Black Sky Legion

by LurkingEvil

Summary

Having played the DMMO-RPG for almost as long as they have been married, gamer couple Harmony and Lurk log in on the last day of YGGDRASIL. Little do they know how thin the veil between worlds really is. Thrust into a new land far from Muspelheim, how will they shape it?
It was a surreal thing, to watch a world die. There was sadness, to be sure. A mournfulness to the whole affair. Yet beauty as well, to see something end. Death is so often ugly, except in rare cases.

The world of YGGDRASIL was dying. Ending. And everything that had ever been done within it, would turn to nothing. Every character, player avatar or otherwise. Every guild, ambitious or foolhardy. Years of intrigue and alliances and betrayals. It would all cease to exist. Though sad, there was a grace in its few remaining hours. Reassurance in finality.

At least, that's what Lurk thought.

He had not wanted to log on. He did not want to watch the world die. Harmony, his love, his life, his wife of nearly a decade, had been the one to convince Lurk to stand with her on the precipice of Ragnarok. The man had gotten on late. There was only an hour left. Just a single short hour. He saw the GM message announcing the final countdown and his heart sank.

YGGDRASIL had once consumed every spare moment, and every extra dollar the couple had. There had been a time when they had counted their names among some of the highest ranking guilds. Been a part of some of the greatest conflicts. Struck some of the most lucrative trade deals. Once upon a time, the Dive-MMO had been the king. No other boasted the level of customization. No other game had the same depth as the nine grand worlds of YGGDRASIL.

Even though at one point Lurk would have been okay with letting it all fade away, he was glad Harmony had maintained their guildhall until the end. A careful balance and a lot of rare items meant that the upkeep of their base was always covered. However, regular logins from at least one guild member was still needed. After so much time, Harmony could not let it go. Harmony did not blame him for not having the same dedication. His job was exhausting, and was what supported them as well as a rather excessive amount of cash shop spending. Yet another reason it was hard to let go.

Because of his body's shape, it would have been easy to assume Lurk for a simple Dragonkin, with his rich burgundy scales, long tail, and reptilian muzzle, the resemblances ended there. His character stood more upright and did not have the same bulk. Much like a traditional RPG where the enemy leader was sleeker, and deadlier. The male had Wyrmblood and bore the mark of the Ancient Dragon Incarnate. The two racials had the distinct moniker of being Heteromorphic. His scales were a rich, burgundy hue.

Half-dragon was a more appropriate description of Harmony's avatar. From the elbow on and from the knee down, she had purely draconic traits. Slit-pupil eyes peaked out from a soft, human face. For the most part, her torso was also human. The Scarlet Drake traits gave a bright, crimson cast to her reptilian extremities. While the Scalebound of her essence speckled her entire body, even her normal skin, with glinting golden scales.

Both had pronounced horn structures to reflect their racial levels.

Lurk's began with an aggressive set of ram-like horns that spiraled back from where his human hairline would have been. The other pair sprouted from the top of his skull and had a more traditional
draconic shape, being thicker and mostly straight with the slightest curl near their points. Both sets were darker and had hairline cracks which leaked a ruddy glow between pronounced ridges, denoting the Ancient modifier.

Although daintier, Harmony's were no less impressive. Hers were a beautiful double pair of ivory horns that corkscrewed around one another like dancers caught in a helix crown that branched and split near the points. Fiery hair hung thickly down from her scalp.

Both stood as regal monarchs in a far off kingdom. They were rulers of a very small guild. Black Sky only ever had three members. Though they had only ever been or ever were, three, together they were legion. If someone did not know them, it would have been forgivable to mistake the pair for king and queen of some draconic principality. Their design and bearing were regal.

Now that they were standing together in their Hall of Memories, Lurk definitely did not regret logging in one final time. If only to say goodbye to it all. It was a massive corridor that connected the end of the eighth floor to the final ninth. Lurk had placed it there as a showoff connection between the last two floors that led to the throne room.

They were at the beginning. The very beginning. Their starting weapons, a level one shortsword and a level one bow. The most humble beginnings. Everyone started somewhere, and it was good to remember. Even though that furthest memory was hazy, they both could recall the feeling. The joy and wonder of truly stepping into another world for the first time.

"I can't believe this was so long ago." Lurk started, voice heavy with nostalgia. With a gesture, he summoned the bow. It was so small. So weak. The string had such little poundage he could have pulled the string with a stern look.

"Doesn't feel like it, huh?" Harmony agreed. She was engrossed in her own recollection. That first time holding a sword, feeling it bite into the tutorial monsters. That was what she treasured. Even though the physical feedback of the neural connection was dampened, the heft of a blade remained.

"Not at all." He said, glancing at his wife. YGGDRASIL could not render facial expressions, so her lips did not move as she spoke. Another wave of his claw returned the small bent piece of wood to its place.

The hall was lined end to end with such shrines. Framed paintings that were actually screen shots taken. Sculptures commemorating victories. Tapestries representing alliances and wars. Armor stands. Weapon racks. Trinkets and cosmetic items and curiosities. Defunct Data Crystals and raid trophies. The entire history of their guild and by extension, their whole playtime, laid out on a timeline of sorts.

Setting off down the hall, Lurk's next stop was an armor stand with a grand window of stained glass behind it. Where six went down into a vault, and stood against the timelord on his throne. The suit of armor was of a much lower level, but a perfect matching set for Lurk's race and frame.

"I'll never forget this one run of the Crystal Sepulcher. Do you remember that one guy? Augh. What was his name. We only raided with him once or twice. He ran it... What, twenty times? He was just missing the helmet."

"And you got the whole armor set in a single run." Even though her character could not smile, there was audible mirth in her tone. She had heard the story a hundred times, yet indulged her husband all the same. "But, you never got the Centurion's Gaze." She teased him.
The very next alcove held the glittering crystal greatbow in question. The weapon itself was rather niche in application. Not many could appreciate its strength. And although only few ever sought the Centurion, shockingly few ever got it to drop. Harmony never missed an opportunity to remind Lurk that she was the one who finally got it. Unfortunately, all the drops from the Crystal Sepulcher were Soulbound, and non-transferable. Lurk never even got the chance to use it when its quality made it worthwhile. Like so much, it was now just a pretty wall decoration. A mark that they were there. That they had seen it. Which was a boast few could make.

"This thing is so old you can't even get the upgrade material anymore." He remarked, admiring it for its aesthetic if nothing else.

"I got rid of all mine before they discontinued it. I traded it for something." Harmony, ever the savvy deal-maker, was the reason they had accumulated so much wealth. Their treasury levels were normally reserved for thirty-person guilds.

"I never threw it away." Said Lurk, hoarder of junk.

"Hmph, implying that I throw things away." She retorted, having spent real money to expand her personal inventory in the name of junk.

Lurk moved his arms in an exaggerated way, giving his best shrug. The physical expression was a better stand-in than the hollow emote pop ups.

"Hmph," The dragon lady said with a flick of her tail before moving on to the next alcove. "Oh my gosh do you remember when we went through all that trouble on the release day of Naught but Niflheim? I think we dove for thirty straight hours."

"I remember you making those cupcakes in the expansion's colors. Oh man, and those jalapeno poppers. Those were good. The cream cheese and the bacon? Yeah." Lurk's mouth could not actually water, but his hunger reminded him that after the shutdown he would have to eat and go straight to bed. His work needed him to take third shift for a few days.

"Then all the boss dropped was that stupid hat."

The backlash against the devs had been a little intense after that one. Their guild-mate, Woodsolution had been the one to compare the hat to reindeer antlers, and Harmony had applied her digital editing skills to give the picture a cherry red nose. Finally, Lurk had been the one to take the picture and post it to the official forums. Afterwards, none of them could look at the ridiculous thing without being reminded of a Christmas decoration. They had even adorned the gaudy thing with a multi-colored string light from one such seasonal event.

Although a blessed reprieve from the crushing sorrow, even the most genuine nostalgia was tainted. All the preserved sights would soon be gone, only to exist in living memory. Some of it had no in-game, or material value. Which made them priceless.

Then they came to one of their mutual favorites.

On a weapon rack were a trio of identical halberds. Highly powerful, and reasonably rare. They were a specialized, set drop from a specific weekly event. The loot pool for the event however was incredibly vast. And somehow against a near statistical impossibility, the three of them, Lurk, Harmony, and their absent guild-mate had all gotten the exact same drop.
The husband and wife both shared a competitive streak. Their old guild-mate had too. It culminated into a hunger for challenge. They all thrived on pushing their limits.

It was for that reason they frequented the harshest, most inhospitable regions of YGGDRASIL’s worlds. Muspelheim in particular, was their favorite, and the location of their Citadel. The dangers of the region went beyond merely hostile mobs. Incredibly lucrative drops dotted the landscape, but only for those quick and clever enough to seize them. And, if a player wanted to exploit the riches offered by the most environmentally dangerous regions, there were few methods of protection.

There were only two reliable ways to best the hells offered by those far fields. Items, or character builds. The items were beyond countenance, their cost ruinous. Whereas builds, be they job or racial, were held in disdain. Only certain guilds understood the real benefits of having avatars that could go where no one else could. Your average player did not see the value in such high resistance builds. At least until they needed something that only dropped from a particular chest situated beneath a magma river at the bottom of a volcano.

Soon they crossed the threshold in the hall delineating when they had acquired The Citadel.


The dungeon had been a special one. The developers had experimented with endurance raids, where only a very small team could take on the challenge. Sometimes only six, and even as few as three.

The problem was that they had forgotten to appropriately tune the difficulty during the first days and accidentally left the mob levels suited to parties of more normal raids. For three weeks, nearly every dungeon remained unconquered until the developers were able to recognize and correct their mistakes. They earned the nickname; Burn Dungeons, for the intensity likened to fighting an inferno. Only a few teams accomplished the feat.

Every group or guild that managed to defeat the raid boss of a Burn Dungeon during those first three weeks received numerous special rewards. Although Black Sky Legion did not conquer The Citadel on the first week, after a grueling grind and hours of planning, the three members defeated the dungeon on the tenth day. For their efforts, they were awarded the vanquished Elder Dracolich, the former raid boss. Who then stood as the first NPC for their new guildhall.

One of the first alcoves from that time held a very simple portrait. It was a picture Lurk had taken that always gave him a smile on the inside. Despite how Harmony hated it, she knew it made him happy.

Framed from Lurk’s perspective, the painting showed Harmony deep in concentration. Even through their avatars did not have facial expressions, the intensity was clear in her posture. In her scaly crimson hands, was the helmet of her first NPC, Legion. On the table where she sat was a spread of different plumes of style and color, with many more Data Crystals ready to be used. The console for imputing information was open to her right, the holographic display illuminating her right side with a teal glow.

They became lost in the sea of memory, until the GM message announcing the final countdown shattered the illusion of the past with all the subtlety of a freight train.

The couple could have spent hours down that hall, just laughing and crying in equal measure.
Yearning made the heart grow fonder, and how they yearned to revisit those rose-tinted days. The game had reached precipitous heights in its prime. Then, it had faded. As all things did, in time.

All things, except their love. That could only ever grow. Love was real magic in the way it could go backwards through time, until neither of them could remember a time where they did not love one another. Their might, and their deeds, could fill the hall a dozen times and though Ragnarok would fall, their love would endure even the end of the world.

The gamers reached the end of their path, with the hall opening into the seat of power in The Citadel.

On the floor of the throne room, was the grand crest of their guild. Three cruciform longswords, aligned parallel to one another, with the middle slightly higher than the other two, all imposed on the silhouette of a black sun. The entire space had been designed to give the massive, yet minimalist design the center of attention.

As with so much else, the throne had been a collaborative effort for the three guild-mates. Before they had conquered The Citadel, the trio worked from one of the central cities. In a hidden alley, they had stumbled upon a courtyard with a twisted tree, said to be a depiction of the World Tree in miniature. Between raids, outings, and sometimes just to hang out, the three had sat upon its roots, or hung from its gnarled branches. All three had fantasized what a wonderful throne it would have made. A perfect replica of that tree, itself a rendition of the greatest in all the nine worlds, had been made with three seats worked into it.

That was the throne of Black Sky Legion. And behind it, was a symbol of their wealth.

Nova Crystal. A Prismatic Ore found in Muspelheim. Though not as valuable as the universally recognized Celestial Uranium, it was still a resource of incalculable potential. A vast, unbroken wall of it stretched from floor to vaulted ceiling behind their throne. The material bore closer resemblance to obsidian with its black, glassy luster. An aurora of color danced and undulated through the ore. Only on such an expanse could the soul of the mana-reactive crystal be really seen.

It was a daunting waste of the resource, to be used only for decoration. The triumvirate had spent years stockpiling the ore. On his own, Lurk never would have been able to justify the expense. But his wife, and best friend had urged him on. Saying it did them no good just sitting in their treasury. Once done, they had all stood in silence, admiring the way the prismatic whorls seemed almost alive. Looking at it now, he was grateful they had given him the courage to do so.

A respectful silence hung over the space. An unobtrusive cocoon, to compliment the solitude that went with the vigil. In days gone, the chamber would have been cradled in ambient string music. A large harp, and grand piano sat off to one side, with a violin and cello leaning against two chairs. Now, the instruments were still. The order to play had not been given in a long time, and although it would have been nice to hear once again, the sun would soon set on YGGDRASIL.

Only two NPCs were in the throne room itself.

Lurk and Harmony had designed the pair together. Combined, they were the Guardian Overseer.

Two parts of a single whole. The brothers, Nox and Crisis. One light. One dark. They kneeled before the thrones, in reflection of one another. Their worn capes spilled out onto the floor behind them in rivers of silver and grey. Pointed steel helms and high collared leather vests hid all but their eyes. Each was covered head to toe in a mixture of steel plate armor, chainmail, and leather. Nox
wore a gauntlet and shoulder piece only on his left arm, and Crisis, the right. A nobility hung from the pair like a mantle. There was strength in the steadfast resolution the two represented.

No compromise, even in the face of Ragnarok.

It felt right to Lurk that the brothers made during their own golden age, were the witnesses to his and Harmony's final moments. The monarchs took their places on the central and right-hand seat of their throne. Each was dressed up in their Sunday best. It was the last day, and if the world was going to end, they were going to look damn good when it did. The woman favored a more fantasy, knightly look to her gear, while her husband leaned heavily towards more militaristic themes.

If YGGDRASIL's creators had nailed one thing to true perfection, it was the endgame.

The game's first and truest boast had been freedom. The ability for the players to create anything and everything. From character, to class, to gear. A simple cloak could have enough data invested in it to where the style of stitching on the hem could be customized. Harmony really had not taken off her best equipment in a long time. Sometimes when she had logged on to perform basic maintenance, she had played dress up, finding her most stylish or best pieces. Lurk had taken a moment to put on his best gear. Even after many years of having it, he was still covetous of it.

Harmony excelled as a digital graphics artist, and used her skills to great effect. Their guild's emblem design had been hers. While Lurk had studied programming in order to better implement subtle effects for enchantments, data crystals, and NPC behavior. They had both spent many sleepless nights watching dozens of hours of tutorials where others explained how to get the most out of YGGDRASIL's creation mechanics.

From helmet to sabaton, Harmony had poured her heart and soul into the armor she wore.

Divine class. The highest data level attainable via player creation in the game.

Her armor was not just a collection of in-game items, it was the depiction of a legacy. A legacy of conquests and friendships. Where Lurk tended to have a multitude of smaller projects, Harmony had dedicated herself to more elaborate pursuits. Some of the pieces she had spent years on. Even when she had won treasures beyond counting, mountains of gold and vaults of data crystals, the gamer hardly ever put any of it toward herself. She always made sure that Lurk had that next upgrade he had been pining after, or that the guild's coffers were always growing.

Only after the most momentous dungeon crawls or trades did she spend on herself.

That care and effort showed through the intricacy of her armor. On its own, the boots with their adamantite buckles had marched from one end of the nine worlds to the other. The crimson-edged, segmented gauntlets that protected her scaly claws had felt the death throes of a thousand bosses. She had even gone through the trouble of adding cosmetic blemishes, chips and scratches to the knuckles and top. The chest piece stood out most of all, with her own rendition of their crest. The three blades were held in branches of a different tree, an oak, with the design inlaid using different Prismatic Ores.

She referred to the ensemble, as Grand Alliance.

Lurk in turn had no good name for the Divine armored greatcoat he had made for his avatar. He preferred to wear it open to show off his segmented breastplate and greaves. His guild symbol he wore on his back so that no matter who gazed upon the couple, their unity would be visible from any
"I wish Woodsolution could have made it." Lurk sighed. "He's been working a lot."

"Me too. He'd be here if he could. We haven't played with him in a while." Harmony agreed. "There really hasn't been any good cooperative Dive games lately."

"I think the last one we put any decent time into was The Divide." The Incarnate Dragon thought on the brief life that poor game had enjoyed. Their playtime had been marred by a great initial interest, followed by cataclysmic failure on the game's end.

"Hm, you both enjoyed it more than I did."

"You enjoyed destroying those poor under-leveled newbies in the midnight arena too."

"True, but that first 'half-raid' killed it for me. I wanted you to help me on Cretaceous Kingdom."

"I know. And I did, for a while. Our private server got kinda boring."

"You just get bored so easily." Though her avatar's face did not move in the slightest, there was sorrow in her tone.

Lurk nodded guiltily. She knew him too well.

"I know, sugar. Thank you for taking care of everything. For logging in and making sure The Citadel didn't decay. Even though we really haven't played YGGDRASIL in so long, I'm still grateful we could be here one last time. I'm glad we could... Say goodbye to everything."

They both took in the view from their thrones. Of the guild crest. Of Nox and Crisis both kneeling.

"Hey," Lurk reached a claw out for his wife. "Thanks for getting me to log in. I love you."

Harmony unequipped a gauntlet and entwined her digits in his. Their reds both blended together. Her gold flecked, crimson scales molded with his dark, rich red. She gave him a reassuring squeeze and a smile emote popped above her head. Even though the touch was dulled, Lurk was grateful.

"I love you too, baby. Thank you for doing this for me. Even though you didn't want to." Harmony answered.

"It's not that I didn't want to log on because I was tired of our Citadel. I just didn't want to watch it..." He trailed off, unable to finish the statement.

"I know you didn't have to. I'm still glad you did."

They shared a sigh, then Lurk spoke again.

"You remember what we'd always say? The slogan I thought of? We will fight until the sun burns out, and Black Sky comes." Hope. Regret. Nostalgia. Longing. All paired with a wistfulness that made his words airy, as fading and ephemeral as their tenuous hold on the defunct reality.

"Yeah, until Black Sky comes." Harmony answered, heart straining in the unforgiving grasp of
woe.

They both sighed again and watched the final countdown in their HUDs in mutual mourning.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

The time counted down as inexorably as it always did. A grindstone of infinitesimal inevitability, with all the universe in its thrall.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

A hundred moments of glory flashed in Lurk's mind. So much pain. So much triumph. So much time spent in this world whose life was measured in seconds. The hall he and his wife had traversed was only the tip of the iceberg of the lives they had led.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

At least he had those memories. At least Harmony stood by him, as she always had. His eternity. Time would grind on, but their love had no end. YGGDRASIL was something that they had shared, which meant every moment spent was worth it.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

This was it. The last gasp. Meaningless moments that were anything but. Lurk's heart bore the weight of years. Years he did not regret. Not even for a second. Harmony squeezed his claw hard, bracing for the impact of forced disconnection.

Tick...

Tick. Tick. Tick.

What?

Lurk inhaled sharply and heard his wife do the same.

What happened?

That breath, his first gasp that was supposed to be the last, rushed through him as if the hourglass of eternity had chosen that moment to give Lurk a singular boon. The smallest, simplest, second most valuable commodity in the universe, aside from love.

Time.

It all happened within that single lungful of air. Suddenly he was feeling. Seeing. Smelling. Nostrils flared, eyes wide, he took another, tasting the cool air of the throne room. Everything became sharper. The lighting was more dynamic.

"My Lord? Lady? Are you both feeling alright?" Nox lifted his head to regard his liege from under the brim of his helm.
"Nox, sweetie. You're... Talking." Harmony stared with her mouth agape. The Dragon Incarnate looked at his Scarlet Drake.

Nox and Crisis glanced at one another. Both of them were moving!

"Of course, my Lady." The Guardian said with a nod.

Lurk looked at his wife and saw her face move. Immediately he pulled his claw from her loose grip and poked her cheek. The soft, scaled speckled surface dimpled inward under his push. Not only did her face behave realistically, he felt her warmth.

"Hun..." He barely managed, mind both running a mile a minute and at a complete standstill. The Dragon Incarnate froze. When he spoke, he had felt his face move. And his own voice sounded foreign. Deeper. Resonant in its draconic pitch.

"Nox," He started hesitantly, trying to keep the scales from crawling off himself as he turned to face the kneeling suddenly sapient being.

"Yes, my Lord? What would you have your shadow do?"

"You understand me." Lurk said more for himself than anything.

"Naturally." The Shade stated as if this were the normal state of affairs.

"You're responding in a dynamic way."

"If you wish to call my responses so far, dynamic, then I'm sure more complex sentences will be a marvel, my Lord." The Guardian's tone carried not even the barest hint of rudeness. Only flawless inflection of snark.

"Nox," Lurk's eyes narrowed and pointed a claw directly at the Shade.

"Yes, Lord?" He responded innocently.

"Less smartassery for now, please." Lurk responded, thinking that if the artificial intelligence was witty enough to back-sass him, it was able to tone it down too.

"Of course, my Lord." Nox reached up and dipped the rim of his helm in a nod.

The lovers turned to regard one another.

"There's no way. YGGDRASIL can't do this. Look at me. Look at us talking!" Harmony's bright crimson eyes flashed with the promise she dared utter. Had they been plunged into a new game? Was this a secret sequel?

"Are we real?" Lurk said, reaching once again for his love's face. He gave her jaw the most gentle of touches, tracing it with the tip of a claw before cupping her cheek.

"We feel real." Harmony reached up and touched the back of his claw, testing the breadth of their new sensations for herself. "Our HUDs are gone. And there's no call function. I think we're on our own."
"Do you love me?" Was his gut reaction. He knew she did. He knew that she loved him as surely as he knew the fundamental forces of the very universe were immutable.

"Always." She answered without hesitation. Even though her voice was different, Lurk recognized her.

"Then we'll figure it out. As long as you're with me." His scaly muzzle turned up into what his brain translated as a smile. Harmony reciprocated, and a good deal of alarm was lifted from both of them.

"You don't think the others are alive now, too? Do you?" She ventured, eyes darting to their living, breathing creations.

"If Nox and Crisis are..." He trailed off. "There's really only one way to find out." The monarch released his spouse's face and turned to his knight. "Nox," He hesitated for a moment. "Gather the floor Guardians. Have them come to the throne room as quickly as they can."

"Right away, High Lord." The Shade stood, bowed deeply, and melted into the floor. The pool of inky dark shot off down the hall. Crisis followed his brother the normal way after giving his own bow.

"Darlin', I have an idea. I know for certain how to tell if we're still in a game." Lurk rubbed his chin now that they were alone. His reptilian muzzle moving as he talked was so detailed he could feel his tongue playing along his fangs.

"What?" She asked, eagerly fidgeting in her seat, equally appalled and enthralled by her tail suddenly sending signals to her brain.

"Take off your chest piece." He said with an offhanded gesture.

"Why?" She asked, thinking her husband had finally lost his mind.

"Because if we got sucked into YGGDRASIL-two or some other crazy experimental game or something, then I won't be able to touch your breasts." Of course the married couple had tried many, many times to try and find ways around YGGDRASIL's ban on inappropriate touching. They understood it was to prevent harassment, but could a pair of lovebirds not have fun every now and again?

"You wanna grope me? I mean, that's a... Oh! Oh, I get it! If it's still a Dive-MMO, then you won't be able to do something X-rated." The Scalebound woman bobbed her head emphatically.

"Exactly."

With a gesture, Harmony's chest plate disappeared. She still wore chainmail with a thick leather shirt underneath. But with the rigid armor out of the way, she just rolled up the hem of her chainmail until only her shirt showed. With all the infinite possibilities of avatar creation, Harmony had given herself a generous chest. Nothing crudely overinflated like some woman (and men pretending to be women) were fond of doing, but ample bosom nonetheless.

Lurk reached his claws out and grabbed hold of his wife's breasts. He was careful, still highly suspect of their circumstances. Globes of squishy goodness that were a distinctly mammalian trait fit
perfectly into his palms. Both of them watched the monarch fondle his wife's new body through her shirt. He felt something firm, and gave a little pinch without thinking.

"Ah!" Harmony cried out. Lurk pulled his claws back sharply.

"I'm sorry, did I hurt you?"

"No, no, no. It felt good! Like, really, actually, that made my nipples hard in a good way... Good." She explained, letting the hem of her chainmail back down with her cheeks turning a bright rosy red. Not only did she acutely feel the links of the mail on her breasts, but the heat that ignited in her face as well. With another gesture, she put her chest plate back on in a hurry. Lurk had to quash the libidinous urge to make love to his wife then and there.

They already had company.

A streak of living green flame entered the throne room. The trail of emerald fire coalesced into the first Guardian to arrive.

The elven lady carried an air of menace. Skin as pale as death, the elf wore her alabaster silk dress with an aspect of deadly promise. The front of her dress split at the knee, showing off the filigree stockings. She walked barefoot, with every other step accompanied by a chime of the many brass anklets on her left leg. A veil and a lower jaw mask worked into a grinning Oni obscured the features below eyes sharp enough to pierce the reaper himself. A waterfall of tenebrous hair was kept in check by a loose fishtail braid and barbed wire.

Dreadskill. Despoiler. Phage the Untouchable of the sixth floor, was all this and more.

From their many adventures, Black Sky had obtained blueprints to manufacture large obelisks that emitted what essentially boiled down to radiation. Anyone who set foot on the ash plains or attempted to pierce the Darksteel fortresses, would be subjected to a constant bathing of radiation. It was an insidious debuff that did not cause damage, but rather reduced max hitpoints over time. Invisible and extortionately difficult to defend and purge from a player's avatar once accrued, almost no one prepared themselves for it, let alone even knew about it.

Phage approached the throne with musical steps and stopped a respectful distance and assumed a pose more appropriate of a ballet dancer, crossing her ankles and holding out a hand.

"Ah, I see I'm first to arrive. It is a privilege to be in the presence of your might, High Lord Lurk. And your insurmountable beauty, Lady Harmony."

"Phage, thank you for coming on such short notice." Lurk affected his best customer service tone.

The Plague Elf grabbed the folds of her dress and curtsied with a brass jingle.

"Nothing could keep me from answering the call of the Supreme Beings. You have but tell me what stands in your way, High Lord, and it shall be dust. My Corsairs and I await your command. We are eager to hunt." Phage had what could be described as a frail voice. Her words were dainty, tender almost. Yet much like an ash flower dipped in blood, elegant appearance belied a monstrous covenant in her assertions.

The next Guardian followed hotly on the Despoiler's heels.
To see Skitharix walking with intelligent intent was fascinating like watching a train wreck in motion. Though horrific, it was mesmerizing all the same. Lurk considered, not for the first time, if he had overdone it with the guardian’s design.

Skitharix, avatar of madness, wore robes made of literal skin. Beneath which, the Flesh Keeper smoldered with molten un-life that made the inside of his hood glow a hellish orange. Only the matte black metal of his skeletal jaw could be glimpsed. Each Guardian was a reflection of their floor. None more so than Skitharix. The fourth floor was an unhinged dimension where the normal laws of reality had been tortured into more interesting shapes. Temples hung from the ceiling while columns of shredded steel burst from the ground at strange angles. Helix pylons covered in pulsing glyphs that hurt to look at spread passive [Aura of Insanity], dotted the floor.

"Dread lady, Phage the Untouchable, what has this humble servant done to deserve to stand in the presence of so much radiance?" The words issued forth like gargled stone as the Flesh Keeper’s talons clicked on the marble floor.

The hunched giant held out a hand made of knives when he came to his fellow Guardian’s side. With a feminine motion, Phage laid her silk covered fingers on his. Skitharix raised it and guided the Plague Elf in a twirl, as one would a dancing partner. Then stepped back with a bow.

"You indulge me so, dread maiden. Mmm, if only I could add you to my... Permanent collection." With the tip of a finger-blade, he traced her outline in the air.

The titter from Phage could raze nations.

"Tisk, tisk, dear, you know that living art is the greatest expression. Besides, your knives would melt off in the process." She responded as sweetly as arsenic tea.

"Alas, such is the torment of an artist such as I. Only our Supreme Beings can create true masterpieces. I gaze upon evidence of such even now."

"Flatterer," Phage teased with a flip of her hair.

"Skitharix," Lurk called to his creation.

"My Lord, Lurk. I am humbled to be in the presence of one with such vision. There are no greater creators than the supreme rulers of The Citadel." The hunched figure leaned further as he bent a knee and sank lower.

"If the Mad Hatter invites you to his table, what drink would you choose?" Asked the king, tilting forward on his throne.

"Only the finest of his perspective, my Lord. Be it through, above, or even beyond." The Guardian answered more smoothly than a fine grain whetstone.

"Yep, that's definitely Skitharix." Lurk said with a tinge of amusement.

Harmony tugged on his coat and spoke under her breath.

"Lurk, sweetheart, what the actual hell did you just say? What does that mean?" His fiery Scarlet Dragoness demanded.
"Honestly, sugar, I just wondered if he would react to an allusion to Alice In Wonderland like I wrote in his character info." Lurk's scaly muzzle was split with a Cheshire grin.

Both of their attentions were drawn away with the entrance of the next.

A hulking figure made of shining platinum full plate strode into the throne room.

"Lady Harmony! High Lord Lurk! Your Legion is here." The Living Armor marched forth and pounded his gauntlet on the massive round shield he carried, while his axe remained strapped to his back. Legion announced his arrival with all the fanfare of a grand cathedral bell, red helmet plume standing up proudly. With the confidence of titans and a spirit of sterner stuff still, he nodded in greeting to his fellow Guardians and raised his shield in salute to his Supreme Beings.

Legion presided over the third floor and the Eternal War that took place there. Huge formations of Silver Knights skirmished against one another on a large flat plain around the clock. The sound of blades clashing was an unceasing clamor as the Living Armor of the Eternal War never tired with their War Priest standing vigil over it all.

Unable to hold herself back any further, Harmony leapt from her seat and ran to her creation. She had to know. She had to touch him, to make sure he was real, and not just a dream. In a few bounding steps, the Scalebound closed the distance and jumped with her arms wide. Grand Alliance hit Legion with a loud clang as he gave a booming laugh of joy and caught her.

Harmony's doubt was dispelled the moment Legion hugged her back.

Even though neither would say it, Phage and Skitharix were in that moment very jealous of the affection their compatriot was receiving from his creator.

Lurk cleared his throat. While it was hard to retain his own composure, the Guardians were still an unknown element to him. He was unsure what would be expected of them. How did they think Lurk and Harmony should be acting? What would earn their loyalty. He was thankful when his wife broke her embrace and took her place on his right once more.

Just in time too.

Commanding the Demi-Claw Sharpshooters that crewed the Alpha and Omega bunkers of the first and second floors were Wrath and Ruin. The twin Deathclaws bounded across the throne room on all fours in their eagerness. Even larger than their Demi-Claw brethren, the Deathclaw was an imposing species. They were a bipedal reptilian race with long humanoid arms. Massive racial bonuses gave them incredible agility and strength. While the lesser Claws were mostly simple in color, the twins exhibited the great variation that could be found.

They skidded to a halt at the foot of the throne. Like puppies, their large crocodilian tails wagged uncontrollably behind them. Each of them were decked from snout to talon in combat armor more befitting a science fiction setting. Lurk had a lot of fun designing sentient Deathclaws with guns and Valkyrie's Downfall and its subsequent expansions had given him a lot of choices.

"Lord Lurk! Lady Harmony!" Wrath the Commando began, her chameleon exterior shifting in happy blues with streaks of purple.

"We came as fast as we could!" Ruin the Seigebreaker added, her Glowing One breed giving a green luminescence to edge her darker hide.
"We're so happy you called." Wrath bubbled, nodding her head until she was dizzy.

"What are your orders?" Ruin was one espresso shot away from vibrating through the floor.

"Who do we get to shoot?" Wrath patted the strap of her rifle, Deusvore.

"What do we get to blow up?" Ruin clenched and unclenched the large talons of her race, yearning for the trigger of Absolution Through Ordinance.

Wrath glanced sidelong at her sister.

"I bet I'll blow up more than you." She challenged.

"Nuh-uh." Ruin retorted.

"Yes-huh!" Wrath butted her forehead against her sister's, horns locking together. Before Lurk could get a word in the two had grappled together. As they wrestled, the two were just a ball of Deathclaw that rolled about, their bickering voices indecipherable over their limbs smacking the floor. Phage and Skitharix stepped nimbly out of their way without batting an eye. When the pair rolled by Legion, he deftly grabbed each of them by the scruff of their necks and separated the squabbling sisters.

"Behave you two! You're in the presence of the Supreme Ones! Show a little restraint." Legion mustered his best disapproving uncle voice and set the twins back on their feet.

"We're sorry." Their voices echoed together as they apologized.

Last to arrive, an undead dragon approached. Crisis and Nox followed closely behind, their task complete.

The wedded monarchs had great trepidation where Novus was concerned. They had not made the great Dracolich. He had been a gift. A reward for completing The Citadel when it had been a Burn Dungeon. The true undead presided over the eighth and final floor. The level was the largest by a great magnitude, being home to The Scar, and Effluvial Tide. The Scar was a winding canyon with a river of lava flowing from end to end. Greater Wyvern nests covered the walls of the canyon. At the end of which lay the final physical barrier before the ninth floor.

The nest of Novus himself was called the Effluvial Tide. All three members of the guild had agreed to leave it more or less unchanged from when it was the final level of the dungeon. A miasma of choking, toxic gas filled the entire space. The Gravelord himself could control the Effluvial Tide, making a passive defensive screen a weapon unto itself. If you were unwelcome, the air itself would strangle and suffocate.

"And I... Was having such... A wonderful nap." The Gravelord yawned, loose strips of flesh hanging from his jowls.

"Novus!" Wrath and Ruin cried and ran to the sedately walking dragon. They wove between his forelimbs and under his belly in their excitability. More or less ignoring the twins, yet still careful not to accidentally squish either of the two, Novus approached.

The Dracolich had a peculiar nobility to him. Dragons had been the most powerful creatures in the
world of YGGDRASIL. They were the gamer couple's favorite fantasy beings, and had even chosen player races to reflect that. There was no great hurry to the Gravelord's gait.

"Save for the Leviathan, all floor Guardians have been assembled." Nox announced. At his word, every Guardian lined up before the throne. Lurk and Harmony sat straighter in their seats as their NPCs collectively kneeled. Except for Novus, who essentially just laid himself down.

"Wrath!" The first Deathclaw cheered.

"And Ruin!" The twin sister added. Then they spoke as one.

"Guardians of the first and second floors. We pledge our lives to Black Sky Legion. We are the tip of the spear. And the bullet for every face! No enemy can come to the Citadel without knowing Wrath, and Ruin."

"Legion! Named so after the promise of our Black Sky. Guardian of the third floor. My axe, my shield, my life, for my Lady and Lord. I am the promise that though I am one, I am Legion." With a mighty crash, the Living Armor slammed his metal fist to the left side of his chest.

"Skitharix, shepherd of the Flayers, conductor of the grand symphony of madness. Guardian of the fourth floor. All trespassers are unclean, rife with sickness. And I shall be their surgeon." A mildly disturbing series of clicks and snicking sounds issued from the robes of flesh that hung from the kneeling Abomination as he moved his finger knives.

"Phage, given the title 'Untouchable', by the Supreme Beings. Guardian of the sixth floor. Every foe shall look upon me, and know despair. Then, they will be ash." Phage's voice carried her final promise with a certainty akin to splitting atoms.

"Nox, and Crisis. Guardian Overseers, and protectors of the Seventh floor. Together, we are the will of Black Sky made real." Nox spoke for his mute brother with conviction enough for each of them twice over.

"Novus, Gravelord... Keeper of the Effluvial Tide. Guardian of the eighth floor. None can fell me, for my... Every breath, belongs to the true... King and Queen of The Citadel." The grand Dracolich wheezed.

In unison, every Guardian assembled spoke their final vows. Their voices layered atop one another in ineffable unity. The chorus shook the hall and exulted the monarch's spirits in equal measure.

"We pledge ourselves to High Lord Lurk, and Lady Harmony. Our lives for the Legion. We are your Guardians. And we shall fight until the sun burns out, and Black Sky comes."

Once Lurk understood that the Guardians were really alive, he was apprehensive that their first course of action would be to either turn on the pair, or abandon them. When the assembled NPCs swore themselves to Black Sky with such vehement conviction, Lurk's worry melted like frost before the dawning of a new world.

Chapter End Notes
Whew. What a wild ride that was.

Thank you, gentle reader, for joining me on this journey. I had perhaps, far, far too much fun creating the breadth of floors and creatures and races and classes and items that all went into this little story.

I hope you will continue with me as I lay out the tale of Black Sky Legion, and their time spent in the New World.
"Rise, Guardians."

At the command of their absolute ruler, every assembled denizen of The Citadel stood. Well, except Novus, who started to lift up, and only managed his front half. Even if he had tried, Lurk would not have been able to hide the grin that threatened to rip the corners of his mouth. For a moment he sat, awestruck. His gaze rolled from one to the next. The man, now king, knew them utterly. He knew their every facet. He had been there from the moment they had been conceived as ideas, to code, and now to flesh and blood and steel.

"Thank you all for coming so quickly. My wife and I wanted to see you for ourselves. I'm glad you're all well." His first impulse was to be perfectly honest with them. "Something has happened to our world. A fundamental paradigm has moved. I don't know what that means for us, but we must have the utmost caution." Lurk was not thinking, just acting. It felt like the right thing to say.

"Know thy enemy, and know thyself." Nox accepted the word of his Lord as gospel with all the others nodding at the wisdom.

Lurk had to keep from visibly starting. He had not put that Tzun Tzu in Nox's character information. Had he spoken of it around the Shadowkin when he still only an NPC? How much did they remember? How aware were they back then?

"Our lives are owed to you, Supreme Ones. We carry the blessings you bestowed upon us. Because of that, we shall not fail." The Shadowkin asserted.

Shifting in slight discomfort at the idolatry displayed, the monarch finished quickly.

"Harmony and I have very important matters to discuss about our situation. Be vigilant. Be safe. We must be prepared for anything. Nox, please only disturb us if there's an emergency."

"As you command, High Lord Lurk."

"Teleport to our room." The Ancient Dragon said under his breath to his wife, holding out his claw for her to grab onto. Harmony threaded her digits through his and reached for her magic
without thinking. Though their HUDs were gone, desire became reality and they were whisked away in a small flash of light.

In the quiet reverie that followed, Phage was the first to speak the simple truth that held them all enthralled.

"They... They stayed with us."

This one observation encapsulated the secret fear that every one of them had harbored for many years. It was equal parts relief, disbelief, and wonder.

"Aren't they just the coolest!?" Wrath was quick to squeal, bouncing on her feet.

"I know right?" Ruin agreed, doing a little spin.

"And Lady Harmony is so pretty." The Commando said wistfully.

"And smart."

"Lord Lurk was so awesome!"

"I bet he thought I was cooler."

"Nu-uh!"

"Yes huh!"

Once again, the twins locked their horns and became a ball of wrestling Deathclaw.

"Was Lady Harmony not the most radiant thing you have ever seen?! She hugged me! If I were to perish this moment, in this spot, it would be with no regrets. Nothing in this life can every measure up to such triumph." Legion pressed an open palm to his chest where his creator had touched him. Though the Living Armor possessed no physical presence within the plate, he could not shirk the feeling within his cuirass. He was completely lost in the recollection. So lost in fact, he did not even notice the sisterly squabble roll by him.

"Nox," Phage approached the Overseer brothers. "You felt it too, didn't you?"

"What did you feel?" Skitharix looked between Phage and Nox. They were both difficult to read.

"A stirring. Something behind my eyes." The Shadowkin explained.

"Like taking a deep breath before plunging into water." Phage the untouchable remarked, taking a sharp intake through her Oni mask.

The Guardians of the fourth, sixth, and brothers of the seventh were quiet for a moment, each contending with different impressions.

"Now that I've had time to reflect on it, there is something different. My Flayers are restless. They tell me the Pylons are nearly frenzied. For good or ill, it is hard to say. We must protect our Lord and Lady. We owe them an unfathomable debt." Skitharix held out an arm, his long knives open in silent adoration to the vacant thrones. "It was beautiful to watch them together. Their unity is truly perfection. How often would we hear of the disharmony that would cause the downfall of others?"

Phage touched the Flesh Keeper's wrist.
"We will protect them. They made us with purpose. With power. We who stand cast in their image cannot fail." Phage said.

Though he could not directly see her face beneath the veil and mask, Skitharix knew she was smiling by the tiny creases under her ghostly eyes. It was a comfort for the Eldritch Construct to touch the beauty second only to his Lady.

Nox nodded to his mute sibling and turned back to the others.

"My brother and I agree. As soon as we hear the word from our Supreme Ones, we shall scout to see what has changed. For now I believe discretion is best. Our movement must not be overt. Our Lord spoke of caution, and we will abide by it. Phage, please post some of your Corsairs at the front gates of The Citadel. They are not to engage, only stay hidden. If anyone or anything approaches, have them contact me immediately." Although he itched to take action, Nox was the shadow of his liege and knew not just Lurk's word, but intent behind the order as well.

"Of course." Phage nodded. Her Plague Elves were best suited to the task. She then looked over at the Living Armor who had yet to move from his spot. "Legion, are you with us, dear?"

As unresponsive third floor Guardian continued staring at the lower-right throne with his gauntlet on his chest. Legion was utterly smitten.

"I know a madman when I see one." Skitharix remarked.

Wrath and Ruin bumped into Novus. The Gravelord yawned languidly and nudged the Deathclaws as a lazy house cat would a ball of yarn. With the most begrudging of efforts, Novus stood once more and turned his ponderous bulk to make his way out of the throne room.

"I bid all my fellow Guardians... Farewell. If anyone needs me, I shall be in my... Second favorite napping spot. It is good we have such a King and Queen. Their strength is as indisputable... As always. Our power... Is theirs. And their power... Is The Citadel's. I am content in this."

Last to come, and first to leave, the Elder summarized his impressions and left to do just as he said he would. The others bid Novus goodbye and continued to hold their counsel.

The twins, still locked in their wrestling match, slammed into Crisis at a decent velocity. The trio were sent sprawling with a crash. Wrath was splayed over the humanoid Guardian's legs while her sister was on his chest, very nearly sitting her not insignificant reptilian rear right on his face. Phage and Skitharix shared a chuckle at their antics.

Dizzy from their extended tumble, the twin sisters moaned and swayed drunkenly.

"Sorry, Crisis." They echoed in unison.

"Alright there, brother?" Nox called.

Crisis raised a hand and gave a thumbs up. The Shade grasped his brother's hand and hauled him to his feet, the twins tumbling off.

"Was it nice to have a face full of Deathclaw p-" Nox's sentence was cut short as the back of his brother's metal gauntlet slapped him in the gut.

"Nox!" Wrath bounced right back and regarded the Guardian overseer like an overgrown puppy.

"Nox!" Not to be outdone by her sister, Ruin crowded up beside her.
"What can we do?" Their voices overlapped again.

"I want you both to lock down Alpha and Omega. If anything bigger than a speck of dust gets in without permission from our Lord or Lady, I want you to shoot it, stab it, set it on fire, blow it up-"

"Then set it on fire again?" Wrath finished his sentence. Nox grabbed one of her horns and tugged it playfully.

"That's absolutely right." When he noticed Ruin pouting at her lack of attention he scratched under her chin until both Deathclaws were wagging their tails happily.

"What shall we do in the meantime?" Inquired Legion, at last regaining himself and joining the discussion.

"Return to your floors. Be ready, as commanded. High Lord Lurk had the right of it. The world has moved. I don't know what this means for us, but we will protect our Supreme Beings. Their counsel is sacred, and their wisdom will guide us. I'm sure they're already planning our next move."

*****

"Holy fucking."

"I can't even. How-"

"-sh*t this is amazing. We've got-"

"-is this possible! I know it's incredible-."

"-to figure out what to do."

"-to see them walking!"

"They're so fucking cool."

"This is real!"

"Really really really real!"

"I have a tail!"

"I know! I do too!"

Lurk and Harmony babbled nonsensically at one another for at least twenty straight minutes. Harmony sat on the edge of their ludicrously oversized banister bed holding her tail while Lurk paced furiously back and forth. The guild member's personal room was lit by a few ornate sources. From a fireplace that crackled low, glowing embers cast a cozy warmth that each of them could sense. And a few wall-mounted sconces flickered that suffused the space with pale witch-light.

A molten orange snout poked out from under their bed and sniffed the air. Stopping dead in his tracks, Lurk almost completely lost himself right then and there.

"Hun. Honey. Holy shit. Holy shit, it's Soot. Looklooklook!" Pointing with a claw, his jaw nearly
hit the floor.

"What?" Harmony cried out and looked over the edge of the bed. She squealed at the sight of the creature.

About the size of a chubby cat, Soot walked out from under their bed. Catching sight of Lurk, the little dragon rubbed himself against Lurk's shin, nuzzling into his owner. With one claw, he scooped up Soot and held him.

The Gunpowder Dragon had been a drop acquired from a long drawn out quest chain associated with Lurk's Gunpowder Sage job class. In YGGDRASIL, Soot had been a level one pet accessory. Because of their proclivity to... explode, the pet Gunpowder Dragons were all indestructible. The little bundle of doom was considered a joke item. Scorched black scales were covered in tiny adamantite plates and molten lines of glowing magma coursed over the minuscule creature. He would have been just a tiny bit fearsome, if not for the extra belly that gave him more of a rounded appearance.

This final damning evidence clearly meant that Lurk had died and gone to heaven. That was the only way to explain the meeps that poured forth from Soot as Lurk stroked his back and rubbed the top of his head. Harmony reached over and although the pint-sized bundle of scales accepted the attention, he did so with great reluctance.

"Oh my goodness, he's a little shit." She remarked.

"Do you think it's because he was technically equipped to me?" Lurk was most astonished by the feeling of Soot breathing. His little chest expanded and contracted in a way YGGDRASIL wished it could have simulated.

"Could be." Harmony giggled when Soot gave a disgruntled grumble from being held.

Squirming indignantly, Soot wriggled until Lurk put him down. The indestructible little hellion walked over to his tiny bed, nudging the edge of the blanket until his snout was under it and burrowed into the Soot sized pet bed. Clearly, it was nap time as the Gunpowder Dragon gave a heavy sigh and went straight to sleep.

With so much happening, Lurk gazed at his wife and reached out to touch her cheek once again, rubbing one of the little scales along her jaw. The way she smiled back sent his heart into somersaults. Now they had privacy and the Wyrmblood regarded his spouse's body, the urge that had risen in his loins returned. It was a curious, yet familiarly libidinous urge. Harmony noted the flare of his nostrils and the mischief that tugged the corners of his muzzle.

"What?" She asked coyly.

"So... If this is real, like, really real, then you don't suppose we could..." He trailed off.

"Hm?" Harmony cocked her head to one side, thinking of the dozens of possibilities he could be alluding to.

"Do you think these bodies can have sex? Because that would suck if we're just fuckin' barbie dolls down there."

"You've had better pickup lines." She teased.

"True, but was it good enough for you to take off your pants?" He responded.
Standing, the Queen of the citadel gave an exaggerated sigh, then giggled.

"I suppose so."

Lurk distinctly remembered immediately after character creation, Harmony remarking she wanted her avatar to have a 'Slamin' ass'. The general rule of thumb was that anything that was covered by a bikini was off limits for customization. There were small ways around this however. Too much tweaking left the upper body overblown and strangely proportioned, so she did not want freaky-huge boobs. However, thicker thighs meant bigger hips which gave her character the butt she had wanted.

Almost more curious than her husband, Harmony once more used game abilities despite having no HUD. The connection was natural. So many years had ingrained the movements to equip items that it was second nature. With a gesture, all of her armor and most of her clothing vanished. The Scalebound female was left with only her lacy black bra and panties. In the immediate past, it was impossible to even get under the waistband of her underwear and the bra had no clasps.

With her husband practically drooling as he watched, Harmony pulled her top up and her bosom bounced free of its confines. Although not entirely surprised by her breasts because of Lurk's earlier groping letting her know that she did indeed have nipples, it was still nice to take off the bra. Forbidden, naked flesh grew goosebumps upon exposure and the pair were stunned speechless.

Harmony's new body had special piercings. Slim golden rings with a single teardrop ruby that hung on a three small links adorned each pebbled bud. Her womanly peaks were also crimson in hue rather than pink.

The couple had discussed body modification many many times. The Scalebound's elfin ears had many hoops. In real life however, Harmony had never had the guts to go through with something like getting her buds pierced. And she definitely would never have gotten jewelry that was so flashy! Barbells were one thing, but rings with dangling rubies? Not ever.

"Huh, I thought I felt something under your shirt earlier." Lurk mentioned with a weak chortle.

Still unable to find words, Harmony reached up to fondle herself, gauging the consistency of her womanly bust. Unused to the additions, she accidentally tugged one a little when she lifted a ruby to examine it. Crying out, she would have fallen onto her backside if she had not already been seated.

"May I?" Lurk asked, gesturing at her chest.

"Yeah, yeah go ahead." She panted. "Just be gentle. They're uh... A little sensitive."

"I can tell. Wow these puppies are gorgeous." With great care, the Wyrmblood male cupped his wife's breasts. They definitely felt like the real deal. Maybe they had been dumped into a secretly cancelled adults only game. Her talons curled and abdominal muscles clenched as incandescent pleasure began to melt her core.

After a bit of fondling, Lurk moved up to the main attraction. With surgical precision, he slid the tip of a claw through the golden hoop that pierced her left breast and gave it just a little tug. The pebbled buds were already hard enough to pierce mythril, and watching the skin pull taut was enough to make the male acutely aware of the fact that his pants had become immeasurably tight in the crotch. Harmony rubbed her thighs together as it felt like someone had turned on a faucet between her legs.

"Okay, okay, whew. That's a lot." Pushing his eager claws away, the woman moved back on the bed. "Alright, moment of truth time." Harmony gasped, hooking her scaly thumbs into her panties.
She pulled the underwear down to her ankles and kicked the garment off to the side. Harmony fell back on the bed, face framed by ivory horns and a halo of bright red hair. Panting while her spouse looked on with baited breath, the Scalebound spread her legs.

A smattering of scales led down her stomach and between her legs. The medley of intimate flesh and scales had a much larger concentration of metallic yellow. Lurk was utterly entranced by Harmony's luscious pussy. The lips of her sex were engorged and puffy. The plump labia seemed ripe for a good hard rut. Being draconic, her peach was hairless and smoother than a newborn Dire Silkworm. Lurk followed his wife up onto their bed, shedding his clothes the old fashioned way and casting them off as he did so.

In response, the woman reached down and used her fearsome claws to spread her flower. It was what she always did before they consummated their love for each other. And it felt right to do it then, exposing herself for the one man she had ever loved. Her inner labia was pure gold with striations of crimson. It was glistening with Harmony's arousal. Her honeypot dripped molten gold. Aureate juices flowed from her shimmering feminine core.

Following her, Lurk crept forward, laying his chest on her thick tail. Hooking his arms around her generous thighs, the draconic male looked up at his wife.

"Darling, may I eat the royal pussy?" He asked, unable to suppress his amusement.

Giggling at the unexpected question, Harmony wiggled her butt and responded.

"You may."

Well and truly unable to hold himself back by weight of sheer amorous delight and curiosity, Lurk used his new forked appendage. Velvet dipped in mango juice played along his long reptilian tongue. An explosion of flavor that almost made him weep in joy. The male buried his snout in his wife's puffy slit, inhaling her heady musk. Even with his human nose, he knew her scents. He knew how her sex smelled normally. He knew her scent after she had cum. Their mingled aroma. He even knew when she was ovulating, much to her embarrassment.

Below the ripe fruity taste and aroma, he knew her. Beneath the frankincense of her draconic sex, was the bouquet of his loving wife. He did not know how in a billion worlds such a coincidence could have occurred, and took it as yet further proof that they had crossed an indelible threshold together.

Knowing just where and how to lick, he got straight to work. Harmony was always glad that she had a husband that was willing to go down on her. She rarely let him though because even though the feeling was heavenly, the woman always felt bad at how much effort it was to make her cum. The obscene sounds that came from his oral ministrations made her cheeks light up, yet the ecstasy was beyond compare. When his long tongue circled her buried nub, teasing the woman's clit from its shy hood, she thought she was going to explode.

Not only was the act itself heightened at the thrill of their new forms, hers was especially receptive. Already near to overflowing, Harmony's chalice sang with delight. Acute new nerves told her brain that she was going to cum fast, hard, and all over her husband's muzzle. Though she tried to warn him, as Lurk's lapping, circling, acrobatic tongue pushed her over the edge, all breath was stolen from the dragoness as she climaxed. Her mouth opened in a silent scream.

The one advantage of his new face, was that when his wife's thighs slammed on either side of him, his snout let him keep breathing. Although he was surprised at how quickly he was able to make her cum, it was with even greater joy. Her roiling hips and clenching legs let him know he was doing a
good job, and the juices that gushed forth was his reward. Another thing that shocked in the best way was how literally sweet her pussy was. He had eaten her out on many occasions, and always enjoyed lapping up her nectar, however this was a special treat indeed.

Letting her ride out the high with more gentle tongue play, Lurk waited for Harmony to stop trying to pop his head from his shoulders, rubbing that familiar spot on her thighs as he did so. Her physical strength was prodigious now too.

"That good?" He tormented as she quivered and at last released him.

"Shabagagh. Shut up. Holy mother of dragons." Harmony wiped sweat from her brow as her chest heaved. As her breasts rose and fell, the glittering rubies on her piercings rolled back and forth with the motion.

Crawling up between her spread legs, Lurk's tail found that of his wife and quickly constricted around the fifth appendage. Planting his claws on either side of his lover, Lurk gazed down at her with wanton lust.

"If you... Ask to... 'Fuck the royal pussy'... I'm going to hurt you." She threatened.

"Yes, my darling dearest dripping wet dragoness."

"Hm," She said, mildly appeased. "I suppose it would be nice to give my big handsome man some dragoness pussy."

Sitting up to grasp his cock and better guide it to Harmony's entrance, Lurk could not help but run his tongue along his teeth in anticipation. Looking down, he watched the triangular head of his cock brush between the lips of his woman's sex. Based on what he felt and saw, she was going to enjoy this quite a bit too. Moaning openly, Harmony threw her arms around his neck and encouraged him to continue with a push of her hips.

"What am I to do? My wife has become lost in this lewd body that loves dragon cock."

Just as she was about to respond, Lurk put some real body weight behind a thrust, eliciting a throaty moan from his partner. Just from sinking himself a little ways into her, the female's stubborn depths seemed to cry out to the Dragon Incarnate to rut her senseless.

Even though his member was almost monstrously huge, Harmony's Scarlet Drake racials made her quite durable. The Drakes were famed for being females that could only be conquered by the strongest, most virile males. At least in the flavor text of the job class it said that. Although proportionately large, his manhood fit perfectly inside his wife. Her pussy was built to both provide the most sumptuous of cushions with its buxom petals, and be able to take a hard pounding.

Even with the entirety of her tunnel saturated after Lurk had made her cum, he still needed to pull back several times to work her open. Soon he bottomed out within her, his length and girth wrapped from root to tip in plush gold satin.

"Oh god, you're definitely just as big as you were. Does your cock have ridges now? Fuck that feels good. Don't stop. Just fuck me 'till you cum. I wanna feel it. Please?" She knew that begging got him off, and she knew she had hit right on the money. A snarl of determination rumbled from Lurk's chest as his crotch came flush with hers. The enhanced body heat of her cunny was almost too much just on its own.

Harmony felt the head of her husband's cock twitch and pulse against the smooth muscle of her cervix. Just as before, the sensation was familiar. Although both were larger in their avatar's, they
had maintained the same proportions as the old world. Despite sexual anatomy obviously being off
limits to YGGDRASIL, their bodies fit together just like they had when they were human. He was
cozied up to that same spot he always did when they had sex. Her tunnel was stretched by his length.
There was always that extra inch or two that nudged the fall wall of her insides, nestling the head
right up to the entrance of her womb.

When he pulled back, Harmony's lower lips clinging to his textured length he lost what little
control he had. Although their mating was in different bodies, he knew it was her. Just like her scent,
he could recognize his wife just from the way she moved in response to him filling her cute scaly
cunny. The way she reciprocated his thrusts when he hit a good spot inside her told him all he
needed to know. They had been together for so many years, had made love in so many ways, that all
it took was a touch to let her know to raise her legs.

Their intimacy was a consummately unspoken bond. It was there when they had made love on
beaches. In dressing rooms. Under covers on a cold winter day. In the morning. Before bed. In every
touch and whispered promise of eternity. How she moved and moaned and whispered his name was
a fundamental truth of his universe.

Even as his weight bore down on her muscular tail, Lurks own squeezing it rhythmically with his
thrusts, Harmony lifted her ankles for him to grab. With the tilt of her pelvis, the Wyrmblood male
got a better angle and thrust more of himself in an out of her with every back and forth motion of his
hips. The woman moaned openly, letting out little squeaks when his pronounced ridged caught her
entrance and tugged at the delicate nerves.

If Lurk had wanted to, he could not have stopped if he had tried. She was almost virgin tight. He
was only able to sustain his pace of vigorous mating for a few minutes. Just as Harmony had reached
her high quickly, the Wyrmblood lost himself to the slick velvet vice nursing his length.

Her thick, plush petals were crushed into his groin as he mashed his hips into hers for all he was
worth as his own orgasm erupted from him. A tidal wave of pleasure overtook the male. Driving
himself down with thrusts that rocked her with their force, Lurk flooded her suckling depths with his
seed. As a baptism of their union in their new forms, he gave her the mating press of a lifetime. Even
though he could not kiss very well with his muzzle, that did not stop him from pressing it against her
full lips. She moaned, tasting herself on his tongue.

A few quivering bucks made Harmony's core flutter, feeling the hot rush of cum spill into her
sacred depths. Nestled in his wife, Lurk did not pull back until every drop of his essence was firmly
fucked into her. Sometimes the need to claim her pulsed through his blood with each ardent beat of
his heart. This was one of the many, many ways he displayed his affection. Tightly grasping the
sheets underneath them, Lurk pushed until his wife's poor hole was stretched into a lewd O.

Panting after the exertion, they both stayed exactly as they were as Harmony's insides were
painted white with a potent load of cum. Cooing in delight and contentment, the female's lower half
told her that she was nice and full. Lurk released her ankles and sat back on her tail, ever so slowly
dragging his softening manhood from her sex. She groaned as even not fully hard, the ridges of
Lurk's very exotic cock pulled wonderfully on her delicates.

Bloated with seed, Harmony's unplugged pussy began leaking down the base of her tail right onto
their sheets. Neither cared in the slightest that both of their nethers were an absolute mess and that the
room now smelled of raw sex.

"Do you love me, my Harmony?" He slurred, having fallen loosely to the side to lay with his wife.

"Always, dearheart." The woman answered, her belly nice and full.
And just like in their original world, Harmony's sex was so sumptuously tight, that Lurk got comfortable on their bed and fell straight to sleep. Giggling knowingly, his wife curled against his side and shortly followed. Both drifted off, content. Even if everything else changed, their love did not. Even if their constituent atoms were blown across the cosmos, Lurk and Harmony would find each other because of one simple truth.

They knew one another. No matter what form they took.

*****

"Hey, boss! There always been a giant door 'ere?"
Strength of the Legion

[Message]

Lord Lurk, I'm sorry to disturb you, but we have a problem.

Nox? I see that [Message] works with the Guardians. What kind of problem?

The kind that walks on two legs and carries torches. [Life Essence] Can be deceived by a clever mage, but [True Discernment] cannot be.

What are their levels?

I believe I could kill one with a sarcastic remark.

Are they hostile?

No, but they are trying to pry gems off the great gates of The Citadel.

Thieves... Scavengers...

My thoughts exactly, Sire.

Confirm your suspicions, Nox. Just be careful. Knowledge is power, and something we are woefully short of. I'll be there as soon as I can.

Yes, my Lord.

[End Message]

*****

"What door, you blithering idiot?"

"This giant one! Right 'ere!"

"There's never been a do-... Oh. That's a fancy lookin' door."

The gaggle of bandits, about three dozen in total, all crowded to take a peak at the platinum etched front door of The Citadel as it towered over them. The portal was wide enough to admit a dragon with its wings outstretched. Light from the group's torches flickered off gemstones and made the draconic mural dance with life. A few of the criminals were trying to fit the points of daggers into the
brilliant crystals from the eyes of the sculpted entrance.

A voice dripping with scorn came from behind the throng.

"Did you get lost, gentlemen?"

The lot turned, with many drawing weapons. They were supposed to be the only ones up on the mountain, and none of them had heard the newcomer's approach. At the edge of the torchlight, a silhouette wavered in the dark. Grizzled, and exuding all the charm of rusty chain mail, the apparent leader called out to Nox.

"Oi! You can just clear off with yer fancy self. I dunno who yer with, but we got 'ere first. Whatever's on th' other side o' this door, is ours." Squinting in the flimsy illumination, the leader was able to discern the quality of the Shadowkin's garb, and also that he seemed unarmed.

"Really now? What makes you think that?" The Guardian cocked his head quizzically to one side.

"The Bandit King controls these mountains. Hang on, you look a little too pretty to be one o' us. You an adventurer or something? Tell ya what. You hand over everythin' you own, and we might let ya go. Or else."

"Or else what?" Hushed contempt rumbled forth as Nox's voice grew, seeming to surround the bandits.

"Or I'll gut ya and take that nice lookin' helmet ya got." The leader sneered, oblivious to the way that shapes were forming in the murk around the pool of light. He had killed his fair share of bounty hunters and starry eyed adventurers. With a swagger, the cutthroat marched straight up to within four strides of the Shadowkin.

"Well, c'mon then." Turning his palms out, showing his lack of weapons, the Guardian shrugged. "Show me."

The man got his sword one inch out of its scabbard before Nox decided the bandit was too slow.

With one hand, Nox pulled a piece of abyss into reality. Trailing ribbons of blackness, Echo of Damnation manifested in his hands. In YGGDRASIL, following the Valkyrie's Downfall expansion that introduced firearms, many subsequent additions to the games had increased the variety. All sleek Darksteel lines and ergonomic matte crystal polymer, Echo of Damnation was a tube-fed shotgun. The special ammunition it used was a more classic approach in that it was generated from the user's MP. It had the added benefit of being nearly silent until the abyssal buckshot made explosive contact with any target.

Nox did not merely shoot the bandit in the face. He decapitated the offending lowlife with a point-blank discharge of his Divine weapon. Neck stump smoking, the bandit swayed, then dropped like a sack of meat.

"Well? I'm waiting. Weren't you going to gut me? Steal my hat?" Giving his gun a twirl and setting it on his shoulder, the Shadowkin remarked on the sorry sight before him. "I don't think it would look very good on you now though."

The Guardian possessed the job Shotgun Surgeon, and felt no need to waste any more time on target practice. With his left hand, Nox made a gun gesture with his thumb and pointer finger, then
depressed his thumb to mimic a hammer falling.

Corsairs occupying the crenelations above the door opened up with their repeater carbines. The advanced crossbows whirred and clicked as their mechanisms launched a hail of bolts into the backs of the bandits. Some had the presence of mind to bring their shields to bear on the death pouring on them from behind. Simple wood and iron stood no chance against the carbines. The Darksteel was designed to pierce defenses, then stick in a target to deliver their toxin.

Projectiles filled the air with angry hissing as the storm turned the hapless men into pincushions. Some fell with dozens of metal rods protruding at obscene angles. One wretch had the misfortune of having their feet, then knees were punctured, holding him upright. Like a pinned butterfly, the bandit did not cease being a target until he resembled a thicket of fletched shafts. The few that did not expire immediately from massive trauma quickly succumbed to the caustic bolts.

Only a minute after the massacre, Lurk stepped from his bedroom to the entrance of The Citadel in one smooth stride. In his haste, he had only donned his dusky pants, a simple shirt, and his armored greatcoat. His tie to their guild item allowed him free movement anywhere within the domain of Black Sky. The class, Sovereign of the Masquerade, filled in the rest.

The Mask of the Unbound clung to Lurk's scaly visage. Although there were no slits or holes in the smooth ivory faceplate, four magic eyes hovered just above the mask's surface like smoldering pinpricks of azure coal. More than the strange eyes were the way his horns seemed to bleed into another reality. Their color was akin to a negative photograph, with the high and low-lights swapped in brightness, at odds with his surroundings.

Dismissing his mask, Lurk surveyed the aftermath of the very one-sided fight. His physical sight had no trouble piercing the gloom as he crouched down to look more closely at one of the dead. The cadaver was... Unmistakably human in ways the old world had only ever dreamed of capturing. This had, until moments ago, been a living, sapient being. The monarch had seen real death only a handful of times, yet felt nearly nothing over being in some ways responsible for the blood spilled.

"Was there any trouble?" Lurk asked Nox as the Shadowkin joined his master. The Guardian shook his head and let Echo of Damnation evaporate back into the blackness.

"None. They had no mages, and [True Discernment] was accurate."

"We need information." Lurk pondered the problem, rubbing his chin with a claw. An idea slowly formed. Did this world operate by the same rules? There was only one way to find out. If Nox had been able to use [Message] to contact him, then perhaps...

[Message]

Skitharix, can you hear me?

Truly I am blessed by your singular attention, Supreme One. What had codified this boon?

I need your Puppeteering skills, if you please.

Without question, Sire. How may I serve?
Please come to the front of The Citadel. There are some dead things with secrets.

Your will be done, High Lord.

[End Message]

The Guardians were limited by traveling the gate network threaded throughout the guildhall, so it took Skitharix a few minutes to arrive. Taking the time to walk around, Lurk marveled. The high-altitude air was thinner, but so very clean. From the peak, the first shy diffusion of sunrise was visible on the horizon. The stars were already asleep in the early morning hours. Standing undaunted before the breathtaking view, Lurk did not let doubt undermine his wonder.

Skitharix moved through the gates of The Citadel, which had been opened just far enough to allow his passage before closing again.

"Hm, mongrel things." The Flesh Keeper remarked, weaving his way around the bodies to ensure his robes did not touch the dead. Two Corsairs had come down from their perch and were examining the one man still held upright by the sheer quantity of Darksteel piercing him. Skitharix paused to regard the Plague Elves and their unintentional sculpture.

"Hm, fair work. Good brush strokes. Try for a better canvas next time."

"Thank you, Lord Skitharix." The two Corsairs bowed low under the praise. Their voices carried the hollow echo of the ornate respirators the Plague Elves all wore.

Having heard the doors open, Lurk was already waiting in front of the body he wished to interrogate. Wasting none of his Lord's time, Skitharix performed his own bow, then used his skills of Puppeteering. From his outstretched knives, gossamer silver threads hung down and attached to the cadaver. The wires pulled taut and the dead man rose, twitching and juddering, to stand before the ruler of Black Sky Legion.

"Who are you?" The Wyrmblood rumbled.

"Michas..." Bubbles of blood collected at the corner of the dead man's mouth as his lungs were worked manually by Skitharix to produce sound.

"What were you doing here?"

"Scouting... For the Bandit King. Keep watch... For caravans that might... Warn Kadusia."

******

By the time they were done interrogating the pupeteered corpse, the sun was starting to peak from the distant horizon. But to Lurk, it was worth it. They had gained immeasurable insight into the world The Citadel had been transported to. The major revelation they had gleaned, was that they now resided at the top of a completely different mountain range from their original home. A far cry
from the fiery rivers of lava and active volcanoes where The Citadel had resided in the crags of Muspelheim.

They overlooked a narrow pass that was central to trade in the region. The mountain chain in particular was infested with bandits. And they were planning something big.

Kadusia was the closest large city. And the bandits were going to mount a massive assault while the city's army was away fighting some kind of coalition war. The body of the bandit was rather poorly educated. Just a simple man really, swept up in an unsavory lifestyle. Apparently this Bandit King was a cautious, ruthless, and fairly competent leader by the account of the interrogated dead. If any of the scouting teams sent out to make sure Kadusia was isolated and did not report back, the Bandit King would initiate his attack immediately. His success was dependent on a swift assault on an unprepared defender.

Right on time, Harmony teleported the more traditional way. A loose gray tunic hung from her shoulders and long cotton bloomers made her the image of a woman distinctly disgruntled at having her sleep interrupted. The tips of her scaly talons announced her agitation at being awoken under such uncouth conditions.

"Lurk! What the hell! Were these real people?" Her wrath was a potential thunderstorm in the making, crimson tail twitching in irritation. The pair of Corsairs vanished in trails of emerald fire and Nox disappeared into Lurk's shadow. Even Skitharix tried to make himself scarce, though the hulking Guardian had little luck.

"Yes, and they were thieves that tried, very unsuccessfully, to attack Nox." Knowing his wife's temperament very well, he defused her anger with a deadpan summary.

"Oh, well fuck 'em then. I mean... They look like a typical bandit mob, but they're so different from each other."

"I think we're in a Medieval European analogue. Or a fantasy equivalent anyway. These guys," Lurk gestured to the hapless men. "It turns out are scouts for a much larger force. There's a city nearby, called Kadusia. I took a peak. It's mostly civilians. Big walls though. The bandits are planning on sacking the place, taking all the food and gold they can carry, then razing everything they can before leaving."

"And?" Harmony asked.

"And what?" Until then, Lurk had been content to sit, and watch. His analysis was cold and distant. Harmony was passion and aggressive action. Although both of them were close to overall neutral karma, the Wyrmblood male hung a hundred below, while his Scarlet dragoness was a positive by a higher margin.

"And? What are we gonna do about it? I assume you already have a plan to wipe the bastards off the map." She crossed her arms under her bosom.

"Well, I might have considered some options." Lurk said with a fang filled grin.

*****
True flight was everything Lurk and Harmony had ever dreamed of. In YGGDRASIL, flying was commonplace. Everyone who did not have a job or racial for wings could come across pendants that allowed free use of the [Fly] spell at reasonable cost. However the game had limitations on the feeling of the wind, of the dizzying scope of precipitous flight.

All her life, there had been a hole in Harmony's being she had never known of. When her wings caught the wind and her form had lifted as effortlessly as a leaf in a breeze, that gap was filled. She was free. To the truest meaning of such a simple word. The Scarlet dragoness was flying. Real, unhindered, and more terrifyingly splendid than she could have every imagined. And, not least of all, she was sharing this with her love. Even if it all ended up not being real in the end, she would hold the breath of sky nestled in her heart of hearts for as long as she lived.

The two monarchs soared on membranous wings at high speeds even in their armor, easily keeping up with the six Greater Wyverns that accompanied them. Each of the mighty beasts was encrusted with smaller creatures. All six had been given saddles to transport their assignment of troops. Squads of Demi-Claws crowded along the spines of the living transports while ranks of Silver Knights were daisy-chained together with straps and harnesses off the sides of the enormous saddles. Long wing beats resounded like leathery drums even over the high winds. The dangling Knights glinted in the sun, the resplendent sky bright, crisp, and eye-wateringly beautiful.

With Legion, Wrath, and Ruin's help, Lurk had assembled a small attack force and set off. The plan was simple. Because the MP drain of using [Gate] on even a hundred troops was prohibitive, Wyverns with [Lightweight Cargo] was a thousand-fold more efficient. Painlords provided by Skitharix would be dropped in as a high-mobility distraction while the contingent of Silver Knights and Demi-Claws were deployed behind the besieging force and hit their flanks. Legion would direct the Knights. Wrath was in charge of the Sharpshooters. And Ruin would provide air support and reconnaissance.

With so many unknowns, Lurk and Harmony would observe from a distance. The whole operation was to pit the power of The Citadel against the threats of this new world. Both rulers were curious to see just how intelligent their NPCs were. Could they think for themselves? How would they handle battle? A smaller detachment meant more control. If things started going sideways, the Guardians had been given strict orders to withdraw.

To all of Lurk's limited testing, it seemed as though every power they had by simply being players, had transferred with them. This would be the real thing, however. And yet, neither he nor Harmony felt any trepidation. There was no fear, or worry over the prospect of real bloodshed. Though, Lurk was confident that even if there were other players, they would be unprepared to face a combined arms force in a traditional fantasy setting.

*****

The seventh floor in Black Sky's domain was the smallest. Its only denizens were normally Nox and Crisis. Its only topography was a massive roman style amphitheater. The seventh was one of the floors where Lurk and Harmony both had left their mark in its creation. Roman inspiration meant titanic fluted columns and white marble everywhere. The entire site floated in a dimensional void of true, bottomless abyss. Back in the golden era of YGGDRASIL, the three rulers of Black Sky had used the floor to watch distant player wars or movies rented through the in-game cash shop.
Sets of remote viewing mirrors hovered in front of the new occupants of the sloped seating gallery. Excited conversation buzzed between the clusters of Demi-Claws, Silver Knights, and Corsairs who occupied the tiers.

At the moment, Nox was the center of attention, holding his helmet up high.

"Alright ghouls and gals, pony up. Place ya bets. Place ya bets here. Do I hear twenty on Legion getting the most kills?"

"Fifty on a Ruin kill steal!" Cried a Sharpshooter.

"Alright, I've got kill steals. Can I get top kill of the day? Who is gonna get the flashiest finisher?" Nox flourished his other hand with a shadow demon in his palm.

"Legion accidental team kill on one of his Silver Knights!" Shouted a Corsair through cupped hands.

"Remember everyone, friendly fire isn't very friendly. What else have we got? Come on up, don't be shy." Coins clinked and bets were made with Nox’s helmet being a bottomless reservoir.

Nox passed by his brother and gave his steel helm a shake. Though at first Crisis held resolute, arms crossed defiantly over his chest. It only took a few prods for the mute brother to roll his eyes and plop a few coins begrudgingly into the helm.

"Thank you, brother, I'm sure your bet was well placed." With eyes full of gold, he gave his brother a wide grin.

Nox came to Phage, reclining on a silk chaise lounge that Skitharix had made a few moments ago for her to relax.

"Dread Lady, would you care to partake of our little game?" Giving a courtly bow, the Shadowkin held out his helm with a soft jingle of coin.

"So crass, Nox, but I suppose. My Corsairs do seem to love it." Phage mostly hid her amusement. She called over her shoulder. "Skitharix, darling, place a bet for me. Would you please?"

The towering Abomination leaned forth like a mechanical millipede about to consume a meal.

"Of course my ashen blossom. Hm. I'll place a bet on Legion making a huge mess all over Wrath's face."

Nodding in certainty, Skitharix flipped a few coins into the Shadowkin's helm and went back to alternatively clicking and pacing excitedly.

"That's uh... Oddly specific. And rather innuendo heavy. But very well."

*****

With the advantage of altitude, the walled city on a small hill became clear many miles off. As
well as the rising columns of smoke. Many wide patches of farmlands that formed the skirts of the little nation had been put to the torch.

Zooming ahead, Lurk assessed the assault unfolding. Rows of ladders had been propped up against the tall walls of the fortified metropolis. Fighting was thick on the walls. The defenders on the battlements were holding, but a few pockets were threatening to open into full footholds that could tip the balance. Heaving crowds gathered around the base of each ladder, shields held overhead to protect from the arrows still falling from the round towers that anchored the sections of wall under attack.

Some poor fools had ridden out on horseback to try and face the ad-hoc army and been run down by the bandit cavalry in turn. The remnants of the sortie were still being chased off as Black Sky's force approached.

Rows of wooden barricades sheltered cutthroats ready to rush in once the walls were taken and protected the attacking archers while they peppered the defenses with counter-fire. Wreckage of a battering ram still smoldered from a failed attempt on the gatehouse. This Bandit King was clearly someone with soldiering experience. This person had gathered several thousand men, all bent on slaking their fill of plunder from stolen spoils.

Hovering in place, Lurk pulled on his Mask of the Psion. Ethereal tendrils sprouted from his skull, waving in an invisible wind. Using his psionics, he communicated with the four Painlord engines that Skitharix had provided, and ordered them to jump. As Lurk's consciousness brushed against the machine intelligence inherit to his creations, he felt like he knew them intimately. They were as he had made them. Calculating, logical, yet with a spark of awe and deference to him, their god, that gave him uncomfortable responsibility.

Each Masterwork Construct crashed to the earth like meteors and set off to their assigned locations for the coming battle. Fifteen feet of bipedal, mechanical death machine raced as fast as a galloping horse. Their limbs were inhumanly thin and graceful. Smooth, featureless heads covered in glyphs swept back from broad armored shoulders. Fluted spires sprouted in symmetrical pairs down their backs. Hexagonal indents in the steeples held gems enchanted with various auras.

With the toughness and tonnage of a main battle tank, the Painlord's normal role was providing heavy support to the Flayers of the fourth floor. Lurk had designed the chassis that each was based on, then given them all individual accents. Two carried poleaxes meant to punish defensive builds, while the other two had swords that could cleave a man and his horse in twain with a flick. All four were equipped with wrist-mounted staves that had [Extend Magic: Napalm], to be used in effect as flamethrowers. And many more tricks besides that.

They were hard to miss as they moved in pairs and passed the back line of the bandit force to put pressure on the sides. Though unsure at first, the cutthroat army soon recognized the behemoths as threats when a few men got trampled along the way. Arrows, bolts, and even a few low tier spells pattered off the Painlord’s projectile repelling enchantments like rain.

Watching closely, Lurk wanted to gain a measure of the force they faced as a coterie of outlaws charged one of the towering Constructs.

The Painlord reached out a hand with its palm open and mechanical fingers extended. With a sharp pulling gesture, several dozen men fell as their life essence was ripped from their chests. The red mist coalesced into numerous spheres which came to the Construct and orbited around its spires. With a reverse motion, the Painlord cast [Blood Lightning] from its splayed hand. A single orb
among the dozens evaporated as fuel for the spell.

With a wicked crack, a forked crimson lance seared into the group. The discharge struck one very unlucky bandit and arced to several others. In an instant, the human target's vitae was flash-boiled in their veins. The deaths were messy, to say the least. The survivors recoiled as their companions were gruesomely painted onto the dirt. It only took a few failed attacks to convince the rest to abandon the effort.

The shocking disparity in power made Lurk certain he had made a mistake in assessing the threat the army posed as anything other than laughable.

With the flanks secured, it was time to advance.

[Message]

Ruin.

Yes, High Lord Lurk!

Do a sweep of their defensive line there. See if we can take some of the pressure off the city.

Yes, Lord! With pleasure!

[End Message]

[Message]

Wrath.

Yes, my Lord?

When your Demi-Claws land, have them target the bandits on the ladders. We want to save this city.

Not one more will set foot on those walls.

Very good.

[End Message]

[Message]

Legion.
Good to hear from you, High Lord Lurk!

Thank you, Legion. The defenders look hard pressed.

Aye Lord, their hold is tenuous at best. If too many more get on the walls, it will be over for them.

Ruin will sweep their defensive line of barricades with a breath attack from her Wyvern. Land your troops and attack as we planned. I’ve ordered Wrath to have her Sharpshooters target the enemy scaling the ladders first.

An excellent idea, Lord.

And Legion,

Yes, Sir?

Show them the might of Black Sky.

With pleasure, Sire!

[End Message]

"What're you thinking?" Harmony asked as she pulled up alongside her husband. She tried to search his face, but his features were hard to discern under the ectoplasm of the Mask of the Psion.

"I think it's going pretty wel-"

Then Ruin's Wyvern mount hit the line, marking Black Sky Legion's commitment to the conflict with apocalyptic fanfare. One breath attack was all it took for the sweeping run to carve Ruin's name into the besieger's line. Quick as a flash, the hastily erected wooded palisades were obliterated by a wave of fire. Backwash of flame spread from the impact point. Those not incinerated on contact, were thrown from their feet as the over pressure flung those too close to the blast like toy soldiers.

"Wow, holy shit." Lurk dismissed his Mask so he could look on without anything getting in the way.

A resounding clatter of gear drew both the monarch's attention as their force assembled. The Greater Wyverns carrying troops had landed and were waiting on the ground. Silver Knights unclipped and fell, running to assemble in their lines. Demi-Claws rappelled down and gathered in squads behind the spearmen.

"Form ranks! To your positions! C'mon you bucket heads you know the drill. This day we have the honor of fighting for our Supreme Ones." Bright plume standing proud in the open air, Legion was the fulcrum upon which the force turned. Wrath took the rear, corralling her Sharpshooters forward and spreading word of their first target.

Emblazoned across the front of every tower shield, waving from every banner, was the symbol of Black Sky. The winged helms of the Silver Knights stood proudly, catching the cold light along with the points of their long spears. All told, there were three-hundred Knights, and half that number in Sharpshooters. In any normal engagement, such a numerical disadvantage would mean encirclement
and destruction. But this was not a normal battle.

Legion, the Tactician, the Crusader, the Warsage, set the tempo of the march. The flat of his axe rang a single indefatigable note in time with his steps. As his Knights took up their place, they added their own hammering knell to the choir of steel. Though the Demi-Claws had no plates to drum on, they took up the beat with a cadence of their firing drills. Heavy footfalls in lockstep became the finishing touch as the force set off.

His Lady and High Lord were watching, and he was not going to disappoint.

Both of whom were watching with baited breath as the polished array of their precious NPCs made ready to wage the war their creators had chosen.

When they were within their maximum range, the Demi-Claws opened up with their Type Ninety-Nines. The long, bolt-action weapons were slow, heavy, accurate, and powerful. Lurk had designed the pop monsters of the first and second floors with the weapon in mind. Because although it was a relatively low tier firearm compared to the more elaborate MP or patterned guns, fired en masse it delivered exceptional performance. Black Sky’s line troops were of middling height, so the Demi-Claws were just the right stature to shoot unimpeded over the spearmen that defended them.

Bandits attempting to scale up the walls in their desperate ladder assault began dropping faster than they could line up. Heads and helms were split, while torsos had fist-sized holes blown through them. Very unlucky souls had limbs shorn off, to fall screaming into their comrades below. The order to abandon the ladder assault filtered through the mob of cutthroats and the outlaws reformed a sloppy line to meet the advancing force. The ranks of Silver Knights marched unscathed through the lingering Wyvern flames. Withering volleys from the Sharpshooters shifted from the ladders to the main swarm, carving swathes through the mob.

As the vagabonds reformed into a ragged row, the Silver Knights paused in their advance. The bandits brayed, hooting and hollering like beasts. Then, not one, but two Wyverns did another attack run, carving the opposing force into three pieces with their breath. Before the cutthroats could get into the open gap, the line of Silver Knights rammed into the slots between trenches of flame. Like serrated teeth, the ranks of spearmen formed into wedges. At the center, just behind the main formation, Legion kept vigilant. The glow of his Warsage buffs were toned low. Even without them, a single one of his Knights could have stood his ground against dozens of such a rabble. With the passives as they were, each soldier could have culled hundreds from the braying herd on their own.

As the jaws of Black Sky tightened around the enemy's throat, more deserters peeled off, crumbling the already shaky flanks. Every bandit that tried to escape felt the wrath of the vigilant Painlords. Those who stood and fought were cut down with ruthless efficiency. Whenever a group on the three fronts tried to coordinate, any hard pocket was blown away by concentrated salvos of the Sharpshooters. As inexorable as the tide, the bandit force was mulched before the thrusting spears and ever cycling bolts of the Knights and Demi-Claws.

There was one small hope the dilapidated brigand army had left, and that was their cavalry swiftly closing in on the rear of Black Sky’s phalanx.

Unfortunately, Wrath saw them first, galloping wildly towards her.

The Deathclaw brought her rifle up. She seated it firmly into her shoulder. She drew a bead, slit-pupil eye lining with her holographic sight. Her right foot drew back, talons carving a furrow through the dirt. She bent at the knee, steadying her lungs and pulse. Her target was only hundred
Though her Divine Class rifle, Deusvore, was a custom piece, it carried the stamp of the Apollyon pattern firearms. Her weapon was much shorter than the rifles the Demi-Claws carried. Deusvore had solid metal construction and a straight detachable magazine. It might have been mistaken for a modern, if esoteric assault rifle. However, the mark of the Apollyons were unique sights and the floating rings of ever-shifting blue runes that enveloped and extended from the short barrel.

"[Reaper's Buzzsaw]." Wrath cast the eighth tier spell. The bands of magic symbols grew from her gun and spun rapidly, cycling and identifying targets. In a blink, the whirling blue runes locked into their compliment to the cast.

She pulled the trigger.

Her aspect was overwhelming firepower. Wrath was the tip of a million spears. No enemy had ever breached the gates of The Citadel and not known her name. The charging cavalry were a field of wheat at harvest time. And she was the angel of death. In the vein of the Reaper himself invoked, the cavalry met the fusillade as if they had run into straight into the walls of the city itself.

A barrage of projectiles spat from Deusvore at a daunting rate. Her shots layered on top of each other so quickly that the muzzle flashes blurred together into a gnashing demon trying to claw its way into reality. A single cast was all it took. Wrath scythed her bloody harvest through horse and man alike. One sweep, from left to right and back again, cut down the formation to a man.

Several were hit by so many bullets, they fell into pieces. Pulped and perforated bodies littered the field where the cavalry once stood. The spell was a flexible one, meant to either pour a large amount projectiles into many targets, or a concentrated burst at a single threat.

The tip of Deusvore glowed cherry red, steaming in the cool air.

Among the most dedicated circle of gunner build, there was a piece of equipment agreed upon as indispensable. Ring of the Autoloader. Though rare, it was not often sought after because of its niche application. For the few fully automatic solid ammunition weapons, it was a massive boost to damage. The ludicrous level of customization for NPCs meant Wrath and Ruin both had such rings.

In a transcendent moment, the fighting stood at a standstill as the bandits and defenders of the wall looked on in awe and horror at the display. Only the cries of the dying broached the refrain. Then the Silver Knights crashed their spears and shields together. The note of challenge shattered the pause and the last of the morale of the attackers.

On another part of the battlefield, the Bandit King had narrowly avoided being set on fire in Ruin's first attack run and had been desperately attempting to coordinate an effective counter to the force crushing their flanks and surrounding them. The walls of the city they had hoped to sack were now keeping them pinned. He could not believe the strength of these attackers. All his plans. Years of scheming and waiting and amassing strength to pull off the biggest score, to really cement himself as a real threat was being crushed. All around him his men were dying to the ugly magic users with the long sticks that coughed fire.

He saw the decimation of his cavalry and balked with everyone else. However, he saw an opportunity. The horrible creature that had killed his men must have been some kind of caster, and after such a spell, had to be recovering. That was his chance. If none of the other curs had the guts to do what needed to be done, this was his chance to break out, maybe grab a horse and run. But he
needed to take out that magic caster.

With sword, shield, and Martial Arts, the Bandit King used all of his prodigious strength to make a leap, easily clearing the shield wall of the Silver Knights, with a path clear to Wrath. This was not where he would end. He would rebuild, he thought with a mad grin.

The Bandit Lord was fast, but compared to Legion, he may as well have been standing still.

The Living Armor used his simplest, most basic ability. One that was intrinsic to nearly every warrior class.

Shield Bash.

With a single backhanded swing of the Living Armor's large circular shield, he struck the human attempting to harm his fellow Guardian. The Bandit King was not merely obliterated, he was liquefied by the force of impact. The detritus of the man's ignoble end had very unfortunate direction and velocity.

Although Wrath was of the chameleon breed of the Deathclaw race, she was not willingly red.

"Eeee!" Wrath shrieked as the realization sank in as to exactly what had been splashed all over her. "Augh! Legion! Why! Oh gods... Oh it's in my mouth! Eyugh. Ugh. Ugh. Oh. It's everywhere! Oh that's so nasty!" She helplessly scraped globs of it off herself.

Legion stepped up, grabbing his waist sash as he did so to try and get some of the gore off the poor girl.

"Oh no, little one, I'm sorry! Here let me help... Oh dear. Oh dear he was a juicy one."

"Aw man! I had him. You stole my kill!" Wrath thumped a fist into Legion's chest.

Ruin, even up on her perch, had seen her sister get absolutely soaked and laughed so hard she very nearly fell off her Wyvern.

*****

"Oh! What do I win?"

Skitharix clacked his finger knives together, quite pleased with himself while everyone else stared in disbelief.
Captain of the guard, Warren Reese, had seen a lot of things in his many years of service. For nearly ten years he had held the post, and took pride in the work he and his men did in defending the kingdom of Kadusia. Sure, it was not as glamorous as the standing army, but there was honor in defending his city. He was the one who made sure their king and soldiers had a home they could return to.

In his long tenure, Captain Reese thought he had witnessed all the insanity the world could offer. From crazed adventurers, to crazier magic user's twisted experiments. And of course, the famous Kadusian exploding cattle disease. So, when an army of brigands led by the self-proclaimed Bandit King had come knocking, Warren Reese had not panicked. He tightened his sword belt, roused his men, and over his dead body would not let a single wretched knave into his protectorate.

They had set fire to the battering ram under a torrent of spells and flaming arrows. Then the enemy had brought up ladders. All that was left was the grit of the defenders to stem the tide. Warren was helping push one of the assault ladders off their walls, shoulder to shoulder with halberdiers to shove off the combined weight of the bandits scaling, when one of his men grabbed his arm and pointed at four colossi entering the fray.

Their size alone gave the Captain cause for worry. What were these things? Surely the cutthroats did not have magic casters talented enough to make such golems?

As Reese picked one to watch, the mechanical man-shaped thing waved its hand and men fell dead by the score. To the Captain's eyes, the brigand's very souls were ripped from their chests only to be redirected into red lightning that sprung from the fingers of the golems. Spells of macabre ferocity ripped men into bloody pieces. Warren recalled legends of adventurers of old that had power to sway the outcome of battles with the breadth of their skills. Not a single man even got within reach of the monstrous close combat weapons wielded by the automata. Whoever controlled the giants were clearly no friend of the Bandit King.

When the dragon had come along and torched the bandit's back line, his men had cheered. Reese did not. He had survived as long as he had by hoping for the best and preparing for the worst. Though he had gawped when, with apparent suicidal inclinations, their allies of circumstance marched through the still burning fire.

Though he was not able to discern exactly what was going on, he heard the cries of the bandits on the wall beneath him. Reptilian mages used long wood and iron staves they aimed at their shoulders like limbless crossbows. The exotic implements boomed with explosive spells. Reese saw smoke and heard the impacts. The Captain, for all his years, did not recall any spell that produced such strange visual effects and audible whistling cracks.

With the bandit assault forced to abandon the ladders under threat of the reptilian mages, his men quelled the last pockets of resistance on the walls. The Captain studied the unfolding battle as intently as he could.

Even from a distance, the armor the knights all wore was of ludicrous make and quality. It must have been ruinously expensive to have so many troops with such equipment. With long spear, they mulched through the ranks of the ragged mob like chaff. The impressiveness would have been diminished if the knights were not outnumbered a dozen times over. They fought on, heedless of
when they should have succumbed to a normal man's vigor. Their tall shields were an unbroken wall bristling with deadly thorns.

Screaming curses, the Captain and his men all ducked when a pair of dragons raced towards them, breathing streams of flame. They veered so close to the ground, their talons nearly scraped the ramparts. Near enough to see that they were wyverns, not dragons as he knew them. Even at blistering speed, their proximity really let their size hit home. The things were massive! Their wingspan alone blotted out the sun. After the passage of the flyers, Warren moved to watch through the ramparts once more.

He saw that the besieging force had been separated into three pieces, and were being cut down with relentless ferocity. Yet, Kadusia's erstwhile allies were soon going to be in trouble as the cavalry that had routed Warren's best men approached on their flank. Several city guard on the wall tried to call out warnings or were waving their arms and pointing.

An absurdly tall and colorful reptilian magic caster was up to something, however. Reese knew a high tier spell when he saw one, the lizard-folk's strange staff lit with an arcane glow that was visible even from so far away. A deluge of streaking meteors emitted from the weapon. They seemed small, but packed enough power to slice through man and horse alike. Where the caster stood, the entire cavalry division that had driven off even experienced defenders, fell.

If Reese had not been on the wall that day, and witnessed that single caster slay so many men with such ease, he never have believed such a thing possible. Even though they were just bandits, Warren felt some sympathy. To be dispatched in such callous disregard for life stunned the man. These people who had come to their aid clearly understood war in a very different way than he did.

The Captain of the guard was lucky to be on a section of the fortification that afforded him a perfect viewing of the Bandit King's demise. Reese only knew of one person with enough Martial Arts to perform the stunt of vaulting over the knight's spear line. The cutthroat was heading for the mage that had slain so many. It was smart. Such a powerful spell doubtless had quite the cost and a long rest period.

A colossus in gleaming armor with an axe no human should have been able to lift, let alone swing, smeared the Bandit King into red paste with a single blow. Not with the axe even. His shield.

Just as Captain Reese thought he had well and truly seen everything that day, a pair of godlings alighted on the ramparts before him.

Not just one. Two.

Both wildly different in species. A male and female.

The Captain regarded the woman first. Despite the power she exuded, it was not with malice. Regal crimson wings, strong enough to casually bore the woman aloft with all the steel she wore. Even on her perch, it was clear the female was probably taller than most of the men on the battlement who gaped at the sight of her. She moved with such easy grace that Reese was certain she could have probably broken a normal human in half with one hand.

She was both beautiful and deadly. Plated armor that looked to be worth a small kingdom covered the draconic woman from talon to neck. A helm designed to fit over her many horns was held under her arm. Though her stance was casual, Reese did not miss the palm she rested on the top of the axe at her hip. Gold-flecked scales dotted her cheeks like freckles, and hair as red as the sun on a bloody
day cascaded down her shoulders. Yet, she was smiling. A warm, genuine display of happiness.

Reese might have guessed the other one to be lizard-folk with his burgundy scales and fang-filled snout, but Warren had never seen one with wings. Dragons were the single most powerful entities that existed in the world, and this man was very draconic indeed. As a child, Warren had once had a teacher that had a piece of a dragon's horn. The teacher had told the class that the more ridges you could count, the older the specimen. Looking at the double pair of horns, the man could not see any. Staring more closely he saw ridges so fine and innumerable the Captain had mistaken them for a pattern in the light.

Cylinders of brass and other stranger metals adorned the figure's cuirass. A side of the scaly male's long black coat hung open, with many other unidentifiable tools, more pointed brass tubes, and other curiosities were in easy reach. Oddly shaped wands hung on the figure's belts. Based on the lighter armor and magic items, Reese guessed the male to be a caster. And if his power was comparable to the earlier display, it set the Captain's teeth on edge.

It was not the inhuman appearance, nor the staggering stature of the dragon-man, it was the unknown he represented. The warrior woman and her axe was an honest figure. One that Warren comprehended. Magic always made him wary. Especially the kind he did not understand.

Though the dragon-man did not scowl exactly. His gaze swept the fortifications, slit-pupils taking measure of its defenders. The city guard were a simple lot. Steel helmets, dyed gambeson, wielding a mixture of halberds, crossbows, and swords.

"May I speak to who's in charge?" A subtle pressure of command exuded from the winged man.

Though he was hesitant, Warren answered.

"Aye, sir. That'd be me." The Captain glanced between the pair. "And uh, who am I addressing?"

"I am called Lurk." The male raised his arm towards his companion. "And this is my wife, Harmony. We are the leaders of Black Sky Legion. Our troops shall make sure your people are safe. We'd like to talk to your city's ruler."

All doubt on the pair's claim to leadership evaporated from the man when the largest wyvern he had ever seen latched onto the walls. Stone groaned under the weight and heavy thumps reverberated under the leathery membranes of its pinions. Every man still standing had to brace themselves lest they be thrown back from the buffeting wind from the wingbeats of the monumental creature. One forelimb was mantled out, hooked onto the top of the nearby corner keep. Soldiers manning the ramparts moved with haste to get clear of the claws of the gargantuan death-dealer. Tall as a siege tower, the wyvern loomed overhead.

It was clear as fiery breath that this creature was regarding Reese as a hound would someone that it did not trust around its master. Made even more abundant by the rider who stood high in the saddle. The wyvern's pilot looked oddly similar to the magic caster that had cut down the cavalry and carried a stave that was even deadlier looking up close. The creature had a green glow to it that roiled in warning. Two sets of eyes bored into Warren Reese, and he was not about to argue with something that had teeth taller than him.
Word traveled fast through the city, of the attack and their saviors. Where before, the Kadusians had been running from the main gate of their city, now they moved towards it. Crowds lined the cobblestone street to catch a glimpse of the name on everyone’s lips.

Black Sky Legion.

Not wanting to be rude, Lurk had only taken a small honor guard into the city. The rest of their troops were keeping watch outside the walls. He understood that it would not be good for first impressions to invite themselves and their army inside.

At the head of the procession was Legion, who was simply having a grand time of it. He had insisted that if he was to act as grand marshal, then he needed a really big flag. From her inventory, Harmony had found a massive one emblazoned with their crest. Their white swords and sun on a black background with glittering gold trim. She always had several on person. Legion had then taken the banner with reverence normally reserved for holy relics. So, with immutable joy, the Warpriest led their entrance into Kadusia proper.

To make sure they presented themselves as allies, Lurk had instructed the Silver Knights and Sharpshooters to march with their weapons leaning against their shoulders. A theoretically universal display that the Wyrmblood believed would convey their non-hostile intent. The two monarchs walked between the score of Living Armor in the front, with the Demi-Claws behind. Of course, bringing in one of the Painlords may have been a bit much, striding sedately right behind Legion. Having proven themselves more than capable, Lurk was more comfortable in unknown territory with one of the constructs close at hand.

Though Captain Reese did not want one of the giant automata into his city, he doubted any of his men could have stopped it.

The throngs of people were mostly human. Although Lurk spied a good smattering of other races as well. Here and there were a few elvish looking folk of mostly woodland breeds and even some examples of beastkin. Over the heads of the knights and between the legs of the Painlord, he could see the top of Legion’s bright crest, emphatically waving their flag. Kadusians all around cheered and clapped as the group followed the mounted city guard to the kingdom’s seat of power.

"C’mon, give the crowd a wave. They’re just eating it up." Harmony nudged her husband. The Scarlet dragoness had put away her helmet and was gazing in wonder at their surroundings. Old stone houses and shops lined the main thoroughfare and the kingdom’s colorful denizens all looked on in wonder. The mood was infectious, and Harmony’s grin went from ear to ear.

"Do you think Legion still has his passives on?" Lurk mused.

"He's having fun." Harmony laughed.

Lurk chuckled in agreement. At his wife’s coaxing, he raised a claw and could not hold back his own smile when fresh cheers arose. "I'm glad I didn't bring Entropy. I think our Knights and Sharpshooters did very well."

"All those guys were so low level. We probably could have sent one of the Caliber Court, or just Legion."
"True, but it would have taken them a while."

"Are you sure? Just one spell from Wrath took out all their horses."

"Also true. We got so used to grinding Arch-Dragon Peak that I don't remember the last time I had to spam crowd control spells."

At the mention of their old lives in YGGDRASIL, another comparison brewed in Harmony's head. "Are these real humans? All of them?" She wondered aloud. There were so many. And they were all so different, so natural. No game developer in the world had enough time or a perfect enough facial rendering engine to articulate so many unique faces.

"I think it's safe to say they are."

"We can be anything we want. Have you thought about that?"

"We could, couldn't we? This is literally a new world. A different world. We are our avatars. I can feel my spells. My MP. We could actually be a king and queen." His voice was distant. Wistful, almost.

"Do you think we can?" Harmony challenged. If there was any man in her opinion that could do it, it was her husband.

"I think it'd be fun to try. Who's really ever ready to lead?"

"Lurk, sweetheart, you're being overly analytical. This is a new world. One in which we can be anyone we want. There's no harm in calling ourselves king and queen."

Taking his wife's claw in his own, Lurk gave her digits a gentle squeeze.

"As long as you're my Queen, I think I can manage."

Harmony rubbed her husband's knuckles with armored claws.

"You've always been my King, sweetheart. Now you're King Lurk to everybody else too."

*****

A single lapse in focus can lead to tragedy.

Buried in the crowd was a mother and her young daughter. Little Thea wanted a closer look and tuuged on her mother's skirt, wanting to be lifted up. She had flowers to wave in the air. Though Thea did not know what the occasion was, she knew that something good had happened, and there was a parade. Her mother was too occupied by the marching spectacle to notice. Finally getting tired of not being able to see anything, the girl wove between the legs of the adults to squeeze to the front of the crowd with her red chrysanthemums held tightly.

She emerged just in time to see Legion walk by waving his flag. So overwhelmed by the sight of him, as soon as the Guardian passed, the child ran out into the road.
Right into the path of the striding Painlord.

To the ensorcelled engine of destruction, the child would have impeded its steps no more than a drop of water would have interfered with a tsunami. Thea turned and stared like a doe would an oncoming diesel.

Yet, it stopped.

With what could only be described as curiosity, the Painlord scooped up the creature that registered as level zero to its detecting spells. The Greater Construct rotated the girl left and right before bringing her close to its ivory faceplate. Many Kadusians on either side of the street looked around, wondering why everything had come to a halt and fingers began pointing up in horror.

Being lifted high into the air, Thea had the fearlessness only children had and laughed in joy at being able to see so much. Her bare feet and gray tunic hung in the autumnal air. She marveled at the intricacy of the Painlord's smooth design and runic symbols painted on it. Close enough to reach out and touch the Construct, Thea followed through with her original intention. Straining her arm as far as it could reach, the child deposited her flowers in the hollow of the giant's throat.

With its machine intelligence, the Painlord recognized the offering of a red object formed into fragile patterns and reciprocated the gesture.

A crimson blood offering floated into its other fist. The Greater Construct crushed the orb into a perfect sphere of crystalline life-essence. Pinched between two skeletal metal fingers, the Painlord held the lustrous sphere out for the child. Thea eagerly took the unbelievably pretty jewel, thinking it the most wonderful thing in the world.

Both Lurk and Harmony had watched the exchange with held breath. Trying to hide his sigh of relief, Lurk's great stature allowed him to discern the mother of the child among the crowd and held out a claw towards the poor woman. Fortunately the people parted so that the maiden could come forward. Hands clasped so tightly together her the bones of her knuckles looked ready to burst out of her skin, the hapless woman approached. She seemed like a minor noble, or perhaps the spouse of a wealthy merchant. Immediately, the human fell to her knees in supplication heedless of the dirt of the street getting on her dress.

"Please, please m'lord. Please, my Thea's but a child. She knew no better. Please-"

Holding up a claw to stop the woman from thinking he was holding her child hostage for daring to simply be excitable, the Wyrmblood turned. Speaking low words of reassurance, Harmony got the woman back to her feet. Using Mask of the Psion, Lurk gave a quick order to the Painlord, then banished the Mask once more.

Completely at odds with its appearance, the Painlord looked their way and carefully gave the little girl back to her mother. The woman was on the verge of tears as she hugged Thea tightly against her bosom. Harmony smiled at the girl with her pretty bauble, choosing not to remark on the actual morbidity of the gift.

"It looks like someone got a present."

"Thank you, merciful lady. Thank you." With Thea still awestruck at the dragon-lady, her mother quickly melted back into the throng of people. Those close enough to see, regarded the crimson
jewel with wonder.

With the situation sorted, complete with happy ending, the crowd resumed cheering.

"Lurk, you did tell the Painlord not to crush small children right." Harmony asked her husband accusingly as they resumed walking.

"Well, yeah. Of course I did."

He had not.

******

Warren had ridden ahead of the procession and had hastily informed his ruler of the situation. And of the company that was heading their way. The Queen was silent as she was told of this mysterious force. So when the procession arrived at the doors of her palace, she was at least braced for the worst.

The Queen was a frail thing, thin of wrist and waist. She had a voice just above a whisper, and the heart of a lion. A thick mantle of white Direwolf fur and wool hung from her shoulders. In the fading season, chill set in for her easily. Beneath, a flowing blue and white dress hid her unhealthily lean frame. The winter months always did a number on her arthritis, after all. Reese stood by her side with his hand near the pommel of his sword as their saviors approached.

Ismeena looked on the two dragon-kin and agreed with the assessment her Captain of the guard had given. Staring at Harmony, Queen Belgrave concluded that Reese had woefully under sold the beauty of the fiery red woman. The Scarlet Drake exuded a passionate calm and had disarmingly honest features. The Kadusian ruler's attention was mostly drawn to Lurk because of the less flashy state of his garb. Much as Reese had, she quickly concluded that the King of Black Sky Legion was a caster. A ruler who was also a battle mage? Ismeena had never heard of such a thing. Then again, neither had she ever heard of Black Sky before that day.

"I am Queen Ismeena Belgrave, Steward of the Kingdom of Kadusia in my husband's stead. On behalf of my people, I thank you for the great service you've done us this day. I do not know how fate arranged for your intervention, but I am eternally grateful. By account of Captain Reese, the battle was not in our favor by the time you arrived. May I ask your names?" Ismeena inclined her head in thanks, and never let her eyes drift from the pair.

High Lord Lurk waved a claw to indicate his troops should stand down. The Silver Knights and Sharpshooters all let the butts of their spears and guns clack to the flagstones of the Kadusian palace courtyard. Legion turned so that the flag of their guild framed his Lord and Lady as they ascended the steps towards the waiting Queen.

"My name is Lurk, and this is my wife, Harmony. It's a pleasure to meet you, Queen Ismeena Belgrave." Lurk placed a claw above his heart and reciprocated Ismeena's greeting. "We are the rulers of Black Sky Legion. A scouting party from the Bandit King tried to assault one of our men at our doorstep no less. A... Survivor informed us of their plans to sack your city. We saw your plight from afar, and that civilians would be the ones to suffer. Believe me when I say that there's no one we detest more than thieves. We are strangers to this land, and have many questions, if you would
"A trifle, King Lurk. Please, let us discuss things in my home. It is far too cold out here." Ismeena pulled her mantle tighter and gestured for Reese to follow.

Turning, the Belgrave matriarch ushered them into the palace.

They were led to an ornate sitting room specifically designed to entertain foreign dignitaries or visiting diplomats. A pair of ladies-in-waiting flanked the double-doors they came in through. Taking her seat across a low oaken table, Ismeena held herself with all the regal bearing she could muster, hands in her lap, turned slightly to one side. Warren took his place behind her, folding his arms across his chest.

Harmony and Lurk looked at the small lounge sofa. Perhaps without armor on they would have both fit on the single couch. Rather than risk an awkward shuffle, Lurk simply grabbed a chair large enough for his bulk and set it right beside much to the horror of several waiting attendants. Though neither of them were in the least bit sore after the extended flight or small parade, it was still nice to sit down.

The Kadusian royal was reminded of the strangeness of her guests. Especially compared to herself, Harmony was an absolute giant of a woman, yet unquestionably beautiful. Lurk was taller still, and looked as though a dragon had grown tired of its old form and desired to walk around the world of men at their level. The Queen was well read, yet had never come across mention of such races that fit what she saw. It would be impolite to ask, and Ismeena had to keep her aspect of hospitality.

"Would either of you like anything? We have many fine spirits. And I think one of our chefs just finished a batch of honey cakes." Ismeena offered.

"Some tea would be wonderful." Knowing it would be rude to their host to refuse all offerings, Lurk asked for what he always did in such situations.

"Honey cakes?" Harmony inquired, sometimes too honest for her own good.

Queen Belgrave nodded to the two attendants who bowed and left to retrieve refreshments and confections.

"You must forgive my own curiosity. Where did you hail from? I've never heard of Black Sky Legion before. Surely such mighty warriors must be famous." The Queen asked.

Lurk and Harmony glanced at one another, silently agreeing that sincerity would probably be the best policy until they were more certain of their situation.

"Honestly, we're from another world. It was similar to this one in many ways, but the actual people were... Few." Harmony said somberly.

Warren visibly started, and Ismeena's eyes grew wide.

"That's... Another world? Gods... You're serious, aren't you. What happened? Why are you here?" Reese blurted.

"Our old world ended. We thought we would end with it, but instead, we seem to have been
transported here." Lurk answered.

"Why did it end?" Ismeena asked.

"The gods all died." Though he was unsure where the statement had come from, Lurk felt it was the right thing to say. His wife nodded. After a drawn out silence, the male pulled a gold coin from his pocket and handed it to the Queen.

"Do you know the word YGGDRASIL? Or does that coin seem familiar?" The currency he had handed the Kadusian monarch was the eponymous currency of their old world, bearing the nine-branched world tree on each side. Turning the weighty gold coin over in her palm, Ismeena shook her head before handing it to Reese. He also answered in the negative.

"I'm sorry, I'm unfamiliar with your word or your coin." The Queen had genuine sorrow in her tone.

Harmony piped in next.

"Could you tell us about this world? What other lands are there? What of the people? The races? Are there monsters?"

"Before you leave, I shall have our cartographer fetch a copy of our most accurate map. It should help a great deal. Take it with my thanks. Please, feel free to tour my city after we're done. Our local chapter of the Seeker's guild has many seasoned men and woman from afar. I'm sure many of them are well-traveled enough to tell you of the dangers of the wilds." Ismeena was bold and proud of her land, and her people.

Just then servants returned with a fresh pot of tea and a platter stacked high with golden finger-cakes, tops glistening with fresh honey. Lurk took the offered cup of steaming tea gratefully and had a sip of the fragrant liquid. Hints of lemongrass and hibiscus with just a touch of rosewater gave it a light, refreshing palatability. Harmony helped herself to a bite of honey cake and chirped happily, telling Lurk that he should have a taste. Giggling, she fed her husband the sweet treat, seeing him light up when the dense confection hit his tongue.

Ironically, it was this little display that set Ismeena most at ease. The draconic monarchs showed such an easy comfort with one another that reminded her of her own husband, and set her heart aching to the song of longing.

"I think we may have much to learn from one another. Captain Reese told me you magic casters are quite formidable." First and foremost, Queen Belgrave was no diplomatic slouch.

"Ah, I can see why you would think the Sharpshooters are casters. It's actually the special weapons they carry." The Wyrmblood male set down his drink. From his inventory, Lurk summoned a Type Ninety-Nine. Leaning forward, he passed a claw over the components of the rifle. Warren in particular paid very close attention.

Though Ismeena was not as enamored with tools of war as her city Captain was, she could appreciate the clean lines of the wooden components and metal cylinder of the foreign armament. More than the Type Ninety-Nine, Belgrave took note of the many intricate, clearly magical rings that adorned eight of Lurk's digits.

"In itself, this one is very simple. It uses self-contained ammunition. It can hold ten such shots, and
can be fired as quickly as one can work the bolt and pull the trigger." Lurk pulled back the straight, infantryman style bolt, and fetched a round out of his coat to hand to the Queen. Here, the Wyrmblood was in his element. "When you fire one round, the extractor on the bolt ejects the spent casing, and chambers a new one when you push it forward."

Being an educated monarch, Ismeena could roughly follow what Lurk was saying. When she held the brass and copper point tube however, she became completely lost. How could such a small thing kill a man? Warren had told her that he had seen more than a hundred cut down in an instant with such things.

Seeing the Captain's interest, Lurk held up the rifle for the man. Unable to quash his curiosity, Warren walked around where his ruler sat and took the offered wood and metal contraption. Watching the human get the heft and balance of the gun and work the bolt, Lurk considered that Reese likely could not have pulled the trigger, lacking levels in the Gunnery job class required to use even the most basic firearms of YGGDRASIL. The Wyrmblood made mental note to test that theory at a later date to see if the same rules still applied to even just a mechanical system.

"What do your people know of magic? I saw a few of the bandits casting spells." Lurk took the opportunity to turn the conversation back in the direction he wanted it.

"Though these questions would be most suited for our head wizard, I can attempt to answer them to the best of my knowledge." Though she eschewed violence, Queen Belgrave did have a fondness for magic. She liked finding and sponsoring young mages, and helped foster the Kadusian Caster Academy.

"It seemed like tier magic. Do you know it?" Harmony asked.

The queen puffed out her chest and lifted her chin.

"Of course, we have many casters and Seekers who know up to third tier. Our head wizard even knows a fifth tier spell, though he is away with my husband. What spells did your casters use today? I'm told it was very powerful."

Lurk and Harmony exchanged yet another glance. Harmony felt the tickle of her husband's connection.

[Message]

She can't be serious...

I think she is.

What do you think we should show them?

Do you think the highest is really fifth tier? I can't even remember the last time I used a fifth tier spell.

We would have seen it during the attack. No one in the city is even high enough level.
"Let's not show our hands easily. Don't admit what tier, but not deny it either.

Good idea. What spell then?

Let's not use anything... Destructive.

I'll use Unbound. We'll be able to see how they react to that.

[End Message]

"I think it would be easier to demonstrate." Lurk stood. "Our home has come to reside in the mountains to your kingdom's west by my reckoning. I can show you exactly where. That way you can inform your soldiers, just in case they need to travel nearby. We'll be there and back again in a few seconds."

"You claim to know [Teleportation]? That's fifth tier." The Queen remarked, and Lurk shook his head.

"Oh no. Normal [Teleportation] has limits on distance. I don't know how well it translates in this world. No, my Mask allows me to use [Greater Teleportation] without casting time, or other effects of my choosing."

"Such spells only exist in legend. It is one thing to allege knowledge, and bolder still to declare you can cast magic of myth." Ismeena narrowed her eyes only a hair, yet otherwise remained unfazed.

The Wyrmblood nodded in understanding. Based on their responses, actions, and all reconnaissance performed through scrying on the city, fourth tier seemed to be the limits of the Kadusians and the surrounding territories. If such a lowly scaling of magic was seen as the heights, it was little wonder they regarded something as simple as [Greater Teleportation] with incredulity and skepticism. Lurk must have sounded like quite the charlatan.

"The mountains? You can't be serious. That's a six day journey by horse if you ride it to death." Reese challenged. "You're not goin' anywhere with Queen Ismeena." Warren declared as he folded his arms over his chest, defiant of any magic caster no matter how powerful they claimed to be.

"You're more than welcome to come instead, Captain Reese. We'll be gone for less than a minute. My wife will even wait here for us." Lurk stated as he made a casual pulling gesture over his visage.

When the Wyrmblood summoned his Mask of the Unbound, Warren had to tell himself not to recoil. The alien visage turned to him and the human felt his knees grow weak. The Captain would not buckle however. Not with his Queen watching.

"Captain, if you would place your hand on my shoulder." Lurk's voice echoed, as though his words passed through an ethereal undercurrent.

With a fearlessness he did not feel, Reese walked around the couch and did so. He took a deep breath to control his breathing even as his heart beat at a furious pace. When a hand as light as a songbird came to rest on his shoulder, he looked in shock to Queen Ismeena. Ismeena was a strong-
willed woman. She understood that it was necessary to be bold, and fearless. She considered that it might have been a trap, but seriously doubted that if Lurk was as powerful as he claimed to be, it would have been a needlessly elaborate plan. She stood behind her Captain and beamed in response, committed to her action.

"Alright, here we go." Without any other preamble, the King of Black Sky took a step.

To Ismeena and Warren, it felt like a full body blink. For less than a second, all five of their senses gave back nothing. A muffling blackness fell on them, and was just as quickly lifted.

"Here we are." Lurk remarked casually. "I would love to give you both a formal tour some time later. Today has been a long day already, and I wouldn't want to inconvenience either of you. I'm sure both of you have a lot of work after the bandit attack."

Neither of the two Kadusians had words. They were stunned to silence, either by the sight of the ornate door of The Citadel, or the speck in the distance that was their city. Ismeena and Reese were petrified. Rooted by their feet, mouths agape. They breathed in the noticeably colder, thinner mountain air.

"Hm," The Wyrmblood said, more to himself. He gave them a moment to look around, then stepped them back to where the three had been standing only moments prior.

Stumbling back, Warren was quick to remove his contact with the tall draconic man. Worry commanded him to guide his Queen back to her seat.

"What do you really want from us, King Lurk?" Ismeena Belgrave demanded.

"We'd like to be your friends." The High Lord answered.

"What conditions would you impose on this relationship?" The Kadusian retorted.

The true negotiator, Harmony stepped in to the conversation properly.

"Please, don't think we're looking for such... Forceful alliances. We haven't come here out of malice. We didn't come to your city's aid because we expected to be compensated. I genuinely believe there's no reason we can't be neighborly. In our old world, we never sought conflict with others. But we were always ready to answer it. Especially if it was on behalf of a friend." Harmony was soft, but firm in her assurances.

"Once my husband returns from helping our allies in the Coalition from fending off the Heymon Empire, I'd be more than happy to work out formal wording on a partnership between our two kingdoms. Until then, will a non-aggression agreement suffice? I would ask-"

"That we return with our troops? Naturally. Like I said, we only came to help. Not to occupy or conquer." Having passionately studied many a dark age European society, Lurk could guess what the Kadusian ruler was going to ask.

"Thank you." Queen Ismeena released a deep breath in relief. "I don't want to seem ungrateful. I would just prefer to have my husband present before jumping into such a commitment."

"That's perfectly understandable. Would it be agreeable for us to leave just ten of our troops here in the city? I can instruct them to give aid if your city comes under attack again, as well as a means to
contact us instantly, should the need arise. Or if you just want to talk. Ah, I actually have the perfect candidate in mind." He turned to his wife. "Let me go get one of the Caliber Court. One of them should be well-suited."

"Good idea, darling." Harmony spoke around a mouthful of dense honey cake.

Once more, Lurk vanished.

In the interim, the Scarlet Drake engaged the Queen in simple, endearingly girly discourse. Both Ismeena's dress and city were brought up in equal measures of grace, beauty, and aesthetic. With her background in digital graphics, Harmony was well acquainted with color theory and fashion. Pleasantly surprised and disarmed in parallel, Ismeena connected the monarch who sat across from her with strength that she envied and passion with which she empathized.

In short order the High Lord returned with Lapua Magnum in tow.

Lapua was a member of a rather obscure race. The Neverborn were a psionically sensitive species. Her features were elf-like, however a nest of slim tendrils sprouted from her head in place of hair. A halo of psionic power floated inches from her brow, giving her face a pale cast. Her irises and sclera were cloudy, but she was far from blind. The most striking and immediately noticeable oddity were her arms. They were long, covered in chitinous alabaster plating, and bifurcated at the elbow. Each hand ended in four segmented, sharply-tipped fingers.

She wore the aristocratic armor ensemble that all the Caliber Court shared. Her outfit was replete with both filigree mail and the trimmings of Victorian era vestments. Though for Lapua, it was important her arms were free and unimpeded. All four of her hands lifted the hem of her half-skirt as the Neverborn curtsied.

"Fairest Lady! Queen Harmony, your beauty is as the rising of the reddest sun. This humble member of the Caliber Court is truly graced to have been given such a glorious purpose by the Supreme Ones this day."

Only after Harmony dipped her head, acknowledging the Neverborn, did Lapua turn and properly introduce herself to the other occupants.

"Greetings, and fair day. I am Three-Thirty-Eight Lapua Magnum. Please, call me Lapua." When the Neverborn spoke, her smiling lips did not move. Instead, the air vibrated at her psionic command to emulate speech.

Glancing at the two Kadusians gawking at one of the less threatening of the Caliber Court, Lurk wondered if he should have gotten Mags instead.

Ah well, all things in retrospect, the Wyrmblood thought to himself.

"High Lord Lurk has given me the honor of acting as a representative of Black Sky Legion. I shall pray to the holy Tetragrammaton that we can foster a relationship that serves The Citadel and Kadusia both, Queen Ismeena Belgrave and Captain Warren Reese."

Fumbling for her etiquette, Ismeena did her best not to stare.

"I'm sure Captain Reese will be able to find you appropriate accommodations within the city, miss Lapua. It's the least we can do after the service your King and Queen have done for our people."
Pitching in, Warren clumsily contributed.

"Miss, uh... Lapua... Just, if you please, return to the palace, or ask one of my watchmen, and we can direct you to one of the manors we keep for diplomatic guests."

"Thank you, Queen Ismeena. Though I wish the Court had been able to participate, I'm glad to hear that the Legion's actions this day were meritorious. The Neverborn placed a pair of hands over her heart.

Harmony chose that moment to break into the discussion.

"My husband and I don't wish to take anymore of your time. As long as nothing else unexpected happens, please ask Lapua to contact us when your own husband arrives back. That way we can lay down a more formal peace agreement."

"Of course, I'm sure he will love to meet all of you. In the meantime, please, enjoy the sights of my city. Its sights and wonders are plentiful, I assure you. Would you like me to arrange a guide?"

"I think we'll just stroll for a bit, then return home." The Scarlet dragoness looked to her mate and he nodded in agreement.

Giving their formal farewells and goodbyes, the first meeting between Black Sky Legion, and the city-state kingdom of Kadusia was officially ended.

The Queen was first to speak as soon as she was certain they would not be overheard.

"Captain Reese. I'd like to hear your thoughts. If it came to blood, how would we fare?"

The seasoned watchman replied instantly.

"They would crush us. No illusion spell that I know could've done what King Lurk did. And since that only leaves the possibility that what he showed us was real, that means he's more powerful than a simple human could ever be. And he did it without effort. Without preparation or difficulty. With just a few hundred, they massacred ten-thousand men in hours."

"I wish I could disagree. Let us pray that they are true to their words of peace and fellowship. I fear that is our only hope of survival."

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Having given the order to the rest of their army hours ago, nearly all of Black Sky Legion had returned to The Citadel.

Lurk made sure to instruct Lapua not to divulge information about or use any spell over seventh tier unless it was an emergency. The rulers of Black Sky put their heads together and came up with a long list of inquiries for the Neverborn, acting as their envoy to Kadusia, to look into. She would make a daily report to The Citadel on her findings. Each member of the Caliber Court were level ninety back in YGGDRASIL, and Lurk was confident that she could handle herself, but still left the
woman with five Silver Knights and four Sharpshooters just in case.

Ten, just as they had agreed with Queen Belgrave.

It was with this small retinue, that Harmony and Lurk wandered the streets of Kadusia. They simply followed the path of least resistance, following the whim of fancy and wanderlust. Residential houses leaned on each other like old friends in the older districts, having been built up generation by generation. Family-owned businesses hawked wares or were closing for the evening. There was some light to be had, and Kudisia's arteries still flowed with its people, bustling about at a much more sedate pace.

As the group passed a bakery preparing his ingredients for the following morning, they stopped to watch and remarked upon the simple routine.

"Look at that medieval baker doing medieval baking shit."

Snorting in amusement, Harmony marveled at the liveliness of the inhabitants. Although the baker was too engrossed in his work, many gaggles of onlookers watched the visiting royalty and their now famed knights and reptilian casters.

"I mean, damn, hun. This is it. We're really doing it. Can you believe it?" Lurk continued.

"This was supposed to all end. But it didn't. We didn't. The Citadel didn't. We can make a place for ourselves."

Lurk grabbed his wife's claw and swept her into a hug. Chest to chest, their noses only inches away, they gave each other a quick peck.

"Shall we retire for the evening my Lady?" Affecting a thick, nasally tone, the Wyrmblood licked his love's cheek.

"After you, my King."

The pair vanished in a muted arcane flash.

After the wedded pair left, Lapua Magnum was left to squeal in absolute joy. The Neverborn let her formality fall for just a brief jaunt of self-indulgence, jumping and prancing about, giddy as a schoolgirl at the prospect of serving her Lord and Lady. Giving her best ballerina twirl, Lapua stifled her giggles with four palms, and gave thanks to her Supreme rulers.

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After one of the longest days of his life, Captain Warren Reese just wanted to go home. Preferably to spend the rest of the evening with his wife and child in his most comfortable chair with a mug of his favorite mead. His station afforded him some of the nicer things in life, and owned a large house near the center of Kadusia.

Closing the gate of their grassy front yard behind him, Warren sighed in relief. His daughter, wearing one of his gray tunics had been waiting for his return, and ran to him.
"Daddy! Daddy!" She cried. "Look what I got!"
Chapter Notes

Warning! This chapter contains graphic depiction of explicit sexual relations between a married couple. You have been warned, oh reader mine.

Hints of ancient Roman architectural influence were sprinkled throughout The Citadel. Both Lurk and Harmony shared an appreciation for fantasy worlds and settings that drew inspiration from historical sources. Just with flares here or there. The ninth floor had elaborate bath houses. The veined marble and ornate decor betrayed the old world inclination of the structures.

Each separate bathing area was the size of an Olympic swimming pool. Hot spa water cascaded from statues, fountains, and long aqueducts that ran the circumference of many. Some had a vaulted ceiling, while others had nocturnal ivy that formed a living canopy of emerald green. Some were open, and others more private, with partitions of fluted columns supporting shingled red clay roofs. All of the baths had lounging areas with chairs, benches, bars with drinks, and changing rooms. All of it was needlessly embellished and had served no practical function back in the game.

Now, actually swimming in the luxury of their own private bath house, Lurk no longer regretted having put way too much time and effort into their creation. He had spent many a long night studying building tutorials for YGGDRASIL to get all the moving pieces in order. Though Harmony lacked the skill in geometry to actually make anything other than the Greco-Roman statues, her feminine sensibilities insured that each bathhouse was furnished with appropriate five-star resort level creature comforts.

She had been the one to suggest not just taking a bath, but skinny dipping. It was their house after all. And they could be naked if they damn well pleased. Something they both valued, was privacy. The married couple had lived together on their own for many years. Strangely, even with The Citadel now brimming with life, Lurk did not feel this peace intruded upon.

Busy being enthralled with her immense strength and the novelty of swimming with a tail, Harmony was happily gliding about.

Relaxing on the outer perimeter, the Wyrmblood sat on one of the deep steps going down into the spa with his arms splayed out onto the edge on either side. Taking a deep breath, Lurk lost himself to his body's feedback. Though he knew this particular bath was scalding hot, the water felt perfectly pleasant in temperature. The parts of him that were thick with scales seemed natural, as if he had been born in the form. He was very glad his avatar had binocular vision. Different sight would have been very disorienting.
The Scarlet dragoness floated into her husband's arms with a contented sigh.

"Mmm, this is nice. I can't remember the last time we relaxed like this." Harmony nuzzled into her lover's chest.

"Let's go for a walk through the Arboretum after this. Like how we used to walk around that city park? I miss that." He answered.

Being a virile male, Lurk noted his wife's lovely naturally buoyant breasts in the warm water. A stirring roused within his nethers as he drank in an eyeful of her jewelry adorned bosom. Back when the couple had first gotten together, they had fucked like rabbits. Though things had eased down from a boil, their sex life had never cooled like so many couples. It had stayed at a warm simmer throughout their time together.

When Lurk pressed his snout into her jawline, Harmony knew exactly what he wanted. Without thinking, she tilted her head to give him easier access. His tongue, warmer still than the spa, danced from the hollow of her throat, up her neck, to nibble at her ear.

"Hey, how long is your tongue now?" He asked, sticking out his own long, serpentine appendage.

"Bleh," The Scalebound said as she worked the muscle, not having considered it. Sure enough, hers was similarly reptilian. "Oh, tha feels weird." Before she could pull her tongue back, Lurk could not resist playing. Their forked ends danced before Lurk corkscrewed his around his wife's. They both moaned around the strange kiss. Even Harmony's tongue had a streak of gold that ran along the underside. Once more impulsive, the male pulled his mate's lips into his muzzle by pulling her tongue into his mouth. He massaged and sucked on her, loving the way she murmured in answer.

Even though YGGDRASIL did not allow x-rated contact, and facial expressions did not exist, they would often bump noses as a way of showing affection, as a kind of surrogate kiss. It was comforting to make that familiar motion with new benefits. Whenever one of their old friends bemoaned losing the 'passion' in their significant other, neither Lurk or Harmony could ever empathize. The flames of love and intimacy never went out for the couple. Not even a little. They just got used to the heat, and relished the ever-present warmth the other provided.

Harmony inwardly pondered the receptive nature of her new body. The stimulation felt almost as intense as she had before losing her virginity to Lurk. Though she was immensely grateful that when they had first had sex in their newfound forms, she did not need human cherry popping. Going through that once with a very well endowed man was more than enough.

Even though they had barely kissed and done only a little heavy petting, Harmony checked to pleasantly find herself absolutely drenched. A quick rut seemed perfectly appropriate, breaking their tangled tongues. She knew exactly how to rile him up too, bending over the steps and spreading her legs. Even flagging her tail for good measure. The Wyrmblood grasped his manhood in one claw, guiding his tip to rub between the plump, aroused petals of the lovely lady presenting herself so wonderfully.

A sly grin split Lurk's muzzle as he dragged his length a little higher, nudging the lubricated tip into Harmony's butt. The Scarlet dragoness jumped at the contact before easing back with a moan.

"We can't do that. We need lube." She whined. Once the idea was planted by her naughty partner, the desire to have him fuck her up the ass made her delicates clench.
"Oh, I know." Lurk chuckled, before sinking into the proper hole for mating.

Ripe nethers engulfed the male. He moaned openly, unabashedly enjoying his wife's plump peach. Between the Scalebound sex and the spa, it felt as though he was sinking his cock into a sheath of molten gold. Grasping claws found a luscious waist and stroked her haunches.

Harmony's lower lips sang with pleasure as she was filled to the brim with hard dragon cock. The way his new shape tugged at her sensitive walls was always wonderful. Just as she thought he was all the way inside, his last few inches forced the end of her tunnel to conform to the head of his member. Even with new bodies, he always had an extra bit of length to make her gasp and squirm. Rubbing along the smooth muscle of her cervix was not unpleasant, and just enough to let her know how spread she was.

Once buried to the hilt, Lurk used his knees to widen Harmony's stance, getting her mound to rest just above the water line. Reaching back with her tail, the Scalebound hooked her husband's waist and pulled him close. Once again, Lurk and Harmony both embraced the exotic nature of their situation. It was undeniably each other, yet the bodies they inhabited were more suited to divinity.

The Dragon Incarnate took his time, luxuriating in sawing his length in and out of his wife's silky folds, water splashing against the edge of the pool at their motion.

One of the many Lamia maids that took care of the custodial work around The Citadel emerged from a side entrance carrying a pile of fresh towels, humming to herself. Although the lip of the bath prevented the Lamia from being able to directly observe Lurk and Harmony's carnal union, when she caught sight of her Supreme ones very obviously engaged in adult activities, she promptly fainted.

Although he stopped thrusting, Lurk's iron-hard cock lost none of its potency as he called out to the other maids waiting outside. Harmony was too busy giggling.

"Ladies!" He shouted, his voice easily carrying beyond the threshold of the room. A pair of maids poked their heads in at their lord's call with their eyes covered by dainty hands.

"Please, come help your sister." He instructed, significantly more amused than upset.

Nearly jumping out of their skins, a trio of Lamias rushed forward to help their stricken sibling. It took them a minute of searching, having covered their eyes before entering. Eventually they were successful, and carted away the unconscious snake-lady.

"Hey, d'you remember that time we had sex in that park late at night?" The equally mischievous and devious dragoness pushed her hips back, impaling herself on Lurk, feeling his length twitch inside her at the memory.

"Mmm, I remember," Lurk agreed, meeting his wife's naughty motion and giving the female a bit more length than she bargained for, feeling the stiff head strain against the depth of her nethers. Lurk ran his claws down the the Scalebound's smooth back. With her wings retracted, there was only the faint marks where they would emerge.

"Ohh, grab my horns." Harmony moaned.

Yet again, Lurk needed no more encouragement. He reached forward with a claw and wrapped his digits around an alabaster horn.
Indulging his carnal whim, the Wyrmblood happily pounded his wife's pussy until climax overcame the male. He might have lasted longer if he had tried, but neither wanted to indulge too much. Tugging on Harmony's horns in time with the zenith of his ecstasy made her back arch and thighs slap back onto his deliciously. She gyrated her hips just a little, to help milk his cock free of its burden.

With the hot bath as reference, Harmony realized just how scorching her husband's seed was. She nearly laughed upon realizing that he probably would have melted her if the Scalebound did not have the racial bonuses she did. Heat resistance was mandatory for surviving Muspelheim. And apparently for surviving coitus with her husband too.

Unable to tear his eyes away, the Wyrmblood relished the view of crimson and gold flecked labia parted into a rosy teardrop. The buried ruby at the top of her sex shined with their combined aurate and white juices.

"Ah! Fuck, honey. You cum a lot now." Harmony groaned, love tunnel sloshing as she was uncorked. Her further chambers felt saturated with heat and greedy male essence. Yet, it was a heavy comfort, like massaging a deep muscular ache. It reminded her of when she and Lurk would make love to relieve the pain of her feminine cycle.

"D'you like it?" Lurk puffed his chest out expectantly, reveling in the masculine act of making his lover just the right kinds of dirty.

"I mean, if you're gonna make a mess, at least you did it when we were already in a bath." Harmony giggled.

*****

The ninth floor Arboretum served many vital functions to the upkeep of The Citadel. It was the one of the most secluded area of Black Sky's base, second only to the treasury itself.

Before creation of the Arboretum, Lurk shuddered to recall all the foraging he had to undergo in order to be useful in combat. The material cost was one of the larger reasons firearms were highly underutilized in YGGDRASIL. Ammunition was expensive. Good ammo was hideously so. And the best ammo was damningly valuable to waste. Once the most commonly consumed components were available to Lurk in renewable quantities, he was able to go from using everything made, to arming the many denizens of The Citadel with power similar to what he wielded.

As a gamer, Lurk was always striving for efficiency. Mass production. Which dungeons to grind. Which materials had the best time to value ratio. Minimum viable ammunition expenditure.

Hundreds of herbs and alchemical ingredients were cultivated and grown in the safety and convenience of their home. The two leaders of Black Sky passed neatly developed squares of ocher Nitroshrooms, hedges of Blazenuts, Bomberry bushes, and Blast Yews. Much of the area was given over to practical nurseries for ammunition and stat-boosting potion ingredients, Woodsolution had sprinkled his personal touches throughout.

Dirt paths connected the dedicated partitions, with vast oaks lending their shade to the footpaths.
Gurgling streams meandered lazily through small meadows. Water sources were hidden with rocky outcroppings, topped with gazebos that offered breathtaking views of the colorful patchwork of farms. Attendant Nymphs darted here and there, grooming fickle Vanir Aspen, or carrying baskets full of fruits of the gardener's labors.

At the center was the home of the Arboretum's area guardian. Lurk and Harmony meandered their way lazily, arm in arm, to the stand of cherry blossom willows that circled an azure pond.

Although she was in essence, a living tree, Loam had subtle feminine curves. Long willow branchlets cascaded down her shoulders. Small white flowers bloomed from the bark on her shoulders.

"High Lord Lurk, and Lady Harmony, welcome to the Arboretum." The towering Treant bowed so low her branchlets brushed against the ground.

"Thank you, Loam. Don't mind us. We just wanted to enjoy a walk through here." Lurk affirmed.

"Mind! Please, High Lord, and most beautiful Lady, it is my singular joy to have the... Last two Supreme Beings in my humble garden."

"Loam, are you okay?" Harmony asked, squeezing her husband's claw as she did so.

The Treant gave a long sigh like a spring breeze.

"I... Feel a great sorrow at the absence of Lord Woodsolution. Was it something I did, my Lady?" The Treant visibly wilted upon mention of her creator.

"We..." Harmony searched for the right words. "He would have been here, if he could've. He didn't leave you behind. Not on purpose. I promise. Nothing you did drove him away, if that's what you're afraid of. He was always proud of you. If you need anything, just ask, okay?"

"You believe so? I... I want you to assure, my Lady, that I will not falter in my duties. I won't disappoint my Lord. Even if he's not here."

There was movement near the couple as another Area Guardian entered the area. Loam turned and addressed the newcomer in the grove. Another of Woodsolution's creations.

"Ah, hello, Lord Chickenbomb." The Treant chirped happily.

While the small gaggle of hens around him clucked like real hens, Chickenbomb actually spoke the word 'cluck'.

"Cluck. Cluck cluck."

Fowl. Greater Fowl. Feathery Doom. Living Bomb.

Thirty-five levels spent on one of the most ridiculous creations the game had allowed its users to make. They had considered the name Lord C4, but it just did not roll off the tongue the same way Lord Chickenbomb did.

While Lurk desperately tried to contain his laughter at seeing the ridiculous creation of his old friend brought to life in all its insane glory, Harmony asked another question.
"Loam?"

"Yes, Lady Harmony?"

"Do you have anything that's safe to use... as uh, lube?"

"What do you mean, my Lady?" The Treant tilted her head ever so slightly.

"You know... Personal lubrication. Something to..."

"A marital aid." Lurk chimed in, still keeping himself from exploding with mirth.

"Oh, you mean... Oh. Oh! Oh my." Loam's shoulder flowers closed their petals. The poor thing rubbed her legs so tightly together she was at risk of setting herself ablaze. The Treant squeezed her eyes tightly shut as she held out a small glass bottle. "This essence of rose is safe for... Intimate areas. I use it to keep my softer areas conditioned and supple, so I know that it provides lubrication that lasts a while. Please take it."

"Thank you, Loam." Lurk said, taking the bottle and tucking it into his inventory. It would be good for regular coupling as well as making other bedroom fun more comfortable.

Bidding their farewells, the monarchs of The Citadel departed the Arboretum. They took their time, enjoying the walk along the shaded paths.

After the couple left, Loam sat on the edge of her pond with her legs in the water. Dealing with her gods was overstimulating.

"Cluck. Cluck." Said Lord Chickenbomb as he ambled over to where Loam cooled her roots. The Treant smiled and picked up the Feathery Doom. She lovingly stroked Lord Chickenbomb just as her creator would, and found it soothing. Loam had been made to be the caretaker of the Arboretum. That was the purpose and duty her Lord had blessed her with. Knowing that they had not been abandoned because of some failing on her part lifted a great weight the Treant did not know she had been carrying.

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When the monarchs returned to their room to retire, they found Koh there, tidying. Upon the arrival of his masters, the only male Lamia turned and bowed.

"Koh? What are you doing? I thought the maids took care of this area." Harmony asked.

Much taller, and obviously masculine, the snake-man had splotches of red scales that faded to rich hues of orange. His chest and belly, leading down his underside was of an alternating checkerboard pattern of black and white. His monochrome suit accented his racial coloration.

"Yes, my Lady. I have taken it upon myself as butler to see to your personal quarters. Unfortunately my little slinkies found your bed sheets a little too... Stimulating. The poor dears."
With utmost grace and decorum, Koh excused himself and slithered to his other duties.

*****

Even though they had gone straight to bed, the married couple spent hours just talking. There was a panoply of topics to discuss, and they could hardly wait to explore the rest of The Citadel. It was like a kid discovering that their toy box had sprung to life, with all the lives and dreams they had imagined them with.

Snuggled into blankets of angel down, Harmony eventually did succumb to slumber.

Though he tried to sleep, an idea trespassed upon Lurk's calm. His loving Harmony had convinced him to log on. Without her, he would not be there. There was one piece of work he wanted to feel, to know was real, if only for a moment. If he were to wake up back in his human body once more on earth, he needed it to be without regret. An object, a weapon, epitomized his time spent making The Citadel.

Entropy.

No other singular item had consumed more of Lurk's time in all his tens of thousands of hours gaming. Once the urge to hold, and fire it with real feedback on his senses occurred to him, it was all the Wyrmblood could think of. With Harmony fast asleep, loose and relaxed after the spa and their stroll, Lurk moved carefully out of bed so as not to disturb her. Throwing on a simple shirt and pants, he headed down the hall to a place he knew very well.

The Citadel's firing range existed as a pocket space. Larger on the inside. Targets could be summoned as far as the longest range spells could reach. Straw dummies small to large, glass panes, paper silhouettes, clay pigeons, and more were a part of the range's repertoire. All the targets could be configured to pop up numbers when struck. Back in the day, the range had been an invaluable tool in evaluating spells, weapons, and damage. It was somewhere Lurk felt really belonged to him. It was soothing to just cut loose, and sink into the meditative reverie of placing shots on a target.

Many play styles were mindless. Click a button on your console, and the game would do the rest. However, the makers of YGGDRASIL had utilized the full-dive system to introduce some requisite mechanical skill. When first delving into the offerings of ranged combat that was not just spamming auto lock on spells, Lurk had to get down the muscle memory of aiming and firing. The job classes pertaining to firearms appealed to him because of the skill ceiling they represented. Actual time and effort put into physical marksmanship outside of assistance offered by skills was rewarded.

Lost in thought, the monarch did not notice the tiny patter of little Soot paws following him.

Did he hear laughing?

It was still so strange to regard The Citadel and all its denizens as alive. They were no longer restricted to programmable artificial routines. Fascinated, Lurk hovered on the stairs, simply observing the different Guardians and NPCs conversing and interacting. A mixed group of Corsairs and Sharpshooters sat around a table shouting bets and encouragements to the main attraction.

Ten Gauge, Five Five Six, a female Corsair, and a Demi-Claw were all engaged in a heated game
A level one training pistol was used by one to shoot bottles thrown by the other three, with every miss adding to the shooter's letters.

Nox was sitting nearby keeping track of score and bets.

As Lurk watched, it was Five’s turn with the single-action revolver. In a bit of a devious move to try and take out the leader, the other three threw their bottles at nearly the same time. Fives was not easily tricked however, and fanned the hammer quickly, knocking all three down even firing from the hip.

Five Five Six was a demi-human. The anthropomorphic Jackal had fur of such a deep midnight blue it almost seemed black. Tall lupine ears stood proud and a bushy tail wagged from beneath her half-skirt. Several members of the Court had been designed with experimental or eccentric builds in mind. Fives, with her Acrobatics, and Rifle-Spear, was one of them.

Spinning the revolver around a finger, Fives grinned.

"C'mon, who's the best shot in all The Citadel." She boasted.

"Tut, tut, Fives. No one is the best aside from Lord Lurk." Nox reproached.

"Oh! My goodness. Of course, forgive my lack of decorum. There is no higher standard."

Gauge clicked his jaw and countered.

"So sure of yourself, Fives. I believe it's my turn next."

The other member of the Court, Ten Gauge, was a Wendigo. Proud antlers stood from the heteromorph's deer-skull visage. Gauge's Caliber Court outfit featured a prominent fur-lined collar in addition to its aristocratic frills. With his triple barrelled Hydra shotgun and tall shield, the Doom Slayer was a tank with a close range bite not to be underestimated.

Lurk peered around the corner of the staircase just in time to witness the exchange.

There was the sound of tiny limbs whacking against stone and indignant 'meeps' as Soot bounced down the stairs. He had tried to stop his scamper down the steps where Lurk was situated, only to trip. The Gunpowder Dragon landed at the bottom with a thump and a little shower of sparks. None the worse for wear due to being quite indestructible, the tiny black dragon turned and gave a disgruntled yip.

Everyone turned at the clamor and spotted their High Lord's snout sticking around the corner.

Fives dropped the pistol like it was a snake about to bite her and threw herself on the ground, skidding on plated knees to prostrate violently before Lurk.

"M-m-my-my-my Lord! High Lord! It was my idea, sire. Please, punish me." The Jackal pleaded.

"No! It was my idea! I was the one who challenged Fives to the game!" Ten Gauge, ready to fall on his metaphorical sword to save his fellow Court member nearly smacked his face into the floor in his haste to grovel.

A loud clattering of chairs filled the room as the gaggle of Citadel denizens hastily stood and
displayed their loyalty.

"Well, I thought it was a good idea." Chimed Nox, even though he too was bowing.

The poor Demi-Claw and Corsair still at the firing line were too petrified to speak, their mouths open in horror and reverence.

"Please, everyone, raise your heads. There's nothing to be ashamed or worried about. Why would I chastise someone wanting to polish their skills?" Lurk hoped he sounded convincing, trying to convey his honesty through a genuine tone.

Descending the last few steps, he extended his claws to the Court pair who had hurled themselves so passionately at his feet. Lurk did not want to be seen as a tyrant, and hoped his smile helped to ease the tension. Though they hesitated, gazing up at him in awe, the Acrobat and Doom Slayer both took their offered claw and were hauled to their feet.

"I just came down because I was thinking of how long it's been since I fired Entropy."

"The legendary weapon of High Lord Lurk! Truly sire? The one and only?" Fives had her hands clasped before her as if offering prayer, legs nearly buckling under the pressure of her Lord's mercy, the gun game forgotten in an instant. "You would... We could, could we? I mean, can we, uh, stay and watch, my Lord? Would you let these unworthy ones witness your glory?"

"Of course, you can all stay and watch."

A collective uplifted murmur went through the group.

"Can we hear the story, my Lord? Of Entropy? I believe telling of how you made it would let everyone else here better appreciate the majesty of the weapon." Nox offered. In truth, he had only ever heard bits and pieces, and desperately wished to know the full tale himself.

"An excellent idea, Nox." Lurk could not hide his grin. One thing the Wyrmblood could not resist, was telling a story. The monarch took a seat at the table and everyone scrambled to take a place, crowding around their Lord in anticipation. Corsairs climbed atop jockeying Demi-Claws while the Court members took the two coveted seats closest to Lurk, but at a respectful distance to give the Wyrmblood room to weave his tale.

From a very covetous subsection of his inventory, Lurk retrieved the gun in question.

Shaped with five cores that had taken Lurk years of scouring every inch of Muspelheim to retrieve, the weapon looked as though it had been carved from the calcified heart of a dead god. Entropy was a rifle that Lurk had incarnated into his vision of lethality. He wanted the sight of it to invoke the murderous intent it represented. Clean, sharp lines were the focus. Yet with just a hint of decay. Of malformed menace. The chassis of the weapon was a glassy black. Flickering halos of energy cascaded into one another, cast off the slumbering cores like fitful visions.

Lurk had tried to avoid the gaudy look so many players went for when designing it, and had gone through many different iterations. Entropy bore a resemblance to a firearm. It had a visible stock, upper and lower receiver, ergonomic grips, trigger, and barrel. Yet, thick cables and veins encrusted portions of the weapon. These were dark now, but fed energy into different parts from the cores depending on ammunition and firing modes selected. The five hearts, each an apple sized sphere, were safely entombed in nests of arterial tubes.
"Let me tell you, where this all began." Laying Entropy down on the table, Lurk passed a claw over the embedded cores. He tapped the central orb. An acidic green tetragram flickered, growing and devouring its own points as it rotated within the abyssal sphere.

A tiny snout was furiously nudging at his ankle, so Lurk reached down and scooped up Soot, setting the bundle of pudgy explosives up onto the table as well.

"Harmony, Woodsolution, and I, once got swept up in a small war. One of our allies had been threatened, and the nature of it meant that it could not go unanswered. The particulars of the battle aren't all that important. It was a fairly one sided fight all together. However, when dividing the spoils of the conquest into shares, I saw it. At the time, I was wearing one of my Masks, and spotted something glowing. As soon as I took off the Mask, the light went away, then came back as soon as I put on another mask."

Nox nodded sagely, folding his arms over his chest. It was a fundamental truth of The Citadel that High Lord Lurk always emerged victorious in the end.

"Glory to Black Sky!" A Corsair sitting on the shoulders of a Demi-Claw cried out. A series of answering calls rounded. Grinning, Lurk waited to the commotion to settle before continuing.

"No one else could see it lit up. To them, it was just a strange named rock. The Axiom of Blight. I never found another, or ever got those we beat to tell me where they got it. I don't think they even remembered that point. It had gone into their treasury to be forgotten. I would have forgotten about it too, if I hadn't heard about a puzzle months later, whose reward was a pair of orbs that no one knew what to do with."

With a flair for the dramatic, Lurk reached into his inventory and kept his claws closed. He made sure everyone was watching, before opening his palms onto the table. There were several gasps.

"Suncurse, and Light's Inversion." The Wyrmblood announced.

So named, the pair of cores orbited one another, each a twisted reflection. One had a smoldering orange corona with a blackened center. The other was a dark emitter that devoured light into its incandescent nucleus, like a baleful eye. Left to their own, the two slowly spun. Soot scampered forth and tackled the orbs, rolling off the table with his new treasures.

Not paying the antics of his pet any mind, Lurk continued speaking.

"I have two pairs because Harmony helped me with this particular challenge. The protector of Suncurse and Inversion would not reveal himself until a series of mirrors were lined up so that a beam of sunlight hit a specific spot. There was only one hitch. In order to get the last mirror aligned you actually had to hold it yourself. The lever was broken. So you had to get everything else straight while you hung upside-down from this stalagmite on the ceiling."

With his claws, Lurk indicated the nearly anatomically impossible position and everyone at the table winced in sympathy.

"With Harmony's help, these two weren't that much trouble to get. No, it was the last ones that proved to be the biggest obstacle."

"Nothing could be worse than a puzzle that required you, my Lord, and the great Lady herself!"
Fives declared, with many agreeing.

"Irradiance was the one I spent the most time chasing. Literally chasing. Who here knows of the Glowing Sea?"

A few nodded while others looked around curiously.

"It was a vast desert. Stretched on and on. All kinds of anomalies would crop up. Places where up was down. Sand that moved like water. Invisible threads or walls that could trap and drag. Wild Deathclaws. Slagwurms. And the storms. Well, Irradiance would only appear in the Glowing Sea during a convergence storm. That was when things were most dangerous. Acidic lightning. Glass tornadoes. And so much radiation that it became visible currents that went against the wind."

No one dared to speak. Everyone was crowded shoulder to shoulder, not wanting to miss a single word.

"Harmony, Woodsolution and I, all spent a lot of time in the Glowing Sea. Very valuable resources and loot drops could only be found there. But whenever there was a storm, we always either took shelter, or left the area. It was just too hazardous. Even for us. However, I spotted Irradiance out in that desert many times. Always from far away. It wasn't until I began the hunt for Entropy's cores that I thought anything of it. Then, I remembered seeing it. Seeing that familiar glow."

"Before I could even get started, I had to make a few special tools. Most important was a remote sensor that could detect whenever a storm was brewing. Every time convergence came, I was there, scurrying those dunes for any sign of Irradiance." With equal parts reverence and antipathy, Lurk tapped the core in question, nestled now safely and permanently in Entropy.

The Ancient Incarnate panned an open palm through the air, tracing the vast reaches of a desert more than a world away now.

"Unfortunately for me, finding it was difficult, and catching it was impossible. Across the whole of the Glowing Sea, it would only appear in one place. And never for very long. It had this strange pattern. Took me ages to figure out. The first time, just seeing it, Irradiance would teleport. It would flash, giving off this arrow of light, showing which direction it went. If you tried to use teleportation yourself during the first stage, you would never see it again. I had to fly after it."

"Surely it could not have been that easy." Nox breathed, dreading what trials such a powerful artifact required.

"If it was, I'd have dozens. No, once you got close enough, it would dart back and forth. It was complicated, but I eventually worked out the pattern the core followed. I could usually get it after one or two rotations. The next part was... Difficult. After touching it, Irradiance would teleport again. This time in order to get there, lightning needed to be dodged. A dozen bolts at least. Again, if teleportation spells were used, the core would disappear until the next storm."

Using his claws again, Lurk brought them inward, like a noose tightening, until the only thing visible was Irradiance on the table. A pale, churning teal glow and a single bright white ring bellied the instability of the sphere. It was a blue star as big as his palm on the verge of collapsing into a supernova. Ironically, the core emitted no radiation of its own. The density of mass that existed within the tiny space prevented any from escaping.
"The closer I got, the more that convergence would center around me. No matter how fast I was, I couldn't catch it after dodging the required lightning. Days went by. Weeks. Teleporting to the edge of the Glowing Sea whenever a storm cropped up. I chased it so hard, I burnt myself out on it. But I knew, I knew I couldn't give up. The second I gave up, it would be lost forever."

Shaking his head, the monarch reclined in his chair, tail thumping the ground for emphasis.

"One day, I had just woken up and had left my sensor on from the night before. It was already going off. I thought to myself, hey, why not? One quick look around couldn't hurt. So I teleported to this big rock formation where I usually started."

Lurk paused for dramatic effect, seeing everyone at the range with their eyes wide, hanging on his every word.

"And there it was. This close." Reaching his arm out, Lurk showed the proximity. "I just stood there, staring at it for a second. Could hardly believe it. I reached for it, expecting it to teleport away, like it always did. But it didn't. Irradiance let me take it. As though it would only truly come to me once I wanted it badly enough."

"Muspelheim itself was rewarding your patience and tenacity, High Lord." Ten Gauge clicked his jaw thoughtfully.

"Thank you, Gauge. It certainly seemed that way at the time. I've obtained many things only after what felt like a minimum threshold of effort." Lurk agreed with the Wendigo's assertion. Gauge sat in awe of his King and the praise given.

"Then, came the last." The Wyrmblood began. "There was a..." Lurk trailed off, having about to have said 'raid'. "Challenge of the land."

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For what was surely the eight-hundredth time, Lurk sat in Surtr's throne room.

He knew every spawn. Every enemy. With a machine-like precision, Lurk could run through the dungeon. Every shortcut. All the puzzles. Everything.

Far back in the first days of YGGDRASIL, Black Sky Legion had conquered the raid, celebrated, and moved on. The dungeon was almost like a rite of passage for the inhabitants of Muspelheim. Most of the nine worlds had at least one iconic challenge. One that epitomized the creatures and spirit of that realm.

Much time later, when Lurk was on the prowl for Entropy's cores, he was helping guide some players through the dungeon. When he had reached the throne room, he saw it. From Surtr's chest, glowed the telltale sign of a core. Once more, Sovereign of the Masquerade revealed the hidden.

So it was, that Lurk threw himself at the dungeon. At first, he would guide others, acting as a gaming sherp. The extra hands were useful. After hundreds of successful incursions into the deepest parts of Muspelheim, Lurk was in fact able to run the dungeon solo. It was an older one from the game's history. One of the first, in fact. Designed for smaller parties and lower leveled players.
Again and again, the Wyrmblood fought his way to Surtr. Over and over, Lurk slayed the presiding deity. He had trawled through ripped game files, message boards, and even went to the vast auction houses in the central cities. There was no item ever reported having dropped from the raid that resembled Lurk's prize.

So there he sat, pensive and thoughtful, wracking his brain for any possible angles he might have missed. He had prodded every stone, checked every chest, and combed down every hall of the dungeon dozens of times.

Like many such things, the final encounter did not begin until the raid boss was attacked. The ever-present glow of the core was so distracting, yet alluring, Lurk would often study the entity without a Mask.

It was by staring at the way Surtr sat in his throne, that at last the idea formed. The fire giant's hands were turned up, palms empty. One appendage even had its finger curled. As if around something no longer there. That emptiness made Lurk think of all the lore and background he had read of the boss. In the game's lore, the god-like being was supposed to rise up during Ragnarok.

With a sword.

Yet, Lurk could not recall a single attack where Surtr used a sword. The boss had many lava attacks where he would summon a hammer, or whip, or bow, but never a sword. Even more curiously, Surtr's Blade was a potential reward for completing the dungeon. Lurk had at least a dozen.

It was worth a try.

Surtr's Blade was an elaborate flamberge, almost comically oversized for a player avatar. In the giant's hand and open palm, it fit perfectly.

Taking several steps back, Lurk observed.

The fire giant stood, and the Ancient Incarnate prepared himself for battle, thinking that maybe now if he defeated...

Just as quickly as the thought formed, Surtr turned the blade down and sank its tip into the floor. The dungeon boss reached into his own chest, and pulled forth a glowing orb. Pulsing with a red, thumping beat, the sphere smoldered like a ball of magma.

The core. Surtr's Heart. Offered so easily. Just like that.

However, when he went down a second time to get another Heart...

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"With the greed buff, Surtr was substantially more powerful than he normally was. And sadly, offered nothing extra for the trouble." The draconic king sighed. With dozens of Surtr's Blade, he had placed a copy of the blade on the table during his telling.
"Much like Irradiance, Surtr's Heart was a gift. The land recognizing your greatness, Lord."
Gauge asserted with another click of his bony jaw.

"Wow, all that just to make a single weapon. Your vision is extraordinary, Lord." Fives breathed, hand to her fluttering chest.

"Yes, I had all the cores, but I ran into a problem when finally trying to assemble it."

Many gamers kept trophies. Items with no value, that held sentiment for them, and them alone. Though it was an entirely useless artifact, Lurk had kept the failed first attempt at making the chassis of Entropy. The assembly of NPCs all inhaled sharply at the sight of it. The shell had been constructed of priceless Nova Crystal. The hollows where the cores had meant to sit were ruined slag. The material seemed to have been melted by unbelievable temperatures.

"What could do that to Nova Crystal?" Nox asked, brushing a finger along the edge of one of the holes. Even as a husk, the weapon was intimidating. The normally fluid and radiant ore was dead, and dark, devoid of its whirling color.

"Muspelheim is fire, that's true. Paradoxically, many of its resources do not carry intrinsic fire resistance. The collective power of the cores ran parallel to the Nova Crystal, and it was too much. I had to obtain Prismatic Ore from another world. That is why Entropy is made of Celestial Uranium. It was the only thing I could find that would be able to contain the cores."

"That's why Lady Harmony traded with that Midgard alliance!" Said Nox, crashing a fist into an open palm in revelation.

"And, Celestial Uranium had a secret. I found out from another ally we traded with, that if I used enough of it, not only would Entropy be made, but a Caloric Stone as well."

"In one fell swoop, you not only created the most powerful weapon, but the heart of the Forgemother herself!" Nox crowed. Though many thought it was impossible to regard their creator with higher esteem, everyone present understood the worship they felt must better.

Unknowingly, Lurk had set something small, but powerful into motion. Nox would tell the other Floor Guardians the story. Fives and Gauge would tell the Court, and other area leaders. And even the Corsairs and Demi-Claws would carry it, telling by telling, until every inhabitant of The Citadel knew how their king had bent an entire world to his will.

"It was the culmination of years of work. Entropy was worth it though." Glancing back at Nox, Lurk's mood felt light enough to carry him away. "Do you wanna hold her?" He offered the Shadowkin.

Normally the very embodiment of unflappable snark, Nox stuttered.

"C-c-c-can I?" Even though he could not fire it, Nox was the only other one in the room with enough skills to even pick up Entropy. Despite knowing his hands were unworthy, it was an offer that would have been sacrilegious to refuse, and took the offered weapon. His Lord, Creator, God, had given him this singular blessing, and it was one that the Guardian made sure to forever remember.

Giddy as a kid in a candy store, the Shadowkin cradled the Divine weapon like a porcelain doll.
Now the center of attention, Fives, Gauge, and several Corsairs bold enough, all huddled around the him. They all discussed the majesty of the weapon as Nox put Entropy to his shoulder, sighting down its elegant length.

Lurk watched on and could not remember the last time he had someone other than Harmony to share his gaming stories with. A burden that the Wyrmblood did not know he had been carrying was momentarily lifted from his shoulders, and the world seemed just a little more real.
The Deep

Chapter Notes

It didn't actually take me a month to write this, I promise! I've been crazy busy working on an (entirely unrelated) Deathclaw Story! If that's your thing, stay tuned to my works. If not, enjoy the following addition to Black Sky Legion!

Impenetrable dark surrounded Harmony. She hung in a starless abyss where light faltered in its strength. So far down, all memory of the sun receded, replaced by an utter blackness.

Yet, there was comfort in the midnight expanse. Harmony was safe in the cocoon. The deep water was not something to fear. She swam in a private void where there was only the touch of water conforming to her motion. Even in the dampening dark of the deep water, she still felt light as a feather. Floating through the current, she breathed deeply and easily as if she were still on land. The Scarlet Drake had always had an affinity towards the ocean, and was calmed by her surroundings. It was peaceful. Her max level strength meant a single casual kick of her feet or tail propelled her far. She wore a plain red one-piece swimsuit that she sometimes wore under her armor whenever the Scalebound needed to be able to delve into one of Muspelheim's oceans of fire.

A stirring broke her reverie as Harmony felt the displacement of something gargantuan moving through the deep. For the first time since descending she saw a glow boring through the tranquil abyss. A smoldering luminescence broke through the dark like stars peeking through an overcast sky. The auger of predator that lived and hunted in the blinding dark.

Long and growing longer, a ribbon of spots and glowing streaks undulated in the distance. The range belied the true nature of the creature and its subdued radiance. It grew larger, then larger still, until the titanic nature of the spiraling aquatic colossus became undeniable. Once Harmony's entire vision was occluded by the unrestrained mass of the creature was it actually close to her. The Leviathan circled her. The volume of the water it displaced with its passage moved Harmony dozens of feet. Fins that could summon catastrophe with their power swept over and below the Queen of Black Sky.

The Leviathan swam languidly up to its Supreme Being. Gently, it turned, spinning its thousands of tons of displacement with unimaginably powerful muscles. Indeed, if the Leviathan was subject to physical law, its own bulk would kill it. However, with the benefit of levels, physical resistance alone gave it strength to move at breathtaking speeds far beyond what any natural being alone could.

The Leviathan's design was inspired by mythical sea monsters and prehistoric ocean dwelling monstrosities.

A long snout full of teeth that were bigger than Harmony tilted to regard her with an eye that was
easily twice her size. The Leviathan's body was not just long, but burly, immense fins propelled it through the water, and a tail that could crush battleships moved behind it. Its whole frame, from neck to tail, undulated through the water. The motion was slow, and again belied the quickness it could close on prey.

A sonorous, echoing melody filled the water as the Leviathan sang.

The mixture of high and low pitches reverberated through the space. With blue whales long extinct back on Earth, the Scalebound woman imagined that their song was like what she was hearing. Harmony felt the vibrations shake her to her core. The sheer size of the Leviathan made its melody match in intensity. As it hummed, hooted, and whistled, the Leviathan swam right up to Harmony, pushing its snout as carefully as it could up to its Lady. The melodies seemed happy. At least, she hoped they were. Even though it could not see, the music made Harmony smile.

She rubbed the snout that dwarfed her. Harmony had come down to see what the fifth floor held, and was not disappointed. Elated beyond measure would be more accurate.

The Leviathan, along with Novus, were the only Guardians that the members of Black Sky Legion had not themselves created. Harmony had actually won the Leviathan in a contest. A fishing competition, appropriately enough. One held on the lava banks of one of Muspelheim's great oceans.

The tricky part was not hooking one of the Lavasioth, it was dragging the lava-fish up onto shore and wrestling it into submission. Destroying the creature would make it disintegrate, and thus unable to be weighed and measured. Lurk had been away on a business trip while the event had been going on, so it was up to Harmony and Woodsolution to win the day. One of Woodsolution's real life pastime had been fishing, so it was his job to hook the biggest Lavasioth he could. Then it was Harmony's turn to grapple with the titanic, very angry mob, and drag its slippery ass into a special net. In the long hall of memories was picture of the tournament winning catch.

Laughing in bursts of bubbles, Harmony playfully twirled through the water. She shot off like a torpedo. The Scarlet Drake was a dolphin, joyfully cavorting around a larger creature. The Leviathan moved with her, watching and mimicking her flips and spins. The Leviathan alive and swimming was an entire carnival of lights and song, all for her.

Harmony wanted to know what lay in the depths of the fifth floor. It was every gamer's worst nightmare. A water level.

Lurk had spent an inordinate amount of time designing every floor of The Citadel into not just a visual feast for the chosen aesthetic of that level, but a death trap as well. The first and second floors were concrete nuts coated in steel that had to be cracked. The third was a literal army of pop monsters that were normally steamrolled by experienced players, and were transformed by a Guardian specced into turning those mobs into a meat grinder. By extension, the fourth was one of the turning points in defensive philosophy. Where the first through third were relatively straightforward affairs meant to deter through strength, Skitharix's floor was where things got psychological.

Once, Lurk had jokingly made a staircase that was invisible unless one looked at it from the correct angle. He had tricked Woodsolution into falling down it. Good times were had. However, it made him wonder how far the illusion spells he had used could be pushed. In a fit of maddened inspiration, Lurk had managed to code a set of stairs that only appeared if one were to look through a purposefully placed bit of rubble to create the optical illusion of steps. Once perceived, the stairs would be available for any member of the party to traverse. Though no matter how he tried to replicate the spaghetti programming that had miraculously violated several in game flagging systems,
Lurk could never figure out what he did the first time.

In all the years of its existence, The Citadel only had one group of enemy players make it to the fifth floor. And of that group, only one survived to make it that far. That unfortunate soul had the privilege of meeting the Leviathan. It had been a very short encounter.

After what felt like hours enjoying the swim with the largest denizen of Black Sky, Harmony slowed to a meditative pace. Then for a while she floated still once again with the Leviathan rotating in a ring of impenetrable might. There was still so much work to be done establishing their foothold in the new world, and adapting The Citadel to the new rules of its existence. Harmony grabbed a trailing fin and worked her way up to the Leviathan's head and rubbed it affectionately. Sensing the desire of his Supreme Being, the gentle giant dipped his snout down and lifted Harmony up. With the Leviathan's might, he ascended through his home, acting as an express aquatic elevator for his tiny Queen.

On her ascent through the fifth floor, Harmony passed by the Mystic's Reef. Lurk laid personal claim to the majority of the Citadel's architecture. Harmony had made the third, and done most of the interior decorating of the ninth. The fifth, with its reef wall painted with such a vibrancy of coral, fish, mantas, sharks, and a hundred other examples of fantastical undersea life was a masterpiece. And it had been the personal project of Woodsolution for a good year. He was always a selfless friend, and only every asked for his guildmate's help in gathering missing pieces to complete the masterpiece.

And that work showed.

Harmony's throat felt thick, as her smile grew wide enough to bring forth tears. Tears that were whisked away immediately, yet she could not help herself. She watched Sawtooth Sneaks dance among leafy fronds of bio luminescent kelp. Schools of Cheepers darted through waving tentacles of giant anemone. Blastnut Crabs and gargantuan Snapper Squid foraged through the shelves of pastel coral. Before, all the creatures were programmed with simple artificial Boolean logic engines. Generating random numbers and flitting through preset behaviors.

False was now true. The facsimile had become imbued with blessed life even as an old world died. No less a miracle than an actual oil and canvas painting becoming animate.

Harmony breached the water's surface and felt so lifted she may have floated away. Her chauffeur drifted right up to bump into the only dry ground of the entire floor. She stepped off the snout of the Leviathan onto the small landing. Water rushed off the massive back of the Guardian as it moved away and dove once again. Then the Leviathan breached, flinging its front out of the water only to fall back into the massive underground lake. Spray from the performance touched even the hanging lights and stalagmites of the ceiling. Last to vanish was the tail, that waved to and fro before slipping away beneath the rippling surface.

Harmony waved back.

Her curiosity was satisfied for a time. However, no sooner had that particular desire been sated did she turn her attention to what lay above and a new interest took root.

The staircase leading up to the fourth floor from the fifth was unassuming. Stone lanterns held smoldering coals that were set into alcoves on either side of the wide stairs. Other than that, there was no ornamentation. Her wet talons plapped against the rough cut slate steps. Even though she had not set foot on the floor in many years, the woman thought she knew what to expect of her husband's
creations. The level was, in its entirety designed by Lurk. From architecture, to traps, to denizens. It was an addition to The Citadel paid for by his own wages, and Harmony had let him just go wild on it. She thought she was prepared.

Perhaps, in the old world, she might have gotten away with simply being enthralled, and horrified. But not in the new one. Not with the floor of madness given unspeakable life.

In the deep, Harmony had only known protection. In the new dark, she only knew fear. There was no wind, yet a chill raked over and through her. Whispers, and what seemed like chanting was just inside the range of hearing. Every step Harmony took across the cobbled ground convinced the Scalebound that she was making a mistake. Rubbing her arms to stave off the chill that sank into her bones. Stepping from the fifth to the fourth was like moving between different dimensions.

She gazed around at the upside down cathedral ruins. Titanic blades broke through the top and bottom of the world at peculiar angles. A dim twilight suffused the floor in a ruddy haze. There were lines of Painlords and statues made to look identical to the constructs. Without her HUD, Harmony had no idea which were which. What drew her attention were the obelisks. Tall chunks of obsidian carved into helix horns that formed the focal amplifiers of the passive defensive fields of the floor. In the new world, Harmony's vision was so much sharper, and she could see new details emerging as she regarded the closest helix.

Curioser, and curioser, Harmony approached the obelisk. It was fascinating. The red glow was so pretty. The glyphs seemed just beyond her understanding. They shifted and morphed like tiny serpents. Maybe if she got closer, she could read them. It was only a few steps away. What harm was just a look?

Was her heartbeat always so loud?

Th-thump. Th-thUMP. Th-THUMP. TH-THUMP!

It became deafening. She wanted to cover her ears from the brain-splitting, deadening thud. But she could not. Harmony's arms were no longer listening. Her blood was scalding acid that seared her mind. Her skull felt encased in a net of pain dancing to a hellish tempo. Darkness encroached on her vision. Everything but the obelisk was consumed by an inky haze. She was a passenger in her own body all sense but pain and the twirling crimson glow became distant. There was a far off hissing. Like a teakettle. The Scalebound could barely hear it over the blood screeching through her brain.

Was someone screaming? Was it her?

She just needed to touch the glowing helix. That would make the noise stop. The glyphs pulsed their siren song in time with the unceasing throb of her cursed heart. She just wanted it to stop. She would do anything to make it stop. Make it stop. Make it stop.

Make it stop!

She was almost there. Close. Close. So close. Very Close. Touch it. Touch it. That will stop the pain. Stop the noise. A few miles away her fingers were almost there.

When blackness suddenly engulfed her, it was like quenching a red-hot blade in an ice bath. Cold, gentle dark enveloped her. A release valve was turned in her head and the pressurized ache drained away like pus from an infection.
"Shh... My Supreme One. Shh. It's alright." There were noises that seemed like words, yet to Harmony was just the rasp of flint scraping steel.

It sounded like... Skitharix?

Harmony tried to speak and only burbled. Cool metal was pressed to her forehead. The Guardian of the fourth floor fanned his knife fingers and covered her face as one would hood a falcon to calm them.

"Do not fret. Just breathe. I have you, stray little Jabberwocky." Skitharix wondered why his floor's defenses had affected his Lady so fiercely. Then upon seeing Harmony's swimsuit and dampness, understood that she must have turned off her Aegis of Muspelheim passives. The Supreme Being's normal immunity to psychology was tied to that job class.

Harmony felt herself pulled deeper into something that smelled of freshly tanned leather and suede. It was soft on the outside, yet she pressed against the more solid steel underneath. Supple cloth folded around her, making a protective curtain. Skitharix's voice was pitched so quietly it lacked its usual coarseness. His words were a resonant reverberation of madness chained to unbreakable will. The incensed rhythm of Harmony's chest faded, and was replaced by a musical clinking. She found it oddly beautiful in a way. Her mind's eye beheld a procession of gnomes in a mine. Her brain and senses were lying to her, and the Scalebound was drifting through a different kind of deep water.

Like a metronome fighting to keep time with the Laughing God himself, Skitharix's heart ticked a frenetic mechanical rhythm. Had he not been made of living metal, the pressure within his chest would have burst the arteries behind his eyes.

[Message]

High Lord Lurk, your holy presence is urgently required on the fourth floor.

Skitharix? What's wrong?

It is an emergency, sire. Lady Harmony is here.

[End Message]

Lurk's next step carried him onto the broken ground of the fourth floor.

He saw Skitharix immediately. The tall Guardian was hunched over someone he was keeping in a tight embrace.

Most peculiar, were the Flayers. The lesser creatures of the floor were all busily gathering the many octohedral metallic crystals that sprouted from the large outcroppings of steel that pierced the floor. The hooded Flayers were finding the most pristine crystals, polishing them, and making them into flowers. Each had a few natural levels of craftsman, and hundreds of glittering blooms were
piled in a perimeter a few paces from where Skitharix stood. Every petal was a glassy lattice somehow coaxed into shape, and trimmed with the ferrous impurities of the material to give each fold a polished silver edge. Whenever one was made a harmonious ring sounded like a tranquil bell.

It was not the mighty Flesh Keeper that was the clear object of their veneration, but Harmony.

The industrious worshipers parted for Lurk by his mere presence alone. Though they did not have the levels of their floor Guardian, they formed a path for their Supreme Being, recognizing his dominion as an immutable facet of their existence. Hunched down in their robes, the Flayers grovelled into balls. Lurk was tuned with the place, even before the shift. Now, his intent was enough to shape the area and command its denizens. A thrum went through the very matrix of the floor. The Wyrmblood had rendered the level as a reflection of himself such that the air bent in time with his lungs. The surface of the obelisks crawled with runes that burned the eye in synchrony with the blood in his veins.

Lurk had given into his madness when he made the fourth floor. It had poured from him like water from an Endless Pitcher. Even in the throes of his deepest torment, the axis upon which his world turned, was her. No matter how discordant the symphony of his mind became, he always lived with a tiny Harmony in his heart of hearts. In a twisted way, the concept was reflected now.

Upon his Lord's approach, Skitharix could not bow fully, lest he jostle his precious cargo. Instead, the Guardian dipped his head as deeply as he could. Lurk spared the Eldritch Construct a passing glance and lifted his wife protectively into his arms.

*****

When Harmony returned to her senses, she was laying in bed, tucked with towels and blankets. Someone was patting her face.

"Woah, holy shit." Were her first words spoken. Harmony blinked a few times as her brain got her equilibrium back in order.

"Harmony, sweetheart, are you okay? How do you feel? Are you in any pain?" Lurk rattled off, tail lashing in agitation and worry.

"Whew, that was a doozy. Honestly, no. I don't feel any pain at all. It's like... That feeling you get after having a bad migraine? Shit, is that what the insanity debuff feels like?" Harmony rubbed her eyes and rotated her neck, feeling the joints pop and crunch in release.

"I thought I was gonna lose you there for a second. That scared the shit outta me." Lurk pressed his forehead against hers, needing to affirm that she was there with him.

"Oh honey you're not gonna lose me. My goodness. I didn't even take damage. It was my own fault for not turning my passives back on." She casually brushed off the experience. Though it was definitely not something she was eager to experience again, the Scalebound held no fear of death.

"No, no I'm sorry. I should have thought of the fourth floor. Should have realized that-" Centuries of dread creased Lurk's scaly features.
Harmony quieted her husband's ramblings with a palm on his cheek. She leaned forward and gave his snout a quick flick with her long tongue. She watched the worry gradually melt off his visage.

"Remember, sugar, I'm tougher than I look. Especially now." She gave a wry smile. "My avatar is a fucking tank, don't forget. You're the squishy caster now." Her smile turned up higher even as sorrow filled her draconic eyes. She rubbed her thumb along his jaw. "I think I understand better now. You never stop surprising me, darling. You know that? Even after all our years together."

Lurk understood instantly what she meant.

"I wish you didn't. That part of me isn't something I'm proud of." He averted his gaze and rested a claw on her thigh.

"But it's a part of you. So I love it just the same." Harmony answered faster than Lurk could argue.

Heaving a heavy, knowing sigh, Lurk placed his palm over his lover's hand.

"Why do you love me so much?"

"Oh no. This isn't about you. This is about me, and you're stuck with me, mister. No backing out now." Harmony waggled a finger and smiled. Lurk chuckled and gave her nose a lick this time. "Alright, alright, shoo. I'm done with you. I'm gonna get dressed, then get something to eat. I'm starving."

Grinning, Lurk knew then that his wife was going to be fine.

"Okay, hun. I love you very much. I'll be in the library okay?"

"Alright, sweetheart." She answered. Lurk turned to leave and on his way out, addressed the figure hunched in the corner of their room. The Guardian had been still as a statue, having followed the couple from his floor.

"Thank you for telling me what was going on immediately, Skitharix." Lurk said in a professional tone. He blamed himself for the failure far more than he did the Guardian.

"It is your duty to tend to Lady Harmony, my Supreme One. I only wish I had sensed her presence sooner." Skitharix croaked.

Recovering his composure, Lurk teleported back to the library.

"Skitharix," Harmony spoke softly once her husband was gone.

"Yes, my Lady. Supreme and venerable Queen, goddess of the sky and the seas and-"

"Skitharix," She spoke again. A muffle clang could be heard as the Eldritch Construct snapped his metal jaw shut.

"Yes, my Lady?" He gnashed his skeletal teeth. His metal fingers were tightly interwoven and clutched to his chest.
"Come here." She spoke. Though the Guardian practically launched himself out of the corner he stood in, there was a tremble in his steps. Once at her bedside, the towering Guardian fell to his knees, shoulders stooping more forward than his usual hunch. His eyes were downcast, hidden by the hood of his flesh robes. Skitharix could not bear the shame of it all. Like a pit of tar, his mind boiled over as his thoughts became trapped in a recursive loop of doubt, fear, and self-loathing. His wretched frame was not deserving of being in her radiant presence. He was a shadow before the blinding glare that was the binary stars of his Lord and Lady.

Just as Skitharix feared his own nature would rip him into pieces, a scarlet hand cupped his hollow cheek.

With a single touch, he knew stillness.

Now that she comprehended her husband's madness better, she understood Skitharix. The Guardian was a splinter of Lurk's mind. Although expressed through a game's NPC maker, Skitharix was an honest incarnation of that concept nevertheless. Smoldering dots for eyes glanced up from beneath the hood of his robes.

"You would absolve this unworthy marionette of his sins?" One of his knife hands opened, revealing one of the crystal roses. The ring of blossoms would remain on the fourth floor as a place of worship and pilgrimage forevermore. Harmony took the flower and set it in her lap.

"Are you loyal to Black Sky?" Her smile made the words kind. She did not want to seem reproachful. Harmony held no ill will against the Guardian. It was not his fault she had blundered into the trap. If anything it reassured her that beneath the fourth floor, she and the rest of The Citadel was safe.

"Without hesitance, my Lady. Until Black Sky comes." Skitharix replied instantly, standing straighter, and ready to do carry out any order without question or regret.

"Then you are forgiven. Now shoo. There's breakfast to be conquered."

*****

The morning sun streamed through sheer linen curtains. A bank of windows let light into the generous master bedroom of the guest manor in the Kadusian city-state. By the simple standards of the Kadusians, it was well furnished with a tall wardrobe, nightstands, and its own bathroom suite. It was a warm, comfortable morning. The kind that did not beg for five more minutes. It stole time away with coercive pillows and downy blankets.

Though of course part of the reason Lapua was so at home was because she had destroyed the old bed and used [Create Greater Item] to replace it with something more worthy of her station. Oaken banisters held up a canopy and privacy veils with black sheets emblazoned with the Black Sky sun.

Shifting in her bed, wakefulness leisurely worked its way through the Neverborn. Even her thoughts were warm and fuzzy, and naturally Lapua's mind drifted to her home, and her holy Lord and Lady. She wondered if they were waking up like her, snuggling in their room of The Citadel. And naturally, her wandering mind went to Lurk and Harmony perhaps participating in the adult activities that respectable married couples did in the mornings.
Lapua slept in her underwear. Frilly black underthings were all the rage for the women of The Citadel. With several tentative fingers, Lapua's hands slipped under the waistband of her panties. Drifting on and into the warmth of her core, her talented fingers went to work. All the extra digits the Neverborn was graced with let her part the top and bottom of her slit, while burying the unoccupied pairs of fingers into the petals hiding her pearl and the tightness of her lower folds. Though her bosom was small, another set of hands wiggled into the padded cups of her bra. Like a clumsy lover, she fondled and pinched the pebbled buds as she worked herself up.

Lapua imagined being sandwiched between her Supreme Beings while they made love to one another. The idea of their naked bodies rubbing on either side of her got the Neverborn hot and bothered enough to make her insides clench. Bosom to bosom with her Lady, while the mighty Lord plunged his length along Lapua's lower lips and into his wife. Lapua imagined how wet she would be, and that her leaking honey would drip down and help aid her Lord's manhood in his love making and-

Three firm knocks resounded with the weighty thunk of gauntlet on wood.

"Lady Lapua, I'm sorry to disturb you ma'am, but Captain Reese is here and is urgently requesting your presence." The hollow, metallic timber of a Silver Knight's voice breached Lapua's private time.

Disgruntled in purest clam-jammed sense, Lapua threw off the covers with her fingers still glistening with her own wetness.

"I'll be right there." She called out, her halo of psionic force appearing as she stood and with a gesture, donned her Caliber Court ensemble. She smoothed her psionic tendrils and adjusted her chestpiece in a standing mirror before heading out into the hall. Hand-painted pottery and oil paintings of previous dignitaries that had come and gone ran the length of the household wing.

The Sharpshooters were already waking up and emerging from their rooms. They greeted their expedition leader as they rubbed the night from their eyes. The few manor servants were preparing breakfast at behest of Lapua's previous instructions. The Knight who had woken her bowed at her passing. While the Silver Knights did not sleep, they did enter periods of dormancy. The Living Armor enjoyed standing in places of ornamentation along the halls of the dignitary manor, each taking a spot outside one of the five occupied rooms. Lapua had no intention of subsisting off of the city's guest house for any longer than necessary. She was confident that before long, Queen Ismeena would see the wisdom in giving Black Sky a plot of land near the palace for a proper embassy.

Lapua rolled her shoulders and stretched her legs as she walked downstairs to meet the Captain in the foyer of the manor. The Neverborn trailed a pair of hands down the wrought iron bannister of the stairs. No doubt the twirling bars of iron and carved wooden rails were seen as opulent in the Kadusian culture.

"Good morning, Captain Reese." Lapua called as she crossed an expensive rug meant as a gift for the Queen carelessly left behind by the last diplomat who had taken up residence there. The Neverborn pretended she was happy to have her morning personal time interrupted as she approached the man. He had on a fresh tabard trimmed in Kadusia's colors, unstained from the bloodshed of the previous day and a clean blade in his scabbard. Under the crook of one arm was his helmet, and in the other...

"What is your Lord trying to pull!" The man launched into his tirade the moment Lapua came to a
halt in front of him, gesturing angrily with a crimson sphere. "My daughter-

Before he could get another word out, Warren's voice stopped working and in another blink he was staring down the barrel of a magelock firearm.

One of Lapua's right hands held the weapon while the other made a show of slowly cocking the hammer. An ignited match was held in the jaws of the hammer, shaped like a snarling dragon poised to fall.

"Before you say anything you might regret, Captain, let's sit down for tea." It was not a request, or suggestion. And Reese was under no delusions what would happen to him if he did not comply. Lapua's halo flashed in warning in time with the psionic pulse that ran through the Neverborn's eyes. With a psychic lock on his voice, Reese could only nod.

"Good. I'm glad we can discuss this like civilized individuals." Lapua raised her gun, and gave a smile that made it clear she would be only so tolerant of flippancy. Turning, she dropped the firearm, and the magelock vanished from existence before it hit the floor. Warren dutifully followed behind the Neverborn as she led them to the dining room, knuckles white around the red orb clenched in his fist.

Taking her place at the head of the table, she invited the Captain to sit on her left. The Sharpshooters sat down on the opposite end, leaning their rifles against the table at their places. Male and female Demi-Claws all wore their vests and chest rigs festooned with ammo pouches. They did not need boots to cover their wide talons but did wear pants in various blends of olive and grey. The Sharpshooters were soon all enjoying their first meal of the day, piling eggs and bacon from platters in the middle of the long banquet table.

A Silver Knight dutifully poured Lapua and Warren both cups of tea. One of her chitinous hands gripped the saucer while the other looped through the handle of the porcelain cup. Lapua held out her other hands to the Captain. Reluctantly, Warren set his helmet on the polished tabletop and plopped down on the offered chair.

"Let's see what's got you in such a tizzy, Mister Reese." The Neverborn took a sip of her tea as she spoke.

Very grudgingly, Warren set the crimson orb in Lapua's expectant palms. The Neverborn spun the sphere in her digits, immediately recognizing the object.

"A Bloodgem! Where did you get this? I thought your best mage could only cast fourth or fifth tier magic?" She set down her tea to add honey as a sweetener even as her other hands made the orb turn and spin.

"During the..." Warren cleared his throat. "When your Lord and Lady came into the city the other day, one of those giants picked up my daughter along the way and gave her this." Warren gestured to the crimson sphere. He shifted uncomfortably and left his cup steaming on the table.

"You have a very headstrong child, don't you? You should feel honored. The Painlords were all hand-crafted by High Lord Lurk. To be given something by one of them, your Thea must have done something impressive. Why, I wouldn't be surprised if the Painlord was impressed by her bravery, and thought to give her something it believed would protect her. Humans are so fragile after all."

"I didn't tell you her name was Thea." Warren's skin crawled a little as he stared at the unmoving
"You did. Just not how you wanted to." The ghost of a smile graced Lapua Magnum's pale visage as she took another sip of her drink. With their keen hearing, the Demi-Claw Sharpshooters at the other end of the table chuckled quietly.

"So... What is that exactly? What does it do?" Reese asked, not wishing to linger on the woman's alien nature too long.

"Well, in order to cast [Blood Lightning], special charges must be gathered and then expended. They do expire over time. Although a certain number of those charges per day can be made into Bloodgems that have no expiration or casting cost. They're quite harmless unless you choose to use it, mister Reese. Right now, it's little more than its name suggests. A gem. It was given, so you should keep it, Captain. Who knows? It might bring you good fortune." Lapua suggested without ill intent.

She held out the Bloodgem, tapping its glassy surface with her off-hand. While Reese did not find the Neverborn's nonstop fidgeting as annoying, it was certainly distracting. He took back the orb with the wariness of a man staring at a flesh-eating spider. Warren knew better than to insult the Black Sky representative by refusing the gift.

"I know your shift starts soon, Captain, so I won't keep you. Is there a good place to learn about this world? A gathering point of adventurers or something similar?" Lapua's demeanor was friendly. She wanted to do her part in establishing favorable diplomatic footing in the city.

"Adventurers? Well, I'd recommend the Seeker's Hall. Seekers travel all around the continent. Many of them don't belong to any nation either. Security risk if you ask me, letting in anyone from the Heymon Empire just because they claim to be a Seeker." Reese folded his arms over his chest. "You can find the Kadusian branch at the city center in the market square."

Warren stood, returning his helmet to its place under his arm. Although he was not completely reassured, the man did not have any reason to believe the Neverborn was lying to him. He slipped the Bloodgem into a drawstring bag tied to his belt and gave a shallow bow. Respectful, yet reserved.

"I apologize if my tone earlier was abrasive, Lapua Magnum. I am still grateful for what Black Sky did for Kadusia. As a father, the safety of my child is always at the forefront of my mind, and that made me act rashly. I hope you forgive a moments choler."

"I respect anyone willing to admit when their passion got the better of them. What matters is if we are able to learn from our mistakes. There's no shame in putting your family first, Captain. Black Sky Legion is my family. And there is nothing I would not do for them."

"'Till Black Sky comes!" One of the Sharpshooters crowed.

"Ra!" The expedition team echoed. Reptilian fists thumped the table in a ring of silverware and the standing Silver Knights rapped their gauntlets against breastplates or shields. Lapua raised her cup of tea with a wide smile. Reese tried and failed to hide balking from the passionate display of loyalty. Not because it was off-putting. No, it was the ferocity of the declaration that had the experienced man impressed again by Lapua.

"I take my leave, then. Good day to you, miss Lapua, and good fortune for the rest of you."
Reese bowed and turned to march off to his post.

"Excuse me, miss?" The portly man with rosy cheeks asked. A brown tunic and stained apron made him the spitting image of a humble street cook.

"Yes?" Lapua turned to regard the human who had addressed her. Floating in a psionic grip, the notebook and quilt the Neverborn was using to keep notes continued to scratch out words even as she paused. She and her entourage had meandered their way through Kadusia until finally ending up in the market square at around midday.

"Are you a part of that Black Sky Legion everyone's been talkin' about?" Having worked up his bravery, the middle-aged man had spoken before realizing just how tall the Demi-Claws were or how majestic the winged helms of the Silver Knights were. Now, face to face with Lapua Magnum and her psychic halo glistening in the bright sun, it was too late to back down.

"Yes, we are." The Neverborn leaned forward with interest.

"Here, these are for you." The man held out a half dozen wooden skewers with roasted strips of golden chicken. Lapua took the treats, kept one for herself, then gave the rest to the Sharpshooters. On their best behavior, the Demi-Claws took one skewer each from the bundle and passed it on.

"Thank you, kind sir. My Lord saw your people's plight from afar, and could not sit by while your city suffered. While I'm in the city, he's told me to give aid once more should a similar situation arise. You can rest easy, knowing you're under his protection."

Feeling any other words spoken would simply be him fumbling, the portly man thanked Lapua one more time and hurried back to his stall. With her finery and very heteromorphic appearance, most assumed the Neverborn to be a noble from some faraway land. This assessment was not far from wrong. Between the silver of her armor, wealthy look of her Caliber Court dress, and armed soldiers, the average citizens of Kadusia were too intimidated to approach. Other than the street vendor, the city guards were the ones who gave the warmest greetings. Ones that had been on the walls that day, and seen what Black Sky had done for them.

Taking a thoughtful bite from her roasted chicken, Lapua continued to compile observations as she walked to her goal. No detail was too mundane. Races, mannerisms, goods on display, the spices in the chicken skewer, street layout and building fronts. What prey hunters were hauling or hawking. A hundred tidbits that formed the mosaic of life in Kadusia.

Seeker's Hall was one of many that ringed the market. It was the only one with a huge lot of land sectioned off from the city park however. Having gleaned an image of the place from Reese. Lapua finished her treat, headed towards the door, and entered the establishment.

The common room of the Seeker's Hall was a large gathering area for those adventurous souls who came to roost. At least in the city-states, the Seekers were a respectable, and respected bunch. Tables and chairs of all shapes and sizes for different parties and party members filled most of the available space. One side was a fully furbished and functional bar, while stairs led to an upstairs of simple rooms for rent. Opposite the bar, an entire wall was plastered with hundreds of job postings.
Some old, some new, some with crude illustrations, and some with a lot of zeros attached. At the back was a long service desk, staffed by workers dutifully handling the many bureaucratic functions of the organization. They wore blue doublets over white long-sleeved shirts. The men wore black pants, while the woman had ankle-length skirts.

Lapua marched straight up to the counter with her entourage right on her heels. They looked the part of a mercenary group set for battle. The Sharpshooters had their rifles slung, but the Silver Knights of course carried their cross-spears proudly and tower shields with the gleaming Black Sky sun. Though not crowded, many colorful adventuring parties sat around conversing, drinking, or perusing the wall of posters. Every head turned to watch the newcomers enter.

There was a kindly looking human woman that spoke up at their approach. Her brunette hair hung down across her shoulder in a pony-tail and glasses hung from her neck on a delicate silver chain.

"Welcome to the Kadusian Seeker's Hall! Are you here to open a contract?" The woman behind the counter gave her well rehearsed greeting. She took Lapua and her party in stride. The woman had seen individuals of dozens of different races, nationalities, and dress. While the desk worker had not met a Neverborn before, she was not the strangest the experienced contract coordinator had laid eyes on.

"Well, I was told by Captain Reese that your establishment was a good place for knowledge of the world." The agent of Black Sky stated openly.

"Correct!" The bubbly receptionist bounced on the balls of her feet.

"Tell me about the Seekers." Lapua's notebook carried on dutifully as it was dictated mental notes.

The woman cleared her throat and adjusted her glasses.

"Many call us adventurers. We fulfill contracts for a variety of clients. We hunt monsters, find rare alchemy ingredients, protect caravans, map uncharted lands, and mount research expeditions as well. The Seekers pride themselves on being the shield of the people first and foremost. We try not to involve ourselves in the politics of the empires or city-states. As such, we have Halls in nearly every major settlement of the land. Though we ask our members to put the lives of the innocent before any personal or political agenda, a Seeker is never under any obligation to go against the will of their homeland or nation."

"No one knows more about the lands abroad than the Seekers!" The receptionist boasted. "Though if you chose to join us, you would be given direct tutelage by our most experienced members." The Seekers were always on the lookout for talent to add to their roster.

"Would we earn currency recognized by this land?" Lapua asked.

"Of course, successfully fulfilling contract is how many of our Seekers make their living." The receptionist swept out an arm to indicate the job board.

"Is there an entry fee for joining?" Was the Neverborn's followup.

"No, but there is a test."
"A test, huh?" Behind Lapua, Demi-Claws gave toothy grins while Silver Knights conversed and nodded amongst one another.

The woman was a seasoned recruiter, and recited her orientation from memory.

"Aspiring Seekers are not allowed to go on missions until they have proven capable of handling themselves in potentially dangerous situations. Junior Seekers are apprenticed under True Seekers or above until at least two different mentors approve of their promotion to Adepts. Now, if your tests go well, I can get you started as Adepts. That is the lowest rank allowed to take on contracts. Only through successfully completing contracts are you able to move up, and only Adept level contracts will be available to you. A committee of higher ranking Seekers will be convened and vote, moving you up to True Seeker, and Master Seeker. Only the most venerated individuals make it to the rank of Wise Seeker. They lead us, but few in a generation have the skill to climb those heights."

"Am I required to follow the command of someone with a higher rank?" Lapua's disembodied voice was neutral, however, it would be a deal-breaker for her.

"No ma'am, though I would urge you to heed the wisdom of the experienced, no Seeker may order another Seeker, even if they are of a lower rank. The rules of being a Seeker are simple: Do not harm the innocent. Do not steal from your fellow Seekers. Never abandon a contract without just cause. And observe the laws of the land."

"A teaching of the holy Tetragrammaton of my Lord is to not harm those who stand by in innocence. Your policies are reasonable. Very well, as representatives of Black Sky Legion, I would like to join the Seekers." Lapua laid a pair of hands over her heart and nodded.

The receptionist positively beamed with pride, quickly fetching ten paper applications from beneath the desk. During the whole exchange, a gaggle of Seekers and other onlookers had gathered around, listening in or admiring the craftsmanship of the Silver Knight's armor. Lapua waved a single hand, filling out all ten forms simultaneously using writing implements held in telekinetic grips. It was not unusual for potential Seekers to be illiterate, so it was no problem for Lapua to write in the information for her away team. She was eager to start.

"Alright ma'am, if you and your party would like to follow me this way, we'll begin your test." The woman gave the forms a quick review and walked over to a wide set of double doors that led out behind the hall.

The Seekers had occupied their particular place in Kadusia for well over a hundred years, and had inherited their building and generous plot of prime land from a now defunct woodcutters guild from the past. Its primary use was training and assessing old and new Seekers alike. There were straw targets, dummies, wrestling pits with sand, sparring circles, and even an obstacle course. The worker turned to address the Neverborn and her dutiful soldiers. Seeker and petitioner alike had followed Lapua and her squad out into the yard to watch, and formed a semi-circle of curious onlookers. Even if they had not yet heard of Black Sky, it was clear that the foreigners meant business.

"As party leader, it's tradition for you to go first, miss Magnum. There are three tests. Strength, agility, and skill." Now acting as testing coordinator, the brunette woman read Lapua's name off her application. "The first test is strength." She pointed to a series of rocks, lined up in a row of increasing size.

"Boulders? Aha! How quaint." Lapua sauntered up to the row of rocks and looked at the largest, about fifteen feet of stone. Squaring up, the Neverborn put her left foot forward and drew her right
hands back to her side into fists.

"Ma'am, the test of strength is-

"Ha!" Launching a straight hook, her knuckles impacted the boulder. Every bit of stone that lay above ground exploded. A shower of dust and fragments spread in a cone in the direction of the blow. Chunks fell to the earth even as the trees behind the former boulder were revealed to have stone shrapnel embedded in their trunks.

"The test... Of... Oh." The poor testing coordinator sputtered. The woman's glasses hung askew on the bridge of her nose from the shockwave given off by Lapua's punch. Everyone in the crowd was stunned to silence even as polite applause rose from the Sharpshooters and Silver Knights.

"Sorry, what? Was I not supposed to do that?" The Psion turned.

"Well... you were just meant to lift the heaviest stone you, uh, could... You know... Lift? That rock was part of the test of agility."

"Whoops, I got excited." Lapua's halo lit up and the chitinous hands that had destroyed the stone were wrapped in arcane circles as she summoned her telekinetic power. With a flick of her wrist, the intact, bottom half of the boulder was exhumed. Using her other bifurcated arm, she pulled the pulverized chunks into the hole left behind. Flipping the rock over, she set the flat side down on the bed from its own gravel pieces. At least two magic casters in the crowd passed out from shock.

Doing her absolute best to stay on script, the receptionist moved on.

"The second part of the test of strength is arm wrestling. Do we have any volunteers?" When unsurprisingly not a single soul spoke up, the testing coordinator muttered to herself. "I'm just going to put down 'passed'." She scribbled on a sheet of paper and lifted her chin. "Next is the test of agility." The woman pointed to the small obstacle course of balance logs and tangles of metal bars that ran up to the newly refurbished climbing rock.

Without a word Lapua bounded forward quick as a flash. Nimble feet seemed to barely touch the ascending poles. Half-skirt flaring behind her, the Neverborn leapt like a gymnast between the metal bars meant to slow the runner, forcing them to climb over or through them. Then she spring-boarded from the final pole to the tall rock she had accidentally demolished earlier. Was it entirely necessary to add a double backflip to her final dismount off the boulder? No. Was it worth seeing the collective jaws of the crowd hit the ground again? Yes. Once again, courteous applause came from her squad. This time a few of the gawkers did join in.

"Lastly, the test of skill. Could I have two volunteers this time?" Also greatly impressed, the kindly worker woman announced. The mass of people moved on to the training circle marked with a ring of gravel. Lapua did not need to be a mind reader to know what needed to be done as she stepped into the circle. Two Seekers did step up this time.

One was a stout, olive-skinned man. And the other was an older, very serious looking woman. Both were leaders of their own groups, and were courageous enough to take the measure of the foreigner. Lapua squared off against the two with wooden shields and training swords they had gotten from a rack set out expressly for such purposes. The Disciple of the Tetragrammaton had no weapons, and stood with her four palms turned out. She gestured for the pair to come at her.

The two were clever and their first blows came from both chest and knee level. She weaved
between them like a ballet dancer, one leg lifted while she bent backwards, wooden blades coming within an inch of the Neverborn's thigh and chest plate. While the woman backed off, the man followed through with a swing of his shield, aiming at Lapua's middle. With a swish of her skirt, she twirled out of her bend with laughable ease.

In a bid to do something other than hit empty air, the Seekers both swung to layer their blows on top of one another..

The Neverborn caught the descending wooden swords in a cross grip with the curved pommel of a magelock that materialized in one of Lapua's many chitinous hands. A quick flick sent the training weapons flying. Every eye followed the sudden motion, even the two with their hands still stinging. An ignited match struck a magical primer and an arcane discharge reduced the training weapons to kindling.

Just like the other two tests, things were over in a flash with the member of Black Sky's Caliber Court as the incontrovertible victor. This time, the whole crowd clapped their hands and whistled praise. Lapua banished her spent magelock and honored her opponents with a dignified bow. The two could do little other than blink and return the gesture.

"That concludes your test, miss Magnum. I'm very, very certain that you'll be given Adept." Declared the coordinator. "Since your-" The training coordinator glanced down at the forms she was holding. "Uh, Sharpshooters are put down as rangers, we'll have them take the test of skill for archery in lieu of the others. Are those their... Bows?"

"The Type-Ninety-Nine is sacrosanct under the holy Tetragrammaton, and much better than any bow." Lapua vaunted the work of her creator with perfect seriousness as she rejoined her squad.

"Then please stand behind the white line and pick a target." With practiced efficiency, the Seeker worker was happily moving the trials right along.

The away party understood that their actions would affect how Black Sky Legion was perceived by the Kadusians. Their leader, the esteemed Three-Thirty-Eight Lapua Magnum had set the bar.

The Sharpshooters took their place at the line of painted rocks. They readied up, weapons seated against their shoulders, but pointing down in a forward stance. The first one up loaded two rounds, while the middle three each slotted one, and the last chambered nothing, leaving their bolt open. Raising his weapon, the Sharpshooter on the left put irons on the chosen target and pulled the trigger. Many among the crowd flinched and covered their ears at the air splitting crack of the rifle. As a group, the Demi-Claws had picked a thick coniferous tree with a bullseye daubed in a bright blue pigment. The armor-piercing-incendiary was useful for a variety of reasons over the simpler steel core high-velocity penetrators. Those with quick enough vision would have spotted the screaming spark of the glowing tracer as it thudded into the tree. Almost everyone saw the trunk buckle slightly, and the shower of splinters that scattered from the back of the tree.

Ejecting the spent casing, the Sharpshooter chambered the next round, then pulled the bolt back a second time. Extractors sent the live round flying in a flash of brass right into the waiting palm of the next Demi-Claw in line. The shooter placed the gifted bullet into their waiting internal magazine, closed their bolt, aimed, fired, and repeated the action, sending their own extra round spinning through the air for the next. And the next. And the next. Then the last finished the chain. As a squad, the Sharpshooters tamped the butts of their rifles into the ground at the conclusion of their drill.
With the last bullet away, the tree cracked under its own weight from the line of holes punched horizontally through it and toppled over with a crash. The stump smoldered a bit from the fiery nature of the rounds shot at it as the onlookers stared.

"Good work, you do Lady Wrath and Lady Ruin proud with your accuracy." Lapua offered up as praise as she added her applause to the Living Armor's metallic clamor.

"And laaaaast of the last, and I'm certain not least, the Silver Knights? Looking at their armor, I think we can safely skip the test of strength and agility straight on to skill."

Never to be outdone themselves, one of the Living Armor stepped up to represent the group.

"Any warrior wishing to protect their companions must face situations where they are outnumbered. Please, pit four of your best against me." In the spirit of Legion himself, the knight planted the end of his spear into the ground and stepped into the training circle with only his shield. His fellow knights crashed spear hafts against shields in salute to their brother.

Since it was not going to be up against Lapua, there were several willing warriors who came forth.

Much like the pair who had fought the Neverborn, they all gathered training weapons from a rack and tried to coordinate their attacks once the test began with all of them in the circle. The Silver Knight never attacked on his own. Only defended, or countered. The Living Armor was an implacable wall, unmoved by the heaviest or most rapid of blows. Though he did maneuver, utilizing the training circle's limitation to get the four tripping over themselves to get to him. Seekers called out encouragement to their fellows in the ring.

After a few minutes of nonstop assault, the four lay panting and heaving from exertion. Fingers deadened from laying strike upon strike against unforgiving metal. And the Silver Knight stood proud with his winged helm catching the light from the evening sun. Striving to be the example set by his Lord Legion and Queen Harmony, the knight went around and helped each Seeker to their feet before exiting the ring.

There was a round of cheers, and with the promise of drinks after the magnificent showing, everyone headed back inside the hall.

"Your group is... Astonishing, ma'am. You yourself are incredible, miss." The worker clutched her stack of papers to her chest as she walked beside Lapua. "I'm so glad you've decided to join us. I know it might be a bit premature of me, but please don't be shy about picking some contracts to start off with. I'll submit them and all your results to the lead Seeker. I believe you're going to do great things."

Enjoying the physical and mental chattering full of ripe gossip and knowledge, Lapua knew that tale of their exploits would travel fast, along with the name Black Sky.

"I hope I can continue to do my High Lord proud with my work." The Neverborn clasped her many hands together as she followed the coordinator back to the reception desk. While Lapua Magnum finalized the details of their entry into the Seekers, she sent two of her party to look through the contracts. Even though the job board was in another language, a simple psionic charm let one Sharpshooter and one Silver Knight read through the listings with ease.

They returned as just as the Psion finished a last couple formal processes to begin accepting
"Lady Magnum, we believe we found a trend." The Silver Knight said.

"A trend, eh? What are your thoughts?" Lapua responded.

"It looks like there are numerous postings for escorts through the mountain pass The Citadel now overlooks." Stroking a claw thoughtfully over her chin, the Demi-Claw summarized their findings.

"Now that the Bandit King is dead and his mob destroyed, there's going to be a power vacuum in the mountain outlaw tribes." Lapua stated, considering the far reaching consequences for the surrounding lands that were affected by the former Bandit King's territory.

"Without a leader telling them who they can and can't attack, it's going to be like wading through a nest of hornets to get over that pass." The Knight shook his head at the deplorable state.

"With the city's armies away fighting that empire, there's no one to capitalize on the opening and pacify the up and coming wild lords wanting to carve their piece out of the trade route." Crossing her arms over her chest, the Sharpshooter glanced back at the job board covered in more escort missions than there were Seekers to fulfill them.

"This keeps turning into a better and better opportunity for us. According to preliminary wyvern scout reports, beyond the mountains there's at least two large port cities on the ocean-"

A commotion arose as a loud and boisterous party barged their way into the Seeker's Hall. All swagger and self-assured smiles. Strutting right between Lapua and the reception desk, the apparent leader acted like the Neverborn did not exist.

"I've got a contract to turn in." The man announced with all the pomp and entitlement that his noble father had bought for him. It went well with his gaudy jeweled sword and gem-spun cloak.

"I'll be right with you, True Seeker. I'm helping our newest member with her first contracts." The receptionist tried to politely motion for the man to move. Instead he turned, as if seeing Lapua for the first time.

"You demi-human trash are worthless as adventurers." The large man attempted to use his mass and the forcefulness of his presence to intimidate the diminutive Lapua out of his way.

"You better back off before she breaks you in half, Lomar." Called the dark skinned man who had dueled Lapua during her earlier test.

"I don't understand this man. Can someone translate stupid?" Setting her hands on her hips, the Neverborn shook her head as the Seeker grew increasingly agitated.

One of her Sharpshooters called out even as Silver Knights moved to surround the Seeker and his group.

"I believe this man is attempting to insult you, Lady." Said the Demi-Claw who had been in the middle of her report.

"Oh, is that it? Well he's doing a very poor job then." Lapua waved both dismissively, and as though there were a foul odor in the air.
True Seeker Lomar saw the symbol on the shields.

"Oh, I know who you are now. Tch, I heard your little merc group thinks they're hot shit after dusting a few rowdy bandits. If you ask me this Black Sky isn't-" 

Whatever else the man was going to say was cut off as Lapua grabbed him by the mouth and throat, lifting him bodily into the air. The man let out a muffled shout of shock and surprise. His first instinct was to beat against the thin limb holding him aloft, but it was like trying to beat adamantium with his fists. Slender fingers tightened in threat, the bones of his jaw creaking under the strain. Panicked eyes darted around, looking for help even as his boots kicked inches from the floor.

Yet no aid was forthcoming.

All around, every living witness to the events excluding the Demi-Claws and Silver Knights, were frozen. Not a soul except for Lapua's entourage even twitched, locked in place. The Sharpshooters looked on and sneered while the Living Armor mocked the man. One pointed their spear right at the man.

"Teach him some manners, Lady Magnum."

Chuckling, Lapua waggled a pair of index fingers.

"Oh, no, no, no, no. This simply will not do. I might have been tolerant of your words if they had only been directed at me. That Captain Reese fellow has worth. Has use. My Supreme Ones would be displeased if I killed him. But you're just a dumb animal. And now, as a reward for your tongue, you get to be nothing at all. My Lord instructed me to not use anything over seventh tier, but I think I know just the thing. [Terminate]."

From the point of contact, the large man began to dissolve. He had enough time to give a muffled scream into Lapua's palm, before the flesh of his entire head was consumed, leaving only a charred skull, then that turned into blackened dust. A second later, the rest of the body followed suit. Like a surgeon, Lapua then excised the memory of the man ever existing from every witness still frozen in stasis from her mind lock.

The kindly Seeker's Hall worker blinked a few times.

"Hm?" She pondered, looking around as if confused, then saw Lapua waiting patiently. "Oh! My dearest apologies, miss Magnum, my mind got away from me there for a moment."

"Tut, tut, there's no need to worry deary. It happens to the best of us." Though her lips did not move with her words, they did curl up into a wry smile. Behind her, the new leader of the adventuring party waited his turn to talk to the Seeker representative.

"Yes, now I remember! You were selecting from our jobs board. Have you decided where you'd like to begin?"

"Yes, I've perused your selection and would like one of each, please."
The grand library of The Citadel was a calm nucleus nestled into a pocket of the bottom floor. Being there quieted the restless worry that threatened to unravel the King. Harmony's near brush with danger kindled the only thing he had ever feared. An old, familiar dread.

Losing her.

Lurk took a deep breath, letting the scent of the great library permeate his soul. It was a balm to him. A blessed relief. Ice water on a burn. Its aroma was an incense made from essence of dry ink, spine binding glue, and just a hint of wood polish. The many blazing hearths were all full of Evercedar, the logs replenishing themselves even as they burned. His acute senses could detect the many different ages of the books like a vineyard master walking his storage cellars, able to discern vintage by nose alone.

In a ritual the draconic man had perfected over years of working his way up the corporate ladder, he inhaled and held his breath. Lurk counted to four, squeezing his eyes shut and balling his claws into fists, then released the air in his lungs and loosened himself. Inhale, count to four, exhale. Through will and resolve, he centered himself. Even in his new body, the motions were familiar. Lurk was glad that he had devoted so much time to perfecting control of his Wyrmblood avatar.

I need to remember I'm not here for pleasure. I'm here for a purpose.

Even as he affirmed the directive to no one but himself, Lurk could not resist the need to at least look around. Literature was a course through schooling that Lurk hated to take, and loved only in retrospect. He was reminded of this as he took in the sight just as he had the scent.

He had teleported just inside the threshold.

From the doors, the wings of the library radiated outward in sweeping stacks of shelves that stretched to the vaulted ceiling three levels above. Wrought iron spiral stairs led up to the second and third layer of walkways and bookshelves. Elegant banisters and walkways criss-crossed the cavernous space. A variety of reading areas interspaced the walls of books. Stuffed chairs, sofas, and Darksteel cafe ensembles huddled by the many crackling hearths. On the ground floor were neat rows of workstations, each with their own spread of writing tools and blank paper.

In one of their many bids to be the premier online service, YGGDRASIL had copies of every written work in the public domain, and even a small shop of digital work for purchase. A couple gigs of compressed words were nothing compared to the many terabytes of data dedicated to monster spawn algorithms.

Every shelf was filled to bursting with books. Enough written word to occupy a dozen lifetimes. Lurk recalled making the first floor, then typing in the command to automatically fill the shelves, only for the books to actually explode as the physics simulator attempted to have multiple objects occupy the same place. It was one of the only instances where his game had stuttered from all the loose pages flying everywhere. After he built the second layer, the same thing happened, only the books rained down from higher. Once the last level was in place everything sorted itself out.
Aside from the firing range, it was one of Lurk's favorite places. He could get lost in a comfortable seat and a compelling tale. The advantage of being in a game was always not having to worry about cramping up from sitting for too long. Though now, the library was Lurk's to enjoy with the tactile feedback of a real book in his hands. Nothing beat the taste of a fine cup of hot cocoa or iced tea whilst losing oneself in the depths of another world.

The irony was not lost on the Wyrmblood.

Past the threshold was a wide mahogany reception desk. Silkeena the Drider was the librarian of Cognitio and occupied the anatomically compatible seat behind the circular counter. Though she was the lone custodian of tens of thousands of books, the spider woman was easily capable of handling her duties. A vintage jade-glass shrouded banker's lamp spilled light across a sprawling clutter of leather bound ledgers. Different writing implements held down sheaves of parchment and towering stacks of books formed buttresses for Silkeena's tiny fortress of ink and paper.

The Drider looked up from the tome she was studying on her desk and adjusted the circular glasses up her slim nose to better see the new arrival. Though she wondered how she missed the front door opening. Upon seeing who it was, the spider-lady nearly fell from her special chair.

"High Lord Lurk!" Even exclaiming her joy, Silkeena's words barely rose above a whisper. The Drider inclined her head, snow white hair spilling across lilac skin. Even her movements were muffled by layers of dusky robes draped from the librarian's shoulders, waist, and abdomen. "Welcome to Cognitio, most venerable Lord. What service may I provide? My breadth of knowledge is yours to command."

Lurk smiled. He could not help himself. Silkeena had been another joint creation between Harmony and himself. Just as Woodsolution had his affinity for oceans and forests, the husband and wife duo of Black Sky Legion enjoyed the many creepy crawly things of their previous lives.

Other than abstaining from his cuirass and greatcoat, Lurk wore his usual ensemble. His talons clicked and tail trailed across the polished marble floor. Its reflective luster made Cognitio seem much larger than it already was and a distorted twin of the Wyrmblood followed every step. He stopped before the sprawling desk and rested a hand on its lacquered top.

"Hello, Silkeena, I'm glad to see you well." Lurk was certain that he would never tire seeing the inhabitants of The Citadel living and thriving.

The Drider hid herself behind the sleeve of her robes, her cheeks blooming with a deep magenta blush. Finding the shy display absolutely adorable, Lurk still had a job to do.

"I need atlases for Earth, the nine realms of YGGDRASIL, and... Hm. I suppose any other maps that have accurate coastlines. Also anything on the myths and legends of YGGDRASIL. Possibly Norse myths as well." The Wyrmblood rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

"Yes, of course. Your will be done. Is there a specific direction for your research? It might help narrow down the criteria of your search, High Lord."

From his inventory, Lurk retrieved the map provided by Queen Ismeena before departing Kadusia. He had only given the roll of thick vellum a cursory glance before Skitharix had called him to his wife's aid. The draconic man gave the map to Silkeena. She took it with care more suited to fragile weaving silk. The Drider unrolled the New World chart.
"See if you can find anything on this same distance scale. Use the distance between The Citadel's peak here, and Kadusia, here." Lurk tapped the two positions on the map. "As for myths and legends, let's say anything to do with... New worlds or anything concerning events post Ragnarok. I know that's got some world re-birthing in it." Pondering what other avenues he could go down, Lurk folded his arms across his black cotton shirt.

"Would you like your research material here, or delivered somehow for review at your leisure, High Lord?" Silkeena blinked over the rim of her glasses.

"One of the tables in here for now, please."

"By your command, sire." The librarian rolled up the vellum map and set off to her task. Unfolding her many legs, the Drider stood tall, hooked the sharp tips of her legs through the rails of the rolling ladders and clambered straight up the many shelves. Her form carried her vertically with ease to the vaulted ceiling before she passed out of sight to fulfill her Lord's request.

Left alone, he enjoyed another dose of fragrant cedar. He focused on the distraction, using it to drive away the past trauma encroaching on his calm.

A whispering caught Lurk's attention. The faintest susurration drifted on top of the rustling fire. The draconic man might have convinced himself he was imagining the noise if not for its continued presence. His brain was still reconciling with his new and improved senses. Walking around the reception desk, he trekked down the main hall of Cognitio. Passing wing after wing, the sound gradually coalesced into discernible words.

"...approach sap, this time aimed at the head of the Primus Revelin, but until the batteries had had a chance to open fire and dismount most of the keep's wall guns, work could not yet begin."

Following the feminine voice, Lurk was shocked to find Phage and one of her Corsairs. The female Plague Elves were seated across from one another at one of the brass cafe tables. With her respirator hanging from her neck to better narrate, the Corsair was reading from a book in her lap. Phage was the very image of courtly serenity. Back straight. One wrist laid over the other. Knees together. Bare feet flat against the floor. Yet she held her stately posture with ease. The Guardian's eyes were closed and the skin around her temples was relaxed. The only motion was the faint twitching of her long ears as she listened intently.

Both were engrossed in their activity and immediately sensed Lurk's presence.

"Hello, Phage, I didn't realize anyone else was here." Tentatively greeting the pair, the Ancient Incarnate attempted to give a convincing smile.

Brass anklet jangling, Phage launched herself out of her seat to kneel before her Supreme Being. The Corsair joined her in a flurry of wyvern leather and Darksteel chainmail.

"My Lord, please, I shall leave at once if my presence is in any way disruptive to your peace of mind or focus." Phage's alabaster dress pooled around her ankles as she gave her declaration to the floor.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply you were bothersome. No, no. I was just thinking heavy things, is all. Worrying about Harmony had my mind in... Another place for a moment. That's all."
The Guardian's head snapped up, acid green iris swirling. Her brow was knit together in concern.

"What is there to worry about, High Lord?" She presented a front equal parts rage in waiting, and ferocious consternation.

"Oh, she just had some trouble on the fourth floor is all. This new world makes many things feel different, and she was unprepared for the... Intensity." He attempted to casually brush off the distress he felt as easily as Harmony had dismissed her encounter.

"Was Skitharix negligent in his holy duty?" Phage stood and the back of her chair melted to slag then crumbled into rust a second later. Fury threatened to let loose the shackles which restrained the Dread Soul's passive auras. The Corsair still kneeling beside her visibly shuddered as waves of nausea made the less powerful Plague Elf's stomach cramp and roil.

"No!" Lurk held up his claws to assuage the Guardian's wrath. "No, Skitharix was more diligent than I was. He caught Harmony before she could get hurt. He did exactly what I would have done in his position. If anything, I should have remembered how dangerous the floor was and taken precautions." There were many new, yet old things that Lurk would have to be careful with.

"High Lord, it is the duty of every living thing in The Citadel to serve you. If anything, it would be our failing for not having the forethought to protect our rulers. I am relieved to hear that my beloved Skitharix performance merited praise from you, most venerable Lord." Her benediction carried razor blades of promised reprisal. Lurk realized that the Guardian's fanaticism did not spare one from the other. He wondered how tight their scrutiny was.

Hoping to quickly change the subject, Lurk looked to the book forgotten on the table.

"Storm of Iron? One of my favorites." He stepped around the women, patted the kneeling Corsair on the shoulder, and picked up the paperback. He studied the cover and turned it over in his claw. The Wyrmblood gave a casual wave and mended the chair that Phage had destroyed in her fervor. Lurk did not want his Guardian blacklisted from Cognitio because of an outburst he caused.

"I enjoyed the depiction of the siege. It is a subject I would enjoy Ruin's discourse on. There are many arts of war worthy of attention." The Guardian remarked and dismissed her attendant with a gesture. The Corsair bowed deeply to her High Lord and Dread Lady before departing in a trail of green fire distinctive to the Plague Elves.

"If you enjoyed it, I might recommend Mantle of Grey. 'When you are lost in the howling dark, remember that it is not a void, but a mirror. One that nary a man can look into without losing himself to the truth staring back. Look for the spark. Be the fire that lights your own way.' I'm sure I'm misquoting that, but it has excellent portrayals of sieges with different techniques on different castles.” Many other volumes sprung to mind, and Lurk had to bite his tongue to keep from blabbing like a fanboy.

"Thank you, Lord. Since it is by your word, I would have Skitharix read it to me. I'm sure he would enjoy it as well." Phage said wistfully.

"Do you enjoy having things read to you?" Lurk felt comfortable asking the more personal question since they were alone.

"I would love to read them myself, but..." Phage held up her hands, daintily encased in ivory silk gloves up to the elbow. Ash flower patterns threaded through the gloves with smoky Darksteel lace.
"I'm afraid even wearing mittens of silk would not keep the pages from rotting away." The Guardian let out a demure sigh, resuming her more sedate demeanor.

Understanding slapped the Ancient Incarnate across the face.

Dreadsoil. Despoiler. Lurk had made her. He had written into her code her love of books and stories, never realizing the consequences of his actions. It had all just been a game. He had wanted to make a powerful character around a build idea that he himself wanted. Instead he had burdened a living being with his own selfish fantasy. His thoughts went to Phage, handicapped by her power. He considered Silkeena. Did the Drider truly want to be a librarian? Or was she just forced into that role by what had been decided for her. They did not choose the manner of their existence. These creatures were made by him, given life because of him. And they were his responsibility.

For a moment, Lurk felt the terrible weight of accountability. Bearing down like a millennia of strife and all the pain of living so long as to know love, loss, and have brushed death's own shoulder and known the chill of his passage. Such was that weight, that for a moment, he bore entirely of The Citadel on his shoulders. It stole the air from his lungs and blurred his sight. It laid scalding talons of guilt into each of his scales like a branding iron.

Once the second had passed his ability to breathe returned, he pulled up a chair and sat down with a two-ton sigh. He felt the ages of the Ancient Dragon Incarnate carved into his horns.

Phage started upon seeing her Lord in distress. She reached out to help him, then remembered herself and clutched her hands to her breast. The Guardian wrung her silk gloves as an outlet for her impotency.

Lurk gave a dismissive wave to forestall her worry. Clenching his claw, Lurk realized he still held the book and set it down. He did not want to test whether he could fix it as easily as he had the chair.

"Don't mind this old lizard." He chuckled, then reached up to rub his horns at the sudden soreness where they connected to his skull. Was this what his racial was doing to him? The fluff behind the Ancient Incarnate had allured Lurk. Dragons who went to war for so long their bodies wore out. So they ritually sacrificed themselves and concentrated their souls to be reborn into smaller forms that could fight and be renewed again and again. They would lose and have to re-earn their physical skills, but their knowledge and experience would persist through the lifetimes.

What did that mean for him?

_I was human. Harmony and I both were. Now we're not. Different brain chemistry. What are we outside of our memories of being human? How will we change in a month? In a year? What is this going to do to us?_ Lurk stared down at _Storm of Iron_. Then he looked to Phage, expectantly standing beside him.

"Do you resent me for making you the way you are?" Lurk reached out a claw and brushed his claw along her cheek. She was so full of life. Flush with a heart that beat and a chest that rose and fell. There was only so much data that could be crammed into one character. The transition to the new world had filled in the rest. More than just an affinity for books, but knowledge of Cognitio and a desire to seek it out illustrated how far the Guardian had come into her own.

His contact was light as a feather. Lurk traced his thumb down her jaw to the corner of Phage's mask, lost in remembrance of when he had made her. Nostalgia made the Wyrmblood forget himself.
The Plague Elf inhaled sharply, her respirator filters rattling. Her eyes widened in surprise as although she could not fathom the reason her Lord was showing her such affection, she would not protest.

Just the barest touch sent shivers from the nape of Lurk's neck to the tip of his tail. Phage had her passives turned as low as she was able. Even with his resistances, Lurk could only withstand her Dreadsoul for a short time.

*Is this the first time someone has ever touched her?* He reflected. *I made her this way. And now she has to live with the consequences.*

Lurk perhaps lingered too long without pulling on one of his masks and the tip of the claw began to smoke as Phage's control slipped a bit. Nonplussed at the minor cosmetic char, he pulled his claw back. Regarding the smoldering digit, Lurk gave a throaty laugh at his own negligence. There were a dozen ways he could have avoided the damage. Potions, equipment, or otherwise. But against his non-buffed self? Not much chance.

Having spent dozens of hours studying the hundreds of racial and job classes, the Wyrmblood had many ideas for builds. The most intriguing or esoteric ones had found shape in the Guardians of the Citadel. He never enjoyed following the meta. Even with the vast diversity available to YGGDRASIL players, certain jobs and races were considered objectively above the rest. Whenever a tournament winner published their build, copies would pop up by the dozen. Several particularly affluent members of the community would publish lists that ranked the spells and classes. Black Sky Legion belonged to the anti-meta-meta philosophy of finding unique and interesting ways to break opponents who wore their ideology of victory above creativity on their sleeve.

"High Lord!" The Guardian exclaimed. She went down on her knees once more, reached out with her silk covered hands and smothered the burning claw. Even though the crisis was averted, Phage did not let go. Her slim fingertips followed the lines that wound across the hide of Lurk's palm while she held onto his thumb. The Plague Elf pointedly studied her Lord's claw rather than look directly at him.

"I know that my classes make certain things difficult. However, I am your blade. Your Untouchable. I live to serve. No enemy will ever pass the sixth floor while I live. You are my creator. My Supreme Being. It is only through you that I was made. And only through you that I live. You could have decided for me to be a hideous blob, and I would not have complained." She did not know if her babbling would make a difference. Phage could only hope that her sincerity came through.

"I wanted your beauty to match your lethality." Lurk replied and studied his Guardian. It seemed like so long ago that he had made her. He remembered the surge of inspiration when the Plague Elf race had been introduced.

Flickering light from the hearth glinted off the decorative brass barbed wire in her braid. Lurk had made a few different accessories for the Guardian. The grinning fangs of her crimson Oni mask poked between the circular respirator filters. Copper and more brass branched and split in the chemical formula for uranium hexafluoride which adorned the cheek of the mask. She had several respirators to reflect Lurk's love of intimidating facewear.

"You... Think I'm beautiful, my Lord? Truly?" Ghostly pale ears turned pink.

"I mean, yes, of course. I try not to make ugly things." He blurted.
"I don't think you've ever made anything ugly, my Lord." Phage countered, turning his claw over in her grasp. They were the miraculous tools which shaped The Citadel. Formed her like a sculptor would clay.

"Ha! I wish my first attempts at The Citadel's front door had been as beautiful as you are. Or Skitharix for that matter. He had a Mohawk for a little while."

"A Mohawk?" Phage tried to maintain her composure, yet a giggling fit slipped out. The image of her fellow Guardian with a set of hair alone was enough to keep her entertained for a long time to come. "There is nothing beyond your abilities, High Lord Lurk."

She spoke as though Lurk occupied the same importance as a fundamental law of existence.

"Oh, there's plenty I can't do. That's one of the many reasons I married Harmony." Wistful joy managed to sneak back to curl the edges of his mouth.

"Your relationship with Lady Harmony is something every inhabitant of the Citadel hold sacred, my Lord. There is not a one of us who do not see you both as perfection."

"I wouldn't go that far. We've made plenty of mistakes." Trailing off, his draconic eyes looked far into another time and place. His jaw hung slack as an old wound throbbed through a spot on his chest. Without realizing what he was doing, the Wyrmblood rubbed his free palm over the poorly aged mark on his soul.

"My Lord, there's nothing you can't tell me. If you tell me it is a secret, then it shall never leave my confidence. You have my solemn vow." Phage declared after glancing to see why her King had fallen so deathly silent.

Once goaded, the words bubbled up like froth thrown up from an ocean storm.

"We... We've lived other lives. And, the rules of that world weren't as... Fair as YGGDRASIL. Harmony and I tried to make something. However... The world did not agree. But, we made you. And now you're... And... I don't know what I'm saying. Or why I'm saying it." Lurk pulled his claw from Phage's grasp, thinking that he had perhaps overstepped himself. Once off his foolish tongue, he could not take back his words. He had no way of knowing how a Guardian would react to such concepts. What had he been thinking? A whirlwind of emotion tried to rip his brain in half.

Inhale. Count to four. Exhale. The Ancient thought, and grudgingly his body obeyed.

"I... My Lord. I can be anything you wish. I will not pretend to understand the magnitude of your divinity. Your power transcends worlds. So it makes sense that you sometimes left for other worlds. I can't imagine one that could take something from you or Lady Harmony. I hope Lord Woodsolution went to a peaceful one. If it would balm your sorrow, then I would be the replacement for this creation." She vowed, placing a palm over her heart as she did so.

Curiously, Phage's words spoken in ignorance did not harm the Wyrmblood.

"Thank you, Phage. I guess what I'm trying to say is that... In a way... I hope that in the other life, Harmony and I might have had someone like you. I hope you don't take that the wrong way." Inwardly, Lurk berated himself for putting on such a pathetic showing. Why was he still lingering on worlds better left forgotten? On pain he thought he had moved beyond?
"My... Creator... Even though you cast no spell, your words alone display your wisdom and majesty. Truly we are but shallow reflections of your greatness. Please, High Lord, I live to serve. There is no wrong way I could ever take it. Every moment I spend with you, is a gift, Lord Lurk. One that I shall treasure every moment of my life. Your company, your kindness, is more than I am worth. Yet I selfishly hold on to it all the same." The palm on her heart clenched into a fist, ash flowers pulling taut on the back of her gloves.

Phage the Untouchable kneeled before her creator. Her god. Her power, released from the restriction of mere code, transistors, and binary, and set loose into a mortal world was terrifying beyond countenance. And yet, she bowed to him. She bended knee in unquestioning loyalty. There was nothing he could not ask of her. No task. No request. Nothing would be too much for her Supreme Being. Lurk saw this truth. He knew what miracles and atrocities could be wrought at his word by this creation of his.

Instead, he placed a claw on her shoulder. When she looked at him, acid flowing around her pupil, Lurk reached up and brushed a few loose strands of her hair back into place.

"I can dream that she would have been beautiful, like you." Was all he said. And in that moment, there was no greater gift she could have given him.

Lurk could not bear to go any further with the comparison. If he did, there would be no return from it. And he did not want to burden Phage with such a selfish whim. She was no longer some toy, like a doll for him to project his insecurities onto. The Plague Elf was her own being, now gifted with self-determination. It was not right for the Wyrmblood to use his position of authority to force her to conform to some demented surrogacy.

Phage had only a second to relish the attention and praise of her Lord.

Then the revelation struck her with the force of splitting atoms. It pierced her heart, body, and soul. She had not the breath to gasp, for she had been crucified by the void of pain she never before conceptualized. Despite her gifts of knowledge, all of it failed her. No flowery prose emerged to explain away the oblivion of reason. In the halls of Cognitio, knowledge shattered the Guardian where no mortal blade could ever hope to.

For all her strength, she dared not utter the truth. If her Lord could not give voice, how could she? But Phage understood. And that understanding swept through her like a double maximized casting of [Necrotize]. The very composition of her being threatened to buckle under the revelation. Though no wound had been inflicted upon her, the pain was more than anything she had experienced.

_I could be your child, Lord Lurk. I would be your daughter._

Though she did not have the audacity to speak it, she could think it. Then the DreadSoul convinced herself what a foolish and egotistical whim it was. She was no replacement. And never could be. What Phage did have, was her duty. Her fealty. Dedication. Unwavering and unflinching devotion. Her purpose was not to selfishly demand any special treatment. That was not her place. To ask such would be to blaspheme an already generous deity.

"The Citadel exists to adorn you with glory, High Lord Lurk. And I am no exception." She inclined her head to express her instinctive trust to his word and judgement. "You have but to ask, sire."
"Thank you for indulging me, Phage." Lurk said, continuing to fix her braid. Just like he would for Harmony. The Wyrmblood had spent hours learning how to. "Do not look upon what a man says or does, but upon what he creates to take the measure of what he loves and treasures."

"I like how that sounds, my Lord. You are very well versed. Where does that come from, so I may read it as well?"

"Me."

Lurk was about to continue when Silkeena respectfully approached, the tips of her chitinous legs tapping on the stone. King and Guardian looked to the custodian. The Drider bowed low enough that her abdomen almost touched the floor.

"I have gathered all relevant and requested material, High Lord Lurk." Silkeena's voice drifted over the crackling Evercedar with the wonderful gift all librarians seemed to share of being heard no matter the setting. She swept out a hand to point the way. "Of course I would be more than happy to remain at your side. In case you... Needed something else retrieved!" Silkeena quickly stammered.

"My Lord, what are you looking for? Can I help in any way?" Phage gazed up at Lurk like a hopeful puppy of the apocalypse.

"Two pretty ladies offering to help? What a lucky dragon I am today." He said with a chuckle and stood. Holding out a claw, he took Phage's hand and helped the Dreadsoul to her feet. Although her mouth was hidden beneath her oni respirator, the faintest lines crinkled under Phage's eyes.

Turning on a heel, Lurk assumed his professional demeanor as easily as he would one of his many masks. He followed Silkeena to a long table that had its many seats cleared away by the librarian so Lurk could more easily cross-reference a wider range of sources. He picked up a massive tome chased in gold leaf with a vast tree on its cover.

"I'm looking into the deeper myths of YGGDRASIL and the world before it. Even if we can't find out what happened, understanding why could be of great help. One cannot play a game without knowing its rules. Every myth has a kernel of truth hidden in it. Sometimes it's only in retrospect that we understand the real roots of a tale, or its warnings." The Wyrmblood studied the book containing the appended world lore of YGGDRASIL. Years of content updates to the pseudo-Norse inspired game had grown the many interweaving tales into a tangled skein of interconnected dead-ends and contradictory artifact descriptions.

He set aside the monstrous volume that was only a summary of the first year of the game's uptime in favor of the physical certainty. The map of the New World, inked by a Kadusian cartographer was spread before him with paperweights on each corner. Silkeena raised herself up to see better while Phage kept far enough away to make sure her Touch of Rot auras did not damage the vellum of the map.

"I did as you instructed, High Lord, and found several atlases of different worlds we have on record that have the same scale. I estimated the distance from the points of reference you described." Silkeena proudly patted a stack she had assembled for him. First was Earth, and Lurk grabbed the relevant atlas out of the stack.

The chart provided by Queen Ismeena was more comprehensive than Lurk first suspected, showing many hundreds of miles by his reckoning. An ocean dominated the west, stretching up to tundra in the north, and curving around the continent far to the south, terminating in the east in more
inland straits. The Citadel occupied the middle of a mountain range that started from the southern edge and ran directly north into a densely packed sawtooth mess chewing its way haphazardly eastward. Of particular interest to Lurk was the continent-spanning jungle of the south. Artistic depiction of what seemed to be dinosaurs were interspersed among the trees. An oversized stone pyramid dominated the center of the jungle.

Lurk tried to match it based on coastline, but nothing even came close after flicking through dozens of pages. He was not an expert on geography by any stretch of the imagination, and set the tome aside. Next was the nine worlds of YGGDRASIL, but that was equally fruitless and he added that to the pile of duds. Flanked by Phage and Silkeena, Lurk tapped his chin thoughtfully, believing the world still a puzzle to be solved. He gave the relative positioning of the kingdoms a cursory glance.

Land and resources shaped cultures and civilizations. At least that was how it worked on Earth, and Lurk had no reason to doubt that the same was true in the New World. So long as his hypothesis that it was indeed a real, breathing land and people continued to hold true.

"Queen Ismeena spoke of an alliance of city-states. Typically, kingdoms in such close proximity are most likely to fight one another. You don't build castles and fortresses for show. And Kadusia was built like it was meant to withstand a hundred years of conflict. This Heymon Empire must be quite a threat to get them to work together." He mused aloud. Beyond Heymon territory was only a vast stretch of land simply labelled as the Great Desert with hazy borders.

"The Heymon Empire is trying to attack the kingdoms?" Silkeena asked, then looked at the map with new insight. The Drider pointed to the network of rivers and lakes that split the generous swath of territory belonging to the Alliance from the giant of the southeast. "If they're marching an army, then best land route would be here, but Deeka is in the way." Just as Silkeena stated, unless they wanted to go through the jungle or around the ocean, there was just one narrow belt the kingdom of Deeka occupied.

Phage pitched in her thoughts next.

"Why do you think the Heymon Empire is so set on uprooting such an entrenched foe? Would it not be wiser to form a truce and wait for the alliance to fracture if there's a history of wars like you say? Strike a weakened enemy, rather than a united one." The Dreadsoul had no formal training. Just an instinct for battle.

Through his interactions with Kadusia, Lurk now understood that compared to a normal human, Phage was akin to a demigod. If he were a little soldier plodding along who only knew maybe third tier magic and along came a being who could cast tenth tier, that would be his view of her. And what did that mean for Lurk himself, who had access to Super-Tier? In a world subject to physical law, dropping such a spell would likely be equal to natural disasters on a continental scale. Surprisingly, his finger being on the metaphorical trigger of weapons of mass destruction did not bother him. Perhaps it was his racial again.

No, I mustn't get complacent. There's no guarantee that we're the only ones with access to such power. A world is a big place, after all. He thought. Then the Wrymblood continued.

"There could be many reasons. Greed. Hubris. Ancestral tensions. Expansionist ideals. Kadusia sits in the middle of these plains, forming the breadbasket of the region it seems. When we flew in, most of what I saw was farmlands. Small villages here and there. I'm guessing that Kadusia is a major source of food. The Heymon people must have enough land to sustain a large enough
population to support an army that can threaten the Alliance."

In the rougher terrain of the north was the land of Orza. The kingdom had access to a reasonably sized inlet gulf that let out into the ocean. Beyond the northern Orza was a mountain range shown to be massive and past that, only icy tundra. Dragons circled the prominent peaks. A sprawling swathe of coastal territory south of that denoted the Oxelans. A few villages and harbors dotted the thin strip of land between the ocean and the mountain range that ran parallel to it.

"The north looks too close to tundra to effectively sustain themselves. I wonder what they grow and how much Orza and Oxelan quibble over fishing rights. Orza has this gulf which forms protection from the sea. But mountains usually mean mineral deposits. There's all these pickaxes here, so that's probably the case. No nation lives off just one trade." Lurk trailed the point of a claw from the Orza gulf down the coast to Oxelan.

"These roads look dangerous." Silkeena pointed to the thin capillaries through the rough terrain between Kadusia and Orza.

"They must ship goods via barge or boat to Oxelan, then over our mountain pass to Kadusia and back again." Lurk brooded.

"That makes our spot even more valuable. We could strangle their trade if we wanted." Once more with the thinking of a predator, Phage pointed her fangs at her prey's throat.

"We could cut off the best road, that's for sure. But I suspect plenty of longer voyages plot their path south around the continent all the way to Deeka. It's a trek, but not impossible. Look at where Deeka is located. All they have are the narrow straits connecting to the Heymon Empire and this jungle to their south. They're pinched between a rock and a hard place." Lurk's mind was churning, wondering where The Citadel would most benefit.

"The others must know that if Deeka falls, the Heymon can sweep on to them." The Dreadsoul concluded.

"What do you suggest, Phage?" Lurk wondered if his Guardian was having similar suppositions.

"Winter is fast approaching. These warring states are only human, after all. Humans are frail, and fighting will stall come winter. We should send envoys to the other city-states. Let's keep our options open. The Heymon might be a safer long-term ally." Phage offered pragmatically. "Assuming we choose to support Kadusia, we're backing the Alliance. If we back the Alliance, then we back Deeka. We should secure our position here first. Reach out to Orza, and Oxelan. With the good will of Kadusia, we'll have a diplomatic advantage. And with the other three, Deeka will have to back us."

"Incredible, Dread Lady." Silkeena trilled, politely clasping her hands to her generous bosom.

Lurk smiled at the two interacting, then finished his own train of thought.

"These southern jungles and northern mountains intrigue me. We must gauge what threats The Citadel may face. I think sending the rest of the Caliber Court out on Greater Wyverns with escorts should be a negligible drain on resources. I'm interested to hear what Lapua's scouting reports will entail."
Three-Thirty-Eight Lapua Magnum made a solemn vow that if she had to clear one more house basement of giant rats, she would simply skip the basement and burn the whole thing down.

Chapter End Notes

The passage read by the Plague Elf to Phage earlier in the story is from Storm of Iron by Graham McNeill. All credit for that particular book belongs to its author. If you're a fan of Warhammer 40K I highly recommend it. One of my favorites and definitely helped spark my love of all things siege-y.

Mantle of Grey I made up!

If you're wondering about the formatting change, gentle reader, don't worry, I plan on going back and cleaning up my earlier chapters. Time, time, time, time.
Life will congregate around light, warmth, and food. And the feasting hall of The Citadel bustled with life.

Dozens of Lamia maids moved about their tasks, taking serving trays of steaming food off to various parts of the ninth floor. Others congregated around the many long tables in their off time. Chandeliers and a few hearths bathed the space in a rich glow. Hanging vines climbed up fluted columns from stone planter boxes. The lush green ivy scaled up the walls and dangling arms sprouted with glowing yellow blossoms that added to the luminescence of the hall.

On a hanging pavilion overlooking the hall, the monarchs Lurk and Harmony enjoyed a meal befitting their station. They had made the mistake of asking for 'something nice'. The couple had realized the breadth of their error when their table had become crowded with plates piled high with the finest cuisine conceivable. The Lamia cooks had rolled up their sleeves and whipped their sous chefs into a frenzy. It was not often one had the privilege of serving royalty. A sampling of delights with enough opulence as to make a sultan blush was delivered up to the balcony. Harmony was glad she was still wearing her comfortable clothes.

Dozens of different offerings were on display, from the familiar to the exotic. Numerous different meats, served whole, or sliced, or prepared raw, many still sizzling from the spits or grills of the kitchen wafted their mouth-watering bouquet of rich promise to the delight of the ruler's acute noses. From one of her favorite cooking shows, Harmony recalled a chef saying that a meal starts with the nose. And the spread did not disappoint in that regard. The Lamia cooks had taken this aspect into consideration and coordinated the spices used to provide complimentary hues to the sweet and savory aromas.

The selection was not limited to proteins. Fruits and vegetables from The Citadel's stocks or from the Arboretum joined the explosion of delights. The apple, pear, and pineapple dishes alone were nearly falling off one edge of the table. There was even an ice sculpture chiselled into the shape of a wyvern with its cold wings chilling watermelons carved with flowers. That display had taken four Lamias carefully slithering their way up the stairs to carry. There was even a charred prime rib larger than Soot placed on the table, which the Gunpowder Dragon had gleefully fallen upon. Though Soot was looking more rotund than usual, he was determined.

Harmony felt a small stab of guilt over the possible waste, but consoled herself with the notion
that it was all simply summoned by magic. That did not stop her from dragging a steaming chunk of bread through the fat drippings of a plate piled high with rosemary-roast duck. She had yet to take a bite of the same thing and was already feeling full.

Luxury was not something Lurk and Harmony were well acquainted with. Luxury was a distant thing. Something that other people enjoyed. A rich privileged few who lived off the blood and sweat of the rest back in the old world. Like the other ninety-nine point nine percent of people living in America, the husband and wife enjoyed what they could, and tried not to live beyond their means. Lurk had his books. Harmony had her art. They had simple jobs that were tolerable on the better days, their games, and each other. For them, that was enough. It was less about modesty, and more about sustainability. Yet those experiences had taught them patience and humility. It was either learn, or become indentured servants to debt labor companies, like Harmony's extended family had.

So while they were wary of falling prey to the trappings of extravagance, they would not waste the opportunity either.

"How do you think we're doing on food?" Harmony asked around a mouthful of Greater Tuna.

"The chefs say the magic larders are staying nice and full." The cook maids nearly fainted when Lurk had personally stepped into the kitchens for inspection. "I'm glad I made all those meat freezers. The big eaters are the Demi-Claws and the wyverns on the eighth. The Plague Elves only rarely eat, the Silver Knights and Flayers don't eat at all, and the fifth floor is self-sustaining." He paused for a moment to chew a mouthful of garlic fingerling potatoes. "If I remember correctly, I set up army style MRE stockpiles in Alpha and Omega for the shooting and HP stat boosts they gave. If the kitchens are refilling themselves, I certainly hope those are."

Lurk skewered three pieces of salt-crusted quail and popped it all into his mouth. The meat practically melted on his tongue. He thought about all the times he had salivated over the food when YGGDRASIL had been just a game. That was the thing about the full-dive world. There was plenty of food and drink to be had, but none of it interacted with the player avatars. Full-dive had such strong potential for physiological and psychological ramifications. If you ate or drank in the game, it could fully trick your brain into believing your stomach was full. People had accidentally died during some of the earlier days where the technology was not fully understood.

Now though... Now it was real.

Many players carried rings of sustenance, and the monarchs of Black Sky were no exception. It was basic kit. Yet the ring occluded the ability to use some of the more advanced buffs offered by rare drink and prepared meals. Cooking was a serious job class for a reason. It was a respectable occupation. One that was always in demand, and turned a fair coin. Or at least, it had been. In all the excitement since coming to the new world, neither of them had taken the time to sit down for an actual meal. They had either grabbed a quick snack or popped on their rings unless they were sleeping.

Time, Lurk pondered as he chewed. We thought The Citadel was out of time. Now that we have it, there's more to do than ever. He swallowed his bite of duck and voiced his thoughts aloud.

"Y'know, I'm glad to not have work anymore, but we're going to have our hands full. There's... There's a shitload of stuff to do to make sure we're not hemorrhaging food or other essentials."

Harmony stretched her arms high as she yawned, light glinting off her long, pearly white canines. She grabbed a mug of hot cider and raised it towards Lurk. He reciprocated with his Bomberry juice.
"Fuck work." She stated with the bitterness of unfulfilled commission promises. Though Harmony sometimes enjoyed her old digital graphics profession, she did not miss the corporate bullshit that went along with it.

"Fuck work." Lurk agreed with the sour affirmation of a thousand days of unpaid overtime.

Although the table was too wide to toast directly, they made the motion with their glasses.

"Clink." The couple said in unison, then laughed and drank to cement their toast.

Lurk drained his cup and poured himself another helping of juice from an obsidian pitcher. Before the volcanic glass pitcher that the Wyrmblood was quickly exhausting could even get halfway empty, a Lamia appeared with a fresh vessel and replaced it. The beverage was cooled so as to have a wafer thin layer of frost along the top.

"Thank you." Lurk said reflexively, giving the Lamia a wide draconic smile. The maid's cheeks went as red as Harmony's hair as she squeaked out an 'excuse me'. The Lamia darted away with a curtsy.

On her way to the stairs, Koh, The Citadel's resident butler, leaned in and whispered something in the girl's elfin ear. The maid visibly trembled and pretended to adjust her grip on the pitcher while she actually pulled her top down just enough to give the large male a view of her ample breasts. She whispered something in return before hurriedly slithering down the stairs towards the kitchen. Koh rested back on his coils, resuming his original posture with only the fleeting mirage of a smile breaking his perfectly dutiful facade. He thought he was being covert about it, but Harmony saw the whole thing.

"Honey, honey, oh my goodness. Oh my goodness." Harmony rapidly patted the table, her eyes going wide. Since she was facing the stairs, she had a perfect view.

"What? What happened?" Lurk froze with his fresh cup almost to his scaly mouth and began to turn where his wife was staring.

"Don't look. Koh. Koh totally just put the moves on one of the maids. Holy shit that was priceless." The woman hid her grin behind a Terror Bird drumstick.

Lurk nearly snorted his drink.

"Did... Did we program him to do that?" The Wyrmblood sputtered.

"Fuck, I..." Harmony's eyes nearly crossed as she sped through her memory. "I think I..." Her face turned a fine shade of scarlet and her lips puckered as she tried to not burst out laughing. "I think I wrote that he's a total stud muffin. That he's the only male and... Services all the maids!" She tried not to blurt the revelation too loudly, eyes flicking to Koh and back to Lurk. The snake butler stood vigilantly at the top of the stairs, ensuring his King and Queen had their meal in relative privacy unless they needed something.

"Oh that's absolutely hysterical." He stuck a fork into a slab of medium rare porterhouse and hauled it onto his plate to mask his wry smile. "Now that is a lucky snake guy." The draconic man carved off a hunk of steak and a moment of silence passed between them.
"Do you think it's right that we... I guess rule them?" Lurk's scaly brow knit together as he chewed on another bite of steak to calm his nerves. His question was tentative.

"Well, we can't exactly abandon them. I don't know if they're dependent on us, but leaving would be wrong. I think, anyway. Besides, where would we go?" Turning up an open palm in askance, Harmony took a small break to let her stomach settle.

"True. True. I just wish... I don't know. That we had better prepared." Though he was melancholy, the idea of Koh getting as much Lamia tail as the butler could handle provided masculine satisfaction.

"How would we have known this would happen? Don't worry about what we couldn't have predicted. They... Were just... Characters." Harmony looked over the ivy strewn railing down to the hall. The maids had moved around back when YGGDRASIL was just a game. But now there was so much more vibrancy in their action. She swivelled her head back to Lurk. "We sometimes talked about living in certain games."

"Do you remember designing our bedroom in Demon Slayer Eight?" Nostalgia tinged his voice with sorrow and fondness both. It had taken Lurk quite a lot of convincing to get Harmony to play that title. Much of YGGDRASIL, even the melee combat, was just pushing buttons. Demon Slayer Eight had been a full-dive sequel of the Demon Slayer series. Although it did not have competitive player versus player combat, the game sold itself on the player's physical skill and reflexes deciding the outcome. Once he had gotten her to try it, her love of dual blades inspired Harmony to pick up the Wyvern Berserker job class.

"Oh yeah! We spent a stupid amount of time collecting all the species of imp pets and decorating. That was the first time we put the Black Sky symbol on bed sheets. I guess things have come a long way. The Citadel was pretty much automated by the end. I hardly ever had to log on, really." She said as she began to feel the weight of what was plaguing her husband.

"We definitely never thought through all that it would entail. Especially not something like this. Not on this scale. It would be different if it was just us." He trailed off, grabbing an apple far more luscious than any that could be found in the old world.

"Hey, what do you think happened to our bodies?" Harmony asked. She imagined that if anyone would know, it would be her scholarly husband. He took a bite of his apple, fangs sinking through the crisp skin into the tender flesh and sat back in the chair. Then he folded his arms over his chest to ease his own quickly filling stomach.

"Well, I think it's possible we're still just sitting in our recliners. Perhaps we got fully sucked in, body and all. Though it's also possible that when our minds left, our bodies died. Though maybe we were just subjected to the coin flip. That fifty-fifty shot whenever a mind is duplicated that either you end up where you're going, or get left behind." Dancing through the different possibilities, the Wyrmblood avoided other... Darker avenues. Nightmares belonged on the fourth floor, not spoiling dinner.

Harmony blinked rapidly as her brain spun in circles, chasing its own tail trying to follow all the different outcomes.

"Which is most likely?" She asked.

"There's no way to know, really. Hopefully nothing bad. I don't fancy the idea of us sitting there
like empty husks." Shaking his head to dispel the fugue, Lurk tried to tell himself not to linger on what ifs and instead voiced a more real concern he had been holding in for some time.

"Do you think we were too bold with Ismeena? With Kadusia?" He asked. Lurk had been replaying the conversation with the queen over and over, trying to find faults and wringing himself dry with worry.

"Again, sugar, what else could we have done?" Harmony responded, well accustomed to Lurk's vexatious manner.

"We could have stayed out of it." Was his immediate counter.

"Aaand, what would have happened because of it? The Bandit King would've probably gotten in and stolen a whole bunch of their food and probably other nasty stuff. Then they would've come back here and we would've had to deal with 'em anyway."

"We could've just locked ourselves in The Citadel. Just live in here for the rest of... Forever. But good things don't happen to passive nations. Bad things mostly." Grumbling more to himself than anything else, Lurk could not resist the bowl full of honeyed dates. Something he had only ever read about. It was like taking a bite of ambrosia, the thick honey oozing between his teeth.

"You just answered your own question." Grabbing a cherry, Harmony deftly removed the seed with her dexterous tongue and spat the pit at her husband. The shot was good and bounced off Lurk's snout.

"I know. Talking it out helps." He took the hit with a grateful smile and a sip of his drink, washing down the sticky honey.

"I think if anyone could be a king, it'd be you sweetie." Though the table was too long to reach with her scaly hands, Harmony strained her tail and managed to hook the tip of Lurk's extra appendage under the table. Her bright red mingled with his deeper burgundy.

"You're gonna give me tooth decay with all this sweetie talk." Lurk's face drew tight, his mouth screwing in at the corners. "I just don't know if I'm up to it." He idly clenched and unclenched his left claw. "I've managed teams before, but nothing like this."

"There's nothing you can't do." Though she could not grab her husband's worrying claw, her tail gave his a reassuring squeeze. This got a chuckle from Lurk, and he entwined his tail tighter around hers.

"That's exactly what Phage said to me in the library." He said distantly, peeling an orange to keep his claws busy. His dexterous digits made quick work of the diminutive citrus.

"She was in the library?" Empathetic for fruit, Harmony cracked open a pomegranate to pluck at its juicy center.

"I forgot I had put in a love for reading in her character information. But the poor thing can't touch the books." A now familiar ache threatened to return in the base of his horns.

"Oh yeah, that's kinda her thing, isn't it?" Harmony had not made Phage, but recalled Lurk talking about how he wished that YGGDRASIL supported having multiple avatars, and instead making Phage with one of his theoretical builds.
"She says she likes being read to. So I hope it's not too bad for her." He tried to bury the peculiar new feelings, and his rumbling tone was too neutral.

"That's kind of adorable. Did you put that in?" Even with a different face, Harmony knew the depth, if not the exact content of his mind.

Lurk took a hefty swig of Bomberry juice to clear his throat.

"I'm pretty sure I didn't. I think when we transferred to this world, all the gaps got filled in. Do you think the Guardians have full agency? Can they self-determine?" A thousand questions still rattled around in the Wyrmblood's skull.

"They're definitely alive." Harmony looked down to once more watch the Lamias, paying closer attention to the interactions they had with one another.

When they were only characters, serving the ninth floor as custodians for the general upkeep required of The Citadel, the Lamias followed strict paths. Harmony had gotten more than a few unstuck from faulty artificial determination getting them trapped on walls or decorations. A major criticism of YGGDRASIL had always been its AI. The devs could create amazing mobs and bosses. Unfortunately said bosses and raids rarely came down to anything other than high damage output slugfests. Once upon a time, YGGDRASIL had been a singular achievement. A milestone of gaming. Then others had come along to usurp the dive game. And once the decline was underway, there had been no stopping it.

Little gaggles of maids congregated at the tables with food and drink. They laughed and were in motion as they talked, leaning forward and back, touching one another, and acted as though this was how things had always been. Once more, showing such a range of motion and expression that full-dive could not have been able to produce in another hundred years of development.

"I almost forgot to mention, I checked everything I could think of in Cognitio for any clue as to where we are." Lurk discarded the peel, splitting off wedges and popping them one by one in his mouth.

"And?" Harmony perked up as she continued to hollow out her pomegranate shell. She glanced to Lurk but was disappointed as he shook his head.

"Nothing. I even looked at maps for other games. Assuming the map Queen Ismeena gave us was even somewhat accurate, we're nowhere. So here we sit. In what used to be a game, inhabiting bodies we made with button clicks, surrounded by spontaneously sentient game characters that we also made, transported to nowhere. What to do about all of this..." He turned his head, surveying the feasting hall and the wider implications.

"Maybe a bath? Then relax?" Patting her flat iron stomach, Harmony's answer was self-evident. "Whew, I'm full."

Lurk chuckled.

Soot had fallen just short of victory, having made it almost to the end before falling over onto the platter sound asleep. His little head rested on the last and fattiest chunk of prime rib.

"Are you sure?" Lurk teased. "I bet I could get dessert going."
"It's not nice to joke about those things. I'll have you know dessert is serious business." Though she pouted, Harmony squeezed Lurk's tail. "I'm at just that right amount of fullness. Almost too much, but not so much I feel sick. Also this was all really rich food. Back... Before, this would tear my stomach up." After she fought down another spike of guilt due to waste, Harmony asked her own question.

"How much do you think all this would cost back on Earth?" She waved to the cornucopia. Even with their new and expanded appetites, they had barely put a dent in the offerings.

"Real meat? Not artificial? More than we'd make in a year. Probably two years." Most of what had been laid out for them the monarchs had only had once in their lives. Certainly never in such quantity or quality.

"Hey... Hun?" Harmony asked, her brow crinkling as she tugged on Lurk's tail. "How much did this actually cost?"

"What, like in gol-" He froze, realizing that in all their excitement, the couple had made one critical error in inspecting The Citadel.

"The treasury!" Both shouted in alarm. Harmony gracefully spun around in her seat and launched herself away. Lurk Knocked his chair over with his tail and hastily righted it before running after his wife.

Koh bowed as his masters bounded down the stairs. Then he gave a short whistle and a cleanup team of maids dutifully began clearing away the mess, with several of the cooks jockeying in to see whose dish had been eaten the most. Meanwhile Soot was handed off to a pair of Lamias who took the grumbling Gunpowder Dragon down into the feasting hall for belly rubs.

From the feasting hall, they only needed to cross into the main thoroughfare of the ninth floor, and pass by their throne room. Two pairs of talons clicked on the inlaid Black Sky sun as the rulers hurried to their destination. Slowing to a halt, neither of them were out of breath as they stood before the monolithic entry to the forge. Before they could go into the treasury, Lurk and Harmony had to go through the forge. They could have bypassed it, however the antechamber and its contents were just as important as the room it guarded. Everything about the forge and the treasury had to be in working order, and that meant going through each step manually.

Similar to the front door of The Citadel, the gateway in to the forge was wide in scope. However, its only ornamentation were the intricate system of opening mechanisms and locks. It was meant to be large enough to allow even the largest entity entry, or the largest inhabitant back out. Lurk got there first, so he pressed his palm to the center lock. A cascading mechanical ballet played out as the whirring gears and pins sank into new positions in a radial pattern all the way to the edge, releasing their hold along the way. Wheels spun, interlocking bars retracting into the walls and floor thick around as tree trunks and made of solid adamantium.

Lurk was always thorough when it came to defenses.

As the door cleared its threshold, a wave of heat and the roar of industrial furnaces blasted forth like an uncorked crucible.

Inside the forge was controlled chaos. Dozens of polished metal dragons the size of ponies hurried about the various stations. They tended to hungry furnaces with refined coal, Giant's Sulfur,
and other exotic means to oxidize or introduce different elements, casting pure liquid runoff into molds while scooping away the slag with their silvery talons. Muspelheim was rich in many products used for advanced smithing. Some worked at stations or anvils, with teams wielding hammers to coax stubborn material into shape with resounding clangs. Much like Cognitio, the forge had its own gantries and granite shelves. But rather than books, thousands of ingots and data crystals ranging from lowly iron, all the way to Prismatic Ore were smelted into neat bricks for cataloguing. Many dragons went back and forth, adding to or taking from the stores.

They were the Forgelings, calling out measurements, for extra hands, material, or production estimates.

And above them, surveying the work with a watchful gaze, was the Forgemother.

The Forgemother was the the beating heart of The Citadel. She was a metal dragon of monolithic proportions, tasked with protecting the treasury, and the guild item contained within. Fittingly, she was the single most powerful Guardian. Area or floor. Her perch was well suited to her majesty. It was dais of pipes and channels which sat at the center of the forge and through which everything flowed. An altar of creation that she fueled with her molten blood. A pair of staircases spiraled up on either side leading to the vault door of The Citadel's treasury. Glowing orange fire rose and fell between the shifting plates of her chest in time with the dragon's breathing.

Lurk and Harmony crossed the threshold of the forge into the heat and bustle. Hammers rose and fell in a staccato rhythm. To Lurk, seeing the Forgemother was akin to seeing a piece of Entropy alive. Being there. Feeling the heat. Smelling the tang of hot brass and alchemical agents. Hearing the Forgelings vocalizing. It all came together into more the old magic made new again.

Only Lurk and the Forgemother had higher max levels than all the rest. Sovereign of the Masquerade raised Lurk to that precipitous height.

For the Forgemother...

Godmaker. Avatar of Metal.

The monarchs approached the floor Guardian. As they did, she mantled her wings outward like a bird of prey. Her pinions were thinner sheets of plate and whispered along one another as her joints opened the razor sharp sheaves of burnished metal unfolded in a display of welcome. Her body was a furnace with the intensity to melt gods into swords, claws that diamonds envied with their hardness, and wings that were made of blades sharp enough to split prismatic ore. And she had a voice to match. Beneath a regal feminine intonation, was the rumble of constrained heat. Her Celestial Uranium body cast off waves of power like a star shedding its chromosphere.

"High Lord Lurk! Fairest Lady Harmony. Welcome to the forge. You honor us with your warmth." The Forgemother put a claw to her mammoth chest with a clang and lowered her head in deference. Between her two curving cobalt horns, a ball of boiling Relic Iron was suspended between the two points. Despite being many thousands of degrees, the sphere's roiling surface was contained. Like planets orbiting a sun, spheres of Adamantium and Darksteel spun around her brow in a glittering crown.

The Forgelings all dropped what they were doing and supplicated themselves before their Supreme Beings. They were wingless reflections of the Forgemother in miniature. Individually, each of the Forgelings were appreciable threats to high level players, and she towered above them like an empress. She was what they could be, given a Caloric Stone.
"Hello, Forgemother. I never get tired of seeing you." Said Lurk. His eyes were wide, jaw hanging slack. Yet Lurk's scaly face slowly turned into a smile. Then into a grin that made his cheeks hurt as he looked at all the Forgeling. The Forgemother's tail lifted once in a contented wave as she adjusted herself on her perch, puffing her chest up and laying one claw over the other like an oversized cat. All her children waved their tails to and fro with much more emphasis. Harmony bounced on her talons in delight.

"Have you come to make something?" The Forgemother asked as she gave her tail another flick. "A new gun perhaps? Or... Or a blade? Special ammunition? I just turned out a fresh batch of casings." The Forgemother spoke faster. The boiling iron held in check by the cobalt bent and flexed in impatience as her ring of other metals hastened in their orbits. At her mention, a Forgeling jumped up and ran over with a basket held with its mouth full of freshly drawn casings from their acid bath.

"Not today." Lurk felt a stab in his heart when the Forgemother drooped like a badly quenched blade. The Forgeling slowed from its eager gallop to halt just a bit short of its goal. "Though, we are here for something very important. How are we doing on funds?" The Forgemother perked back up.

"You're going to have to be more specific, High Lord Lurk. I mean no offense, holy Ancient." The Forgemother bobbed her head in veneration.

"No, that was vague. I meant sustainability. Right now, how long can we remain as we are in terms of active defenses?"

"Active defenses? Let's see." The metal spheres slowed, and two broke off from the rest to hover before the inferno contained within the Forgemother's eyes.

Each was actually a connection to the different floors of The Citadel, and could be assessed at a glance. Her Imperior Titanica class saw to that. Black Sky Legion was not a large guild. In fact, it was minuscule in comparison with the top slot contenders. Having a guildhall was expensive. Everything cost gold. The summons. Feeding the inhabitants. Growing plants and ingredients. Even keeping the water in the baths running. Not only was the Forgemother obscenely strong, but she mitigated the upkeep cost of The Citadel.

Arrayed along the walls of the forge, nestled in lattices of pipes were industrial strength smelters, furnaces, and all of it fed to and from the Forgemother. An unceasing churn of weapons and ammunition poured from the forge. A separate stockpile and work area connected to the forge held the processed gunpowder from the Arboretum. Not for many years had there been so many orders. She could feel and therefore measure the liquid metal churning in her smelters. When she sat upon the seat of power within her fiefdom, the Avatar of Metal could sense its every working as though it was an extension of her body. The blood of war was the Godmaker's to command.

"The largest order by far is from the Alpha and Omega bunkers. The twins have put in requests for more of everything. Spike traps. Type Ninety-Nines. Hellhammer Howitzers. And shells for the Hellhammers. They wanted more ammunition, but for now I'm just filling the bunker's magazines. I've already gotten in contact with Loam to make sure we have enough plots of Blazenuts. I did approve more [Implosion] mines as well as satchel charges. There's only daily restrictions on those production lines so I felt it prudent to stock them on fallback consumables."

As the Forgemother gave her more detailed report, Lurk glanced down at the Forgeling dejectedly pushing around casings in its basket. When the metal dragon noticed his attention, the end of its tail twitched hopefully. Shifting his gaze back to the Forgemother, then down, then back again, Lurk
could not resist. He patted his thigh and curled his digits into his palm in a come hither gesture. The Forgeling peeked over its shoulder and inched forward on its belly.

The two satellites resumed their position and a new one took its place before the watchful gaze of the Forgemother.

"The third floor has remained mostly unchanged, cost wise. Extra spears. Shields. Whetstones of course. And the repair packs." The Forgemother rattled off the growing list of items with ease despite the logistics behind the production.

Being Living Armor meant that the Silver Knights did not use normal health potions. Spare parts could be changed out at a moment's notice so even if a soldier fell, he could simply swap out a piece of himself and return to the fighting. Customization in YGGDRASIL extended even to NPC types available for populating guildhalls, and allowed Harmony to make the third floor into exactly how she had envisioned it.

When the Forgemother examined the next orb, one corner of her mouth curled upward in wry amusement.

"Skitharix cannot do what I can, though I respect his dedication to using his own crafting abilities as much as possible. The Flayers only require ingots or crystals and the helix pylons need minimal upkeep." Back in the game, the solar system of metallic surrogates was only a cosmetic that had appeared to accompany Imperitor Titanica. Where even the most advanced simulation technology had been unable to render, life had filled in the rest.

The Flayers of the fourth floor were the first craftsmen of The Citadel upon its initial founding. Skitharix and his Flayers had been Black Sky Legion's main source of the skill set for a long time. Short of contracting another player in an ally guild for certain specialized tasks. Large guilds back in YGGDRASIL could afford dedicated crafting characters. Black Sky Legion was not a large guild. The grind had been a stressful undertaking initially. In the age old role-playing loop, Lurk, Harmony, and Woodsolution had gotten better gear to fight bigger monster to get more resources.

It had taken uncountable billions to make the forge, and the Forgelings to protect and run the dedicated crafting area. However, creation of the forge had required more than just grinding lucrative spawns in Muspelheim. The levels from The Citadel devoted to the forge, the Mother and her children, had cost Lurk a great deal of real world money. It had been difficult to justify the expenditure on an in-game guildhall that could be lost or destroyed with enough of a concerted effort. However, that was the nature of YGGDRASIL. And it could push whatever greedy practices the devs had wanted back in its heyday.

A larger sphere of cobalt responded to its Imperitor and only needed a passing glance.

"The Leviathan and the rest of the Mystic's Reef are doing well. They're expensive, but I would be remiss in my duties if I allowed anything to tarnish the legacy of Lord Woodsolution."

Lurk diverted his focus to the Forgeling sitting on its haunches before him. In both of its foreclaws, it held up glittering piles of casings. Light from the lit forges glinted of the copper alloy. He considered when they were just concepts in his head. And he thought of what a pitiable expense they were. What if he had never spent those bonus checks from his job on The Citadel? How much would he have paid just to see one Forgeling really alive? Just like Phage, it was not something he could dwell on. Instead he plucked a few bits of brass and examined the laser-cutter precision the dragons could achieve by hand and eye alone.
"Grown in its native soil of the, the ash flowers are maturing nicely. The Corsairs have plenty of the bloom to make their poison. The [Radiant] obelisks are turned low, so the drain there is negligible. The forts are fairly well stocked with bolts and razorwire bombs. And Phage the Untouchable has personally asked for several hundred training carbines as well as blunt bolts." The Forgemother cocked her head slightly, examining the representation more closely. "It seems the Dread Lady is honing her craft. The Corsairs are conducting mock raids between the fortresses of the ash plains." There was approval in her tone as the Forgemother smiled. The Plague Elves were not content to rest on their laurels, but needed just a bit of help to adequately practice.

And the Forgemother was happy to provide.

While the Avatar of Metal was busy calculating resource draw against her own generating abilities, Lurk held an open palm out in front of the Forgeling. A flexible ribbon of a tongue flicked out before it pushed its snout into his claw. Lurk crouched down and stroked the top of its head and neck. Steel scales rippled with its breath and motion.

"Well, hi there. Aren't you gorgeous?" Being so close, Lurk marveled. Every time he feared the magic might fade, The Citadel proved him wrong. The Forgeling squealed softly in delight as its tail wagged, thrilled beyond measure to get personal attention.

Life found a way, with all its impossible complexity.

And the eye is one of the most complex structures in any living creature. Within the Forgeling’s eye were a mesh of crystalline wires, a dozen times thinner than a strand of hair. These wires controlled polished pyrite mirrors to form a lens, floating on top of a tiny pool of mercury within the glassy sphere. A draconic slit pupil of Darksteel contracted to bring Lurk into focus in the nearer light.

Even though they're metal, they're so... Lurk thought as the unmistakable spark of intelligence and understanding gazed back into him. The irrefutable glimmer of a soul.

Seeing their sibling getting attention, many of the closer Forgelings began sneaking their way forward. Naturally, being Lurk's creations, they crowded around Harmony.

Harmony had been lost in nostalgia for days gone while the Forgemother spoke. The forge was a common stop for the guild members of Black Sky Legion. Whether it was to maintain gear, make things, or dump their overloaded inventory into the treasury, the three members had made hundreds of trips to the heart of The Citadel. Although Lurk had made the Forgemother, Harmony was the one to give the magnificent dragon different animations for whenever they used her to create something. The mantling of her wings that the Forgemother performed to greet the monarchs was one of Harmony's favorites.

As Lurk spoke to one, a particularly brave Forgeling snuck right up to Harmony and nudged its snout against her ankle. It peered up at her with a pleading expression that melted her heart into mush. Leaning over, Harmony lavished the Forgeling with affection, scratching under its chin and just behind its jaw.

"Gooney, gooney, gooney!" She babbled to the small dragon. Playfully, she rubbed down its back and pushed it onto its side to rub the Forgeling's belly. Like an oversized feline, the dragon rumbled happily, tail thumping against the floor as its raised its claws up.
Another Forgeling jealously wiggled its head under Harmony's arm, wanting affection. She rubbed its face as she continued to polish the underbelly of the first. Then another nudged her. And another. Soon Harmony was giggling as if she was covered in puppies as she was swarmed by the Forgelings while the Forgemother pretended not to notice.

Looking at his wife being so happy, Lurk could not remember the last time he had smiled so much.

A ball of Relic Iron with a vein of molten basalt was the last sphere to float before the Forgemother.

"The eighth floor is unchanged. The Scar has eggs on standby to hatch in case any Greater Wyvern losses are incurred." The Forgemother scoffed. "Novus seems unconcerned about anything getting to his floor. I'll get that lazy zombie's arse in gear if I have to light it on fire." The imperious metal dragon exhaled an exasperated plume of white-hot flame that faded to red before dissipating.

Heh. I couldn't change Novus's character information, but I gave the Forgemother a bit of a thing with him, didn't I? Lurk inwardly chuckled at the visual of the two dragons acting like an elderly married couple. I think she fits ornery grandmother quite well.

"In summary, the upkeep is manageable. Many defensive systems are on standby. I shall be ever vigilant, High Lord Lurk. So long as the forge is under my command, no enemy shall make it here. But if they ever do... The flames of Muspelheim itself will seem like an icy breeze by compare." The glow in the Forgemother's chest brightened in promise.

Lurk reflexively looked up to the ceiling of the forge.

Like control rods of a nuclear reactor, stalactites of Nova Crystal with [Inversion] could be raised or lowered to curb the temperature of the forge. Cranked up to its maximum heat, the only thing that could survive more than a few seconds was the Forgemother and her Forgulings if they huddled underneath her. Within the forge, the Forgemother was a force of nature that could withstand a siege for months. Rivers of liquid metal flowed through channels. That was its greatest weakness. Inevitably, the treasury would be exhausted by the prodigious cost.

Lurk had tested the lethality using only a fraction of the rods, and nearly killed himself by accident. Then he tried it again with his best fire gear, a masterwork potion of flame resistance, a buff from Harmony, and his mask of the Keeper. Then he survived all of about a minute with the rods at a quarter. Harmony's Aegis of Muspelheim class let her withstand more than half before the damage overcame her natural regeneration when exposed to fire.

Lurk dabbled in flame. He used it in many of his weapons. But Harmony lived and breathed it. She had spent her early days in the game experimenting with pyromancy and shaman builds. The allure of Wyvern Berserker made her lean more heavily into classes that would compliment melee and front-line sustainability, but nothing would make her give up her Aegis of Muspelheim. She grew to love that harsh and unforgiving land of dragons, desert, and brutal difficulty. That affection was one of the reasons she logged in every week to make sure The Citadel never faded.

Once, The Citadel had existed in a realm of volcanoes and pyroclastic flow. Now, in a fragile world, in his mind Lurk could only think of it as a matchstick by comparison.

"That's... incredible. I'm glad you're with us, Forgemother. You seem to have things under control. Just let me know if anything... Uh, anything changes." Lurk was staggered for a moment
before recovering. "I have faith in your report and capabilities, but we'd like to go into the treasury to see things for ourselves."

"Of course, High Lord Lurk. Not a single coin is moved without my knowledge. My life and the lives of my children belong to you, our creators." The Forgemother dipped her head almost to the edge of her dais.

While Lurk shifted in discomfort at being so regarded, the weight of it was tempered by relief. Even if he and Harmony were to vanish, pulled by whatever force had placed them in the world, the Forgemother would let The Citadel live on. He tenderly scratched under the Forgeling’s jaw. The longer he spent with the Guardians and other inhabitants, the more Lurk felt a jealous urge to keep them all safe take root and grow from within.

The Forgemother rapped her knuckles on her dais to get the attention of her wayward children. All the Forgelings piled on Harmony reluctantly scattered back to their tasks.

"Go on." Lurk gave the small dragon a broad smile. Though it whined, the Forgeling gathered up its basket of brass. With one more glance back at Lurk, it returned to the pack.

Just as disappointed, Harmony joined her husband and they walked up one of the curving staircases up to the platform where the Forgemother sat. As they passed, Lurk placed his palm on the Forgemother's back leg.

"Thank you." Was all he said.

In response the Guardian curled her massive tail around her two Supreme Beings with a mixture of protectiveness and love.

"Woah, big momma." Harmony said, touching the warm and polished steel.

The Forgelings had been on their own for several years following their making. And initially, the draconic man in another life had no intention of adding anything else to the forge. At least until through her herculean diplomacy, Harmony secured the Celestial Uranium used to make Entropy, resulting in the Caloric Stone. Harmony and Woodsolution had entrusted the Caloric Stone to Lurk. They had entrusted the making of The Citadel's most powerful protector to him.

With that glittering crimson orb in his grasp, inspiration had struck his brain like a casting of [Saturn's Needle]. And he knew in his heart of hearts what to make.

More than a crafting character, or another creation to take on the role of craftsmen, or blacksmith, they needed an NPC to encapsulate their guild and time spent in Muspelheim. No matter what game the three played, Lurk, Harmony, and Woodsolution were always Black Sky Legion. Yet the time and money put into YGGDRASIL was a special experience. One that no game had ever managed to recapture. There were other role-playing games. Other fighting games. Other shooters and strategy and simulations, yet there was never another YGGDRASIL.

There were many lofty races, jobs, and classes which attracted the egotistical. The highest tiers needed to be unlocked through events, quests, or special items. The Caloric Stone was the key. With it, a whole new tab of racials and classes buried in menus and game interfaces were at Lurk's command. He had only the flavor text to go on. But this was after his hunt for Entropy. The riddles of the game were laid bare to him.
Lurk remembered his hands... His claws... Shaking when he finalized the Forgemother.

Turning, the Forgemother brought her head down to Lurk. He lifted his claw for her. And with gentleness belying her ponderous bulk, the dragon touched her nose into his palm. The spice of heated brass and copper hung about her like a perfume. Though she dwarfed him, Lurk rubbed her snout just like he had the Forgeling. The boiling Relic Iron bubbled between her cobalt horns while the metal satellites rotated sedately in their orbit. A pleased rumble vibrated the ground and the Forgemother smiled as she pulled back and resumed her regal posture. Lastly, she lifted her tail with a happy wave now that she had gotten her own attention.

With the surety of the forge secure, the gamer couple moved on.

The circular vault door to the treasury itself was a several feet thick and adorned with the sun and sword crest of Black Sky. It irised open at Lurk's contact and closed automatically after the monarch crossed the threshold.

At the top of the stone staircase down into the impossibly vast underground cavern, they had the perfect view out into the vault.

It was less a treasury, and more a desert, with every grain of sand a coin or jewel. Dunes formed of the world tree stamped gold discs. Piles of data crystals arranged by color. Columns of stone reached to the ceiling were festooned with hundreds of relic weapons and armor. At the zenith of the mountain dome was a set of blazing solar crystals to act as an artificial sun much like for the Arboretum.

Being real, it was now an unfathomable display of wealth.

Lurk broke their silent awe.

"We haven't been in here for... Years. Damn, it's strange to say that. There must be more gold here than all the gold back on Earth. No, way more than that. What could we have done with all this? Could have bought anything we wanted." Lurk threw his arms wide, a covetous longing making his mouth salivate and tongue shift uncomfortably.

"Woohoo!" Shouted Harmony as she jumped off the ledge into the nearest pile of gold. She crashed into the coins with a carefree laugh. Stray pieces flew far and wide in a fountain of flashing coins. They came back down in a melodious rain of currency. A wave of dislodged coin flowed down the hill.

Waist deep in the pile, Harmony dug her claws elbow deep and threw them up, laughing freely as currency fell back and bounced off her horns and got lost in her hair.

"C'mon hun!" She called up to him.

"Hup!" Lurk plummeted like a stone and threw up an eruption of coins with his impact. Up to his thighs, Lurk was awed. Scooping up a double armful of gold, the clinks of the tree and Valkyrie coins musical to his hearing. Falling forward, he pressed his whole body against the pile of gold. Stretching out his arms and burying his snout, he was lost in the wealth.

A rapturous bliss settled on the Wyrmblood. His bones and scales sang with the hoard and its majesty. Hooded eyes feasted on abundance. It folded around him. Surrounded by a cocoon made of treasure, he idly wondered if his racial was kicking in again.
Crawling across the mountain so she did not sink, Harmony laid beside her lover and flicked coins onto his back with a happy hum. Lethargically, Lurk rolled onto his side. Relishing the weighty coins sliding and shifting, he looked at his wife with a new appreciation for the gold flecks in her scales. Surrounded by riches, his perception shrank until he only knew Harmony. Even all the contents of the treasury paled in comparison with her. Their eyes met, and Lurk was lost within the scarlet eternity he found there.

Just as the draconic greed sank its fangs into his blood and brain over the unfathomable riches of the treasury, the avaricious pull settled on Harmony. The desire, the need to place his mark on her, possess her and her love was a heady sensation. Drawing on that passion, he wanted Harmony to know, to understand the depths of what he was feeling. No words could express the bottomless want. Only action.

Although his scaly muzzle was not as good as actual lips, he still pressed his mouth against hers.

"Mmm!" She let out in surprise as he kissed her, then leaned into it. Pulling his wife down to lay with him, Lurk embraced her for all he was worth. When he kissed her, she kissed him back. When his arms locked around her waist, hers draped over his shoulders. When he squeezed her tightly to his chest, wishing that she knew just how his heart beat was a drum that set the rhythm of his love for her, she squeezed back.

"What got into you?" Harmony whispered, nuzzling into his cheek. She rubbed his chin over a goatee that was no longer there.

"Just wanted to show you how much I love you." He said, taking a deep breath filled with her wild mane of red hair.

"Aw, I love you too, handsome." She giggled.

Keening in barely constrained libidinous craving, Lurk's claws roved over her back and down her tail. Giving the top of her extra appendage a brush, his wandering touch slid to the private underside of her tail.

"I think I know what you're after." Sitting up, Harmony relished just how badly her husband wanted her. She turned on her knees and gave him a flirtatious wiggle.

Lurk sat up as well and cradled his wife from behind. Moving her hair out of the way, his hot breath and even hotter tongue down the back of her neck. He laid wet kisses with his tongue and snout down her vertebrae. The one directly at the base of her neck was one of her weak point. As he lavished the erogenous area, a breathy moan escaped from Harmony's lips. His pants became unbearably tight. She was the finest instrument, and he knew how to make such music with her. With the right strokes and keys pressed, Lurk could make her sing.

His claws found her breasts, first fondling her through her shirt. He cupped the modest globes in his palm, tugging on the rings in their soft cotton covering. Although she had not designed her avatar to be the bustiest, her cup size was perfect to Lurk. Familiar. He wanted more. Tickling her hips, he lifted the hem of her shirt and reached up to feel her skin directly. Lurk inhaled sharply and lost himself in her scent and body.

In his blind groping a short claw hooked through the ring in her stiff nipple. Tugging on the erect bud a bit harder than he meant to elicited an unexpectedly wonderful cry of helpless pleasure.
Wearing a mischievous grin, Lurk did it again. The dragoness thrashed in his embrace, trying to escape the pleasurable torment.

"Ah! Honey! Honey! Too much. Too much." She begged, slapping her claw over his to keep him from tugging. Panting, she was overcome with the tingling in her womb. Confined in his pants, Lurk's iron hard rod pushed against Harmony's tail. The female flagged her tail high in invitation and the male hugged her close. Pressing his covered cock into the underside of her tail and butt, Lurk groaned in need. Tremors ran down Harmony's spine, aftershocks transferring through to her chalice and making a certain place clench in anticipation.

Reluctantly, Lurk released Harmony's breast to pull his pants down and let his manhood spring free. Sighing in respite, he hooked his thumb through the waistband of her comfortable bottoms. After he pulled his wife's shorts down below her haunches, his cock found the gap between her thighs. Knowing exactly what he wanted, Harmony spread her legs enough to let Lurk's iron shaft grind against her cunny. Once her curvaceous thighs cradled his manhood, Harmony gyrated her hips. Using her silky skin to stroke the draconic tool, her vulva settled onto the top of Lurk's cock like a perverted ballet dancer on a barre.

The motion made her arousal drip down her inner thighs like honey off a comb. The slick feminine juices soon coated Lurk too, forcing a groan from him. Harmony giggled at how much her husband was enjoying her shapely rear and stacked hips. She shuddered under the assault on her senses. The body she occupied as a Scarlet Drake was so much more receptive than her older one. Colors were so much more vibrant. The dunes of gold coins glittered like an ocean. Provocative traces of her sex and musky maleness invaded her nose.

And it got wetter too. Back when they had been human, they had used lube a lot because of Lurk's girth and Harmony's body had not always kept up with her desire. If she wanted to bend over and have a quickie, she wanted to have a slick hole on offer for her husband. She only had trouble getting her southern region slippery on short notice, but her hairless sex was like a faucet. Lurk could have gotten inside and pounded her raw then and there.

However, Harmony had too much fun being an enormous tease. She pulled off of the gigantic tool riding her petals. Stepping out one leg of her shorts, she turned and fell back into the coins with a melodious clink. On her back facing Lurk, the woman spread her legs invitingly. Lurk's mouth practically watered with burgeoning lust. Adorably posed, he drank in the sight of her, buds poking through her shirt and pajama shorts hanging off one ankle. Naturally her cherry slit was tantalizing him with the promise of burying his tool in her molten sheath. The male eagerly slid between her thighs once again.

Gems and data crystals speckled the piles of gold. A perfect oval sapphire the size of a chicken egg lay off to one side in easy reach. Lurk picked up the gem and rubbed it up her thighs. The cool, glassy jewel glided along Harmony's intimate flesh. On her back with her plump petals spread, her own gold flowed from her sex and pooled in the crease of her tail before dripping onto the coins below.

"How's that?" He asked, rubbing the priceless gem into the buried bundle of nerves at the top of Harmony's sex.

Lurk had his sights riveted to the hooded ruby swimming in the gold. The glittering sapphire made her nub seem all the more appealing, glistening with her aureate juices. Watching the stiff bud peak out from under its shy hood was mesmerizing. Another delight was lifting her shirt up and over her bosom so her breasts would drop free. It was a visual feast on par with the gourmet offerings they
had left behind. His free claw found her chest, massaging a soft globe. Dexterous digits squeezed
gently and again found the jewelry hanging from her stiff bud.

"Mmm, it's nice but kind of a tease. It's so smooth that it's slippery." She wiggled her hips,
eyeering for something with a little more friction for her needy clit.

"Y'know it might be fun to get a bunch of jewels or coins and fill you up, then have sex with your
treasure chest stuffed." He rubbed slowly, making little circles and varying the pressure he applied.

"Fuck you, you're not stuffing me like a turkey. Though that does sound pretty hot. Mmm, would
you like that? My pussy full of jewels while you fucked me?" Harmony reached beside herself and
grabbed fistfuls of coins. She let the coins drop onto her breasts and belly, spilling down her
cleavage.

"It does sound... Enticing." He growled as his cock twitched. "I mean, some would call it a coin
slot." Lurk's stuck his tongue out at his wife as she turned even more scarlet than normal. After one
more stroke, he guided the sapphire lower.

"Do not call my pussy a coin slot!" She scrunched her arms into her bosom, inadvertently
gathering up a small pile of gold onto her chest. Harmony shooed away the groping claw, coins
spilling down onto her toned belly.

"Can I make a deposit?" Lurk nestled the sapphire just inside her entrance, her petals held open
by the gem. Normally she was pursed so shyly closed that only the thinnest hint of crimson inner
labia peaked from her buxom mound. With the palm sized gem halfway into her sex, the brighter
crimson of her slit formed into a teardrop, the small O of her pussy contrasted exotically against the
opaque blue.

"Or are you my golden goose going to lay me an egg?" He relentlessly tormented, keeping the
glassy toy firmly in place no matter how she wiggled in protest. He had mastered the art of making
her into a songbird of embarrassment. He felt her trying to push the jewel out of her sex with her
pelvic muscles, but he pushed back, enjoying dipping the small oval gem in and out of her honeypot.

"Do not push that all the way in, mister. You'll get it stuck in there. I'm the one supposed to be
teasing you." While Harmony was enjoying herself, she wanted him.

"I could blindfold you and make you guess what I'm putting in you. Rubies and emeralds and
some of those special pearls from the lava lakes. I bet those would be nice and warm. Then,
whatever you guess wrong, you have to keep inside you. Then I get to give you an extra filling. Call
it buried treasure." Lurk got off far too much on his wife's squeaks of protest, pushing the sapphire
almost to its widest point. Just an extra quarter inch and the improvised toy would slide beyond
Harmony's puffy entrance into her swollen ruby channel.

"You are such a pervert! So help me, Lurk, the... Things that go through that lewd head of yours.
Do you just sit around thinking of this stuff." Harmony pouted, nudging at his forearm.

"No, you're just too much fun. It's not my fault seeing your pussy full of jewels is only beat by
your pussy leaking my cum while full of jewels. My queen deserves only the best."

"Okay! Okay. Fine. I'll let you do it. But not right now. Now, I want you. Please?" She demurely
blinked at him over the swell of her chest, piled high with gold.
"Since you asked so nicely..." Letting go of the Sapphire, Lurk let the jewel slide free of Harmony's flushed petals and tossed the honey-dipped gem aside. Grasping his manhood, Lurk moved up between her legs. He stroked his tool through the channel of her sex. Her plump lips hugged the shaft rubbing her velvet inner petals. Collecting her juices onto his cock, Lurk guided his tip down until it snagged the entrance to her sacred depths.

Even with the talon-curling foreplay, he was too girthy to plunge all the way to bedrock in one go. Though that did not stop him from sinking until her lips snagged tight through friction. Bit by bit his thrusts grew deeper, collecting a bit more of her slick aureate fluid and getting further with every push. Lurk moved his claws up to Harmony's knees and set a steady pace. The entrance of her sex gripped him tightly even as her yielding tunnel provided the perfect sheath. Hard as steel, he luxuriated in the plush furnace pulsing around his manhood.

At the same time, Harmony lavished in the feeling of the coins pressing into her haunches as her cunny had something nice and thick to fill her. Her chalice reveled in Lurk's penetration. She had been with her husband long enough to have the shape of his length ingrained in the muscle memory of her sex. Now though his draconic spear and her scaly sheath were exotic and new. Yet her Scalebound pussy knew him by the way he tugged on the fragile bottom of her tunnel, and where he nestled right against the entrance of her womb.

That extra push when she thought he had bottomed out sent a jolt to her nub.

"You've got just a bit less squish now." He said, trailing the tip of one claw through the hills and valleys of Harmony's abdominal muscles. Then he bent low over her. "But you're still very soft where it counts." He growled, hungrily swirling his tongue in the hollow of her throat. Although he would definitely miss her cushion, her human body, he loved her all the same.

No matter what form either of them took, they would love each other just the same.

The wonderful scent of sex and sweet mango mixed with the spice of her draconic blend between scales and skin. This perfume spurned Lurk on. As his pace got faster, his hips slapped harder against hers. Every thrust rocked her body. Shockwaves traveled up to make her breasts bounce. The rubies tied to the rings through her pebbled buds flicked up and down. Just the small weight tugged on her sensitive breasts. Harmony cried out in shock and delight, covering her bosom to keep the body jewelry from pulling her nipples too much.

Her back arched, causing Lurk's cock to ram hard into the end of her tunnel. Each time his base came flush with her mound, a jolt of current traveled from the smooth muscle of her cervix to her nub. Whenever her flower was stretched to its widest by the thick root of Lurk's member her petals were forced much further than the tiny sapphire had, pulling back the crimson hood and exposing her ruby clit.

She left one arm covering her breasts and reached the other down to play with herself. The Scarlet dragoness took two fingers and rubbed fast, small circles as her honey flowed freely around her digits and the manly length rearranging her insides. As soon as she touched her nub, her insides tightened around the invading length. The broad ridges that ran down the underside of his spear tugged deliciously along the walls of her sex. Harmony relished the chance to clamp down and push back, making Lurk force her walls in and out with every thrust.

Harmony savored the unyielding force crushed against velvet vice and forced her spread open regardless of how her pussy fought. Her haunches were rammed into the coins beneath her with musical clinks. The depth and ferocity tickled the muscles that cradled her chalice, making her
stomach clench and flex. Starting at the base of her tail and traveling up her spine, an electric current of ecstasy turned her body into a writhing conduit building towards heights of bliss she had only dreamed of.

Lost to the sensation, given over to his instincts, Lurk plowed the lovely sex toy that squeaked cutely every time he pushed particularly hard.

"Don't stop... Cum... Cumming!" Harmony cried. Her tunnel spasmed, then seized up as she came. Lurk kept pounding her shape into the coins below as Harmony's world went white and her mouth opened in a silent scream. Her walls cinched taut around the invading length holding her open.

His pace did not slow an iota as the sound of their union became quite a bit squishier. Though Harmony paused in rubbing the ruby nestled at the zenith of her flower, the carnal onslaught kept her nub stimulated. As her first climax died away, another quickly rose, boiling over. She just held the tips of her digits into her crimson folds, putting pressure on her clit as her husband hammered her delicates. The jolts of ecstasy pushed her to a second climax before the first had fully faded. A long cry was drawn from her full mouth as Harmony screwed her eyes shut and shook like a newborn fawn in the throes of orgasm.

This time, Lurk did slow, watching Harmony's heaving breasts rise and fall, the rubies on the end of her nipple piercings roll across skin covered in goosebumps and a thin sheen of sweat.

Overcome with the desire for closeness, Lurk let go of Harmony's knees and laid fully on her. He sank his claws through the piles of gold beneath her, hugging the unutterably beautiful woman. Deliberately pacing himself to luxuriate in her, feeling as though silk ribbons wrapped around his manhood. Dark red length disappeared between buxom petals. Brighter crimson was dragged out with each pull, her velvet cunny snagging on his ridges. He buried his snout in her neck even as he thrust himself at a steady tempo. So enraptured, he became lost in where he ended and she began.

Panting, Lurk raised his head to look at his wife. Her cheeks were a flushed cherry red, the scales on her face catching the light cast from the sun crystals at the top of the treasury. The yellow light reflected off the gold and gave her spots of light. Her bright white canines winked as she breathed heavily, chest rising and falling against his. Harmony felt the hammering beat of Lurk's racing heart through her bosom.

"I love you, my Harmony."

"I love you too, sweetie." She said with a playful giggle. Lurk launched on a tirade of sweet nothings. Muttering and moaning her name. As Lurk's mouth hung open in rapture while burying himself in his sumptuous wife, she took the chance to use her long tongue. Their tongues danced with carnal desire.

"God honey, you feel so fucking good." Her legs wrapped around his back, smashing the head of his manhood into the end of her tunnel. Insides straining, soaking wet velvet walls pulled taut, Harmony wiggled her hips. "Right there. Cum right there." She begged, knowing his weakness just as well as he knew hers.

A few more shallow thrusts were all the more he could manage before climax overcame him in a torrent of pleasure. Once the floodgates were open, Lurk could not stop until he was spent. He exploded within her molten depths, painting her walls white. Harmony bucked her hips up to receive her gift of draconic essence. Every pulse of cum down the pronounced underside of Lurk's cock felt
like he was balls-deep in her throat rather than lodged in her lower lips.

The way his cum splashed and pooled, suffusing her womb with its warmth reminded Harmony of some of their particularly involved sessions back in their old world. Her human body had been cursed with heavy, irregular cycles, and Lurk was her consummate companion for many reasons. Whenever her chalice would curdle with unrelenting cramps, he would ease her twisting insides with a good, long, hard pounding. He knew to wear her out and leave her a quivering, cum-drunk mess to appease mother nature. And of course it was just a happy bonus that he got to rut her raw, replacing one soreness with a much better one.

It was this same satisfaction that thrummed in Harmony's Scalebound body. The comfort was familiar. Also familiar was how Lurk twitched and shuddered on top of her, jerking his hips by inches to use her pussy to squeeze the last drops of seed from his length. Accidentally ramming himself into the end of Harmony's tunnel caused her to clench yet again. All the extra pressure forced his cum to splash into her cervix.

Easing down, Lurk let his manhood gradually grow soft on its own. Pulling his cock free, Lurk groaned and rolled off his wife onto the mountain of coins. Harmony moaned as she was uncorked and her liquid contents shifted not unpleasantly. She covered her mound with a palm, feeling the heat radiating from her well-used sex. Cum pooled in the join of her thighs and tail, but she was far too euphoric to care.

For a few minutes they lay together in perfect afterglow.

As he reclined in the pile of gold, an idea occurred to Lurk. A uniquely draconic urge gripped him.

*I wonder if this'll still work. Is this a good idea? Probably not.*

"Hey, sugar, I'm gonna try something." Heart beating fast once again, Lurk stood.

Still basking, Harmony only nodded.

Being heteromorphic, the Ancient Incarnate had another form. Reaching deep within himself, Lurk found his transformation. Back in the game it was as easy as tapping a button and waiting a few seconds.

It was as though he was stretching a strange muscle. One that the more he leaned into it, the further it went. Like a taut string, he felt tension coiling in his extremities. Lurk could let the pent up energy go all at once and burst his other form forth. He was curious though. So he took his time, reaching the point of highest strain, then easing it down.

Wings unfurled from his back and snapped open with a leathery flap. As he relaxed, iron spikes slid from everywhere except his face, neck, and belly. His tail lengthened and thickened and became significantly heavier as large concentrations of spines emerged in thickets down his back and slid between the scales. He shuddered a bit at the strange feeling. The only equivalent he could find was imagining he was bending his knees backwards, or that his elbows had suddenly become ball and socket joints. Not painful or directly unpleasant, yet bizarre all the same.

Everything became much smaller as Lurk grew in stature. Shaking himself like an overgrown dog, the Ancient Incarnate rolled his shoulders. His joints popped loudly as the transformation finished. Lurk stood on his back legs, adopting a very Skitharix posture. Like a prehistoric Earth
dinosaur, he could switch between a quadrupedal and bipedal stance. He examined the curving scythe talons meant to maul or heave long metal spines as javelins. Instinctively he could sense the number of attacks he could make. How many spines he could grow. The unique spells and abilities his other form unlocked.

"This is so fucking cool." He said, then put a forelimb over his muzzle upon hearing the deep bass of his new voice.

"Wow, hun. You picked that, didn't you?" On unsteady legs, Harmony rose to her feet and had to crane her head to look up at her husband. Lurk had not used the form in a long time.

"The Ancient Dragon Incarnate racial had a few options for lineage. The Iron Conqueror seemed like an obvious choice. It synergized with Tetragrammaton Cleric and my other gunnery classes." Aiming his arm like he would any other gun, Lurk felt the reassuring solidity of the metal spines.

"The cooldown on this stuff was always stupid low. I just stopped using it as much because once we had The Citadel I had all the ammo I could have wanted. That and I overused the shit out of it."

Many racials eschewed the ability to use equipment at all, thus bypassing the need to gather data crystals or ores. This also meant that those avatars had hard upper limits to their damage and abilities.

"You really went all in with the ranged thing." Harmony commented. She had dedicated herself to handling the tank role so that Lurk could pursue his passions. Happy coincidence had her fall in love with being the center of combat.

"In the early days of our YGGDRASIL time, gun making and ammunition was expensive. Magic had daily limits and I couldn't always make weapons to keep up with our levels. It's still good for burst damage, and has extra hit points and regeneration in case you need to take a break on the front." Lurk continued to stretch muscle and sinew as it ran across lengthened bone.

There were no true playable dragon races back in YGGDRASIL. And although his Iron Conqueror resembled a bizarre draconic monster, it did not benefit from the bonuses and levels only available to dragon raid bosses or the highest level mob spawns.

What he lost in agility and attack, he gained in physical defense, hit points, and special armor that had to be chipped away. Natural spines could be weaponized to great effect. That and the added health and armor pool let him take the heat off of Harmony if she ever needed to switch off tanking for a while. Though even with his guns, the Iron Conqueror had access to certain abilities that remained useful no matter how much stronger his firearms were.

"Watch out, sweetheart. I don't wanna squish ya." Lurk set down on all fours, careful not to land on his wife. Although nowhere near as large as some of the other forms he could have picked, Lurk was still three times her size.

Harmony quickly shuffled out of the way.

Walking on four legs was actually not as strange as Lurk thought it would be. He moved a bit down the pile, then dove in nose first. Wiggling his snout, the Ancient Incarnate felt like a real dragon as he buried himself in his hoard. Despite its weight, the gold shifted easily. If he could have melted into a puddle then and there, he would have. Unable to contain himself, he moved like an underground serpent, burrowing through the gold until he emerged out the other side of the mound.

He rolled onto his back and wriggled his entire body, feeling coins slip between his spines and glide against his scales.
Giggling as the pile beneath her rose and fell, Harmony met Lurk on the far side. Shedding her clothes to stand gloriously naked along the way. Her talons slid down the small incline in a wave of coins into Lurk's side. Harmony climbed onto his stomach and rubbed her bare bosom along his scales. The body jewelry dragged along him, tugging on her pert breasts. A broad, salacious grin split her cheeks.

"What are you doing, my darling dearest dragoness?" Lurk rumbled in delight, genuinely curious. He looked down to the sexy and suddenly smaller female crawling on him. A fresh stirring roused his dragonhood to attention. Though he had cum once already, his other body had not, and his flaccid length grew hard quickly.

"Holy mother of cocks." She said as she made her way to Lurk's erect length. "I know our bodies have... Functional parts. I was... Curious what you were packing."

Shimmying her rump up, she pushed her crotch against the thick base of his draconic member. Pressing her hidden nub against the dark red manhood, she gasped at the heat saturating into her. She pushed the tree trunk cock against her belly and squished her breasts around Lurk. Harmony's talented hands knew exactly where to touch. She stroked her hands up and down the pronounced ventral bulge along the underside of his member.

The head was so big she could only just get the whole end of the tool into her mouth. Her long tongue corkscrewed a bit further. Lurk moaned and shifted his hips as Harmony’s warm maw enveloped the end of his spear and her digits worked him over. His Iron Conqueror body was sensitive and he shuddered as he sank into the gold beneath him.

"As much fun as it would be, I don't think that's gonna fit inside you, sugar." He rumbled in a deeper tone.

"Ah!" She gasped, popping the cock free of her mouth. Her tongue hung loosely, connected for a moment with strings of saliva to the virile member. "Yeah, it would definitely be fun. You'd be wearing me like a condom. That's actually really tempting to think about. Oooh, and you'd cum so much in me."

She ground the lips of her sex against him, plump and engorged from the thorough pounding she had taken earlier. It was such an erotic thing to her, that Harmony could not help but lean back a little and sneak a claw down to her nub and rub while she pressed her puffy sex against Lurk's shaft. She kept his virile monument against her cunny with her free claw. Lurk was not the only one with a dragon fetish. The reason Harmony had climbed onto the belly of her husband was with full intention of doing unspeakable things with and to an oversized cock.

The exact scenario that was playing out, with a fair maiden pleasuring her dragon captor, or lover, atop a mountain of gold? Deep-seated fantasy that much like her entire life lately, had become reality.

Moaning and writhing, Harmony let her inhibitions fall away and wanted to make sure she had no regrets. Tail twitching and flicking, she gave Lurk a show even with her back to him. She found her sweet spot and did not relent. Surprising even herself at how turned on she was, Harmony reached her peak quickly. It was always easier to cum after the first time. Even easier with a toy as thick as her arm to rub herself on.

"Honey! Lurk! I'm gonna... I'm gonna ah!" She cried, digits furiously working over her clit as she mashed her hips against the huge draconic spire. Her calves nearly cramped with the intensity as she
Female cum came gushing forth as Harmony exploded all over Lurk's crotch. Her scaly pussy almost winked with aftershocks as she leaked a double handful of built up honey.

"Aw, my pent up little dragoness. Did you gush?" Lurk purred, setting his forelimbs behind his head to recline in the lap of luxury.

"Sh-sh-shut up." Harmony shuddered. "I... Whew... Can't... Remember the last... Time... You made me... Squirt." She said breathlessly, trembling from repeated orgasms. Even shaking and unsteady from her own mind-blowing climax, Harmony gathered up her all natural lubrication and slicked Lurk's shaft in liquid gold. Harmony worked Lurk over with a frightening amount of skill.

"New meaning to 'riding the dragon'." She said with a giggle, polishing his spear with gradual strokes. As Lurk moaned throatily, pride made her chest lighter. "I still don't think I could handle even part of this monster. You'd have to really warm me up."

"What, that doesn't turn you on?" He hummed. "We did get that oil from Loam. Even if you couldn't take it very far, I bet you would melt if I put 'that' in your butt. Especially if I filled that cute little ass of yours with cum." Lurk chuckled as Harmony cried in embarrassment. He knew all her weak spots.

"I'm not a size queen, thank you. That's more your thing." She deflected even as her cheeks burned.

"Maybe not, but you do have a thing for size difference. I've found your porn stash more than you found mine. You could come over here and give my new tongue a try." Lurk flicked a tongue whose girth made Harmony's womb clench just looking at it, unable to resist glancing over her shoulder. "You could sit on my face and we could have a good ol' time." He teased.

"I just came super hard, and the idea of taking that thing in either hole is just way too much. Besides, you're pretty much proportionate to when we were human, so if you want anal, mister, you're gonna hafta earn it."

Though it did give Harmony cause to wonder. Her old body never took to anal as much as she would have liked. Her favorite thing in the world was to have her husband's fat cock jammed to the hilt in her ass, preferably filling her rear with slick, slimy jizz, her butt was not cooperative. Except for one very memorable night, it was always too painful to bear, or make a regular habit. It was her secret dream to be able to let Lurk pick whichever of her holes he wanted at any time. Preferably starting with her mouth, then her pussy, then finishing in her rear. Just being a banquet of pleasures and sensations on offer for him to use and relieve himself of his manly burden as he saw fit.

Though she knew one of his favorites was when she used her hands. They only did it rarely because they both preferred to have Lurk sheathed inside her in some way when he finished.

The buttermilk smooth skin of her chiseled abdominals and pillowy breasts stroked his length. Her gyrating hips kissed her sopping wet sex against his root. The warm spot at her core kept the base of the massive tool company. She knew he was close to cumming when she felt his entire body tense up underneath her. Her claws circled around his length, rubbing his shaft with the shameful, slick juices she spilled earlier. His cock became hotter as she stroked faster down the bulging ridges along his length to urge him on to release.

Lost in the helplessness of his climax in the literal claws of another, Lurk eagerly raised his hips and succeeded in only lifting Harmony on his crotch. Writhing in desire and at the mercy of
Harmony's claws, he could only moan and heave his loins. He begged to be touched more with the motions, and chased his high.

Clenching his jaws, his powerful stomach muscles seized as his orgasm rushed free.

His first spurt of cum sailed over Harmony's shoulder to splash onto his abdomen. The second pulse went about half as far. And the rest erupted from his cock with weaker pushes, covering Harmony's breasts, running down her cleavage. The rest dripped down his length to pool with their collective cum between Harmony's thighs. Thick dragon seed coated her front. Harmony could not hold back her moans of delight at the sheer eroticism of the act. She had been secretly hoping to be adorned with strings of pearls, and was not disappointed. A claw found one of her pierced pebbled buds while the other reached down between her spread legs. Two digits slid through the gooey cum and dipped the mixture into her sex. The feeling was simply divine. A soothing tingle suffused her over-fluffed petals.

She did not want to cum again, her clt was actually sore from her earlier abuse. The dragoness only wanted to enjoy the afterglow and think that next time she would absolutely have to try and get him to finish inside her.

"Now this... This is a mess." Harmony stated both proudly and tiredly. Strings of male essence connected her to the massive tool.

"Could get... A maid to come clean it." Chuckling weakly, Lurk's brain was consumed by afterglow.

"I think if one did, their hearts would explode. Just... Give right out." She trailed off for a moment and realized as fun as it was then, having that much cum all over her would not be nearly as enjoyable once it started drying. "Hold on. I've got an idea. Because there are not enough towels in the fucking world for this. Need like... A Divine class towel." Harmony muttered as she reached into her inventory for a scroll. "Aha!" She said, unrolling the parchment.

"[Clean]." She spoke and the scroll floated up and disappeared as it snapped back into a tight curl. The bucket's worth of dragon jizz as well as her own spilled honey evaporated in a few seconds.

"Fuck yeah, magic." Lurk smiled faintly, still euphoric from the whole ordeal.

"That is handy. Hell yes." She flopped onto her back, untidy red hair spilling out over a spotlessly clean burgundy stomach.

"Why did you even have that in your inventory?" Distantly pondering what wondrous items lay hidden among his cavernous inventory, Lurk sighed. It was delightfully opulent to lay on a mountain of gold with a sex goddess lying naked on his chest.

"Fuck, hun, I don't remember. I think it was a drop I meant to dump off but forgot to." Reluctantly, Harmony slid off her transformed husband. Stretching with her arms high over her head, her knees and elbows popped. "C'mon sweetheart, We still need to check the guild item."

"You're right. You're right. Do you think our racial made us extra horny or something? Would be kind of hilarious if it did." Shaking off the coins among his spikes, Lurk shifted his form back to his normal body. Without drawing out the shift, it only took a few seconds. He adjusted his magically reinstated shirt and glanced sidelong at his lovely Harmony.
"We might just be horny bastards." She noticed exactly how closely he was inspecting her and covered her important bits with her claws.

"It's because you're so sexy." Lurk reached towards his wife, unable to resist her naked body so fresh and ready for another romp among their hoard.

Harmony popped her wings out and shot off like a rocket to escape the licentious advances of her insatiable husband. As Lurk launched himself after her, he hooted in freedom and delight.

Flying would never get old.

The monarchs of Black Sky Legion sailed over the ocean of YGGDRASIL currency on leathery wings. Their treasury had one central landmark. Tucked among the gold, data crystals, and armory columns, was a lake of crystal pure water. At the center of the underground lake, was a tiny island covered in standing stones and emerald grass, dominated by a single tree. The twisting trunk climbed high into the air with the sweeping branches giving shade to the petite isle. Rather than leaves, the tree sprouted with hundreds of thousands of scales that were shades of red ranging from scarlet to maroon. Light was refracted and bent off leaf-scales as if they were stained glass.

Lurk and Harmony both alighted on the island, grass rustling under their talons. While Harmony headed to the guild item, Lurk simply looked around. He took in the sights with new eyes. Everything was so much sharper, more detailed. Placid water sluiced against the rocks and the leaf scales clinked together in a melody of nature. Like a massive wind chime, the music of the tree sang with the resonant air currents of the treasury itself.

Two pedestals of unadorned marble sat innocuously by the tree.

Harmony rested one claw on the side of one, staring at the item it held and into another place and time. An amulet rested on the smooth stone display, depicting a crimson dragon curled nose to tail covered in intricate black scrawling runes.

"Pact of the Red Dragon." She said in reverence as Lurk joined her to stare at the world item.

The pinnacle of the Scalebound heteromorphic racial was a transformation that enveloped the user's avatar in an augmented suit of draconic armor. The power and protection of [Apex Shift] was incredible, though temporary. Charge for the skill had to be built up through combat. Damage taken and given. Harmony had meticulously gathered rings and other pieces of equipment that could extend the duration or hold charges for her racial ability. Pact of the Red Dragon gave a similar buff, focused more on offensive claws and breath attacks. Through controlled testing, Harmony had discovered that the Pact of the Dragon stacked with [Apex Shift] and molded her into a weapon of terrifying potential.

"It was the first World item Black Sky ever got. And it was pure luck." Chuckling, Lurk shook his head at the absurdity. "I remember that lottery. Woodsy paid real money to buy a few tickets from the cash shop. There was a teensie tiny chance you could win a World item. There was so much backlash against the devs. Paying for bullshit like cosmetics was one thing, but a World item? It was obvious the shitty devs were just seeing what they could get away with without infuriating their player base."

Lurk rested a palm on her lower back, just above her tail.

"And by Surtr's flaming nipples, he got a World item from that stupid lottery. I'm still glad to this
"Then he just said he would probably never use it and gave it to me. Wood always did have the most insane luck. Do you remember when he got Lucifer's Eye from Demon Slayer Eight?" She smiled at the memory. Though her heart nearly skipped a beat, she scooped up Pact of the Red Dragon in her claw. Just to make sure it was real.

"He would have given that to you too. You needed it for your broadsword." Lurk remarked even as he moved over to the other marble display. Just like the other plinth, a lone item rested on top. It was a single-action Colt army revolver. The kind featured in old western media. The revolver did not appear extraordinary on the outside. Just burnished steel parts with polished sable-dark grips.

"What I remember, is you getting Deschain for me." Seeing the weapon sparked a covetous twinge, and he could not resist the call to at least touch the gun. Unlike Entropy, soon after he had learned about the pistol, Lurk had given up on ever obtaining it. While the gun did not do much in the way of damage, there was no avoiding it. No magic, armor, or resistance could diminish or dodge the bullets once fired.

After replacing Pact of the Red Dragon, Harmony stood with Lurk and provided her own insight.

"We never chased World items like some guilds did. I had a few chances to pick some up from our allies. But it never seemed worth it for something that would just sit in the vault. I'd rather have a few metric tons of Scarletite or Celestial Uranium." She recalled once seeing a World item reach into the trillions the few times one had made its way into the public auction space.

"But you still got Deschain for me." Lurk smiled with a small jab of guilt.

"The game was in decline. Guilds would go bankrupt because people stopped playing. Their stuff would go up for claim. Whoever got there first would get most of the items or they would be auctioned off. I kept watch on the guild that owned Deschain. Even though you weren't playing with me anymore, I still remembered how much you wanted it. It was special. One for you. One for me."

After tapping the cylinder to reaffirm its existence, Lurk turned and touched his nose to Harmony's.

Then together, they turned to the tree itself, their guild item.

Three names were carved in the ebony bark.


The usernames were preserved with the same clarity as the day the trio had bound themselves together in the heart of The Citadel. YGGDRASIL was not the first, nor the last game that Black Sky Legion had been a part of. That had been their clan, their guild, their company, tribe, alliance, fireteam, and squad for many years. As it had been, as it was, and always would be. Even then, the two remaining members of Black Sky Legion were irrevocably linked to their guild item. Only they were allowed free movement through the halls of The Citadel. All others had to use the teleportation network.

There were two kinds of guild items; equipment, and utility. Equipment came in many shapes and sizes. Weapons. Staves. Even armor in a few cases. But they could be lost, or stolen, though offered
Then there was utility. Items that provided global abilities to the entire guild. Utility options were only rarely used because it required an implicit level of trust between players. Any guild member could use the item, but it required a unanimous vote from all other players. For Black Sky, their scaly tree allowed one of them to assume a special form once a day. More than either Lurk or Harmony's heteromorphic abilities, the guild item of Black Sky Legion gave them the [Dragon Ascendant] boon. The transformation lasted only for ten minutes before being put on a twenty-four hour cooldown.

With a contented sigh, Harmony sat down in the grass. Soft green stalks tickled her rump. She patted her thighs and Lurk could not say no to that invitation. He sprawled out beside his lover and was careful not to stab her with a horn as he laid his head in her lap.

"So, what should we be doing?" Lurk voiced a troublesome thought which had been gnawing at his brain.

"What do you mean?" Sweet as a honeyed mango, she blinked and gave him a smile worth more than all the Nova Crystal of Muspelheim.

"Do you think we should be meddling? We're like aliens giving computers to primal man who just discovered fire." He asked even as he reached up to caress his wife's lips. "Every day I fall in love with you all over again." Lurk said reverently, enamored with the way Harmony's facial scales glinted in time with the Black Sky tree framing her features.

"If we have the power to change things for the better, are we obligated to?" His tone was low, full of uncertainty.

"I don't think we have to if we don't want to... But generosity can be just as damaging as negligence. So, let's be smart about it. I asked earlier, but do you regret helping Kadusia?" Harmony challenged again.

"No, of course not. Innocent people were going to be killed and a city would have suffered because of greedy shitheads. Are we in a position to change the world?"

"Look at what we can do, hun! Magic... Magic is real. And so is The Citadel. We're kind of like time travelers, in a way. We've seen what can happen to a world... Everything here is clean. I never knew what real air felt like to breathe. Shit," Harmony said, looking up at their guild item. "How many real trees do you remember seeing back on Earth? They were practically extinct."

"I don't want this world to become like our old home. But I want to keep The Citadel safe. I want to protect it. I want to see it thrive. Not just survive."

"Remember, sugar, we're under no obligation to do anything. We're free. The only limits are those we impose on ourselves." Harmony put her claws on either side of Lurk's head and rubbed just above where his horns sprouted from his temples.

"Have you thought about what we'd do if we meet other players?" Lurk's jaw tightened unconsciously. A thin breath whistled between his teeth as he forced himself to relax.

"Shit," Harmony succinctly expressed.
"On that last day, even though it was a celebration for YGGDRASIL, it was practically a dead game. Even the top guilds didn't have more than single digits in active players. If we came through. If tier magic is here, there's no telling what, or who else came to this world with us. Let's look at this logically, assess the possibilities."

Lurk ticked off his digits.

"Either they transfer with a guild, or without one. Less than a third even belonged to a guild. Even in YGGDRASIL's prime. That's ideal. We've got all the Guardians. Even the best World Champion was only good for maybe five or six level hundreds at a time. If they were dedicated to maintain a guildhall after twelve years, then they've got to have that attachment. You and I both know that inter-guild conflict can ruin both sides. All out war is the last thing anyone would want. Taking The Citadel would take an army of players. Do you remember the Dive-Aholics-Anonymous?"

"They were a shit guild." Harmony scoffed.

"Yeah, a shit guild that took four days to siege. We had them from the beginning with numbers, resources, and determination. The Drunken Elves and Big Boys had a serious bone to pick with the Dive-Aholics. In the end, the Dive-Aholics went bankrupt and then got steamrolled. The raid was pretty much textbook." The Ancient Incarnate

"True. But their counter raid against us went... Poorly."

Now it was Lurk's turn to scoff.

"Fucking cowards couldn't even attack us while we were online. At least they wasted a metric shit load of gold on summons. They picked us because they thought Black Sky Legion was only three people."

"They got past the fourth floor." Harmony cocked her head to one side.

"No, we checked the logs and they lost all their mercenary summons going through the first and second floor, ran past the third, then tripped down my hidden path to the fifth."

Harmony laughed at the visual of the last member of the Dive-Aholics raid team running away from Skitharix and falling backwards down Lurk's trick stairs. Mind grinding through the different scenarios, the King of Black Sky felt he was close to a conclusion.

"A world is, and isn't, a big place. If players transferred then I'm sure we'll hear about them soon. We need to get out there and explore. We need to get dialogue open with the other kingdoms on this continent. If we've got these feudal kingdoms talking to us, it'll give The Citadel a buffer. The humans are... Just humans here. Normal... Weak humans. Fuck that's weird to say. But it does make sense. I mean, what would a regular person do against something that was even level twenty? Level ten?"

"Even a level twenty could probably go on a massive killing spree through any normal human town unless someone of equal level was there to stop them. I bet Lord Chickenbomb could peck through most of the Kadusian army. Hell, the Caliber Court would be like gods among men." She giggled, and filed away the idea of unleashing Feathery Doom upon their enemies.

"We need information. You just gave me a good idea, and now I think I know a good way to get
several things done at once."

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Three-Thirty-Eight Lapua Magnum made a solemn vow that if she had to clear one more house basement of giant rats, she would simply skip the basement and burn the whole thing down. She made this assertion as she considered the progress made by her squad.

The Neverborn and the rest of her entourage emerged from one of the old, monster infested forests on the outskirts of Kadusia. Even in settled lands, the nature of the world meant that everything that went bump in the night found residence somewhere. Usually where it could prey on those who strayed too far from the light of civilization. To Lapua, it was only natural that spawn points near cities had a constant supply of missions and loot.

A Silver Knight broke her reverie.

"Lady Lapua, you don't think the Seekers will raise objections to us taking on assignments we are not high enough station?" The Silver Knight asked.

"Of course not, bucket head. They would not dare give offense to the Lady." One Silver Knight smacked the other with the flat of his spear.

"The request for Chimera... Parts... Was open ended. General contract. We just happened upon one or two, and defended ourselves. Happy circumstance that it was meant for Master Seekers to supply the magical collegiate with components. This should be enough to raise our rank to True Seekers. There are no Adept level contracts for escorting caravans over the mountain pass, after all." Lapua waved a pair of hands dismissively, certain that the gains far outweighed the rebuke for taking something above their rank.

"At least they made for a good lunch. Too bad the hearts were listed in the components. The things had three of 'em." A Demi-Claw licked his chops and the other reptilian Sharpshooters nodded in agreement. Although the Silver Knights could not eat, nor need to, they still enjoyed the aroma of the roasted animal.

"Judging by what we've seen, I'm sure they were top of the food chain. They probably had easy pickings of cows and pigs along the forest edge." Lapua opened her notebook and scribbled a reminder to herself to obtain a copy of the bestiary from Cognitio.

"I thought they were a bit gamey. The goat wasn't bad, though."

"The one that Lady Lapua slayed was nice and tender."

"Explosives make the best tenderizer." The Demi-Claw smacked her fist into an open palm.

"No arguments there."

"Lady Lapua, can we get some beef hearts, maybe?" A Demi-Claw begged.

"Our coins are precious right now." The Neverborn admonished.
There was a communal groan of disappointment. Lapua's mouth teased a smile.

"Tell you what, as soon as we can afford our own embassy, we'll have a feast. So the faster we establish trade and get those escort quests, we can establish our embassy and utilize the Seekers to facilitate regular contracts through the mountain pass. Tariff tax for passing through Black Sky land, and protection fee. Remind me which contracts we're bringing in?"

The Sharpshooter with the list of their errands held it up to examine.

"Let's see, we cleared out those two barns, five houses, and that basement of giant rats."

"Please don't tell me it's more rats. I swear I will burn down every rat infested house in this whole kingdom before I go in another musty basement." Lapua stated with a shudder of disgust. It would have been easy to simply go into the animal minds, yet she could not stand the idea of touching the vermin in any way. Even psionically. Her proclamation did get a collective chuckle out of the group as they trod along the dirt road back to Kadusia's northern gate. Golden wheat a few days away from harvest swayed in the autumnal breeze.

"Did someone grab those Balm Leaves?" Lapua asked.

"I've got them, Lady Lapua." A Silver Knight held up a burlap sack.

"Toad horn?"

"Yes, Lady Lapua."

"Ogre ears?"

"Here," Another Knight held up the ears all strung together that were proof of the extermination quest.

"Hobgoblin liver?"

"Definitely not eating that, so yes." A Demi-Claw held out the wet bag at arms length.

"That was all that we needed to do out here, right?"

"I believe so, Lady." Said the Demi-Claw with the list.

"From here, let's try to focus on contracts that pay out platinum. That seems to hold the highest value and exchange rates of the differently recognized currencies. It seems most of the struck coinage originates from that northern kingdom. Orza, and its Silver Barons. Most seem to regard them as quite... Hoity." Lapua consulted her notes as they walked.

"Lady Lapua..." One of the Sharpshooters cautioned.

"Don't worry. I know they're there." The Neverborn nonchalantly held up a clenched fist and the column halted with a snap.

Around forty outlaws stood from their hiding places. They had gone prone in the ditches alongside the road and among the fields of wheat. Several had blades, while many more pointed
knocked arrows or aimed crossbows at the squad of Black Sky soldiers. They were a raggedy lot, with old cloaks and a mix of brigandine and gambeson. Their leader stepped out into the road before Lapua with an easy swagger. Two more bandits emerged and pointed primitive wands at Lapua in what they believed to be a credible threat.

"You're the ones who killed the Bandit King! You'll pay. The bandits own this land. Not Kadusia." The surprisingly young man drew his blade and raised a kite shield.

Lapua ignored the man. She had no desire to entertain the man with monologuing about the futility of his efforts.

"Killing you should give us quite the reputation boost. But not without witnesses. Hm." Lapua tapped her foot, then snapped several sets of fingers. "Aha! I'll give you to the city guard. I'm sure you have all kinds of juicy tidbits in your brain meat. There's no contract, but I'm sure you're worth something."

The leader raised his blade to signal his men to make ready to fire.

With an off-handed gesture and a flare of her halo, Lapua froze the man mid flourish. He stood like a gladiatorial statue as his men milled about, suddenly aimless. Though his body was frozen, his eyes darted around in fear as he became little more than a passenger.

The bandits outnumbered the away team four to one.

Not wanting to waste time, Lapua summoned exactly that many magelocks. One for each bandit except the designated survivor. The multitude of floating guns swiveled to each target a different outlaw and shouts of alarm rose from the bandits. The two lowly mages were the smartest among the bunch. They cut and run, abandoning their frozen leader.

"[Faceoff]." Lapua cast.

Dozens of heavy cracks layered on top of one another, then a deafening bang echoed through the trees. Decapitated with large bore musket balls, every bandit fell no matter how they ran or hid. Still frozen, the leader floated along in Lapua's Psionic grip as the squad resumed their march.

Lapua consulted her notebook and flipped through her pages of scribbled information. Much of it was speculation and rumor. However, the day was getting late, and she wanted to make sure she delivered her findings in a timely manner. While she and her team were making their way back to Kadusia was a good opportunity.

[Message]

Lord Nox?

Ah, Lapua Magnum. I don't think we've ever had the pleasure of speaking directly.

Correct, Lord Nox. I have a report to deliver on this world, Kadusia, its people, as well as information regarding the surrounding kingdoms. Are you free to receive my report, sir?
I'm a bit preoccupied. However, your report is important to High Lord Lurk and The Citadel by extension. I'm sure you've gathered a great deal of intel and I'll be happy to hear your findings in their entirety so I may brief Lord Lurk.

Yes, sir.

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In summary then, I believe establishing ourselves in with the merchants of the land trade routes will be key in making the kingdoms dependent on us. We need to simply lay out the cost of further caravans lost to the bandits of the mountains as opposed to contracting Black Sky to provide escort.

Your suggestion of using the money you're collecting through these Seekers for a Black Sky embassy intrigues me. I shall inform Lord Lurk that your idea has my vote. How do you think the other kingdoms will react to us?

I... Worry on that front. Though I am hesitant to voice any concerns that may cast doubt as to my certainty of our glory. The glory of Black Sky Legion.

Speak to me, Lapua. You would not have been entrusted by High Lord Lurk with your mission if he did not have trust in you. Do not worry on that. I will judge whether your concerns are valid of passing along to our Lord.

Of course, Overseer. I do not wish to withhold anything from you, our Lord's shadow. Even if it is only speculation.

Continue, Lapua.

By skimming the surface thoughts of the Kadusians, I can tell that they are immensely grateful for saving them from the Bandit King. Our warm welcome by a Queen that the people love also helped assuage the mood of the city. However, beneath these sentiments are undercurrents of paranoia and xenophobia.

We are dealing with humans. You know how they behave stupidly around their betters.

I worry that without gratitude instilled in them already, the reactions of the other kingdoms might be unpredictable. Though he did not tell me directly, the mind of Warren Reese informed me that Queen Ismeena Belgrave sent messages via magic and physical missives about us to the other members of her Coalition. I intercepted one, and although it urged the others to cooperate and be open, strong subtext urged caution. Outwardly they are polite, but they are hesitant to trust us. Our power frightens them. I've made sure to exercise great restraint, per the word of our Holy Lord.

It's only natural they are wary. Our King and Queen were wise to aid Kadusia against the Bandit Whatever-he-thought-he-was. He made a much prettier stain than he did a human. Keeping them certain that we are stronger than they are, while still being benevolent will foster compliance. As long as they're smart. Based on your report, Ismeena seems to be a shrewd ruler. Let her think that our good nature will give them diplomatic clout to use.

Helping them costs us nothing other than my time, Lord Nox. And I believe so far it has paid back
good dividends.

Right you are, Lapua. High Lord Lurk and Lady Harmony have no peer. Their wisdom shall see The Citadel take our rightful place in this new world. And it is the duty of we Guardians to make sure they have the information to guide us.

Thank you, Lord Nox. You are an echo of our Holy Lord's wisdom. That finishes my report for now, sir.

Excellent, so am I.

Excuse me?

Perfect timing is all, Lapua. I can pass your findings along to High Lord Lurk directly. Continue your work with these Seekers. Kadusia can be an advantageous beginning to Black Sky's dominance of the region.

Until the sun burns out...

And Black Sky comes.

[End Message]

Back in The Citadel, Nox pulled his generous manhood out of the poor Lamia he had been ravaging with a wet pop. The Guardian stood and put himself back in order before buckling his pants.

Nestled in the V where the Lamia's buttermilk skin met black and orange scales, her flushed sex leaked a thick mixture of fluid from their salacious affair. Her breasts spilled from the lacy bodice pulled below her shoulders. The intimate cream of her skin was peppered with love marks and her pink buds were puffy from being lavished with attention. The skirt of her uniform was hiked up above her serpentine hips, smooth midriff and well-used flower on prominent display.

He had cornered the maid, pushing his needy girth against her. Then sealed his lips around hers in kiss of such intensity and desire as to make the Lamia's feminine core melt. It had only been a matter of time before Nox's roving hands had reached the flower hidden beneath the black and white maid outfit and found her delicates slick and ripe for his pleasure. Once firmly seated, he had pounded the shape of his manhood into the heart of the Lamia's femininity.

Despite being interrupted by Lapua's message partway through, Nox was excellent at multi-tasking. That and the distraction had let him last a bit longer.

"Mmm, that was magnifique, monsieur Nox. Though you seemed rather distracted as you finish-hey! Where are you going?" The maid cried indignantly, covering her modesty as Nox threw open the curtains of the alcove they had been hiding in.

"Sorry darlin', duty calls. Thanks for the quickie." Nox returned his pointed helm to its rightful place with a spin and a bow, making sure to keep his eyes locked on the maid as her petite hands left little to the imagination.
"You are a fribouille, monsieur Nox! A blackguard of the highest order!" She decried the Guardian, turning her nose up at him with an indignant 'hmph!'.

Nox flitted forward like a wrath, putting the tip of his index finger beneath the Lamia's chin and drawing her slitted eyes to his own.

"Such uncouth words from such a pretty mouth. Although... I know what these lips can really do." Nox stated, brushing his thumb along her lower lip. "Maybe you can... Persuade me of the error of my ways sometime later."

At the mention, her forked tongue flicked the air, tasting the fresh air as it mingled with the heady mixture of sweat and sex. Though her hands were occupied covering her breasts and lady bits, her tail reached up to slap the Guardian for his behavior. Just as the blow landed, Nox disappeared into the shadows of the alcove.

"Eep!" The maid cried as her tail hit nothing but air. "A real gentleman at least would have gotten a lady something for the mess he left." The Lamia sighed.

Making all due haste, Nox flitted through the dark as a wraith. He of course knew that his Lord and Lady were in the treasury with absolute certainty. As much as he would have liked, the Guardian had to go through the forge first.

Upon entering the massive crafting chamber, the Forgemother knew Nox was there before the Shadowkin was even able to form from the swirling dark.

"Nox, what brings you to the forge?" She rumbled with the constrained heat of her furnaces. The Forgemother had actually been cozily daydreaming about how the gold of the treasury was in a way an extension of her body and the... Intimate details about what her creator and his mate were doing with the jewels and coins. Avatar of Metal and Imperitor Titanica let her know exactly what and more importantly, how they were doing it. From multiple angles.

"I have a report to deliver to High Lord Lurk personally. I sensed his presence in the treasury." Nox stated, squinting against the bright light of the forge. He waited at the entrance out of respect for the area's Guardian.

"You are correct, Nox. However, High Lord Lurk and Lady Harmony are rather occupied at the moment." She purred with enough force to vibrate her throne of pipes and conduits.

"I'm sure that High Lord Lurk will be very interested in the report he expressly instructed me to deliver to him." Nox furrowed his brow against the glare and in consternation.

"Well, I could certainly check." The Forgemother coyly offered.

Rather than answer, Nox crossed his arms and tapped a foot impatiently.

The Forgemother took another peek in time to see Harmony with an especially... Girthy problem between her legs that she had to use both claws to get a grip on.

"Believe me, Lady Harmony is assisting our Holy Lord in a very hands-on issue. You know there are some things that require a delicate feminine touch."
"I am the Guardian overseer, and you are obstructing me from performing my duty to our High Lord." Nox was not used to being denied.

"Half the Guardian overseer." The Forgemother corrected, wagging a talon back and forth.

Nox sputtered and tried to come up with some counter-argument. Huffing and muttering about finding his brother, Nox sank into the shadows once more.

The Forgemother settled atop her dais once more with a contented rumble. She considered resuming her observation, but thought that perhaps it would be rude to intrude on the intimacy of her monarchs.

Well... One more look would not hurt.

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"Look, just help me, okay? I need you for Corona Nox." Nox begged his brother.

Crisis rolled his eyes. Though he was mute, Harmony had given the Guardian a plethora of emotes.

"Lord Lurk wanted Lapua's report on her findings in Kadusia given as soon as it came in."

Much like a mime, Crisis made the outline of a box, then lit his invisible square on fire.

"Semantics." Nox scoffed. "I would never intentionally interrupt our Lord and Lady to potentially get secret information to sell to the rest of the Guardians."

Making a show of stomping out the imaginary box, Crisis then gave a 'ta-da' style wave of his hands.

"Alright, alright, you made your point. It's not urgent enough to bother our King and Queen while they're inspecting the treasury." Leaning in, the brother spoke in a soft, conspiratorial tone. "But if you help me, I'll make it worth your while."

Crisis leaned back and jerked his chin up for Nox to proceed.

"I know you have the hots for-"

Crisis firmly stomped on his brother's foot.

"Ow! Unnecessary. Just talk to her! I mean, I know I'm the handsome one. But some of my good looks and charm must have rubbed off on you." Nox struck a pose with fingers trailing off the edge of his helm while he turned to one side to show off his profile.

With his fingers Crisis made an air quotes gesture.

"Now you're just being rude."
Once more rolling his eyes, Crisis pointed to Nox, then back to himself.

"I know we're twins. I'm just the better looking one. The ladies can't resist this charm." Nox put a hand to his chest and gave a mock swoon.

Staring in egregious disdain, Crisis drew a straight hand across his wrist.

"Edgy? Where did you learn that? Such language coming from my own flesh and blood. What would poor impressionable Wrath and Ruin think if they heard so much vulgarity? It would corrupt their poor, innocent minds."

*****

With the knowledge imparted by Lapua Magnum's report, Lurk had spent a late night formulating his plans.

The next morning, the Wyrmblood stood before the gates of The Citadel with the Caliber Court assembled.

The broad shelf of mountain that led to the front doors of The Citadel was bustling with activity. The ground had already been smoothed in preparation for proper laying of concrete foundation. Nymphs from the Arboretum were molding the terrain with their druidic abilities. Demi-Claw gunnery crews coordinated with the Nymphs to make earthen bulwarks that would provide temporary positions for Hellhammer artillery until more permanent fortifications could be made. Even though the sight lines of the Alpha and Omega bunkers were long, they were nowhere near the maximum effective range of the Hellhammers.

More groups of Demi-Claws and a few Flayers with their Tailoring were hard at work outfitting five Greater Wyverns with equipment for their journey. Before the first battle against the Bandit King, simple saddles were all that had been necessary. At the onset of longer, potentially much more hazardous journeys, simple leather saddles would not cut it.

Heavily reinforced, the larger saddle could carry the entire expeditionary team.

Attached to the harness were massive rust red armor. Segmented lines of plate covered the top of the neck with broad-link chain loosely covering the throat. A molded plate protected the tops of their heads, the protective helmet molded around the sweeping horns but left the jaw free to open, bite, and unleash their breath attack. The largest single piece of the ensemble was the breastplate, needing to be hoisted by Flayer spells.

Relic Wyvern armor was equipment that Black Sky Legion had in bulk. After all, Wyvern Nest Peak back in Muspelheim was one of their favorite hunting areas. In fact, it was such a routine drop that Lurk usually just recycled it with the Forgemother. Mounts back in the game were sought after commodities, and outfitting them in stylish gear was mandatory. It was not the Relic armor that was difficult to obtain, but the cash shop cosmetic transmuter that was so low in drop rate. No one would be caught dead wearing the unaltered set, despite it being functionally the same.

However ubiquitous it was, equipped to a Greater Wyvern, the Relic level items would repel most attacks, and were imbued with numerous buffs. [Sustenance], [Lightweight Cargo], [Sensory Boost].
And numerous damage resistance enchantments that raised the Greater Wyvern's natural own racial immunities. Even weaponry rated as Legendary would have great difficulty damaging them. Only Divine items could confidently cut into them. And if the enemies of Black Sky Legion had access to Divine... Or worse, then The Citadel had bigger problems.

Final checks were being performed. Straps tightened and supplies double checked.

Neither Lurk or Harmony had ever bothered to equip any of Greater Wyverns with the gear back in YGGDRASIL because it had been time consuming. They had grown rather complacent in the old days. No incursion had ever reached beyond the fifth floor. That and they enjoyed the natural blend of ashen grays, reds, with various shades of orange typical of the Muspelheim breeds.

But now every resource was precious. Especially the living.

The away teams were comprised of six Silver Knights, four Sharpshooters, two Corsairs, and one Painlord. In addition to the level ninety Caliber Court member. The Greater Wyverns could carry a large compliment of troops, but Lurk kept the groups compact. Though he did add more variety to try and insure the away teams were in theory able to handle multiple different scenarios. Both because of supply, and smaller, elite units were easier to maneuver than armies. And also not larger in number than could be easily teleported to safety in an emergency.

The remaining five of the six members of the Caliber Court stood ready with their cohorts.

Lurk knew that it was going to be a risk, entrusting such an important task to what had been once just NPCs. Lapua had been an experiment. One that he was pleased with thus far. The Ancient Incarnate had high hopes for the rest of the Caliber Court. Although their data and racials had dictated much of their personalities, the depth of loyalty the denizens of The Citadel had displayed assuaged most of worry about defection festering in Lurk's heart. The Caliber Court had been a collaborative effort between Lurk and Woodsolution. An experiment in different, sometimes wacky builds they had devised.

"Your mission is to explore and understand this new world." The Wyrmblood panned his gaze as each team stood at attention.

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The skull-headed Ten Gauge was the leader of the Caliber Court, and the first that Lurk addressed.

"Ten Gauge, your goal is north, to the city-state Orza. According to Lapua's report, Orza is ruled by a council of powerful families that control the valuable metal deposits in the mountains and are known as the Silver Barons. Kadusia sentiment holds Silver Barons to be arrogant and haughty. They seem to run their city more like a business than anything else. Approach accordingly. Get an audience with the Barons, but promise nothing. Present as allies and potential investors. Harmony and I will handle the rest."

The Wendigo had his tower shield planted on the ground, one arm resting on its edge. His other was held to his heart in salute. Ten Gauge had the eponymous Doom Slayer class, with his tri-
barrelled shotgun holstered on his hip. His noble outfit was mostly stock, except for the high, fur-lined collar of the coat.

"It will be done, High Lord Lurk." Ten Gauge clicked his bony jaw and inclined his head in reverence and awe.

After the Wendigo, was Three-Fifty-Seven Magnum.

The diminutive Kobold wore a petite outfit and carried large pistols. For her size at least. She did not wear a chestplate like her fellow Court members did, instead opting for greaves and vambraces. Over her white doublet was a black leather vest criss-crossed with bandoliers of shells. Her waist and hips were festooned with a complex harness holding her paired double action revolvers.

"Mags, your objective is to determine the whereabouts and temperament of the nation supposedly hidden in the southern jungle. Do not try and make contact until we know if there are people living there. Fly high and keep things covert. The jungle is so far from Kadusia, that most people Lapua has interviewed have little to no knowledge of it."

The ashen gray Kobold gave a sharp salute and an eagerness glinted in her cat-like yellow eyes.

"If there is anything to be found, Mags will find it yes-yes! Treasure and glory for High Lord Lurk and Black Sky yes-yes!"

Smiling, Lurk nodded and turned to face the next.

Seven-Hundred Nitro Express was certainly the most well-dressed and definitively posh Minotaur in all the worlds. What elevated him above all the other Victorian era Minotaurs was without a doubt, his monocle. Though the top hat certainly added to his flair. Nitro's tailcoat could have easily clothed a family of four and his silver cuirass could have outfitted an equal number in armor. His big game rifle stood as tall as he did, and had a massive bayonet in the form of an axe blade.

"Nitro, to our west spanning the ocean coast is the Oxelan nation. Some of the most important trade on the continent goes through their ports. It is vital that we get on good terms with them. Be diplomatic. If you're attacked, try to use non-lethal defense only. Withdraw to a safe distance and contact us."

"Leave it to me, High Lord, m'yes. They would have to be savages to see your invitation as anything other than natural. Your terms are obscenely generous, m'yes." Nitro guffawed at the mere idea of anyone being crazy enough to refuse Black Sky's invitation. "I shall honor Lord Woodsolution, m'yes. I carry his honor in every breath I draw, thus I cannot fail!" Nitro declared. Fives and Grendel nodded in affirmation. They were each created by Woodsolution. Meanwhile, Gauge and Mags bowed their heads in respect, products of Lurk's hand and mind.

"Very good." Lurk affirmed. Tail already wagging in anticipation, Five-Five-Six twirled her Rifle-Spear over her head before planting the butt of the weapon into the ground. She held up the half-skirt of her dress and curtsied in the manner of her courtly station.

"Fives, your mission might be the most delicate. The city-states of Kadusia, Orza, Oxelan, and Deeka have been in an alliance, formally known as the Coalition to defend themselves against the Heymon Empire. Deeka occupies a region of immense strategic importance. Scout the area as well as any conflict that might still be going on. I want to know about the armies of the Coalition and Heymon Empire. What are their numbers? What are their weapons? Magic users? Do not contact
Deeka until we have firmer footing. Ideally with the other members of the Coalition. This appears to be an ongoing conflict that mostly simmers during the winter, so now will be a good opportunity."

"If necessary, do I have permission to enter Heymon territory?" Fives replied with absolute seriousness.

"I'd rather you didn't, but if it's unavoidable, make sure you stay at high altitudes. If you can, actually, get a cursory estimate of Heymon population and production. In drawn out conflicts, its often the one who has the stronger economy that emerges on top. We need to know what the Heymon are capable of if we're to negotiate from a position of strength with Deeka."

"I understand, Holy Lord. I will not fail you." Fives curtsied once again.

Lurk regarded the last member of the Caliber Court.

Last, but certainly not least, Six-Five Grendel was of a demi-human avian race known as the Kraku. The black, white, and silver of her Court garb accentuated her ebony feathers. Beaded platinum necklaces and charms hung from her person. The Rocket-Bow she carried was one of Woodsolution's personal creation.

'Wood, there's no Rocket-Bow weapon class.' Lurk had foolishly declared, only for his guildmate to demonstrate its flare and obscenely destructive power. Woodolution had cackled like a mad fiend and left the weapon with Grendel. Somehow the Rocket-Bow fell under both the Greatbow class as well as the truly bizarre Rocketry class that no one in YGGDRASIL ever took seriously.

"Grendel, the north represents an unknown. The kind of unknown that no one returns alive from. It's vast. It's uncharted. And could potentially host a great danger to The Citadel if rumors are to be believed. I'm afraid you'll be going in blind. Proceed with extreme caution. Anti-scrying enchantments are paramount. Just as I told Mags, do not attempt to contact the natives unless there is no choice. Just try to find who lives there, and what their strength is."

"What shall I do if zee natives are hostile?" A faint slavic accent peaked through Grendel's speech. Something superfluous that Woodsolution must have added to her character information.

"Same rules of engagement apply. Try to establish peaceful relations. If it comes to a fight, you're clear to use any means necessary to defend yourselves. In case that happens, message The Citadel immediately."

"Zee heavens belong to Black Sky. Soon zee rest shall know it too." Grendel declared.

Nodding, Lurk panned his gaze and began to pace back and forth.

"We have been thrust into this new world on the eve of the death of the old. Black Sky Legion's place in this new world depends on your actions. Be smart. Be decisive. Be vigilant. Carry our flag with pride." His voice boomed off the mighty door at his back, projecting forth like a natural amphitheater.

The assembled Caliber Court stood straighter and puffed their chests out. All around, activity slowed or stopped to better hear Lurk's next words. A small part of him felt silly. That he was just spouting meaningless fluff like a con man. But it meant something to them. And he remembered always wanting a leader to do what he was doing. Looking at the Court, the Greater Wyverns, the Demi-Claws, Nymphs, Plague Elves, and Flayers, knowing that all eyes were on him, his next
words were meant for everyone.

"Within every single one of you, is the strength of your brothers and sisters. Never forget, even if you stand alone, you are legion.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, it took a little while, but I think the length of this chapter speaks for the reason.

I hope you enjoyed this snippet, gentle reader. And I hope you're hungry for more, because believe me, the story of Black Sky Legion is far from over.
Though a much longer flight, Oxelan was still within easy reach by way of wyvern wing.

As Nitro Express signaled for his team to land before the gates of the sprawling oceanic settlement, he reflected on his mission. Knowing what he had to do, and seeing the high walls of the old city were two different things entirely.

His High Lord had impressed the importance of tact and diplomacy. They needed to establish favorable relations with the people surrounding The Citadel. Black Sky was sandwiched between the rich, sweeping plains of Kadusia and the port city of Oxelan. Securing the mountain pass which saw such a large portion of the continental trade was only half the battle. Getting goods moving through Black Sky territory would mean nothing if they did not benefit from it.

Even before the Greater Wyvern had landed, Nitro leapt off its back. Full of energy in anticipation, the Minotaur paced back and forth as his away team quickly assembled behind their leader.

Nitro addressed his squad Painlord and indicated their Greater Wyvern.

"Wait here, my good man. Keep our enduring friend company as he takes a well needed rest, m'yes."

The Construct inclined its smooth head and planted its poleaxe in the ground to watch over the valued member of their squad. Nitro then turned to address his entourage.

"The rest of you, with me. We're here to do a job. So, shoulders back, heads up, and let's show 'em Black Sky's finest, m'yes."

Doing as instructed, the squad got into modest formation as one of the Silver Knights hoisted a banner with his shielded brothers at his back. Smiling in satisfaction, Nitro turned and lead his soldiers.

In order to succeed, Nitro knew he would have to utilize every gallant and refined bone in his body. Lord Woodsolution had made him to be the perfect gentleman. So after he dismounted the Greater Wyvern and approached the monumental gatehouse on hoof, Nitro threw his arms wide and projected his voice loudly enough for the city guard up on the walls to easily hear him.

"Hello! Good people of Oxelan, I am pleased to be the emissary of Black Sky Legion! Take me to your leader!"

*******
High Lord Lurk, Nitro is requesting your aid with the Oxelan situation. He says it's urgent sire. He's with the Oxelan king, but has encountered something rather... Difficult.

Oh sweet Muspelheim. What happened?

He would not say, sire. Just that he needed you to join him in negotiations. Nitro stated he was sorry to bother you, but that he would not have reached out if he did not feel it vital to the success of his mission.

Very well, Nox. Let him know that we'll [Gate] straight there.

Lurk and Harmony rushed through the doors to the worn, but still serviceable keep. It sat on a rocky promontory overlooking the sea, protected by a blocky gatehouse which overlooked the narrow path up a long drawbridge. Ocean breeze, crashing waves, and noisy gulls mixed together to the point where they could all but taste the salt even as they stepped out of the portal Lurk had summoned.

Though it had taken a bit of practice, both were able to equip their weapons and armor at a moment's notice. The technique had taken more un-learning the reflexive use of the old menus. Harmony wondered if it was alright to let themselves become so used to the new world. Her mind was always lingering on the potential consequences of becoming too comfortable with something. Her many old jobs had taught her that.

Grand Alliance hugged her curves in a protective cocoon. Wearing the armor with her new senses was like being blind and seeing a friend for the first time whose voice she knew so well. Ebony and Ivory always had a reassuring weight on her hips. Now their handles seemed to warm at her touch. Harmony did not grip the haft of Ebony, though her claw never strayed far as they approached the inner doors of the Oxelan castle.

They heard a great commotion and what seemed like shouting. Lurk and Harmony had outstripped the gawking Oxelan castle guards with their long legs. Most of the poor men were too stunned at the pair's appearance through a magic portal to even bother to follow.

Harmony's nose wrinkled as she detected... A seafood boil?

Lurk threw open the doors to the hall.

The rulers of Black Sky entered into the hall to see Nitro arm in arm with the king of Oxelan at the end of a long banquet table, mugs filled with rich red wine as they swayed back and forth singing bawdy sailor songs. A seafood feast of respectable size was arrayed along the table. Nitro and the king sat at its head, splashing liquid from their mugs as they made merry. The Minotaur's monocle hung from its chain and Nitro's tophat sat skewed on the king's head. The Sharpshooters of Nitro's group raised their own wine and thumped their fists on the table while the Silver Knights kept time...
by tamping the butts of their spears against the stone floor in rhythm with the song.

Meanwhile, the two Corsairs were dangling from the chandelier. Their legs were hooked through the ceiling fixture as they each downed their drinks while upside down.

"Ox man, Ox man, tell me what ya see out on the wa~ter."

"Ox man, Ox man, tell me what ya see out on the wa~ter."

"It's a meeermaid there with 'er tail a wa~ving."

"No it's an old hag with 'er teats a swing~ing"

"No, it's a fisherman whose line's a pull~ing"

"No, it's a barmaid with 'er skirts a li~fting."

"Ox man, Ox man, dive out there and see!"

Upon finishing the last line of the song, the pair broke into laughter. The modest assortment of human waiters and guards clapped heartily.

The king of Oxelan was an older man with a round belly, a receding hairline, and a white beard that was a bit of a mess, but still well maintained. His cheeks and nose were flushed bright cherry in color, contrasting his tanned exterior.

When Nitro spotted his Supreme Beings standing dumbfounded at the other end of the table, he shot to his hooves and slammed his mug against one of his bull horns as he attempted to salute with the hand holding the vessel. Silver Knights snapped to attention and two of the Demi-Claws saluted with their mugs as well, dousing themselves in drink. The two Corsairs transformed into emerald flame, fell through the table and reformed on either side of it, already bowing.

"High Lord! Fair Lady! Thank you for coming so quickly. As you can see, we are in dire straits. It would be an affront to my station, nay, negligence of an unforgivable degree to not insure you partook of this impeccable celebration, m'yes."

"Aha! You two must be- woah!" The portly bear of a man stood to welcome his guests and grew just a bit too tipsy and would have fallen completely if not for Nitro's quick save. "Thank you, Sir Nitro."

"My pleasure, m'yes." Nitro Express gave the stout old king a gentle slap on the back that almost knocked him forward.

"Ha! So you both are the High King and Queen of Black Sky Legion I've been hearing so much about. It's Oxelan tradition to welcome guests with the bounty of the ocean." The King swept out an arm to indicate the platters of seaweed wrapped fish, clams, oversized crawfish and hunks of crustacean thicker than a man's arm. "The sea may be cruel sometimes in what she takes, but she's generous with her gifts when the mood strikes 'er. My people honor the Sea Goddess, and she in turn takes care o' us."

The portly man gave a boisterous laugh.
"And where are my manners! I am King Wojak, of the salty land called Oxelan. As my father before him, and his father before him."

"Greetings, King Wojak. I'm Lurk, of Black Sky. It's a pleasure to meet you." Lurk looked to wife.

"And I'm Harmony, of Black Sky. Thank you for your hospitality." Harmony looked at the seafood with a greedy purse of her lips.

After introductions, the two went around the table to shake hands formally. Only once the monarchs were all seated, did Nitro and his squad resume their own.

"We're glad to meet with you in person, King Wojak. The Citadel overlooks a mountain pass that we understand to be very important between Oxelan and Kadusia."

"Aye, aye, Nitro's already mentioned where your home is. I'd be more 'n happy to knock some heads in the merchant district to get some formal trade and all that salt squared up. But that's boring! Now is the time for feasting. Then I'll show ye around a real city. Not like those prissy Orza starched-collar-platinum-stick-up-their-ass salt suckers!"

Lurk and Harmony laughed politely along with Wojak's tirade.

Although Lurk helped himself to some flaky pink fish that was at once tuna and trout in taste, he stared at the platter of giant crab legs and slid it over to Harmony without taking any for himself.

"Don't be shy, King Lurk. The Karkinos is in season!" Wojak motioned to the oversized hunks of crustacean.

"I wish I could." Lurk looked forlornly at the steaming hunks of meat swimming in butter. "I'm allergic to shellfish."

"Oh, shell fever! Ah, ye poor soul. Is it of the skin? I have some excellent alchemists who can brew ye a potion fer that ailment."

"Throat, actually." Rubbing his neck in recollection of when his symptoms first developed. "I used to love oysters when I was younger." The Wyrmblood heaved a long suffering sigh. Though of course, he had not considered magic or that his new body might not have the same affliction. Regardless, he did not want to take the risk.

"High Lord, forgive my failing." Nitro stood and bowed his prodigious bulk until his nose nearly scraped the table.

"You didn't know, Nitro. Please, don't stop on my account. Harmony has always enjoyed things for the both of us." Smiling, Lurk waved away Nitro's concern, and the Sharpshooters that had frozen while stuffing their muzzles sheepishly resumed.

King Wojak looked to Nitro, then back to his royal visitors.

"You've got a loyal warrior, here, King Lurk. I wasn't sure about ye lot. I'd heard about Black Sky from the messages from Queen Ismeena, but wanted to reserve judgement until I met ya. If there's one thing an Ox man knows, it's things aren't often as they seem. Ye can be sailin' clear waters that capsize yer ship before ye know east from west, or sail straight into a storm that makes way just for..."
you. Maybe the storm washes treasures ashore. Or monsters."

The Oxelan King cracked open a the lower part of a Karkinos claw large enough to encircle a full grown man without making eye contact with any of his guests.

"So, the message from Queen Ismeena also told me about your timely arrival in helpin' Kadusia with the Bandit King." Wojak's lip curled as if he had eaten a bit of rotten Karkinos. "For that alone, Oxelan owes Black Sky Legion a debt. Kadusia was not the only kingdom to suffer from that bastard. The bandits would go into hiding during the winter, always strikin' out when our armies were away. If they couldn't steal our wine, they'd burn our vineyards outta spite. But no more!" King Wojak raised his mug as a toast.

Picking at his fish, Lurk felt a bit left out. Feeling guilty and not wanting to spoil her fun, he looked at his beautiful wife. Harmony smiled back, flecks of bright red crab meat blending in with her crimson facial scales. The wedded pair entwined digits and bumped noses. Lurk took the opportunity to squeeze Harmony's claw twice. It was their secret signal that they were socially exhausted or wanted to get out of a situation.

Harmony swallowed her bite and spoke up.

"Oh, sweetie! Wasn't Nox wanting to go over Lapua's report on the Seekers?"

"Ah, you're right. But that can wait." Lurk made a show of suddenly remembering something. "Oh, but I did need to help Wrath and Ruin set up Hellhammer positions overlooking the pass. That can't wait."

Harmony winked at him.

Standing with a smile and a swirl of his greatcoat, Lurk turned to their host.

"King Wojak, I hope this isn't rude, but I must return to our home and oversee our efforts to protect that pass."

"Not at all, King Lurk. I hope ye don't mind me taking yer portion. Ye must take some wine, though! I didn't break into that batch of Chryss Red because I like the color." King Wojak gestured, and a dutiful attendant held out a small cask of treated wood. The young man stared up at Lurk in wide eyed wonder.

Thanking the attendant, Lurk set the barrel of wine under his arm.

"I'll stay and tour the city, don't worry." Harmony reassured him.

Bumping his nose affectionately into her wild crimson mane one last time, Lurk summoned his Mask of the Unbound and stepped away.

"Woah, that's a neat trick." Wojak commented. The portly king set down his wine with a shake of his head and turned to Harmony. "Yer husband trusts ye to handle yer affairs?"

"Absolutely," She shot back instantly. Though not as well versed in medieval society as her husband, Harmony knew full well in old Earth culture that women were often undervalued or treated as second class.
"Ha! Ye remind me of my missus, Ocean Goddess rest her soul. She was as wild as the sea and willful as it too. Our sons are away right now. Sailed to Deeka with our fleet to help the Coalition. I'm sure they'll love to meet ya once they get back."

"Is there a more shining example of perfect unity! Truly High King Lurk and Queen Harmony are the epitome of what all lovers strive to achieve!" Nitro stood with his mug of wine raised and the rest of his team toasted to their Lord and Lady.

Barely containing her giggle, Harmony stifled her amusement at Nitro's antics by grabbing a wide bowl filled with the largest crawfish she had ever seen. Back on Earth, she had absolutely loved seafood, but crawfish was a particular favorite. In fact, she found the YGGDRASIL equivalent of her favorite blend of spices. Even though back in the game, taste was not a real thing, it still pleased her to entertain the idea that her food buffs were well flavored. Harmony sprinkled a generous helping of cayenne pepper over top of the dish. She lifted the whole bowl and gave it a shake to distribute the spice throughout.

Satisfied, she licked her lips and grabbed the biggest one she saw off the top of the pile. With a twist, she separated the body and stripped the tail of its hidden morsel, then sucked the head with a shameless slurp.

King Wojak leaned over with great interest.

"What's that ya got there, Queen Harmony?"

"I'm so sorry, should I not have added something? I just got carried away. It's my favorite thing to add to crawfish." She picked up another crawfish and waited before tearing into it.

"It's a feast! If there's something to be added, it's only right ye do so. Especially if it's somethin' Oxelan doesn't have. So it goes well on mud-pinchers, aye?" Wojak crossed his arms over his chest, skeptical, yet intrigued.

"It's a pepper that's dried and ground down. It's a bit spicy, but would you like to try some?" Holding up the bowl, she gave it a small shake. After Wojak took one, she held the dish out to Nitro. The Minotaur put a hand to his chest and had to adjust his monocle to appropriately wear his look of awe at his Lady's generosity. As unworthy as he felt, Nitro would sooner give up his own life than refuse an offer from Lady Harmony. The rest of the team looked on, trying to hide their jealousy.

"This... This is incredible!" King Wojak proclaimed. "For this alone I'd agree to whatever trade terms ye want!" The jolly fellow licked his fingers and then quickly grabbed his wine to douse the heat.

"I can get Loam to see if we can grow some." Being a far cry from a botanist, Harmony had no idea if they could grow the spice, and hoped that Loam could work her magic.

"What's a Loam?" King Wojak asked.

"Oh, our Treant. She's very sweet." Harmony smiled.

"Treant?" Wojak inquired, even more confused.

"Sorry, she's a tree that looks like a beautiful woman."
"A tree that looks like a pretty lady? You've got good taste!" Though he struggled to understand these strangers from a far land if the talk was to be believed, King Wojak was finding it difficult to mistrust Nitro or Harmony.

"Yes! Another fine addition to The Citadel, courtesy of the great Lord Woodsolution! My fine attire was chosen by Lord Woodsolution, so you can imagine how beautiful Loam must be by compare, m'yes." Nitro brushed imaginary crumbs from the shoulder of his coat.

"I've got some sauce that goes very well with oysters too, if you'd like to try that. They go best raw on the half shell. Do you eat them that way?" Eagerly, Harmony's mouth was already salivating in anticipation.

"Steamed, raw, so long as they're fat and juicy!" King Wojak slapped his belly and waved to one of his attendants who had overheard. The young man hurried off and returned in seconds with a platter of freshly washed and shucked oysters on the half shell.

Reaching into an almost forgotten corner of her inventory, Harmony pulled the platter to her and summoned the ingredients. She did her special mixture of tabasco, horseradish, cocktail sauce, and squeezed a lemon wedge over the top. After taking a plump oyster for herself, she then offered the platter to Wojak and Nitro who both graciously took one before passing the oysters around. The Demi-Claws and Corsairs were stunned speechless and took their oysters as though they were offerings from the dead gods of YGGDRASIL itself.

The gamer-turned-queen was just happy to share.

With a sly grin, Harmony downed the whole slippery mixture, chewing on the rich flavor and sharp spicy bite that warmed her sinuses. Taking their cue from the Fair Lady, Nitro and his team all did the same.

"Woah, that's hot. That's good hot!" Taking another quaff of his wine, the portly king slapped the table in appreciation for the rich new flavors he was experiencing.

"Spicy, m'yes?" Nitro agreed, grinning as he watched the Sharpshooters and Corsairs down their drink with eyes watering from the seasoned oysters.

"I'm beginning to believe that ye came from another world. Or at least far enough away that it may as well 'ave been." Wojak leaned back in his seat, and although his tone did not shift, his words belied a deeper suspicion.

"So, if you came through, what else came with ya?" He looked straight at her.

Harmony was no fool, and understood then that King Wojak was much sharper than he let himself appear. She made sure her face betrayed no surprise.

"That's one reason we're making sure to be friendly neighbors. In case something followed us, we want to make sure we're in a position to know about it. If Oxelan ran across an item or creature, you'd give it to us, right?" The Scalebound's smile was just as innocent as Wojak's.

"What sorts o' things mighta followed? So that I know what to keep an eye open for?"

"There were many things from our old world. Different races and places. Most of it's harmless." She lied easily. She rapped her metal shod knuckles against the chest piece of her Divine armor. The
sword and tree crest glimmered with the many prismatic ores of the nine worlds. "I named this armor Grand Alliance because of what it represented back then. Black Sky Legion had many friends and allies. This armor commemorates that union with the materials from the scattered corners of our old home."

Once more searching for a reason to distrust the peculiar queen and her colorful entourage, Wojak conceded.

"Aye, lass. Er, Queen Harmony. You've got my seal of approval. Most o' mine still listen to mah word. But the common folk would be reassured if they knew ye were friends o' the sea too."

Harmony considered this request. It did not sound unreasonable, though she found it interesting that Wojak was so seemingly concerned for his people. She did not doubt his commitment to his kingdom. Yet in her personal experience, the ones at the top did not care for those below, holding them up. Finding a monarch who put his duties first was certainly refreshing, and in her mind, Harmony put Queen Belgrave of Kadusia into the same category.

Then an idea struck her like a sack of clams and she gave a loud snap of her claws.

"Well, what if I could command the biggest sea critter you could imagine?" An idea had been quietly brewing in the Scalebound's head since she learned that Oxelan was next to the ocean.

King Wojak blinked a few times, not quite certain if what he considered a big sea critter would be quite the same.

"Hm," The portly man stroked his bear. "If by big, you mean 'uge! Then that might do the trick. How big are we talkin'?"

"Bigger than your castle." Harmony tried and failed to hide her smirk.

Though he looked skeptical, Wojak nodded.

"Aye, that'd do it."

"Great!" Harmony nodded before messaging her husband.

[Message]

*Hey honey?*

*Oh, I know that tone. What do you need, sugar plum?*

*Could you by chance teleport the Leviathan out into the ocean for me?*

*Ha! Oh god, you're not going mad fish woman on me, right?*

*No, no, silly. King Wojak likes me. Likes the idea of trading and all that good stuff. He just thinks it'll win over the people if I show them we're sea friendly too.*
Ah, that does make sense. And you're thinking the Leviathan?

Yup. I'll give you the signal, okay?

One colossal king-sized helping of sea monster comin' right up. I'll teleport him far enough out that he won't damage anything. From there he should just come to you.

Thank you, sweetness!

I love you my darling dearest dragoness.

I love you too, handsome.

[End Message]

Nitro's hairy brow knitted together until revelation visibly passed over his face. He pounded a fist into his open palm.

"The Leviathan! What a splendid idea, Queen Harmony. The very one you and Lord Woodsolution wrestled from Muspelheim herself. M'yes, not many were brave enough to face the Lavasioth of the magma rivers, and fewer still able to wrestle them up onto the shore."

"That's right, Nitro. I'm glad you remember."

"Of course, Lady Harmony."

"So, shall we head down to the shore, King Wojak? I'll be more than happy to show the people of Oxelan that Black Sky Legion is friends with the sea."

"Ah... Yes... Of course." Trying to pretend he did not just hear a Minotaur casually mention that the dragon-lady still casually sitting at his table had swam through a river of lava to wrestle with a creature, King Wojak struggled to his feet. He was bit more tipsy than he had intended from washing down the spicy mud-pincher and oysters. However it would not be the first time he had conducted royal business while drunk, and confidently walked out of the hall.

A motley collection of knights escorted their king. They were a more traditional chivalric order, each with his own heraldry and were lavishly well armed. They were meant as a rapid response force to fend off the numerous bandit raids on Oxelan territory.

Not to be outdone, the Silver Knights snapped to attention sharply enough to startle several of the Oxelan noble order of sea knights. The Living Armor had remained so still, that the nearby attendants jumped in surprise as well. Next to the Silver Knights of Harmony's make, the sea knights may as well have been dull as a river stone. The Sharpshooters took up their arms and fell in step behind the crested shields of their battle brothers. Fulfilling their own duty to the letter, the two Corsairs disappeared in trails of emerald fire, jumping from spot to spot ahead of the Black Sky forces.

Shouldering his enormous rifle, Nitro Express gleefully took his place at his Lady's right side.
There was only a short walk between the ocean keep and the main dockyard of Oxelan. It meant that defenders up on the walls could rain arrows or harpoon bolts on any hostiles attempting to take the bay. The well armed diplomatic force of The Citadel took a sedate pace behind the entourage of Oxelan's King.

As the sound of ocean and bustling city life overtook them, Harmony rested a palm on top of Ivory and spoke.

"Nitro, tell me what you've learned about Oxelan."

"It would be my honor, Fair Lady." Nitro cleared his throat and recounted the knowledge he had gathered thus far.

"They are a proud people, m'yes. They worship the ocean as a goddess, regularly making offerings of food and spirits either in celebrations at shrines at the water's edge, or while at sea. They pray for good harvests and bury their dead at sea as well. Fishing, and especially hunting Karkinos is the most respected means of supporting family. They have roots in raiding and pillaging up and down the coasts, so most of their military strength is in their fleet of war galleys."

A flash of light drew Harmony's attention for a moment, noting how the Corsairs kept pace. She found herself much more at ease with their watchful carbines above and Nitro's massive presence beside her.

"While they look down on Kadusia for their reliance on farming, the Oxelan vineyards along the mountain slopes are appreciated for both the wine and offerings to their ocean goddess. All of their magic is focused on rituals, namely one that culminates in what I believe is [Control Weather]."

"[Control Weather] is sixth tier." Although next to nothing had trained her to be the queen of a magic society, a lifetime of gaming had taught Harmony puzzles and problem solving.

"M'yes, Fair Lady. Lapua shared her findings with Kadusia's magic collegia and instruction not to let on with anything higher than seventh tier. It seems that the magic casters of Oxelan all come together in times of crisis to perform an elaborate ritual that quells the raging sea. It is said to be very dangerous, and that entire groups of mages have lost their lives in the attempt."

"Then there's King Wojak himself. He believes fervently in the traditions of his people. The Kings of Oxelan are all expected to know and sail the sea. He's admitted that he's over the hill and relies on his sons to lead the fleet in his stead. His favorite wine is from a slope that's quite close to The Citadel. He secretly hates silver, and much prefers gold."

"Don't forget a great love of seafood. Though I can understand that, at least. How did you manage to get so much information so quickly?" Harmony asked, catching the wafting scent of fish and brine as they neared the docks.

"King Wojak is loose with his wine, and even looser with his tongue once the wine has set in, m'yes. Though I suspect he's much sharper than he lets on. He's asked many subtle questions trying to gauge our strength. I've kept only to recounting tales of our victory over the Bandit King and the disposition of only what we deployed on the field that day."

"Smart, and a gentleman? Woodsolution did a good job with you, Nitro." Harmony said with a smile.
Nitro stood straight, tall, and proud as the kind words of his Lady punctured his soft underbelly.

The Oxelan port had many long stone piers. Many divisions were clear, with the largest docks armed with defensive towers and were mostly empty. Merchant vessels and the heavy fishing boats occupied an area with several cranes and warehouses for storage. As the Oxelan and Black Sky entourages approached, sailors and dock workers crowded up onto the sails and rigging of the ships moored to get a better look on.

At the pier, Harmony looked at the different vessels moored. Many of the fishing ships had large ballistae loaded with harpoons mounted to platforms that stuck out from the sides. She stepped up beside Wojak to ask him about the peculiar addition.

"What are those for? Do you fight at sea a lot?"

"Oh the crab harpoons! No, Queen Harmony. They can be useful for war, but they were made for hunting those Karkinos. I mentioned they were in season? Well, that's figurative and literal. It's their spawning time. They'll breed and the currents will shift with the winter and bring the eggs to the warmer southern waters. It's the best time to hunt 'em, but the last thing you want is a bunch 'o horny females climbin' yer boat without protection."

Harmony raised a scaly eyebrow, wondering if the king knew the connotations of his statement. Looking at the blissfully oblivious Wojak, she could only stifle a laugh.

Making their way further down the pier, a large group of Oxelan city guard attracted Harmony's gaze. They were gathered before a ship flying a blue and silver flag. It was obviously foreign, having a sharp keel for deeper waters and made from a darker wood compared to the golden oak of the Oxelan boats.

A tall, thin, and well-dressed aristocrat with a hook nose to match was arguing vehemently with the guard sergeant.

King Wojak had a frown crease his lips for the first time Harmony had seen. He turned to her with a glowing smile, his sun-kissed cheeks wrinkling.

"Queen Harmony, If you would excuse me but a moment if it please ya. Minor kingly duty to attend, you understand." Though he was a large man, Wojak was only just taller than Harmony's six foot stature. Her horns more than made up for the rest.

"Of course, It's no problem." Harmony replied with diplomatic poise.

"Be but a moment, don't ye fret." Wojak clasped his hands, callused from rope and rigging.

King Wojak moved with great purpose towards the knot of wharf guards with his sea knights sticking tightly to their monarch. The guard all straightened at the approach of the king. The ludicrously overdressed nobleman kept quarreling right up to the point that Wojak came up behind the guard sergeant.

The King thought he was far enough away from his guests and spoke in firm tones to the man that was mostly lost to the tumultuous ruckus of the docks.

"Nitro," Harmony said. She pretended to be interested in her gauntlet as one eye and ear stayed fastened on King Wojak.
The courtly Minotaur bowed to be level with his Queen.

"Lady Harmony?"

"What do you think Snowdrop is?" A suspicion rooted itself into Harmony's stomach. An unshakable certainty that the innocent sounding name hid a venomous snake.

"Hm, King Wojak does seem quite adamant in making sure none of it gets into Oxelan, m'yes."

"It doesn't sound like an animal, or beast. Something magic, you think?"

"I'm certain it will be trivial to discover the nature of this Snowdrop."

"Be discreet, Nitro. Don't take any unnecessary risks." She cautioned.

"Lady Phage the Untouchable's Corsairs will be able to seize the information. High Lord Lurk was wise to assign a pair to the away teams. I would be unworthy of his trust if I did not utilize the skills of my team, m'yes."

As the Queen and her posh attendant spoke, the Orza nobleman wilted before the king of the port city.

Wojak returned with only half his men as the city guard and knights marched onto the ship.

"Thank ye kindly, Queen Harmony. As much as I appreciate what the Coalition represents, I sure as salt wish the thrice-damned Orza weren't a part of it. And if you're intendin' to talk to 'em too, I shall make an offering to the sea goddess on yer behalf. Shall we carry on?"

"I was thinking that now would be a good time to summon my friend." She said jovially.

While they waited, Harmony had selected an empty pier and marched off towards it.

"I... Ah, sure. Aye, if it pleases ye." Warily, Wojak followed.

After a quick message to Lurk, Harmony crossed her arms over her chest and waited. Her Silver Knights made sure their Lady was framed by the flag and crest.

With her sharp Scarlet Drake eyes, Harmony spied the distant splash. She held up her claw and though it took her moment to get her lips just right, she blew a shrill whistle that carried on the ocean breeze.

Sailors hung from rigging and wharfmen crowded the piers, all straining to catch a glimpse of what the foreign beauty was set to do. They were not kept waiting for long. A swell of disturbed water from the Leviathan's passage approached the city. Men all around began to shout and point.

Harmony whistled again and lifted a claw and gave it atwirl. Like the extinct blue whales of old Earth, the Leviathan breached the waves. Trailing arcs of water, the creature splashed back down.

A distant fishing galley was approaching the port. A rippling wave taller than its largest mast threatened to engulf the vessel. Giving another whistle, Harmony quickly corrected her underestimate of the Leviathan in open waters. The titanic Guardian gave a firm push and propelled
itself forward faster than the wave. Gently, the Leviathan lifted the boat with its tail so that the galley bobbed over the crest of the surge onto the calmer waves.

To the Oxelan observers, a deep sea god, the stuff of legends, had come to their city. Harmony glanced back at King Wojak and gave him a winning smile. Jaw hanging down, he could only stare.

"The Leviathan is very friendly. He guards part of my home." Harmony whistled again and the aquatic titan swam eagerly, yet slow enough not to accidentally cause damage.

"Just a part?" Wojak's question slipped out unintentionally, and he nearly bit his tongue.

A tempest of thoughts and emotions raged through the Oxelan king. He was caught between wonder and fear. Awe and terror. Was this Leviathan and its master a bringer of hope? Or doom. And he was King. His duty was to protect his city. Was he supposed to believe that someone who controlled such power would not use it? If Queen Harmony commanded the Leviathan to visit its wrath upon the port, what could they do before the might of such a creature?

In the middle of the day, the Leviathan's glow was somewhat muted. The strips of luminous still glimmered beneath the surface of the water, giving the Leviathan the appearance of floating on a halo of light. Radiance also gave the onlookers a clear view of how big the creature was under the waves. A single fin alone was larger than the biggest fishing galley.

Nitro gestured with his rifle and clapped King Wojak on the back.

"Haha! Have you ever seen a more magnificent creature! Truly a majesty, m'yes. A splendor of nature if ever there was one. My Supreme One, Lord Woodsolution was the greatest visionary! The Mystic's Reef is almost as posh as I am, m'yes."

Despite the assurance of King Wojak, many men did not have the mettle to face the rising giant of the deep as it approached, running for higher ground. The main city harbor was just deep enough for the Leviathan to swim inside without scraping its belly on the bottom. It dwarfed every ship moored in the city by a huge margin. If it wanted, the Leviathan could have drowned the city in an apocalyptic splash of its tail. One snap of its jaws could have broken the largest harpoon ship into splinters.

With finesse that defied all logic from its size, the Leviathan swam right up to the long pier that Harmony stood on. Its nose nearly bumped into the end of the stone jetty. Even Wojak himself took a few steps back. Trill hoots and haunting siren calls emanated from the Leviathan. Warbling song borne of that deep could not reach far in the open air, yet the resonance was audible for all the gawkers on decks and jetties.

As Harmony stepped forward, Nitro bowed his head and held out his huge paw of a hand.

"My Lady," He took off his hat and held it to his chest as any true gentleman would.

"Thank you, Nitro." Harmony daintily laid her claw in Nitro's palm.

"I am blessed by this duty, Queen Harmony, think nothing of it."

Fearlessly, Harmony stepped off the dock straight onto the Leviathan's snout. She walked carefully so she did not dig her talons into the Guardian of the fifth floor. The Scalebound turned to address the human king.
"How about now, King Wojak? Would you say I'm of the sea?" Leaning down, she gave the Leviathan an affectionate pat. Obeying its Supreme Being, the titan began reversing out of the bay.

"Aye," He said in wonder. Then the fear seized him once again. What was he supposed to do in the face of such power? Power that only the divine should have. Surely only someone blessed by the ocean goddess would be able to command such a creature? At least that was what he would pray for.

"Aye!" Wojak shouted louder.

Nitro began clapping and hooting in admiration. The Black Sky entourage joined in, shouting encouragement and praise for their Fair Lady. Though it started slowly, the many sailors and Oxelan dock workers joined in.

"Nitro! Take over for me, alright? I'm gonna catch some sun and then head back to The Citadel." Harmony shouted to the Minotaur. She figured floating away on the Leviathan would be a good way to make an exit with her negotiations with King Wojak.

"Enjoy yourself, Fair Lady! Take good care of her, Leviathan!" Nitro waved in return, the squad all joining in as well.

Riding on the back of her oversized steed, Harmony left behind the tumult of the Oxelan docks to the serenity of the open ocean.

Flopping down, Harmony's tail beat out a happy rhythm atop the Leviathan. Grand Alliance was not uncomfortable to wear, yet not conducive to lounging. With an easy gesture, she stripped down to a simple shirt and summer shorts. Reclining back onto the manta-like hide, she put her arms behind her head. Closing her eyes, Harmony breathed in the fresh air and listened to the clean expanse of ocean. The waters were untouched by centuries of spoilage and pollution. Gulls circled overhead or bravely alighted on the Leviathan's back.

Radiant warmth from a yellow sun bathed her scaly claws and talons. A bit of seawater soaked through her back and her hair. She sat up for a minute and looked all around, seeing nothing but a plane of blue. Oxelan was a distant splotch, with the mountain range behind like an oil-painting backdrop.

Feeling bold, Harmony stripped completely naked and sunned herself on the back of the Leviathan. Aegis of Muspleheim flashed the water off of her and the sun kissed her bare breasts and stomach. Rays of light made her gold-flecked crimson scales glitter. Ivory horns poked through the wild spill of her red mane.

She ran a claw up her thigh, and felt the small bump of her pelvis.

*I've never really felt that before. Damn, what woman wouldn't want to design her own body? Well, maybe not the six-pack and tail. But most people have shit taste. And now I have it.*

Back in the old world, she knew she had been pretty. But not like she was then. Her avatar was a goddess. Sometimes, in her digital arts job she was tasked with touching up models for magazine covers. Now what had been only possible with photo manipulation, she saw every time she looked in a mirror.

Nor was she ever floating on the back of a giant sea monster back on Earth!
Her tail wiggled slowly beneath her and she patted her Guardian affectionately, hoping that Lurk was enjoying himself as much as she was.

Below her, the Leviathan began to sing once again.

*****

"Load!" Ordered the Demi-Claw commander. His cannoneers sprung into action.

The two loaders worked smoothly in tandem. They locked the Hellhammer cannon's breech open then packed the five-inch, or one-hundred and twenty-seven millimeter payload into place. The casing slid into the firing chamber with a faint scrape. The falling breech block locked in with a solid clunk.

It was a simple high-velocity shrieker shell. Good for taking out heavy armor or piercing strong defensive spells. Though it relied on accurate hits to deal damage.

"Ready!" Called the loaders.

"Target distance is twenty-thousand." The commander spoke with his spyglass trained to the target which had been set up on the nearby mountainside.

"Twenty-thousand, aye." Answered the gunner, one eye firmly fixed on the sights set along the side of the gun, working wheels that controlled angle and elevation. The muzzle brake of the Hellhammers were worked into demonic mouths, with the fangs forming the directional vents. Hungry to fire. Gear teeth crunched through their mechanical motion, drawing chains through spools that gave the appearance that a devil had been harnessed as a weapon.

"Ready to fire." Announced the gunner. A magical connection existed between the gunner sights and the commander's spyglass, highlighting the desired target and showing a line of travel for the shrieker to take. Individually, the Sharpshooters were some of the lowest level occupants of The Citadel. Their cooperation and mastery of the tools of war was what elevated them into a threat that spelled the doom of almost every raiding party that dared set foot within the crosshairs of Alpha or Omega.

The commander stayed as steady as his Hellhammer.

"Fire."

One of the gunners pulled the firing cord and the charge inside the shell was ignited.

The gun carriage shuddered and long hydraulic rods drew back from their piston housing as the Hellhammer recoiled. Generated pressure was released as flame along vents interspaced along the top of the main piston housing. The reciprocating action of the cannon flung the fired casing. Substantial, even spent, the brass clanged like a bell into one of the Hellhammer's deployed limbers. The long struts used for towing and to stabilize firing shuddered under the force of the howitzer.

The snarling fireball from between the fangs of the brake extended a dozen feet out from either
side of the muzzle.

At such close proximity, the bang would have been deafening to anyone without racial protection against the sound and pressure. Camouflage netting had been stretched over the top of the Hellhammer to obscure it among the foliage of the mountain. The fabric shook from the discharge.

Then, the shrill scream of the shell pierced the air as it shredded speed and split the wind. Though its impact was small, it utterly obliterated one of the yellow and red painted stacks of logs on the opposite mountain slope. Sound from the impact took a few seconds to travel back to them.

"Hit on target is confirmed." The commander grinned from horn to horn.

The Demi-Claw crew raised their fists and shouted in exultation.

Turning, the gunnery commander knelt before the High King of Black Sky. The Wyrmblood unclasped his hands from behind his back and rubbed his chin in consideration. Behind him, both Wrath and Ruin were giving their Sharpshooter signs of approval. Legion stood stoically beyond, yet was suitably impressed by the discipline of the crew.

"My Lord, master of the holy Tetragrammaton. Was that to your satisfaction?"

"An excellent shot, commander." Lurk took a deep breath of the burning powder, reveling in the sharp scent. He looked to the Sharpshooter with a lopsided grin and a destructive gleam in his eye. "But can you do it again?"

"Yessir!" The Demi-Claw shot up and turned back to his crew. "Load!"

Ruin could no longer contain herself, and performed a flying jump hug. Her arms and legs wrapped around her Lord. Although staggered, Lurk managed to stay upright even as he stumbled forward a few steps. Giggling, Ruin put her claws over Lurk's face. Her carapace armor squashed into his back. She squeezed him with a squeal of glee.

Lurk could only laugh. He would never get angry at the Deathclaw twin for her playful nature. It was how he had written her, after all.

"Can you guess who it is, High Lord? It's your most loyal Guardian!" Ruin's tail wagged in a jubilant dance.

"Hm, who ever could it be. Soot? Is that you? My, you've gotten big all of a sudden. And can talk, too!"

"It's me, silly. Ruin!" The Deathclaw lifted her claws in unrestrained joy. "We can get so much range out here with the Hellhammers. That is not to say Alpha and Omega are not flawlessly designed. They're perfect. Just like you are, High Lord! And now your foresight has perfectly readied us for this new world and its big new kill boxes!" The Glowing Deathclaw brightened in glee.

"Ruin, stop being selfish. You're hogging High Lord Lurk all to yourself!"

Fuming, Wrath grabbed her sister by the tail and gave a firm yank. This time Lurk was a little more ready for it and was fortunately not knocked off his talons.
"Now focus, dumbass. We've got a job to do. High Lord Lurk trusted us with setting up our
Hellhammers out here. And I think we should fortify that slope there." Wrath pointed off to the
distant slope and set her other claw on her hip.

Ruin rolled back upright without skipping a beat.

"No, dumbass, we need to have a line going down our mountain first. My Hellhammers,
shortstroke. I'm the Siegebreaker."

"If we put everything here first, there won't be coverage for the pass." Wrath retorted.

"There will if we use my setup."

"Your setup is stupid."

"You're stupid!"

The twins locked horns and became a wrestling ball of deathclaw. Bickering could still be made
out as they rolled back and forth until they became dangerously close to the edge of the mountain
shelf.

"Girls..." Legion began, but it was far too late as Wrath and Ruin rolled off down the side of the
mountain. Trees could be heard snapping as the two crashed through the underbrush.

Lurk and Legion watched the two go, then resumed the discussion on their own.

"We'll continue entrenching Hellhammers where we are now. I want us to be able to hit things
coming or going from either side of the valley. Just enough to give us overwatch support for now.
After that we'll set up a forward outpost on the mountain opposite from us." Lurk watched on in
satisfaction as the Hellhammer crew fired off another round and obliterated the next target.

Legion nodded, his plumed helm bobbing.

"Might I suggest watchtowers, High Lord? They'll be quick to build. Perhaps a chain of them
traversing the mountain pass? At least until more permanent defenses are in place. We can
exterminate all the bandit scum we want, but if they can still prey on caravans then we may as well
not hold the pass at all." Legion pointed off towards the Kadusia side of the pass.

"Have we been having any difficulty with the bandits?" Idly, Lurk pondered how effectively they
could dig the bandits out of their holes.

Legion's sound for scoffing was akin to bolts being aggressively rattled in a tin can.

"Occasional pockets have sprung up. Ambush attempts have been made, but they've stood no
hope of success. The Flayers sniff them out before they even get a chance. Though the more we kill,
the deeper they dig. They've started to avoid us and go back to their old habits of looting farms that
border the mountain forests and trying to make traps along the road."

"Let's not be only passive in our defense. Organize some hunting parties." Though Lurk enjoyed
the sea of greenery, he knew what a nightmare it could be rooting out an entrenched foe that knew
the terrain.
"What kind of prey will they be hunting?" He asked, though Legion already knew the answer.

"They two-legged variety. Corsairs and Flayers. Sweep by sectors. Treat our mountains as hostile territory until we can fully secure the area. Go easy on the satchel charges and razorwire bombs. We don't need to re-shape the entire range just to put down a castle."

Legion heaved a heavy sigh.

"Blasted knaves! Alas, I must concede the task of delivering justice to my fellow, Skitharix. My Silver Knights do not have the same skills when it comes to stalking prey."

"Don't trouble yourself over it, Legion. I need your soldiers to guard civilians traversing the pass. That chain of watchtowers you suggested should help until we get bunkers and hardened Hellhammer emplacements. I need someone to be the face of Black Sky. I need someone to be our shield."

Then it was Legion's turn to fall to his knee, overwhelmed by the trust his leader was placing in him.

"Truly, sire?"

Lurk turned to face the Guardian and clasped his hands behind his back once more. He hoped the greatcoat gave him the aspect of a military commander like he imagined when Lurk had made the Divine item.

"As a soldier, you must always be aware of the talents and skills of your team. I think you and your knights are the best suited to that job, Legion."

"Thank you, High Lord Lurk! We won't let you down.\" The mighty Warpriest contemplated his Lord's words and came to a decision on something. "In that case, High Lord, if I may, do you wish to hear my thoughts on what might make a fine addition to that mountain yonder?"

"Tell me, Legion. You have me curious."

The Guardian leapt to his feet and drew invisible lines of a fortress in the air.

"Why, nothing less than a grand castle befitting Black Sky Legion!"

"Oh yes, a keep and ravelins? The slope would be a good place for tiered layers of bastions." The idea got Lurk's mind churning with possible designs and placement.

"A star fort with a central keep? Oh, that makes my plates shiver! It would be wonderful to have a hardened, entrenched position to provide coverage on both sides of the valley! Though of course we would have to embellish this side as well. Can't have lopsided defenses."

"You are a man of culture, Legion. I'm very proud."

"Haha! You do me honor with your words, High Lord. The Citadel on its own is a more magnificent fortress than any other that was or shall ever be, but wouldn't it be nice to design one to show on the outside the might of Black Sky?"

"Giant banner. It would need giant banners." Lurk insisted.
"Visible from the pass?" Legion asked, already thinking about how to procure enough black and white dye for such a display.

"Without a doubt."

"Oooh, yes. Unfortunately, it is my duty to raise one concern. Will Kadusia or Oxelan protest our claim on their territory, High Lord?"

"Well, it's more bandit territory. If they make a fuss then we can use the excuse that we're simply pacifying the countryside. Securing borders, as it were."

"Doing them a favor, really. I'm certain that you or Lady Harmony can work it in with the peace agreement?"

"That will be easy to claim we're simply defending ourselves. You seem to have things well in hand, Legion. Carry on with our plans. And make sure when they get back up here, that Wrath and Ruin do push ups until you get tired. I'm going up to the peak of our mountain to make a small alteration."

Legion placed his fist over the left side of his chest and bowed.

"By you command, High King Lurk. 'Till Black Sky comes."

Spreading his wings, Lurk began to climb until Legion was a small red crested speck far below.

Up and up. Further and further on wings that felt as though they could carry him to the ends of the world and back again. With the ease of a morning jog, he made an ascent normally reserved for only the most dedicated pilgrims, ready to give their lives to weeks of navigating to the top as the path grew treacherously steep.

The view was still worth more than what his old job could have earned him in several lifetimes. The rich fields and verdant forests of Kadusia spread out on one side, while the great ocean stretched far off to the blue horizon on the other. And beneath him were the mountains that split the two with snow-capped fangs.

Lurk’s breath puffed as water vapor hit high altitude air.

He pulled on his inner self. A steadiness overtook him and he welcomed it. Locked onto his target, he raised an arm and pointed with a sharp claw. Magic symbols sprung around Lurk, shedding their arcane glow in a revolving cocoon of rings and glyphs. The Ancient Incarnate called forth his magic and it answered his intent with surety and mana. He knew the words and what shapes to hold in his mind.


A ring encircled the peak of the mountain. A ring that grew spokes, then teeth. Cogs meshed together, turning and weaving and ticking. More and more rings propagated into gears, impossibly fitting greater numbers of individual pieces into the greater whole.

"[Cathedral of Brass]."
The tangible ebb and flow of magic responded to his will, and shaped the world in turn. An intoxicating rush filled Lurk's snout. Fortunately the heady surge was tempered by the essence of [Cathedral of Brass]. Rock and snow yielded to the metal of Lurk's whim. Mechanized instinct marched in clockwork ranks through his mind as the buttresses of the Cathedral rose from the mountain top. The peak was wholly subsumed and converted as frost and stone was pushed aside to make room for the yellow metal of the dome and spire.

Super Tier took no MP to use, yet had a hard limit on group casting within a twenty-four hour period. It was not meant to be the ultimate win button in player fights back in the game. The spell was a long cast. It was not designed to be used in the heat of combat. Not normally, anyway. No, [Cathedral of Brass] was a support spell which summoned an actual steepled cathedral done up in Gothic architectural patterns. Complete with an overabundance of brass gargoyles, stained glass, firing slits, and automated gun emplacements tucked among the arches. The automated turrets could be activated with Lurk's Gunpowder Sage abilities and charged with explosive energy.

Back in the game, Lurk had grown used to the size of the summon. Looking at the outer arches and flying buttresses gave him a new appreciation for its breadth. The central spire alone reached almost a hundred and fifty feet into the air. After so much use, [Cathedral of Brass] felt less like a spell, and more like a single location he just moved from place to place, interconnected through numerous castings. Now it adorned the peak of a mountain he called home in a strange new world.

The spell originated from his Tetragrammaton Cleric class. The chief principle of its design was to give temporary buffs if meditated within. It was where the disciples of the gun, who dreamed in trajectories and terminal ballistics could go to dwell on their calling. To those dedicated enough, whether through plasma, laser, or old-fashioned lead, the [Cathedral of Brass] was open for all those Clerics and Disciples, Snipers and Gunners, Seigebreakers and Commandos. Whether it was one shot, one kill, or no kill like overkill, the Tetragrammaton gave its blessing generously.

Any allied player to the caster could sit and 'meditate' by in-game standards and receive huge bonuses to aim and accuracy. As well as special dodge chance and attack speed. All of that was available without reciting any of the hymns etched upon the place of worship for the Tetragrammaton.

And then there was Lurk, alighting on the landing platform with a newfound reverence.

Close to the front doors reinforced the new sense of scale. Ironwood, criss-crossed with bands of brass which sprouted curling Gothic patterns made up the gates. The entryway dwarfed him, metal gargoyles forming a procession overhead, holding up rifle to form an archway. After so much use, usually before long forays into the dangers of Muspelheim, Lurk had grown accustomed to the grandeur of the bastion. As with everything else, the Cathedral carried a new magic that renewed the King's appreciation.

At his touch, the gates swung open on silent hinges. After entering, the doors closed behind him and Lurk was shielded from the howling wind. Quiet enveloped the Wyrmblood. True, and sorely welcome silence wrapped him up.

Inhaling, holding the breath, then exhaling expelled much of the tension knotting the muscles in his shoulders. A peaceful reprieve from all the stress and messy workings of political dealings with the new world kingdoms and ruling The Citadel. The gamer was certainly enjoying his role, but he still relished the quiet. His old job had been just a slog. An endless monotonous grind of migraine inducing noise. Never a moment of rest. Never a break from the nagging demands of incompetent
coworkers, lazy underlings, and arrogant leaders.

Walking to the center of the nave, Lurk looked up, then ahead. Above the nave and suspended in the dome was an apparatus which measured time in the most non-traditional sense. A mad clock maker had poured his soul into the work, forging a piece that only counted when time meant almost nothing. A reverse clock, in a sense.

Going a little further, he stopped on the northern point of the star and found his gaze drawn up to the window at the end of the Cathedral. [Cathedral of Brass] always spawned with its orientation pointed to the north.

Occupying the far end of the Cathedral was a multi-tiered keyboard controlling the pipe organ which stretched up to the ceiling. Centered between the branching ranks of pipes was a stained glass window, wrought into the eight-pointed star of the Tetragrammaton. Cold light streamed in a prismatic display, onto the star embedded in the floor where the meditation buffs could be obtained. The different spots and patterns on the floor denoted the various boons that [Cathedral of Brass] could impart. By meditating on each in turn, the bonuses could be combined into the hymns etched into elaborate crosshair patterns along the towering windows. Always in sets of four.

At least in YGGDRASIL, to be beholden to any of the Tetragrammaton classes was to adhere to the divine side of the gunnery classes. Designed less around direct damage and more toward enhancing skills, spells, and giving bonuses to allies. The guiding principle was to face all threats from any direction. Different stances could be taken to achieve this goal.

Entropy went across his knees as he sat cross-legged on the ground. Designed for temperatures ranging far below, or far above what the mountain air could provide, Lurk was quite comfortable on the hard floor. Free from worldly fetters, his mind wandered through his job classes and not what they could do, but what they meant to him. Following this thread, he pondered on his most prized ability. His biggest achievement in YGGDRASIL aside from Entropy.

Sovereign of the Masquerade.

There was no quest or hidden item to obtain the class and once gained was a permanent feature of the player's avatar. Only by taking part and winning a special competition known as the Grand Ball could one gain Sovereign of the Masquerade. Funnily enough, there was no combat involved. Just dancing. One small catch in entering the competition limited many YGGDRASIL players from participation.

The normal physical input and feedback was turned to its safe limits as understood at the time.

The start of YGGDRASIL had been delayed due to legal hang ups with the full-dive technology. Much of the long term effects of full-dive were poorly understood, and the company had to agree to many restrictions to get the game launched at all. Certain probationary periods where game testers had to undergo grueling game sessions and medical analysis before the game was deemed safe to release to the general public. With settings tuned far below the safety margins established by testing.

In order to take part in the Grand Ball, Lurk had to sign hundreds of legal waivers, agreeing to submit any biometric data gathered to a non profit organization studying the effects of less restricted dives.

There were nine categories of entry, split between male and female solo, doubles, with those three options divided by racial class. There could be only three sets of winners for humanoid, demi-human,
and heteromorphic. Lurk entered himself under the men's solo heteromorphic. He wanted Harmony to dance with him, but she had been insistent on him doing the competition on his own. She was a great gamer, yet had been cursed as a human with barely an ounce of athletic coordination.

Then, Lurk got to practicing. For weeks on end he created and practiced a routine set to his choice of classical music leased for the event.

His edge was using every extra limb. Wings. Tail. Everything. With the stronger link, he spent a lot of time training his brain to accept the new additions. In the normal game with its limited connection, the extremities were crudely linked. Controlling them was like moving a deadened limb. The attachment was there, but it was weak.

For that span of time, he became the Wyrmblood, the Ancient Dragon Incarnate. Tactile feedback turned up to its maximum safe threshold meant that Lurk knew in excruciating detail what it was to have phantom limb syndrome. To have his brain trick him into believing that outside the dive he was in the wrong body. He would move to avoid bumping wings that were not there into furniture, or tucking in an invisible tail when he sat down.

Whenever Lurk wanted to practice he was restricted to a certain amount of time per day to limit exposure to the higher physical connection. Upon being timed out and forcefully disconnected from the dive he would practice in human form. After the event he would learn how many heteromorphic contestants dropped out of the Grand Ball because their motor functions suffered detrimental effect in the real world. Scientific papers would be published later with data gathered from the special training sessions. There were a lot of charts displaying active portions of the brain and even more discussion around neuroplasticity.

With the strength he could ply through his avatar, Lurk could achieve incredible feats of physical skill that actually inspired him to take up his old ballroom dancing and mixed martial arts form books and study them. He blended the two disciplines with his heteromorphic body. At the time, it had been just a privilege to be able to experience what it truly felt like to be something more.

Far sooner than he had wished, the day of the Grand Ball arrived. He loaded into the waiting area with all the other contestants and fidgeted nervously for hours. Heteromorphics were last. Lurk was glad in that stretch of waiting that he had selected the category. Watching the human contestants perform made him quite nervous. Later it would be found that several winners were real life professional dancers. But not him.

After an eternity that felt like a second, it was his turn.

Lurk still remembered most of his choreography. Some pieces were fuzzy after so many years, but still buried in his muscle memory.

Every contestant was given a few costume choices. But they all wore pure white masks in the fashion of old Earth. It was the mask that calmed him down the most. Donning the draconic visage put him in the proper state of mind. It was strange to recall in such flawless detail what it felt like to climb those stairs. To feel the harsh lights of the stage cutting into his eyes. Yet he did not blink.

In that singular window, all concern, doubt, and fear had no place within him.

There was only the purity of purpose. When he took that platform and felt the music, all else ceased to exist. He did not think of winning, only to execute the motions he had sewed into his muscle and sinew. To express his mastery of self and control over a body alien to the one he had
been born with. Given wholly to the self that was a conductor. Through artistry of form he put himself and his work forward as the genuine article. Not a human controlling an avatar like a puppet, but a real Ancient Incarnate. A real Wyrmblood.

That was the essence of the Grand Ball, and why its reward was Sovereign of the Masquerade. Because the players wore the masks like old renaissance performers wore masks of gods and kings in the same way wore their character avatars. The winners were the ones who could most convincingly put on the show of being someone else and performing a dance to prove it.

Through focus and dedication he got up on that stage and performed his blended mix of formal dance training and martial arts. Then he bowed, and exited with as much grace and dignity he could muster. The nerves and lead in his belly disappeared the moment he stepped up, and did not return. Lurk did not care then if he won or lost. He had performed the routine he had made to the best of his abilities, and therefore was content.

When the judges announced his name as winner of the male heteromorphic solos, it did not seem real. No matter what the outcome was, Lurk was proud of his performance. So when he actually won, the feeling was unreal. Only a distant whim pushed him to climb that stage the second time to receive his proof. He remembered grinning like such an idiot, unable to stop. Harmony had watched the whole thing and gushed at him for hours afterwards. She knew roughly the routine he had been cooking up. But she had not been able to follow him to the special training space. So Harmony saw it fully for the first time with the rest of YGGDRASIL players that tuned in to watch the competition.

From a far corner of his inventory, Lurk retrieved the trophy he had been presented that day. During the competition all the participants had been issued masks. Only the winners were given golden masks.

The announcer doing the play by play for the Grand Ball had given him the nickname 'The Dancing Dragon'. That moniker was engraved on the inside of the golden mask in Lurk's claws, specially shaped to fit his draconic face and muzzle. He read the inside and was instantly transported back to that day. That had been the last time he had felt the indents of the filigree patterns worked onto the symbol of victory.

He should have put it on display in the Hall of Memories. The outfit and plain ivory mask he had competed in sat in one of the alcoves of the hall. The golden trophy was not an item meant to be worn. Yet silly sentimentality made him keep the mask on him whenever he thought to put the thing away.

Logging into vanilla YGGDRASIL had felt... Dull. Numbing in a way.

Fortunately his disappointment had been tempered once he looked at his character information and saw that magical level one-hundred and one. Of course they made him level up four more times to get the new job class up to its maximum, yet that really only served to whet Lurk's anticipation for finding out what it could do. And he was not disappointed. The different Masks and Mantles were shockingly powerful.

Gunpowder Sage gave him special ammo, and unique variants of pyromancy specializing in explosives. Quickened ammo. Enervated shot. And more long-range destructive output than was usually necessary. Deadeye granted him targeting abilities that were second to none. Trajectories and paths were laid before him and made hitting targets with the unstable Gunpowder Sage spells manageable rather than impossible. Tetragrammaton Cleric anointed him with combat stances, acrobatic dodges, and firing drills mixed with various buffs and passives that turned him into a
One of his favorite options was to use a [Combustion] charged shot. Enhanced with Gunpowder Sage and aimed with Deadeye, using it to get instant cast and travel time. Then, with Tetragrammaton, he could thread the spell through a needle and place it right into an opponent's weak point.

Sovereign of the Masquerade granted that final layer of enhancement. Mask of the Fulminator was his preferred mask to use in conjunction with the Gunpowder Sage spells. A ten percent increase did not seem like much. But as soon as additive bonuses became multipliers, certain limits started breaking. Just like the other masks, Fulminator only had so many charges that could be used per day. That was why he had devoted so much time to switching masks quickly.

Again, Lurk dragged his claw across the surface of his golden 'Dancing Dragon' trophy. He considered that the spells and abilities once ingrained in him like a second self might be need to save his, or Harmony's life. The northern point of the Tetragrammaton granted him mental clarity, and he flicked through the masks that lay just beneath the surface of his scales, ready for the call of their master.

Mask of the Unbound became such a regular part of his kit, the time before it was a distant memory. The nine worlds were within his reach through the Unbound. Only a few masks actually granted their own activated abilities. Most enhanced the strengths of certain classes, like an actor performing a role. Lurk counted Unbound as an extension of his body not unlike his own wings.

Psion gave almost as much utility. He could hardly recall playing YGGDRASIL without close to every detection spell a button click away. In the new world, Lurk could use Psion for its literal purpose of gleaning information from lower level minds. Ironically, it was Psion that paired best with his Iron Conqueror form. Nothing quite like telekinetically controlling a barrage of Relic Iron spines to decimate an unsuspecting foe.

Mask of the Keeper was what he used to traverse the glowing sea during his hunt for Irradiance. It could be tuned to specific environmental hazards or grant elemental resistances. Though sadly Keeper could not give resistance to piercing or slashing, Lurk's true weakness.

One of his favorites was Tempest, which granted him unique buffs during any kind of storm. Which on Muspelheim and its inhospitable nature, was all the time. Lurk never appreciated its application until a long and enlightening conversation with a dedicated Storm Herald player.

Abyss for traversing the void and all manner of nasty traps and for situations where stealth was paramount. Celestial for passing through the realm of light and calling down holy orbital strikes. Visage of the Nephilim was the unholy union between the two, and had unparalleled summons. Yet was only good for a handful of uses per day. Lurk wondered how well those summons would perform. What sentence would they have? Would they be timed like they were back in the game?

He added those questions to the obscenely long list of spells, abilities, items, and magical theory that still needed to be tested.

The apex of Sovereign however, was Visage of the Immortals. Lurk shuddered to consider what actually using the class ability would feel like.

Realizing that his mind was drifting perhaps a bit too far afield, Lurk put away his golden mask and trailed a claw along Entropy's smooth Celestial Uranium composite and the five cores.
slumbering in their cradles.

Lurk clenched his right fist, feeling ring of the Autoloader on his middle finger clink between Macrosunder and Odin’s Eye. Temporal on his thumb insured that he was protected against any and all time spells. And lastly the Soulbound ring tied to Entropy insured that even if he died, his prized weapon would never be lost. His other claw was also covered in jewelry. Four more Divine Class bands of precious metal glinted in the clean light. They varied in use. Thermo-Antithesis on his index for spell shells, with Hydra right beside. Gunshield on the next digit. And Valkyrie’s Nanite Oath on his last.

Both he and Harmony had spent almost as much money on their avatars as on The Citadel. As much as they both resented having to purchase the ability to wear more rings to stay competitive, they were willing to spend money to level the playing field between themselves and those who thought to win by throwing enough credit cards at YGGDRASIL. Back in the first days, cash shop items could be traded between players willing to fork over enough coin in the auction house. At least until the shitty devs had made every real money purchase non-transferable.

Stretching his claws, Lurk followed the whim of his classes and decided on an old rite. After reaching into his inventory one more time he had a palm with five empty bullet casings.

Ritual is given power through symbolism, repetition, and by meeting criteria that transcends physical law. I believe it to work, and through words of power, and actual power, it will and does. Care. Repetition. Precision. Power. Faith.

I never was a man of faith before. What gods live in this world? If there were gods of the Earth, they were small, helpless things. Helpless before man. Gravity. Magnetism. Strong and weak nuclear forces. These were the bonds and bounds of that man. Now what are my bonds? By my nature I am now immortal. Except perhaps by physical force. Don’t feel like testing that just yet. If it’s an eternity spent with Harmony, then it would not be so bad.

One by one, Lurk set four empty casings on the floor in front of him. Upright and orderly, the open brass shells seemed to brim with potential.

His attention turned to a specific ring on his left index finger. Thermo-Antithesis flared to life as he tapped into it, summoning forth the power to convert daily limits of spells and MP into bullets. Soot was only the cosmetic reward for completing the elaborate Gunpowder Sage questline. The real gift was the ring purported to contain a miniature superconductor linked to a mana reactive quantum computer hidden in Lurk’s inventory.

"[Napalm]. [Shrapnel]. [Acid Claw]. [Chain Dragon Lightning]."

One by one, he imbued the empty shells. The spells coalesced into crystals or swirling energies trapped in small glass ampules. The power was released when the bullet impacted its target, often with spectacular visual effect. He once accidentally lagged the game with too much use of [Chain Dragon Lightning] as YGGDRASIL’s visual rendering struggled to keep up with dozens of instances going off at once. The stutters were usually small, yet absolutely impossible to look at and not feel as though one was suffering eye damage.

Ancient Incarnate gave him access to a versatile grimoire. He had spent a lot of spell books experimenting, unlearning and reworking his repertoire based on what made the best fodder for Thermo-Antithesis. Among his gunnery peerage, much debate had sprung up around which spells made the most efficient MP to damage per second conversion while not overloading the game. There
was a fine line to walk between optimization and what YGGDRASIL could actually handle.

Although it was limited to unmodified seventh tier spells, there were few things as priceless as an opponent's reaction to a cast of [Reaper's Buzzsaw] full of bullets loaded with [Shrapnel]. A personal favorite thing to do with the ability was to infuse bullets with [Heal] and shooting allies with it. Lurk called it 'Friendly Fire'.

Once upon a time, he had logged into YGGDRASIL every single day without fail, even if it was only to drain his character's MP into consumable spell shells. Then those days gradually faded. The game entered its twilight years and Lurk moved on. Even if he did log on to help Harmony farm some gold or do an event, there was hardly ever any need to use his spell shells. That classic gamer paradox of attaining consumables that would not be used. His inventory was rife with ammunition almost beyond counting. Forgotten junk ranging from data crystals to cash shop items spilled into potions and old job class books for builds he considered tinkering with. Almost forgotten with time.

Almost.

Knowing that Thermo-Antithesis worked gave him an unexpected measure of solace. Scooping up the bullets, he felt confident enough to check on some of his other central abilities.

Centered, the Wyrmblood stood. He took up Entropy and adopted his neutral Kata. Talons together, heel touching heel. Entropy was held straight up with his right arm bent tight. Left arm crossing his chest to rest on the front sickle curve of the magazine. From there he could shift his claw to its grip and pivot the weapon in any direction.


The Cathedral did not have a firing range, but it did have the titanic pipe organ that dominated the far end. Hundreds of pipes arranged into divisions, could be controlled by the many keyboards at the base of the instrument, or by triggering reactive targets set among the ranks of pipes. Lurk could not pull the trigger, lest he actually destroy the instrument. Aiming was enough. The tricky part of drawing a symphony from the organ was not what targets you hit, but rather the targets a gunner threaded his sights around without triggering.

Deadeye answered his call. To Lurk's vision a series of targets lit up as another side of gunnery, the precision sniping side, obeyed his will as if it were his personal skill instead of a game mechanic. Deadeye was the discipline of the long gun. The reaching arm of high caliber wrath, or sustained, unceasing fire. Lurk reveled in the ability to apply a relentless stream of damage on target.

An endless feud raged within the long-range inclined players when it came to mechanical skill as opposed to in-game aim assist. Lurk could see both sides, and understood the appeal of being able to just hit a button and let percentage dice rolls and character stats determine whether shots landed. However, even though Lurk respected that belief, he still ascribed to the other school of thought. Skill should be rewarded, the draconic man believed. His love of the realistic dive shooter, Chernobyl Extraction was proof of that. The hardcore allure was too much to resist, and the game sold itself on leaning solely on player insight and mechanical function.

Launching his left talon straight while his right ankle turned. His shoulders stayed straight as his hips pivoted into a forward stance. Digging the butt of his rifle firmly into his shoulder, the Wyrmblood focused on his Autoloader ring. Before, all it took was a drop down menu or a verbal
"Load earthshaker." A reassuring click answered him as Entropy's magazine was packed with alternating explosive, frangible, and [Flak] shells. While his spell shells could not be augmented on creation, they could be enhanced by Entropy itself. Corresponding cores in relation to the ammo loaded lit up the gun, feeding their unique properties through the nests of cables cradling the artifacts. Bullets of material cost mixed with the spell shells.

To aim. To fire. There is no hit. The target has already been hit. The Tetragrammaton is not the result, but the act. The result is written. Inevitable. Fate.

Lurk brought his gun up like a conductor's baton. The tip of Entropy flicked gracefully between targets. A bombastic symphony filled the cathedral. Its strokes were broad. Bold, multi-key notes bellowed forth as many targets were triggered simultaneously.

Lowering Entropy, the Tetragrammaton Cleric let the music fade from the [Cathedral of Brass].

"Load anti-armor." Another click as his ring flashed and the bullets in the magazine were replaced by a pattern of [Acid Claw] and armor-piercing shells with Darksteel cores.

Again, Lurk raised his rifle to create a fitting accompaniment. Rising crescendos marched up the organ. Lines of keys depressed as the slur notes rose in pitch, only to fall and start again.

"Load mage-slayer." Possibly his most expensive load, the Scarlettite hollow-points and ripper shells were useless against armor, but could cut through most lightly armored casters to devastating effect.

The symphony started low, building up suspense with deeper, resonant pipes that shook the air with its intensity. The pitch dipped lower, only reaching anything other than sonorous with gravely portentous notes.

"Load crowd control." Quickened rounds with occasional [Chain Dragon Lightning]. Lurk bent his forward leg down, planting his knee to give him better leverage over his gun.

As if there were three maestros playing in unison, a frenzied melody sprung forth, weaving between harmonics and clashes. The notes conjoined then separated then multiplied in a drug-fuelled frenzy of aural expression.

Ironically, many of his custom loadouts were gross overkill. Any skill or ability that utilized stored up magic was forbidden in dueling. Generally only foolish player-killers went hunting in the hazardous regions of Muspelheim where Black Sky Legion frequented. The new world had no such restrictions as far as Lurk could tell. Real life had no arbitrary rules that enforced balance. Reality was cruel that way.

Lurk eased Entropy down, letting the bombastic music fade until silence once again overtook the space. Though he did not know it at the time, the [Cathedral of Brass] acted like a tuning fork of massive size and let the sound of the pipe organ drift down the mountain all the way to the shelf of The Citadel's doors. Wrath and Ruin paused in their pushups to listen. Even Legion inclined his head for a moment to hear the faint tones carried by a favorable wind. Everyone who heard it, from Sharpshooter to Guardian all felt blessed.

Standing, the Wyrmblood looked back at the star in the floor, then up to the reversal clock still
unmoved. Though he felt selfish for what he was about to ask, Lurk felt he was duty bound to insure he was ready to face any threat to The Citadel or his beloved.

[Message]

Phage?

High Lord Lurk! My mind is blessed with your gracious contact.

Hello, Phage, I hope you’re well today.

You are too considerate of a lowly Guardian, mighty King. I was actually just thinking of you, High Lord. I was pondering what book to read after this round of capture the fortress. What task would you have your Untouchable do?

The Forgemother mentioned your war games. They sound like a lot of fun. If you wouldn't mind, at some point later allowing me to sit in on one or two?

I... I... Would be thrilled! Please, High Lord, you need not ask. My Corsairs and I would be honored to have you attend one of our games. More than honored. Exonhorated! I am certain that your presence alone would be enough to spurn the Corsairs to heights of greatness.

Glad to hear it, Phage. Thank you. Really. I would never be so discourteous as to just show up out of the blue. Regardless, I would ask a favor if you’re not too busy.

Name it, and no force on this world will keep me from such honor.

Would you lend me twelve of your Corsairs for a short time? Half an hour, tops. Tell them to bring those training carbines. I've place a [Cathedral of Brass] at the top of our mountain. Please instruct them to meet me there.

At once! I shall ask for volunteers.

...

It seems they all volunteered. One moment, High Lord, and I'll have this sorted and the dozen you requested on their way. I'll make sure myself.

If you're busy overseeing the rest-

No trouble at all, High Lord. I would be remiss in my duties if I did not personally make sure they performed to a Supreme Being's standards.

[End Message]
Lurk put away Entropy and sedately wandered to the gates of the Cathedral to wait for Phage on the generous landing platform. He enjoyed how clean the mountain air was while he waited. Clasping his claws behind his back, Lurk grinned, thinking he must look quite silly. But not silly enough to stop.

Being gifted with their unique brand of traversal, it only took the Plague Elves a few minutes to ascend the mountain in pillars of green fire. Ever punctual whenever it was at the behest of her Lord, Phage appeared first. The deadly beauty appeared and went down on one knee. Pale dress and even paler skin made her appear like a phantom in the stark sun. Her dozen Corsairs formed in a semi-circle behind their leader. They also manifested and showed their allegiance. Their long capes swirled in the wind.

"High Lord Lurk, Phage the Untouchable has answered your summons. My Corsairs and I are eager to serve you." She lifted her chin with an eager gleam in her acidic eyes.

"Rise, Phage. Stand, all of you." Lurk unclasped his claws and gestured for Phage and her group to rise. When everyone did so, the Wyrmblood turned.

"Welcome to the [Cathedral of Brass]. It's been a fine day for some drills. And I think all of you are perfect for what I need." He swept his arms out to encompass the Super Tier structure before clasping them behind his back once more. Lurk set off with a formal stride toward the doors. The Plague Elves all followed hotly on their Lord's heels. The gates of the Cathedral opened for the procession at Lurk's touch and closed again behind them.

Marching off to stand on the northern point once again, the Wyrmblood turned to address the Corsairs.

"Welcome, welcome. Good of you all to join me. I want to hear that clock tick." Lurk pointed straight up at the reversal clock. Every eye followed where he indicated, then back down to their Lord. "And I need you to shoot at me in order to make that happen."

"Holy Lord, that would be unforgivable of us!" Cried one of the Corsairs, before she dropped to both knees and pressed her forehead against the stone floor. The other Plague Elves bowed as well, nodding their agreement.

Though she wanted to admonish her underling for daring to speak in defiance against her Lord, Phage could not disagree.

Lurk paced over and offered his claw to the prostrating Corsair. Timidly, the slender female put her hand in the huge palm. After lifting her up, Lurk patted the Plague Elf on the shoulder.

"Believe me, if you hit me, I will be very impressed. Notice I didn't say 'shoot me'. I said, 'shoot at me'. Big difference." He looked around and made sure they all understood before taking his place at the center of the star.

As Lurk walked, he felt movement in a pocket of his greatcoat.

Of all things, Soot flopped out of Lurk's coat out onto the floor. The pudgy, walking explosive landed on his back with a thump and indignantly wiggled onto his feet before rubbing against Lurk's leg like an affectionate cat.

"Soot, how and when did you get there? I don't remember giving you Dimensional Imp." Bending
down, Lurk rubbed the neck of his pet and laughed a bit. Every female Plague Elf present had to resist Soot's overwhelming cuteness. The men would never admit it, they had to restrain themselves as well.

"I'll take care of him, High Lord." Phage eagerly offered.

"Go on, go over to Phage." Lurk patted Soot's butt.

Hesitantly, the Gunpowder Dragon padded over to the Guardian.

Whilst visiting Cognitio, Phage had looked up the Gunpowder Dragon. Specifically, what the little dragons liked to eat. She had procured several sticks of charcoal and fetched one from her inventory. Luckily, the charred wood was technically already 'ruined' enough to not disintegrate from her touch. Her silk gloves were enough protection to preserve the stick. Phage moved out of her Lord's way and held out the charcoal.

The overgrown lizard sped up as soon as he saw the offered treat. Phage sat down on the floor and coaxed Soot up into her lap. The bundle of anarchy wiggled into the soft fabric of her dress. Soot grumbled happily as Phage stroked down his back and fed him more charcoal. He was one of the only living creatures she could touch and not harm, owing to his indestructible nature.

With his pet taken care of, Lurk spoke to the Corsairs once more.

"So what I need from you twelve, is to move in two groups of six. Inner and outer ring." The Wyrmblood pointed and the Corsairs dutifully split themselves into groups. "Inner moves clockwise. Outer moves counter-clockwise. Fire one full magazine, or if I instruct you to stop."

Once Lurk was satisfied that the Plague Elves were all thirty or so feet away along the points of the star and appropriately spaced into the two rings he had described, his claws went to his side in readiness.

"Begin," Lurk commanded.

The inner and outer circle began turning in opposite directions. Drawing their practice repeater carbines, the Black Sky soldiers fell to their duty. Although the Corsairs still had reservations at first at the idea of firing upon their creator, Lurk's direct orders outweighed their hesitance. That, and they were only using training bolts with blunted tips.

Triggers were pulled, and mechanisms whirred, unleashing fletched wooden shafts.

Lurk moved like a man walking between raindrops. His coat billowed and flowed with him. The Wyrmblood was conservative in his movements, adjusting himself just far enough out of the way that the air disturbance given off by the fletching of the bolts whispered across his scales. Much like meditating, it required him to relax his mind. After adopting the appropriate Kata, he just let the form do its work. He could feel where the bolts would go, and his only consciously needed effort was deciding how far to move.

Time dilation kicked in. As cliched as it was, the YGGDRASIL devs had named the set of skills that turned dodges into temporal distortion 'bullet time'. They had watched far too many action movies whilst designing job classes that branched from Valkyrie's Downfall and the subsequent expansions. Then again, Lurk loved those movies too. Many branches of various job sets had similar effects. From 'witch time' to 'adrenaline' skills. While any self-respecting player expecting to engage
in player versus player combat wore Temporal rings in one form or another, the bullet time skills did not target the enemy. It only affected Lurk and his dodge chance. The first few bolts avoided then cascaded into a swelling of the effect.

Far above the nave, the reversing clock began whirring madly. As Lurk dodged and moved between more bolts and time bent and slowed, the whirring slowed to rapid ticking. Once the highest tier of bullet time was in effect, the clock began running at a normal pace.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

He knew they would be hesitant at first, not quite ready to just lay on the trigger. To their eyes, Lurk seemed to move instantly. They were aiming and firing at where he was, yet as soon as their weapons discharged, he was no longer there. The Wyrmblood turned here, dropped a shoulder or lifted an arm there. His legs flicked through stances in a specific sequence that was predicated on an exact firing sequence from the Plague Elves.

Losing himself to the trance of the exercise was cathartic. Knowing he could make his body move the way he wanted was exhilarating. The Grand Ball had been one thing, but the dive still had limits. The weight of the coat pressed against his scales. The segmented silver breastplate moved with his breath. The fresh scent of mountain air filled his nostrils and lungs. The bolts whistled as they cut through space he occupied then vacated faster than the blunted projectiles could chase. The sleeves of his coat snapped at the crisp turn of his limbs.

It was real. He was real. His control and Tetragrammaton skills were real too.

Once at full effect, Lurk leisurely waited patiently for the Corsairs to empty the rest of their ammunition. As he turned his body on automatic, the Tetragrammaton Cleric reveled in the satisfying tick of the reversal clock. And his body enjoyed the warmup.

After the last bolt flew by, normal time reasserted itself and Lurk grinned. Phage politely applauded her Lord's effort as the Corsairs stared in esteem and veneration for the display they had been lucky enough to witness.

"Alright, again please." Lurk looked between the Corsairs in his direct sight, fixing his attention on a single point as the Plague Elves all reloaded in his peripheral vision. Rolling his shoulders, Lurk got into a wide stance and held his arms straight up and out to either side.

"Begin." He commanded.

Bolder the second time, the Corsairs opened up with bursts. Once more the Ancient Incarnate knew exactly what was coming at him, from where and what angle. With his new Kata, rather than evasion he activated his passive [Point Defense].

Phantom hands holding ethereal pistols sprung into existence. Magically summoned bullets intercepted each bolt immediately after it left the carbines. Gunshots layered on top of one another in a blistering rhythm. Wooden shafts splintered into pieces as the training bolts were split by Lurk's passive skill. Showers of debris collected in drifts in the rotating rings of elven boots.

[Point Defense] could not block everything in a real combat situation. Some spells and other attacks did not exist as projectiles, or by their nature were impossible to deflect. But against assaults that fell under such criteria, the passive did good work. It negated everything below a certain level and mitigated damage caused by higher tier projectile attacks.
Without bullet time, the turning of the two rings happened quite a bit faster.

Throughout the entire exercise, Lurk did not move an inch. Only once the carbines were empty once more and the Plague elves had stopped did Lurk relax his stance. Phage clapped more softly so as not to disturb Soot who had dozed off, curled nose to tail in her lap.

"Very good. Alright, this next one's got a bit of a twist to it. I'm going to be returning your bolts back at you. If you get hit, just stop moving, okay?" He looked around and made sure all the Corsairs had reloaded and nodded in understanding before taking his next kata.

"Begin!" He said with greater confidence, opening and closing his claws in anticipation.

Once more he flowed through the motion as bolts sailed towards him.

Feeling the flow, the disturbance. The simple intimate and irrefutable knowledge of where every bolt was and where each was going filled him. A panoply of three dimensional puzzles made of velocity and trajectory. It was as easy as plucking a hummingbird from the air. In fact his claw moved so quickly that he simply had to twist his digits to send the bolt straight back at its shooter. The reversal clock barely started whirring before all twelve Corsairs had been struck.

Everyone reset one more time.

"The last is simple, but the most important." Lurk held up a coin as he spoke. "I'm going to toss this in the air. As soon as it hits the floor, I want all of you to fire one bolt at me, alright? Just one."

With grave seriousness, every Plague Elf nodded at their Lord's command.

One final nod was all lurk gave before flicking the coin high into the air. Corsairs lifted their carbines, fingers on their triggers as they glided in their alternating rings. The gold caught the light, flashing the tree, then Valkyrie back and forth as it hit the zenith of its flip then tumbled back to the ground.

Ting!

The metallic ring echoed through the [Cathedral of Brass].

Twelve triggers were pulled in unison. Even while the click of mechanisms engaging, loosing potential energy into kinetic force, Lurk knew where the bolts would be.

There was no room for thought. If he had to think, then he would be too slow. And if it was a real threat, a real battle, then if he was too slow, he would be dead. Lurk simply imparted on his body what he wanted to happen, and found the appropriate nerve and sinew to snap or make sing in order to accomplish it. Both of his arms outstretched and he gathered up the twelve in a full half turn, before jumping. In the jump he continued his spin, but as his arms came close to his chest, absorbing the bolts, he threw them back out again.

Lurk landed and completed his turn. Before his talons came to rest back on the floor, the twelve Corsairs all stumbled back where their return bolts had struck them in the chest.

The move had taken no more than a second, yet was absolute in eliminating the mock assailants. [Counter Fire] did not have to use the enemy's own shots against them, but it could. Usually the skill
made any fighting riposte after dodging do more damage. An effective tool in the Tetragrammaton repertoire.

"Bravo! Bravo! Magnificent!" Phage clapped her silk wrapped hands with gusto, and Soot grumbled before adjusting himself.

Each of the Corsairs went down on one knee before their king.

"Thank you for helping, everyone. Thank you for taking time away from what you were doing to indulge my desire to hear a silly old clock. If any of you wish to return, the Cathedral is open to any member of Black Sky at any time." Lurk stretched his neck and let out a relieved sigh.

Phage waved a hand and her own version of [Clean] dissolved the spent bolts and scattered debris from the mess of splinters from the Cathedral nave. Then the Guardian spoke.

"Holy Lord, if... You would entertain the desires of those unworthy, may we linger awhile? Perhaps let our minds fill with the teachings of the hymns?" Phage asked what her Corsairs were all silently begging.

Though at first surprised, a wide smile soon split Lurk's scaly muzzle.

"Well, I did say the Cathedral was open to anyone, at any time."
The city-state kingdom of Kadusia had sat upon its hilltop, surveying the rich fields of its sweeping plains, and wild woods for centuries. Her tall stone walls had withstood siege, famine, plague, and the jealous advances of her rivals and neighbors. Despite the unyielding might of the stone and the bravery in the hearts of the men who watched over that city, they were only that. Men. Fallible.

Mortal.

In a world wherein ancient dragons and lost demi-gods dwelled, woefully little was sympathetic to the plight of man.

"I need help over here!" The Kadusian guard sergeant shouted. He glanced to either side for half a second.

All the time he could spare.

Around him, the other soldiers of the city guard were equally engaged with their undead foes. The guard sergeant grimaced and hurriedly reloaded his crossbow. At such a close range, he placed his shot into the head of the approaching zombie even though his hands were shaking. He was one of several soldiers who had broken off to draw attention from the flanks of the horde, hoping to get them away from the throng of innocent civilians trying to get to safety.

A sinkhole had opened just outside the gates where the battle with the Bandit King had taken place, the ground crumbling away to reveal a writhing pit of undead that crawled and shambled forth.

Arrows and bolts from the wall fell into the growing mass to little effect. Zombies or occasional skeletons would sometimes fall. However, the horde was growing far faster than what could be put down. Normally, undead were weak. Little more than a nuisance. They were really only dangerous to the isolated or inexperienced. Undead were an insistent plague upon the country. This was different. Like the great blights of old which threatened the entire continent with destruction.

There had been panic as the civilians coming and going along the road either scattered or tried running into the safety of the city. The gates were a bottleneck that slowed progress as wagons and horses blocked the way. Inside the walls, the guards were desperately trying to sort the situation so they could close the gates. Meanwhile, it was up to the soldiers on the outside to fend off the undead until reinforcements could arrive. The host of dead could not be allowed into the city.

As more and more undead poured from the wound in the soil, the situation rapidly turned to one of desperation.

The few city guard on the ground were each making their own hopeless stand as they quickly
became outnumbered a hundred to one. Their fellows on the walls lent what support they could. Braziers and fire arrows were on standby in some of the towers. Yet the gaping maw festered faster than it could be cauterized by the limited fire.

A larger, fiercer looking undead warrior reared up before the man. With a slap of its shield, the half-skeleton bashed zombies out of its way and lurched towards the sergeant. There was not enough time to load his crossbow again, so the Kadusian abandoned it. From his training he knew that crushing weapons were most effective against such enemies.

From his belt loop, he drew forth his war pick and turned it over so that the crushing hammer was at the ready.

The man took a step forward and feinted a blow at the revenant's knee. Just as he hoped, the skeletal warrior lowered its shield to block and the Kadusian guard altered the angle of his attack and drove the hammer side of his pick deep into the blighted thing's skull. The temple collapsed into the eye socket with a hollow crunch of rotting flesh and wet bone, extinguishing the hellish pinprick of light on that side.

However, the enemy did not fall. The skeletal warrior brought down its own sword. With reflexes born of fear and adrenaline, the city guard caught the wrist of his enemy before the blade could chop into his shoulder. Gambeson would not stop such unholy power. With his other hand, the Kadusian desperately tried to free his weapon from the half-caved skull. But it was stuck fast in the bone.

Unnatural might pushed him down, forcing him onto one knee. The man's elbows shook, trying to hold back the blade as it came down. Down. Down. He grit his teeth, and wanted to call for help once again, yet could not risk breaking his concentration. He was alone. Sweat ran into his eyes, stinging his vision as he abandoned the handle of his war pick to hold back the bony wrist with both hands. Human strength was not nearly enough. All around the Kadusian men on the ground were being pushed back. Those who could not get away were cut to ribbons or torn to pieces.

Closer and closer, the sergeant faced his grisly end. The chipped and pitted blade sought to tear into fresh meat. His foe leered at him, jaw hanging from tattered scraps of maggot-riddled flesh as it moaned. Its remaining red eye grew brighter at the prospect of a kill.

Salvation came for the man in the form of a rifle bullet. The medium caliber hunk of metal shattered the rest of the revenant's skull, leaving only the stump of neck bones protruding. As the stuck war pick fell, the monster went slack before the unholy magic holding it together faded. Without ligament, the undead fell to pieces.

Black Sky Legion had come.

Up on the walls, the Sharpshooters of Lapua Magnum's team feverishly worked their Ninety-Nines. Every retort of the long guns meant another monster was returned to their rightful grave. Skulls were popped. Torsos ruptured. Soon the pressure eased enough for the surviving Kadusians to regroup and make a protective cordon between the retreating civilians and the blight. The sergeant shouted orders to rally his men and was more than happy to handle the stragglers.

Silver Knights leapt from the high walls of the city to join the fray. They landed with their shields at the ready and charged forward. Forming into a line, the Silver Knights speared into the fetid throng of undead. With their own abilities, the winged helms marked their progress slicing through the tide. And their hymn of war lifted the hearts of the defenders.

Streaking over the battlements on a wave of psionic energy, Lapua entered the fighting as well. She hovered above the horde, easily keeping out of reach. As if moving across the keys of a musical
instrument, her four hands danced to the frenzied melody of the battle. A brace of magelock firearms spread before the Neverborn, each firing their one shot before being replaced by a fresh one. They spun through fan patterns as they unleashed a steady rhythm of fire. Lapua's hands worked their magic, conservatively applying her force as she assessed the situation.

Like a lightning rod, the undead were drawn towards Lapua even though they could not reach her.

"[Volley]." Lapua calmly used the Tetragrammaton Disciple class ability. A hundred magelocks appeared in staggered lines at ground level before the horde. In ordered rows, the guns lit off as if they were held by an infantry formation. Strikers fell, and a wave of magic bullets cut through reanimated dead. As the front ranks of undead dropped, the next line of magelocks fired.

Then the next.

Then again.

Gunpowder smoke obscured part of the battle as chunks of undeath were sent screaming from the land of the living.

Rifle grenades from the Sharpshooters up on the walls thudded into the denser pockets of undead to clear away the chaff. Rotten flesh and limbs were torn to pieces as the grenades detonated on contact. Dirt and zombie parts erupted from the blasts. Dull whumps could be felt as force of the explosives were absorbed by the rising mounds of corpses.

They made sure their leader, Lapua, did not have to waste too much of her precious mana or skills on the meatshields.

The horde gradually shrank as it was hemmed in from multiple angles. Whenever a segment threatened to break through the noose, Lapua would summon a simple wall of magelocks or the Sharpshooters would focus their fire. It seemed the battle would just be cleanup from that point forth. None of the undead present could scratch the Living Armor of the Black Sky soldiers.

Then the Death Knights emerged. From the center of the pit, rising through the churning mass, the towering Death Knights were summoned into the world of the living. A wretched assembly of them yelled, forming a hateful chorus as they charged through their lesser fellows. Without a controlling necromancer they were compelled only to slaughter. Driven by a ceaseless rage, they charged the Silver Knights. Quick action from the Sharpshooters meant that at least two fewer made it into striking distance of their brothers.

Blades clashed so loudly that those up on the walls could clearly hear the blows being traded between the undead and the Living Armor of Black Sky.

Jagged flamberges clanged against polished tower shields and were met in turn by thrusting winged spears. Swords that could cut a man in half from crown to groin moved with whistling speed. Swiftness that should not have been possible from hideous undead of such size. The Silver Knights met the monstrous undead blow for blow. Yet the melee was chaotic and the Silver Knights were outnumbered. For every four strikes they blocked, one would make it through. The shining soldiers were surrounded by their dark counterparts.

Lapua Magnum reacted quickly to the credible threat the Death Knights posed.

She began to chant, beseeching the fire in her soul, of her home of Muspelheim come aid her to incinerate her foes. Heat distortion surrounded her psionic halo and every summoned gun floating around her moved into place. The crystal strikers of her magelocks turned cherry red as they were
imbued with fiery energy.

Every one of her many fingers mimicked pulling a trigger.

Lines of red lanced towards the monstrous undead.

Reacting instinctively, the Death Knights raised their shields. However, Lapua was leagues apart from the middle-tier undead and her halo flared with light. Her many fingers wove new trajectories for her bullets and they curved around the Death Knight's shields to strike true. Although the shots had enough power to destroy the hellish creatures, the Death Knight's unique skill meant that they survived. Held together by an infernal will that meant they could survive any single attack no matter how much damage. The undead could face-tank Super Tier after all.

What they could not handle was damage over time, as all it took was being hit and then set on fire to finish them off.

Even so, the monsters went down swinging as they burned. Flamberges rose and fell. Rose and fell. Yet could find no gaps in the ring of steel. The Silver Knights stood shoulder to shoulder, covering each other with their shields. As the animating magic faded, the twisted armor contorted and folded in on itself, Imploding into balls of spiked steel. The battlefield at last grew quieter. One Death Knight struggled on for a few seconds before succumbing to the flame.

Only once the final opposing knight crumbled did the Silver Knights break ranks while Sharpshooters picked off the few shamblers left crawling from the pit.

Lapua landed among her troops as the last of her magelocks vanished.

"Is everyone alright?" The Neverborn asked, still keeping one eye on the pit. Her psionic senses were useless in detecting the undead.

"We took a few hits, Lady Lapua. Nothing a repair kit won't fix." One of the least injured knights responded as his brothers slapped patches over gashes in their plate.

"Very good. Stay vigilant until I make sure the pit is safe." She commanded.

"Yes, ma'am."

While the Black Sky soldiers conversed, the sergeant who had survived his earlier encounter came forward. He glanced about in awe as zombie heads intermittently popped nearby. Though he flinched at the loud retort of the Demi-Claw's rifles. Wiping blood and sweat from his brow, the man stepped around the still smoking husks of the Death Knights.

"Master Seeker Magnum, the city is immeasurably grateful to the Seekers this day. I shall see to it personally that a contract is filled out in your name."

"My actions are for the glory of Black Sky Legion. Remember that, Kadusian." Lapua was not harsh in her chastisement. However, she would never let an opportunity slip to exalt the name of Black Sky.

"Yes, miss Lapua Magnum!" The sergeant straightened. "I've seen undead plagues before, ma'am. But never anything sudden like this. They just started boilin' out o' the ground like a kicked over anthill. What could've caused this? And what were these big 'uns?" He asked as a man desperate for reason among the madness, staring at the imploded metal husks.

Ever diligent, Lapua summoned forth her requested copy of common monsters and magical
artifacts of the nine world of YGGDRASIL. Floating beside her, the book flipped open to the relevant Death Knight entry in the bestiary section with a psionic flick.

"I suspect foul play. Death Knights are not from this world originally. They reek of Helheim." Lapua folded two of her arms over her courtly curiass and gestured with the other two. She read over the Death Knight entry in more detail and consulted the book further for best practices for handling undead aftermath.

"Keep the civilians away from this gate for now. Direct traffic elsewhere until the area is certain to be safe. Get the best holy magic users you have down here to cleanse the soil. You do not want this poison getting into the city or the crops. Then gather up all these bodies. Nothing fancy is necessary. The have already been altered by the necromancy. What's important is that they are burned. Burn it all, cleanse the ash, then burn it again. Keep running it through fire until the undeath is fully cleansed."

Although the sergeant's head spun, he waved over his men to begin dividing them into groups.

"Alright, I need three of you to run up the road and make sure no one comes down this way. Direct them over to the southern gate. Keep your eyes sharp for any stragglers that may have wandered off." The three that the sergeant pointed to split off and jogged away, giving the pit a wide berth.

Lastly, the field commander split the remaining bunch into two squads.

"You lot guard the civilians until that gate gets closed, make sure our wounded get inside too. Then come help the rest of us. Everyone else start getting bodies away from that pit. We've got some pyres to light. Everything gets burned."

As the sergeant moved to join his men, two groups of Seekers ran towards Lapua. The Seekers were a motley bunch. Colorful, in the way that freelance adventurers often were. A cluster of individual skills, bound together through hardship and the pursuit of fame, fortune, or both.

"Master Seeker Lapua! We're here to help. Though you seem to have things well in hand. What can we do?" Asked one of the leaders, a scarred young man who could not have been shaving for long. The Seekers behind him were also on the youthful side, with eyes that had seen horrors beyond their years.

The other leader was a hardened woman who was as stoic as the old walls of Kadusia who was busy assessing the strength of the undead horde. Her group of grizzled veterans likewise surveyed the furrows in the land, carved by Lapua's magic.

Both bands of Seekers had witnessed Lapua's entry and subsequent meteoric rise through the organization. Although wary of such a powerful individual, in moments of crisis, the pair had enough integrity to set aside their personal feelings and respect Lapua's might.

"Do you know of any plant that wards away bad spirits? Eucalyptus? Jasmine? Rosemary?" The Neverborn remained impatient, hiding it by tapping her may fingers against her arms.

"Yes, Master Seeker, rosemary." The older woman answered.

"After the pit is cleansed and all the ash twice burned, pack all of it back together. Half dirt. Half ash. Then plant that rosemary. No necromantic energy will linger and it should make certain that this can't happen again. Not for a long time, at least. The guard will need your help getting everything cremated. The faster, the better."
"You get all that, lads?" The scarred young man roused his group and set off with gusto. After giving a final, lingering stare, the other Seeker led her group to follow.

Lapua let out a sigh of exasperation. She found it immensely tiresome to handle so many different political fronts. Her admiration for her Supreme Beings only increased as she understood the strain of juggling all the conflicting interest groups.

There was still work to be done.

"[Greater Detect Magic]." After the spell, the color of the countryside became muted. Small ripples of a purplish hue emanated from the center of the pit. Like an infected bruise, the ugly violet was undercut by a gangrenous olive color.

Walking unhindered through the smoldering regolith of bodies lining the pit, Lapua made her way to the middle. Reaching out with telekinetic hands, she took her time, feeling every square inch for traps. There were several. None that were a threat to her, but if the Kadusian guard or the Seekers managed to beat back the tide of summoned undead they would have paid a dear price for their victory.

Toxic clouds and bone spike traps would have triggered while attempting to pierce the arcane veil. And if the enchantments had been attacked directly, it would have unleashed an [Anti-Life Nova]. When laid as a delayed trap, the spell was much easier to cast.

Peeling back the web of snares, Lapua burrowed through the layers until she reached the festering heart of the corruption. Turning her hand, Lapua gave a wrenching motion and pulled the offending object from its cradle. From the depths of the pit, a simple skull rose. Buoyed along, it floated into Lapua's waiting hand.

To all outward appearances, the half-melted skull would not have seemed out of place in the pile.

"[Magic Item Appraisal]."

Knowledge flooded into the Neverborn as her spell revealed the skull's secrets.

It was a Death Lure. An object given the enchantment would slowly generate a necrotic charge. Its effectiveness was muted by the fact that it took time to reach critical mass. Though it was capable of summoning a huge horde of low-tier and occasional middle-tier undead equal to [Undeath Army]. Whereas the spell could do it instantly. Whoever had placed the Death Lure was both clever and malicious. Only a powerful necromancer could have gone to such lengths.

At least in Lapua's psionic mind, there was little doubt that the Death Lure was otherworldly in origin. It was a perfect match for the sketch of such objects in her book. She put away the tome and the enchanted skull to finish her business.

After ordering the Sharpshooters to begin incinerating the pit with the Silver Knights to supervise, the Neverborn searched the trailing thoughts of the city guard to find her target. Lapua moved with purpose, parting the marshaling soldiers with simple mental suggestion.

"Captain! Captain Reese!" Lapua shouted over the din of civil unrest and fearful men.

In among the throng of city guard ushering the last of the Kadusians through the gates, Warren Reese fervently directed efforts. Although he turned to Lapua, the Captain was greatly distracted by something other than the narrowly averted undead incursion.

"Yes, Lady Lapua?" He might have stretched a rictus grin in most other circumstances, yet the
man could not even muster up the desire to fake being happy to see the Neverborn.

"There's a bit of an urgent matter regarding the source of the undead..." Lapua trailed off, unable to ignore the tumult of thoughts worming their way through Warren's mind like so many parasitic wyrms.

"The Queen is very sick. You fear she may die." Lapua stated, looking to the Kadusian palace. She did not even glance back at Reese as she marched off. Her goal was clear.

"You can't just-" Warren stepped in front of the Neverborn and placed a hand out to forestall the foreign agent from casually waltzing into the royal palace. Unfortunately for the man, it was child's play for Lapua to simply tune her halo and teleport away.

Lapua reappeared right outside Queen Ismeena's bedroom.

Guards moved towards the Black Sky agent. A small mental suggestion assured them that not only had Lapua been there the whole time, but that she was supposed to be. They resumed their earlier discussion, worrying about their queen. About the future of Kadusia, should their beloved monarch not recover. Talk died down as attendants carried an unconscious man through the antechamber. The head wizard of Kadusia was surprisingly young for his station. Middle-aged, yet prime. He had driven himself to mana exhaustion in trying nearly every spell in his repertoire to heal his Queen. Ultimately, to no avail.

Entering in after the procession, Lapua read the atmosphere as dread-filled as the citizens had been outside the walls. Many of the female handmaidens hung on the edge of full breakdowns.

Queen Ismeena Belgrave did not sleep so much as lay in a catatonic state. Her eyes were almost closed as her mind drifted, boiling in a fever haze.

Lapua placed two of her hands carefully on the Queen's temples and reached out with her psionic power.

The Queen was so weak that the sickness could be driven back by spells or potions, yet nothing could keep her strong enough to make sure it did not return. And this time, it was rooted deeply. Resurrection magic could not bring back someone so frail. Being so fragile, Lapua did not risk simply the brittle human full of healing magic. Ismeena's heart would likely give out from the strain. A minuscule trickle of power connected the two.

Lapua coaxed Ismeena's life force with the greatest care. The Neverborn sheltered the candle of the Queen's spirit before the gale trying to swallow it. A candle that had burned so low, it was a drowning blue pinprick, feebly paddling on the surface of the dark wax that was all that remained of itself. Too much heat and the last of the wick would be consumed. Too little, and it would starve. Slowly, weight was lifted from Ismeena's lungs. Brought back from the brink, precious oxygen propped up the dying Queen and a color other than ghost returned to her cheeks. Some of the dangerous fever drained away in turn.

Muttering a chant of trigger discipline, Lapua dedicated a small partition of herself to maintaining her connection while the rest of her contacted Nox and explained all that had happened.

Then, she settled in to wait.

Panting from having ran there, Reese charged into the room, yet was not expecting Lapua to be the only thing standing between his monarch and death. Any protest turned to ash in Warren's mouth as he chastised the attendants for not getting Lapua a chair or a drink before he did it himself.
Without breaking her concentration, she sat on the light pine chair and reached one of her secondary arms to beckon the man to stay.

"It's not necessary, Mister Reese, but it is appreciated."

"How's she doing?"

"Better. Not in immediate risk, anyway. This is beyond my skill. I don't know what will fix her without killing her."

"But... You have such powerful magic." Reese pleaded.

"Imagine setting a bone, and letting it heal wrong. Right now, I'm keeping her heart beating and her lungs filling. That's where much of the damage is."

Opening, then closing his mouth, Reese searched for the right words to express his helplessness and despair. For a moment, he could not look at his Queen so stricken. Then he forced himself to look, and remember her strength of spirit, and be strong himself. A chitinous hand patted his back.

"Don't fret, Warren. If Queen Ismeena can be saved, then Queen Harmony will know how to do it." As she spoke, Lapua stood and turned. Keeping one hand on Ismeena, the Neverborn bowed as Harmony came into the room as a warrior-goddess at rest. Out of Grand Alliance, she had thrown on a black blouse and comfortable jeans. Gold hairpins and jewelry hung in whimsical drifts through her crimson curls as the Scarlet Drake had been mid hair-taming when the call for aid had come.

"Queen Harmony, I have performed only emergency first aid to insure that Queen Ismeena is stabilized. Your powers of healing far outstrip my own, and your wisdom is without peer."

Harmony took the seat that Lapua offered her while Lurk hung back to let his wife concentrate. Lurk's attire was more calculated, eschewing his coat, but retaining the segmented curiass and belts.

"Thank you, Lapua. I'll take it from here." Harmony placed her palm over Ismeena's forehead and let her High Priestess powers come to the fore. She could innately feel how much mana was in her pool. The many spells in her repertoire were at her call as though memorized as fresh as the day she had selected them back in YGGDRASIL. They filled her with warmth and light and life such that she could acutely sense the fading chill gnawing on the edge of Ismeena's remaining spirit.

"[Detect Life]."

Ismeena's life force faltered as a canary before a wind elemental. Death was calling the woman as her vitality balanced on a razor's edge so fine she almost did not appear to [Detect Life]. So close, Harmony could see the faint pulse of a heartbeat struggling to overcome the mortal stillness in the Queen's limbs.

"[Protection of the First Flame]. [Blessing of Ifrit]. [Death Ward]."

The spells were simple ones. Chosen for efficiency, utility, and their ability to stack with one another. One by one, the enchantments fell over the Queen until her breathing became less labored and a color other than gray returned to her face. Reese and the royal handmaidens all watched with fear and hope as Ismeena gained a faint aura from the lingering glow of the spells.

Neither Lurk nor Woodsolution had dedicated healing classes. Which left Harmony to be her own support as a tank. Just as Lurk had optimized his build for gunnery, she had made hers entirely to do whatever her friend and husband could not. Most of her High Priestess grimoire was picked to unify the abilities of her Aegis of Muspelheim. Her job had always been to anchor the front line through
Harmony waited patiently as the buffs worked through the woman, anchoring her soul to her body just in case things did go awry. As well as provide a warm place for the fading light within the Queen to rest.

"[Heal]."

The sickness in Ismeena burned away like a cobweb before a blowtorch. Dead nerves flashed back to life. Atrophied muscles regenerated. Childhood weakness that had plagued the Belgrave woman was erased before power equal to a lifetime of healing potions. Enchanting buffs kept Ismeena's cardiovascular system from collapsing as her body went through its subtle changes. A sterile scent, not far from rubbing alcohol filled the room.

Ismeena's eyes fluttered open as she inhaled a sharp breath.

The Queen started upon seeing Harmony sitting so close, being the first thing to come into focus. Reese nearly threw himself onto the bed.

"Your Majesty! How are you feeling?" His knuckles were white from holding so tightly onto his helmet.

Ismeena refocused and blinked at Reese a few times as her senses returned. Although a bit disheveled, the Queen sat up in bed. Two handmaidens ran forward to help. Their Queen waved them away.

"I feel absolutely fantastic. Never better! Not in years. Not since I was a little girl wandering around the northern fields." Ismeena threw the many layers of blankets off of herself, quite warm. She put a hand to her chest and marveled at how easy it was to simply breathe.

"I'm glad that worked. I was worried. Here, this should help you recover." Harmony slipped a necklace over Ismeena's head. It was wrought into a traditional Celtic knot and hung from a silver chain. Amulets of Vitality were an YGGDRASIL staple.

An Amulet of Vitality gave a modest bonus to maximum hit points and strength. It was a ubiquitously utilitarian piece of kit. Only used until a player could make something more specialized with data crystals. Harmony felt no draconic pang upon giving away the little trinket. Amulets of Vitality were so basic they were almost less than worthless. Not only were they only a step or two above starter gear, but at one point an NPC shopkeeper back in YGGDRASIL had become glitched and whenever a purchase was made, equal value in Amulets of Vitality were given instead.

Harmony had discovered this the hard way after attempting to restock. Then, thinking it was a momentary glitch, did the substantial transaction again and walked away with several hundred of the charms.

Lifting the amulet, Ismeena examined the interwoven lines of the knot. Whatever lingering weakness from being bedridden was washed away as the equipment did its job. One monarch looked to the other.

"Merciful heavens, it seems I owe you another debt, Queen Harmony." Although she smiled, Ismeena quashed an unsightly pang of jealousy as her eyes darted over the crimson and gold that flecked Harmony's face and glittered among her curls. Beautiful and strong. Strong enough to carry a burden, rather than be one.
"Don't worry about it. I have way too many of those stupid amulets, and I'm sure it'll help. How are you feeling? Does anything feel funny? Hard to breathe? Pain?"

Trying to control the shaking in his hands, Reese walked by Lurk without making eye contact and out of the room. Though he did give a quick nod out of respect before departing. Lapua followed closely behind Reese and consulted with her Lord quietly while Harmony did her best medical professional impersonation.

"High Lord Lurk, your timing could not have been more perfect. Thank you for answering my humble request. I would not have troubled you or the Fair Lady Harmony unless absolutely necessary."

"You were right to call, Lapua. I would consider Ismeena dying a worst case scenario for our relationship with Kadusia. I trusted this wasn't a Nitro kind of emergency." Lurk chuckled.

"Just so, High Lord."

"Harmony always did enjoy being a healer."

"Her power is wasted on a mere human. But if she enjoys such things, then my heart is a bit lighter for deferring to her boundless skill." Lapua scoffed. Though she had grown at least a bit fonder of the Kadusians, the Neverborn would have sacrificed any and all of them for any single member of Black Sky.

"Nox told me there was an unusual undead incursion?" Lurk changed the subject to what he believed to be the more pressing concern.

"Yes, High Lord Lurk. I found this in the pit where the undead emerged." Lapua held out the Death Lure as a supplicant, lowering her head and offering the skull in two open palms. Warily, Lurk took the weaponized bone.

"You think this is from YGGDRASIL?" Lurk traced a claw over the intact eye socket of the melted skull. Even dormant, he could sense the MP needed to reactivate it.

"It's likely, sire. I don't think even the most experienced Seeker could have manufactured a Death Lure. Especially not one that would maintain its enchantment after being used.

"We know they have tier magic, but that could be coincidental. This would be the first sign of other YGGDRASIL objects. And where there's one, there's likely more." Rubbing his chin, Lurk vaguely recalled similar items. Only rarely did he venture into Helheim, and rarer still for anything other than raw material.

"Yes, sir. We can test it, if you feel it prudent to do so. Though I don't advise doing it near any population center. Only your great wisdom in ordering me to watch over the city made sure that someone was in position to contain the threat."

Lowering the skull, Lurk gave his full attention to the Neverborn.

"You've done very well, Lapua Magnum. I'm proud of your initiative and judgment." Hoping his praise came across as genuine, Lurk added a smile to help get the message through.

Lapua's eyes glistened and her chest swelled with pride. Even though she did not need air to speak, her words caught in her throat regardless. She clasped both sets of hands in front of her and fell to her knees in joy.
"Your words are too much for a lowly Disciple, Cleric."

"Do you want anything special? You've earned a reward. And stand up, silly."

"No! I could never, High Lord. Your praise is more reward than I could have ever dreamed of. No, your mere presence!"

"Nonsense. It would be unjust of a leader not to compensate someone for a job well done. And I would hate to be unfair or unjust. Within reason, of course."

Only when framed as a detriment to her Lord, did Lapua actually consider what she might want.

"Well... If..." Hesitantly, a tiny hope blossomed. "Since you summoned the [Cathedral of Brass]... Would I perhaps be allowed to meditate with you, High Lord?"

Though he raised a brow, Lurk was beginning to understand how the classes and racials influenced the inhabitants of The Citadel.

"You just want to meditate? Sure. I see no reason we couldn't do that. Go help entertain Harmony and Ismeena. Contact me later this evening when you'd like to, alright?"

"Yes! Yes. Yes. Yes. Thank you. Thank you, High Lord. Your kindness is greater than I deserve, yet I will not be the one to sully your holy word."

Practically skipping, Lapua went to Ismeena's bedside and followed her Lord's instructions to the letter. The Neverborn addressed both Queens.

"Fair Lady Harmony, I simply must show you to a dress maker in the city. The tailor at Ramon's Finery has the ability to make gemcloth, and I believe a ball gown of ruby would flatter you."

"Ramon's Finery? Truly? The tailor there knows gemcloth? Why, we must head there at once!" Ismeena declared, swinging her legs off the bed.

"Queen Ismeena, you mustn't strain yourself." One of the handmaidens pleaded.

"Tish tosh, Fara. As I said earlier, I haven't felt this fine since I was a little girl. Besides, I would not qualify dress fitting as strenuous exercise."

Harmony gave a feminine laugh and relished the prospect of a girl date. The idea of dress shopping was greatly enticing to her. Another thing that the old world only offered to the obscenely rich.

Even as Lurk pondered all that was and might be, the girls talked about their plans to go dress shopping. Possibly lingerie browsing. Then to get their hair done up. Then crossbow shooting, of all things. Mostly because one of the finest restaurants for the rich and powerful boasted an indoor range meant to pique the guests appetite and order overpriced drinks.

Even though it was far from a hospital room, the healing magic had given the space a cloying antiseptic scent. And Lurk hated that smell. He was grateful for Harmony and Lapua plying their feminine charm. It gave him an plausible reason to escape.

So he excused himself and went out to get some fresh air. An effort that was slightly hampered, considering the drizzle that had fallen over the city. Even at the center of Kadusia, he could spy the towering pillar of smoke from the burning pit of undead bodies. Once, Lurk had the horrific pleasure of witnessing a field of oil derricks catch flame. He pondered the comparison and rubbed the grooves
of the Death Lure. Without his coat, the water did not bother him a wit, vaporizing to steam on contact with Lurk's scales because of his passives.

There was no use in wondering what had been brought onto the new world with the arrival of The Citadel. That choice was far removed from Lurk's claws. All he could really do, was decide how he would use his power to intervene. His mind drifted far and wide as his legs carried him nowhere in particular. The servants and guards of the palace sheltered from the rain and avoided his imposing presence as the Wyrmblood brooded.

Wandering the perimeter of the modest Kadusian palace, Lurk spotted Reese.

The Captain was huddled against the wind and rain in an alcove formed by two decorative columns holding up statues of old heroes. There was a periodic flash from the man's cupped hands. Getting closer, Lurk saw Reese was fiddling with a small medallion that would spark as he tried to catch the little cinders into a pipe packed tightly with dried tobacco.

Reese was aware of someone approaching, but was far too agitated with his faulty fire starter to care who.

At least until a draconic claw entered his field of view, inches from his nose. A small flame hovered above the burgundy hide of Lurk's palm. Warren glanced between the steady tongue of fire and Lurk's unreadable visage. Then back to the fire. Then back one more time, before he wordlessly brought his pipe towards the offered light and took a few short puffs to ignite his dried leaf.

Reese took a deep drought, letting the well-aged flavor roll through him. It eased his fraying nerves.

Lurk stepped off to Warren's side out of the drizzle and pulled out a black clove cigarette of his own. Setting it in his mouth took some fiddling because of his muzzle. Eventually he succeeded and lit the cigarette Back in YGGDRASIL, the bottomless pack was just cosmetic. One that was quickly discontinued due to censorship laws. The glowing ember on the end of the clove stick flared as he inhaled. Lurk let out the tentative puff through his nostrils. Shapes danced through the fragrant smoke.

The Wyrmblood felt a sharp pang of guilt as he indulged in the vice. It was far too pure not to take his time with. Free of chemical preservatives. Free of poison and nicotine and tar, the flavor was sublime beyond compare.

"Harmony would kill me if she saw this." Leaning against the stone, Lurk felt his back press into his armor. Pensively, he continued to roll the Death Lure in his left claw, resisting the urge to channel his inner Macbeth.

"My wife can't stand smoking. She always makes me go outside, so I rarely do it. Especially during winter." Reese spoke around the stem of his pipe.

"Back in my world. Well... Long story. Anyway, these were very bad for you. All the real plants were either extinct, or too expensive. So it was mostly just plastic, tar, and nicotine. I swore to Harmony that I would quit for her. Almost went back once or twice. Some habits never really die."

"Peculiar smell. Are they good?"

Without a word, Lurk handed Reese one of the little sticks. His cosmetic refilled automatically through magic after all. Reese lit the clove cigarette on the remaining cinders in his pipe and switched. For a time, there was only the susurration of the rain.
"Sir, if you don't mind, I'd like to say something that I hope doesn't offend." Even though the day had worn away his manners, Reese still chose his words to be clear and honest.

"Speak your mind, Captain. We're just two men sharing a smoke right now."

"I didn't like you at first, King Lurk. Not after what happened to my Theresa." Reese was not an especially superstitious man, yet was acutely aware of the Blood Gem hanging from his belt. The one he had sworn to his wife he had thrown away.

Warren took a draw of clove smoke and continued.

"I still don't know if I do. Regardless, you have my gratitude. I'm not gonna lick your boots like some Orza noble might try to do. But I'm not blind. Nor will pretend to be a fool. Kadusia owes you a debt that can't easily be repaid. When the people hear about how your Queen saved ours with a magic spell, you'll have won them all over again. And by the accounts from my men, miss Lapua saved us from a serious threat. Again. You could ask almost anything of us, and most would jump at the chance. That makes me uncomfortable."

Before replying, Lurk enjoyed his own drought of sweet clove.

"It can be said that an extraordinary man in an extraordinary world is no better than an ordinary man in an ordinary world. Believe it or not, I do know what it's like to be helpless. To be insignificant in the face of strength unattainable in a hundred lifetimes. To be one among a billion, desperate for respite between the crushing numbers all around."

Warren's head spun trying to comprehend Lurk, and chalked it up to his alien nature.

"What kind of world was that?"

Rather than answer, Lurk took a deep inhale and held it, letting the pressure in his chest ripple outward through his limbs. He held up the Death Lure and thought that its malformed visage carried a grief. Sadness for the living. As most death seemed to convey.

"I really shouldn't keep bringing it up. I always hated those 'back in my day' sentiments. let me ask you a question instead, Mister Reese. What would you do to save your wife? Your daughter?"

"Anything," Warren grimaced, realizing that he may have just crossed a threshold. Made a pact with an otherworldly creature. However, his fears were unfounded.

Lurk simply nodded.

"Then we understand each other better than you may realize. The world is unkind to the powerless. And there is nothing, no length I would not go to in order to protect my wife." The Ancient Incarnate looked at the Kadusian. "If there's one thing I know about my Harmony, it's that she's too kind. So you don't have to worry, Captain Reese. Black Sky believes that friends and allies are better than enemies. We're not conquerors. We only make war on those who bring war to us."

Both men exhaled clove smoke in the silence that followed.
Later that day, Lurk met Lapua in the Cathedral just as he promised. Lurk had arrived early and burned the time by playing a few notes on the pipe organ. He was determined to relish every day as if it were his last in the new world.

"My Lord, I'm... Not interrupting, am I?" Lapua timidly slinked across the floor to where Lurk stood at the center of the cathedral nave.

"Good afternoon, Lapua. You're not interrupting at all." Lurk had left off his armor to give a more casual air. He smiled, noticing the extra polish on Lapua's Caliber Court attire.

"I beg your forgiveness, Holy Lord. I heard some of the music you were making. It drifted on the wind down the mountain. It was beautiful."

Though her sycophantic attitude was a little much to bear, Lurk never lost his patience. He was slowly coming to understand the devotion programmed into The Citadel. On one claw, it reassured him, knowing that they were loyal to a spiritual degree. On the other, he was discomforted at the blind nature of it.

Lurk could not go back in time and change their settings. The draconic man was most disturbed at the idea that he had taken away their free will. They did not get to choose their place or lives. A melancholy strain of thought drifted to Phage. All he could do, was be genuine with them. Be real for them. Lead them to the best of his abilities and in time perhaps, if given the choice, they would make it because they wanted to and not because they were compelled to.

"Your troops are well kept, and by your reports, relations with the Seekers and Kadusia is building quickly. Your actions bring honor to Black Sky."

"Thank you, Holy Lord. I am unworthy of such praise. It was by your effort and judgment that I was given this opportunity to be first among the Caliber Court sent out as a representative of Black Sky Legion. And I have done nothing but build upon the work Lady Harmony and your blessed lordship did with Queen Belgrave."

Lurk waved a dismissive claw.

"An opportunity too good to pass up. Regardless, you only wanted a chance to meditate with me, correct?"

Lapua clasped her four hands together in front of her and seemed weak at the knees, about to drop in supplication yet again.

"I know it's selfish to even ask for a moment of your time Holy Lord I merely wished to reflect on the Tetragrammaton in your presence it would be the greatest honor but I understand if you have more important matters to attend what am I saying of course you do please forgive this foolish servant of yours in her blasphemous monopolization of your-"

Unable to hold back, Lurk let out a hearty laugh. He raised both claws and gestured for the Neverborn to relax a bit.

"It's no trouble, Lapua. That's part of why I summoned the [Cathedral of Brass]. The top of our mountain was too perfect not to put one up here. Having a clear and organized mind is just as important for good health as cleaning the body. As a psion, I'm sure you've seen men close to
breaking by their mental stress alone. Everyone in The Citadel is welcome here."

"Your wisdom is effervescent, Holy Lord. Where else to be closer to the Tetragrammaton than the high ground?"

"Just so." A warm chuckle slipped through Lurk's smile. "Which verse would you like to meditate on?" He gazed around at the cardinal directions.

To the north, focused on the mind. The Cerebral side of marksmanship.

To the south was the reflex, the snap reactions.

To the east, the relentlessness aggressive, full auto control.

To the west was the immovable. The sustained, bottomless magazine.

"North!" Lapua blurted, before covering her mouth with all four hands even though she did not use it to speak.

"North. Wind. The mind. The sword. Clarity. And accuracy. An excellent choice."

Immediately the Neverborn brightened back up, placing two hands on her heart while she hid her smile with the other pair.

"Holy Lord, if... If my fellow members of the Caliber Court perform their duties as well as you say I have mine, then would you entertain the suggestion of the shadow of the concept of the idea of perhaps maybe allowing your humble and unworthy servants to hold court in your Cathedral?"

Lapua quivered like a leaf, positively terrified of what reprimand he might dish out for the simple insolence of asking a question. All four of her chitinous hands worked the others, nearly rubbing herself raw as she fidgeted.

"If they succeed, then yes. But if they do not, then they shall still come to the Cathedral, but they will meditate on their own." He hoped by keeping his tone soft, his words would not seem harsh. Lurk had not considered failure, but hoped that if any of the Court did not succeed in the mission he had laid out to them, it would be through no fault of their own. Lapua's actions gave him confidence.

"Your generosity is only matched by your wisdom, High Lord."

Lurk and Lapua sat on the selected branch of the Cathedral floor. Lapua went into a lotus position with her many fingertips touching, her four arms crossed over her chest. Crossing his legs and laying Entropy across his knees, Lurk let the silence of the Cathedral settle on him like a shroud. Both the Wyrmblood and Neverborn let the cold focus of the northern hymns of the Cathedral fill their minds with accuracy.

"Nox, would you care to join us?" Lurk broke the quiet that settled in the hallowed space.

Wordlessly, the Guardian formed from Lurk's shadow in a cross-legged pose. Echo of Damnation spanned his knees just as Entropy sat on his Lord's own lap. Lurk closed his eyes and tried not to laugh.

Breathing in, counting to four, then exhaling, Lurk relaxed his body piece by piece. Step by step, the Wyrmblood king considered his actions like a Kata.

Kadusia was saved from an undead assault by someone with access to YGGDRASIL artifacts.
The Queen was saved. Oxelan was willing to trade and share knowledge of the world. Casting Super Tier was possible and had been illuminating as well as exalting. Using Thermo-Antithesis had been nostalgic and informative. Playing with the Corsairs had been... Strangely fun and reverent at the same time. And The Citadel's position in the world was only growing stronger.

And yet there was still so much to do!

Harmony had done beautifully in her negotiations with King Wojak and Oxelan. He was certain that with the Leviathan, the Oxelan people would be won over. They were sailors and sea folk after all. And just as Reese had said, Black Sky was cemented in the minds of the Kadusians as benevolent allies.

*What do these people trade? What can we profit on? What would benefit The Citadel without giving away our technological or magical edge?*

His worries and mental somersaults ranged far and wide in breadth and scale. He considered the massive material cost of setting up more Hellhammers, yet told himself that the Forgemother had such things well in hand. As each worry or nagging doubt or just pent up debris from living life as a real king came, he let go of each in turn.

More than anything, he needed to be at the top of his game. He had to be sharp, cunning, intelligent, and adaptive. And Lurk could do none of those things if his brain was tied up in knots so tight it would take a greatsword to hack through.

Fear. Doubt.

Lurk let it pass over and beyond, allowing the mental detritus drift far away into the placid sea of mind. The storm of thought and consideration melted into calm reflection. Then into stillness. A thousand worries tugged at Lurk's mind, and he let them drop away. He cut away the insecurity with certainty and sharpened his thoughts with the whetstone of surety. If he was to be measured by word and action, he considered what he had said to Reese before departing Kadusia.

True to Lurk's word, Black Sky would not start any war in the new world.

War, however, did not slumber. Its coils shifted, furnaces stirred, and hoofs pawed the ground in anticipation even as the smoke of undead pyres rose into the weeping sky.

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Chapter End Notes

Hello and welcome everyone! Welcome once again to the end of the chapter, gentle reader. I'm so glad to join you here. Unfortunately this chapter took a bit longer than expected due to ludicrous work-related... Ugh. I won't bore you with the details, let's just say it's difficult to find time to write around a full-time job.
Thank you to everyone for the magnificent feedback and comments recently! I can't express enough of how much every word means to me. Please don't be shy! I read everything, and it helps me find the drive to push this keyboard late into the night.

I hope you all join me for the next chapter soon! Escalation is at hand, and I can hear those familiar drums of war, rumbling in the distance.
Silver Barons

Ten Gauge was first among the Caliber Court. The group had no formal ranking system amongst its members, but the Wendigo occupied the honorary head seat nevertheless. Important for breaking ties whenever court was held and motions passed. Before leaving, the Caliber Court had convened in perhaps their most important session. Whereupon it had been decided that Nitro unquestionably held the title of 'Most Posh', Ten Gauge was agreed to be the 'Most Dashing'.

The Wendigo dwelled on the honor of such a distinction as he at last set eyes on the final destination of his mission.

His wyvern team had taken a more circuitous route to the city, arriving well after Nitro had forged Black Sky’s connection with Oxelan.

It was not enough to achieve their mission, it had to be executed to the maximum letter and spirit of intent. Orza was their ultimate goal, but Lurk's completionist attitude had made its way into Ten Gauge in the form of a systematic kind of practicality.

His team spent three weeks spent meandering the countryside as the air grew in its bitter chill while fast approaching the winter months. Every day was used to gather information, local currency, supplies, and of course, spreading word of the glorious name of Black Sky Legion.

Ten Gauge quickly caught the trail of the fleeing remnants of the Bandit King forced north through the efforts of Corsair and Flayer kill squads. There was great pleasure to be had in annihilating any bandits unfortunate enough to be caught by the Wendigo. It offered pretense for his actions and loosened tongues along the way. Folk accustomed to their autonomy took better to a new power when the strength of Black Sky Legion was demonstrated to their benefit rather than intimidation.

Far from the protection of the city-states, the settlements technically fell into Kadusia or Oxelan territory, and had to fend for themselves in most cases. With their armies away, local militia or wandering Seekers were the only thing keeping the torch lit for the more isolated pockets of life. An unruly mob of misfits and cutthroats, broken off into packs like wild dogs prowled the more lawless country. Free company and bandit groups regularly exploited isolated villages and sometimes whole towns. Even the more modest settlements were fortified against monsters rather than the wicked cleverness of their fellow man and were easily abused.

They arrived at Orza in the evening. In the fading light, the silver city gleamed.

Ten Gauge ordered a fly over, circling the fabled silver city to assess it before landing. There had been a lot of talk from the towns along the way, and the Wendigo was curious to see if Orza lived up to its reputation.

In the glittering bay, frost collected on the shore and massive icebreaker ships were moored at
stone docks. Their mass and magnificent prows cut through the thick ice to keep the city open. Many were so massive that they were lashed to the outer jetties. When the deepest winter months set in and the roads became too treacherous, the icebreakers were a vital lifeline for trade. Although Orza took great pride in its naval power, the standing army was where their true strength resided.

South of the city, rolling hills turned into treacherous crags which led to the natural depression in the surrounding peaks. Snow capped mountains surrounded Orza while the city in turn girdled a large bay open to the ocean. Ancient watch keeps kept their crumbling vigil on the high mountain steppes. Only a few still had fires lit.

Orzan architecture leaned towards steep roofs with ceramic shingles and tall spires. The city had been planned, burnt down, and rebuilt several times to resist both fire and cold with wide streets and avoided flammable building materials. Storms of apocalyptic ferocity would ravage the city from over the northern mountains. After generations, the people had just learned to live with it. Being ever a tenacious sort, humans focused their efforts and managed to achieve life in some of the most inhospitable places.

Just like the other city states that survived the dangers of the continent, Orza had tall stone walls and numerous defensive fortifications. Every tower was festooned with mounted crossbows and larger weaponry as well. Three square keeps rose up even higher than the gleaming silver spires, topped by ballista whose construction was now lost to the Orzan people.

Although he respected the natural defensiveness of the city, Ten Gauge counted woefully few guards actually patrolling its walls.

Landing on the road from the eastern mountain pass, the Black Sky wyvern team dismounted to stretch cramped limbs. There was much discussion among the soldiers as their goal was at last in sight. Sharpshooters and Silver Knights pondered where the fighting would take place, curious about the strange layout of the city streets they had seen from the sky. The two Corsairs pitched in their expertise in close urban fighting. They all had some idea of what to expect, yet knew that the woes of the countryside were likely only the tip of the iceberg compared to Orza proper.

Ten Gauge moved ahead to announce their arrival to the city, and hopefully begin his mission. No one else was on the road at such a late hour, so Ten Gauge stood along before the eastern gatehouse. A quick enhancement meant his words were heard by everyone within several hundred feet.

"People of Orza, I am Ten Gauge of the Caliber Court, and representative of Black Sky Legion. I am here as an official envoy from The Citadel to foster a mutually beneficial relationship between us."

All that immediately happened was panic among the wall guards as two of the ballista on either side of the gatehouse swivelled to point his way. A heavy iron portcullis dropped into place with a clang.

Despite lacking an expressive face, the red pinpricks of his eyes shrunk and his jaw clicked in agitation. Clenching and unclenching his fist did help assuage the urge to draw his Hydra. The Wendigo held his massive riot shield in a stately pose. Though not too far to bring to bear. Just in case.

Minutes passed by in uncomfortable stillness. The sun dipped sleepily behind the city, casting its ruddy winter tiredness across the bay. Spires caught the fading light as the silhouette of Orza was bathed in setting red. Discipline kept the Wendigo staring intently at the closed gates, unstirred as the chill wind ruffled the fur adorning the collar of his coat. Finally, the portcullis raised just high enough for a rather portly gentleman to squeeze out. It was the greasy ease through which countless
uneearned coin had slipped between his fingers that the man exuded the unmistakable air of a tax collector. With all the charm his station could afford, the gatehouse supervisor trundled over to the waiting Black Sky soldier.

Many facial subtleties of humanoid races escaped the Wendigo. Language and tone was easy to understand, and Ten Gauge correlated them with the many expressions that mortals could produce. He had learned much in dealing with the country lords and simple folk who staked their honest lives on the sweat of their brows. An incident early on involving cattle accidentally eaten by the Greater Wyvern had taught Ten Gauge quite a lot.

If the man had any reservations about Ten Gauge's appearance, it did not show.

"You must move your creature, sir! It is blocking the main thoroughfare."

Out of every possible reaction that the Wendigo had expected, foot traffic obstruction was the last. Only after rapidly clicking his jaw, did Ten Gauge default to his mission.

"Do you represent the people of Orza?"

The Wendigo watched, completely baffled as the portly man wiped sweat from his neck from even the smallest amount of exertion.

"Only insofar as collecting the toll for using house Bellane's gate. You're going to want to take up official business with the Silver Council. Again, sir, my duties to the city require I ask you to move your..." The man peered around Ten Gauge. "... Dragon, I suppose."

"Where is a clear landing space within the city?"

"Public space is open domain, but you will incur a fee if you use it. And of course, requires the proper forms filed with the public offices with no less than three days of advance notice." Even the portly man's perfectly neutral face betrayed some hesitance at the prospect of dealing with these 'public offices'.

"Where is a clear landing space that can be used today?"

"Well, if you're that desperate, then perhaps one of the houses might be generous enough to extend a line of credit so you can use a space to conduct business. They will want interest on their credit line, of course. I can put word in with Belane, if you make it worthwhile." With a gesture Ten Gauge had learned in dealing with a particularly unsavory and quite dead group of mercenaries, the gate official indicated that a little coin could grease the way.

Ten Gauge was unprepared for the inscrutable unscrupulousness of a red-blooded beaurocrat. He was caught between admiration at the audacity and anger at the attempted extortion.

"Where is a clear landing space that can be used today, which does not require either money or a three day notice?"

"Foreign dignitary, right? Yes, you might ply the houses, see if one wants a favor owed, if you catch the gleam of my silver?"

*****
In Orza, the rot went deep.

As far as governing law was concerned, Snowdrop did not exist. The smugglers, peddlers, and dealers of the drug who formed a loose collective around the market preferred to keep it that way. Frostbite and the Glares especially. They were by far the largest and most organized in the silver city, and more than once mounted bloody feuds through the streets over territory with the households beyond caring so long as their personal supplies continued to flow.

The small, woefully underfunded city guard tried valiantly to stamp out Snowdrop dens and destroy shipments whenever possible. Yet their jobs were next to impossible with so many household soldiers directly on either gang's payroll.

Ballard and Cedrick of the Glares were camped out on the rooftop of a cargo warehouse by the bay. The section of dockyard was ostensibly owned by House Lamosseau. Though it had not seen use in several months. Other Glares huddled underneath blankets and huddled around Firestone heaters. The two leaders watched as a wyvern covered in red armor landed and the foreigners dismounted. The whole affair was hard to miss because a magic caster among the group lit up the area with a [Flare]. Cedrick recognized the spell. The man was an avid collector of relics from the Meteor Fields.

"So, I know we were supposed to figure out why someone needed five bolt throwers in such a hurry. But what're those stupid household bastards doing?" Ballard spoke softly to his prone companion.

Word had travelled quickly through the unsavory elements of Orza given the nature of the sudden request for heavy weaponry transported discreetly to the warehouses. Cedrick and Ballard along with a strong group of Glares enforcers had been sent to make sure it was not Frostbite setting up something big.

"Look! Look there. You can see the point of a bolt sticking out between those crates. They aim to take out their dragon. You can tell by the barbs on it." Lifting his spyglass, Cedrick's mind whirled with the implications.

"At that kind of range? Well, there's no way they can miss. Especially with those throwers. Why are they so set on killin' these guys? What d'you think they gain?" Even without a glass, Ballard could easily make out details. Knights in polished armor. Lizard men with strange staves. Strangely dressed elves with wicked looking crossbows. Even as he looked, a golem unfolded and stood to its full height, easily three times that of a man.

"Dunno. I'm sure they've got valuable stuff, but you know they're not gonna make back what they spent to get those ballista relics in such a hurry. What is that giant? Who are these guys? I've never heard of a trained dragon. 'Specially not one decked out in armor."

"It's a wyvern." Ballard corrected, scratching the stubble under his jaw.

"What?"

"Common mistake. Dragons have four legs and wings. Wyverns have two legs and walk on their wings."

Cedrick lowered his spyglass and wordlessly stared at his partner with incredulous disdain. Realizing what he had said, Ballard could not look the other Glare in the eye.

"Who d'you think they're tryin' to get on their good side?" Ballard deflected.
"Not us. Not another house. And Ice Orcs don't do subtle. Not like this." Cedrick looked between the foreigners and the bolts poking between stacks of crates. He caught only a brief glimpse of one of the men waiting in ambush. Undoubtedly a household knight, yet his heraldry was either missing or obscured.

"You don't think... Heymon?" Cedrick ventured.

"No way. I know the Barons are all idiots, but even they wouldn't be stupid enough to work with the Heymon? Right?" As soon as the words left his mouth, Ballard felt a pit drop into his stomach.

*****

"Alright, those monsters are in position. I wasn't sure about attacking these Black Sky people. But now I see why the Heymon want them gone." Serlo ducked back behind the crates once more. He rubbed his lower back beneath the plate armor. The would-be slayers had gotten everything together in a hurry.

"Just another time where I was right and you were wrong." Gil muttered, keeping his voice low. They were hidden a far distance away, tucked between the old stone buildings of the quay. Gil's hands were shaking as he checked and rechecked the ballista, making sure the cord was drawn as far back as possible and the barbed bolt was trained squarely on the heart of the scaly beast on the other side of the docks.

The dragon slayer tools were old. Leftovers from a war between the dragons and everyone else. Centuries without conflict had caused the war to retreat into myth and legend. Trophies and tapestries commemorating heroes were relegated to museums or the more sentimental houses. Symbols from when Orza was not called Orza adorned the artifact. The techniques and materials to make more of the ballistas were lost just as the heroes of the old dragon war. As such, they were irreplaceable and were worth fortunes. Back in those days, precious metal from the Comet Fields had been forged into bolts, able to pierce any dragon's hide. There had to be a unanimous vote from the ruling Silver Barons to open the vaults where the stockpiles were stored.

Five of the antique weapons pointed at the entourage of Black Sky Legion.

Serlo glanced around to check if they were being listened in on.

"I still don't like doing anything that helps out those Heymon bastards. I've got a brother who's off fighting with the Coalition." He hissed the misgivings for the tenth time since they had gotten their orders.

"Some of us had to go fight. We have to keep up appearances for the Coalition. Ya don't have t'like it, Serlo. Just follow my orders. Baron Lamosseau wants to make sure that when the Heymon come, we're the ones they put in charge. Simple as that." Gil did not like it either, and had gotten as well regarded in house Lamosseau by never letting his distaste show.

"Look at the size 'o that dragon they brought. Did we bring enough ballistas?" Serlo's heart raced in worry that the angry behemoth would come for them if they failed to land a killing blow with the first volley.

"We just need to wait for the right opportunity. They're busy. Looks like they're unloading supplies." Gil patted the side of the ballista and kept his hand feather-light on the release. "These are
the real deal. Even if we don't hit something vital, it'll be stuck on the ground and we can get off more shots."

As the two men spoke, men in gleaming armor and odd lizard folk called out weapons checks and took personal tallies of their ordinance. A strange statue that had been curled up in a tight ball unfolded slender limbs and stood, easily taller than three men put together.

"What about that giant they've got? I don't like the looks of that." Serlo remarked as the construct turned its wrists and retrieved the long blade from its back.

"It's slow. Watch. It's probably a golem for moving heavy things. Some magic casters use things like 'em. If it becomes a problem we can load another set of bolts." Gil pointedly ignored the smooth grace and large weaponry of the golem. "We've got a hundred armed men and some of the best magic casters in all of Orza. As soon as the ballistas fire, everyone else has crossbows and the casters will hit 'em with third tier magic. They won't know what happened."

"So let's take the fucking shot." Serlo's chest tightened in fear he would never get the chance to voice.

"Hold. Wait until we've got a clear shot at its neck. The others will fire when we do." Gil hissed, teeth on edge.

"Hey... Hey, hey, hey... That weird lookin' one is coming this way. Does he see us?"

Serlo pointed to the deer-skull man with the large shield heading straight towards them.

Tighter and tighter, Gil's hand constricted on the release of his ballista as Serlo backed away from their cover and raised his own crossbow.

"Shit... He's not stopping. Fire now!"

******

"I still think we should've bribed that Nothier guy. At least we wouldn't have ended up somewhere that stank like dead fish." The Sharpshooter tried not to breathe through his nose too much. He turned and helped one of his sisters dismount the Greater Wyvern.

"At least it was free." She responded.

"Yeah, I know we're not exactly swimming in the silver these Orzans are so obsessed with, but do we want them to think The Citadel is poor?" A Corsair chimed in as his partner tended to the group's Painlord.

All around, the Black Sky soldiers checked their gear and made ready to explore the city.

Ten Gauge clicked his jaw.

"Until we know what rules can be comfortably bent or broken, I'd rather not proactively tarnish Black Sky's reputation in this city. Remember, our charge is primarily good relations." The Wendigo consulted a small ledger of their travels and skimmed his own notes on priority objectives.

"The gate official recommended greasing our passage with a bit of coin. Wouldn't that have made
"He also said that we might leverage political favor with one of the houses for free use of a space."
Ten Gauge answered the concern. He was not bothered by the uncertainty of his troops. Human
custom and manner always baffled the Wendigo. It just meant Ten Gauge felt all the more honored at
being selected for such a challenging mission.

"Could we not have just landed outside the city, sir?" A Silver Knight respectfully asked,
exasperated with the time they had spent bouncing through bureaucratic hoops. The soldiers were all
on edge. Warehouse buildings crouched like old toads around them, giving the distinct impression of
abandonment and neglect.

"Yes, we could have, but one does not tip over a Hellwasp nest gently. Our goal is information.
We must convey our strength to tantalize the wolves among the sheep as well as appear ignorant. It
also lets us know who's best at pretending to be friendly. The Lamosseau representative was the first
one to not actively seek out a bribe, and I'm curious to see what kind of greeting they plan." Ten
Gauge closed his ledger and walked out from underneath the canopy formed by the wyvern's
leathery wings.

He panned his gaze around the warehouse quay and his paranoia tickled. A hush permeated the
space. There was the faint murmur of the bay, of water and stone whispering. But no birds or
animals. Two-legged or otherwise.

It was a heavy quiet.

"[Preysight]." Ten Gauge growled. The pinpricks of lights in the sockets of his skull blazed white.
It was one of his favorite spells as few ever thought to put counters up against the non-traditional
detection magic. So long as his targets were not undead, or a clever mage, he would see them.

Heartbeats and the creatures attached to them were highlighted to the Wendigo. Men appeared as
pulsing flashes of red veins. Some were hidden inside the warehouses. A sizable group watched
from atop a roof. But the largest collection of life clustered behind barricades of wooden crates that
blended with numerous other stacks of old mercantile detritus.

"Typical humans. Always believing themselves to be the hunters." Ten Gauge scoffed.

Ten Gauge marched straight towards the men whose red veins stood out like ruddy beacons in the
night.

That was when the ballistas fired.

The barbed steel ballista bolt whistled by Ten Gauge and was deflected by the [Projectile
Protection] woven through the Relic armor the wyvern wore. A barrier was briefly visible as it was
struck, rippling in a web of blue hexagons.

To protect his Legion, Lurk had dredged up old plans of his to arm and armor the Greater
Wyverns which protected the eighth floor of The Citadel. The process of it had always seemed too
much time investment for too little return. No raider had made it that far into the Black Sky guild
home. With the ability to delegate the task, it was easy to simply order the large creatures outfitted to
his exacting detail.

Faster than mortal eyes could follow, Ten Gauge lifted his shield and an automatic skill kicked in,
forming a phantom copy of his shield in front of the other bolts. He swatted away the attack. Metal
clangs echoed off the warehouses. The fur lining of his collar barely rustled. A flurry of smaller
projectiles flew his way and were stopped by more of the Wendigo's Shield Lord abilities.

Eyes still blazing with [Preysight], he knew exactly where the attack had come from. A guttural growl escaped his throat, and if he had the gift of lips, they would have been curling in disgust.

"[Feast Of The Deep]." His free hand reached towards the group and clenched. A void opened like a trench. Roots covered in splintered bone fragments rose from the shadowy pool and lashed out. The spell was gross overkill. Men were pulled into a meat grinder of sorts. A tidal pool of druidic wrath. A few screams were cut short by wet tears as globs of wet meat wrapped in bits of cloth were scattered like party favors. In a brief celebration of violence, every man was torn to shreds while the ballista were smashed to pieces.

A warehouse front too close to the epicenter sagged as its foundation was eroded.

Turning on his heel, Ten Gauge marched back to his team. Along the way he glared at the men on the roof and cowering in one of the other warehouses. The second group took the chance and made their escape, scampering off into the alleyways of the city.

Silver Knights formed into a protective circle, their spears held ready. Sharpshooters scanned the quay through their irons. The Corsairs were flitting around in trails of fire. And the Painlord only appeared still as a statue, when in fact its magic staves were primed from its internal reserves.

The Wendigo was graced by his Holy Lord and creator with many skills and abilities, from Shield Lord to Doom Slayer. Ten Gauge's race had natural affinity for certain nature magic, and he was thankful for High Lord Lurk's gift of Thorn Mage. With his druidic levels, Ten Gauge could speak in most beast languages, and addressed the Greater Wyvern of his team first.

"Bohra-rak. Filia s'kar ro shulva." He said, instructing his wyvern to circle overhead and spot any more ambush points.

"M'duroh, Ten Gauge." The Greater Wyvern answered with a deferential nod before taking wing. Tightening the ring, the squad converged around their leader.

"Three knights in front. Three in back. Sharpshooters between them. Corsairs on lookout. Painlord, take the rear. Until stated otherwise, this is hostile territory." Ten Gauge tapped the polished wood of his Hydra's grip.

"Sir!" Came the chorus reply as the soldiers took their formation.

"Certainly the most eventful place we've been to so far." Grumbled a Demi-Claw. His trigger finger itched.

"At least we're not dealing with those country lords anymore." Answered a knight.

"I liked all the people bein' grateful. And the fresh air. Not like here. The cold is takin' the edge off, but you can still smell the fungus clinging to all the rot." Another Demi-Claw added as the squad moved out of the open towards the sight of Ten Gauge's opening salvo.

In a steak of emerald flame, one of the Corsairs flitted up onto the Painlord's shoulder.

"Heya big guy. Don't mind me." She swayed on her perch to match the giant's gait.

The Painlord made a wing gesture, missing the previous town they had been in where doves had roosted on him for a few days.
"You Painlords are weak for little critters, aren't ya?" The Corsair asked.

In its ponderous way, the Painlord made a circle around the top of its smooth, sweeping head.

"Don't worry big guy, I'll make you another flower crown when we get a chance, okay?" The Corsair crouched down to reduce her silhouette and patted her shoulder guard perch.

With a contented nod, the bipedal automaton slowed to stand behind its team.

The squad came to the darkened stain of splinters and bone left behind by the aftermath of [Feast Of The Deep].

"That was a real dirty trick they pulled. Inviting us in on friendly terms, then trying to cut our throats." A Silver Knight derided in the face of devastation. "I think Eighth Tier may have been a bit excessive for such scum, Lord Ten Gauge. Though an understandable reaction given the circumstances, sir."

"Ah, I suppose I should have left some alive for questioning." Ten Gauge gave a few thoughtful clicks as he considered how to rectify his zealous persecution of Black Sky's enemies.

Given the state of the corpses, Ten Gauge was uncertain if even the esteemable Lord Skitharix could piece something back together. Among the spilled entrails steaming in the cold there might have been a few usable pieces. Although missing the lower jaw and much of the scalp, there was a head that had managed to roll free of the carnage. The Wendigo picked up the morsel and looked into its one remaining eye.

"Though perhaps in death they might relinquish secrets." Ten Gauge opened his jaw wide enough to engulf the entire top of the head. Special glands under his broad tongue primed his mouth with a unique saliva. Acid melted through bone in seconds and let him take a generous bite of the man's brain. The rich grey fat dissolved in the Wendigo's hungry maw.

Fragments of memory came to Ten Gauge. Memory of a man named Serlo.

Flashes of coins being changed hands furtively. Smuggled goods and black market dealings. Foreign power was at work, undermining the foundations of Orza from many directions.

Snowdrop smoke. A disgusting euphoria brought on by the substance which clouded much of Serlo's brain. There was a man the flavor of sand, and a smell like an ice so bitter that Ten Gauge had to run his tongue over the roof of his mouth to cleanse it of the acrid tang. The first was indeed a man. A spy of the Heymon Empire. The other was... Something else. Something that Serlo regarded as more of an abstract. A concept that was buried under layers of narcotics.

In a moment, Ten Gauge understood life for the Orzans. At least from the perspective of Serlo of House Lamosseau.

Two things made up the lifeblood of any Orzan citizen. Silver. And Firestone. Summer for them was an aberration. A brief respite of the freezing temperatures that lasted for less than a quarter of the year. Firestone was a ubiquitous, and vital magic ore that provided warmth on the nights that could freeze a man's very blood if he stepped outside in the howling ice storms. And silver was the reason the silver city existed at all. There was no other place on the continent with richer deposits of metal. Precious and otherwise. Orzan iron was exported by the shipload. And Orzan silver made for over ninety percent of all silver in circulation among the city states.

Noble houses controlled the different mines. They controlled everything. A vestigial skeleton of public works existed for the city, underfunded and anemic of any real power. Ten Gauge had
discussed the Silver Barons at length with Lapua. His courtly sister had given all the information she had gathered through the Seekers about Orza and its ruling council.

Being there, and consuming someone with direct insight on the matter gave Ten Gauge needed clarity on just what he would be dealing with. Black Sky Legion had not been players on the continental stage for long, and already there were factions out for blood. Self-styled hunters seeking prey. The city of Orza itself was going to test Ten Gauge and his men.

And he relished the challenge.

Sending a silent prayer of thanks to his Holy High King for gifting him such a task, he turned back around and addressed his waiting soldiers.

"We march for a place we can make a claim of parlay. One of the courthouses in this district will suffice. Once we've made our claim, the Silver Barons will be forced to put us under their protection. The enemies we face are going to do their best to stop us."

Ten Gauge met each expectant soldier's gaze.

"And they're going to fail."

With his new knowledge, Ten Gauge set off to invoke an ancient right laid as deep as the strongest foundations in the city. One of the old laws that the Silver Barons were still beholden to required them to meet anyone who called Orza to parlay. His troops followed him into certain conflict without a backward glance. Orza squatted low, its forgotten slums muffling the sound of water as they pressed into its crusted alleys. The streets were even older than the city. Often times in the past, only the scorched cobblestone would remain after particularly fierce dragon attacks.

It only took two streets and a bend before the jaws of the next trap snapped shut. But Ten Gauge's squad was ready.

"Contact. House to our left. Crossbow in the window pointing our way." A Demi-Claw placed her irons on target. "Taking the shot."

With one easy bullet, the Sharpshooter popped the man's head and anarchy broke loose in the street.

Men boiled from the nearby houses and from hidden side streets faster than the Demi-Claws could work their bolts. Windows were smashed and arrows were flung down in thickets. A few magic casters threw fire and lightning.

And from every pair of lips came a single cry.

"For the Bandit King!"

"Not these assholes again." One of the Silver Knights complained as he stabbed a man in the heart, having been at the battle in front of Kadusia's walls.

Even though he stood in front, Ten Gauge at first simply held his ground. The humans could not get within reach of him through the Shield Lord's wards. Every one that stayed and tried made themselves an easy target and were gunned down. The howling bandits held a peculiar quality to them. Most fell by rifle round or spear thrust. Yet some kept on despite suffering grievous wounds, seemingly immune to pain or fear. Enough unnatural vigor allowed them to smash their weapons against Black Sky shields. And that was as far as it got them.
Once satisfied that he had taken the measure of them, the Wendigo at last drew one of his weapons.

Lurk had spent quite a bit of time experimenting with gunslinger and pistoleer classes. One of his forays was indeed combining Shield Lord with a firearm discipline. The weakness being that Ten Gauge's shotgun was only effective at extremely close ranges. Point distribution made closing the distance to more agile ranged classes annoyingly difficult. What was the point of using a gun if a bow user could kite a Shield Lord to death? After Lurk had his fun with Shield Lord and Doom Slayer, the mantle and ensemble had fallen onto the first of his Caliber Court.

Among Ten Gauge's inheritance was one of Lurk's favorite backup sidearms that he could no longer use with his chosen classes.

A Grisha pattern hand cannon. Grisha's trademark were elegant magnum weapons with inclination towards wood furnishing and engraved steel. Nitro's magnum rifle was also a Grisha.

Short recoil, semi-automatic, with an internal magazine of forty rounds that was refilled by stripper clip, the Grisha was more of a precision weapon. A long barrel gave it excellent muzzle velocity. It required an inordinate amount of strength and specialization to wield effectively because of the weight and power of firing it with one hand. Though slow, it let Ten Gauge put pressure on opponents at long range where his Hydra could not reach.

Demi-Claw Ninety-Nines made holes in that they punched through armor and man and left entry and exit wounds. They would occasionally cleave a skull into parts or take off a limb. Ten Gauge's Grisha exploded torsos. Mere human physiology, even amongst the attackers that had garnered levels throughout their lives stood no chance before the weapon. One shot was enough to reduce a man-sized target into bloody giblets.

Entirely unconcerned with the paltry enemies, Ten Gauge meandered forward, putting down anything that moved. Such opponents were nothing more than a distraction to the Wendigo. He barely spared each target a passing glance, looking for any real threat. Putting single rounds into torsos, nothing any of the humans wore could hope to stop the rounds. A few lieutenants among the ambushers had protective charms or spells floating about their person, and every one fell just the same.

One woman held out her amulet smuggled from the Meteor Fields. The Grisha round deflected off to one side and the amulet began to glow with heat. She screamed as it ate into the flesh of her hand yet would not relinquish her hold on it. So Ten Gauge just shot her a second time, shattering her head into wet chunks and the amulet into pieces.

Things seemed well under control.

*****

"Now, now, now you idiot! There's not gonna be a better chance than this." Ballard popped a small Snowdrop crystal into his mouth and chewed. In such a pure form, the drug acted as a combat booster. Veins popped out of Ballard's neck and arms as he urged the Glares forward.

Cedrick did not like it. Did not like chasing a crazed deer-headed mage. Did not like how many bandits he was watching be cut to ribbons. Did not like how his fingers trembled around the hilt of
his sword. But he had no choice in the matter. His boss, the leader of the Glares had made it clear that Cedrick and Ballard would come back with either the house knights heads, something from these rich newcomers, or not come back at all.

Cedrick rationalized what he had seen by convincing himself that the power came from items in the possession of the Black Sky people. It had to be things from the Meteor Fields. There was no way a caster could do anything like what had ripped apart the household knights. No mage alive could use such spells in that age.

"Run around that big golem and get 'em in the back!" Ballard felt the cold in his limbs replaced by the Snowdrop's telltale icy burn. It was hot and freezing all at once as his skin began to sizzle with energy. The numbness spread quickly into his jaw, so the man did not realize that a sickening grin stretched from ear to ear. While the fools were all busy killing each other, the Glares would come out on top again.

Even with the fancy armored men, reptilian spellcasters, and weird deer-man distracted, Cedrick hung back.

Glare cutthroats ran ahead at full sprint. Each of them had taken a fair hit of Snowdrop. Enough to no longer feel pain and strike with the strength of three men. They would close the distance and plant their daggers into backs and necks. That was the plan.

Then the sluggish looking golem turned with far too much speed and with a wave of its hand, ripped the very life from the leading glares. Even with ice pumping in his veins, Ballard retained enough sense to turn and run, even if it was only to find another angle of attack. Other Glares fired their crossbows at the golem, and were deflected by a magic barrier around the construct.

Gesturing for the survivors to hurry, Cedrick watched red orbs coalesce around the golem's hand. Lightning, red as a dragon sunrise spilled from mechanical fingers.

Ballard's last look of panic and fear was seared into Cedrick's vision as the other glare popped like a blood blister. Hot fluid splashed across his face. He flinched as his nose filled with copper and thickly ionized air. Cedrick ducked into a side alley and tried to control his racing heat.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit. By all the old gods what just happened? What in hell's unholy bowels are these fuckers? They're demons. I've never seen anything like this." He slid down the stone wall of the alley and rummaged through his pockets. Viscera splashed nearby as another one of his men was wetly smeared across the street.

"Gotta use it. Gotta." Cedrick told no one but himself.

He grimaced. Just looking at it made his skin crawl. A fleshy orb, purple and blue like a bruise, covered in animated tendrils. The single item was more valuable than he was. It was a one-time use. From the Meteor Fields. Stolen and smuggled and passed down through years. It was a final failsafe. Only to be used in the most dire emergencies. The Glares had obtained a significant amount of dangerous relics from an old collector with more wealth than sense as collateral for the aging man's Snowdrop addiction.

Cedrick gave the repulsive sphere a firm squeeze and brought forth a Shoggoth.

The Eldritch Abomination was not summoned, so much as reality boiled until congealing into a roiling mass of flesh, teeth, and eyes. Its bulk spilled along the street, cracking century old stone beneath its ponderous mass. In a vile tide of mouths and tentacles, it flowed up the nearby buildings. It moved with speed, shooting out growths in the form of amorphous barbed tentacles.
Its unfortunate summoner was the first casualty.

Death came for Cedrick as he was impaled through the head before being sucked into the mass with a wet crunch.

******

An [Aura of the Unnatural] paralyzed the weakest among the humans, Snowdrop or not. The Shoggoth plucked the stationary prey and consumed them to fuel its genesis. Eyes and mouths opened to identify and consume as needed, melting in an out of the body.

Mere humans were not the only ones to meet this new threat.

The Painlord raised both its arms and triggered the staves there. [Napalm] sheeted against quivering mounds of flesh, yet could find no catch. The Shoggoth lashed out at the Painlord, forcing the construct to step back and respond with its sword. With the blade, the Painlord carved away hunks of the beast, yet the gelatinous mass was unfazed. Fire alone could not burn away the infection of reality. The Painlord could not use any of its more powerful reality bending attacks for its enemy was immune to such tricks. Madness did not affect creatures born from such.

Shattering nearby windows with a roar, the Shoggoth lifted a wave of its mass and smashed the Painlord away. The construct was boxed in by the buildings and was slammed through the nearest block of houses. Brick and insulation that had stood the test of time crumbled. Worn down, the houses had survived the ancient dragon wars. And were reduced to rubble. Most houses in the slums were abandoned.

In a second, the Shoggoth advanced on the other Black Sky soldiers.

Even the Sharpshooters would have run if not for the buffering presence of their Silver Knight comrades. As it was, the Living Armor clustered in front of their scaly brothers and sisters. The Legion steeled itself together, and discipline let them fall back on their training in such situations. Even without the Hellhammers, the warriors from the Alpha and Omega bunkers of The Citadel were not defenseless. Even against enemies far above their own levels.

Sharpshooters used the explosives they had offloaded from the wyvern, ripping off safety cords and heaving satchel charges into their foe. Detonations shook the gelatinous Shoggoth mass. Windows and storefronts were pulverized by the blasts. Stone shrapnel clanged off the shieldwall of the Silver Knights. Moaning in displeasure, the Shoggoth surged forward. Which meant it ran straight into the second salvo of charges. Ichor spewed from the grasping tentacles severed by the charges. Razorwire bombs went off next, filling the street with spools of snares that caught on the Shoggoth's hideous rolls of flesh.

The two Corsairs on the roofs of the intact houses focused their fire on every eye that manifested. Poison resistance kept the Shoggoth from dying instantly to the Ash bloom toxin, but did not negate all the damage. Necrotized holes were gouged into the beast.

With the beast distracted, the Painlord sprinted out of the crumbling buildings and drove its sword deep into the Shoggoth's center mass. With grace befitting a gymnast, the construct flipped back out of reach from the return blow. [Blood Lightning] lanced forth. Bolts cracked into the Shoggoth, rupturing hide and paralyzing its mass. Crimson orbs evaporated quickly as the blade served as a
conducting rod into the abomination. But the Shoggoth would not be cowed so easily. As soon as the Painlord ran out of charges, its enemy expelled the sword lodged within and howled with dozens of mouths. The two giants traded blows with alarming speed. The Shoggoth battered and pulled while the Painlord ripped and punched.

Alone, the Painlord would not have emerged victorious. The battle would have been one of attrition, and even though its hand-crafted armor would have held for a long time, the Painlord would have run out of mana and spells.

No one of Black Sky Legion fought alone.

Ten Gauge dumped the remaining magazine of his pistol into the Shoggoth, blowing man sized-holes into a church-sized beast. The Painlord used the reprieve, retrieved its sword and assaulted from a distance with [Tormentor Shackles]. Hot red runes appeared and were branded into flesh which sizzled. In reality, the Shoggoth was subject to pain.

The Wendigo holstered his Grisha pistol and wielded his Hydra once again. And he advanced.

Although it was an affront to nature, mortal minds, and resistant to magic, the Shoggoth was still a physical creature. Therefore, was vulnerable to physical force.

Boomboomboom!

The Hydra voiced its throaty bellow. Three hammers fell in such short succession that the shells went off in a single conjoined sound. Vines extended from Ten Gauge's wrist, cracking open the Hydra and loading fresh shells. Doom Slayers were focused on raw killing power. Chunks of Shoggoth were blown into organic soup that sizzled. The Shoggoth shrieked as it tried to escape Ten Gauge's reach. Every human still in the area began to bleeding from their ears due to the abomination's scream.

His next volley opened a huge cavity in the mass of the Shoggoth that disrupted the creature as its remaining volume rushed back to plug the gap. Ten Gauge's Hydra would be salvation for the cosmic horror. He prayed to his Holy Lord, giving thanks for the gift of life, of his body and mind and force of arms. The Wendigo voiced his worship as he walked forward, each shell an offering for his sermon of rebuke.

Shoggoths were creatures gifted with a disturbing amount of intelligence for something so beastly. It had to retreat, gather its strength and regenerate lost mass. Needle bites from the lizards and elves kept it bleeding, while the hurting-machine did not relent. Through all of the projectiles thrown its way, the horned mage was the real threat. If the Shoggoth could get enough room, it could slink away into the wilderness and recover.

In a voice made of slapping skin and wet meat holes exhaling, the Shoggoth used its magic to distort the rubble of the street into a wall between it and the attackers. Turning, the eldritch abomination found its retreat blocked by a wall of thorned wood summoned just as quickly.

A hunter would not be denied his prey.

Twisting trunks burst through the summoned stone wall and split the barrier for Ten gauge to continue his implacable march.

Cursing the horned mage in a hundred different languages, the Shoggoth attacked. In a last desperate counter, the abomination used more of its precious mana to transform one of its rolls of flesh into a reality eating substance. Skin peeled away to reveal a starless sky that would dissolve
apart any physical matter before a pocket of space that was antithetical to the natural order.

This tide rushed towards Ten Gauge like a tsunami. He raised his shield, and bashed the attack away.

Others might have given that moment to taunt the creature. Monologue on the inevitability of the conflict. But Ten Gauge was on business from his High King, and would brook no interference. The Doom Slayer took the Shoggoth apart with quick shots and efficient reloads. He targeted the largest concentrations of its body, reducing it down and down. The monster's back was pressed into the thorns, scrabbling to climb the bramble wall to escape. Screams turned to pleas. Pleas turned to whimpers.

Until finally, one more burst of buckshot caused the summoned creature to lose all cohesion. A slurry of gelatinous liquid splashed against the wall of thorns on one side, and stone on the other. The liquid had an oily sheen as it shimmered and evaporated, unable to remain in the world. One last quivering lump of Shoggoth still twitched, a tiny eye bulging from the tumor. Ten Gauge stomped on the lump. Beneath his heel, the Shoggoth at last died with not a roar, but a wet pop.

Although he was not generally given over to emotional responses, Ten Gauge gave the blister an extra twist to make sure it was nothing but pulp. He holstered his Hydra and dismissed his thorns with a flick.

"Sound off, who's not dead?" Ten Gauge called to his troops as he returned to them. The Painlord bowed its head to the Wendigo and signed that it was fully functional.

"Silver Knights, aye. Some scratches. Nothing that won't buff out."

"We've got some injuries over here, Sir Ten Gauge." A Sharpshooter wiped blood from a cut on his brow with one claw and saluted with the other.

The two Corsairs manifested, supporting each other. One Plague Elf had taken a barbed tentacle to the leg, but was still hobbling along.

"Just a scratch, help the Demis first, sir." The Corsair took a seat on a hunk of rubble with a pained sigh.

Most druid classes came part and parcel with healing spells and Ten Gauge was no exception. His hands glowed with emerald light that knit wounds back together. Soon everyone on his squad was back to combat readiness.

"Sir, your orders?" Asked a Silver Knight.

"If there are innocents, save them from the rubble. If there are survivors of the attack, detain them for questioning."

"Yes, sir." The Living Armor saluted.

Ten Gauge assessed the destruction.

Patiently, the Wendigo waited for any kind of response from the city while his squad were set to task. In the days spent traversing the countryside and stopping by villages and towns, he had quickly learned that some kind of organized authority group would meet and discuss his actions. He had accidentally stolen some cattle and been delayed a day by repaying that accidental misunderstanding.

He would have thought in the vaunted capital of Orza that there would have been an army bearing
down after all the ruckus.

Looking around, he noted the many boarded up shops. Watchmakers. Jewelers. Signs of wealth and prosperity, now run down and overtaken by the slums. Up close, the silver spires that marked the Orzan architecture appeared tarnished, if not defaced. The lights of the gleaming city were distant, hazy things. Isolated from the coming winter nights.

Eventually, there was someone who looked official. Much like everything else Ten Gauge had seen, it was only a surface appearance. In actuality it was a man with a crooked back directing a cart pulled by an old mule. Two others in threadbare Orza livery hung off the side, collecting body parts.

"Do you represent Orza?" Ten Gauge asked the leathery Orzan.

"No, sir, just the cart man." The driver looked up from his reigns. "Well you're a strange looking fella. Look like a lord with that outfit, but I can't say I've ever seen a deer skeleton head... Man."

"Are you a part of or affiliated with the household knights?" The Wendigo clicked his jaw as he drew on the information he had gleaned from his cerebral meal earlier.

"Ha! Household knights? Down 'ere? The only reason a household knight would come down here to the gutters is t'buy Snowdrop. But that's what their servants are for. The city guard is supposed to police this area, but they've turned a blind eye for years. Either bribed to stay away, or smart enough to know not to fight the dealers. You learn, or you wind up drowned in a shallow puddle if ye catch the gleam o' my silver." The cart man gave a wry grin which was missing surprisingly few teeth. He gestured to their surroundings as his helpers carried on piling pieces into the corpse wagon. Large and small. Man or woman. Bandit and Glare alike.

"I think I'm starting to understand Orza a bit more." Ten Gauge clicked thoughtfully to himself before flicking a coin at the cart man. It was the first bribe of many. And the first the Wendigo believed would be worth its cost.

After inspecting the coin and its elegantly wrought tree, the man pocketed it without a second thought.

"I'm just the cart man. Clean up. Don't ask questions. It's thankless, but it pays because no one else wants it. As long as I can afford enough wood, food, and Firestone to make it through the winter, that's all that matters."

"For just a cart man, you know an awful lot." Ten gauge spun more coins in his fingers.

"Aye, lord. No one pays attention to the cook. Or the servant. Or the slave. Or the cart man."

More hunks of former person thumped into the cart while the two spoke.

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An eventful night was followed by a laborious day as Ten Gauge made preparations for his monarch's arrival. Hours spent hemming and hawing through the ludicrous Orzan legal processes. Black Sky Legion's claim of parlay went a long way. The city was slow to react to disturbances, but once roused, swarmed with rumors on what occured at the docks and the slums. Stories circulated, more extravagant with each telling. The more outlandish they became, the closer the tales became
closer to the truth.

Of course it was rather difficult to miss the armored wyvern moving from courthouse to courthouse towards the wealthier districts of the city.

Ten Gauge was honored to spend significant time in direct communion with both his High King and Lord Nox as the three discussed what the Caliber Court member had learned. In Kadusia, they had come to the city as saviors. Nitro's forward personality paved the way for Black Sky in Oxelan. Now in Orza, there were different diplomatic hurdles at play. And foreign authority seeking to either interfere or eliminate Black Sky Legion.

No normal entrance or introduction would do. Others would be watching, and it was agreed that a show of strength was warranted.

The center of the Orza was a large plaza. A central point from which the major roads of the city radiated like the spokes of a wheel. Having been burnt to the ground and built up again over and over, Orza had taken shape around what survived. A perfect place for the planned arrival. One street of the wheel was wider than all the rest, and terminated in the grand council hall. Ten Gauge and his squad waited there, and the city congregated. A few of the major houses had sent groups of household knights to ensure the bargain of parlay was kept. They waited behind the Black Sky soldiers.

Well dressed nobles from minor houses and their attending guards lined the main thoroughfare while more common folk crowded the small streets. Just like Kadusia, everyone was curious to see just who and what was Black Sky Legion.

Wingbeats were heard. Ten Gauge and his squad knelt.

Fingers pointed upward. Tentative calls of wonder turned to cries of fear as death came to land. Tattered membranes stretched between ancient bones. A true dragon, the likes of which had not been seen for centuries, and one of titanic proportions. Primal fear of the undead gripped the populace as Novus landed. His bulk caused the ground to tremble as his back claws touched the ground and his front came thudding down before the Legion away team. Unrest roiled through the people. Many ran or cowered. Many more stood petrified and watched with morbid fascination.

Novus took a deep breath and sighed as he folded his wings. Even with his natural toxic miasma contained within his breast, a lingering mist spilled from his scales. Wheezing an athsmatic cough, his voice carried through the city.

"Attention, human people of..." Novus looked down to the still kneeling Wendigo. "What was this place, mister Ten Gauge?"

"Orza, Lord Novus." Ten Gauge replied.

"Thank you... Human people of Orza, bow before the High Lord and Lady of The Citadel. Masters of Black... Sky... Legion."

Scaled meteors plummeted from the sky and arrested their fall just before crashing into the street. Lurk and Harmony were two halves of a single being in that moment. They had flown enough together to alight in unison. They had soared together in a hundred games and a million dreams. They needed no fancy signals to both slow their descent at the same time and land in a few heavy wingbeats.

The monarchs had agreed that shock and awe on their end would allow their troops to operate
with impunity.

Each of them had picked large weapons.

For Lurk it was his Dreadspear. Part glaive, part belt-fed heavy automatic, and all Stormgold, the weapon was dark like a cloudy thunderhead that glittered around the edges with an auric sheen. Lurk held the long weapon upright as he walked, tamping the butt against the stone street in time with his steps. Linked rounds clinked together near the rear receiver.

Harmony in turn had chosen one of her show pieces to match her husband.

The two-handed axe was unnecessarily large. Its single edge was interrupted by a grip midway up the blade to pivot and turn the weapon better. It was not for battle, it was a ceremonial blade of the god of executioners. Kurze was the patron of all axemen after all. And by wearing his pendant, Harmony could wield such ludicrously oversized blades without agility penalties. She rested the axe on her shoulder.

Stormgold had been another event material, from the Midas’ Rain celebration. Although it was supposed to be a generous event, the loot of real value was deceptively elusive. Most of the items were gaudy trash, and getting the good stuff required either a disproportionate amount of work, or purchase through the cash shop. Stormgold was the most aesthetic to the couple, and they had justified the purchase only after sinking dozens of hours into its fruitless pursuit. On the last day, no less.

The bulky weapons made holding hands rather difficult, so Harmony reached out with her tail and snagged the end of her husband's extra limb. The tips of their tails locked together. And together they sauntered down the street with Novus and Ten Gauge picking up the rear after their ruler's passage. Some of the household knights forgot themselves and

"We get to play king and queen again my love, aren't you excited?" Harmony gave Lurk's tail a squeeze.

Lurk chuckled.

"It's not play if you really are. You don't need to pretend to be a queen my darling dearest dragoness, you were always royalty to me."

"Stop it! You're making me blush." The Scarlet Drake giggled.

"Do we have any crowns? I bet you would look great in a crown. Mmm, maybe a crown and nothing else? That'd be nice." Lurk daydreamed at the thought.

Harmony laughed more and gave another squeeze.

"Didn't some drop from this event?" She asked, patting her axe. "Or did we scrap all of them for material? I'm sure we could make some if there's none in the treasury."

"Can some spawn out of those pop chests? I don't remember."

"It would be funny if they did. But it's just gold." Harmony lamented.

Looking casually around, Lurk took the measure of the people he saw. He also looked up at the minute flash of Flayer knives among the shadows of the rooftops along the street. As the two monarchs made their way, Painlords stepped from portals at regular intervals and held their weapons out in honor of their rulers. If there were conspirators or assassins watching, they would have to go
through many layers to reach either Lurk or Harmony.

The household knights parted to either side of the grand council entrance. As soon as Lurk and Harmony were beyond the threshold, Novus turned his bulk and sat on his haunches, completely blocking the doors with his tail and backside.

"Ten Gauge..." Said Novus with a yawn.

"Yes, Lord Novus?" The Wendigo answered, his squad having followed on the Dracolich's heels, forming a ring of spear points and bayonets after their High King and Queen's passage.

"Find me... An old goat. Maybe two."

"My Lord, are you not a true undead? Do you need to eat?"

"Mm... No. But I would like something to chew on." Novus smacked his chops, wishing for something between his teeth.

Inside the council hall, the rulers of Orza, the Silver Barons had all gathered. They sat in a raised semi-circle of seats beneath a glittering frescoed dome. Personal Firestone amulets glowed on the Baron's person. It was a showing of wealth in addition to the silver filigree in the noble's voluminous cloaks.

"The city of Orza gives welcome to Black Sky Legion. House Vellot answers the call to parlay." Began the central man. Baron Vellot held the head seat, and watched Lurk and Harmony as closely as he did the other Silver Barons.

"House Nothier answers the call to parlay." An older woman wearing extravagant makeup spoke.

"House Bellane answers the call to parlay." The youngest of the bunch, he was staring intently at the glittering weapons of the Black Sky rulers.

"House Choistel answers the call to parlay." A portly fellow, Baron Choistel was slightly drunk on wine at the time.

"House Lamosseau answers the call to parlay." Baron Lamosseau used to be a handsome man. Before premature aging had carved wrinkles into his clenching jaw and turned much of his hair gray.

"Thank you for your welcome, Barons." Harmony began. "I am Queen Harmony, and this is my husband, High King Lurk. We are Black Sky Legion." She gave her axe a twirl and planted the end of her weapon on the floor to rest one hand on the pommel. With her strength, Harmony kept the Barons off balance.

"Queen... Uh... Queen Harmony, of Black Sky... May I ask that you move your..." Baron Vellot's eyes nearly crossed in consternation as he tried to find a word that was not 'monster'. He gestured in the vague direction of the undead dragon preventing the household knights from entering the council hall.

"Is Novus in the way?" Harmony turned and tapped a finger against her lips. "I suppose he is, isn't he?" She looked around for a moment, before pointing and gesturing at the Baron Bellane.

A Flayer emerged from the shadow of the Baron. With an effeminate shriek, the man tumbled out of his chair at the proximity of the hunched abomination. Sliding along in near silence, only the whisper of its skin robes was audible aside from its mechanical clicking. Its appearance had the rest of the Silver Barons shuffling uncomfortably and checking behind themselves.
Skulking over, the Flayer clasped its metal hands in supplication, ready to receive its Fair Lady's command.

"Be a dear, and go tell Novus to move out of the way of the door. That way everyone else can come in. But first, go get me something to drink, please. Since we haven't been offered anything. Something fruity, I think. Lemonade if they have it, or just something with citrus and honey."

"That sounds lovely. Get some for me too, please." Lurk added.

The Flayer nodded enthusiastically and then phased through a wall to head outside.

While the rest of the Silver Barons gawped, Vellot recovered enough composure to carry on.

"By the rules of parlay, it is customary that those who invoke it make their offer first. Black Sky, what do you have to offer the city of Orza?"

Ten Gauge had provided vital intelligence into Orza despite having been there for less than a day. The Silver Barons respected one thing above all.

Harmony merely smiled and pulled up a vestige of YGGDRASIL when it existed as a game world. The menu hovered before her free hand and a quick selection summoned forth an old pop chest. Only a little smaller than a luggage trunk, the chest thunked to the floor. She tapped the top with the flat of her axe and it popped open. The pop chest contained between roughly three and four hundred thousand world tree minted coins. A pitiable amount to any max level player, yet enough to make the center of the council chamber into a swimming pool of gold.

More of the gold party favors cluttered Harmony's inventory because they took so long to open. She had never sat down and gone through all of them. A player could only open one at a time, and had to wait until the entire animation was finished before collecting the contents. A fun way to pass the time while waiting on bids at the old auction house, but not much more.

"I can assure you that favorable relations with Black Sky Legion means profit and prosperity for everyone. If Orza is capable of it, of course." Harmony spoke over the incessant clinking.

"Well of course we are!" Vellot insisted. The other Barons nodded fervently. Even Lamosseau's mouth hung open.

"Well, this was meant to be a gift for your hospitality towards Ten Gauge..." Harmony trailed off, having waited until the pop chest finished spewing forth riches. The Barons all leaned forward hungrily. Then the coins funneled into an open rift beside Harmony. In a few seconds everything had disappeared into her inventory, leaving nothing but watering mouths and disappointment.

Harmony had guessed exactly what kind of men the Silver Barons were. And it provoked exactly the reaction she was looking for.

"This is an outrage! They destroyed valuable property at my warehouse. At the very least I should receive enough gold to cover the expenses." Baron Lamosseau forgot himself in his emotional outburst. Greed filled his eyes and made his mouth water more than Ten Gauge's had when eating Serlo's brain. If Lamosseau had known the fate of his bannerman, he might not have been so eager.

"Lamosseau! You will be quiet until it is your turn to speak." Vellot admonished the man. Their city was built on a fragile peace between the houses. Blood feuds had sprung from that very chamber more than once.

"Oh, is that where those men tried to shoot one of our wyverns with ballistas? After being offered
to land there?" Lurk spoke up as he idly cycled the belt feed of his Dreadspear.

"My household knights were in pursuit of criminals. I've reprimanded the man responsible for offering the warehouse for free use." Lamosseau nearly swallowed his own tongue trying to backpedal.

"Oh, so you're not complicit, you're just incompetent." Lurk jabbed.

"You're man is responsible for those damages. So Black Sky should be held accountable for payment." Again, Baron Lamosseau let desire overrule his reason.

Harmony cleanly built upon Lurk's supposition.

"I thought criminal elements were responsible for the attack? Unless of course your household knights were the ones with the ballistas trying to kill our wyvern? Which not only would mean that you were responsible for the damage, but that you have declared war on Black Sky Legion on behalf of Orza."

She turned to Baron Vellot.

"Is that it? Is Orza declaring war on us?" The Scalebound leaning on her executioner axe asked innocently.

Baron Vellot spread his arms to encompass the room.

"No, no, of course not, Queen Harmony. Orza is deeply sorry for the failings of our city watch. That district was under public protection. A common tactic criminals use these days is to cause a large commotion to cover up their real agenda, if you catch the gleam of my silver. There was a large fire in another part of the city, likely the cause will have been arson to keep the watch busy while your people were ambushed."

The Baron smoothly passed the blame onto the underpaid and underpowered public servants that the Silver Barons collectively supported as part of old peace treaties.

"So it was not any of the house's responsibility for patrolling those streets. Am I understanding that correctly?"

"Precisely, Queen Harmony." Baron Vellot nodded.

"It seems like you have a slight problem policing your city. We would be more than happy to task Ten Gauge with hunting down those responsible for the attacks if your city watch is not up to the task-" Harmony began to offer before being cut off.

"I will not stand by while some pretentious lizardmen inbred tramples on Orza's name!" Lamosseau slammed his fists against the desk he sat behind.

Harmony made sure her annoyance was felt in a noticeable increase in temperature within the council hall. Choistel visibly broke out into a sweat and Bellane removed his Firestone amulet to keep from overheating.

"Are we going to keep getting interrupted? Because the other cities have been much more welcoming. Who I am sure would be more than happy to receive your share of trade as part of our alliance." Harmony moved her grip to the handle of her axe.

Baron Vellot was nearly red-faced with rage.
"Baron Lamosseau, one more outburst and I am ejecting you from this hall, dragon or no dragon. You can climb out of a window for all I care!"

Harmony continued diplomatic discussion while her husband did some much needed investigation.

Pulling on Mask of the Psion, Lurk turned his mental self to face Baron Lamosseau. Leaving his body facing forward, Lurk's ethereal form became invisible as he blocked himself from the minds of everyone but his target.

"So hostile. Convenient that you're the one who let Ten Gauge land for free. Convenient that he saw you talking with someone from the Heymon Empire." Lurk's mental projection glided towards the Silver Baron.

Lamosseau stiffened and he opened his mouth to shout.

Lurk's physical body waggled a digit and a corner of his muzzle turned up. His projection spoke.

"Ah, ah, ah, you're the only one who can hear me right now. What else are you hiding?"

Lurk floated forward, his psionic tendrils waving. His head cocked to one side as Lamosseau's mind roiled like wind blown across the pages of a book. The man's face screwed up in a panic as his eyes darted around the room, secretly hoping that someone else would react to his vision.

"You're keeping all kinds of juicy secrets. There's the usual corruption and bribery... But... Oh? You've been conspiring with the Heymon. They heard about Black Sky Legion and told you to get rid of us. Their spies see us as a threat. Want to nip us in the bud before we grow and give more support to Kadasia and Oxelan. Don't want us to reach Deeka. That's what they told you."

"You have no proof." The Baron growled.

"You only think I have no proof."

"You have no idea what position you've put yourself in. I have powerful friends. You can't touch me."

Lurk laughed loud enough for Lamosseau to shrink back in his seat. The projection got within inches of his face.

"What's that you're thinking of now? A lure. Very interesting. You need to use it soon. The other Barons have grown very suspicious as to why the platinum mine hasn't been producing. You've stalled them by minting old bars over again from the Lamosseau vaults, but you're running out. The Heymon promised you a lot of things, didn't they? And to you, either Lamosseau gets to rule Orza, or no one does."

Lamosseau flinched as a waving tendril almost touched him.

"What's a Platinum Wyrm, Baron Lamosseau? Pray, tell me what ever could that be?"

"There is no Platinum Wyrm!" He shouted at the phantom and shot to his feet. Only to blink and the illusion disappear. Baron Lamosseau looked at Lurk as the draconic man smirked.

Everyone else in the council chamber was staring.

Baron Nothier turned an even paler shade than her makeup and nearly fainted. The other men
stared in a mixture of disgust and disbelief.

Baron Vellot wore his trademark scowl. And his eyes blazed as he spoke with deathly seriousness.

"Lamosseau," Vellot's eyes burned with an old hatred. "You will explain yourself. Now." Vellot's knuckles turned white as his desk groaned under the man's grip. Baron Vellot technically did not have the authority to command any of the other houses. No one did. But his command would brook no argument.

"Mark my words." Baron Lamosseau pointed accusingly at the other nobles still sitting. "There will be consequences for associating with monsters." Glaring at Lurk and Harmony, he threw his cape over one shoulder and stomped out to take a rear exit where his carriage waited.

On his way back to the family estate, Baron Lamosseau shook uncontrollably in his carriage. He clutched the crooked wand made of Platinum Wyrm scales tightly to his thundering heart. His plots were unraveling. Keeping everything a secret had taken years of planning.

The Baron had a contingency for just such an occasion. He and his house would escape at speed out of the nearest gate with their surviving household knights. It was getting late, and by the time word of his departure would reach the other houses, they would have much greater problems. Baron Lamosseau had woken up that morning, and not imagined any outcome other than success. Especially after giving so much silver for the old ballista. That transaction alone had given him a few more gray hairs.

If everything went as the Baron had designed, by morning the next day, Orza would be rubble. The destruction would be just another footnote in a city that had gone through many such catastrophes. Once he activated the wand, there would not be much time. The lure had been placed in the heart of the city. And the Platinum Wyrm hidden in his mines would come bursting forth to lay waste to the silver city. Heymon victory was inevitable. Not even the Coalition could stand forever. Better that an Orzan ruled Orza. Even if it was only as a vassal. And what better Orzan than House Lamosseau?

He had to protect his family and get them all out of Orza. It would be a long journey over rough terrain to the waystation set aside for his household. From there he could decide whether it was worth returning to the destroyed ruins of Orza after the Wyrm did its work, or flee all the way to Heymon. With his connections and more than a few carriages full of silver, he could purchase a place in the foreign country.

Then, he spoke to the wand. The scales unraveled and fell like flower petals. They crumbled into glittering dust as they touched the floor of the carriage. Strangely, a calm settled on the man once the deed was done. Events had been set into motion that could not be stopped, and there was only action left.

The few remaining minutes of his journey passed in a flash. He instructed his driver to go get the other carriages ready and walked briskly into his home.

As soon as he threw open the doors of the lavish Lamosseau manor, something was off. All the lanterns were dark. There were no footmen or servants to greet him. A stifling quiet was broken only
by his muffled footsteps on well-tended carpet.

"Why is it so dark in here? Servants! Where is everyone."

Frowning deeply, Lamosseau at last came to the dining hall with its doors closed. Doors that should not have been closed. His heart started beating quickly again, but time was of the essence, so he went inside.

Every living denizen of the manor was present. Seated at the long table, they all were face down. They all straightened in their seats and twisted to look his way as the Baron entered. He could hear the motion in their necks, dry pops from their tendons as everyone turned to him. The only light came from a few lit candles on the table, light flickering off faces pulled into unnatural grins. Some still held awareness, and panic made them twitchy. Others looked glassy and limp, like dolls.

"Hi, dad." Spoke his eldest son. One of the young man's eyes rolled back in its socket and blood wept down his cheek. "Do you believe in monsters?" He asked as a few drops of scarlet dripped off his lips and stained his smile.

"Darling, what a terrible host you've been. Black Sky Legion were our guests! I wish you would have told meeee!" His wife shrieked for a moment, her mouth contorting into a gaping hole. Then the scream cut off as her teeth clamped shut, severing the end of her tongue. The woman resumed her rictus grin.

"What is the meaning of this?" Lamosseau uttered.

All their lips moved in unison, layering their many voices into a choir of the damned.

"Hello, and good evening. My name is Skitharix."

Baron Lamosseau heard a sound similar to gears and leather snapping. Though it echoed in the dark hall, the Baron whirled and searched for the puppeteer. From the corner of the room where the light could not reach, a shadow grew taller and taller, stretching up to brush against the ceiling. A hand made of knives extended into the light, and a voice like a whetstone being dragged across rusted steel issued forth from a hole in the dark.

"But you can call me consequences."

Chapter End Notes

Hello yet again, gentle reader! I'm so glad to put my voice in your heads once more. I do apologize for the abnormal delay. I blame Monster Hunter World Iceborne and RLCraft, the nuts as fuck Minecraft mod. Go play it. I am a huge sucker for great co-op games for obvious Lurk and Harmony parallel wife reasons. My wife and I have really enjoyed it.

I hope you all enjoyed the little finale to this chapter. There are certain milestones within the story of Black Sky Legion. Things within it that have existed before even the first
chapter was written.

And personally, I can't wait to meet you at the next milestone.

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