”. She stared at him for a long moment, and then suddenly kissed him. He was so shocked he didn’t have the time to kiss back, nor respond as she said “I’ll trust you, Thiesel… don’t break my heart a second time!”. He could only nod and send her on her way. He turned to him and yelled with rage “You damned pest! You’ve ruined everything!”. He smiled and said “Then catch me and make me pay, fellow traitor of mine!” and ran through a nearby door. He ran down the hall and through another door and closed and locked it, then whispered “Hitometaru!”. The metal knob glowed red as it became superheated. He smirked and ran deeper into the building. The only other way to him was on the first floor. Further, they’d waste time on the door before returning to it. He navigated the building right to the place he sought, the room that held the weapons of guests. He entered as he attached the dagger to his VTP and said “Alright gentleman, now if you would kindly leave, I can work in peace”. He was shocked to find it unguarded. He shrugged and headed to the weapon vault, retrieving his thieves tools. The lock, while complicated, was not as complicated as the hinges and so used the screwdriver he jerry rigged onto the set to unhinge the door and kicked it down. He then walked in and smiled, seeing the axe.

“Don’t mind if I do. Payment for my friend’s generous help” he said to himself, grabbing the axe and lifting it. However it suddenly wrested itself from his grasp. He quickly leapt back, leaving the vault it was in. He clicked his tongue in annoyance and said “I should’ve known. Robert Bueller… you always were selfish… so? What’d he offer you?” with a tone of annoyance. Robert smirked and said “2 mil. Security. We knew why you came. I’ll admit, I did not see that coming. Good job. Successfully ruined their plans”. Robert took a hard step forward, holding his axe to his side “However, that also cost me half my payment. Thus, I now have motive to re-capture and re-collect on your bounty”. He frowned and said “It’ll take more than brawn to get me!” and turned to run. “I know” Robert said, moving and tossing his axe horizontally. He ducked down and was about to stand but didn’t. He heard the footsteps behind him, but the axe had stopped mid-air a few feet ahead and then spun backwards towards him. Specifically, to Robert. He instead rolled forward, sacrificing the ‘tails’ of his tailcoat, and avoiding the return on the axe and Robert’s foot stomp. He then leapt left, chanting “Yama Kaji!” and sent a stream of fire surging forth, which then curved up and uppercutted Robert. Robert had to take a step back from the force and heat, but he was largely unhurt. “Shit!” he remarked as he leapt over the counter, avoiding an axe strike from Robert. He took another step forward, but he quickly made some hand signs and chanted “Kosoku suru!” and instantly mana in the air around robert’s neck, wrists, and ankles formed and locked in place, spatially speaking. “D-dammit! Why can’t I.” Robert began to demand, but was cut off by his own
screaming as a hook tore out blood vessels in his wrist that held his axe. He dropped it and he held a hand out and whispered "Yama Kaji", sending the fire stream directly into Robert’s neck, and held it there, choking Robert into unconsciousness.

He grabbed the axe and pulled out a specific strip of metal he’d prepared for this occasion. The axe was massive, his hand barely went fully around the handle. However, this strip was enchanted with a ‘shrink’ spell that would shrink any item it was attach to. Slapping it onto the axe shrunk it to half its height, making its transport easy. He proceeded to turn on his thermal vision and saw people approaching from the wedding hall and above. Smiling, he moved and ran out. He navigated the halls again, heading for the wedding hall, and more specifically the sewer grate. Within minutes he was there, and he opened it. He left it open, deciding to leave it clear how he infiltrated. He proceeded to collect his dumped clothes and speedily navigated to the other sewer grate, left through it, and then used a nearby fire escape to get to a roof. As the sun set, he escaped the wedding venue across the rooftops of lower Boulderfall.

It was 11 pm when he finally arrived at the motel outside of town. He hitched a ride on a passing truck once he escaped via the sewer and was in his normal clothes; slacks, cotton pants and shirt, shoes, and a straw hat. The motel was a few hours away and so no doubt was outside the scope of the search of the police. He entered the room him and Solas rented the night before the heist and saw them. Solas was still up, watching TV while sitting in a chair. Emily was asleep in her wedding dress. He closed the door behind him and walked to a bed, sighing deeply as he laid in it, setting his axe on the bedside table. “Hard fight?” Solas asked softly. He nodded, saying “Mountain of a man… had to use Restrain…. And a few other spells”. Solas nodded, saying “I see. However, you accomplished your goal. Robert being discovered will make things complicated for all involved, Emily’s testimony about your parents torture will bring them to just-” but he stopped him, saying “No need. Robert will sell them out instantly. He’s involved in a massive conspiracy. He’s facing death. The high emperor will likely offer a simple deal: Sell them out and you simply spend life in prison until old age. He will take it, and both my parents and John will be arrested for fraud”. Solas chuckled, waking Emily, and said “A regular dysfunctional family, huh? Selling each other out for the biggest payday”. He sighed as he removed his mask, placing it on the table, saying in a soft, sad voice “Yeah…. But it’s always been that way…. All i’m doing is finally adding justice to the equation”. “Is it really that bad?” Emily asked, sitting up. He turned, sitting up himself, saying “For me, it was. For John, yeah”. “Then… what about our children?” Emily asked.

“H-huh?” he asked. “What?” Emily questioned, then puffed her cheeks in anger slightly “Don’t tell me you said all that and didn’t mean it!”. He began to get a bit scared and said “Well… I did mean it.. B-but well… It’s a bit early?”. Emily stared and stared and said “Fine. However, we are talking about this” and turned over, going to sleep. Solas laughed and said “Well, well. A successful heist and a new lover… will your adventures never end?”, tossing a journal to Thiesel. He caught it and looked at it, then smiled and opened it to the last page he wrote. ‘I have managed to wrest Juanes Lavinda from his seat of power. Though the legendary Green Axe of legend eluded my grasp, an adventure awaited me that would lead me to it… and more. Here, I finish my records of this
adventure. For now, the epilogue is ongoing…’ he wrote. He wrote well into the night about everything that happened. Of his hopes and dreams. Most of all, of his crusade to bring justice back to nobility.
Chapter 37: The Hunter, Act 4-For Hope

Chapter Summary

Zem Kholint, glory stealer of S’waarki returns home after leaving 20 years ago to fulfill his dream of acquiring enough leaves to reopen the "S’waarki Hunter's School". However, he worries the town has not forgotten his failure. Are his fears true? Will he succeed in reopening the school? or will he be rejected once and for all by the proud hunting community of S’waarki.

Chapter 37

For Hope

Zem Kholint stood at the gates to his hometown. S’waarki, Halihall. A kingdom that favored strength and a town that trained the best hunters in the kingdom. Several legends spoke of hunters defeating legendary class prey. From Z’aanta to H’aanit, to Leona Balacruf, J’uuva, and Marcus. H’aanit and Marcus were the pride and joy of S’waarki, having helped defeat and kill Galdera, the fallen god. He once had aspirations to be chosen as a hero, but now those desires were dead and buried. His time had passed and likely one of the younger generation would. With a heavy sigh, he trudged into the village, passing through what everyone called the ‘Hall of Hunters’. On either side of the path leading into the medium-sized town were large 20 foot tall statues that depicted the many features of famous hunters and their equipment, with a plaque describing their deeds and fame. Eight statues in all currently. The ones he knew, and others he was unfamiliar with. Aurion, a mage who supposedly could literally talk to nature and used it on hunts, a hunter than had managed to capture and tame a drake from the Whitewoods northeast of S’waarki and had a large number of successful hunts, and finally another hunter mage whom rather than control or communicate with nature learned how to replicate it and used that to hunt many dangerous beasts alone. He only learned of these by reading the plaques. They were new and he was curious. As he read, he saw a hunter approach.

A guild hunter no less, told by the badge hanging from the woman’s neck. She was a spitting image of H’aanit, but he knew better. She was not H’aanit. Her name was E’erika. She was one of the villages four top hunters. Technically, he was the fourth, but he was disgraced and thus was generally unacknowledged, to his satisfaction. Matured, he knew he didn’t deserve it. E’erika approached and stated “Well, well, what has the cat dragged in? A skunk it seems like”. He sighed, saying “Nice to see you too, E’erika”. He moved continued on when E’erika held an arm out to block him, saying “Hold on you little shit. You really think after that tantrum you threw 30 years ago, you can just walk away like that?” in a tone suggesting malice. He shook his head, saying “No. I don’t. I haven’t. However, words do nothing…. Action does. Please. Move your arm”. E’erika didn’t and retorted “Oh, and what ‘action’ will a faker like you take?”. He sighed and moved around
the arm quickly, practically becoming a blur, saying “Simple. I plan to re-open the Hunter’s School we used to have” and continued into the town.

“Wh-what? A… fake like you really…?!” E’erika questioned, then followed “Wait! That building costs 200,000 leaves! Do you really have that kind of cash!?”. He nodded and showed her a small folder of his previous contract, turning and offering it “Take it. I have multiples. I’ve worked hard and managed to amass a small fortune of 250,000 leaves” he said, then turned and continued. He heard the gasp and guessed it was because E’erika likely had less money than that. He continued to his goal, the official Housing Agency of S’waarki. While housing agencies weren’t a requirement for towns or villages or kingdoms, the empire 400 years back created the concept and launched the first in Rippletide as a way to help towns deal with the issue of regulating house ownerships. S’waarki used one since to the culture there ability mattered more than ownership and having a housing agency helped to deal with the matter of dealing with and organizing who owned what house and how much, etc. etc. Around 10 years ago, he asked about the Hunter’s School and he was sad it had finally closed down. He decided then to work to reopen it and worked to gather the money. As he walked, he realized E’erika was stalking him. He ignored her however and simply continued towards the agency. It was a nice, quaint building, a single story high and about the size of a nice house. He walked in and to the reception counter and said “Excuse me, can I speak to an agent? I’m looking to buy property”. He could tell from the glare that the receptionist knew of his reputation. “Yes sir. There is an hour wait however… and you must stay on the premises the entire time” the receptionist said in a strained professional tone and began to make a call. He simply nodded and sat on a bench in the reception area. He didn’t doze off, knowing that if he dared, the receptionist would make him regret it.

After around half an hour, the door opened and he saw E’erika enter, with an astonished look on her face. “You’re really doing it…. Those hunts… the paperwork…” she stuttered, shocked. He nodded and stated “I’m serious… it won’t erase my shame… but then, my name needs not be attached to the school”. E’erika sat next to him and asked “Then… what’s the plan?”. He sighed and said “I’ll run the school, but others will teach…. And make sure to learn the lesson I had to”. E’erika stared and then sighed a bit, saying “Well… seems you really did learn… fine. I’ll judge for myself if you’ve really changed. Can I be a teacher?”. Zem looked at her and slowly nodded and E’erika said “Then, you must have a plan?”. He shook his head and finally found his voice, saying “I’ve only gotten up to repairing the building… I’ve not begun planning the school structure”. E’erika nodded and said “Fair enough… well you know where I live.. I’ll see if I can get others in on this. Just to make sure, you’re absolutely certain about taking no credit for the school beyond management?”. He nodded and she said “Then i’ll see you when I see you” and left. “Mister Kholint? The agent can see you” the receptionist said. He stood quickly and walked towards the agents office as instructed. He knocked as instructed and was told by a soft feminine voice “Come in”. He did and saw someone he didn’t recognize.

He sat down and said “I’m Zem. Zem Kholint. Been a resident for 49 years… 50 in 4 months”. The agent nodded, saying “Yes, I see that on your record, mister Kholint. I hear you want to buy...
He nodded and said “Yes… the old Hunter’s School building… if you’re not a local like I suspect, it’s the building near the entrance to the Whisperwood”. The agent nodded and said “I see. That building is in fact for sale. 167,810 leaves is the amount for full purchase”. He blinked and asked “Not 181,920 leaves?”. The agent shook their head, saying “No. the amount listed is 167,810 leaves with taxes included on the sale… in fact, if you wouldn’t mind me searching, I believe we have a deal on it… the only additional cost is the 14,720 leaf repair cost that can be discluded if you take repairs into your own hands”. He answered “I don’t mind waiting”. He was shocked. The last agent he spoke to had a ridiculous 10,000 leaf a month deal and said the property plus taxes and repairs would total to 220,000 leaves. The agent walked over and sat down, placing a paper down, saying “We do in fact have a deal. If you were born here and are planning to register it to the Hunter’s Guild, you get 13% off”. He stared at the paper and asked “Registering it to the guild… what would that do?”. “Simple” she said “It’d essentially form a contract between you, the owner, and the guild. The ultimate details are to be hashed out between you and they, overseen by me if you purchase with me, or another agent if you purchase through them”. He nodded and said “Then i’ll register”. The agent nodded and pulled a stack of papers and said “Then let’s go through the contract!”. Zem blinked and was about to speak, the agent cut him off and said “Don’t worry. I’m an honest agent. No shady stuff. However, we do have legal authority over housing here in S’waarki by the High Emperor himself. So, this contract details basically the rules and regulations around the various sorts of ownership. Let’s begin with, what do you plan to do with this building?”. Zem sighed. It was going to be a long day.

“Aaaaaand… sign there, and you, sir Zem Kholint, are the sole and proud owner, barring whatever agreement you make with the Hunter’s Guild, of the S’waarki Style Hunting School for All Peoples!” the agent declared with a slightly excited voice. He sighed a bit as the agent continued and said “All that’s left is payment. Are you doing a plan, which will include interest, or an upfront full payment with taxes included?”. “Payment. What do I owe?” he asked. “Well then… 167,810 leaves, plus 14,720 leaves, minus 13% discount, and the 10% sales tax… The payment required is 181,282 leaves”. He nodded and pulled his satchel. He retrieved the required amount, making the satchel go from the size of a large feed bag, to a simple feedbag. He still had 38 thousand or so leaves left, so he had a tidy sum to spend on facilities and other such things. Then the agent spoke and said “I’ll arrange a meeting for you with the hunter’s guild and we’ll get that sorted out soon. As for the building, while it is in disrepair, it is still livable. It simply isn’t suited to be a place of learning, especially for such a physically active….” the agent trailed off, trying to find a good word to describe hunting. “Tradition. Trade works too… but in S’waarki, hunting is everything. The past, the present, and the future. It has been and always will” he said, reciting something he read when he was learning in the school he was about to rebuild. The agent smiled and said “Poetic… then you may leave. I’ll be in touch” and handed him the keys. He nodded, stood, and left at that. He walked to the building itself and pulled out the keys he was given and used them to unlock the door and walk in. He closed the door behind him and closed it. He sighed and let the feeling of nostalgia make him feel good. A feeling he hadn’t truly felt in around 3 years. He walked through it to his old room, and was shocked to see it still had a bed. It was barren otherwise, but that was fine for him. He put his mauser against the wall, along with his browning double auto. He put his hand axe next to his bed against the wall, took over his mythril kevlar vest, chain, hunter’s garb, and boot, and went to bed for the night.

The next morning he was awoken by a loud banging and the sounds of demands from people outside his house. He groaned in annoyance and got up. He put on his garb and picked up his hatchet,
putting it onto his belt hold. He then walked downstairs, taking 3 minutes to get to the door. “Get out here you reject! Now!” a loud, angry, male voice screamed. He knew who it belonged to. Another one of the six he adventured with 34 years ago, a man named Reynald White. He opened the door and saw the man in full. Exquisite clothing with mythril trimmings here and there and a pair of guns he’d never seen before on his back. Reynald glared down at him and tried for a straight punch. He avoided it and backed up, saying “Careful now. Halihall allows for deadly force in self defense” with a blunt, tired tone. Reynald stopped and growled, standing tall. “Reject. I heard about your plan. Trying to make everyone forget eh? Well forget it! Until I die, no one shall forget your sin!” Reynald yelled with fury. Zem sighed and said “I never said I was trying to”. Reynald spit on the ground in front of him and said “Sure, and I’m fuck’in champion, ye prick” and stomped out. He sighed and closed the door, locking it. “What a great way to start the day” he grumbled as he prepared for the day.

He eventually was contacted by the agent around mid-afternoon. She was hoping to meet over dinner with him and the representatives of the Hunter’s Guild. Which was less than desirable due to the fact that he’d had literally no plans. The old Hunting School closed for a reason; It kept old traditions and refused to adapt to the times. The institution he wanted to create would keep the old traditions, but it wouldn’t be the sole thing learned. He got the message via courier which he assumed was set up recently. Couriers mostly belonged to a single guild, the Imperial Courier’s League, called such because in fact the guild was formed by the Empire in an attempt to capitalize on the fame of guildship. It mostly worked but less because of the league being a guild and more because the empire capitalized on the idea of secure, private communications in a time when espionage was quickly becoming common amongst the nobility. Eventually he got himself ready and headed to the venue: The only restaurant in town that locals went to. H’aanits watering hole.

He entered and was shocked to see it empty at first, then realized why that might be. He saw the guild members he was to meet, his agent to one side, what he assumed to be their supervisor on the other, and an empty seat opposite of the guild that he assumed was for him. He assumed they had reserved the restaurant for the night specifically to make this meeting go smoothly. A wise decision. He knew the guild would be trouble when he signed. He was a contract hunter and they were guild hunters. He walked over to the seat and sat down, one member clicking their tongue in annoyance. It was then he realized that a majority of people there were former friends. “Well… this is a surprise” he stated. “Indeed. I never thought you’d have the guts to show your face again” Gimly said, taking a drink of his water. He was a tall man, 8 feet tall and was one of the top hunters in S’waarki. He participated in the fateful dragon hunt and was the one to find it. He simply replied “Yes…. I finally got the funds for what I decided to do with myself”. Another hunter, also part of that hunt and the youngest member at 29, said aloud “Oh and is that this ‘Hunter’s School Re-opening’ I heard the nice agent speak of? Don’t make me laugh. You’re just—” but was cut off as the agent said “Mister Lufwitz. I’ll remind you that this is to be a cordial meeting”. Louise went quiet as a grizzled old man spoke, whom he recognized as the guildmaster for the Hunter’s Guild in S’waarki, the birthplace of the Hunter’s Guild, said “Louise, Gimly… I understand you have history. However, you must put it behind you… for the sake of the village”. Louise and Gimely just looked away, saying nothing. The man turned to him and said “Now. Let’s negotiate the terms of registration. Registering with the guild guarantees even you some perks”. He nodded and said “Then…. lay your terms. My own demands mostly begin and end at being part of running the school and the discount… I could pay for
it but the money I have left I plan to use to improve what’s there after repairs”. The guildmaster nodded and said “I understand… alright. Very reasonable demands… almost far too kind. Guess it’d be rude to demand resignation”. “Yes sir. It’s not equivalent at all, since hunting is tradition and culture here” the agent said.

The guildmaster gave her a crooked eyebrow, looked at him, then scowled and said “Talking to outsiders as well… guess I should’ve expected that”. Zem shrugged and said “What can I say. She works here. She lives here…. It’s pointless to treat her as one”. “You haven’t learned a damn thing” Gimely said, spitting to the side. “Mister Gimely!” the agent said in a stern voice “You will show respect while in a legal meeting! Is that understood!?”. Gimely remained quiet but he knew her defending him would just stoke fires worse. He sighed and the guildmaster said “We’re just getting worked up. I’ll lay out the guild’s demands and be done with it. You are to resign as a contract hunter and join with the guild immediately. Instead of you being sole headmaster, the school is to be run by a board and for the first year, you will be chairman, after which we will elect a board member and you will take their seat. Finally, everyone on the board will be paid a fair wage. Regardless of your feelings on them”. Zem stared at the guildmaster and nodded, saying “I consent to these terms”. The guild gasped collectively, though the agent showed no shock. “Ar-Are you serious!?” Lufwitz stammered out “N-no argument? No clarifications!?”. Zem nodded and said “Indeed… I never said I was married to contract hunting. It’s just more profitable and now that I have re-opened the school, I can go with the guild. It’ll be good to take jobs I want from now on without all the hairy paperwork beyond checking if it’s a legal hunt”.

There were details to be hashed out but the agreement was simple enough. He sighed after the guildmaster and then asked “So. Any idea for board members?”. The guildmaster nodded and said “Yes… chairman plus eight seats. Four of them filled by your friends… two filled by E’erika and Joshua Grahmen”. He froze a bit. The top hunters of the village being involved changed things. “Hold it” he said “Why them?”. “Simple, Their name being attached to the admin board of the school will cancel the shame you would bring to the school… and with the guild throwing their clout behind it, it will be successful. All we need now are teachers, which I would success those of the admin board become temporarily” the guildmaster replied. He sighed and said “Yeah… that makes sense”. He had forgotten the social aspect of this “Good thing you were brought on… I forgot the social aspect”. The guildmaster smiled kindly and said “Its fine…. Frankly? I like your idea… and that’s why i’m overlooking the shame you’ve brought upon the village and am working for you…. Giving you a second chance if you will. Don’t disappoint”. The guildmaster stood and said to the agent “I trust this is handled and it will be filed away properly. Any problems, come to me” and then turned to him, saying “I look forward to see what happens with the school”. He left with that.

The next few days were spent meeting with the new board members. One member in particular he was avoiding was the top hunter of S’waarki, Joshua. The ‘dragonslayer’ as they called him. He was less angry about it and more weary. Joshua had let the fame go to his head and continually bragged and used the hunt as a point of reference for his brags. He had as well, but Joshua let it continue well into what was now his fifties. Further, Joshua made it a point to not let him live down his shame. It
was that reason why he felt the air of hopelessness that he did. However he could delay no longer. He had met with everyone else but E’erika and Joshua. They were on board and even willing to give him a second chance. He knew Joshua wouldn’t. He approached the house and was about to knock when it opened and Joshua, still looking like he was in his mid thirties, stepped out. He was 7 feet tall and broad shouldered, having brownish-orange short hair and a slightly curled and bushy mustache. He had bright blue eyes. He was looked down on by Joshua as he asked “Well, well, well. What brings the ‘Great Liar of Hunting’ to my doorstep?”. He was about to respond as Joshua spoke for him and said “Let me guess…. You finally bought that rickety building and are making the school? And you want me in some sort of leadership position? Well naturally I accept! You can’t have a hunting school without the great ‘Dragonslayer’! Nay, it could hardly be called a school, so much as a daycare with some educational value for future hunters”. He simply nodded and was about to bid him farewell when Joshua said “That said, I am busy for the next few months so if you planned to open soon, I’m afraid you’ll need to reschedule. Don’t worry though, my agent is always available!” and closed the door. He wasn’t sure what he expected out of that, but it was always like this with him.

He now headed to the woods. Not to hunt but to go to E’erika’s cabin. E’erika was a rare kind of huntress, one that combined all the techniques of S’waarki into one. H’aanit came close, but only just. E’erika was the one and true chosen of Draefendi, goddess of the hunt. He still remembered the dream he had involving her. He brushed it off as the woods began to part and revealed E’erika’s cabin. It was less a clearing more a natural, small circle one could build a cabin in the woods. He could already feel the chill on his spy and saw them. The creatures she had tamed and befriended. Only a few, but they were deadly. A gourmandown toad, an ogre eagle, and a hrodvitnir. Each one gave him a gaze telling him to step no further. He complied and E’erika walked out, saying “Who needs- ah. It’s you. I thought it was strange they went quiet. How can I help?”. He looked at each and said “I’ve come to inform you that the guild and I formally invite you a seat on the administration board for the school i’ve funded”. E’erika nodded and said “I see. Interesting… Hrod. alítheia?”. Hrod stood fully and walked over. He didn’t move, as he only had his hatchet on him and knew he stood no chance. Further, E’erika was no slouch when it came to taming. Hrod would not be within 100 feet of him, let alone right next to him if she doubted Hrod for a second. Hrod sniffed him, smelling him, then turned to E’erika and gave a low yip. “I see…. Well then. Shall we hunt and talk?” she offered. “I would but-” he started but stopped, seeing E’erika reach in and pull a mauser m98 from inside and walk to him. He chuckled and accepted it, saying “Well. I believe I can, E’erika”.

He walked through the woods, Hrod walking next to him. The woods had a low fog and that combined with the sunset currently going on made for an interesting fairyland effect. However, he was more focused on Hrod. He had grown up in the woods after all, and so did not find them as odd as he found Hrod odd, as most hrodvitnir were at least 14 feet tall and 10 feet in length, with 5 feet width to them. Hrod however was two-thirds of these dimensions. A runt so to speak. “So. what is Hrod’s tale?” he asked. “I found his family when it was weak. I showed some kindness. The mother brought Hrod to my doorstep as a pup…. And that’s it” E’erika replied, petting Hrod as they walked “I raised him as a sister might and trained him to be a guard and hunting dog”. He nodded, saying “I see…. so you felt no pity that the mother abandoned its runt to you?”. E’erika sighed and said “I mean, sure she did that…. But Hrodvitnir are fiercely territorial. She’d sooner eat the babe than risk it
growing and turning because of the abandonment. Besides, she never did abandon the pup. She shows up during good seasons to spend time with him”. He sighed and said “I see… I apologize”. E’erika said “It’s fine… what you been through? I’d be a bit cynical”. He was silent when Hrod stopped and crouched. Him and E’erika crouched as well, trying to see what was ahead. His eyes widened as he saw something he never thought he would. A Sanska.

Sanska were bovines of extremely rare quality. Untameable beasts that were extremely nomadic and dangerous if gentle. Sanska were golden-hided bovines with extremely potent magical properties. 50% of whatever a bovine ate would become metallic that would deposit into their horns, effectively making them spears. Further, Sanska themselves could will different kinds of spells into existence without chanting the command words in the language of magic. Finally, because of their magical qualities, it was rumored that their meat was extremely expensive, costing 50 leaves an ounce. He prepared his mauser while E’erika prepared her bow. “Hrod. vélos. epíptosi. Kynígi.” E’erika whispered to Hrod, whom simply tensed in response. He didn’t fire when the arrow flew. As he guessed, the moment the arrow slammed into the Sanska’s knee, Hrod bolted, closing the 300 foot distance in seconds. The amount of time it took for the Sanska to rear up, bellow, right itself, and turn to meet its coming attacker. Hrod wisely used its claws and slashed the Sanska’s face as a start, to which it bellow and lit its horns on fire with an advanced ‘heat metal’ spell. He then aimed and fired, sinking a bullet into its neck, though he had been aiming for the eye. It bellowed again, turned and began charging when E’erika whispered “Fukusū no ya” and let an arrow that, through her spell, turning into a flurry of six arrows. Four sunk into various parts, though only as deep as the arrowhead, while two flew under and over its body. He chambered the next round as he rolled to the side, turning and aiming and firing a shot into its hide himself. Same result as the arrows, though one bullet instead of four. Hrod then landed on its back and bit into the Sanska’s neck, attempting to use its strength and body weight to pin it. After a few minutes of struggling, Hrod finally had it pinned.

They moved to either side as E’erika said, petting the side of Hrod’s body as she did, “[insert greek for good boy here]”. He stared, then looked down at the Sanska. It looked at him. It made a low whining noise. His eyes widened as he made a realization. It did speak the magic language… just not in a way they understood. “E’erika! Get back!” He yelled as he backed up rapidly. E’erika yelled “Hrod, ypochórisi!” which made Hrod let go and leap back immediately. Instantly the cow instantly exploded with a furious gale that bent the nearby tree’s outwardly, as though a hurricane had blown through, and even sent them flying back despite having retreated a full 10 feet by now. The fog was gone because of the spell and it made a huffing noise and he could see a thin layer of mana cover its body. It was on full defense. He sighed and prepared his mauser, looking at E’erika and asked “What’s the play here? It’s on the ropes but… it’s cornered”. E’erika looked torn but got a stern face and said “E’erika the wild does not flee! We finish the hunt!” then turned to the Sanska and said “Hrod. pali!”. Hrod howled that, making the Sanska flinch as E’erika lent down and slammed her palm on the ground, whispered “Ashi o tsukami”. Instantly a bear trap made purely of mana was formed in front of it. Understanding her strategy he nodded and walked forward, shouldering his gun and staring the beast down. It caught eye contact with him, stared, and he knew it understood his intent. It wasn’t false intimidation or even a false taunt. He was daring it to charge.
It took his challenge head on, rearing back and bellowing and launching forward. Lightning cloaked its body like an aura, clearly some sort of spell. However its back leg slammed onto the trap, it instantly snapped onto it and took effect. A spell he’d used once or twice. The spell was nasty, tripling a victim’s weight upon contact. What would’ve been a charge at 40 miles per hour and potentially life threatening became a 13 mph charge. Still fast but not unbelievably fast nor something too fast for him to react to. He sidestepped the creature and as it passed he whispered “Shogeki, Parasu” and slammed his palm into the side, letting electricity climb from its hide into him. He took some damage, but nothing serious. The creature however tensed up and fell, skidding across the ground, effectively paralyzed. He crouched down, panting a bit from the pain. He wasn’t exhausted, but being shocked was the worst kind of pain. E’erika took up the slack as Hrod ran forward and went for the throat, ending the fight instantly right there. All he had needed was a moment of vulnerability and they had created it. He smiled, looking at E’erika and Hrod, and walked over to it and said “A good hunt… you’ve trained Hrod well”. E’erika nodded and said “Indeed… thank you. Your help was indeed valuable. You’ve not lost your touch”. He hesitated, and looked down at the Sanska and said as its magical aura died off “I… don’t know if I ever did” in a low, somewhat sad and doubtful tone.

“Nonsense” E’erika said “You have. Don’t you remember the two hunts that let you get on the dragon hunt job?”. He thought about it and said “I do… but-” but was interrupted as E’erika said “Then feel pride… hope. You have skill. You just let it get to your head as a youth. Move on… I’ve forgiven you. I see the talent you have… let yourself see that”. He was silent as E’erika said while petting Hrod who nuzzled her affectionately, sensing that the hunt was over “Believe me… after I forgave you, I felt a lot better… and I feel fine with you running the school. Now come. Let’s celebrate this victory. Help me harvest the Sanska”. He nodded and did just that, and helped her carry back everything. The bones, the meat, some of which was fed to Hrod to lighten the load, the hide, and the organs. It only took them an hour to retrace their steps and get it back to her place, which she tossed into a cooler and dumped fresh ice onto. “That’ll keep them cold for about a month, so long as I take proper care… sure to find buyers in the meantime. Oh and Zem?” she said. “Yes?” he responded as he finished setting the hide out to be tanned and cured. “I’ll accept my seat. Just with the understanding I may miss some meetings and events. I am a huntress after all”. He chuckled and nodded, saying “I understand and I think they will too”. He stood and said “I’ll be going now. Night is falling and it’s time I returned”. E’erika nodded and said “Alright. Take care of yourself Zem”. He left at that.

He had never truly thought this would happen. He always assumed when he arrived that the local agency, while ran as an official branch from Everhold, would price gouge him for every leaf, since it employed locally. He was hated by the community, to the point that the day he left to begin his quest to reopen the school they had burned his house and all the belongings within. However, he discovered more and more that the town had slowly begun to forgive him overall. Sure there were some that still despised him. However, they were becoming the minority. After all, E’erika of all people, a woman he insulted majorly in the past, had forgiven him. “Maybe… I should let go of the past? They forgive me after all… mostly…” he said to himself, staring at the sky through a hole in the roof. He remembered E’erika’s words well. “Hope” he said to himself “I’ve really lived hopelessly huh…? Yet… perhaps it was reasonless… maybe I have.. A chance at a happy future despite my mistakes”. With those thoughts in his head, he let sleep take him, a beautiful song being sung on the wind.
Delilah Softbrand, or as her family and friends know her, Diana Franz, heads back home while the Eisenberg Festival is beginning, a festival that celebrates the tale of Olberic Eisenberg, the Unbending Blade. With the First Flame in hand, she confronts the cult. Will she expose the truth to her family and friends? Will they believe it when they see it? Or will they remain blind and drag her into the far reaches of hell?

Chapter 38

For Truth

She looked at cobbleston. Even from the bottom of the mountain it was a sight. A small 4000 person village nestled in the southern mountains of the empire, and tonight was as far as she remembered a special night. It was celebration of the last day of life for the most ancient of heroes and in the communities eyes the most noble; Sir Olberic Eisenberg, the Unbending Blade. They’d pull the ancient blade from storage and used it in a reenactment of his final years. His struggle with coming to terms with failure, his struggle to find Erhardt, and his struggle against Werner in Riverford, Aques. It was a story every kid grew up seeing and being amazed at. Further, the actors generally were either the best local talent or the occasional celebrity. “It will be nice to return” she said to no one in particular. She looked forward to the festival. However, she feared for what would happen afterward.

It was late when she arrived, so she headed to the house she owned. Before leaving, she had bought a house so she’d have some privacy upon returning. She used money the head priest gave her as a salary to do so. It was a small stone cabin with a patchwork straw ceiling, like they would in the old days. The home of one Olberic when he lived in Cobbleston before moving officially to Noblecourt. After entering she heard a voice in her mind, Kard no less. ‘Did you acquire the First Flame my former vestal and confidant?’ he asked in that smooth, but wizened voice he had. She nodded and replied telepathically using the spell he established ‘Yes sir. I have it now… you don’t mind that I sleep first before personally delivering it no?’ ‘Of course not. That is how it must be… simply ensure your up before the town awakens for the festival, so no eyes see it. Sleep well, my vestal of darkness’ his voice said before fading. This confirmed to her that he was in town and that he was going through with the ritual. With a strained heart, she went to bed, fearing what tomorrow would bring.
She woke at 5am. People would wake up at 6:30 in order to begin preparing for the play. She wandered the empty streets in her black cloak with golden trimmings and wore her black habits and gauntlets. She held the lantern within the folds of her cloak and headed up the mountain nearby, towards the cave where the ritual would be held. Once out of the Cobbleston, she checked the lantern. It glowed white. She’d have to change that when she arrived. She needed things to go smoothly if her plan was to succeed. She headed to the cave the bandits worked from as they terrorized Moria in its early days, before it was Moria and when it was in fact Eisenberg. Their leader was defeated, but spared, by Olberic and was in fact his first real adventure. Nowadays it was the site of the small galdera cults meetings and would be the sight of the ritual to not destroy the lantern but to convert it into what Kard described it as the Final Flame, its truest form. According to Kard, the final flame was to come into existence in times when something had to be destroy for the good of the world. It was prevented ages ago not just because Galdera lacked power but because the world was twisted beyond their gods imagination. So, the idea was that they, his faithful flock, would unlike the cult that followed Mattias would work together to bring about Galdera’s freedom rather than place their hopes into a singular savior. She fell for the propaganda and believed fully in the plan. Now, she knew what his real aim was, sacrifice the town of Cobbleston and split the power the final flame would give to each cult member, then march on Everhold, the seat of power in the empire and assassinate the Pontiff. She arrived at the cave as morning turned to noon.

He was waiting for her, holding the patient and kind smile and face she knew. “Hello, child” he said, welcoming her “The lantern?” he requested. She let her dark thoughts flow through her as she pulled it out. It was purple as required and offered it. Kard took it, saying “Good child… it was longer than expected, but you succeeded”. “Thank you, father Kard… truth is, I was in a bit of a bind trying to acquire it….. I received help in exchange for giving it. So I had to take a detour north…” she admitted. She knew hiding the truth would make it harder on herself since she was never good at it, nor was she very sociable. Kard was silent for several moments, then nodded and said “Tithe for tithe, tact for tact. You did right, child… Now go. Enjoy the festival. Misguided by the Great Lie, Olberic is still a savior of Cobbleston and it would be dishonorable to the great one to dishonor such a hero”. She nodded and turned to leave, and began to formulate her plan. She already had an idea of how to do it but she could not alone. She needed allies and she needed to talk to people to find them.

The festival was in full swing as she returned. For now, it was the time when vendors were trying to sell goods and people were buying and participating in activities. Some would play with wooden swords, some would put on magic shows, and some even danced and sang. It was a wonderful festival that she had fond memories of as a child. She was sad that Kard was trying to capitalize on it. She knew he planned to sacrifice all these people to fuel the flame…. However, she knew how to interrupt it. She returned home and got to work. She used light soulstones to fuel the spell she made before her journey here. She used simple festival charms as the medium for the spell. Her ‘Augur of Protection’. “Aelfric, kō no chichi wa, anata no kagayaki o kagayaka sete, soshite mujitsu o mamorimasu!” she chanted each time she finished. By the end of the night she was utterly drained and knew she’d be sleeping in. She had six charms and expended more than her supply of mana, straight into shortening her lifespan in exchange. The spell was one that’d create a barrier that’d blocked attempts to manipulate souls, which is what Kard would try. With no ability to and the festival closing, his ritual would fail and he’d lose face… all while her involvement was secret.
Except, she didn’t plan to keep it such for long after this.

The next afternoon, there was a knock at her door. Sleepily she answered and saw her mother, whom wore her casual attire and asked “Ah! You’re back in town!”. She nodded and said “Yes… I returned yesterday. I simply was tired after my… task”. Her mother nodded understandably, the look of pride in her eyes stung her heart as she said “Well, would you like to join me later? I intend to attend to play of Olberic happening tonight!”. She nodded and said in a forced cheerful voice “Of course mother. I’ll prepare immediately”. Her mother smiled and bade her farewell, then left. She closed the door and got into her cloak and switched her cleric’s garb and gauntlet for generic adventurers stuff, hiding her contraband underneath some floorboards. She took her charms and headed out into the festival proper. She knew she needed to, in order to avoid suspicion, avoid her fake name, Delilah Sofibrand and take her proper name back, Diana Franz.

She headed out, partially to spread her charms, partially to shop for clothes for her outing with her family later. As she headed for the clothes store she dropped a toy between a pair of stalls and inside the clothing store, left one in a drawer of the dressing room. She bought a nice wide-brimmed hat and a beautiful white evening gown with white high heels and white silk gloves. She went took a roundabout way home, distributing the dolls evenly but within 1 mile of each other. This was because of the compound effect she had on the spell. Each one would double the total range. With all six, the range of the spell was 96 miles. It was quite excessive but it was perfect. It’d encapsulate Moria entirely, preventing Kard from even reaching outside the kingdom to grab at souls. Further, it would activate the moment Kard’s magic reached into town, since she made the enchantment to specifically react to magic fueled by Galdera. All she had to do was wait. If her deepest hope was true, then nothing would happen and Kard will have told the truth about Galdera. However, after the events at the Obsidian Parlor, she wasn’t sure.

Later that night, her family arrived. Her younger brother, Jules Franz, her father Darrel Franz, and her mother, Harriet Franz. She left with them to attend the play that was the focal point of the entire festival. It was the best part of it. She and her family took seats amongst the audience. It was a very ancient style of theatre, the kind carved into the sides of hills and mountains. A place for actors to enter beneath the stands the audience sat on, and a large stage before the audience. It had been modernized to include easy entry for audience members and the entry tunnel to branch off into various departments required for the play, but in general the feeling was the same: a high quality stage play recounting the events of Sir Olberic Eisenbergs journey of redemption. They had arrived half an hour early and used the time to talk about her journey. She was mostly honest, but left out her doubts about how she was raised, and her trip into the Obsidian Parlor. Before they could pry her about her efforts, the play began properly.

The play began with spotlights on ‘Olberic’ coming out from between a pair of paper mache
buildings. “Ahh, what a beautiful day” ‘Olberic’ stated. The actor was a fairly well built man, with brown hair with dyed grey highlights. He wore a set of chainmail and kept a large greatsword on his back. The man wore a belt and lax leather pants and boots, along with thick leather gloves. “A fine day indeed” he said. He then moved and avoided a small kid that stumbled out as well, and had attempted to strike him with a paper mache sword. The kid then composed himself and attempted to attack ‘Olberic’. “Ha ha! Phil! I see you are using a proper sword! Small, sure, but a real one nonetheless!” ‘Olberic’ cheered. From there, the play continued, with the actor Olberic doing his best. His performance was a bit over the top, but it was given with heart. She and her parents cried several times. Especially after the final confrontation.

Then came the epilogue. Olberic traveled back to cobbleston as history stated. Then, the actor recited aloud the vow Olberic detailed he made to the world when Primrose released Olberic’s journal to the world. Then the actor began the final scene. The technicians used a complicated system of levers, pulleys, and motors to make props that represented scenery of the various kingdoms pass by to give the effect of Olberic journeying. Each kingdom he visited, each hero he spent time with after the journey’s end, and Galdara sent back into the pit. Eventually, it changed to plains, then to a grand city. Then the actress playing Primrose made her appearance again and began to socialize with Olberic. Treating him like a friend and essentially showing their strained feelings for one another. Then, the proposal. Primrose going to one knee and asking for Olberic’s hand in marriage, to restore the names of Azelhart and Eisenberg, of Olberic refusing and saying instead to let him assist in restoring the name of Azelhart, and of their beautiful marriage. The stage directors spared no expense to make the conclusion the most stunning performance, and the effects real, even having illusionist mages on site to cast them. She smiled and felt tears go down her cheeks as she watched. However, unlike before, he daydreamed of her and Selim. However, her mother shook her and said “Hey. It’s time… we must head to the ritual”. She dried her eyes and nodded, standing. She then left with her family as the actors brought the play to a close.

She entered the cave and internally sighed in sadness. The cave hadn’t changed, hanging flags of Galdara on the walls. Various books and desks served as stations for cult mages to research about Galdara. She had never thought of it before, but she founds the crystals they worked on creepy. She still wasn’t sure why, but with the truth revealed to her, as hopeful as she was that it was merely Galdara testing her faith, she had a feeling it was nothing good. She and her family headed deep into the cave with other cult members. She was eventually handed her things, spellbook included and asked to change, which she did in privacy. Her brother wasn’t there, as he was asleep at home. Once she came out, Kard asked her to stand by his side. Once the cult, all 300 members, were gathered, Kard spoke aloud and said “Fellow believers! Followers of the great father Galdara! Rejoice, for our vestal has returned to us safe and with her task complete!” and held the black lanthern aloft. “With this my brethren we will complete Galdara’s will and with his might shatter the Great Lie!” Kard proclaimed, moving the Lantern onto the pedestal “Chant with me children of Galdara! Let our voices raise and rise the magic of the final flame unto the heavens! Shatter the barrier that is the Great Lie surrounding our beautiful Empire!” He then began the chant to empower the flame into becoming the final flame. She prayed she made the enchantment correctly. “Ā, garudera, ā, garudera, kurakute utsukushi, anata no niku wa inochi ni kite, anata no shinjitsu wa kika reru kamo shiremasen. Watashitachi no koe ga anata no chikara o michibiki, watashitachi no koe ga anata no honō o tsukatte anata no subarashi shinjitsu o subete no hi shinja ni hiromeru yō ni shimashou!” they
chanted, the flame glowing brighter and brighter. She could see Kard’s malicious grin as he stared down at the cult. It was filled with glee and he continued chanting. She did as well, so that her intentions would not be outed at this critical moment.

Then it happened. A wave of magic passed over everyone. Instantly the chanting stopped and the light, which shone almost like a small star, went silent and flickered like normal. Further, it’s black light had turned into a purple glow. “Wh-what…?” Kard said, utterly confused. She held her wand and whispered “Watashi no kage, watashi no kage, watashi kara hanarete watashi no soba ni tsukae nasai”. Her shadow became a shadowy clone, coming out of her shadow and pointed its own shadowy bone wand, while she likewise, at Kard and said “I think this charade is at its end Kard. Now, step away from the First Flame”. Kard stared at her, bewildered, and said “Wh-what!? How!?! When!?” She approached, causing him to back off. He went for the lantern with a hand, but she chanted quickly “Shadoubimu” and fired a beam of darkness right through his wrist. He screamed and fell to the ground, letting her walk to the pedestal and grab the first flame, turning it white.

Everyone gasped and began to murmur and she said “Brethren! I am sorry for the deception, but I had no choice! Kard has been lying to you, by omission! He claimed the old stories false, but he left out a crucial detail, the Obsidian Parlor!”. She then put both hands on it and said “I was confused. I didn’t and still don’t know who to believe. Aelfric, lord of light, or Galdera, father of darkness, so I’ve made a choice! Let’s ask him in person! Aelfric! If you truly are the father of light and creation, and protector of the wayward, hear my prayer! Summon his spirit so we may question it! Have him answer true our questions!”. The light within glowed with a brightness befitting the sun itself. It blinded everyone, yet was not searing, but a gentle warmth. It slowly died down, and before them floated a figure. A black shadow clad in black chains and plated armor. It raised its head and said “Where… am I…?”. “Witch! Witch I saw! That is not Galdera, but a pale imitation!” Kard screamed, standing “Fellow-” and Galdera spoke, shedding Kard’s illusion, saying “Silence, illusionist. I will not stand your loud, lying voice”. She gasped in fear and disbelief. Kard had been tricking everyone. He was not even human.

Kard stood before them. A black, towering man with draping black hair and bright white eyes. He growled and cried “No! My illusion!”. “Liar!” she shouted, enraged “You… you aren’t even human!”. “No, he is not… a Genai I believe… from the north” Galdera said sleepily, yawning. Kard backed away, saying “I-... I had to! The empire demonized my nation! How could I reveal my true self!?”. She growled and turned to Galdera, asking “Galdera….. Is the Great Lie real!?”. Galdera shook his head, saying “Not as you understand it….. The only lie about the story is twofold, the reason for my imprisonment and the fate of the Eight Heroes 2000 years ago” and chuckled sleepily “They ended up dreaming for 2000 years, betrayed by the very empire they trusted. I was imprisoned for gifting you with death and desiring to stay and guide your fate, while the others desired we govern from afar… and the fact I revolted violently”. She stared and felt her heart sink. The truth had come out. Galdera spoke before them and revealed Kard’s great lie. He had revealed that everything they… no she had had believed was false. “Damn you, you witch! How dare you humiliate me! I’ll kill you! Subarashī garudera, watashi wa anata ga kanojo kara kanojo no jinsei o hikisaku koto o
tanomu!” he screamed, holding a hand out to her. He looked confused and tried again. She turned slowly, pulling out her wand. Her shadow clone did likewise and aimed and she said “Shadoubimu”, each of them firing a pair of beams right through Kard’s eyes. He screamed as his sight was stolen from him.

Galdera vanished and the flame turn blue as she approached Kard, saying “I already took measures against this…. A spell that would prevent soul manipulation, in anticipation you’d try to fuel the First Flame into becoming the Final Flame by sacrificing all of Cobbleston during its happiest festival”. She then slammed one of her heels onto Kard’s chest and pointed her wand at his throat and said “Any last words? This ends now!”. Kard smirked and said “Did you really think… i’d not have a plan? Ha! I am but one of two whom rule this cult! My better rides now to get the dragonstones! So you purified and prevented me from using the first flame, so what!? He will destroy the gate and Galdera will rise and kill you all!” and with that began to cackle loudly. She glared down and with a swift chant “Shadoubimu” ended the life of Kard Vallain. She turned to the cult that began fleeing and then her shadow clone her sadly weeped and faded, then back to the flame, walking to it. She caressed its side and whispered sadly “Thank… thank you… Aelfric… for showing me… for Truth….”. She fell to her knees, and cried. For the loss she experienced. For the shattered dreams and memories. She knew not who was friend or foe. She had destroyed the only home she ever knew. Even if it was right, she still felt pain from the act.
Chapter 39: The Beginning

Chapter Summary

Thus our heroes journey comes to a close. This is the first half. The second half is coming. I hope you've enjoyed the tales of these travelers, in a time beyond the Eight from the original game. All plot threads closed, no plot holes, everything is fine. Everything is fine.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 39

The Beginning

A man sat in a chair. He was the Chairman of the board of directors for Stonegard Publishing Incorporated, a massive publishing chain with excellent book binders, editors, and they had a printing press which allowed them to copy a book in under an hour with almost perfect replication. He had recently approved a book detailing the efforts of a rebel group trying to oust a lord pretending to follow aelfric but secretly being an agent of Galdera and how they were doing so with no order from either superior back north. It explored the diverse and communal society of Tir na Nog, though here it was simply described as ‘The North’. Part of their agreement with the group and Sozella. It was then he received a call. He answered and said “Yes? Mardam Fuis at your-” and stopped as he heard Sozella asked “Hey, I was curious. What’s the policy on sales reps trying to get published in their own company?” He paused, then laughed. “Ah, miss Sozella. As straightforward as always… the policy is simple. You take a 15% dip in royalty payouts and you reduce your discount to 5% from 10” he responded immediately “Let me guess… you’ve got a book cooking in your mind?” “Yeah…. I’m thinking of publishing but wasn’t sure. With that information? I think I will… I just gotta check something out” Lapena said. “Oh? What do you need to check?” he asked. “Simple. If this dragon I heard about really exists” Lapena answered, then hung up, leaving him terribly confused.

Lapena smiled as she hung up the payphone and walked out. She was currently at Duskbarrow, a town made around the ruins in the area. All of them had been fully studied and were converted into service centers which made it easier to keep the structures stable, since the owners invested in restoration projects. She headed for one in particular, the one containing the ancient mural of Galdera and of the library Lucia amassed. She headed to this very library, headed for the receptionist and said “Hello. I am here for my appointment with Loremaster Rudia”. The receptionist nodded and directed her to his office with sign language. It was inside a room in the very back with a large staircase and a raised platform surrounded by bookcases on the walls and around the platform and railed staircase a drop into the veritable abyss. She whistled and said “Man. That is one deep pit… you hiding a
dragon there?". Rudia sighed and said “No. I have no need to hide one… so. You wish to hear about the dragon I discovered?”. Lapena smiled and said “Yes.. I want to interview it. I think that'd make an excellent story and a most invigorating learning experience for readers”. Rudia stared then nodded and said “Alright. I’ll introduce you… if he eats you for being rude, that’s on you though”. Lapena smiled and said “I know… what kind of author would I be if risks were a no-go zone?”. “Normal?” Rudia answered. She shook her head and said “Eh. Maybe… but I guess i’m not huh?”. Rudia shook his head and stood, saying “Then… I guess follow me. For your interview with the dragon”.

Sebastian walked through the ruins. He encountered some ratkin, but they were easily dealt with. His equipment was a major improvement to his abilities from when he first entered. Eventually, he approached the tree that held Emily Kringle. She came out of the tree in a green evening gown and said “Ah! Sebastian… you return. I’ll be honest, I doubted you would”. He shook his head, saying “I made a knight’s vow. I’d never break it…. Now, since we have time, why don’t talk? Why did you want me to take your seeds?”. “Simple… they’d grow tree’s and my species of feyfolk require them. Technically, this isn't even my real body. It sleeps in that tree. I can manifest from it… or any tree’s connected to it” she answered. He nodded and said “I see…. Can your body be moved?”. She nodded and said “Yes. Same method, different magic… though I need a lot of mana”. He nodded and said “Let me guess… the holy relic?”. Emily shook her head and said “No…. that relic is for the chosen of Alephan and will only activate for them”. He thought and asked “Would soulstones work?”. Emily nodded and said “As long as they have spells in them… but that’s later. For now, get them planted. A week of care and they’ll bloom and grow rapidly, and then slow immensely”. He nodded and accepted the seedbag she handed him. It was quite small and couldn’t have held more than 20 seeds.

It took him a month but he succeeded in planting the trees and caring for them. With that act, his married life began. Simply put, the emperor asked him to bring Emily in for questioning and he had to refuse due to her unique circumstance. He made sure to include his reason in his response letter, and apologized, but he had to. He knew the emperor wouldn’t be happy but what he didn’t expect was for the emperor to show up personally. He had a small squad of knights with him, all armored similar to him and each holding a saber and small handgun, and all flanked diagonally from the emperor himself. His wife walked up behind him and he asked “Your majesty… I assume you’re here regarding what was discussed via letters?”. The emperor nodded and he moved aside and said “Well, I’d be remiss to not permit entry into my abode for my liege… and offer concessions. Though I must inquire as to procedure”. The emperor entered staring at Emily and said “I was thinking a nice chat in the living room will suffice. She’s no criminal and from what reports say she is a neutral party at worst and an invaluable ally at best. Either way, a simple social interaction will suffice for gathering information”. Sebastian sighed in relief and said “Then let me prepare some tea… any preference?”. Fionne smiled and said “You know my favorite… and I’m sure you know hers” and They laughed together. One knight said “I’d like… green tea if you’re offering, sir”. Sebastian nodded and said “Of course. I actually have excellent leaves. Please, make yourselves at home. We’re in the same court, no?”. The knights smiled underneath their kevlar helms, nodded, and headed to the living room. They retained positions but near places to place tea. With tea ready, Fionne looked at Emily and asked “Let’s begin… what’s your role in all of this?”. Emily gave a sly smile and asked a simple question “Have you heard the tale of one Tam Lin?”.
Selim stood in a payphone booth. Sunshade and other metropolis’s put their payphones in booths to protect privacy. He had just dialed a number to the Saintsbridge branch of the Church of the Silver Flame. “Hello?” he heard a priest answer. “Yes. Selim Deon. I was hoping Gregory was available” he said. The priest sighed and the line went silent, though not dead. After 10 minutes, a familiar voice answered, asking “Hello Selim… how is everything? Acquired the First Flame yet?”. He replied, shaking his head “No idea… she took off after I took her to the Obsidian Parlor… but Fenris mentioned she was definitely determined to find the truth. However, that’s not why I’m calling. My old manager, you remember him…? Turns out he got a bit over his head and needs… help”. There was silence and Gregory said “Go on”. “You know the legends of vampires that haunt Atlasdamn libraries? Jermaine somehow made himself one. An unkillable monster that feeds on the mana of others and uses it to keep himself trapped in time, invulnerable to injury…. Turns out, not all it’s cracked up to be. He wants out” he explained, then asked “Can you help research a cure? I’ve got a friend good at divination”. There was a bit more silence as Gregory answered “Of course selim. I cannot turn away from one who wants to walk amongst the light… but what about the first flame?”. He nodded and said “My next stop… that girl? Turns out she lives in Cobbleston… so yeah”. “I see” Gregory said “Then good luck. And send your friend over. I wouldn’t know where to begin” and hung up abruptly.

Selim made arrangements to have a car rented within a week. Jermaine was fine, understanding he had other rights to wrong, especially since this one dealt with the First Flame, which they both agreed was his greatest mistake, beyond the murder he committed. As he headed towards the rental place that was preparing the car, he saw Angelica waiting. She walked lockstep with him at his side as he passed. “Well. Seeing you in the main city is a treat… especially since you make it a point to avoid it, recent events notwithstanding” he commented. “I thought I should see you off… in their place. Fenris is already heading west towards Saintsbridge” Angelica said. He nodded and said “I see… and you’re gonna keep an eye on Jermaine and feed him plenty of mana right?” Angelica’s creepy laugh got him worried and he asked “Wait… you’re not actually-” and was cut off as he had to yelp in pain, since Angelica slammed her foot down on his, while wearing high heel platforms. “Of course not! I’m Angelica Lorenz, proud heiress of the Lorenz family. I’ll not stoop so low!” she whispered to him, and angrily. He chuckled and they were at the place soon enough. The agent by the car raised an eyebrow and said with a surly accent “Sir, I must remind you, the rental is for one”. He nodded and said “I know… she’s not coming with” and turned to Angelica, saying “I gotta go… take care of yourself alright?”. Angelica stared, looking away for a moment, then moved and whispered in his ear “I love you Selim” and then moved away, saying “Sorry. Had to… after all, you’re spoken for no? I don’t wanna live with regrets either. So have a safe trip… and make her happy”. He stared at her, then smiled and said “Of course. Bye, Angelica” and accepted the keys from the agent, got into the car, and drove away. He then drove on the road, heading east… towards Cobbleston.

She checked things around Northreach. She had been to Duskbarrow and found nothing, but she was certain Northreach would have some wounded. She was right but doctors were handling them. Turned out, the war was effectively over. The north had surrendered and while they were ceding land, they had ended their efforts to invade. She wasn’t disheartened however. She was glad such a
bloody affair was over. Instead, she wanted to focus on helping those she could. Those that needed it. As it turned out, Northreach was perfect. While it was a veritable zone of perfect law, it still had a problem with bringing prosperity to everyone. There were plenty of people unable to afford taxes and thus lost their homes. The war put a real press on businesses, furthering this problem to the conclusion of mass homelessness and worse; Debt Slaves. Of course, the city regulated this as much as possible but could ultimately do so much. The debt slaves shockingly were fine, the nobles who owned their debt and the kingdom came to a mutual agreement, the city funded healthcare while the nobles consented to random checks. Thus, she turned her attention to the homeless, which were largely ignored and sometimes captured under charges of having a debt, the evidence their position as homeless. As one might expect, sickness ran rampant among them.

What she didn’t expect was to find a maid had been stalking her. She only discovered it when she opened her door one morning and saw one turn a corner, as if retreating. She didn’t chase the maid but instead began plotting to figure out what would happen. It was a simple trap really. Leave the door unlocked one night and keep her hotel room dark as she waited for the maid to intrude. As she feared, she had actually seen one as the person whom entered the room after the door opened was in fact one of Madar’s maids. She flicked the room lights on, causing the maid to yelp in shock, cover her eyes, and fall over. Alarmed, she rushed over and asked “Are you okay!? What happened!?”. “My… my eyes… you… it hurt…!” the maid stuttered. She sighed and pulled out some of the replica panacea she had and dabbed some onto the maid’s eyes, which relieved the pain instantly and got them adjusted. “I… still can’t see… gene related” the maid gasped. She nodded and turned the lights off, turning and asking “So. Why are you following me?”. “Truthfully? I am… the Muse of Dreams… and you are the hero I was to inspire” she said “I confirmed it the morning you left”. Ristra stared down, sighing and saying “I see… then…. Take a seat. I’ll make some tea. Let’s talk about this ‘muse and hero’ business”.

Chapter End Notes

Or is it....?
Chapter 40: The End

Chapter Summary

The vagrants of our story meet their journey’s end. Not all went well but all ends well. Their respite begins and shall ever end...... end.... end......

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 40

The End

She stood by a crystal. The mages of Flamesgrace were using them to communicate outside the city. They had stations set up now. She used it to contact Regal. “Hey brother… have you heard? Flamesgrace is in ruins” she said into it. “Yeah. I heard…. Tragic really. Flamesgrace has been the seat of power for the church since I was a lad… how bad is it?” Regal asked. “Bad but could be worse… the military took initiative when they saw the source and evacuated as many as they could to the main cathedral” she answered, leaning onto the counter a bit “However, it seems they surrendered and are cooperating… so yeah. Could be worse but this ending if fine I think”. “Yeah… I agree. Thanks for the update. On my end, it seems like the emperor approved my request for funding. Turns out, being dead divides your assets and just having a bit of property doesn’t pay the bills” Regal said. She smiled and said “That’s good Regal. I hope things continue to look up for you”. There was silence for a few moments before Regal said “Well. I need to get back to getting ready. The lab won’t open for a while and then I have a bunch of work to get it in working order… take care sister” and the crystal went dark. Smiling, she turned and walked away. She wrote down many things she saw. The diary had become her new hobby. Just writing down her thoughts and feelings into it. It would be accurate to say that she had become a sort of journalist, except she didn’t report her findings nor publish them in the local paper. Instead, they remained in her head and journal, so one could refresh the other if need be. What she didn’t expect to find was a perfectly intact ring.

It was quite unusual, a platinum ring with an odd red stone set on it. She then used her extra senses and gasped. The thing was practically brimming with magical power. “What a find!” she said to herself, and began to examine it. She wanted to find out what magic was within. The best way? See the words of power flowing from it. Every magical item radiated magic and by watching it one could catch glimpses of words leaving it. These words were the words chanted when the spell was cast onto the item and binded to it. The chant generally gave an idea or outright stated the spell and its intent. This item for example exuded words like ‘Soshi’ or ‘Ora’. These translated roughly to ‘element’ and ‘aura’, which likely meant the item would give her an elemental aura. She put it on and a bright flash came from her and the ring. When the light dimmed down she looked down at herself
and gasped. She had changed! She had light blue skin, her senses sharpened and she was fairly certain she felt wings. Further she felt so much mana in her she felt fit to burst. However when she took it off, the transformation subsided. She stared at the ring and then smiled big. She had a project to explore.

Sir Lupone. A name that struck fear into the hearts of corrupt nobility. However there was one thing Sir Lupone was having a problem with. Emily Frenzel. He had kidnapped her with the promise of marriage and freedom from John. He wouldn’t say he didn’t mean it but his primary goal was humiliating his parents and John and getting the police to look at them. Why would Emilia put up no resistance? Why was Robert there? The police would be relentless with these questions and eventually escalate it to the high police, where the empire would find all involve guilty of half a dozen crimes each. However, it had the side effect of raising him from just a gentleman thief who stole stolen/questionably obtained artifacts and exposed robber barons, to a man that did the above and also stole brides. He had no illusions that the empire would simply forgive and forget. Thus he had to move carefully. Emily made this difficult as it turned out she still held feelings for him, and while he had feelings for her, neither of them knew what to do with it and neither knew how to ask. As for his identity, Solas, upon his request, used magic to alter his features to ensure non-positive ID even on close inspection. He knew things were progressing as today’s papers featured article was one on the police in Boulderfall officially petitioning the royal police to investigate the matter of Robert Bueller, the wedding, and basically the entire affair. He sipped his Marsalim coffee and walked to the living room.

He sat across from Emily who wove a tapestry. Something she had a talent for and did in her spare time. He had his mask off and wore common clothes. “Good morning” He said. “Good morning” she replied. He looked out the window. They were currently living in an apartment in Marsalim, the last place the police would think to look. They shared expenses between the three of them, him, her, and Solas. “So. Ready to speak about marriage?” Emily asked. He sighed and said “Honestly…? I’ve been ready, just nervous. It’s not that I don’t like you but… it’s been so long. Where do we even start?” Emily gave a small giggle and said “I’ve had the same questions… but I’ve always thought the same thing. We can worry after we get married. Political marriages come and go all the time. We’re young and we can afford to go through with an impulsive marriage… so long as we have an understanding”. He chuckled and asked “Wise words…. When did you become so wise?” Emily stared a bit and said “Well. I had a lot of growing up to do when I was young, after you moved away from Noblecourt”. He looked away, sighing, and said “I see… I understand now… I forgot about…” and stopped. Emily merely nodded and continued on, saying “So. We marry, we develop a romance, have a family… and you keep on with your crusade in secret… sound good?”. He chuckled and looked at her, smiling “Yeah…. For once, I can’t win… I suppose you want to contribute somehow? What’d you have in mind?”. What Emily showed him was amazing. Her talents as a tailor and apparent enchanter were incredible. He was over the moon. Sir Lupone finally got the edge he needed against the corrupt nobility. A proper seamstress.

Zem Kholint had been certain things in life. Confident. Able. Determined. A scoundrel had been one
of them too. Yet for all these things, he apparently had always been hopeless. The feeling he felt now was contradictory to that and something he had forgotten about. He had forgotten what hope felt like. It was a wonderful feeling. It was all thanks to Louise and E’erika. Had they rejected his proposal outright, he doubted his school would have stood as good of a chance as it did. By his calculations, he could restore its reputation, even accounting for his name bringing it down, within 15 years. Without the guild or top hunters? He had reckoned the rest of his life would give it about 10% of its reputation and been good enough that the guild would have taken over and simply stricken his name from the records of its history. However now, he could see it fully flourish in his lifetime. He was excited. He even already acquired requests for entry… and from a most unusual source. A traveler. The traveler had not hidden their inhumane origins but insisted that they were as emotionally and logically functional as a human and proved it when their kid cried after tripping and the father he was speaking with comforted the child. It may have been an act, true, but it was so convincing that the inhumane creatures before him understood emotions enough to replicate them down to the unconscious ticks a person makes when they’re focused. It was far more likely the being before him was simply a different kind of mortal than some kin that had super intellect. Plus, he’d never heard of a kin race looking like a human, sans having pointed human ears that were a foot long and light green skin.

However, the decision was not his alone to make. “I’m sorry sir. I cannot simply admit your child into the school….. What I can do is either go around and seek approval from the other directors or bring it up during the first meeting tomorrow… either way you’ll need to be present” he explained. The being nodded and said “That’s fine. I’ll come back tomorrow, to the meeting”. He nodded and said “Alright. Before you go… might I inquire as to if you’re a northerner or not?”. The traveler nodded, saying simply “Yes… I used to live in the eastern forests of Tir na Nog… my family supplied the gardeners with food. A supposed high honor. I grew tired of that role and wandered south… where I forge my own path… even at the ridicule of my family. I want my son to have a chance at doing the same and learning how to hunt is the best way, since it did for me… problem is, i’m a terrible teacher. However, since a school is opening, the coincidence must not be such and it must be fate!”. Zem watched the father explain and just smiled, saying “I understand… thank you, sir. Have a nice day”. They parted ways and he prepared for the next meeting. He was certain the board would be excited to hear they already had such a unique, prospective student wanting to join. He only hoped his reputation didn’t cloud their judgement. Hope… what a powerful emotion to feel. He felt like for the first time in his life, there was light in his life. It let him get out of bed and feel good about the life he lived.

Most days, she laid in her bed. She had faced the truth and exposed Kard for the fraud he was, exposed his darkness to light and extinguished it, but at what cost? Her life was in shambles. Her family had vanished overnight, saying only they wanted to move somewhere safer with an offer to follow, but no way to. Nothing to indicate where they moved, no money to move, and they had even just sold the house to the housing agency in Stonegard if the sign in the window was any indication. Her family hadn’t even delivered the letter themselves, they used the imperial mail service, so by the time they were gone, she couldn’t even talk to them. She had taken time to emotionally recover only to discover this. Through this discovery though, she discovered that no one in the town trusted her. Weary eyes, scared faces. Apparently, her parents did a lot of talking before leaving, leaving her with a bad reputation. It’d become so bad she was certain people were just giving her what she wanted to
get rid of her. She had become utterly sequestered, only leaving to get food. That’s when the door knocked.

She hesitated to open it but then she heard the voice on the other side and it got worse. She froze. “Delilah? Are you there? It’s me Selim. Are you home?” the voice asked. She wasn’t able to say anything. She was almost petrified. Then she got an idea. “Shadoupetto” she chanted, summoning a pair of the rat-like shadow wolves and sent them to open the door. They did and she could hear Selim pull a dagger, then hesitate. They ran back to her on her mental command. She got out of bed, dressing somewhat. All she did was wear what she did to the festival, though even she knew she held an air of sadness. However, she felt happy when she saw it really was Selim and not just some hallucination. “Delilah” he said “I found you…. Though that’s not your name, is it?”. She shook her head weakly and said “Diana Franz is my name… though… I’m… not sure about Franz… anymore”. Selim stared for a bit, then smiled gently, tilting her head up to his and while keeping eye contact asked “Is that what really matters here? Or… is what matters is that this relationship works?”. She smiled, and said “I’m… fairly certain the latter… though that’s a lot of work”. He nodded and said “I’m glad you agree”.

Chapter End Notes
Final Chapter: Bidh am bàs a ’tighinn air sgiathan dubha

Chapter Summary

"Death comes, on wings of black".

abandon all hope, ye who live.

He’s coming.

She's arrived.

As Fate's Misstress

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The End

For Now

A woman walked through Duskbarrow. She was a orange curly haired woman with green eyes. She wore a green victoria dress with white silk gloves and red high heels. She wore silver framed glasses and held in her arms her purse and work bag. She wore red lipstick and purple eyeliner. It was night time and the full moon hung high in the sky, casting a pale light onto the forest Duskbarrow sat in. The shadows mixed with light to create a visually stunning scene of the city amongst the trees and ruins. The lush greens and the bright browns filled the town and made it vibrant amongst the pale electrical light and stony greys of buildings, aside from those that were wooden and painted. The woman stopped and looked around, as though she had heard something. She in fact did. If one could see things from her perspective, she’d swear she can hear something in the wind. A faint breeze billowing softly, promising some illicit secret. It’s soft at first, nearly undetectable. However, as the woman waited the voice became louder and louder, the wind blowing harder and harder. The tree’s billowed and moved. Then, it all slowed. The intensity of the breeze hadn’t stopped, dew fell at an agonizingly slow pace, and bugs moved as though weighed by 1000 times earth's normal gravity. However, the scenery moved as though it were possessed. Slowly and the sound as though it were through a filter. Yet the voice that spoke was as if it were next to her. “I have found you, my daughter” it said to her. She tried to speak, but only a garbled mess came out. Letters, with no regard for form or function. “Don’t speak. In my world, speech cannot occur until I live” it said “Though your thoughts are enough”.


Who was speaking to her, she wondered. Was she hallucinating? Was she dreaming? The voice responded to such thoughts, or maybe they were slightly different. Regardless, the answer was “I am as real as you are. I reaching out from my domain, beyond their pitiful barrier, to employ my latest plan, and I have picked you as its arbiter, my daughter, the daughter of darkness”. Likely, this filled the woman with more questions, but most importantly panic. Who, with the information about Galdera out there, would become a daughter of darkness willingly? However, the voice spoke, betraying expectation. “Yes, I picked you for your nihilism. You know I am inevitable. You know I am the least of the worlds problems. You know I can fix them. Will you accept my gift and spread my love?” the voice prodded. The woman silently stared ahead as a pale shadow wreathed in a cloak of grey mist descended from tree branches. Before, the voice seemed omnipresent, omnipotent, coming from within and without. Now, there was a single source. The shadow and her own mind, as both said “Your debt to fate is collected and paid. Your reward for your service; power beyond belief, information beyond dimension, and the ability to make use of it. Do as you wish. Simply remember; you must release me on the month of Alephan, the 30th day, at the twenty first hour. You know whom you must work with to make it happen… or will. In three seconds… enjoy your new life, my beloved daughter”. The shadow then descended into the woman, and she became engulfed in a cocoon of darkness. Seconds later, it vanished.

The woman was surprised. She awoke in her normal bed. She had no idea how she got there… no. She did. After she changed, she went home and went to bed. Even if empowered, she was still mortal and had needs. She got out of bed and dressed in a black ball gown she owned. She had matching gloves and high heels, though passed, preferring steady black lace gloves and black boots. She put a black rose corsage she happened to have for just this occasion. She knew she’d have to leave immediately. It would cause trouble but that was no longer her concern. She was the daughter of darkness now. Things such as research on ancient murals and fey folk mattered nothing to her now. Besides, even had she cared her transformation would do her no favors and likely have her arrested for attempted identity… no… kidnapped and attempted identity fraud of one miss Lorelei Harris, head researcher of the Lorelei Project, dedicated to researching the strange ruins that did not match the surrounding ones. Whereas Lorelei had orange curly hair, green eyes, and a mole under her left eyes, and a birthmark on her right calf, the daughter of darkness, Lorelei Harris-Galdera, had straight black back-length hair, ebony eyes, purple eyeliner and lipstick, and had a single slit birthmark on her forehead to signify where her third eye was. No one would believe that a mere night ago, for a single second, Lorelei Harris and Lorelei Harris-Galdera were one and the same nor still technically the same person, simply with the confidence to assert her true beliefs backed by information of the universe, no, multiverse and power beyond mortal ken.

No, she had to leave. She had much to do, much to see, and much to prepare. Galdera had lied a bit. He needed a lot of work to be free. However, much of the work would be done by others. She needed to talk to Bean a Cheo and Vidkar Lain…. Likely better known as [insert scottish gaelic phrase for ‘man of secrets’ in the organization and [insert scottish gaelic phrase for ‘cloud seer’ here]. They ran it, and Vidkar especially was invaluable, having the ear of both the Oberon, Cogadh Ceothach, and the high emperor Fionne Balacruf by being the Pontiff of the Silver Flame Church, which was the ruling body of the theocracy known as Silvia in the northern region of the Balacruf Empire. She needed to get them to move things in motion in order for her to be successful. They’d have the dragonstones, which would help. What would also help? The gate of finis. She needed to
direct Vidkar to it, since it was the one state secret still well kept. Not even the kings knew its true location. At least, that would be the plan. However, she had a much, much better idea. Fact was, the gate of finis is not the only way into the afterworld. It was merely the most direct route. There was an island on the inner sea that led to the void between worlds. From there, with proper power, one could navigate to the afterworld. Of course, there was still the matter of the godly barrier that trapped Galdera in the Afterworld… Or at least, would, were a certain key not made. The dragonstones, while not geared for the barrier, would with some tweaking to their magic. Everything would come together. It was merely a matter of time. Her first errand? Acquiring the Dragonstones and ordering the organizations retreat. It would not do if that meddlesome resistance crushed the cult before Galdera rose. Smiling, she left the house, looked to the sky, and floated upwards… No… she flew, and flew south. Towards Boulderfall.

Chapter End Notes

So, i've decided to do something some may not like. This story? it's officially a two-parter. This is the first part, that entirely takes place in Osterra. The next part? Well, I can't spoil much but if you deciphered the poem from one of the intermission chapters, you know what's coming.

In the meantime, I've got a few more projects I'm going to be doing. As stated, the Legend of Zelda: Noir fanfiction will be updated as I come up with interesting "cases" (stories). So I'm going to announce it here: I'm doing two new fanfictions on top of the second part to this fanfiction.

The first is a story of the shadowrun campaign i'm part of from the perspective of my primary character, Kobold. It will be completely first person, and the first chapter will primarily serve as a legend on the formatting, as I plan to go full unique with it. Some may like, some may not. Either way, I hope you enjoy it. Especially if you know me.

The second is a sequel I promised. Legend of Zelda: Remembrance sequel is officially going to happen now. It will being called Legend of Zelda: the Frontier. As stated, it will cover Hyrule's efforts to expand their kingdom across the sea. There will be minor appearances of major characters at first, but eventually those will drop off besides Linkle and Rank. It will be told from a 3rd person perspective with a major focus on a rookie adventurer that joins the effort to make a name for himself. I hope you enjoy it!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!