

HEROINES OF THE FIRST AGE



THE WAR OF THE PROPHECY

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On the same day, at the same time, the priestesses of the Five Worlds all announce the same news: the Worlds are scheduled to be remade. From among the mortal populations, a goddess will be chosen, and she alone will determine what happens to them.

What follows next is a tale of predatory gods, warring nations, and larger than life heroines at the dawn of time.

Featuring a revised text and exclusive bonus content, The Prophecy War is a reprinting of the high fantasy serial that was released during the successful Heroines of the First Age Kick-starter campaign. Although a standalone story, the events of The Prophecy War also serve as a direct prequel to the setting supplement, Heroines of the First Age: Holdfast.



HEROINES OF THE FIRST AGE
THE WAR OF THE PROPHECY

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HEROINES OF THE FIRST AGE

Heroines of the First Age is a tabletop roleplaying game about larger-than-life legends and mythical monsters at the dawn of time. In it, players take on the roles of powerful demi-humans and lead armies, discover new magics, make and break alliances, and even vie against the very powers that make up the cosmos.

The story of The Prophecy War represents just one potential setting for Heroines. To create your own tales of the First Age, look up Heroines of the First Age on DriveThruRPG.com or go to <http://voidspiral.com/hfa.html>

For a more open-ended continuation of the events of this story, check out Heroines of the First Age: Holdfast, also available on DriveThruRPG.com

FOREWORD

The genesis of *Heroines of the First Age* is lost to the distant mists of early 2017. Richard and I were still working on finishing out *Oubliette* Second Edition, which had turned into quite a bit more of an even than either of us had planned, taking just a few days more than a year to complete. At the time, I was getting pretty tired from long hours banging away at *Oubliette*, and I needed some distance from it. Coincidentally, I got sick for a while and, bored and laying in a recliner to recover, I finally pieced together several thoughts I'd been playing with for years. A few whirlwind weeks later, the Voidspiral testing crew were testing *Heroines of the First Age*.

Richard came on shortly thereafter, having been excited about the ideas and prospects of the “*Monstergirls meets the Iliad*” pitch. After he'd read it, we quickly started talking about ideas. Since the book itself was already mostly done, most of our discussions were about the possibilities of the game and how I was going to structure the Kickstarter campaign. With some additional input from previous backers, friends, and family, we went back and forth over a number of Kickstarter “gimmicks,” or tactics to make the campaign interesting and drive traffic to it. I wouldn't say that we *argued* at any point, but we're both too clever for our own good, so there was quite a bit of analysis, pitching and counter-pitching, and hard thinking. This coincided with my setup and funding planning spreadsheets, which helped to solidify things. What started out as a kind of “best girl” popularity contest had turned into an eight-way battle between the heroines of five separate worlds, each of which having their own personalities, powers, and flaws. I planned to drive engagement by having short fiction detailing each participant and their own thread of the story and invite the backers to vote on the outcome of their interactions.

Now, at the time (as always), I had a lot on my plate between working on the game, working on the Kickstarter campaign, planning the finances, and doing the art and promotion. Richard had done me a great service on *Oubliette* by filling out massive

Foreword

amounts of information about the world and creatures, so it was a natural fit for him to step up to the plate for these particular short fiction pieces. We thought they'd be small, nimble things, that wouldn't be a big deal to do every few days. We wanted to get HFA done much faster than *Oubliette*, since that project had been draining on both of us. Are you following the foreshadowing here?

I wrote out descriptions for each of the characters, did illustrations for them, and set up reveal moments. Richard and I went back and forth over the vote-write-release schedule a bunch of times, and I wrote some preliminary content. We decided to let backers have a chance at adding characters to the cast for a high-level pledge, and we spent a good deal of time figuring out how to execute this crazy plan. We launched, broke our base goal in about eight hours, and were off to the races.

The campaign itself went well; we had tons of events and updates to keep our backers entertained and talking about the game. Backers snapped up the two available seats for adding their own characters to the *War of the Prophecy*. Readers voted on new content as we broke stretch goal after stretch goal. And all the while, Richard wrote and wrote and wrote, stories flying out the door so fast it made my head spin.

A month later, the campaign wrapped and we'd doubled the funding of our last RPG project. We hit the desks, finishing the HFA core book first, then moving into the settings and expansions we'd planned. We struggled a bit with trying to plan those things as we were going, since we didn't *really* know which ones we'd be doing let alone how much content would be in them and how long they'd take when we'd started. A classic mistake.

Holdfast was the setting that Richard had evolved out of the *War of the Prophecy*. While it wasn't the first one we worked on, it was the first we released. Like many things before it, it ended up larger than we initially planned, despite Richard's continuing efforts to keep the scope limited. Sprawling and complex, much of the assumptions and background lore that Holdfast depended on were already written in the short fiction stories of the *War of the Prophecy*, so we didn't need to reprint them in the Holdfast book.

Those pieces didn't end up as small as we thought they'd be. What were initially envisioned as flash-fiction blurbs ballooned into a project all to itself, one so large that when we went back over

the wordcounts for the stories while trying to determine how many pages a print version would be, Richard and I both went hysterical. He'd managed to write a decent sized novel in the space of a month, without knowing *any* of the steps in the middle, without having a planned ending, inventing new worlds and characters along the way, and working only in the short bursts between the voting of the last round and the oncoming release schedule. We were both amazed.

When we first started this project, we promised to ourselves that it wouldn't be another year-long Oubliette. The core book was basically already done, after all. We thought we could polish it out in a few months. The Kickstarter went live July 19 of 2017. Today's date is July 20 of 2018. A few days ago I got a question on the lore of Holdfast, which coincidentally happened to pertain to the War of the Prophecy. Now we're only weeks away from finally releasing it and illuminating the darkness behind the curtain of Holdfast. Fitting, as it's been just over a year since the Prophecy.

—Joe Bush, Friday, July 20, 2018

GRATITUDE

RICHARD

A considerable debt is owed.

This novel would not exist without the other writers I've talked to over the years.

However, it would **extra** not exist without the support of the backers.

So, thanks are due first to Associate Producer Ian Hamilton, Bradie Forsberg, Burnt Bread, Casey Cotter, Creedora, Hooper, Kelly Jolliffe, Miakoda, Roger Smith, Paul Lucas, and everyone who pledged, voted, or spread the word about Heroines. You provided the opportunity for this book to be created. Thank you.

More personally, I would also like to thank Jeff M, Jen O, Dan G, Julia H, Ian Hamilton again, Burnt Bread again, Brandon E, the entire M family, M B, Sofia, Rose, Curtiss, Kurtis, Renee, Josh, Zuger, Larissa, Nirav, Joe C, Don, Pete, Joe Bush, and everyone else I've chatted with about writing since I was roughly knee-height. Your advice, feedback, and tolerance has been the foundation of this weird career.

JOE

Richard already covered the specific backers that I would want to thank, from the commission backers who contributed their ideas directly to the project, to those who voted on the campaign, to those who supported us on Kickstarter, to those who talked us up on Twitter and so on. To all those folks, you have my infinite gratitude.

But I'd like to add a few others as well, that might not see as much appreciation.

Firstly, I want to thank all the staff at Kickstarter for providing us a platform upon which to try out crazy ideas like this, and to make them successful enough to see the light of day. In a world where

corporate competition greatly disadvantages the little guy, you've given us a way to engage with the very people who we want to talk to. Thanks, Kickstarter.

Second, I want to thank our friends and family. Dealing with head-in-the-clouds dreamers can sometimes be straining. Thanks for being patient with us while we tear our hair out to make something meaningful.

THE WAR OF THE PROPHECY

THE FIVE WORLDS

Ethantar

A land of low valleys, fertile soil, and nations locked in an endless resource war.

Urach

A land of high mountains, scarcity, and remote monasteries, caught in the grip of a centuries long lycanthropic plague.

Sasi

An underground land, where predatory insects have overtaken most of civilization.

Axolozug

An inverted world, hanging over a massive and infinite drop.

The Wastes

A vast desert, bombarded intermittently by metal beings from the sky.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Buel

A Dragonturtle slave from Urach, given as a gift to Dorgana's expedition.

Dorgana

A Dragonnewt warrior and Urachian national heroine, tasked with leading an expedition into the unknown.

Ereba

A demoness thief, held prisoner on Axolozug.

Felista of Barrenvale

An impetuous Foxcat, and Ethantar's newest Queen of the Pride.

Haula of the Horizon

A wandering bandit Harpy from The Wastes.

Ikrix

Axolozug's unstable Spidermoth queen.

Jyashuu

An ancient sage, and Sasi's oldest living Slime.

Kha

| *Created By Roger Smith*

A daughter of chaos, born from the rogue energies of the Prophecy War.

Valmetica

| *Created By Paul Lucas*

The last of the Lightwings species, charged with defending the Five Worlds against their hungry gods.

CHAPTER I: INTO THE WIDENING GYRE

*You come to me to ask the future of the Five Worlds. To you
I say this:*

*In thirty days the world will be remade anew. It will be
shaped by a single divine being, our first goddess.*

But the goddess has not yet been chosen.

*Will our new goddess be strong or cunning? Wise or proud?
Will she conquer those in her way or unite the lands under her
banner?*

What kind new world will she make?

This even I cannot know.

THE WASTES, HAULA

Haula sat in the dust, the wide, flat tablelands unrolling around her like a dirty carpet, and gazed up at the metal beings who fell burning from the heavens. They were a long way off, their contrails describing the thinnest of scars on the pale blue wrist of the sky, and the distance gentled them. They were like any of the other thousands of micro-moons that covered the sky, visible even during the day. They were bright and high and brilliant.

As long as you never got close enough to touch, they were as pretty as a diamond necklace stolen out of one of the tents at a caravanserai.

Haula's talons flexed at the memory that bubbled up just then and one of her nimble feet went to her belt pouch. The little leather bag was heavy with jewels, which almost made up for the scant quarter of water that was left in her canteen.

She beat her wings once, twice, trying to cool herself off, but the midday heat was oppressive.

At ground level, the air simmered. Higher up, the thermals would be like strong arms wrapped around her wings.

Chapter 1: Into the Widening Gyre

The only rain that would come for the next few months was of the metal variety.

Every direction that Haula turned in, she could see to the horizon line. That was how the tablelands worked. Everything was granite and shale and sand, pockmarked by meteor strikes. Only the living stood out against the flatness.

Hundreds of miles away, Haula could see the darkened hunch of a Citybeast turning towards the place where the metal men would hit. The Citybeasts grazed on the rubble left in those craters. In turn, the wise built their civilizations on the Citybeasts' backs.

Those that could not afford to live on a beast, or those that craved the feeling of movement under their own power, did not live in comfort or security. They couldn't, under the shadow of those metal beings. They kept a weather eye on the sky and, when they saw the trail of a comet headed their way, they left everything but what they could carry and fled across the rocky desert, never looking back.

Up close, the children of the sky were monsters.

Once they touched the earth, they didn't last for long, but they burned and sundered everything they could touch for as long as there was life in them.

Uncapping her canteen, Haula took a careful, measured drink. Not a drop spilled onto the baking red stone underneath her talons. Her wings beat, exploring their range of motion, and she re-capped the triplebison-hide vessel, securing it against her side. She would need to replenish it soon.

Many people died of thirst in the Wastes, the nearest beast or caravan several days' journey away, but still in sight.

To the east, only a dozen miles distant, Haula could see two great masses of people gathered on an expanse of sand. She had been working her way towards them since morning, and she suspected that she would reach them only a little after nightfall. They were not merchants, which was fine with her. She had had enough of merchants for the time being. They were not a diplomatic caravan either. Even the biggest caravans would have been smaller than either group. Caravans travelled with only as many guards as they were willing to hire, carefully rationing their supplies as they crossed the scorching open between Citybeasts.

Haula's eyes narrowed, nictitating membranes cutting the glare, and she thought she could pick out the tiny shapes of upraised flags among the masses. The banners hung still and lifeless in the dead air, but if she focused she could discern their colors.

Red and black on one side.

On the other, green and gold.

There would not be any fighting yet, not during the heat of the day, but when the evening came and the temperature began to fall, the horns would sound. No one liked to scrap at midday, when the sun was just as inclined to murder exhausted soldiers as an enemy's swords. Both armies would wait, sweating in their tents, until they could afford to exert themselves.

Then the killing would begin.

Like the rains of metal beings, armed conflicts were more common during the dry season. Still, this was shaping up to be a bad year in a way that had nothing to do with this princess' suitors or that princess' Beastrights. It seemed wherever Haula visited the caravanserais, the fences and money-changers told stories of places where reality strained and bled; where alien monsters, spiders the size of houses or angels all in golden veil, ambushed the unwary.

When she visited the Beast Cities, which was only rarely, the courtesans there told her in whispers about the Prophecy.

It sounded like a silly scrap of doggerel, no more meaningful to a wanderer, wayfarer, and perpetual outsider than what the weather was like at the other end of the Wastes, but the nobles had apparently become entranced by it. Now they fought not just for choice oases, meteor access, and ownership of the Citybeasts, but to determine who would have complete control over existence.

Which seems like a meaningless thing to die over, Haula thought.

As long as you were alive, you controlled your own existence. Why bother with ownership of someone else's?

Still, if someone had offered *her* the role of Goddess, she had to concede that she would have taken it—if only to fix what everyone else had done to her world.

High overhead, the metal beings were still falling. It often took them a while to strike the earth, which was the only upside for the people who had to live below. Her stomach growled, and with a push Haula threw herself into the air.

Chapter 1: Into the Widening Gyre

She would linger in the sky while the armies clashed, she decided. She could come down after the battle was decided.

There was always good scavenging after a fight, even if it was only the discarded rations of dead soldiers, and she hadn't eaten since yesterday.

URACH, DORGANA

"My scrying glass, Buel," barked Dorgana, turning back from where the overlook dropped off into empty air. It was high and cold here, with the wind twining ribbons of cloud underfoot and under-tail—but then it was high and cold *everywhere* in Urach. The hostility of the land was simply a matter of degree.

Most noblewomen travelled between peaks on tent-litters, hemmed in on every side by ermine fur pillows and with a rune-engraved urn of butter-tea heated by its own internal magics sitting somewhere in the center of the heap.

Dorgana had fought down a sneer at the thought of travelling like that.

Most noblewomen were not tasked with leading *armies*.

Still, she was wrapped in hides against the worst of the cold, and the massive double-headed battle ax that she kept slung across her back was like a brick of ice even through the layers of padding between it and her spine. Her scales chafed, and a part of her still longed to curl up in front of a fire and pass the day in study like she had during her girlhood in the temple-city.

She had loved poetry once.

She wondered if she would still love it after she returned.

"My lady! I'm sorry!" A voice rang out behind her, interrupting her thoughts. Buel scrambled up the last few feet of rocky scree to the top of the slope to stand behind her. The Dragonturtle looked winded. Granted, she *had* been carrying both of their packs since morning with no complaints. Her pale, sea-green hair was plastered against one side of her forehead and her dark eyes were lowered deferentially as she slid both packs off of her shell and began to rummage through them.

Dorgana almost spat in scorn at this latest display of submission.

How meek could a species be? she thought. No wonder every other proper-thinking folk had enslaved the Dragonturtles. They didn't argue. They didn't fight back. They wouldn't even look you in the eye.

She knew some nobles were uncomfortable around them, preferring to delegate their management to stewards, but those nobles did not avoid their Dragonturtles for the same reasons she did.

It was just *embarrassing to watch*. They would lead a herd of cragwallas from one end of the Range to the other, carrying your whole family on their back if you told them to, and yet they wouldn't show so much as an ounce of spine. Buel had armed herself at Dorgana's request, but that request had taken half an hour of badgering, and had ended with Dorgana demanding to know what they would do if they encountered a feral lycanthrope escaped from one of the monasteries.

Buel had said "trust my lady to defend me", but she had lowered her eyes and buckled on the weapon anyway.

She had never so much as glanced at the mace at her side in Dorgana's presence.

"My lady, the instrument." Buel bowed low, drawing dorgana back to the present. The Dragonturtle was holding out a long-seeing glass with both hands. Dorgana snatched the glass, careful to avoid touching the hands of the other woman. Perhaps her meekness was contagious.

Just the thought of that made Dorgana wish she had brought along a sand-rinse for her hands.

Buel stayed bowed even as Dorgana turned to study the descent. The spaces between peaks in the Range were sometimes vast chasms, but this one dropped all the way into an immense glacial lake.

At least, it should have.

Dorgana turned the glass this way and that, focusing it in the midday sun's feeble rays, and tried to peer through the clouds swarming below. They seemed to be ushering out of a single point in the terrain, a hole in the sky-desert.

By her reckoning, it was only a half an hour's careful descent downslope.

Chapter 1: Into the Widening Gyre

Dorgana's army would have to wait near the peak while she made the trek. They were still new to her command and she did not want some green recruit trying to show off and instead plummeting to her death.

The nobles who had given Dorgana her army had been quite clear that something was wrong here, and they had believed almost unanimously that it was connected to the Prophecy, but Dorgana didn't see why that meant she needed to risk the lives of anyone else on what was supposed to be a scouting expedition.

Dorgana tried to resist the straightening of her neck and the tilting of her chin as her body arched to show her throat. It was an instinctive territorial display, but there was no one here to fight. Not yet.

Still, if there had been an entire army of demons to carve a path through, Dorgana wondered if that would have been any better. At best, it would have meant leaving a lot of good women dead on the slope. And for what?

It seemed so hideously *wrong* that the fate of all existence was to be decided in such a way. Great armies would clash, and the *survivor* would be appointed Goddess?

Great armies were not led by kind people. The resulting Goddess, therefore, would be a horror, a carrion-mother of unending war.

Unless Dorgana beat them at their own game.

The council that had given her her army had understood this, she hoped. They had seen the drive in her to keep evil from triumphing over reality. That was all she could afford to believe.

She handed the seeing-glass gingerly back to Buel and tried not to snap her tail in distaste when the other woman only bowed lower. "Get up," she said, her tone no warmer than the air around them. "We're scouting ahead."

She turned back to the rock face below as Buel began repacking the seeing-glass and was alarmed to find that some undefinable part of the terrain had shifted while she was looking away.

There had been a great gray patch some two hundred feet lower, but now it was only fifty feet away.

Her gaze focused on it, and she blinked.

Were those *hairs*?

Dorgana's ax was in her hands in an instant, but the spider was already barreling forward.

It was nothing like the little huntsmen that were sometimes found in the markets of the walled cities. *Those* were barely a fingernail's width in each direction. This creature was gigantic. It could have swarmed over a monastery's walls without needing to climb.

"Alarums!" Dorgana bellowed. "Alarums! Buel, get behind—!"

The creature's spearpoint legs found a weak place in the slope just below them, shearing through the ice and sand, and suddenly the ground was going out from under Dorgana. She tried to pivot on her tail, grabbing for the ledge, but it had dissolved into debris. She tipped out into the blue, passing underneath the belly of the spider. Its alien eyes glittered as she hurtled past it. Its mandibles worked in silent hesitation, the slope rushed back towards her, and then she *hit*.

The rock face slapped the wind out of her, and she bounced away, careening past the titanic abdomen of the spider. Her side stung from the impact. Her head ached. Air rushed past her. And she hit again.

She clung to her ax. It was the only steady point in her world, which had disintegrated into whipping vertigo.

What should have been half an hour's descent turned into ten seconds of drop, and then the clouds were around her, a welcoming blanket.

She tried not to think about what lay beneath them.

It was cruel, being given an ounce of hope for the future only to have it ruined like this, but at least her last moment would be quick, she decided.

She kept her eyes open—so that she could face her death when it came. Instead, she had exactly a second's warning before the water's surface appeared beneath her, and she plunged into it with a catastrophic splash.

AXOLOZUG, EREBA

Ereba was falling, but then it sometimes seemed to Ereba like she had spent most of her life falling. The Ceiling was absolute wormwood with the bore-tunnels and natural pockets that formed its city-caverns. Occasionally new prospectors would dig out too far

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and an entire city would shear off, and then it would be falling too.

Beneath all civilization in Axolozug waited the Drop: a yawning, vertiginous void. It was a tireless devil made of gravity and empty space, but Ereba was not afraid. Her wings were broad enough to glide with. Even as she fell, she was in control.

No one could take that away from her.

She spun in wider and wider circles, watching the Ceiling fade away overhead. Millions of lights blazed from its black terraces. Airships like swarming flies waited underneath its ten-miles-wide stalactites, plying trade in the open air. But those were far overhead now.

Sometimes the adventurous would try and gauge the depth of the Drop, but none had ever found its nadir and returned. There was an event horizon several dozen miles down, one where even airships couldn't hoard enough resonance crystals to struggle back up to the Ceiling, and it was closing on Ereba fast.

Of course, she had no airship. She had only her wings.

She had passed the point where she could have survived this the moment she had leapt.

Still, she felt only freedom. At least there was no one down here to trouble her.

Folding her wings across her back, she stooped into a dive. The air burned against her face. Her skin felt stretched too tight. An overwhelming pressure swamped her mind, but she did not black out. It was better this than the other thing, better a final liberty than a lifetime in cages. She opened her mouth to cry out in triumph, and woke to the sound of a bell ringing just outside of her enclosure.

Snarling, Ereba pulled herself up into a sitting position, the floor swaying underneath her. One of the iron bars of the hanging cage grazed her left wing, and it burned. She swore, but softly.

After all, she had company, and her company preferred her to be polite.

Her attendant, the only other person in the opulent noblewoman's jail, was a locust woman. With whip-thin green antennae emerging from her forehead and delicate wingcases sticking out from the back of her blouse, her captor lowered her bell. "Are you roused, demon?" asked the woman coldly.

Ereba considered turning over and going back to sleep, but then she had already had plenty of experience with her captors' responses to being provoked. The locust woman would leave, and she would return with the tarantula girl and the cold iron pokers. It would be tedious and painful and last a good twenty minutes longer than it needed to, and so Ereba asked "what do you need of me?"

If she said it languidly, well, that was hardly her fault. She had, after all, been dreaming only a minute ago.

The locust woman scowled at Ereba's tone, folding her arms over her chest. "Tell me a story," she said.

Ereba yawned. "I'm fresh out of stories. Used them up this past Wandsday." She grinned, showing bright white feline teeth. "I'm feeling charitable, though. How about a limerick?" She paused, just long enough for the locust woman to open her mouth in protest, and then launched into verse. "There once was a queen of the Ceiling. She caught a demoness stealing. Now she walks with a strut, and a stick up her—"

The locust woman chucked her bell across the room. It crashed against the far wall, then clattered to the floor with a sound like a knight in full armor being kicked down a flight of stairs.

The silence that followed rang almost as loudly as the bell.

"Now," snapped the locust woman. "I trust I have your attention? Or do I need to fetch Lysallia?"

Ereba stared back sullenly, meeting her eyes for a defiant moment, and then looked away. "No, Bycretia. I will tell you a story."

The locust woman, Bycretia, smiled. Her expression was thin-lipped and strained. "After twenty years of captivity, I marvel that I should even have to ask twice. I will have a word with the queen. Perhaps you require a more regular disciplinary regimen."

Had it only been that long? Despite having lived some four hundred and eighty years, her time in the cell somehow felt like it had been twice that. Ereba lowered her head, if only to keep Bycretia from seeing the dark light glinting in her eyes.

Her imprisonment had started as a mistake, then slowly turned to Ereba's benefit as the queen's advisors began to speak unguardedly in Ereba's presence. It had been tedious, miserable, and full of iron pokers, but long cons often were.

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However, her latest dream had been right. Staying here was killing her. The queen's advisors came daily to ask for new stories, and the Drop alone knew what she needed those for, but otherwise there was nothing to do but stare at the walls and build up an immunity to the iron of the bars.

Ereba had always had a good head for stories. Stories helped you explain why your hand was buried to the wrist in someone else's coin pouch, or why you were taking bread out of the back of the bakery. And so the tale she told Bycretia was a repeat, with a few of the proper nouns and the setting changed. The locust woman would only realize the deception when she got back to her library to study it, which meant that she would have to walk the long staircase to Ereba's prison another two times that day.

Ereba's captors insisted on new stories only, and they were meticulous in verifying each new addition to their collection.

So she got her revenge wherever she could.

When Ereba finally wrapped up her tale, leaving the heroines in charge of the kingdom and the evil usurper banished back to the dimension of snakes, she sat perfectly still as the locust woman made a few final notes, collected the bell, and left.

As soon as the door to the prison closed, Ereba stood. Her jail was well-lit with arcane torches, each blazing white-blue from its scone on the wall, but even if it had been pitch-black she would have been able to see with perfect clarity. To her elongated ears, the world was a tapestry of sound, and she knew every inch of her cage by heart. Walking to the bars, she rested her hands on them.

It hurt for only a second, and then her mind told the pain to go away.

The cage that she was suspended in hung a foot off of the ground, and it had a simple lock that could accommodate a simple key. Both the lock and the key were iron, and so they should have been escape-proof for anyone with even a pint of demon blood and a hint of the old allergy, but Ereba concentrated and willed the fingers of her left hand to transform. Her skin ran like candle wax, flowing into the lock, which clicked open.

Ereba withdrew her hand immediately, blowing on it like it had been burned, and stepped down lightly onto the floor.

There were no windows in her prison, and the only door was a stout obsidian slab that was mage-locked from the other side and

guarded at all times. However, during one particularly dreadful two year stretch, Ereba had practiced the art of throwing her voice until she could hold conversations with herself from both sides of the room. Standing beside the door, she threw her voice into the middle of the chamber and began to sing. It was a jaunty little ditty, with a great sing-along in the chorus, but it was also high treason to listen to it and had been for the past ten years. Almost instantly, the door slammed open and a scorpioness stormed in, spear flashing out in front of her, whip-tail at the ready.

Ereba ducked the spear, dove through the doorway, and then slapped the sigil on outside wall.

The door slammed closed with a satisfying flare of warding magic, silencing the scorpioness' shout of dismay.

The hallway beyond the prison cell was a winding spiral descent and Ereba knew its every step. Despite having been blindfolded on her way in, she had memorized the layout of the prison, and she knew why it was so feebly guarded. There was no passageway that linked it to the rest of the city. At the bottom of the staircase, one final stone door opened out onto empty sky.

The prison was meant to be served by a municipal air barge, docking twice daily and crewed with the hardest members of the city guard. Waiting for it would be folly, but it was the only thing that a sane person could do.

Ereba smiled.

Far below, the dim outlines of aerial skiffs circled over the void. Captained by traders and brigands, smugglers and slum lords, they housed the disenfranchised and the desperate: everyone who had been told there was no longer a place for them on the Ceiling. When the skiffs ran out of resonance crystals they fell like stones into the Drop, but until then they scrounged and scrapped and survived.

Wind blew up the staircase, rushing past Ereba, fanning out her violet hair.

If she angled herself just right, she might just be able to make it to one of them.

And from there, she would have to see about this prophecy that the queen was so interested in.

With nothing but the sound of her own heartbeat in her ears, she stepped out into the void.

CHAPTER 2: ALL WHO WANDER

ETHANTAR, FELISTA

It was two notches on the sundial past evenshade and Felista of Barrenvale, thirteenth of her name, Queen of the Pride, began considering throttling her counselors.

Throttling them wouldn't have been a particularly charitable thing to do, but it was very queenly.

And *that*, Felista reflected, was entirely the problem.

Twelve Felistas of Barrenvale before her had forged their legacy through iron and fire and now it seemed that that damned pattern of behavior was written in her blood. Why talk when she could conquer? Why reason when she could crush?

Her hands were thickly furred, furnished with claws that could tear the bark off a Palisade Oak. Each claw was a little hook of wicked ivory. Ten perfect weapons in glittering array.

She took a breath and let it go, fighting the growl that wanted to climb into the back of her throat. She would not be her mother. She had found a better way, and twelve generations of bloodthirsty sovereigns could hang their heads and weep.

"Abergaul, Passalas," Felista said quietly. "You had best both start again. I'm sorry. I stopped listening."

Abergaul, the jaguaresque who served as her Mistress of the Coin, set her teeth very tightly and leaned back in her seat. It was just the three of them in Felista's pavilion, but this was how Abergaul reacted to adversity. She stopped. She considered. And she very carefully did not say that the eighteen-year-old queen was unfit for command, even if her eyes blazed it.

Passalas was smaller than Abergaul, with a blockier head and tufted, expressive ears. Her kind were an oddity, even in the varied lands of the Pride. Passalas was Felista's Mistress of the Dagger and supervised the far-flung spies and informants that made up the Pride's clandestine operations network.

When she was feeling antagonized, her expression was completely flat. However, that was also true when she was feeling sad, joyful, drowsy, vengeful, or bored.

"Would you like us to summarize, your highness?" Passalas asked, her voice bland and inflectionless.

Abergaul said nothing, clearly not trusting herself to speak.

Felista nodded, trying to appear grateful. "I'm sorry. It was just a lot to take in. Please summarize."

"Very well." Passalas curtsied, as much as being seated would allow. "The short of it is, your departure would burn down everything we have worked to build."

That was a little more blunt than the Mistress of the Dagger was usually inclined to be. Felista blinked, started to open her mouth, but into the pause Abergaul quickly spoke.

"It would bankrupt us as well, in short order." Tawny fingers drummed on the table, leaving neat little claw-impacts in the wood. "We can afford to maintain a standing army of the size that we do only because of our constant territorial expansion. And because of our constant territorial expansion, we *need* that army. Our borders spill into new valleys every other year, and that creates a lot of space, space which in turn requires outposts and watchtowers and soldiers assigned to build *roads*. Not to mention," the Mistress of the Coin continued, "every valley we take belonged to someone else originally, and they have armies too. *They* would dearly love to see their properties returned, not to mention our noses rubbed in our mistake."

"So give them their land back," snapped Felista, losing her calm again. "We can't possibly hope to survive if we make an enemy of every other queen in the land. Maybe it will mollify them."

Abergaul's eyes went luminous with horror. Gold rings encircled black pools that had widened, even past their normal width, in the lantern light. "Give them *back*, your highness?" she asked, as if she were clarifying which limb she had just been asked to chop off.

"Of course, give them back," said Felista, growing exasperated. "Do we even want them? They're full of Toads and Hawks anyway. They can't be happy about our rule."

"Your highness," said Passalas delicately, "I did speak with you a fortnight ago about an initiative to replace those malcontents with honest Prideswomen. The farmlands of any former citizen of the

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Mire or the Aviary could be confiscated and repurposed. Why, there are soldiers even now that would love nothing more than a patch of fertile valley soil to tame—”

Felista’s curled fist banged against the table, rattling their untouched drinks. “Why are we settling soldiers on land that we do not want?!” she asked sharply. “Give it back to the other queens. Send them *my regards*. I am *not* getting bogged down in this. Not when I have an army to lead.”

“Your highness.” Abergaul’s words were almost a hiss. “You have a queendom to lead. Trust your armies to your generals. Trust your missives to your messengers. Trust your politics to your diplomats. And trust *me* when I tell you that the Pride would not survive you leading half the armed forces into that miserable breach you found in the forest. As soon as word got out, our enemies would pounce. We would be torn to shreds, left without the head of our command structure, while you went gallivanting around some dismal netherspace playing heroine.”

“The Prophecy is *not*,” Felista stopped on the word for half a second on a flagstone the way a runner might when they were turning a corner at speed, “a childish whim. Our seers have validated it. *Our world will be remade*. When I become Goddess, I will see that no one hurts the Pride. I will see that no one *needs* to hurt the Pride. I will do the same for the Aviary, and I will do the same for the Mire. How long have we been fighting?” she pressed, hands clenching until her claws dug into her palms. “How many people have died over these pointless squabbles?”

“Territorial acquisition is *not* a pointless squabble—” Passalas broke in, but Felista kept on talking over her.

“I am your queen. This is my decree.” Felista took a breath. She hated having to force the ministers this way but, like always, they just wouldn’t *listen*. “I will leave the bulk of the standing army behind. I will take a single expeditionary corps. I will lead that corps into the breach, and I will win the War of the Prophecy. You will govern, *together*, in my stead. You will cease all unnecessary aggression against our neighbors, and you will make such sacrifices as necessary to repair our diplomatic relations. Do you understand?”

Abergaul was the first to lower her eyes in acquiescence. Passalas' followed only seconds after. "We understand," said the Mistress of the Dagger.

Felista tried to force herself not to stare them down. In their own way, they were innocent of these mistakes. They fought her simply because she challenged their habits. They had served the last queen in the same manner, and it had been all that was expected of them.

Part of Felista wanted to lunge across the table and scrap with both of them until they relented. It bared its teeth at their challenge. It wanted nothing more than to show what happened when someone crossed her.

She could do it, too. She was her mother's daughter. She had been trained by the best.

Instead, Felista made herself relax.

"Ready a messenger," she said, as calmly and as regally as she could. "Inform the 41st expeditionary corps that I will be leaving within the hour and they will accompany me. Until such a time, you may ask me any questions you have about your interim governance of the Pride."

"Our interim governance?" asked Abergaul slowly.

Felista nodded. "Yes. Until I have returned, you will be in charge." Neither minister looked at the other.

"As you command, your highness," said Passalas.

Her expression was completely flat.

SASI, DORGANA

Dorgana surfaced in a spray of foul-smelling swamp water, her tail wriggling to keep her afloat. All around her, the world was dark, as if she had tumbled from day straight into night.

How long has she been underwater?

It was impossible to be certain, but she knew she would have drowned after about an hour. In the walled cities, brats sometimes played games in the public fountains, seeing how long they could hold their heads under the sulfur-perfumed waters. Except for the ones with gills, most didn't manage more than a handful of minutes. Dorgana had been talented, but she had not been the best.

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Still treading water, her feet kicking out into the silent abyss, unease slipped over her. It was dark, so dark she could hardly see her hands when she held them up by her face. Proper navigation would be impossible. The shore of the mountain lake lay nearby, she was certain, but on her other sides there would be sheer granite slopes and glacier. If she picked the wrong direction to swim in, she would be worn out by the time she got there, and with no place to rest.

Frowning, she oriented herself as best she could and began to otter through the still, warm waters. Minutes passed. Or possibly centuries. There were no stars overhead and time felt fluid here. Strangely, the air was as warm as the water. No gooseflesh prickled the places where gaps in her armor left minute portions of her back exposed.

Even among the sulfur springs, it was never this pleasant outdoors.

Had she somehow fallen into a creature's den?

Thinking of the massive spider that had confronted her on the slope, she shuddered—but not for her own safety. Her soldiers would be able to handle it, but Buel had been right behind her.

She did not think the Dragonturtle could have survived a fight with a beggar, much less an actual monster. She probed at that detail, the way you might press your tongue against a broken tooth, and found that it revulsed her.

Had she failed Buel? She had given her a weapon, and that was all you could do with a warrior: hand them a weapon and hope that the courage followed.

But Dragonturtles were not warriors.

They never would be.

Dorgana felt her eyes stinging, even with their translucent membranes closed against the water.

If she became Goddess, she vowed, she would change this. And if someone else took the title from her, she would beg them with her dying breath to make sure that no other woman ever again died as a coward.

Her feet kicked out angrily, driving her forward, and as she did so something grazed against the base of her tail. Dorgana gasped out a string of bubbles, then realized that what she had touched was

slime-slick stone. It sloped up and away from the waters, to the dim outline of a sandy bank.

Emerging onto the shore, Dorgana shook. Her ax swung wildly on her back and the pondwater fell off her in cascades. Her armor remained soaked, but for the moment it was warm enough that drying it could wait until she found firewood and a place to camp.

Firelight would be welcome indeed.

If she strained, she could almost see distant shapes in the dark, but they were all the kinds of murky oblongs that you got when the clouds covered the sky on a moonless night. Any of them might have been real, or they might all have been phantoms conjured by the eyes to cope with the light-starvation.

If she had been further upslope, she would have stayed put until dawn rather than risk tumbling off a precipice in the blackness, but this far down she did not expect any dangerous drops would be waiting underfoot.

There could, however, be dangers of another sort.

Dorgana unslung her ax. She believed quite firmly that it was better to have the weapon ready and not need it than the other way around, and she found it hard to believe that the giant spider would have been the only one of its kind.

She pressed on, walking carefully over sand that crunched and caked underfoot, until something feathered against her tail and she stopped, ax upraised. For a long time, nothing moved.

After what might have been a minute or might, by count of her heartbeats, have been a year, she crouched low and examined the thing that had touched her, running her fingers over its surface. It felt like a fern: one of those bizarre curling plants that sometimes grew at the lowest elevations in the Range. Herdsmen sometimes smoked them, or fed them to their wallas to pacify the mighty lizards.

Had she truly fallen that far?

There were stories of creatures that lived at the fringes of the Range, devouring herders who ventured too far into the edgemists. Even the worst braggarts never claimed to have lingered there. That would have instantly exposed them as liars.

Dorgana touched her side gingerly, fingers pressing at the places where she remembered striking the slope as she fell. Nothing felt

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cracked. Her vision wasn't swimming. But perhaps her head had struck a rock, blinding her? Was that why it was dark?

Then why could she see shapes?

Sudden radiance flared, almost too bright to comprehend. Then her eyes adjusted.

The light was coming from somewhere not far away, perhaps five minutes' walk through the gloom. It had begun as a single globe, but then another flared, and another. Dorgana began to work her way towards it.

If there were people nearby, she could trade with them, swapping pieces of her kit for rations if they were feeling charitable, or story for story if they were not. Even the most solitary herders wouldn't turn her away into the wild. Dorgana drew herself up on her tail to try and get a better look at the lights, and all at once she felt the hard press of a blade against her lower back.

Carefully, rotating only her neck, she looked over her shoulder.

Behind her, framed in the eerie glow-light, was a girl, pale-bodied and clothed in only rags. Her head was a lolling open treasure chest. In her right hand, she held the dagger that was resting, tip-first, on on the lower portion of Dorgana's spine.

Behind *her*, a crowd of similar creatures had formed.

"Best t' be lettin' go of that ax," said the waif, the hinge of her head swaying wildly in the low light. "If you ain't terr'bly careful, someone'll be spillin' t' red."

AXOLOZUG, EREBA

Ereba dropped out of the air and hit the deck of the skiff sidelong, skidding and rolling across the planking. Families shrieked and pulled their daughters away. Women cursed or yelped in surprise. A burly guardswoman unslung eight cudgels with her eight hands and reared back onto her coils, a dervish of potential concussions at the ready.

Ereba managed to stop before she went over the opposite railing, but only by grabbing onto the side of a market stall laden with steaming cricket-and-molasses pies. The pies rattled in their tins. The pie vendor, a blend of shark and urchin, was not amused.

“Here, now!” she cried, brandishing a ladle. “Who do you think you are?” All of her spines bristled. “We use ladders here, and we *schedule* our boardings! We don’t just drop down on each other out of the Ceiling like that. Maybe there ain’t a place for us up in the spires, but we can still be civ-u-lized.”

Ereba blinked. It wasn’t that she had been expecting a round of applause for making the landing, but...

...well, actually just a little bit of applause would have been welcome.

Her right forefinger still ached from its contact with her cage, and so she stuck it into her mouth for a moment to soothe the burn. The deck was rocking lightly under her feet, but that was no different than the floor of the cage, and the ships that filled this portion of the sky were slathered in enchantments to keep their crews and possessions from slaloming off into the void whenever they maneuvered sharply in the air. She wasn’t about to fall off.

This particular vessel had been designated as a kind of trading hub. Several other ships, ranging in size from schooners to rafts, were anchored to it and their crews mingled freely, crossing from vessel to vessel by ladders, ropes, and with their own wings. Further down the deck, where the crowds were slowly beginning to turn back to what they had been doing before the demoness rocketed out of the sky, a teenage girl was selling kebabs at two crystal shavings apiece. The prices were skyway robbery, but enough of those crystal shavings glued together could keep a small boat aloft for a few days, and meat was hard to come by.

Around the vessel, the wind shifted, filling Ereba’s nose with the scent of broiled cricket and sweet molasses.

She turned back to the pie vendor, cocking her head at what she hoped was an innocent and charming angle. “I don’t suppose you could spare one of those for a famished stranger?” she asked.

The woman stopped mid-bluster. She had been just about to tell Ereba about how she could have bowled some poor little girl clear off the ship, and her cheeks were hot with more than just the off-heat from the warmer inside the pie cart. “Did I hear that right?” she asked, pitching her voice so that it carried to the cluster of people that Ereba had nearly collided with—as well as to the octopodal guardswoman with the clubs. “Did you actually come

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down here, taxing *our* buoyancy and threatening *our* livelihoods, to try and codge a bit of free grub off of me?”

“Not really?” hazarded Ereba. Her ears twitched as she tried to keep track of the individual members of the crowd, picking out particular bodies by the frequencies of their grumbling. If one person rushed her, she was sure she would hear their footsteps separating from the mass. On the other hand, if everyone rushed her, she wasn’t sure she would be able to tell who was going to hit first.

The crew would be within their rights to throw her off the boat for landing the way she had, which would mean a long flight to the next nearest ship, assuming her energy held out.

“Look,” she told the pie vendor. “I just want a moment to rest my wings. A bite to eat if you can spare it.”

“We can’t.” The vendor folded her arms. “Not lest you’re planning to pay for the damages caused by your landing?”

Ereba patted her pockets. After twenty years of atrophy, her old habits were coming back, but not quickly enough. There had been three or four good opportunities for a pickpocket since she had landed, but she had taken none of them.

“Fine,” she said loudly. “I’ll just have a bite and pay you when I’m done.” Snatching a pie off of the vendor’s stand, she took two quick steps back and dodged a swing of the ladle. “Hey!” she shouted. “I just said I’d pay y—” She bumped against a bat-eared woman who was trying to sidle around the little pocket of drama and they both went sprawling. Several good-sized nuggets of crystal left the bat woman’s purse, vanishing down Ereba’s top. The pie, meanwhile, hit the ground tin-side-down. Dark syrup oozed from a crack in its crust.

“Now it’s ruined,” Ereba huffed.

By this point the pie vendor was coming around the side of the stall, her weapon brandished, and Ereba had been ready for this, but she had not been expecting the bat woman to start shrieking “thief! Thief!”

How had she seen—?

Oh, right, Ereba realized belatedly. *Echolocation.* She rolled away from her mark and came to an abrupt stop at the feet of the guardswoman. Eight cudgels pointed down at her. “Did you honestly try to rob—” the octopus woman began.

Ereba didn't give her a chance to finish. She kicked to her feet, then threw herself backwards, angling her head back towards the deck. A cudgel swished through the air where she had been and then her hands hit the boards, palms reversed to catch her the weight from her backflip. Her body stacked up on them, the momentum of her handspring glueing her for a moment in place. Another two cudgels passed by harmlessly overhead and then she launched herself upward, landed on her feet, and darted forward, and delivered a harmless finger-flick to the face of the guardswoman. The guardswoman stumbled backwards, tripped over a butterfly hound that had been quietly watching the bipeds' antics, and landed on her back.

Ereba sprang away, scooped up the unattended pie, and was just making a break for the railing when a voice called out "wait!"

Something in the speaker's tone got the better of her. She skidded to a halt. There had been no malice in the single word; no judgement. Instead, what Ereba had heard had been closer to awe.

She looked over her shoulder, cricket pie gripped firmly with both hands. "I'm waiting?" she offered, and the speaker stepped out of the crowd.

Extending a hand to the downed guardswoman, the captain pulled her to her feet. Then, just as deliberately, she crossed to the pie vendor and pressed a half dozen small crystal spheres into her hands. Finally, she knelt by the bat woman, her expression honest. "I can pay you with crystals if you wish, but it has been too long since our last thief-taker left," she said, "and we have been negligent in not replacing her. A position among my crew is yours if you wish it."

Ereba gawped, but—since her mouth was open—she also took a quick mouthful of the pie. It was dense and sickly sweet and crunchy with undissolved flecks of shell. She tried not to make a noise of bliss. She failed.

"And you," the captain turned to her, and now Ereba could see that the captain was smiling. It was a hungry sort of smile, the kind you wore when you'd just thought up the perfect con. The woman wore an improbably large red tricorne hat—the brim of which kept poking the flightless Loop Owl that sat on her right shoulder—and a matching scarlet brocaded coat that ran all the way down to the top of the thick, scaly tail that she had instead of legs. On her

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person, visible to everyone in the market, were no less than three swords and twelve daggers. There was also what looked suspiciously like a thirteenth dagger tucked behind her left ear. “You doing anything for the next week or so?” the woman asked.

Ereba paused. There wasn’t a lot that caught her off-guard anymore, but this qualified. She looked the captain up and down again. “Might be. Who’s asking?”

There came that smile again, broad as a left-open vault door. “Tressa,” she said. “Tressa the Option. If you don’t mind me saying so, you look like you can hold your own in a fight.”

Ereba licked a bit of molasses from the corner of her mouth. “I don’t mind you saying so.”

Tressa lifted an eyebrow. “Are you between work, then? I might have a job for you, if you’d like.”

Ereba considered the pie in her off-hand. All around them, the clamor of the market had abated. Even the pie vendor held her silence. “What’s the score?” she asked at last.

Tressa rolled her shoulders languidly. “Oh, I think you’ll find it quite sufficient. We’re looking for someone to help us win the War of the Prophecy. You interested?”

SASI, DORGANA

“I’m not looking for a fight,” said Dorgana, shifting her grip on the ax. If she needed to, she could probably clear the girl off of her back with a sweep of her tail. More worrying were the thirty others who had gathered in the glow-light, all similarly emaciated and wielding what seemed more like farming equipment than weapons. She could take them, but there was rust on some of those blades, and she wasn’t sure how far she was from a friendly healer. “Leave me alone and I’ll extend you the same courtesy.”

“How’s we supposed to be knowing that?” asked the treasure-chest-headed girl. “You might’a got one scrittled up inside of your brainbox, for all we’s know.”

Dorgana had fought with and against all manner of people, from Golems to Lamia to Medusae, and she had never seen someone with furniture for part of their body. When the girl spoke, it was like the words emanated out of the dark of the chest. Idly, Dorgana

wondered if she kept her possessions in there, and then decided that she didn't want to know.

"I don't know what you're talking about, and at the moment I don't much care. Continue pointing that blade at me, and you will lose it. Do you understand?" She tried to puff herself up as she said it. Tetraodonts and Daughters of the Frill sometimes backed down instinctively when she did that, but she was not prepared for the crowd's reaction: outright panic.

"She's burstin'!" yelled an old woman, her legs tapered into a centipede's tail.

"Put 'er down!" shrieked a girl with arms of brass. "Git the torches!"

Dorgana barely felt the chest-headed girl lunge. At the same time, she moved automatically. Her tail rose up, slapped the dagger aside, and delivered a stinging strike to the girl's head-chest. Its lid snapped all the way open and then clicked closed and she fell over in a heap on the cold dirt.

At the same time, Dorgana spun her ax, deflecting a thrown scythe, then pivoted and drove the haft into the belly of a woman who was charging with a rake. The woman *whumphed* as the breath went out of her, and Dorgana kicked her away.

"I don't want to have to kill you!" she shouted, and the crowd froze.

No one lowered their weapons.

"What kind of trick is this?" someone muttered.

"Did anyone sees 'em?" someone else asked from further back.

"Anyone feels anything? Did she pop?"

Dorgana slammed the butt of the ax handle against the ground.

"What are you *talking* about?" she demanded.

"The scribblins!" a third speaker shouted back. "You gots 'em. We knows it!"

"I think there's been a miscommunication." Dorgana let the head of the ax hang, resting the end of the haft on the ground. "What in the Everblood's name is a scribblin?"

"It's like a spider," said the chest-headed girl, picking herself up from behind Dorgana. "But it's only as big as the tip of my pinky finger. 'S not fifty or sixty feet high, like a spider's supposed to be. It wriggles in your ear, or up your nose, or in a wound, and then you're not what you're supposed to be either."

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Dorgana blinked. "Wouldn't I know if I were full of these things?" she asked delicately.

Chest-head shrugged, unlatching the front of her face as she picked herself back up. "Not in a way that has meaning, no."

Dorgana stared back blankly. "And what does *that* mean?"

The girl looked at her strangely, the way you might at an abbot who had just asked you what the bars on her cell were for. "They gets in an' you changes. Not on the outside, maybe, but you're no longer carin' 'bout the things you used to like. All you're carin' about is passin' the scribblins on."

Dorgana let out a long breath and tried not to think about how long she had been underwater with her ears open, with her skin and scales scraped from the fall, and with her eyes wide.

"I don't think I have any of those in me," she said, "but is there a test?"

The girl nodded, the lid of the chest waving in the air. "City-folk don't think so," she said, "but cities keep up an' disappearing in the dark, so that's just showin' what they know. Us outsiders, we get by fine. If you see someone you think is infected, kill them. If scribblins swarm outta the body, you was right."

"That's the test?" asked Dorgana, both eyebrows going up.

How long had these people been living down here to grow so vicious? So insular?

Chest-head shrugged again. "Beats wakin' up to find one'a yer kin coughin' scribblins in yer ear."

Dorgana shivered. "There has to be a better way."

"Yer a thinkin' type, then?" asked the girl, tilting her cumbersome head to the side. "Cities wouldn't let you in, not after you'd been out here with us, but I bet the hermitess'd likes to see you."

There was a murmuring of agreement from the group.

"The hermitess?" asked Dorgana.

"Yeah, ah," chest-head hesitated. "She's a mite strange, you know? Been broodin' for ages on this war she says is comin'. Not to be rude or nothin', but I'm not sure's I agree. Only war I know is 'tween us 'n the bugs, an' they've won. But she's real clever. You'll get along for sure, or my name's not Kismet."

Dorgana studied the girl. It was very hard to read the honesty in a hinged box. "And is your name Kismet?" she ventured at last.

The girl brightened. “It is! Good guess! Now,” she turned to the rest of the rabble, “let’s step lightly, yeah? I think I smells a centipede hunting-pack headed this way.”

CHAPTER 3: THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

URACH, BUEL

Gone. Lady Dorgana was gone, and in her place was a horror of onrushing fangs and hair.

Buel spun aside, ducking beneath the spider's legs as it scrambled up the slope. Each leg hammered down like massive gray pistons, but none so much as touched her shell.

The mace at her belt was useless. She had not had time to train with the weapon. She had not been sure the Lady Dorgana would have even *allowed* her to. The mace might have simply been another of the citypeople's incessant tests.

When I hand you a knife you're supposed to question me, but Everblood help you if you try to question me about handing you anything else.

Dragonurtles had been kicked off the edge for a lot less.

Buel wished she could have asked her herdmother for advice, but the home flock was far away. For now, she would have to rely on her own judgement. It was not wisdom, but it was all she had.

The spider, its massive thorax directly overhead, tried to turn and bring its fangs to bear. They quivered, throbbing with chitinous malice, and it tried to press its body low and flat, lining its face up with hers.

She stared into its glittering eyes, and she felt the angles come to her. A curious detachment spread through her body. Her limbs felt cold.

It was like she was standing adjacent to death, and the Maiden was resting her fingers lightly on Buel's arm, telling her where to step. What to do.

The spider lunged and Buel was not there. Without seeming to have moved by any real design, she had stumbled a few steps to one side, following the path the angles had shown her.

Reorienting, the spider twisted its body and tried to strike sideways at her.

Buel pivoted, and found herself standing under the arch of its legs when its fangs glanced off of stone. Awkwardly, she raised her mace and brought it crashing into the nearest leg at just the place the angles told her to strike. The mace almost popped back out of her hands with the rebound from her swing, but the leg *cracked*. It sagged and yellowish green ichor welled out from the break.

The spider tried to pivot, but Buel hurried forward, somehow threading the rise and fall of its legs with perfect precision. When it stopped, confused, she broke another of its legs. And another.

As she moved, the world seemed to fall into place. It was like this when she summoned the angles. Everything had a proper spot, an orientation in space, and she could see all of it. No attack could touch her. No upraised hand, no bent stick, no discipline switch.

She had only used it once against another person—the taskmistress had screamed with impotent rage as Buel dodged her slaps—before realizing that it was not something other people could do. She had kept it hidden since that day, and wore the bruises of the beating that came when she finally stopped dodging for weeks afterward as a reminder.

She couldn't afford to take risks simply because they felt good. The cold calm was exhilarating, true, but it would not save her from a punishment.

On the other hand, in the face of the spider, she could either call the angles or she could die.

And Buel did not want to die yet.

The spider continued to turn and its feet found the razor-line between earth and sky. It was balanced perfectly, so Buel lifted her mace and brought it crashing into the spider's maw.

She was rewarded with a fang twisting loose. The creature's face had been dented and the thing reeled, side-scrabbling along the edge of the drop in order to get away.

It screamed at her then, its chelicerae shivering together to produce a sound like a lute being flayed, and before she could respond a flight of arrows struck its side. Some punched only as far as the outer layer of its shell. Others went straight in, vanishing in yellow-green *puffs* of slime.

Lumbering away, the spider fled downslope and into the clouds.

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Buel frowned. The angles had not shown her that the arrows were coming.

She had not been watching out for them, but now here she was, with a weapon upraised, in the presence of her betters.

Grimly, her hands shaking, Buel let go of the angles and the mace. It clattered on the ground, rolling to a rest by the edge. She did not meet the soldiers' eyes, but she knew what she would have seen if she had.

Lady Dorgana had been a fine warrior, and many like-minded women had gathered under her banner when it had been announced that she was going to fight in the War of the Prophecy. Eager for a taste of the glory, every able-bodied killer in the walled city had signed on with her.

They were arrayed now, in a semicircle at the top of the slope, staring at Buel.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, ducking her head low.

She should not have forgotten about the soldiers.

She should not have fought back.

She should simply have spun and evaded while she waited for them to arrive. It would have looked strange, her dancing with the monstrous arachnid, but she could have passed off her survival as luck.

Citygoers sometimes thought Dragonturtles were lucky.

It was a superstition she had never understood.

"The lady Dorgana!" demanded a Gorgoness from the center of the formation. "Where is she?"

Buel simply pointed down and into the clouds. She could not speak. The warriors would throw her off the edge for sure. She had allowed their champion to die. Now no one would represent them in the War of the Prophecy.

The ground was cold as her knees hit it. Her hair fell all around her eyes. Long-suppressed instincts made her want to bare her neck in submission, but Dragonnewts somehow always read that as an act of challenge, and so she had learned to suppress it.

"What do you mean?" snapped the Gorgoness. "Speak! Did she go off scouting?"

Buel shook her head. "She fell, my lady."

The troops were too well-disciplined to show much response, but a muttering went through them. "And did you see where she

landed?" the Gorgoiness asked. "Does she need assistance climbing back up?"

"She's gone," murmured Buel. She had hardly known the other woman, she was unprotected now. No one would vouch for her. She still carried the bags of a mistress who had been snatched away by fate. When the soldiers understood this, she would be reassigned, and her new charge might be considerably crueler.

Dorgana had been much too awkward to ridicule or hurt her.

Not every Dragonnewt was like that.

"Rotten luck," said the Gorgoiness, spitting on the ground. The granite sizzled and smoked where her saliva had hit. "I don't like the look of that descent, but there's nothing for it." She straightened up and, as if seeing Buel for the first time, snapped her fingers.

"You, herdswoman. Lead the way."

"But she's..." Buel began.

The Gorgoiness cut her off. "You people are supposed to have good senses, right? You can count the wallas on a distant peak through the fog? So take us to Lady Dorgana. Track her by scent if you have to. Am I clear?"

Buel nodded, keeping her eyes down and her head low. She couldn't look at the fallen mace, in case they somehow realized she had been holding it. "Crystal," she whispered and, quietly calling the angles, began to pick a path down the treacherous stone slope.

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The Gorgoiness' name was Luthalla. She watched over Buel's shoulder when they stepped through the hole in the air, and she swam just ahead of her after they had plunged into the black waters.

She said nothing the entire time.

When they reached shore, having found no trace of Lady Dorgana's body in the pool, the two of them waited in silence while the other soldiers surged up the bank, weapons and packs running with the warm, fetid water. Even then, when they had all assembled and Luthalla called for light cantrips to be cast by the company mages, she did so curtly. Efficiently.

Buel knew she was going to be blamed for Dorgana's fall.

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It was a miracle she hadn't been made the scapegoat already, but of course she was still useful. When that usefulness ran out, she would be left behind.

If she was lucky.

Buel shuddered. The water had found its way into the contours of her shell, pooling around the divots in her shoulders. She hunched down, trying to tip it back out, but a hand grabbed and propelled her to her feet.

The hand was Luthalla's.

"Keep moving," was all the Gorgoness said.

Illuminated, this new land was eerie. The mages' light orbs drifted in lazy orbits around the party, shedding their harsh glare on strange pale plants and misshapen fungi. Things like crabs with too many legs froze as they passed, sightless stalk eyes tracking nothing until the last of the soldiers had passed by.

Something that could have been a snake, but for all the bristles and feelers making it look equally like a hairbrush, clung to the side of a shelf-mushroom as big as a walla saddle and undulated its back at the soldiers until they moved away.

"Where are—?" a mage asked, but Luthalla hushed her.

"Enemy territory," she said.

Buel thought about that.

If the stories surrounding the Prophecy were to be believed, then every one of the four worlds would be sending its champions into the fray. Every one of those champions would have family, friends, lovers, rivals.

And by the time the war was over, all but one of those champions would be destroyed.

Buel hung her head low.

She couldn't change that there was going to be a war. She couldn't save those desperate, doomed strangers.

She couldn't even save herself.

Maybe if she had been born a Dragonnewt—

The thought was cut off as she ran straight into Luthalla's outstretched arm. "Shh!" hissed the Gorgoness. Buel froze. "Mages," Luthalla continued, as if she'd barely noticed her presence. "Fan out your lights. There's an unpleasant flavor to the air."

Buel lacked the Gorgoness' flickering red whip of a tongue, but she could smell it too. It was like the rank, acrid reek of a bull walla

marking its territory. It had the bitter undertone of ashes and the sharp bright scent of citrus, and it moved between the two, indefinable and shifting. It clung to her nose like a cloying perfume and every sniff she took seemed to strengthen it.

Or maybe it was getting stronger because it was getting closer.

Luthalla figured it out a second before she did. "Alarums!" the Gorgoness shouted, surging forward to put herself between Buel and the dark. "To arms!"

The other soldiers unshipped damp bows, drew sodden arrows, and unslung halberds. Those mages that weren't directing the lights surrounded themselves with thrumming violet energy. One swore and fired off a lance prematurely into the dark. Then there was a sound like a curtain of rain sweeping over them. Millions of tiny noises blended into a single cadence as the first of the centipedes burst into the circle of light.

It was as wide around as the fattest, most indolent gelded walla Buel had ever seen. Its segmented plates were the pale white of bones that had been left exposed, and its mouth was a ravenous black pit, stark even in its comparison with the surrounding darkness.

It didn't lunge at Luthalla. There was no change in its speed as it came on, legs clicking in perfect synchronicity. It just was there, suddenly. It reared up over her.

A ragged flight of arrows arced through the air, striking its hide, and a cudgel of mauve force struck it across the face, batting the column of its body off-course. It stumbled, legs writhing, and up and over it swarmed three more centipedes of equal size.

Someone screamed and another volley of arrows took flight. These fell in a looser cluster, inadequate against the creatures' advance. Halberdiers stepped forward, their weapons flashing in the magelight, and one by one they began to die.

Buel shut her eyes at the horrid efficiency of it.

The centipedes did not hunt like wolves, taking a bite and retreating. They tore and devoured with every turn of their coils, feeding as they went.

From the back of the formation, other cries went up. Archers and mages were falling now too. They had been flanked, Buel realized.

That spider had only been a taste of the horror to come.

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Metal scraped on leather. Blades rasped on chitin. Jaws closed on bone.

Luthalla was screaming. Buel opened her eyes again.

One of the centipedes had made a hole in their ragged formation and was chasing Luthalla out towards the perimeter of the circle of magelight. The other monsters were in among the soldiers, savaging and feeding. One had been almost pulped from repeated spellcasts, but it was still twitching, its jaws were still working, and it was still dangerous. As she watched, it lashed out clumsily and clamped its mandibles over a Lamia's tail. The soldier screamed.

In her bones, Buel knew she couldn't fight back again. Not where the soldiers could see her.

If she did, then afterwards they would question her. They would ask her for her lineage. They would demand to know who had managed to breed savagery into a Dragonturtle.

If a noble could not be produced, her family would be found and they would suffer for her crimes.

On the edge of the ring of magelight, Luthalla's coils bunched as she tried to scramble over a heap of white fungi. She fell, catching herself with her hands, and pulled her tail in, snatching it out of the mouth of her pursuer. She was slow in getting upright, however, and it was on her before she could twist away.

Buel felt the angles stirring in her head. She told them to leave her alone. They did not understand her position. She could not fight.

She hunkered down and waited to be devoured.

Soon, her problems would be at an end. Soon, she would no longer have to bow in the presence of anyone without a shell. Soon, she would no longer be expected to carry missives, or bags, or visit the monasteries; risking infection in order to deliver news and transcribe the prayers of the women tainted by the Everblood's holy touch.

Soon she would not be kicked or scorned or threatened or ignored.

And soon enough, a new goddess would remake the worlds. With luck, the goddess wouldn't leave even a trace of Urach in it.

Buel did not hate her land. The mountain range was as much a part of her as her shell. However, she hated what both Urach and her shell had done to her. It felt good to admit that before dying.

If Buel had been put in charge of the worlds, she would have seen to it that no one was born shelled. That no one was born scaled. That no one was born any differently than anyone else. There would only be people, bare and new, with no reason to fear one another.

She raised her head, still waiting for death to come.

Luthalla was fighting back against the centipede, half-in and half-out of shadow. She had a blade in hand and the blade flashed, stripping legs from the centipede's flanks. It wasn't enough. The creature had bitten her twice—taking away more than just armor. Her movements were slowing.

Maybe, Buel thought, it doesn't matter what I do. In the end, the worlds could be redesigned so completely that all of Urach is eradicated. Perhaps no matter what I do, my family will cease to exist...

She didn't finish the thought.

The scope of it was too great.

It boiled out.

And became action.

Buel shed her packs. Ripping the drawstrings open, she dug. At the top of hers were her cooking supplies: pans, ladles, and spatulas. There were no knives—Dragonturtles were not permitted knives—so instead she hefted a frying pan. The angles came to her, spelling out every possible trajectory, and she hurled the pan along an obvious one.

It arced high, vanishing from sight. Then it fell like a stone, catching the centipede that was rearing over Luthalla in the inside of its mouth.

It was like watching an amateur angler rip a fish hook from her catch. There was no subtlety. Just a moment of tension and then an explosion of flesh. The pan burst out the other side of the centipede's head.

Buel didn't bother waiting to see what became of Luthalla. She had already sent a saucepan into the air and a kettle after it. Then a linen drawstring bag of soup spoons. Then a sack of onions. Then she was dumping out Dorgana's kit and finding the real weapons.

Without a lot of magical amplification, the force behind a throwing knife dropped off sharply after several feet, but this was somewhat less true of axes.

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Buel pulled the first hatchet out of Dorgana's gear and heaved it sidelong into the flank of a nearby centipede. Ichor puddled out, drooling from the mouth of the wound. The creature turned away from the mage that it had been mauling and its questing mouth swung towards Buel. She put a salad bowl right into that, and then a second hatchet, and then the downed mage managed to channel enough of her own Aura to shape a double-fist of purple energy and bring it down on the centipede's midsection, crippling it.

Buel switched targets.

Luthalla's attacker was back on the Gorgoness again, biting and tearing, so Buel sent a serving platter spinning sideways through its antennae. The centipede reared back, blinded, and as it did a sachet arched through the air to land with a plop in its open mouth.

The sachet, which had cost as much as a herd of healthy walla, had contained all of Buel's cooking spices. Within moments, the centipede began to thrash.

Buel switched targets again.

The last surviving horror had been mostly corralled by the surviving soldiers. Halberds darted and struck. Arrows dappled its flanks. Ichor oozed in long flowing runnels down its sides.

Its jaws, however, were perfectly functional. It leaned in and bit the arm off of a Lamia while Buel looked around for something to throw.

Halberd blades cut channels in its sides. Arrows feathered the hard, chitinous mask of its face. Buel dug and dug through her pack, finding only clothes.

She had always carried spare clothes when she travelled with soldiers, in case they might need them. Loose-fitting, tailorable garments filled the bottom half of her pack.

Dorgana's bag, on the other hand, apart from the weapons had been cramped with little kits. Kits for sharpening. Kits for sewing. Kits for starting fires. Kits for sending letters.

Grunting, Buel haphazardly shoveled the personal effects back into both bags, grabbed them, and—one in each hand—began to spin. She whipped around, arms out, letting the momentum of the bags drag her in circles. The angles guiding her, she flung one first, and then the other. They arced high into the air, converged at the zenith, and came down together.

A moment later, there was a pop like a grape being crushed, and then another, meatier, squelch.

Buel collapsed in a heap on the ground, eyes rolling in her head as the earth bucked beneath. She felt like she was about to fall into the sky. Her stomach churned.

If a centipede found her now, the most she could do would be to flail ineffectually at it.

Apart from the groans of the wounded and dying, though, the battlefield had gone quiet.

Blearily, she tried to focus on Dorgana's soldiers, but they refused to stay in one place. They turned in dizzying constellations of warriors, hundreds of mirror images sweating and wounded and astounded at their own survival.

For a moment, Buel thought she heard someone *clapping*, but then she realized it was the centipede that she had fed half a pound of arid mountaintop peppers to relentlessly slamming its face against the dirt. A mage raised her arms, swelled her aura, and the centipede lit on fire. Its armored plates hissed and popped like corn kernels and soon it was moving only in little spasms.

Luthalla staggered back towards the group. Blood soaked her armor from puncture-wounds the size of spearheads. Her face was ashen.

Unsteadily, Buel pulled herself up onto her knees. She met Luthalla's eyes. Defiantly, now. Daring the other woman to kill her.

To her surprise, the Gorgoiness looked away. "Gather up the wounded," she said, her voice hoarse and barely carrying. "Leave the dead. Offer final mercies to those that request them. We must secure a place to bivouac *now*. Finding Dorgana will have to be secondary. Mages, I want you to pool your powers. Pour every scrap of Aura you have into lighting up the night. Make one big flash, and then we'll navigate by what we see. Do you understand?"

Buel just slumped forward, her hands resting in the dirt, her stomach heaving.

She was still alive, she realized.

When she looked down at her arms, they were shaking.

THE WASTES, HAULA

The best time to rob someone was after they were already dead.

Haula picked over the bodies—more of them green-and-gold than red-and-black—hunching her wings and stooping so low that in the moonlight she looked like any other vulture coming to feed.

Armies were strangely particular about who got to poke over the corpses that they made, and so she kept a weather eye out for movement on the edges of the killing field. The losers of the conflict, the green-and-golds, had not gone far. Their troops were only a few minutes' flight away. The black-and-reds, meanwhile, had ringed the perimeter with their sentries.

It was strange to think that anyone should be possessive of so much unmoving flesh, but from the air the soldiers had looked like they would sooner skewer her than chat, so Haula had bypassed them entirely, landing in the middle of the field.

If the battlefield had been nearer a beast or a caravan, she could have spent the whole night prying off choice pieces of armor and flying them away to bury. Then she could have sold the location of the cache to an interested buyer—or, more likely, to *several* interested buyers. If a few of them later arrived to find the loot had already been dug up, that certainly wasn't Haula's problem.

However, the nearest merchant caravan would have probably tried to chase her off with slings and bows if she had set foot in it again, so she was stuck grabbing plunder that was either small and valuable or else important to her immediate survival. A dead crab-woman with faded green-and-black stripes stitched into her leather armor had offered up a belt pouch with a handful of dry biscuits. Haula took each one delicately in her talons and shifted them to her own supplies. Then she flattened herself to the sand, waiting to see if she had been spotted.

The crab-woman's body was still fresh enough that the corpse-stench had not begun to gather around it, and no flies were yet in evidence.

Next to her, Haula looked like just another casualty.

She let several minutes drag by before moving again, creeping deliberately to the next closest body. She was looking for a fresh canteen, which evidently no one thought to bring into battle, and

was just starting to wheedle the gold ring off of the next corpse's finger when it moved.

Haula lumbered back, wings flashing wide as she fought the urge to break for open sky. The body she had been investigating had belonged to a Pangola, with only a few strategic metal plates supplementing its natural armor. Next to it was a banner, criss-crossed with geometric designs picked out in green and gold.

Haula had watched from the air as the two armies had clashed, circling while she waited for a victor to be decided, but she did not remember this Pangola from the fray. Crumpled and prone, she looked no older than sixteen.

"Please," the girl whispered. "Do what you must, but give me a sip of water first."

Haula frowned. There was a long cut that ran down the Pangola's left side. Scales had been sheared clean off, but the injury hardly looked fatal. Of course, there could have been any number of ghastly wounds on the girl's other side, hidden by the position she had fallen in.

And it was bad luck to refuse the requests of the dying.

Haula removed her canteen from her waist and held it out to the girl. "There's only a little left," she cautioned as the fallen Pangola took it gingerly from her outstretched talon. "Drink slowly."

Tipping her head back, the Pangola drained the canteen in three gulps.

Haula almost swore at the top of her lungs, but remembered where she was at the last second. Instead she glared at the girl. "I said 'slowly,'" she hissed.

The Pangola wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I know. I'm sorry." She rolled over part way, exposing a completely *uninjured* right side, then got up into a low crouch. "I'll make it up to you when we get out of here."

Haula blinked. "When we get out of here?"

The Pangola looked embarrassed. "My accent does make me a bit hard to understand, doesn't it? I don't get to talk with outsiders much and—"

Haula stopped her, flaring her wings in warning. "Did I say I was going to help you?"

"Not really," the girl admitted. "But I did kind of assume, based on you giving me your water, that you were the type who might. I'll

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see you rewarded,” she continued. “Did I mention that yet? But first we have to get outside of the circle of women who would sooner put a spear in me than see me rejoin my people.”

“Your people?” Haula asked, interested now. “Are you their commander?”

With long, sloth-like claws, the Pangola scratched delicately at the side of her neck. “It’s a bit like that,” she said, looking nervously out across the field of dead soldiers, “but this isn’t really the place to discuss it. Could you just maybe lift me into the air and carry me away—” she stopped, seeing Haula’s expression.

“I can’t fly like that,” said Haula. “You’re too heavy.”

The Pangola sniffed.

Haula’s face reddened. “Not like that. Not you specifically. *People* are too heavy for me to fly with. Your friends in the other army would see me a few feet over ground-level, flapping my wings like a frantic chicken, and going about as fast as a passing cloud. They’d break out the crossbows, and maybe also a skin of wine.”

“Oh.” The Pangola’s expression fell. “Well, I appreciate that it’s not about my weight.”

Haula looked at her oddly. “Have you done this a lot?” she ventured.

Now it was the Pangola’s turn to look chagrined. “Play dead on battlefields when my side gets the sand kicked out of them?” she hazarded. “More than once.”

“Why?” asked Haula, incredulously. “Once would be enough for me.”

“You sort of...” the Pangola paused for a moment. “You get used to some things, and by then it’s too much work to change them.”

“Things like dozens of people dying around you?” Haula pressed.

The Pangola looked torn. “Look,” she said. “I’m sure you got a good view of the sentries on your way in. Could you tell me which ones looked the least attentive? I’ll sneak by them, and you can leave on your own after I’m gone. Meet me in my camp afterwards. Ask for Mindry. We’ll pay you, if that’s what you’d like.”

“You’re the Mindry I’m asking for?” ventured Haula.

The Pangola nodded. “It’s sort of a nickname.”

“Fine.” Haula pointed with the tip of a wing, angling it towards the northeast where the vague outline of a minotaur was leaning like a drunkard on the crosspiece of her spear. “That’s your best bet.

She's been half-asleep since she got here, but *you* need to find *me* on the edges of your camp. I'm not landing where you might have nets and ropes ready."

"That's fair, I guess?" said Mindry, sounding puzzled that anyone would even worry about such a thing. "Either way, we'll talk in a bit." Gathering her arms around her feet, she tucked her tail up and over her shoulder and leaned forward.

Haula blinked. In the girl's place was a rolling ball of armored scales.

It trundled across the battlefield, neatly threading around bodies, meandered past the drowsing sentry, and slipped away into the night.

Haula gave the other corpses one last, desultory look, then spat and flung herself into the air.

She beat her wings twice, and then she was gone as well.

SASI, BUEL

By the time they reached the massive stone gates, Buel was carrying Luthalla on her back.

Buel was also carrying most of the wounded soldiers' kit bags, and the Gorgoness rode atop a cushion of small canvas bundles.

When the halt was announced, she let Luthalla down gently, then shrugged out of the rest of the burden. She followed the other soldiers at a distance, approaching what they had all presumed to be the entrance to a city.

The gates had been built into a sheer rock face and they had been clearly visible to the company when the mages' flare had gone off. As to whether this strange settlement was inhabited...

Luthalla's head lolled on the dirt. An injured woman groaned. Another soldier, barely conscious, mumbled something about her daughters.

The centipedes, they had learned as they marched, had been venomous.

Stepping up to the gates, one of the uninjured halberdiers pounded a fist on the worn stone. "Open up," she shouted. "We have injured."

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For a few minutes, nothing happened. Mage lights circled and danced around the surviving members of the company, throwing harsh white light down over them. Then, with a shudder and a rain of fine sand, a panel high up on the gate slid open.

“Entry is not permitted,” a voice called down, “except by licensed Representatives of the Wild, and only provided that they are accompanied by their official pair-bonded liaisons.” The tone of it was high and imperious, but also with a reediness that somehow always spelled bureaucrat.

“We don’t care what all that is,” the halberdier snapped. “We’ve got wounded.”

The unseen woman snorted. “And that’s supposed to be our problem? I’m sure if you remain where you are, that problem will be taken care of shortly. We’ve been told there is a particularly nasty whipscorpion that lives in this area. I suspect it will be along to investigate any minute now.” The stone panel slammed closed.

The halberdier looked stunned.

In Urach, settlements were cautious about taking in solitary travellers. There was always a risk that one might have contracted the holy curse of the Everblood, and would shapeshift as soon as the moon rose that night. However, *groups* of people were almost always given shelter. Even in the remotest corners of the Range, it was much better to let a group of armed women in than to give them an incentive to start breaking holes in the walls.

That said, the company didn’t have enough surviving mages to force open the doors.

The soldiers that could still stand fanned out, forming a loose semicircle around the wounded. Their three able-bodied mages stood in the center, keeping their light spells in a slow, careful orbit overhead.

In the dark and in the distance, something like a flagellant’s whip began to beat randomly against the dirt. Another dozen or so whips promptly joined in.

Heads swung in that direction, staring wildly into the dark.

No one was watching Buel when she took something from Luthalla’s body and walked up to the gates, but everyone heard her when she pounded her fist on them. Three sharp strikes rang through the stone. Overhead, the window slid open again.

Buel's eyes wanted to lower in automatic deference. Instead she forced them up, staring at the little gap in the rock face. Staring at the person on the other side.

"What do you want *now*?" the gatekeeper asked disdainfully.

"Shelter," said Buel. "Supplies, if you can spare any. Healing, if you're willing to treat us. We have weapons and magics and trained, capable women. We are willing to trade."

"Not a chance," said the gatekeeper. "We don't need weapons. We've got this gate. And if you don't have a liaison, how are we supposed to trust you?"

Buel scowled. Around her, a few of the soldiers had turned their heads to stare at her, but she ignored them. "You don't have to trust us," she told the woman up above. "Take whatever precautions you feel are required. But without treatment, these soldiers will die."

"I thought I made it clear that this was your problem, not ours," said the gatekeeper coldly. "And we *are* taking proper precautions. We're keeping you out."

"Nothing will convince you to let us in?" Buel asked.

"Nothing," said the gatekeeper firmly.

She wasn't expecting a short sword to go flying through the open gap. No one was expecting the abrupt wet gurgle that followed. Buel wiped her hands on her skirt, then walked up to the wall. The stone panel, left open, was just wide enough that she might be able to wriggle through it, so long as she let her breath out. She would, however, need a boost to reach it.

"Can someone lift me up—?" she began to ask, and then stopped.

Every soldier in the company was staring at her, eyes wide in horror at the casual violence.

This time Buel lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said. "It doesn't have to be me, and we can talk about this later, but someone needs to go through that gap before they realize they've been attacked. You can stand on my back," she continued, "if that helps."

In the silence that followed, Luthalla's voice was low and raspy. "I don't want to die here. Do as she says."

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SASI, DORGANA

The hermit's hut was a single contiguous structure carved from the side of an enormous mushroom. It looked almost idyllic in the glow-light coming from the fine mesh bags of worms that Kismet's people were carrying as lanterns. The hut had glass windows, a wooden door, and even a picket fence ringing the property. Dividing the fibrous, white mycofilament lawn down the center was a little brook that babbled over rocks and moss. A small footbridge ran across it, complete with tiny handrails that had recently been given a fresh coat of paint.

Dorgana stared at it all, trying to process how a place like this could exist in the moonless abyss that Kismet and her people called home.

Kismet, as if reading her mind, said offhandedly "'s magic, obviously. Wards an' whatnot lets us in 'cuz we ain't got scribbins or nothin' in our heads."

Dorgana had felt a thin tickle of arcane energy brushing over her when they had passed through the front gate, but it had been subtle, not like the wards that were used back home. She wondered if there had even been energy enough in it to keep a determined child out.

"Have they been weakened?" she asked as they reached the door.

Kismet pounded once on the wood, then four times, then twice. "What by?" she asked. "The hermit's been 'ere for ages. She tends to this place real careful like. Looks after it the way she would a daughter."

No one came to the door.

"Does she leave often?" asked Dorgana.

Kismet shook her chest-head emphatically, lid wobbling up and down as she did. "Not ever. We brings her grub when we can. She's real smart, but sometimes she forgets the little things, like needin' to eat."

"So she should be home?" Dorgana pressed.

Kismet shrugged. "Sometimes she gets like this. She's all busy in that lab o' hers, but she don't mind if we comes in and sits on the floor for a while, just so long as we touches nothin'." The girl tried

the door, wiggling the latch for a moment, and it popped open with a sigh of its hinges.

The inside looked like it had been overrun by an entire herd of wallas during rut. Doors and cabinets hung open, their contents rummaged through. Rugs were askew. The kitchen was stacked with untended dishes and the living area was carpeted in books. A thin carpet of pale mold had begun to grow over some of them, but the ones that were still readable had titles like “The Ethics of Theometaphysical Intervention” and “Writings on Dimensional Engineering.” From the living area, a thin flight of stairs led up to the second floor. They were tacky with what appeared to be dried pools of blue syrup.

Kismet ascended them gingerly, still chattering animatedly about all her past encounters with the hermit. For every second she spent in the house, however, her mood seemed to slip by another fraction.

At the top of the stairs was a single long hallway. Off to one side, the door to a bedroom hung open, revealing an unmade bed and a rifled-through wardrobe. At the far end, the only other door was painted with strange sigils in lightly glowing paint. It was also shut and locked.

Kismet jiggled the handle. Then banged loudly on the frame. “She don’t like our interruptin’,” she said, “but.” She hammered on the door. There was no response.

However, the door hummed with magic. Far more than the circle around the perimeter had. Dorgana had never had formal training in the forces invisible, but she thought she could sense something vicious coiled up in the woodwork, waiting to strike.

“We can’t just ‘bout face,” Kismet said, looking apprehensive. “She’ll want to see us. I knows it,” she murmured, stepping aside.

Dorgana frowned. It was unwise to try and brute-force a good ward. The very least they could do was make you feel like you’d been punched in the gut.

With some wards, your feet never touched the ground again.

So Dorgana held out her right hand gently towards the door and there was a snap like static electricity when she touched the handle. She cursed, yanking back. But there was a click as the door swung open and Dorgana’s breath caught in her throat.

Chapter 3: Through the Valley of the Shadow

The room beyond was *slathered* in occult signs. They painted every inch of the floor, alien and dark and lifeless.

Unlike the door, none of the patterns inside the room seemed to be wards, so Dorgana stepped gingerly out onto them. Nothing flared or discharged. She looked around.

In the corner, a wooden table had been set up. It was crammed with astrolabes, orreries, sundials, and strange lattices of silver rings. All of these priceless devices had been swept in a jumble to one side, and in the cleared space had been left a note.

Kismet let out a small, nervous noise from the back of her throat. Dorgana crossed to the paper, picked it up, and began to read.

To whomever finds this message, it began, the Prophecy is a trap. Sadly, the people of Sasi will not listen, so I have abandoned my efforts with them and will make my appeal to the other worlds as directly as I know how.

I hope you are an outsider. I keyed my wards so that no one from this world would have an easy time of breaching my door, in case the cities that I failed to convince decided to ransack my lab. The city-women all have a stake in preserving the status quo, but an outsider might believe me. An outsider might realize that our world has become hideously entangled with others, linked by the bleeding-places where the realities seep together.

The bleed will get worse with every day that passes. In the end, the Prophecy might be the only way to stop it.

And I suspect that is by design.

Even if you do not understand what I am saying, share this message as widely as you can. Find those who will listen.

We have been tricked, taken for pawns to use in someone else's grand game, and I suspect we will be sacrificed just as readily.

Although I do not know you, I am hopeful about who you might turn out to be. It is never the small-minded that explore the unknown.

If you would speak with me, then you will find me in the wastelands where the worlds meet, although I will not linger there long.

I have one final theory to test, and then perhaps I can find us all a way clear of this.

May wisdom guide your steps.

The letter was signed “Jyashuu”. A small thumb-print picked out in blue syrup clung to the corner of the page. Dorgana set it down delicately.

It could be a trick.

If it was, it was so convoluted as to defy reasoning.

The hermit might also have been mistaken about what was happening, and Dorgana felt herself clinging to that notion like a climbing anchor in a storm.

However, she finally had an answer for where she was, and where she could go to learn more.

“Kismet,” she said and the chest-headed girl, who had been watching with growing dismay as Dorgana scanned the page, straightened instantly. “If I asked you to take me somewhere where there’s a big, bright light overhead, could you do that for me?”

Kismet nodded, and then looked troubled. “Like a glow worm, but huge an’ hot an’ stuck all circular to the ceiling?” she asked.

“I think so,” Dorgana hazarded.

The mimic’s expression went instantly grave. “If that’s where the hermitess went, she’s lost. Both fig’ratively an’ proper lost, I mean. Those’re the killin’ lands. Folks don’ come back from them.”

Dorgana tried not to think about the words on the page, about the urgency in the handwriting. “You mean,” she said, “that no one’s come back from them yet.”

CHAPTER 4: IN THE MINUTES PRECEDING

THE WASTES, HAULA

Haula hit the sand in a puff of backwinged grit, talons clenching against the tractionless surface. It was gentler to land on sand, but not for those around her. The two Golem guards, one with a chest made of brass and the other with arms of silver, tried to remain at attention while also discreetly spitting and rubbing their eyes. Behind them, Mindry hid her face behind one beige armor-plated hand.

“You didn’t tell me you were bringing guests,” said the Harpy cautiously. Both Golems were armed, and just because they hadn’t raised their crossbows didn’t mean they weren’t going to use them. If it came down to it Haula had twitched out of the way of arrows before, but using her powers that way was taxing on her body. It left her ravenously hungry afterwards, and the biscuits she had looted off the dead crab-woman would hardly be enough to take the edge off.

Mindry had the grace to look embarrassed at her Golem escort. She had a lot more grace than that, actually, Haula realized, taking in the girl’s unexpected change of clothes. Mindry had shed the metal plates of her haphazard armor for something a lot more robe-like. It was dyed green and black and it moved the same way silk did, except that silk was so expensive hardly anyone short of a noble with Beast Rights could afford to buy enough of it to wear.

“I’m sorry,” the Pangola girl said. “They insisted on coming with me. I told them I’d been out by myself on a battlefield with you, in hostile territory, and that if I was right to trust you then, I should certainly be able to trust you now that you’re in bowshot, but they were adamant.”

Brass-chest gave Haula a pointed look. It was the kind of expression that said *I know your type*, regardless of who it was directed at.

Silver-arms quietly drummed her fingers on the stock of her crossbow.

"If I'm not welcome, I can leave." Haula turned away, wings flaring, but Mindry took a step after her and she stopped.

"I might have been a little bit less than honest with you," the Pangola admitted. "It's just that we *were* on a battlefield, and I didn't know if you had undisclosed allegiances, or if you might have simply offered to sell me to the other side once you knew who I was."

That brought Haula short. "Who are you?" she asked.

Neither of the two Golems seemed inclined to answer, so Mindry spoke again. "My full name is Mindrastae'alura'arandrella. I am princess and heir apparent to the Beast City of Mont Aran—although, sky willing, my aunt will continue to govern for quite some time. I apologize for the deception, and I *did* mean what I said back there. I would like to reward you for your assistance."

Haula felt her jaw come unstuck. Swiftly, she closed it.

Princesses didn't like it when you stared slackjawed at them.

"Your royal highness," Haula began.

Mindry waved it off, her cheeks reddening. "Please. I skulk around battlefields and march with soldiers. Formal address is not required."

"I can't very well call you Mindry," Haula said.

"What if I decreed it?" asked Mindry.

Haula tried not to look like she'd bitten into a travelling ration and found weevils in it. Royalty were always like this. They had *everything* except the ability to be anyone's equal, so they played at that, using their power like a cudgel as they made themselves conversationally comfortable.

"I don't belong to any of the Beast Cities. Nor any other the caravans, either," Haula said. "I'm just a wanderer."

"Well," Mindry looked a lot more confident now that she wasn't surrounded by fallen soldiers. Her teeth were much whiter, too, in the camp light than they had been on the battlefield. She gestured to Haula graciously. "You may either follow the rules and call me Mindry, or you may break them. And call me Mindry." At that she smiled prettily, as if it had been the cleverest thing in the Wastes that she had just said.

Haula was forced to admit that the smile made up for the quip.

Chapter 4: In the Minutes Preceding

“Look,” continued the heir apparent. “You found me in a tough spot. You helped me out. Let me do you a favor in return. Would you like a garden?”

“A...what?” The question might as well have been *would you like thirteen beautiful veil-dancers* or *would you like to live forever*. The lush mage-gardens that were grown Beast-back were legendary throughout the Wastes. They produced a seemingly endless harvest of figs and pomegranates and walnuts and almonds, more than even the most successful scratch-farmer could imagine. “I am not sure that I know how to garden,” Haula said carefully. Surely, the princess hadn’t meant to give her—

“Well, I *could* also provide you with an instructor and grounds staff,” said Mindry speculatively. “It musn’t be *too* hard. My sisters have loads of gardens and they hardly spare a minute for managing them.”

Haula stared. This was a trick. It had to be.

This was the sort of thing that happened only in the stories, and the difference between what was true and what was told was that what was *told* had a sense of justice to it. What was true had no such obligation.

“Is that too much?” asked Mindry, cocking her head slightly. “My guards said I should simply chase you off, but I *know* that’s not right. The rest of their suggestions haven’t been of much help either.”

Haula tried to swallow her bewilderment and realized that her throat was completely dry. “Could I have something to drink first?”

Mindry nodded emphatically. “Of course,” she said quickly, as if she had been rebuked. “It was rude of me not to offer. Come with me.” She turned and began to stride back towards the camp.

Towards the camp belonging to an army of the Beast City of Mont Aran, Haula reminded herself.

Brass-chest and Silver-arms did not follow the heir-apparent. Instead they stared intently at Haula.

“Look,” Haula whispered. “I don’t want to make trouble for you. I just want to fill my canteen, and then I’ll leave. Is that okay?”

“If you so much as scratch her,” Silver-arms began, but just then a tremendous cry went up from the other side of the camp. The guards’ heads whipped in its direction.

There was a plume of smoke rising from the furthest tents.

A moment later, a thunderous crack split the air as mage-lightning began to lash out wildly, shredding tents and supplies.

"We're under attack," breathed Mindry. "But I thought we'd agreed to a temporary ceasefire? Can they *do* that?"

"Apparently they can, your highness," said Brass-chest blandly. "Luckily, this was not unanticipated."

Silver-arms nodded. "They will regret their treachery after they see what we have prepared."

ETHANTAR

"First," Felista was saying, as they passed through the hole that hung in space, suspended in the air like an enormous gold earring, "we're going to need to have missives drafted."

She stepped from cool, damp forest to night on a broad, flat plane, and a part of her marveled at how normal the transition had seemed. The rest of her marveled at how strange this new world was. The air was warm and dry. The stars were high and bright and there were so *many* of them. Moons, too. Tiny and cracked and splintered, the little orbs crowding the heavens shone with reflected light.

Beside her, Drail grunted. The Minotaur was the leader of the 41st Expeditionary Corps and she had proved to be a woman of few words, having taken the hard-earned lessons of years spent creeping around hostile valleys to heart. She carried a pair of knives that would have been cutlasses to anyone else but looked somehow dainty in her massive, brown-furred hands.

Behind them, Felista's soldiers began pouring through the breach.

"I mean," Felista continued, still staring up at the stars, "how are we supposed to know who's a valid target in this conflict? Surely, not *every* woman is participating in this war. We need to send word to whatever nations this world has, requesting to know who we must fight. Perhaps there is even a way to organize this. A tournament, I think—" She stopped. Behind her, someone was shouting in alarm.

She whirled and, in the opposite direction of the one her army was facing, was a massive sprawl of hide and canvas tents just a

Chapter 4: In the Minutes Preceding

dozen feet from the portal. Cookfires blazed everywhere and heavily armed unfamiliar women were standing up from their dinners to point and shout at her newcomers.

“Do not be alarmed!” Felista called out. “We are not a threat! We are simply here to participate in the War of the Prophecy! We will retreat to a civil distance and allow you time to prepare messengers—” An arrow whickered low overhead and Felista immediately ducked, snarling in surprise.

Behind her, a corpswomen gave a low, horrified groan.

Someone else began yelling for a medic.

“Formations!” bellowed Drail, the word rolling out of her like a hornblast from an alerted watchtower. “Rank-and-file, ready shields! Mages, deploy countermeasures!”

The purple flare of hastily seized Auras and the cobalt-blue glow of directed lightning strikes lit the night.

SASI, LUTHALLA

“Where are your leaders?” Luthalla demanded of the cowering women. The Gorgoness had not completely recovered her strength, but having a semicircle of women with drawn bows behind her lent her a fair bit of gravitas. She was clinging to her halberd like a walking stick to stay upright, but the cache of potions that they had looted from the fortress was slowly washing the poison out of her system.

Very slowly.

“We do not have all day,” Luthalla continued, still looking like she would fall over dead if she had to run somewhere. “You have a minute to answer, and then the executions begin.”

The civilians of the fortress, now seen from close up and in the softer tones of lantern-light, were pale and scared. Hardly any of them had shown real knowledge of how to fight, and they had seemed just as lost when it came to dealing with outsiders. They kept trying to communicate with bits of hand-fluttering and sing-song shorthand, then apparently *remembering* that they were supposed to use words instead. It made Luthalla want to pull her hair-snakes out.

Buel had been more tolerant, but Buel—after finding and distributing the potions—had gone quiet, her previous meekness reasserting itself with a vengeance. Unless Luthalla specifically brought up the mental image of the Dragonturtle recklessly flinging cookware at the pack of hunting centipedes, it was hard to imagine that she could even speak without being spoken to.

One of the fortress' inhabitants tentatively raised a hand, moving awkwardly away from the others. At Luthalla's instructions, they were all kneeling.

Rounding them up had taken little time, as the place had been much smaller than Luthalla had expected from the outside. Plenty of corridors had been walled off or blocked up with fallen stone, but none of them had seemed like new security measures.

If part of the fortress's population had fled down one of those tunnels and then collapsed it after themselves, they had done so years ago.

The woman who had raised a hand raised it a trifle higher, ignoring the scathing looks from her comrades.

"Yes?" asked Luthalla, watching her intently.

The woman, who had redundant cricket hind-legs and two droopy whip-length black antennae, spoke softly. "We're not supposed to disturb the elders."

Luthalla just stared at her. "I threatened you with death, and you're worried about being polite?"

"They were very adamant about it," cricket-woman continued. "We've left them in the administrative chamber for...well, it's been a long time now." She looked down. "We don't really keep track of the days. Besides, we can't get in. Their doors are warded. They took the key."

There was a rustling sound behind Luthalla and she looked over her shoulder to see one of her archers scratching at her ear. The woman, another Gorgon, promptly straightened up and redrew her bow. Luthalla mentally marked her for a rebuke once they all got clear of this mess.

"If you can't show us your leaders," she said, her voice one of long-suffering patience, "then show us where they went. We won't be staying here long, and you can get us out of here faster by cooperating."

Cricket-woman bowed low. "I will take you."

Chapter 4: In the Minutes Preceding

She led them down twisting corridors, the same ones they had taken before, but where they had previously passed what seemed like a dead-end, they stopped and their guide gestured to a sculpture of woman made of hundreds of individual scorpions. The cricket-woman stepped up to it and pressed her finger deeply into the statue's right eye. There was a grating sound as stone moved against stone and the statue slid into the floor.

Behind it was a single stone slab: a door etched with a ward against intrusion.

The three able-bodied company mages looked worn out, but they had hastily eaten and drank while the other soldiers pacified the fortress' brief resistance and their Auras were beginning to recover.

"Do you think you can break this?" Luthalla asked.

The mages conferred. One of them announced that it would take a couple minutes.

"Very well," said Luthalla. "You," she pointed a sharp finger at Buel. "Come with me. We need to talk."

A few tail-lengths away from the others was not as far as Luthalla wanted to be for the conversation she was about to have, but they were all still in enemy territory, and she did not want to leave their backs open to an ambush, even if the fortress seemed safe. Something skittered over the tip of her tail and she smashed it against the stone floor.

The sound made one of the mages jump, scattering violet sparks through the air, and Buel startled too. Her eyes, however, were still firmly rooted on the ground.

"I will not apologize for what I did," the Dragonturtle said softly when Luthalla turned back to her, "although I may yet regret it."

"You may," agree the Gorgoness, "but only once this is over. Until then I need to know: how did you fight like that?"

Buel seemed to be trying to memorize the details of a particular piece of flagstone. Her cheeks had colored, although whether it was with shame or anger, Luthalla could not say. "It's not something I do consciously," Buel blurted. "It just comes to me."

"Can you control it?" asked Luthalla.

"I can control when I call on it," Buel said evasively.

"Fair enough," said Luthalla. "Do you think Dorgana survived her fall?"

Buel stopped, considering. After a pause, she said "no."

Luthalla's follow-up was immediate. "Did you push her?"

"No!" Buel said forcefully, then froze. "No." The second time, the word was much softer. It was barely even audible.

"Fine," said Luthalla. "You must understand something of how desperate our situation is, or else you would not have broken with your people's ways. I realize that it must put a great strain on you, to commit violence, but I will have to ask you to do it again."

With her eyes cast down, the Dragonturtle was difficult to read. Luthalla wondered if the other woman had heard the ironic note that had crept into her voice, but it was almost impossible to tell.

"What do you need me to do?" Buel asked, managing to keep her voice calm and inflectionless.

"To fight," said Luthalla, and her voice was steel. "We are understrength and our champion is gone, but we cannot quit the field. The War of the Prophecy cannot be abandoned, so we will press on. That means that when I tell you to, you will fight for me. Do you understand?"

Buel nodded. A moment passed, and she opened her mouth to say something else. Then there was a deafening bang and the hidden stone door that the mages had been fussing over exploded into rubble.

The cricket woman who had been guiding them sank to her knees, falling in supplication before it, gazing through the settling dust to stare in horror at an empty room.

The space the leaders had gone into was a circular chamber, engraved with yet more magical carvings along the floor, but it was only wide enough to hold three or four women at a time. It could not have possibly contained the number of people the cricket-woman had told them had been in there.

"It's empty," murmured one of the mages, a Quetzel with rainbow feathers ringing her midriff. She stepped towards it, and space abruptly *tore*.

Where the empty center of the chamber had been, an endless rocky desert sprawled. A low, howling wind blew across the sand and Luthalla *felt* the breeze coming through the gap in space.

"Is that—?" she began, but was interrupted as a pair of warriors stumbled into frame, hacking at each other with short blades.

"For the Prophecy!" one of them was shouting.

"For Mont Aran!" screamed the other.

Chapter 4: In the Minutes Preceding

“Saints preserve us,” Luthalla breathed. “The Everblood provides.”

AXOLOZUG, EREBA

The wind fanned Ereba’s hair.

The cricket pie tasted like freedom.

The deck of Tressa’s airship, the Wings of Antiquity, bucked pleasantly underfoot, all of its enchantments holding.

Which was a fine thing, because all three of her Aura-sails were filled and she was barreling down through milling clusters of houseboats to a point in the abyss where the darkness changed subtly in hue. That was the bleed, as Tressa had called it. The place where worlds were mingled.

“I’d originally meant to use it for smuggling,” said Tressa candidly, holding her tricorn hat to her head as she walked the deck, surveying the crew as they made preparations for the transit. “But once we heard of the Prophecy, that sort of skullduggery just seemed...small.” She shrugged and the small blue owl clinging to her shoulder tightened its talons in response. Her copper hair was a wind-whipped riot and her grin was predatory. “I don’t expect anyone else brought a boat like this to the fray.”

Ereba finished chewing on the last piece of flaky, sweet crust and then looked indecisively at the pie wrapper still in her hands.

“Just toss it,” said Tressa, “but mind that you toss it *up*. We have a rule here about throwing things where they could blow into the faces of the crew.”

A shark-faced woman who was otherwise busy coiling rope nodded grimly.

Ereba wadded the paper into as dense a ball as she could and then flung it Ceiling-wards. The wind promptly snagged it, slammed it back against the deck, and sent it rolling from midships to the stern, where it finally was whisked away into the void.

Tressa laughed and the sound was throaty and warm. “It was a good effort,” she said. “Give it practice. We’ll make an honest freebooter of you yet.”

Ereba fought back the urge to correct her. She wasn’t sure she felt like being an honest *anything*, but the captain’s words seemed well-

intentioned enough. After this was all over, perhaps she would tell the woman the story about her duel with the spider-queen. That would give her something to mull over, even *if* that particular tale had ended in Ereba's capture.

"One minute to transfer," shouted a high and sharp voice from the helm.

Tressa nodded sagely. "Best hold on to something," she said. "Sometimes the enchantments flicker when we cross."

Their dive was perilous now. The bleed was rushing towards them. Ereba could almost see a picture of the other side. It was like the Ceiling, but inverted.

Was the hole between worlds upside-down?

Not liking what that might mean if the enchantments failed, Ereba dashed to the main mast and wrapped her arms around it.

"Five seconds," called the lookout. "Four."

There was an abrupt change in air pressure, Ereba felt herself being ripped forward, and then gravity reasserted itself and her feet slammed back onto the deck. They were through.

They hadn't flipped right side up, however. The topside of the ship was pointing towards an abyss that was strewn with thousands of brilliant lights, like glowing orbs in the dark. Over the railing, Ereba could see a broad, flat Ceiling below. Experimentally, she spat into the air and the spit rushed down towards the Ceiling, rather than up into the void.

"It's wild, isn't it?" remarked Tressa, who was now smoothing the feathers of a very flustered owl. "You can't fall into the abyss here—Least, not the parts of it I've seen—and you can walk right on the Ceiling. Most people do."

Ereba stared.

If the Ceiling was down, that explained the lack of ships. She could see clusters of people below, like ants swirling around a kicked hive. They seemed to be...

Ereba narrowed her eyes.

They were *fighting*.

"I think we've found the war," she said as a bolt of lightning stabbed the air just a few feet off of the starboard bow. "Should we start looking for a place to land?"

"Land?" asked Tressa, bemusedly. She turned languidly to her crew. "Someone go get a spyglass and a listening cone and confirm

Chapter 4: In the Minutes Preceding

that these women are, indeed, fighting over the Prophecy. Everyone else, ready the explosives. We'll go in low as soon as the targets are verified."

Ereba felt a shiver run down her spine.

"Explosives?" she asked.

Tressa nodded. "Would you rather we fought this war on their terms?"

Breathlessly, Ereba shook her head.

After twenty years of captivity, it would certainly feel good to *win* again.

CHAPTER 5: FIRST BLOOD

THE WASTES, BUEL

“Alarums!” The call went out, although there seemed no need for the warning. All around Buel, Lamia, Medusae, and Dragonnewts had their weapons at the ready. The two forces swarming in front of them were already engaged.

The enemy’s—*both* enemies’—flanks were exposed.

“Archers and halberdiers, divide ranks,” barked Luthalla. “Dinasia,” the Gorgoness’ finger stabbed out towards a Medusa with a pair of scars crossing her chest, “you take the mages, archers, and a screen of halberdiers and hit the enemy there, to keep them occupied.” Her finger stabbed out towards one end of the disorganized knot of fighting soldiers, where the women mostly wore armor of green and gold. “I’ll take the other half and strike their camp. Buel, you’re with me.”

A chill swept over Buel. Try as she might, she could not stop seeing the stone walls of the fortress around her. She could not stop hearing Luthalla telling her that she would be asked to fight.

There had been no doubt in the Gorgoness’ voice. No disbelief when she made the request. The idea of a Dragonturtle with a blade in her hand had not been surprising to her.

So what in the Blood’s name did *that* mean?

“Come on,” Luthalla snapped, and Buel found herself propelled forward, the Gorgoness’ hand on the back of her shell.

“I need you to keep up,” Luthalla said bluntly. “If we’re going to make there without interference, we need to move quickly. Do you understand?”

Buel bowed her head. “Yes,” she said simply.

She could feel Luthalla’s touch right through her shell and an unexpected urge rose up in her to swat the hand aside. Among the herdswomen, the touching of a shell was an act of surprising intimacy.

Outsiders treated a shell like it was just a big cushion of bone; a thing to slap or tap or shove.

Chapter 5: First Blood

“Are you ready?” Luthalla asked, and Buel found herself stepping forward to get away from the hand.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Then go.” Luthalla surged into motion. The rest of her half of the company ran or slithered alongside her.

They had trained for this kind of thing just as much as they had trained for long marches with heavy kit, and Buel found herself sprinting to keep up.

A cry went up from the enemy as the others struck the tangled mass of deadlocked soldiers, transforming a one-front struggle into a two-fronted implosion.

Buel saw the green-and-gold formation trying to desperately peel away from the strangers they had been fighting in order to shelter their archers and mages against this new attack.

Then, sooner than she had thought possible, the Urachians were among the tents and Luthalla’s blades were spinning, blocking strikes from a surprised defender, and then falling on the woman when her sword went flying from her hands.

A tail-slap sent the defender reeling, and one last downward chop took her out of the fight, subsiding in a heap against the side of a tent.

The camp had been in the middle of its evening meal, and meat was blackening on neglected spits as the green-and-golds scrambled to rally a defense. Water overboiled into fires, sending choking columns of smoke into the air, and there were wounded sheltering here as well: Angels with splinted wings. Gargoyles pressing poultices of mud into missing chunks of their stony flesh.

Luthalla’s company fanned out, treating those that tried to stand and fight the same way as any other combatant. Halberds rose and fell. Blades flashed in the moons’ light.

Buel’s senses screamed to her and she ducked. A rock went humming past her head, punching a hole through the side of a neighboring tent. The ox-bodied woman who had launched it at her was loading another into her sling, but Luthalla got to her first.

Buel turned away.

She might not have to fight at all, she realized. There wasn’t any real opposition here. She could just let the soldiers—

Buel heard the twang of the crossbow and Luthalla let out a surprised cry. Stepping out from behind the glow of a cookfire, a

woman with arms made of silver stomped the frontpiece of the crossbow to the ground, knocked another bolt, and yanked it into place by hand. She lifted the crossbow and leveled it again, angling its mouth towards Luthalla's chest, where one bolt was already buried to the feathers.

Luthalla shoved the ox-woman away and raised her blades to protect her face.

Silver-arms corrected her aim by a few degrees and shot Luthalla in the abdomen.

Much of the company had already fanned out, looking for new targets, but those that were still with the captain rushed forward to confront Silver-arms, only to be interrupted when another Golem carrying a crossbow, this one with a chest of brightly polished brass, stepping out from behind a tent.

With the Golem was a Pangola girl, dressed like royalty, and a Harpy dressed like a beggar.

Like the two Golems, the harpy, and the other soldiers in green and gold, the girl's visible skin was as dark and the style of her clothing was strange. Her expression was a mix of surprise and fear, and as soon as she saw the intruders, the Golem snapped something at her and the Pangola turned on her heel and began sprinting away.

The Harpy and the brass-chested Golem remained in place, though they were outnumbered five to one.

Buel felt the angles moving to guide her and she stepped aside without thinking. Brass-chest's crossbow bolt blew through a friendly Dragonnewt and hissed through the space where she had been standing.

Silver-arms, meanwhile, was cranking in another bolt, staring Luthalla straight in the eyes as she did so. At the same time, the Harpy had somehow zipped forward, her motion blindingly fast, and intercepted the other company soldiers. She dove among them, talons flashing, and they fell back, clutching at their throats and eyes.

"Buel," Luthalla gasped. Her voice was strangled. The first bolt had punched into a lung. "Urach needs you."

Buel looked away.

The crossbow bolt that had gone through the Dragonnewt was lying on the ground next to her.

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Buel bent to pick it up.

Lightning boomed overhead and bright forks of twisting energy lit the cloudless sky, lances aimed at a speck of darker black that was passing overhead. Something struck the ground nearby, only a few dozen feet away, and a tent was immediately consumed by the explosion.

Flames licked out from the wreck. Burning shards fell like rain. Dry canvas began to catch.

The speck turned around for a second pass.

Buel stopped thinking.

She surrendered to the angles and flung the bolt at the Golem with all her might.

THE WASTES, FELISTA

It was all going wrong. Felista tore the halberd from the Lamia that had closed with her and flung it aside, the weapon glinting in the moons' light as it skidded across the sand.

The Lamia hissed and wrapped around her.

"Stop this!" Felista barked. "Our fight is not with you!"

It was unclear where this particular Lamia had come from. The battlefield was already a shifting, chaotic mess. There were the women in green and gold, there were these new attackers, and then there was the 41st Expeditionary Corps, trapped in the middle.

The Lamia's tail wound twice around Felista's waist, then pulled tight. The queen gasped, fighting for breath.

"Stop," she murmured weakly, but the Lamia was bleeding and there was a strange, feverish light in her eyes. She ducked in towards Felista's neck, long fangs showing, and Felista let out the last of her air in a small, regretful sigh.

She did not like using her powers.

It went against everything she stood for.

But hypocrisy was better than death.

She let her power flare, sending out a wash of psychic force that struck the Lamia as solidly as any hammer blow. Allure poured off of Felista, bleeding from her Aura, wrapping the Lamia's thoughts up in cotton and bliss.

“You will not fight me,” she wheezed as she broke the warrior’s self-control like a brittle twig. “This war is not for you.”

In an instant, the Lamia’s fury was gone. Shame and anguish flooded her features. She took one look at the Queen of the Pride, dropped to the ground, and bolted, her coils lashing the sand as she fled.

Felista felt sick. Her ancestors, had they possessed her gift, would not have hesitated to use its power. They would have brought it to bear on every soldier, every noble, every farmer in Barrenvale. All of Ethantar would have danced to the pull of those puppet strings.

Felista had vowed long ago that she would not give in to the temptation. She had sworn that she would not be like them.

Arrows fell around her in a glinting hail. Some deflecting from their courses, snatched away by defensive magics, but others found flesh.

Flesh of reptile. Mammal. Insect. Bird.

The rain of wood and metal cared for neither species nor allegiance.

Felista watched as a scorpioness in a tabard of green-and-gold took an arrow through the back of her neck. The fletching on the arrow was also green-and-gold. She collapsed, tail whipping out blindly, at the feet of a trio of fox-likes from the 41st Expeditionary. The fox-likes, each holding a handax, tried to pull back, but the rest of their company had formed a living wall behind them, trying to hold fast against the two-pronged assault, and this had cut off their escape.

The scorpioness’ barbed tail caught one of the fox-likes in the arm, then struck another in the side of the face, before they could respond.

Now there were three women dying senselessly, where there had previously been one.

Couldn’t the enemy’s archers see that they were killing their own?

She could stop them, Felista knew. All she would have to do was use her Allure and strip them of their free will.

Would that be worth it?

The archers were concealed behind a shuffling, stabbing press of fighters, none of which were hers.

Moment to moment, the lines of battle were being re-drawn.

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Her army had been pushed away from her.

Another flight of arrows arced through the air.

All she could smell was blood and ozone. All she could hear in the lulls between the volleys and mage-lightning were the screams of the scared and the dying.

“My queen, what are you doing?” a voice bellowed behind her, and Felista jolted to find that Drail was standing at her side. The Minotaur’s skin was scorched and smoking and both her knives were gone, replaced with the broken-off blade of a halberd. The blade’s edge was damp and dark and chipped.

“I am not hurt,” Felista began, but Drail grabbed her roughly, pulling her away from the front.

“You are not dying here, your majesty,” growled the Minotaur. “Not on my watch. We are leaving.”

The archers fired once more, and arrows fell indiscriminately.

Felista tried to pull free, but Drail’s fingers might as well have been bands of iron. There was a momentary break in the melee up ahead, and through it Felista could see the way back to Ethantar. A pair of half-wolves were holding the breach with pikes, spearpoints darting as they fended off a crowd of green-and-gold raven girls.

“Keep your head down and follow me closely,” rumbled Drail.

“No!” cried Felista. “We have to stop this!”

The minotaur stared at her, as if trying to comprehend the words, then grabbed the queen by the middle and threw her over her shoulder. Falling into a low, thunderous sprint, Drail shot through the crowd of fighters surrounding the portal and together they burst back out into the cool, damp air of the Ethantar woodlands.

Behind them, there was a sound like the world tearing itself apart, and fire flooded the night.

THE WASTES, EREBA

“Keep circling!” shouted Tressa. Her hair was wild, flying out behind her like a copper mane. The Loop Owl on her shoulder had its head down and was pressing itself as flat as it could to avoid being plucked away by the wind.

Ereba had her wings folded too, and she was watching as the crew of the Antiquity carried alchemical bundles up from the store room and hurled them over the side.

They looked like nothing when they were falling through the night, but they landed in triumphant blossoms of flame.

This was the way to fight a war: no opposition, no enemy in your face, nothing but victory.

A part of her bridled at the lack of challenge, but to the rest, it was a relief.

If Ereba could wrap up the war before *she* arrived, that would be all the better.

For all of the worlds' sake, queen Ikrix' plans could not come to pass.

"What's the biggest thing you've ever stolen?" asked Tressa idly, walking over to stand beside the Daemon. The Antiquity was banking for another pass and someone on the crew was whistling a shanty over the distant sounds of combat. A few more crew members joined in on the chorus.

Lightning stabbed off the bow, and then the stern, its flash illuminating the captain.

"The biggest thing I've ever stolen?" Ereba folded her arms over her chest. "A woman's dignity," she said. "Twice. The second time was just a few hours ago."

"That's it?" pressed Tressa.

Ereba shrugged. "You don't know the woman."

"She was proud, then?" Explosives began to fall again.

"She owns most of Axolozug," said Ereba.

Tressa laughed. "Well, I almost feel bad about outdoing you then. Personally, I've boarded a few ships out in the open sky between cities, but I've never hijacked a prophecy before. Is there anything you'd like to have, once I'm Goddess?"

Ereba tried to think about that, but the lightning strikes were getting closer now, prematurely detonating a string of alchemical bundles mid-air. Fire fell in blazing streams across the sky. Eventually, she shook her head. "I just want to be cleverer than my enemies, faster than my pursuers, and better than my rivals. That's not something I need a wish to give me."

Tressa rolled her eyes. "Think on it, would you? You're not going away from this empty handed. I don't care if it's a palace, a

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continent, an actual *army* of buxom serving girls. Just ask. Everyone on my crew's getting something. Just because you and the thief-taker are new doesn't mean you're any different."

"Alright," said Ereba.

"And think quickly," Tressa continued, "because it looks like we're almost done here. When we run out of explosives, we'll circle low, and then you and the rest will disembark and take care of the last of the soldiers. Got it?"

"I—" Ereba began, but only too late did she feel the gathering static in the air. At the last second, she flung herself to the deck as the lightning burrowed into the Antiquity, smashing through the warded wood into the place where the alchemical jars were kept.

Then the stern evaporated in a wave of splinters and heat.

THE WASTES, BUEL

There.

The angles chose the target. Buel was simply an agent of their will.

The bolt spiraled through the air, striking Silver-arms' crossbow just as she pulled the trigger. The weapon lurched in her hands and the payload went wide, vanishing into a tent.

Startled, the golem slammed the mouth of the bow against the ground, preparing to reload, but Buel was already marching forward. She scooped up a handful of sand and, without looking, flung it into the air overhead. As she did so, she ducked. Talons scrabbled and scraped for an instant against her shell and then the Harpy that had been harrying the company spun away, blinded.

"Leave," said Buel calmly. "I don't want to hurt you."

Brass-chest sent a bolt at her.

Buel jerked her head to the side so that it only cut her ear as it went by. The pain lasted barely a second before her body's natural healing kicked in.

That healing was a Dragonturtle trait, although it was forbidden to Dragonturtles to discuss it.

A Dragonturtle was to be humble in all ways, mild and enduring. She was not to raise her voice or call attention to herself. She was *never* to make another woman feel intimidated.

Buel felt a little rush of spite at the shocked expressions as her ear regrew from the wound. She filled her left hand with another scoop of sand. With her right, she fished a rock from the ring surrounding a nearby cookfire. It was ferociously hot, but she only needed to touch it for a moment.

She lobbed the rock at Silver-arms. The Golem raised her hands to block, but the stone went right under them, catching her in the hollow under the mid-point of the ribs. The Golem folded and went down, the crossbow falling over in the sand.

Buel turned her attention to Brass-chest. With the Harpy gone and Silver-arms down, she was the only one of the three still standing. "Leave," Buel said. "I won't give you another warning."

Luthalla, supporting herself with her hands, was watching Buel with a kind of fascinated horror.

Buel ignored her.

"What do you mean, *leave*?" Brass-chest asked, the flickering firelight making a mystery of her expression. "*You attacked us.*"

"I will not pursue you," Buel said.

"Do I have any guarantee of that?" asked the Golem.

"No," said Buel.

"Fine," said Brass-chest, carefully tossing aside her crossbow. "Can I take her with me?" She nodded towards Silver-arms.

"You may," said Buel.

The soldiers that were still recovering from the Harpy's attack moved forward to object, but Buel held out a hand. They stopped abruptly.

Brass-chest helped her companion to her feet, then the two hobbled away as quickly as they could manage. When they were gone, Buel turned to the others. She opened her mouth to rationalize.

Whatever she was going to say next was lost in a chorus of desperate yells as a detachment of green and golds reinforcements arrived.

THE WASTES, HAULA

The grit stung, but worse than that was how quickly the little turtle girl had repelled her. One strike, and then she was written off,

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eliminated from the battle. Haula blinked desperately, trying to clear the sand away, unable to rub her eyes with her wings or her claws.

Slowly, the battlefield below shifted back into focus. She swooped low again, searching for an angle that would let her strike at the turtle girl, but her arms felt leaden. Her stomach snarled in warning.

Even a few short bursts of hyperspeed had been enough to drain her. Flapping heavily, she returned to cruising altitude. There, she snatched a biscuit from the pouch at her waist, popped it into her mouth, and chewed. It was dry and tasteless and as hard as slate, but it was better than nothing.

Down below, the turtle girl was surrounded on all sides by enemy soldiers.

It didn't seem to matter.

She couldn't be hit.

Spears thrust and skittered harmlessly off her shell. Sword blades came closer, but fell inches short as she bent out of their way at the last possible second. Somehow, she had grabbed another rock from the campfire ring and Haula watched as she took out a moth-winged ax-wielder with it, then grabbed the ax. The ax was only in the girl's hands for an instant before it went spinning end over end into a woman with a spear. The spear fell forward, the girl grabbed it, and then javelined it up so that it came down on a Gigasborn with a sword who was still rushing to join the fray.

The Gigasborn's ceramic skin ignored the spearpoint, but the hit startled her enough that she stumbled and fell.

An octopus woman with twelve hands spun as many slings, but the volley of stones missed the turtle girl by a hair's breadth, striking one of her own soldiers instead.

Haula shook her head. This wasn't her fight.

High overhead, something huge was falling from the heavens, trailing smoke and fire. It didn't look like one of the metal men, but its trajectory was taking it towards the closest caravanserai.

She hoped, despite how they had treated her when they found out about the thefts, that the caravans would be safe. If they died, there would be no one in this stretch of flatland to steal from.

But that was a future worry.

In the meantime, she would have to look after herself.

Letting the air fill her wings, Haula turned in wider and wider circles, studying the camp below. There were pockets of resistance all throughout the beige-colored domes of the tents, and her eyes roved from one to the next until finally she found what she was looking for.

On the far side of the camp, heading out into the vastness of the desert, was a little scaled ball trundling over the sand. Haula beat her wings and swooped, slowly bleeding altitude until she was cruising along beside it.

With the burning camp fading behind them, the softer glow of the moons' light made a welcome return.

"Mindry," she called, and the ball abruptly burst into a startled Pangola, who whirled to face her. Haula backwinged as hard as she could, but her trajectory carried her like a kite past the heir-apparent, until the resistance from the air was solid enough against her feathers that she stopped and dropped talons-first onto the sand.

"Haula," said the girl. Her face was wet with tears. "Mitalsa told me to run, and I just," she drew a shuddering breath. "It was automatic. I've never seen her look that serious."

"Mitalsa?" asked Haula.

Mindry bobbed her head emphatically. "My guardian. The Golem. She and Divalsa, I think they tolerate my trying to learn the art of warfare. I know I scared them terribly earlier today, when they thought I was..." She trailed away, took a deep breath, and began again. "Maybe Mitalsa panicked because of that. I don't know. But I just turned and..." The words gave out again. "Do you think we're winning?"

Haula looked behind them, where the green and gold camp burned, and then just past it to where the red and black army was stationed, still honoring their cease-fire.

She couldn't imagine what the battle must look like to them.

If they were wise, they would swoop in after everything was done and declare themselves the winners of the protracted, multi-sided scrap.

"Even if we are winning, I don't think we can afford to stay here," Haula said.

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Mindry gulped and nodded. "We could go to Mont Aran," she ventured. "We could gather reinforcements. I could lead them, and..." She stared off into the distance, her expression faltering.

"Where is your city?" prompted Haula.

Mindry pointed towards the hunched shape of the nearest Beast. It was hundreds of miles away.

The canteen at Haula's waist was empty. The biscuits would barely be enough to take the edge off her hunger, never mind feeding the Pangola.

And in another eight hours, the sun would be up.

"You should get going," she said. At Mindry's look of confusion, she added "don't worry. I'll catch up with you."

"Why?" asked Mindry. "What are you going to do?"

"Don't worry about it," said Haula. "It's important. But I'll be back."

"Promise?" asked the Pangola.

Even exhausted and heartsick, there was something dignified about the heir-apparent. Her back was straight. Her scales were even. Behind the sorrow in her eyes was a blaze of determination.

"I promise," said Haula, and took to the air.

THE WASTES, BUEL

There were bodies on all sides. They lay where they had fallen.

In places, they were stacked like cordwood.

Some were moving, but not with any sense of purpose. A hand reached out towards Buel, but closed on nothing. A woman's voice, the accent strange and unfamiliar, called out for water.

Buel's hands were both empty.

That felt strange to her.

The angles were leaving, their purpose fulfilled, and they were taking their curious sense of detachment with them.

All at once she couldn't stand to be where she was. Who she was. She took off at a run, stumbling over the dying.

"Buel," a voice croaked. She skidded to a stop.

Luthalla, arrow-pierced and stricken, was lying on her side, breath heaving, looking up at her.

"I'm sorry." The Gorgoiness coughed. Blood dashed out onto the sand. "I'm sorry to ask this of you. I need you to fight—"

"No." Buel flinched at her own voice.

She hadn't meant to speak. She hadn't meant to speak so loudly.

"I can't," she said more carefully.

"Urach must remain.." Luthalla paused to cough and spit again.

"No sacrifice is too..."

Perhaps there was still some residual coldness left in her from the fight, because Beul opened her mouth and what came out was "I am not yours to sacrifice."

It seemed to give them both pause.

Luthalla spat again. "Do what you must." She stared back defiantly. "I have nothing to threaten you with."

Buel nodded, knelt down, and lifted the Gorgoiness onto her back.

"What are you..." Luthalla started to ask, but Buel cut her off.

"I'm finding you a healer," the Dragonturtle said. "Do not talk. It will only strain you. One more death today would be too many."

And eyes fixed straight ahead, she began to walk.

CHAPTER 6: SLEEPING GODS

ETHANTAR, FELISTA

It was still dark when they struggled out of the woods, walking side by side. Drail had eventually set Felista down, but the Minotaur had carried her until they were a good distance away from the hole in the fabric of the world. Drail had listened courteously while Felista explained that this was wrong, and that they should go back and rescue the 41st, and politely agreed that yes, Felista was queen, but she had also made it abundantly clear that she would not permit Felista to risk her life by going back through the portal.

The women of the 41st would hold the entrance to the portal for as long as they could, and the Pride's other armies would take over from there.

What was important now was for Felista to survive. Otherwise word of her loss would spread to the capital, and the Pride would falter.

Like previous rulers, Felista had kept her seat of power mobile. The bastion-city of Domus roamed from valley to valley, building and unbuilding as it went, taking much of the Pride's standing army with it.

While the cost of the migration was not small, Domus' movement made plans by the Mire or the Aviary to strike at it far too complicated to consider. It also kept the other land-holding nobles in line, in a way that only routinely parking an army on someone's doorstep could.

Previous rulers had commissioned thousands of carpenters and stonemasons to oversee the migration of the city, but Felista's mother had taken that one step further by inviting the royal mages to get involved.

Now the city migrated itself, picking up flagstones and floating them through the air from one end to the other as Domus slowly crawled across the land. Entry to the city could sometimes be a complicated affair, as the mages had not told those flagstones to

wait until there was no one standing on or underneath them, but mostly the system worked.

From the edge of the forest, Felista could see the lights of Domus shining across the valley. Some of those lights were even drifting through the air. It made for a wonderful spectacle, but Felista turned away.

The outpost where she had spoken with her advisors was not a part of Domus' enchanted sprawl. Instead it was small and dark and just up ahead, with a picket of veteran soldiers surrounding it.

At this point Drail threw her bloodied halberd blade aside and dug nimble fingers into a pouch at her waist, coming up with a pair of stone capsules. She rolled them between her palms, then held them up when they began to glow, spinning them in a complex pattern.

A minute later, the picket signalled back.

Felista set her jaw firmly as she marched between the sentries, Drail at her side.

The camp was still but for a trickle of smoke from a few covered cookfires. There was none of the usual fanfare that announced her arrival.

As if prompted, a messenger came sprinting out of the dark, bleary-eyed from her interrupted sleep, and skidded to a stop ahead of Felista. *Would the queen be needing a missive sent announcing her appointment as Goddess*, she asked.

The messenger couldn't have been much older than thirteen, as the fur of her nine white tails was still somewhat wild. Their tails grew more refined as most Kitsune aged, with the oldest of the species looking sleek and graceful, and the youngest looking like they were being attacked by a pack of stoats.

Keeping in mind the girl's age, Felista bit back her first reply and said "thank you, but no. That will not be required."

The messenger looked disappointed, but she must have caught something in Felista's expression because she curtsied, then bowed, then backed away at speed.

Drail made no comment, but as they entered the central tent, Felista looked over and noticed that the Minotaur's wounds were worse in the light than they had seemed in the dark. Several slashes across her abdomen were still open and oozing slightly, and there was a streak of fused skin traversing her chest, running all the way

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up and around her left shoulder, where the fur had been singed away and the flesh badly burned. Drail met the queen's eyes for a moment, and then looked deliberately away towards the other occupants of the tent.

Passalas and Abergaul were in a heated discussion. They had a map unrolled between them, a brass ewer beside that, and a pair of cups filled to the brims. The liquid in the cups looked to be wine, but watered to a point where most of the water had heard of wine, but had never met it personally. There was also a small wooden bowl, carved to resemble a villainous frog-girl being stabbed by a stalwart tigr-esque, which contained several bright red berries.

The berries were called marshbright, and they lifted the veil of fatigue for a quarter of a day, after which the user crashed mightily.

They were a favorite at late-night council meetings.

"Just put it on the sideboard and go," said Abergaul, barely looking up. A moment later Passalas nudged the jaguaresque sharply and they both sat up straight.

"Your majesty," said Passalas carefully, smoothing out the map.

"You are back sooner than expected. Did you find the breach? Were you able to reach the other side?"

Felista took a deep breath. "Yes," she said. "And we were attacked," she added.

Passalas nodded, then looked at her expectantly.

Felista supposed she couldn't fault the Mistress of the Dagger for not being surprised at that. In her line of work, it was natural to expect the worst of people. Still, she didn't like being pinned by that expectant stare.

"We were given no chance to explain ourselves and no information was provided about who we were fighting," she continued, "so we defended ourselves. Someone was shouting about the Prophecy, but I do not know if it was their soldiers or ours."

"Would you like me to fetch an interrogator?" Passalas asked. "I assume you have brought prisoners?"

Felista slammed her hands down on the table, rattling the berries in their bowl and overbalancing the ewer onto the floor. Vaguely red liquid spread out from its mouth.

Felista bit her lip. She hadn't meant to do that, but at least she had her advisors' full attention now.

"I do not know if our soldiers survived," she said. "They were unable to return with us, and I was unable to remain with them. We need to send reinforcements post haste, and I need to return with the entire army at my back."

Her elocution was good, thanks to a series of tutors that had attended her every day of her childhood, starting when she was still in her cradle. There could be no doubt that her advisors had heard her properly.

And yet, they had both gone stoney-faced.

"Your majesty," said Abergaul, "we must send troops at once to the breach, to be sure that our lands are not left vulnerable to foreign invasion. I agree on that count entirely. I do not believe, however, that we can afford to send troops *through*."

Felista blinked. "Why not?" she asked.

"Do you know for certain that the women you were fighting were contenders in the War of the Prophecy?" asked Passalas calmly. As she spoke, with her other hand she grabbed a spare piece of hide, scribbled down a message on it, blotted the ink with sand, rolled the missive, and stuffed it into a carrying case. She rang a tiny brass bell, calling in the Kitsune messenger, who took it and hurried away. "The problem is," she continued, "that even if you were absolutely certain that they were involved with it, you cannot know for a fact that they represented everyone who has entered the fray. As soon as you left, I sent an emissary to the Priesthood of Nebula asking for more information about the Prophecy, and they sent word back that they believe there are as many as *five* worlds out there, all of which are in some way interlocked with one another. If each is as big as our own, and they *all* have champions, then you could spend the rest of your life marching an army around outside the borders and never find any of them. And in the meantime," the Mistress of the Dagger waved a grey-furred hand in a gesture that encompassed the rest of Ethantar, "the Toads and the Hawks would carve us up like a feastday calf. We need a better option."

Felista opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her mother would have just talked over the advice, demanded the army, and called for her advisors' executions if they so much as looked like defying her.

But that way had been wrong. Felista the Thirteenth could do better.

Chapter 6: Sleeping Gods

“I’m listening,” she said.

Passalas bobbed a quick, seated curtsy in gratitude. “We will tend to the breach, and to the army on the other side. In the meantime, there is a task that only you could perform,” she said sagely. “It is a matter of faith.”

THE WASTES, EREBA

Dawn’s light was just reddening the sky. It was scarcely enough to see by, but Ereba was accustomed to having a lot less.

It felt good to be free, flying over what she supposed she was going to have to start thinking of as the Floor.

At least, it felt good as long as she didn’t think much about the past eight hours.

The sand beneath her was littered with debris. Large parts of the Wings of Antiquity had peeled off during the final dreadful seconds of its flight, and some of them were still burning.

Ereba had not been aboard the ship when it had struck the Floor, and that had been a happy accident. She wasn’t used to seeing people hurt by *landings*, and hadn’t given much thought to what it could mean for something so large to plummet from such a height. It was supposed to be the falling forever that killed you, not the sudden stop at the end.

Like Ereba, much of the crew had bailed out before the crash. The bat-eared thief-taker had been among the first, diving over the edge, her gliding-flaps spread wide. Others had followed—some with wings, others without.

The Antiquity’s floatation enchantments had not completely failed when the explosion had taken the entire back half of the boat, but they had been severely compromised. Someone who jumped from it near the very end of its descent *might* have survived, if they hit the enchantments’ buffers in just the right way.

That was Ereba’s hope, because Captain Tressa, like most Lamias, did not have wings.

From her vantage, Ereba peered down at where a cluster of small, hunched shapes was gathering on the sand. They looked like birds, which were apparently common here. Ever since the Antiquity had landed, there had been a lot of birds in the air.

These ones were not like the birds she was used to, which were brightly-colored flirts that fit in your palm and sang to you and were kept in cages. These ones were made partly from metal and they had a wingspan to rival hers. Their eyes were predatory and they drifted effortlessly on the air, hardly ever flapping.

Circling low, Ereba passed over the spot on the ground again. Closer now, she could make out the details. It was a gathering of the metal birds around a stretched out figure.

The horizon brightened by another inch, and Ereba thought she could make out copper hair and a serpentine tail.

Fanning out her wings, she dropped.

It felt impossibly strange to set foot on the Floor, but the ground did not crumble away from underneath her, nor did she suddenly fall into the sky. She took a tentative step, and then another, and then she was among the circle of birds.

They glared at her and jostled her as she passed, but they did not attack. Tressa lay in the center of their circle, and one of them was standing atop her chest, poking experimentally at her clothes with its steel beak.

“Shoo,” said Ereba.

The bird ignored her and bit one of the gold toggles off of Tressa’s coat. It brought its head up and back, gulped the toggle down, and then rustled its wings.

Ereba stepped forward, disappeared mid-stride, and appeared behind the bird, booting it into the air. Startled, the rest of the flock took off after it, lumbering into the sky and screaming like a symphony of iron bars being bent the wrong way.

A few of them shed feathers in the chaos.

The feathers dropped into the sand quill-first and quivering.

Ignoring them, Ereba crouched by Tressa’s side and pressed two fingers to her neck. There was a pulse beneath the captain’s skin, but it beat heavy and slow. Her eyes were closed.

Ereba raised Tressa’s right shoulder, peering underneath. Some of the other crew she had found so far had fallen off the Antiquity amidst clouds of debris, which had proved hazardous on landing, but there were no spars of wood buried in Tressa’s back. She wasn’t bleeding, just quiet.

Ereba shook her gently.

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Tressa groaned and her breathing changed. She murmured something and Ereba's long ears pricked up at the sound.

"Tressa?" Ereba shook her again.

"I'm sorry, mother," Tressa mumbled. "You deserved better."

Ereba took an involuntary step back.

She had not personally had a mother. She had been born when the worlds formed. Still, hearing this made her feel like a trespasser, and not in a good way.

"Tressa," she called, much louder this time. "It's me."

The Lamia's eyes flickered open. Her pupils were wide and uneven. She looked lost for a moment, and then abruptly she laughed. "The new girl," she said grandly, although she still sounded dazed. "Have you decided what you want when I win?"

Ereba stared. Sometimes when you hit someone too hard in the back of the head they got like this, but she hadn't know it could happen from *falling*.

"Come on," she said, returning to the captain's side. Sticking her wings straight back so that they wouldn't get in the way, she helped the other woman stand. "The others are that way," with her free hand, she pointed to the trail of smoking debris, "but we won't get there unless we start walking. Are you with me?"

Instead of answering, Tressa grunted. With Ereba walking alongside her, she began to crookedly slither across the sand.

THE WASTES, DORGANA

The sun spilled into the sky like the yolk from an egg that had been cracked against the horizon. Dorgana felt herself stretching, luxuriating under those first rays. It felt good to be reminded that there were worlds made of more than just dankness, water, and mushrooms.

Kismet and *her* companions, however, had raised a wailing fit when they first saw the dawnlight give way to morning, claiming that the sun was something called "The Angler, Ever Devouring" come to swallow them up, and that their only hope was to hide.

Dorgana had politely tried to stop them from burrowing, and then less politely told them that she would personally fight the Angler if it decided to show. They had accepted that offer hesitantly,

and thereafter had walked in a ragged pack behind her, making sure to keep her between them and the sun.

In the natural light, Dorgana realized, they looked stranger than they had in the dark. Their features were too pale, to the point of translucence in some cases, and if Dorgana looked at some of them closely, she could see bones—although some those bones might have just been a meal digesting inside one of the Cephs.

To make matters worse, none of the women's bodies were right.

Everyone in Urach had a proper head, with eyes and a nose and a mouth and the correct number of scales around the edges of the face. Kismet, on the other hand, was a piece of luggage with a body underneath it; which was probably an uncharitable way to think of a person, but once the phrase had entered her head, Dorgana could not force it out.

Eventually, the mismatched, pale people calmed down and began to walk alongside her, although a few of them were still keeping a wary eye on the sun. As it rose higher and higher, some of them began to stumble. They were all sweating profusely by that point, even Dorgana, and the ground was growing uncomfortably hot underfoot.

Perhaps the strange, pale people were right. Perhaps coming here had been a mistake.

Then again, Kismet no longer seemed to think so.

Even when the others started throwing glances over their shoulder at the rip between worlds, which lingered in the distance, the Mimic girl stayed facing straight ahead. She marched by Dorgana's side, chest-head held high, its hinged lid swinging rhythmically as she walked.

She *cared* about the hermitess, Dorgana realized. She cared deeply enough to march straight into what she believed to be certain death.

More than just respect, Dorgana felt a sudden flash of protectiveness for the girl. There was a bravery in Kismet that was entirely without posturing. No warrior would have acted the way she did, and yet she seemed the stronger for it.

Dorgana wasn't even sure Kismet understood what bravery was.

This was troubling. The girl might try to intervene in the war, and Dorgana realized that she could no longer conscience letting her get hurt.

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Once they found Jyashuu, she would leave Kismet in her care.

A capable mage could make them all a shelter from the sun, and then at night Kismet and her people could find a way back to their unappealing home.

Whatever became of the worlds, they at least would finish their days in peace.

In the meantime, Dorgana found she strangely was glad for the company. She had spent so long as a hero, and almost as long as a commanding officer, that it was nice to be able to speak with someone who didn't assume everything she said was rich with meaning. When Kismet didn't understand something, she said so, rather than quietly deciding that Dorgana's insights were too deep for her to comprehend.

"So what does it hang from, right?" the girl was saying, gesturing airily to the sun, which had been a constant fascination ever since it had failed to eat her. "It's not jus' floatin' there. Balls 'o light don't float all bobsy-totesy in one place, 'cept for near the marches, an' anyway Jyashuu was always goin' on about how that was fla-ma-bale gas or some such, but even if it were fla-ma-bale gas up there, there's not bogs any whichways you turn your meat-windows out 'ere."

Dorgana almost faltered mid-stride, but Kismet kept on striding forward, clearly untroubled by anything she had just said. Dorgana coughed discreetly as she caught up. "Meat windows?" she asked.

"Oh, aye," said Kismet sagely. "That's your peepers. Jus' makes that one up."

Dorgana tried not to think about having meat-windows, or about asking Kismet just how she was able to see when she was luggage with a body underneath. Instead, she turned back towards the horizon and made one last attempt to explain the sun.

"It's not stuck up there," she said patiently. "At least, no one in the monasteries thinks it is. It's more like," she tried to grasp at the right phrasing, "it's like those stones that float on the surface of a hot spring. All this air and earth down here, that's the spring. The sun is just resting on the top."

Kismet looked at her askance. "Stones's not really the floatin' sort..." she began slowly, as if about to explain something very important to a small child, but just then someone at the back of the

group started shouting and pointing and Dorgana whirled to follow the gesture.

“Ceilin’ crawler!” an old woman yelled, shaking her rake at the sky.

To the east, there were streaks of white crossing the blue. Each trailed from the back of a burning speck.

They were shooting stars, Dorgana realized, but not the kind that skimmed by for the briefest of moments at night. These looked like they were headed for a collision course with the ground, somewhere not far away.

There were dozens of them, like arrows fired from the bow of an expert archer, all headed towards the same place.

As Dorgana traced their path, she caught a glimmer of violet around the expected impact site.

Someone there was working magics bright enough to be seen across the intervening miles.

Dorgana turned.

Whether the note in her home had been true or an elaborate lure, Jyashuu was a powerful sorceress.

That light might not be her, but it was the best lead that she would get.

“Come on,” Dorgana said, changing course. “Let’s take a closer look.”

Kismet, untroubled, simply followed. “Aren’t those ceilin’ crawlers we’re all trompsing towards?” she asked.

Dorgana shook her head.

“Widow worms?”

Another shake.

“Silverfish, but all pale an’ straight instead’a glittery an’ wriggly?”

Dorgana sighed. “I suppose we’ve talked enough about the sun for now.” She adjusted the straps of her armor. “What do you know about the stars?”

ETHANTAR, FELISTA

Even for a queen, it was humbling to stand before the Temple of the Inward Sky. The pathway to the temple wove for three miles across the mountain range, and every step of it had been carved

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into the rock face of the mountaintop by the hands of a supplicant. The supplicants came to the temple to show their faith, but they did so by carving a step and then leaving. No matter how deeply a woman believed, she would go no further than the step she had carved. It was ultimately forbidden for the faithful to enter the temple, and so you could tell the faith of a woman by how close she had gotten to the outermost walls before stopping.

Women that later climbed past their step or that walked all the way to the temple were quickly put down by the guards stationed inside its gates. The mountain air was high and cold, and the trespassers were left behind as martyrs, each preserved by the wind and the slopes of the mountain.

Felista tried not to look at the dessicated corpses lining the sides of the trail as she made her ascent.

What she was doing was forbidden, but there was precious little that could remain forbidden for long to a determined queen.

At her side marched Drail, whose face was a study in reluctance and duty. The Minotaur had said little since Felista had agreed to Passalas' proposition, other than to thank the healers that had tended to her wounds, but steam rolled from her nostrils in steady jets and she stared fixedly ahead.

Felista studied the stairs as she climbed them. Each had been inscribed with a story by its carver. The earliest ones were about faith and prudence and how difficult it was to turn back, but later they became more personal, discussing personal secrets that few would climb high enough to read. Finally, they turned grim.

This is not a staircase. It is a butcher's ramp, read one.

I have climbed too high. I do not think I can turn back, read another.

Truthfully, Felista did not understand why the writers treated the ascension this way. She did not feel her body being drawn up the stairs. She did not hear anyone whispering in the back of her mind. She was tired from having slept poorly, most of it curled amid the cushions of the enchanted palanquin that had flown her and Drail to the base of the path, but otherwise her thoughts were clear.

So long as she did not look at the bodies, the hike was invigorating.

No matter how much we are tested, we must continue to carve these words, or perhaps these wards, read the last stair. Beyond the threshold, it awaits.

Felista mounted it easily and passed through the stone outer walls to the courtyard beyond. The wind blew low and rasping over her, chilling her despite her warm clothes.

She looked around. The courtyard was arid and open, with no life growing amid the rocks and dirt. There were no outbuildings. There was no well. There was no shelter, save for the temple itself.

Which was guarded by two women in thick white robes.

Behind them, the Temple of the Inward Sky was striking in its contrast to the bleakness of the courtyard. Its base was a hexagon of finely worked stone, hand-carved rather than shaped by mages, and it was half-covered in intricate designs made of blue and white tiles. There must have been millions of individual tiles, each one no bigger than a kernel of corn, because the pictures they presented were finely detailed, showing frogs, hawks, and Prideswomen alike throwing wide their arms in defiance or supplication to a massive vortex of dark spheres and bright stars. Above its hexagon base, the roof swelled into a dome of worked gold, although it seemed barely an after-thought compared with the tile art.

The guards stirred as Felista and Drail crossed the courtyard, rising as if from sleep. Both wore their hoods up, and their faces were hidden beneath the hanging fabric. "Are you able to halt?" one called out, withdrawing a wicked-looking curved blade from inside her robes.

It was a strange question, but the blade was sharp, so Felista stopped. Drail did too, but only by clenching her entire body.

Felista stared. Every muscle in the Minotaur was quivering. The ones in her neck had pulled taught. Her breath was coming in sudden plumes, much too quickly to be healthy.

Was it because of the altitude, or had an unexpected religious mania somehow overwhelmed her?

"We wish to talk to you," Felista called out to the guards. This seemed to startle them, and she was not sure they had even expected her to stop. "Do you have a moment?" she pressed.

Little was known about the guards, even by scholars. The priesthood of the Nebula, which revered this place as a holy site, had just as little to say. The guards were not allowed within the

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temple. That much they knew. Supposedly, the guards were to slay each other if either tried to enter.

With no food, no water, and nothing to keep the mind occupied anywhere in evidence, Felista wondered if they were even living creatures.

"It is a strain to us," said the woman who had not yet drawn a weapon, "but we welcome the chance to talk. Our conversation must be quick, however. The longer we are conscious, the more the temple's inhabitant calls us. Though we will regret the loss, at some point we must kill you and return to our trance."

"I am not here as a pilgrim," said Felista. "And I do not wish to fight you. I am here because of the War of the Prophecy."

This time the guard with the blade spoke. "We know little of the world beyond. Its wars are not our concern."

"This war concerns all the worlds," Felista pressed. "It will affect you here, whether you wish it or not."

"We cannot believe you," said the unarmed guard, picking up the thread as her companion subsided back into silence. "Our resolve would crack. Even considering it, I..."

The woman with the blade shuddered. Something in her stance changed. She seemed startled by it. "This conversation must end," she said abruptly, and a wave of magic rolled off of her like a glacier-slip, saturating the courtyard in violet energy.

Above her head formed a coruscating Halo.

Felista felt an involuntary wave of terror.

All women had an Aura, which clung to them faintly when summoned. Mages and priests developed their Auras until they were present enough to give off light and power their spells, but there was still an intangibility to the energy—a suggestion that it didn't quite exist.

The armed guard's Halo was real and physical and immediate. It was a single hollow disc of perfect control.

Then the unarmed guard seized her powers and a second Halo flared to life.

Drail, wild-eyed and bellowing, plunged towards them, but she made it only a couple strides before purple chains slithered out from fissures in the air and bound her, hoisting her up so that she floated off the ground. At the same time a whip of violet light went

scything out almost disdainfully towards Felista, arcing towards her eyes faster than the Foxcat could follow.

It was just barely slower than her instincts.

Reflexively, Felista hurled a wave of Allure at the guards. It was barely visible in the energy flooding the courtyard. She might as well have been screaming into a storm.

“Let us by!” she shouted.

And by some miracle it was enough.

Both Halos went out. The lash of purple energy dissolved into incoherent light. The guards slumped. One of them, the unarmed woman, began sobbing. The other started laughing, high and eerie, as if the very sounds were wrong in her throat.

“You cannot keep killing people for wanting to see the inside of a building,” said Felista, pushing forward. Drail, freed from the chains, loped through the doorway and out of sight.

The laughing guard tried to respond, but it was lost in another wave of empty mirth. Instead she clutched at the air, helpless. Felista stepped past her gingerly, all too conscious of the blade lying on the ground.

The guard picked it up and considered it, turning it over in her hands. Then she rested the point on the hollow of her own throat.

The archway was dark, but Felista was through it in an instant, emerging into the forbidden Bastion of the Inward Sky.

It was surprisingly bright inside of the temple, although the source of that light was not apparent at first. The interior was a single open space. The underside of the dome was a broad, curved mirror, reflecting light back down onto it. Tiled steps led down from the perimeter into a single pit in the middle, underneath the apex of the dome, and in the pit turned a giant wheel made of all the stars in the night sky.

“Nebula,” Felista breathed.

She had expected treasures. Relics. Skeletons.

Or at least an explanation.

She had not expected this.

Drail was standing nearby, staring into the pit, transfixed.

Slowly, the galaxy became aware of them. Its tilt changed as if it were turning the massive dark ball at its center to regard its guests. “I am doubly blessed,” it said, its voice seemed to come from

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everywhere and nowhere at once. “Two visitors, after having been penned up here since the Creation? My fortune is endless.”

Felista’s mouth was suddenly dry. How did you talk to a god?

“Nebula, have you heard of the War of the Prophecy?” she asked.

A vibration pulsed through the confines of the space and she realized that the galaxy was chuckling. “You are here because you wish to fight for your world?” it asked. “How excellent. Pray, tell me more.”

There was a strange cadence to its voice, and Felista wondered if that had been ‘pray’ with an ‘a’, or perhaps the other one.

“It is not going as well as I had hoped,” said Felista hesitantly. Then, gathering up her courage, she pressed on. “I came here to see if there was a power within this temple and, if there was, to beg for its aid.”

“Oh, there is no need to beg,” rumbled Nebula. Its voice was like a cat’s purr. “There is also no need to lie. Your skepticism does not offend me. In fact, I would propose a simple exchange of services. In return for my support, you will do me a small favor when you are made Goddess.”

Felista blinked. “What could a god want of me?”

Nebula’s tilt seemed to change subtly again. “My powers are defined,” it said. “My identity is limited. A newborn Goddess’ is not. You could do things that I would find more difficult.”

This was puzzling. “What would you wish me to do for you?” Felista asked.

Nebula seemed to watch her intently, the way a fox might a rabbit, waiting to see if it would run. “When you forge your own universe,” it said, “I want you to preserve this one. Keep it exactly as it is, frozen in state. Then fold it up, turn it into a curio, and place it within your new domain.”

“And that’s...something a Goddess can do?” Felista ventured.

“It would be as natural as breathing,” Nebula assured her.

It seemed a strange request, but she could think of no reason to deny it. What were her reservations weighed against the promise of a god?

“I accept your bargain.” Felista stuck out a hand, then paused.

How did you shake hands with a universe?”

Nebula seemed to be grinning. “Come closer,” it said, and Felista found herself descending the steps past a catatonic Drail, stopping only when she was standing on the edge of the jet black abyss.

A tendril of void rose up from it, becoming a pseudopod, and licked against her forehead.

She almost plunged into the pool as the world lurched beneath her.

Icy fire raced through her veins and the skin of reality seemed to crinkle and pull back, like the bages of a book being burned away, each exposing the one beneath it. She saw a cosmos in every molecule. A barrage of energy pounding through everything she observed.

Vertigo rose within her, and she forced herself back, clinging to the steps.

“You will be able to walk,” Nebula was saying, “freely between the worlds. And those that go with you,” it continued while her stomach heaved, “will also share your gift. You will never be lost, nor will any other be able to hide from you. You will root out the agents of my rivals, and you will reign as champion in the only contest that has ever mattered.”

Felista found herself struggling to breathe. She had to get away.

She looked at Drail, glassy-eyed and vacant, and tried to climb the stairs, grabbing for the Minotaur to lead her away.

Instead, the moment her fingers touched the woman, the space around them imploded into a starscape and they were both whisked away.

THE WASTES, EREBA

The Antiquity was a husk; a shell without a creature to inhabit it. The back half of the vessel was entirely missing. The rest was scorched, distorted, and ruined. The crystal that had powered the enchantments that kept it aloft had, fortunately, been stored in the prow, but the enchantments that clung everywhere else were in tatters. When they functioned, they did so poorly, with force, or unexpectedly.

Or all of the three.

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The bat-eared thief-taker was bobbing in the air, glowering at the crew members below as a bright bubble of misfired magics held her suspended twenty feet overhead. Two moth-women were shouting apologies up to her as they tried to shut off the flow of energy from the core, and one of them began to cast a diagnostic charm, then had to abandon it to duck aside as a trio of porters lugged a crate up into the interior of the ship.

The porters were unfamiliar looking. Their complexion and dress marked them as visitors from the tented marketplace that lay near the crash site. The crew did not seem bothered by their presence, and they moved with the brusque determination of a healer surveying a patient, trying to determine if she could be saved.

A small cry went up as Tressa and Ereba trudged up to the ship. Crew members swung down on rigging ropes or on their own wings, most descending no further than the deck. The Floor was still a difficult concept to grasp, and none of them truly seemed to trust it.

A wasp-winged woman with an eye-patch and healer's robes flitted down to lay hands on Tressa. Energy rolled from the wasp-woman to the captain. Tressa's pupils narrowed, evening out. The wasp-women let go and lifted away.

"As you were," called Tressa to the assembled crew. "Reunions can wait. We all have work to do."

She had grown more lucid during the long walk to the ship, but there was still an unsteadiness in her gait.

"Thank you," said Tressa softly, as she and Ereba climbed into the blackened belly of the ship.

Ereba shrugged. "It's what anyone would have done."

Tressa looked at her strangely, but she didn't outright say what she was thinking: it wasn't, and you know that.

Ereba turned away from that expression and tried to study the ship. It was odd looking at someone's living space in cross-section, but the galley, the hold, half of the crew's quarters, and the door to the captain's quarters were all in plain view.

"I think," said Tressa, "that we might be out of the running for the time being. We can't very well bombard anyone from the skies if we can't get into the skies."

Ereba wasn't sure what to say in response, so she kept quiet.

A little ways away, the porters—all Gigasborn with hulking frames, thick muscles, and horns—were taking delicate measuring equipment out of their crate. One withdrew a circular lens, stuck it over her eye, and squinched to keep it in place. It looked ridiculous, like a little window for her face, but she began calling out assessments in a firm, steady voice.

“I get the feeling,” said Tressa, “that you’re not planning on waiting around. You’re still in the war.”

Ereba looked back to the captain, startled. “You could read that?”

“I’m a corsair,” said Tressa airily. “Knowing how other people think is half the job. You’ve already decided that you’re not going to be stuck here.”

“Maybe.” Ereba folded her arms over her chest. “By the time you’re flying again, the war could be over. And that’s assuming the locals can even fix my ship. They don’t have ships here, and I’m not even sure they know what they’re supposed to do, other than fall from the sky.”

Tressa frowned. “So, you want to keep fighting? On your own? Without support?”

“It’s complicated,” said Ereba. “It’s not really about what I want.”

“But you’re going to,” countered Tressa. “That’s about the same. If your performance on the tradeship back home was anything to go by, you can take care of yourself. But against an army?”

Ereba’s expression darkened. “I’ve fought armies before. As long as you don’t try to take them head-on, you have a chance.”

“What if I could change those odds for you?” asked Tressa. “I’ve got—”

There was a noise somewhere in between a chirp and a purr, and something flung itself off the broken edge of the galley, beating its wings frantically, and entirely failing to fly. It struck Tressa’s right shoulder like a comet made of white-and-gray feathers, nearly knocking the woman over. Shivering happily, the Loop Owl nestled up against the side of her head and began preening the sand from her hair.

Tressa grinned a bit lopsidedly. “Yeah, I’ve missed you too,” she told the bird, before turning back to Ereba. “If you’re willing to listen, I’ve got a proposition for you.”

Ereba raised an eyebrow warily. “What kind?”

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Tressa burst out laughing. “Not that sort. I just like to hedge my bets, is all. How would you feel about some assistance now, in return for a favor if you win?”

Ereba shrugged. “What would the favor be?”

Tressa waved a hand, dismissing the question. “It’s a bit too personal to talk about right now. Ask me again when you’re Goddess.”

Ereba looked at her askance, but let it go. “What can you offer me?”

Tressa tossed her a key, then pointed up towards the charred door to her quarters. “Look in the chest beside the bed. Most of it should fit.”

“Most of what?” Ereba pressed.

Tressa almost looked embarrassed. “I wasn’t always a captain, you know,” she said. “Once upon a time, I was an imperial alchemist.”

THE WASTES, DORGANA

Lighting blasted through the front ranks of the metal men, turning several of them to glowing slag. Unfortunately, that slag just got back up and lumbered forward again, malice blazing in the steel pits of its eyes.

The hermitess was outnumbered, but this hardly seemed to be registering on her face. Her body was made of some kind of blue plasm, and it stretched and ran as she moved through the gestures of a complex, heavily rehearsed, spellcast. A wall of glowing violet force slammed into being between her and the metal men, and they began to beat on it listlessly as more lightning ripped from the sky to strike among them.

Dorgana realized she was standing still only when Kismet shouted “That’s ‘er!” and sprinted down the hill to the hermitess’ aid.

“Stay back!” Dorgana yelled and threw herself forward, overtaking the Mimic girl in a few strides, then leaving her behind. The Dragonnewt’s feet hammered the baking shale and her tail twisted back and forth behind her like she was swimming. She

unslung her ax, grabbed for the power that waited inside her, and roared.

The sound blossomed out from her in a shockwave. It had more texture than frequency. Metal men were lifted from their feet and flung through the air, bouncing and skidding in the dirt far away.

Then Dorgana was in among the ones that had kept their footing, pivoting around her ax as the blade whipped into the forge-heated titans. Her weapon had been a gift from the Scale Nation, awarded in recognition for her services to the civilized peoples of the Range. Carvings along its head and haft flared to arcane light as it bit deep. The metal men bled mercury, spilling boiling clouds of it into the air.

There was no finesse to the way they fought. They simply grabbed for her, making it easy to sever an arm or backstep and punish a rush. As they bled, their skin cooled. Great fissures ran through the cold patches that formed on their surfaces.

And cooling, they slowed. Their wounds turned them gradually into statuary.

The hatred in their eyes, however, remained unchanged.

The lighting had failed to kill the metal men because it had heated them, prolonging their temporary existences. She did the opposite. As Dorgana danced, being careful to check the tail swipes that she would have otherwise used against so many opponents, she almost felt a twinge of remorse.

Whether her enemies understood what was happening or not, this was a slaughter.

Eventually her movements slowed and stopped and she realized that there was nothing left to strike. Kismet stood a good distance away, having skidded to a halt as soon as Dorgana had roared.

The arcane wall was also gone and, together with Jyashuu, they stood on the edge of a crater that was miles across.

The hermitess' Aura blazed and arcane power swam between her hands, but she gestured idly and it turned into a cloud of purple butterflies and fluttered away.

Each butterfly was perfectly detailed, right down to the individual designs on its wings, and Dorgana did not think she had ever met anyone with that degree of control over their magic.

"You are here because of my note, I hope?" the hermitess called out cautiously. "I see you've brought Kismet and her friends, and I

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do not believe they would have accompanied someone who wanted to silence me.”

“Silence you?” Dorgana asked. “Why would anyone want to silence you? Because of what you wrote?”

“Sadly, yes,” said Jyashuu. “That was the reason for my other visitors.” She waved towards the graveyard of cooling corpses. “Would you mind if we continued this in more comfortable environs?”

“Do you have a house—” Dorgana began.

Jyashuu’s Aura flared and suddenly they were standing in a palace of pale purple marble, with pale purple columns, pale purple furniture, and a pale purple wading pool where pale purple waters lapped at the edges. The lighting was, thankfully, a more neutral white, although the ambiance still made Dorgana’s eyes hurt.

Kismet and her kin had also been transported inside, by some sleight of hand that Dorgana had not been able to follow, and Jyashuu was throwing spell after spell at them, healing sunburns, temporary blindness, malnutrition, and malaise. As she rattled off the symptoms, her hands worked the purple light streaming off of her Aura into the shape of each curative enchantment.

“I can have food ready in a few minutes,” she said over her shoulder as Dorgana tried to decide whether it was proper to wipe mercury from her ax onto the furniture, given that the furniture was technically not real and would eventually disappear. “I have to transfigure the native rock into a more palatable state whenever I want a meal, and it spoils quickly, so I don’t keep it around until I need it.”

“That—” Dorgana stopped, arrested by a ferocious growl from her stomach. “Actually, that would be lovely.”

“If you have any dietary requirements,” continued the hermitess, “let me know. I have not had adequate time to study your people, so there may be allergies that I am unaware of, or cultural taboos that should not go unconsidered. Do you eat your dead?”

Dorgana blinked.

“Ah, yes. I thought not,” Jyashuu continued, turning away from the last Kismet’s kin. “Out in the wilds of Sasi, it is something of an obligation to devour parts of a loved one after they pass. It creates an unbroken chain of generations, grandmother to mother to daughter, all inhabiting the same body. Or at least that’s what they

say out in the wild. I have not had the opportunity to test this, as I was born right around when everything began.”

“You were born in this wasteland?” asked Dorgana, desperately seizing on the one thing she had heard that wasn’t horrifying.

Jyashuu shook her head. “I was born in these worlds. My only regret is that it took me so long to figure things out. I had thought that if their gods were kept partitioned, each in their own pocket of space and time, it would keep them from collusion. It seems I was wrong.”

“Lady Jyashuu,” said Dorgana, as gently as she could. “I don’t understand anything you’re saying. Could you please slow down and explain what you meant in your note? Why is the Prophecy a trap? How can we escape it? I swear I will oppose it, I just do not know how.”

Jyashuu smiled sadly. “When you swear, what do you swear by?” she asked abruptly.

Dorgana answered without thinking. “The Everblood,” she said.

Jyashuu nodded. “Each world has something similar. They may not all turn people into shapeshifting monsters when the moon is high, but they corrupt all mortal life they touch, bending that life to *their* desires, *their* purposes, *their* goals.”

“What could a god possibly want with a mortal?” asked Dorgana, surprised by how defensive she sounded.

That sad smile returned to Jyashuu’s face. “The same thing a mortal wants with another mortal: to be needed. That’s how the War of the Prophecy works. I don’t know which god dictated the Prophecy to its priestesses first, but I am certain that the gods agreed on how the Prophecy was to be phrased. They designed the Prophecy, after all, and one of them that stands to reap the reward when their champion wins.” The hermitess paused. “Of course, I doubt that any of them see needing to work through a champion as much of a risk. With a prize as big as reality itself, who wouldn’t show up to fight? And if one of their opponents fields a strong warrior, well...in a conflict this large, there’s always a bigger mawfish.”

“A bigger what?” asked Dorgana.

Kismet made shushing noises. “I get it,” she said, waving for Jyashuu to continue.

Chapter 6: Sleeping Gods

“So the warriors,” said Jyashuu, smoothly ignoring the interruption, “who realize that they cannot possibly win on their own, will call out for aid. The gods are counting on this, and will offer their support, a little at a time, in return for favors. The favors will start small, but the more desperate each champion becomes, the greater the price the god will demand for its assistance. And so, in the end, the winner will be so deeply tied to her god that when she elevates as Goddess it will be as if she had not won at all. She will be owned completely by the power that sponsored her, and her puppetmaster will control all that pooled energy. Then *it* will own the worlds in full.”

Dorgana’s throat was suddenly very dry. “You want me to oppose the Everblood?”

“Not oppose,” said Jyashuu. “Just deny. I am not certain that the Five Worlds can survive without their gods, but a single god, unopposed, is a nightmare. There is nothing to balance them out.” She sighed. “You saw what happened in Sasi. Their god is called the Restless Depths, and it has a fascination with insects. Do you think those people wanted for their world to be nothing but darkness and bugs?”

Dorgana’s stomach twisted. “What am I supposed to do, then?”

Instead of answering, Jyashuu drew a vial from her bedraggled robes. She pinched the vial’s top off, scooped out a handful of glowing blue slime, and stepped up to Dorgana. “I am not a god,” she said, “but I can name you my champion all the same.” Her fingers touched the Dragonnewt’s forehead, drawing a sigil with the goo.

Dorgana gasped. Information flooded her senses.

She felt like she had spent rest of her life asleep, and had only now woken up. Power tingled down her arms, her muscles relaxing and readjusting, and the fatigue of the past two days fell away from her body.

“What did you do?” she demanded.

“I’m testing a theory,” said the hermitess, pulling back to a more polite distance. “I think the gods, in their greed, left a loophole in the Prophecy. If a woman can win without their aid, its conditions would still be fulfilled. The power that the gods had pooled would be gifted to that woman, and the gods would have no say in what she did with it.”

The rush of energy from the sigil was heady. Dorgana felt like she could leap over monasteries or run for days without stopping, and that feeling of invincibility was only getting stronger. “So you want me to fight,” she said slowly.

“No,” answered Jyashuu. “This mark should imbue you with my power, but it will also give you the ability to find the other champions. You must do whatever you must to take them out of the fray. As my proxy in the war, untainted by the patronage of the gods, I don’t want you to fight. I want you to win.” She hesitated. “Only then will the worlds be safe.”

ETHANTAR, VALMETICA

The air in the mountains was high and cold, and the stars were once more bright, when Valmetica alit in the courtyard of the Temple of the Inward Sky. There was something different in the tone of the place, and she sensed it from the moment her feet touched the bare ground.

It had been desecrated; not by others, but by itself.

The doorway to the temple gaped like a broken tooth, and Valmetica felt the pull coming from within.

It was old and familiar: the call of an unfettered god.

She hadn’t felt its like since she had helped to *build* the prison she was now standing in.

“Sisters,” she whispered.

Her pale blue skin had long since acclimated to the temperature of these heights, but goosebumps prickled along her arms all the same.

“Sisters!” she shouted, and the word echoed in the vacant space.

It was then that she saw the bodies.

The two lay side by side, a blade between them, just beside the temple’s entrance. Their robes had been darkened in places, but the stains were not fresh. They had been like this for most of the day.

Even without approaching, Valmetica knew there was no life left in their bodies. Her mind tried to brush against theirs, but it found nothing. Just a hollow, sucking absence where the last of her kind had been.

Chapter 6: Sleeping Gods

Unfolding the massive book that she carried, Valmetica conjured a quill out of purple light. *Hildr*, she wrote. *Hjorprimul*. The ink dried instantly, and the quill dissolved with a flick of her hand. All that was left was the words.

All that was left of *her people* was words.

Words...and her.

She shut the book. It was complete but for her name, and there would be no one left to inscribe it when she passed.

This era was ending, she knew. The last of the gods had been freed.

Once upon a time, Hildr might have counseled her to let the age pass, to fade into obscurity while the worlds found their new configuration, but that was Hildr over there, dead in the dirt. Dead by her own hand. Dead because it was either cut open her own throat or be suborned by Nebula, and a Lightwings in service to Nebula would have ended the worlds in a day.

Hildr's sacrifice had stalled the god for a moment, but that equilibrium would not last.

Without guardians to stand watch, the pilgrims would come.

They would arrive slowly at first, most too terrified to make it past the first few steps, but then a woman would walk too far. She would be called up the slope. She would enter the temple, and Nebula would anoint her with its sign.

That woman would beckon others, and the transformation of Ethantar would begin.

Valmetica let out a breath and it plumed in the starlight.

It had not taken very long for her kind of become an endangered species.

The first to fall had been the temple at Sasi, less than fifty years after the beginning of the worlds. The temple's guardians had been corrupted by the god that was entombed there, and by the hands of their sisters the garrison had been destroyed. The risk of further contamination had been too great, so the survivors had fled the world, sealed the exits, and not come back.

The next to go had been the temple at Urach, two hundred years later. The locals had been hardy, and those marked by the Blood's gift had been easy to track and exterminate, and so the sisters had settled for a policy of containment and left the world to its own devices.

Finally there had been Axolozug. That had been only twenty years ago by mortal reckoning, and when that god had slipped its confinement, the Lightwings' numbers had been reduced to three.

And now they were one.

This never would have happened if she had not been off studying the Wastes, looking for cracks in the sky where its god was kept imprisoned.

The proper thing to do, Valmetica knew, would be to stay here, guard the temple, and keep the thing inside of it contained for as long as she could.

She dismissed that option out of hand. Already, she could hear the whispers of the god in the back of her mind. She would not last long on her own outside its door, and if it claimed her...

She could not countenance that.

A cold fury had settled in her, far more bitter than the temperature of the wind. Her path had been clear since the death of the first sister in Sasi. Her only regret was that it had taken her this long to see it.

The gods had taken her sisters, so she would take their lives in reply.

She would destroy their mortal agents. She would break the sources of their power. She would *satisfy* their Prophecy, and she would use her newfound strength as Goddess to rip them apart.

They would be hoping to play out the war, to bind their champions tighter to them with every passing day. That meant their champions would be weak at the start.

She would strike now, before the gods realized their mistake.

It would not bring her sisters back, but at least they would have company beyond the gates of death.

Valmetica let her power burn and for an instant the outline of two golden wings could be seen behind her back. Then the energy drew together and all that was left was the glare of her Halo.

Lifting a fingernail, she cut a slit in reality and stepped through, leaving Ethantar to the mercies of its newly freed deity.

The wind blew cold behind her, but only until she pinched closed the gate.

CHAPTER 7: THE BEST LAID PLANS

THE WASTES, DORGANA

“If any of you within the ruins have a mind to become a Goddess, I would speak with you.” Dorgana stood in the shadow of the enormous wrecked wooden...*thing*, and called out to the women that were moving across its planks. Several of them jumped. Two drew blades. Dorgana just stood, waiting, with both hands on the haft of her ax. “You may take a moment to ready yourselves, if you wish it, but if you do not come out of your own volition, I will be forced to trespass in your home.”

Dorgana couldn’t imagine that this charred, wrecked structure was what houses were like out here, but she couldn’t think of any other explanation.

The women that were now hiding behind railings and doorways looked like they had been repairing it before Dorgana had announced herself. If that was true, and the burned house was somehow unfinished, then what was it supposed to be when it was done?

Kismet would almost certainly have had some kind of insight, but Dorgana had left the Mimic girl in Jyashuu’s keeping. It had been the only way to ensure that no harm would come to her, but Dorgana found that she missed the strange, half-feral child’s company.

The heat was getting to her, she decided. It had been a long day already, and the sun was barely at its midpoint.

After eating and sleeping in Jyashuu’s makeshift mage-palace, Dorgana had set out at dawn. The design that the hermitess had painted on her brow had blazed and, as she had thought about the other contenders for the Prophecy, unbidden information on three of them had appeared in her head.

One of the women had been close, she had realized. That one had been surrounded by soldiers, and when Dorgana tried to

concentrate on her, all she had been able to hear was a curious buzzing sound. That boded ill, and Dorgana had decided to visit her last.

Another of the women had been further away, trudging towards one of the massive creatures that roamed the plain, but making slow progress. Dorgana had decided to leave her alone for the time being, as her situation was unlikely to change.

The third woman had been near a trading post, from which she might be able to secure transportation. Dorgana did not know what wallas were like on this world, whether they sprinted or waddled or even accepted women on their backs, but beyond the borders of the baking plain, Dorgana's new sensory powers fell away to a vague twinge, and so she had decided that this would be her first target.

The design on her brow had done something to Dorgana's movements, and what should have been a journey of several days to reach the strange, burned house had instead taken several minutes. The sand and stone had shot by underfoot, leagues disappearing with every step, until suddenly she was abruptly in its shadow.

Dorgana flexed her fingers and power ran through them too. It was a heady feeling, having that much magical energy funnelled straight into her muscles. She felt like she could pick up the whole world and hit someone with it—although what she would be left standing on when she did, she couldn't decide.

"I heard you were looking for me." A voice came from the top of the burned house. Dorgana looked up to see a Daemon in a brocaded coat, her wings spread wide, standing at the railing. The Daemon was holding a pair of long blades, both flared at the base but narrowing quickly into curved, razor-sharp tips. "If this is about the war, it was nice of you to announce yourself, rather than just charging in. Or is this just a social call?" The Daemon's expression was sardonic.

"I had hoped to talk first," admitted Dorgana. "This needn't come to bloodshed."

"You mean 'if I surrender, then no one gets hurt?'" The Daemon twirled a blade. "I don't find that persuasive."

"You don't have to surrender. Not if your will is still your own." Energy flooded through Dorgana, but she held it at bay. *Not yet*, she thought, gripping her ax. *Not yet*. "Have any gods made an offer to you? Power in return for a favor?"

Chapter 7: The Best Laid Plans

The Daemon frowned. "Any gods? Not that I know of."

Dorgana drew a breath and let it out, steadying her nerves. "Then I must warn you that this war we are fighting is by the gods' design. They mean to use it in a play for ultimate power."

The Daemon looked startled, and she cocked her head to one side. "Wait, how do *you* know that?" she demanded.

"What do you mean, 'how do I—'" Dorgana stopped, taken aback. "You *know* that the gods mean to manipulate us?"

"Well, *one* of them does," said the Daemon. "Until just now, I can't say I'd heard about any others."

"And you do not...support that one?" asked Dorgana tentatively. If she had to, she could be at the Daemon's side in an instant, ax rising and falling. It would not be a chivalrous way to fight, and part of her recoiled at the notion, but she was in a position where chivalry could cause the destruction of worlds.

The rules that governed what was and what was not ethical seemed to be changing with each new day.

To Dorgana's relief, the Daemon spat sideways onto the roof of the burned house. "I'm here to stop it," she said. "And you?"

"This war is a hideous thing," said Dorgana. "I will not permit anyone to exploit it."

An uncomfortable silence stretched between the two of them. Within the burned house, no one else moved. Finally, the Daemon climbed over the railing and dropped down to the shale and sand. "If we're going to be allies," she said, "you might as well know my name. You can call me Ereba." She bowed incrementally. "I also answer to 'what happened to all the guards?' and 'she's getting away! Stop her!'"

Dorgana smiled. "I am Lady Dorgana, honored servant of the Scale Nation, but I would prefer if you did not call me all of that. I used to be just Dorgana, and I think I was happier for it."

"Alright." Ereba shrugged. "Just Dorgana, then. Do you mind if we share information? For example, how you found me? Or where you came from?"

"Do you want the long version or the short version?" Dorgana asked. "Both of them involve a spider."

Ereba opened her mouth to reply, but just then there was a hollow *pop* that came from behind them and the Daemon launched herself into the air, landing back on top of her house. Dorgana

turned slowly, her ax held in the low, easy grip of a headsman, and saw that two new visitors had just appeared. Neither was of a race that had ever set foot in Urach.

The taller of the two women had horns that emerged from both sides of her brow, and her body was covered in a fine coat of dark hair. Her knees bent in the right direction, but her feet ended in thick hooves. She was carrying a pair of blades that, while they might have been daggers to someone of her size, were both the length of Dorgana's forearms.

The shorter woman bore no weapons, but she had enormous clawed hands covered in fur that matched the bright copper of her hair. Her ears were odd, tufted things that sat on top of her head, and she was dressed as a courtier, rather than a soldier girded for battle. In the center of her forehead, someone had painted a night-black spiral.

The horned woman's expression was utterly blank.

The eared woman looked conflicted, but only for an instant. "That's them," she snapped decisively, and pointed. "Do not hold back. We cannot repeat the same mistake twice."

Dorgana started to lift her ax, but then there was another *pop* and Ears Woman struck her from the side. Dorgana stumbled as the woman grabbed onto her shoulder, thick claws digging in, and *pulled*. Dorgana had been braced for a frontal assault, but the newcomer hadn't even taken a step towards her.

Shifting awkwardly out of her stance, Dorgana spun and rolled her body, whipping the woman around to slam her back-first onto the sand. The claws carved deep gouges from Dorgana's flesh, but they came free at the impact. With the freedom to maneuver again, Dorgana pivoted and brought her tail into Ears Woman's head once, twice. On the third time, the stranger went still.

Which was a calculated move, Dorgana realized too late, as Horned Woman dropped out of nowhere, hooves-first, and kicked the Dragonnewt in the gut hard enough to fling her back, right through the side-wall of the burned house.

Charred splinters sprayed, but the wall gave her as much resistance as paper. Dorgana's shoulder was running with blood and the wind had been driven out of her, but her back and neck barely ached.

Chapter 7: The Best Laid Plans

She felt like she had been slapped, lightly, rather than kicked through solid wood.

Jyashuu's design burned in her thoughts. It had cushioned her, somehow.

If she survived, she decided, she would buy the hermitess a drink.

Dorgana clambered back to her feet amidst a broken table, an upended heap of vellum, and three tall metal women, one of which was wearing an eyepiece and all of which were slowly backing away.

"My apologies, I..." Rather than elaborate, she threw herself back through the hole in the wall and returned to the fray.

Horned Woman had apparently not been expecting Dorgana to get back up. She had turned her sights on Ereba and was swarming up the side of the house, using her daggers like pitons, muscles bulging as she drove them into the wood.

Her attention fixed solely on her target, she was unprepared for Dorgana's leaping headbut, which struck her cleanly amidships.

Ripped from where she clung, the horned woman shot through the air, bouncing twice before she finally hit and rolled to a stop, almost a mile away.

Dorgana wanted to be horrified at the force she had somehow delivered, and about how her head barely even ached, but the magic in her roared for action instead. She took a step forward and the distance blurred. She stood over the horned woman. She lifted her ax.

She heard the next *pop* just in time and pivoted to block a strike aimed at her throat. Ears Woman cursed in frustration, vanished, and Dorgana lashed out with her tail in time for another *pop* just behind her.

She felt more than heard the snapping of ribs.

Ears Woman went rolling.

The stranger did not travel anywhere near as far away as Horned Woman had, however. She hit the ground almost immediately, skidding in the dust.

Something about Ears Woman had dampened the blow.

Dorgana suspected it was the sigil on the stranger's forehead. The potency of a god lurked in that design.

Unless she was kept pinned, she would just keep using its power to attack from Dorgana's blind spots.

Worse, some part of Ears Woman seemed to have been holding back thus far. As the stranger adjusted to the fight, that hesitation would fade. In time, she might become unstoppable.

The only way out of this, Dorgana realized, was to strike decisively.

She lifted her ax, towering over the fallen figure of Horned Woman. "I'm sorry," she found herself saying. "None of this should be happening." She swung. Ears Woman screamed.

And then Dorgana's thoughts just seemed to shut down.

She blinked.

What was she doing with the ax?

She lowered it.

Why was she fighting these women? She shuddered in horror at the realization that she *had*, in fact, been fighting them. Self-recrimination welled up within her.

Why had she wanted to hurt them?

These were the only people that she had ever truly cared for.

"Stop making me do this!" Ears Woman sobbed at her, crouching protectively over the still living body of Horned Woman.

Dorgana was wracked with a sudden wave of grief.

This was not right.

She *would* stop making Ears Woman unhappy. She had to.

She looked down at her ax. The angle would be difficult, but maybe if she put the blade just under her chin—

The earth shook. A wave of fire washed over Dorgana, although the flames hardly seemed to touch her. The explosion was centered around where Ears Woman had been, but now Ears Woman standing off to one side, Horned Woman at her feet. Her hair was slightly smoldering.

Overhead, a winged figure circled.

Ereba, Dorgana realized belatedly. That was *Ereba*.

"Defend me," coughed Ears Woman, and it became the only important thought in Dorgana's mind. She launched herself into the air, ax upraised, and almost caught the Daemon by surprise. Dorgana's blade was an inch away when the woman flickered, reappearing off to one side. Confusion painted her face. And betrayal.

And then Dorgana fell.

Chapter 7: The Best Laid Plans

She hit the ground hard enough to crack the shale. The impact was nothing to her, but her head swam.

Why would Ereba be confused?

Making Ears Woman happy was the only thing that mattered. If Ears Woman wanted Ereba dead, then Ereba should have simply died. She should not have resented Dorgana.

Angling her head toward the circling Daemon, Dorgana's throat bulged and she roared. The force of the blast caught Ereba unprepared. Spiraling, she fell from the sky.

Dorgana was on her in an instant, striking the moment she hit the ground, but the danger seemed to have roused the Daemon, and Ereba danced away. She sheathed both of her blades and simply flickered away when the ax came at her. Digging her hands into the pockets of her coats, the Daemon withdrew a handful of glass vials and hurled them at her assailant. Some exploded in great upwellings of fire, others in bursts of coruscating lightning or clouds of freezing mist.

Dorgana's skin was lightly scorched. Her shoulder bled.

She refused to relent.

"LIKE CHILDREN!" the cry went out, startling both of them.

It had not been Ears Woman, and the voice was too high for what Dorgana had imagined Horned Woman would sound like.

Dorgana hesitated for a second and Ereba shot back into the air, wings beating frantically as she fled. The urge to pursue her was a burning, writhing thing, but Ears Woman's command had been very clear.

Defend *me*.

Dorgana spun to face the new arrival.

A blue-skinned intruder had emerged into the desert from a tear in space. Two golden wings shone for a moment, blooming beautifully from her mid-back, then faded away. The new woman cradled an enormous leather-bound tome close to her chest, holding it the way anyone else might carry a child.

She was comely, with a heart-shaped face—an expression that Dorgana had never understood, since it did not refer to a tangle of muscles the size of her fist—but the newcomer's expression was that of a noble addressing a herdswoman.

She spoke again and her tone was cold and disinterested. "Like children," she repeated, "fighting over a broken toy. If this is all the worlds can muster, the contest will be over before it has begun."

Dorgana stared. She had heard stories of this woman, of *what* she was, but she had only heard them as a child. Serious scholars treated the tales of Lightwings as myths, or a fanciful reinterpretation of history at best. No one had seen one in more than two centuries.

But Dorgana's instructions were clear.

She darted toward the Lightwings, ax lashing out.

The Lightwings moved faster than she could track, and then she—not the Lightwings—was down on the sand, gagging.

Her lungs were full of fluid. Her arms were trembling and weak. And all the creature had done was *look* at her.

There was a *pop* as Ears Woman and Horned Woman both vanished. The Lightwings sniffed disdainfully.

"No, I rather think not," she said as a perfectly controlled Halo settled into place over her head. "I know your nature, god's pawn. I will dig through the 'branes of the worlds like an amateur churgeon through a corpse if I must. You will not hide from me."

A hole tore open in the air, looking out onto a mountain vista.

It was Urach, Dorgana realized. *Home*.

Another tore open beside it. This one led into a cavern of horrors, where things multi-segmented and alien hung from walls or stalked each other across the damp, fungus-littered floor.

Another tear ripped wide in front of that, revealing a broad, lush meadow. Horned Woman and Ears Woman were crouched there, catching their breath.

"Found you," murmured the Lightwings. She gestured and smoke began to pour from her fingers, swiftly forming a shape in the air. At first, the details of the shape were left gaseous and it was only horrific in a vague sort of way. Then, as the smoke continued to billow, they were filled in and it was horrific in a specific sort of way.

The creature looked like a tornado of eyes and teeth.

The Lightwings waved amiably and it flew through the hole between worlds, rushing down towards its victims. The hole snapped closed behind it.

Chapter 7: The Best Laid Plans

Dorgana's knuckles clenched. She couldn't breathe. Her whole body felt leaden. She tried to roar, but there was no air in her to eject.

Footsteps crunched on the sand.

The Lightwings was looking down at her.

All Dorgana could do was meet her eyes.

"I suppose I should be grateful that you were all this pathetic," the Lightwings mused. "It means the gods did not anticipate my involvement. I was not lured into joining the fray."

In the near distance there was a tremendously loud sound, like the crackling hiss of a heat from a glazier's furnace, but multiplied by a thousandfold. Dorgana managed to shift her head just enough to see Ereba's home thundering away across the sand, flying at ground level, parts of it splintering off as it hurtled over shelves of shale.

"Very well," said the Lightwings. "If all you can do is run and die, I can at least make sure you do not die tired." Energy gathered in her left hand. It ran down her fingers, forming a single point. The Lightwings knelt down by Dorgana's forehead. She rehearsed a motion that was like her index finger flicking a marble.

But before she could touch the ball of energy to Dorgana, the blue woman leapt back, wings briefly flaring into existence again, and slapped aside a bolt of pure violet force.

Dorgana felt a warm light embrace her. It suffused her. She coughed and what came out was thick and horrible, but now there was room in her lungs to snatch a quarter-breath. She coughed again, hacking more fluid, and what had felt like a wad of cotton packing in around her thoughts was abruptly ripped away.

She *did not* exist only to defend Ears Woman.

She never had.

The very notion was an insult.

"Can you run?" asked Jyashuu. She reached down to take Dorgana's hand and pulled the Dragonnewt to her feet. Dorgana blinked in confusion, but her vision was clearing. She could see a portal freshly opened behind the hermitess.

She nodded.

Jyashuu bunched her substance and climbed onto Dorgana's back, a feeling like being embraced by a swamp. "I'll open the doors, then," said the hermitess. "You run."

Jyashuu gestured and tear pulled open in front of them, this one leading out onto a glacier.

“No matter how deep you burrow into the worlds,” the Lighteyes began, but in the time it took to say the words Dorgana was gone.

Her heart pounding in her ears, Dorgana raced into Urach, not looking back.

CHAPTER 8: CONQUERORS

THE WASTES, BUEL

Buel set down the body of the Gorgoness and stared into the massed ranks of the red and black army that had gathered on the sand outside of the burning camp. Luthalla was breathing weakly, coughing spatters of vermillion, and at Buel's back the flames from the camp climbed higher. The fires had spread quickly now that there was no one left to stop them. The surviving members of Luthalla's company were all scattered across the battlefield, and none of them looked in much condition to for another fight.

Which was why the red-and-black troops had moved in.

They were clustered in a single formation: a phalanx of Gigasborn holding boar spears while raven women and Harpies with shortbows clutched in their talons spun in a tight circle overhead. As Buel watched, the front ranks of the spearwomen parted slightly and an elegant-looking Gargoyle stepped out from between them. She wore a small gold diadem on her granite brow and had red and black ribbons that trailed from her wingtips. She also wore the slow, confident smile of a bully and had the languid grace of someone long used to command.

Buel looked her straight in the eyes. "I would like to request medical attention for the wounded."

The Gargoyle laughed. Her tail lashed, leaving absentminded patterns on the sand. "It's nice to want things," she said. "*I'd* like to be Goddess. Of course, I can't really hope to do that if I go around wasting resources on every charity case that begs me for aid. Then again," she folded her arms, "you haven't begged me yet."

Buel held her gaze. "I can offer you my service as a porter to offset the loss."

"Girl," said the Gargoyle, "I don't even know *what* you are. I can't imagine why I'd want you in my company." She turned to the soldiers of the phalanx. "Scrounge the battlefield. Loot the dead. Kill the wounded. Verify the death of heir-apparent Mindrastae while you're at it. If this shelled thing gets in your way, kill her too."

Buel stiffened as the soldiers stepped forward. "My lady," she said sharply. "Please do not do this. You act too rashly. These women are no threat to you."

The Gargoyle held up a palm, halting the advance. "My lady?" she echoed, the sides of her mouth curling up. "Now we're getting somewhere. Do you have any other titles you'd like to give me?"

"Please," Buel dropped her eyes. "I'll call you whatever you'd prefer."

"What I prefer to be called," said the Gargoyle, "is my name. You have a keen eye," she continued critically, assessing Buel. "Most people are taken in by the crown. It's plunder. I don't have a title or Beast Rights or a flock of servants at my beck and call. Everything I own, I've taken. The queen of the Beast City of Apelt Lairn delegates her little skirmishes to me, and I feed on the scraps."

"Then what is your name?" asked Buel. Strangely, she didn't feel tired or scared. If it came to a fight, she realized that she *would* fight. She would die, and so would Luthalla, but that idea carried with it a curious kind of serenity.

No Dragonturtle in the past three hundred years had lived as she had.

Not even an army could take that knowledge away from her.

The Gargoyle laughed at her question and the sound was short and bitter. "Alouta," she said. "Are you always this deferential?"

"Yes," Buel said.

"Well, you might not be a flock of them, but everything starts somewhere. I could take you on as a servant." Alouta tapped her claws in the sand as she considered. "Tell you what. I'll spare your life, and one other life of your choosing. The woman at your feet? Is she your pick?"

Buel started to open her mouth in protest but, before even a syllable was out, Alouta spoke again, cutting her off.

"Adjutant," she said, snapping her fingers, "go fetch the healers." From further back in the phalanx, a Pangola with an eyepatch jerked to attention. "Everyone else, forward in groups of three, and leave no one alive."

The formation parted around Buel, Luthalla, and Alouta, streaming into the burning camp and fanning out across the rest of the battlefield. Spear points glinted in the firelight.

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Buel's jaws clenched so tightly that she could hear her teeth groaning against each other, but she kept silent.

It was better to save one life than none.

Cries rose up through the cool air, mingled with the swirling smoke, as the survivors tried to fight or flee. Buel turned her head to look at them, then felt her gorge rise. She turned back.

"You don't need to do this," she said softly.

"Yes, well," Alouta rolled her eyes, "I was born a bastard, and it seems that continues through life. Now tell me, do you have any particular aptitude for sewing..." The Gargoyle trailed off as something changed in the tone of the screams rising off the battlefield. "*Burning rain!*" she swore and her wings pumped once, mightily, taking her into the air. "It was a *trap!*" she shouted. "Return! All of you, retur—"

An arrow caught her in the throat. The broadhead splintered against the stone, not even piercing her skin, but it caught her off guard for long enough for another arrow to break a hole in her in the left wing. Alouta spun, her balance compromised, and tumbled back to the ground.

More arrows hissed by and Buel ducked, tucking her limbs in close so that they were screened by her shell. The angles were in her mind now, calling out trajectories, but somehow none of the arrows were actually headed her way.

Buel watched in amazement and horror as six of Alouta's Harpies, returned from their scavenging, fell upon the fallen Gargoyle. She was shot and grabbed and clubbed until, finally, with a hideous wrenching noise, her stone body fractured and split.

Buel looked away, staring at the night for several long minutes...

When she looked back, there were six Harpies standing in front of her. They all had the same unreadable expression, and their eyes were strange. None of them were looking at her. The six women were staring at unfixed points in space.

Sounds of panic and pain from Alouta's former army continued in the background, but none of the Harpies moved towards Buel or Luthalla or raised their bows. Instead, a tramp of heavy feet announced a group of three Gigasborn in black and red lacquered armor, each carrying a wounded woman instead of a spear.

One of the wounded was from Urach. The other two were dressed in an unfamiliar style and had the long yellow fangs and raised gray hackles of wolves.

The Gigasborn set their burdens down, turned on their heels, and waded back into the burning camp.

“Blood’s curse,” wheezed Luthalla. Her voice was harsh and rasping. Each word was plainly a struggle. “What did you do, Dragonturtle?”

“Me?” Buel glanced around wildly. Out on the battlefield, women in red and black were fighting women in red and black and survivors from Urach were escaping into the night—or joining in. Groups of Harpies and Gigasborn were recovering bodies and returning towards the place where Buel now stood.

The place where their leader had just been butchered by their fellow soldiers.

The six Harpies that had murdered her continued to placidly stare at nothing.

“What’s happening?” Buel asked them, not quite expecting a response. “Why are you doing this?”

In reply, one of the Harpies tipped her head to the side and tapped on it slightly with the wrist of her wing. Something black and iridescent and as thick as Buel’s thumb dropped out of her ear and onto the sand. The other Harpies made the exact same motion, and soon there was a glittering heap of the little objects on the ground.

Beetles, Buel realized belatedly. *They’re beetles.*

There was a staggering number of them. More than the six bodies of the Harpies could have hoped to contain. For a moment they scurried aimlessly, clambering over each other in a nauseating heap. Then a shudder went through them and, moving with a single will, they drew themselves up into a column, rising until the top stood just over Buel’s head.

It was like watching an icicle form—but in reverse—and with the water replaced by scuttling horror.

Features appeared in the column. Pieces of it withdrew to reveal eyes, ears, and lips as some invisible sculptor worked to build her masterwork out of beetles. Buel felt herself gag.

The body made of insects swayed. Its legs were glittering and fluid. Its face dripped as individual creatures lost their grip in their

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scramble to get to the top. With a voice like the rasping of millions of tiny legs, it spoke.

“The Depths are impressed with you, little one,” it said, “and we are here on their behalf. We heard your call for clemency, and we have chosen to grant that plea. By your will, no one dies today who does not have to.”

Buel stepped back involuntarily, running shell-first into the chest of a Gigasborn that was carrying a Medusa in her broad, steel arms. The Medusa was only half-conscious, and Buel recognized the woman as Dinasia, the lieutenant that Luthalla had sent away when the fighting broke out.

On the battlefield, scattered cries of panic and pain continued.

“What do you mean, no one dies who doesn’t have to?” asked Buel cautiously, stepping away from the Gigasborn. The Gigas’ eyes were as vacant and unfixed as the Harpies’, and after setting Dinasia down, she turned around and trudged back into the burning camp without so much as a word in response. “There’s women still being killed out there,” Buel continued.

If she needed to run, her back was to open country now. She could flee into the night, even if it would mean leaving Luthalla and the other wounded behind.

The creature shrugged at her question, its shoulders rippling. A few tiny black bodies fell from them, sprinkling like hailstones around its base before crawling back in and rejoining the columnar horde. “The women being killed are opposed to our intervention. We could leave them be, but either they would resume slaughtering the women you had been trying to protect, or else they would come here and interfere with our drones. Or our body. Or you.”

“I...” Just looking at the creature made Buel’s skin crawl. She took a deep breath and tried again. “I hope you don’t think I’m being rude, but what are you?”

The creature bowed. “We are the Hive, avatar and intercessor for the Restless Depths. The Depths are unable to visit you in person, as there is not enough meat in this place to sustain them for very long, so we speaking to you in their stead.”

“And what are *they*?” Buel asked. A vision of gigantic white centipedes rose in her head and she fought it away frantically. The Depths could be *anything*, she told herself. It could be from *anywhere*.

It did not need to belong to that dark, horrible place that they had travelled through.

The Hive receded a little as it studied her, its stature shrinking until it was looking up at her instead of down.

Buel could not decide whether she should feel more confident now that she outsized it, or more worried now that its face was looking up at her throat.

“The closest term for what they are,” the avatar said, “is ‘god’. This is not exact, as the word is too singular. It does not describe things entwining, or multiplying, or feeding. Still, it must suffice.” The creature raised one of its hands, inspecting it, and beetles ran down its length like black sand through an hourglass. “The Depths are pleased by your willingness to sacrifice,” it continued. “That is the proper way for an individual to behave. You serve a purpose greater than you, and you do so at a cost to yourself. That alone would have won their favor, but then you opened a way for them to pass between worlds. Their gratitude is multipodal. They would like to offer you their assistance.”

“How?” asked Buel. A stray beetle crawled much too close to her feet and she forcefully resisted the urge to smash it and scramble away. It wriggled its antennae at her, then rejoined the body of the Hive.

“When we choose to,” said the Hive, “we can control any living body that has one of our beetles inside of it. When we are not directly controlling it, we can see through its senses. Back home, we control thousands of drones, but here we are diminished. A part of us crossed over with your warriors—a necessary transgression, and we do apologize—but now that part is multiplying, seeking new hosts. The women of your rival colony,” it gestured at the Harpies contemptuously, “will serve you ardently now that we have re-hosted ourselves in them. We believe this is fair compensation for your noble and ethical behavior.”

Buel’s mouth opened. She shut it.

It opened again and still no sound came out.

“We are having to work quickly, unfortunately, and we must consolidate our holdings before reinforcements arrive,” the Hive said, inclining its head towards the horizon, where the red-and-black army’s camp lay, untouched by flames.

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“We have no doubt,” said the Hive, “that we will be able to assimilate them too. However, it will briefly stretch us a little thin. Food will be required. Is there anything you had been planning to do with the corpses?”

Buel swallowed.

The women in the monasteries on Urach had never heard of a thing called the Restless Depths. Urach knew no god but the holy Blood, but the abbots had delivered Buel many sermons about its power. They had assured her that she was blessed never to have been bitten by a holy woman, that the divine potency of the Blood slowly corrupted those who were stricken with its sacred curse. Only a person of great mental fortitude, they said, could hope to endure its gifts long enough to become an abbot. And even an abbot was not expected to stay sane for very long.

Buel had listened to their stories, and considered their perspective, but she had still thought it was better to be an abbot than a slave.

“What do you expect from me in return?” she asked the Hive suddenly.

The Hive looked at her strangely. “In return?” it asked.

“You are caring for our wounded,” she said. “You are giving us an army. You cannot mean to tell me that this does not come at a cost.”

The Hive smiled sadly. “We are afraid you are mistaken,” it said. “This is not a bargain and there is no cost. We wish now to support you in the war, and we do so at the behest of the Depths. If you would allow it, when your warriors are tended to, we would like to be taken to the nearest city. Perhaps that one, over there,” it gestured toward what seemed to be an impossibly large shape crawling in the distance beyond the red and black camp. “We can forge you an army if you do. Would you wish that?”

“And...” Buel hesitated. “You won’t infest me? Or any of the others?”

“None of your people will be inhabited by our spirit,” said the Hive. “The others? We are afraid we cannot guarantee their cooperation if we are not personally in control.”

Despite herself, Buel shuddered.

“It is a small sacrifice, we trust,” said the Hive. “And it is in return for a chance to fix the world. When our partnership is done, we will release everyone we have claimed. Is that acceptable?”

Buel swallowed and nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

“Very well,” said the avatar of beetles. “We believe one of our drones has found a cache of medical supplies within one of those burning tents. Let us bring it out here, and we will see what we can do to preserve the life of your companion.”

Buel risked a glance at Luthalla and saw the Gorgoness’ labored breaths were slowing. Her eyes were fixed somewhere far away.

And she was not the only life that Buel could save.

“Thank you,” she told the avatar, dry-mouthed.

The Hive merely bowed, and collapsed, and its beetles scattered away..

THE WASTES, HAULA

Every mile of Mont Aran’s massive body thronged with life, from the vertical markets that hung from its flanks to the slums that circled the perimeter of its shell to the estates and private gardens that crowded its shoulders and head. There were hawkers and criers, scholars and bankers, thieves and priestesses, orphans and noblewomen all mingling in its streets. The scents of perfume and spices filled the air, competing with the rank bile of a sanitation system that relied on buckets to be carried to the edges of the creature. There were more people in a mile of street than might be seen in a month out in the wastes, and all of them were shouting, breathing, feuding, *living*.

The sight of the Beast City was still breathtaking for Haula, who had visited it three times before.

And of course, none of those other times had she rode at the head of a royal delegation.

As the Elefair swayed beneath her and the silk cushion that she had been given to sit on shifted with the beast’s sinuous motions, a part of her remained convinced that this was all a mirage. The mind could conjure strange fantasies when the body was incurably low on fluids, and by all rights she and Mindry and the princess’ two bodyguards should have died a desiccating death in the desert.

After the battle in Mindry’s camp, Haula had returned to try and scavenge among the tents, only to find that they were almost all on fire. Worse, there had been soldiers combing through the inferno.

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Gigasborn in red and black armor had moved through the blaze, hardly seeming to notice the heat. Haula had kept well clear of those women, used a burst of speed to fling herself through the wall of an outlying tent, grabbed a soldier's abandoned kit, and left before anyone could notice.

The kit had only contained enough food and water for one person to march three days.

It had not contained enough to get both her and the princess to Mont Aran, and that was before Silver-arms and Brass-chest had showed up together out of the wastes to join them, spending the miles alternately fussing over Mindry and casting dark glances at Haula for saving the princess' life.

The two Golems were at Mindry's side now, one at each shoulder, as she stood at the railing of their howdah and waved to the citizens on both sides of the Elefair. Together, the three of them threw garlands of flowers that had been generously couriered to them by a trio of overworked-looking Angels.

Haula had always had a hard time telling Angels apart, and she wasn't at all sure that these three hadn't also been among the rescue crew that had saved them in the desert.

A few miles from camp, a group of Angels had swooped down on them, carrying a luxurious litter between them. They had seen the fire, apparently, and just as the last dregs of the canteens had run out, they had met the princess and her little band of survivors halfway.

Haula and the others had spent the rest of the trip with a canopied roof, a smoking urn, and refreshments enough for eight. The Angels had even apologized, *apologized* for not bringing anything by way of music or art.

Even working as a team, it couldn't have been easy for them to carry the litter. The smoking urn, a dense body of brass and gold, should never have been let on board, and when Haula had tried to calculate in her head the total expense of the trip, she had balked at the math.

She had paid for an Angel to wait on her once, and that had cost two good-sized gold bracelets for one turn of the hourglass.

Having an entire flight of Angels that was paid to wait around on the off-chance that she was stranded in the desert was a luxury so ridiculous Haula had almost gotten angry at it. Her temper had

flared, her talons had clenched, and she had refused to look any of their porters in the eyes for the rest of the trip.

It was undignified, serving someone like that.

The Angels should have left them in the desert.

Of course, the excess didn't seem to bother Mindry. The princess was eating fresh dates from a silver platter in between tossing rings of flowers out into the crowd. She looked comfortable. Relaxed. At-home.

Flowers flew up, and the crowd was there to receive them when they came down.

On the scratch-farms that dotted the waste, no one had the luxury of picking a blossom if it could instead be made to fruit, but here the milling girls and women who snatched the rings up seemed to prize them more because they had come from the princess than because of what they represented.

Haula shook her head in wonder. The parade had reached a part of the city that she had never seen before, and she had never seen it because the guards that patrolled the district would have taken one look at her sand-scoured wrappings and rags and kicked her right out, if they didn't insist on dumping her belt pouch out onto the street first. She *had* been carrying stolen jewelry at the time, of course, but it hadn't come from *within* the district. She had just wanted to look around, and even that had been more than she could afford.

Now she was riding up to the gates of the palace on the back of a creature that could have fed a family for more than a month with its strange, sinewy meat and hollow bones, but had instead been pressed into a life of pageantry.

As if sensing her thoughts, the Elefair trumpeted wildly. The sound that came out of its slender trunk had a plaintive undertone, but the crowd cheered nonetheless.

"I wish it were under better circumstances," Mindry said softly, "but it is good to be back all the same."

Silver-arms and Brass-chest made demurring noises, and Haula kept quiet. She had been almost silent since boarding the litter. At first she had just been awed, but when the awe faded she had realized that being surrounded by this much opulence *bothered* her.

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It *shouldn't* have, she had thought forcefully. She was a brigand. She was *trying* to surround herself with as much gold as she could.

The flash of annoyance that this had sparked had almost made her announce that she was leaving right away, but then Mindry had unscrewed the top off a golden capsule and offered her a small portion of flavored ice to try, and Haula had simply shut down.

Ice was a magecrafted thing, a conjurer's trick. It would have been cheaper to eat gold; maybe chasing it down with the deed to a garden, a bolt of silk, and Beast Rights.

Fortunately, Mindry had seemed to assume that Haula's stunned silence was some kind of post-combat fatigue and had left her alone after that.

Haula grimaced as another garland arced high into the air and fell into the hands of a little Golem girl who clutched at it and dashed away, shrieking with glee. She sank lower in her seat, hunching until she had almost vanished from the crowd's view.

She had robbed people in cold blood for less than the value of one of those rings of flowers.

She was a ruthless mercenary, and she should have been in the front of the howdah, currying favor with the princess, *earning* the looks that Brass-chest and Silver-arms kept giving her, not sitting in the back and sulking like a hatchling.

But she did not rouse once during the journey through the streets, not until they reached the palace, a massive gilded structure carved into the center of Mont Aran's shell, and the crowds were parted by a squad of ceremonially armored falcon women. The Elefair was made to kneel with its four front legs facing the steps and she dismounted warily, following Mindry and her bodyguards into the seat of the Beast City's power.

"Your highness," Haula said as they climbed into the darkened mouth of the building, "are you sure you wish me to accompany you here?" She cursed herself as soon as she said it, but the words were already out and there was nothing she could do to take them back.

"Of course." Mindry looked surprised, as if she had never even considered not bringing the woman that she had met stealing biscuits on a field of corpses into the administrative heart of one of the five great Beast Cities. "You are welcome to retire at any time you wish," added the princess hurriedly. "I know those long flights

can be fatiguing, and the burden of our losses..." her shoulders slumped, but she pulled herself quickly back together. "What I mean to say is that no one could fault you for needing to rest, and I will have quarters set up for you immediately. I would like to introduce you to my aunt, and I know she will wish to see me, so I had hoped to combine the two audiences, but I am sure she will gladly schedule—"

"You want me to see the queen?" Haula broke in. She felt as if her head had been lagging behind her body, but *that* thought was like a white-hot poker to her survival instincts. "Why would you—I mean, why would your highness—"

"I do prefer Mindry," said the princess. "It sounds nice when you say it. And please, do not get so flustered. Auntie is a generous ruler. She is no one to be afraid of."

"I—" Haula stopped. Focused on mastering herself. "I'm not tired. I'm not...undone by anything I saw. I just don't know how to talk to a queen."

Mindry looked puzzled. "Auntie is not difficult," she said, and then looked intrigued when Haula's expression didn't change. "You should speak to her as you speak to me," she elaborated. "Only don't call her Laithy. She hates that."

"Laithy?" asked Haula, almost involuntarily.

"Shh," hissed the Pangola. "Queen Laitholoathiehl. You'll be fine."

Up ahead, the worked shell columns of the entry hall opened up into a vast, circular audience chamber. The ceiling of it was worked in intricate murals, some carved so thinly that sunlight shone through the abraded shell and the entire place seemed to glow.

The floorspace was wide and mostly taken up by cushions, on which petitioners and courtiers sat. There was a long, clear corridor that ran right through the middle of that assembly, and it was down this corridor that Mindry walked. Brass-chest and Silver-arms hung back at the doorway, and for a moment Haula moved to join them, but then Mindry waved to her and she was pulled forward by the inevitable force of an entire room full of courtiers' expectations.

Together, side by side, she and the princess passed through the gathering of Mont Aran's most powerful citizens and approached the dais at the far end.

Queen Laitholoathiehl had been reclining in her throne—a bowl of carved shell inlaid with luxurious red velvet—when her niece

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arrived, but now she was sitting up straight. Her scales were each brushed around the edges with gold paint, and her body shone with an uncomfortable intensity as she moved. "Princess," she called out to Mindry, her voice strident, "you bring us news from the field?"

Mindry took a deep breath, then looked up at her. "Our skirmishers were routed by the Beast City of Apelt Lairn."

There was a hiss of indrawn breath from all around the chamber.

Mindry bowed her head in acknowledgement of it, but only for a moment. "They were not our only adversary," she continued. "We were ambushed by as few as two or as many as four other armies. I do not know where they came from or how they were able to surprise us, but I overheard several of their soldiers were shouting about the Prophecy. By the style of their armor, I can say for certain that they were not from any of the Beast Cities, and I suspect they were not from anywhere else in the Wastes. They were all pale, like a person is before she faints, but much more so, and many of them had scales or fur. Their scales weren't like a Pangola's, either, but more like those of a Rattleback or a Sunsleep. I can only surmise that these attackers were from somewhere *else*, and therefore that the Prophecy is real."

Queen Laitholoathiehl folded her long, dainty clawed fingers for a moment, digesting the news. When she spoke, her voice loud enough to fill the room. "If what you say is true, my niece, then we have been entirely too lax in our prosecution of this war. We have been skirmishing with the other Cities for bragging rights, treating the matter as a tournament for some minor prize, and that error has cost us the lives of valued soldiers. I am glad," she continued, her eyes only on Mindry, "that you returned to us. I have tolerated your martial curiosities in the past, but that time is over. You will be staying here indefinitely, until the war is past and we can conscience allowing you out again. Do you understand?"

Mindry nodded weakly.

"Good," the queen turned to regard Haula. "I see that we have an honored guest with us. May I ask her name?"

Before Haula could speak, the princess stepped forward and curtsied for her. "This is Haula of the Horizon. She is a noble wanderer and a proud warrior. She saved my life twice and, although she does not speak much, she protected me from the soldiers of Apelt Lairn."

Haula almost choked on her own tongue, but the queen seemed pleased. "She must be an uncommon fighter to have survived when so many others were scattered."

Mindry nodded emphatically. "She is clever and fierce, and when she wishes she can move faster than the eye can track."

"Can she?" Queen Laitholoathiell lifted an eyebrow. Reaching over to one side, she produced an ornate golden scepter. Every inch of it was encrusted with jewels. "May I have a demonstration?"

"I don't see why she must be called on to—" Mindry began, but the queen was still speaking.

"Haula of the Horizon, please take this from my hands and return to my niece's side."

Haula froze. The distance between where she was and where the throne sat might have been forty feet.

The queen frowned at her hesitation. Leaning in, she asked Mindry "does she understand language?" in what was almost certainly meant to be a stage whisper.

Haula felt her temper flare. Nobles were always like this, treating their social inferiors as a source of amusement.

Haula hadn't eaten much since leaving the desert, but she had enough energy for *this*.

There was a rush of displaced air and suddenly she was holding the royal scepter and standing a few paces away from Mindry, her wings aggressively flared.

Immediately, she began to look for the exits. The main doors would be guarded and difficult to fly through, but if she built up enough speed she could crash through one of the weak sections of the ceiling. From there, it would be a matter of avoiding pursuit long enough to make it to the slums, and then—

Haula stopped.

The queen was clapping. After a moment, the rest of the assembly joined in.

Bug-eyed, Haula stared at them. Then her eyes flicked over to Mindry, who was grinning.

When the noise finally died down, the queen spoke again. "Approach the dais, but do so on foot, and at a more decorous speed," she commanded.

Haula did, aware of just how loudly her talons were clicking on the floor. At the foot of Laitholoathiell's chair, she knelt and held

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out the scepter. The mature Pangola took it, then looked past Haula to the court.

“My niece brings us dire news,” the queen’s voice boomed. “She brings us news of a threat that we have been lax in addressing. Up until now, the five great Cities have been playfighting by scheduling our battles and limiting the consequences to ransom payments when someone takes a noble. We can do this no longer.

“If there is indeed a war for the fate of reality, we must be better armed and better funded. Moreover, we owe a debt of vengeance to our rivals. To that end, four days from now, we will invade Apelt Lairn. The timing is fortuitous, as our beasts will be on similar migration paths. We will take the City, seize its weapons, empty its treasuries, and bolster our own.

“When we control the city, you will all share in the profits. Bear that in mind when you think about your personal magicians, household guards, and others that you might contribute to the battle.

“My daughter’s champion will be among you, so you will fear nothing the Lairners can muster. Having just now seen her in action, I have no doubt that she could pluck arrows from the sky, or blades from the hands of our enemies. She will give us an edge, but she will not be the only advantage that they do not know we have.

Just last night,” she continued, “my seers met with me in secret. They told me that they have developed a way of contacting the heavens and directing the fall of the metal men.” Lying back in her chair, Laitholoathiehl spread her arms wide. “I can see that some of you are stunned by this news. I suggest you acclimate quickly. Our success will be like a wildfire. Soon we will control two Beasts, and not even invaders from beyond this world will want to anger us then.”

THE WASTES, KHA

Kha had never been born before, and it was an exceptional feeling. She wriggled and stretched and exulted at the fact that there were parts of her to wriggle and stretch. She also exulted at the fact that she knew what facts were, and what words were, and language,

and time. Her body roiled, going through several quick permutations, and as it did so, she briefly took an interest in legs.

Seventy two was too many, she decided after a little bit of experimentation, but there really was nothing better than locomotion. She tried dialing the number down a little and settled on a more even sixty three.

Numbers. She rolled that thought around in her head and it was beauteous. It was beauteous just being able to think. And feel. And be.

Her birth, she realized, was the second best thing in her life.

The best thing was simply that she was.

On a whim, she formed a mouth out of her plasm, then made a satisfied sound by smacking her lips. She followed that with a round of applause, all of it from newformed hands. They grew like dorsal plates along her back, clapping and clapping, until a new interest took her fancy and they merged seamlessly back into the substance of her metamorphic body.

That new interest was the *sky*.

Having not existed until a few moments ago, Kha did not have a lot of personal experiences to compare seeing it to, so she continued to stare at it through the constellation of eyes that had just rippled into being along her flanks.

It was a thing of absolute wonder. It was made of light and not-light and emptiness and presence and...

She burred happily to herself.

This was the best way to be. Existing, covered with mouths, and underneath a *sky*.

There could be nothing better than that, she decided, but then quickly resolved to see if that was true.

She tried taste, and that was overwhelmingly wonderful.

Smell was a parade of sensations, delivered directly to her face by a just and caring cosmos.

Tactility was grand—she had learned that much by clapping her dozens of hands and standing up with her army of legs—but pain was marvellously stimulating too. She tried growing a tiny spur of bone, and then pricking her plasm with it, and it was just too much.

She grew mouths and wailed with them. She grew eyes and wept. Teeth gnashed in pearly lines like zippers along her sides and she shivered as all the stimuli of their movements swept through her.

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Kha wished fervently, *ardently* that she had been born sooner. Then she could have already been basking in this loveliness for minutes, hours, months, or however time worked when you existed and all the information of the world was parsed through your meat in lines of glowing electricity and chemical diasporae.

To have been born early would have been even better than being born.

Life was a wonderment, and she vowed that she could never have too much.

Of course, now a new thought came to her a rush of delicious terror: what if she suddenly ceased to exist?

The idea of non-being again was horrible. It sent Kha's whole body scrunching up into a ball...but the notion was also completely novel, and so wickedly she explored it further. If she stopped existing, she realized, there would be no flavor, no pain, no sky.

If she stopped existing, there would be no time and no mouths and no her with which to perceive time or mouths.

She shivered.

Luckily, that had not happened yet. She could feel in her membranes the weight of the Five Worlds pressing against one another, the strain of their collision generating tremendous energy. That energy had formed her and fed her and caused her to be, and it wasn't even close to exhausted yet.

As long as the worlds continued to grind against one another, scraping raw the skin separating each reality, she would continue to be.

She might last for *days*, even. A week or two at the absolute outside.

She had never been this lucky.

And maybe, a little voice in the back of her head whispered to her, *you might be luckier still*.

The gods of the Five Worlds had bundled together a wad of their divine energies, secured it with a possibility-lock, and then suspended that chunk of god-stuff in the Firmament between realities. Kha could see it there. It shone through the fabric of the world she now inhabited.

That god-stuff was a banquet of energy. It would fill her full to bursting. And the possibility-lock on it was set to grant access to any mortal creature that satisfied its conditions.

She was a mortal. Probably. Technically.
She could die, at least, but not if she got to that nugget.
Kha could feed on it power for months. *Years*, even.
And she could see the possibility-lock, a line of arcane language,
in her mind's eye.

To the victor, it said simply.

Beneath that, in smaller script, was a list of the names of the women that were vying for it. Kha was pleasantly surprised to find that hers was already among them, and then even more pleasantly surprised to find that she *had a name*. That she had *always* had a name.

Kha, kha, KHA, *Kha*, **Kha**.

It rolled around in her head like a marble in her palm.

How ridiculous, how beautiful it was that a person could be a sound and a sound a person.

"Kha," she said, enunciating clearly, so that the world would know.

"Ahhh!" screamed someone in reply.

Which was not quite right, but she would forgive them the mispronunciation.

They had, after all, only just met.

Besides, Kha was fascinated by the idea that she could be talked to. She grew a bristling of eyes all across her plasm in response. If she looked carefully through the eyes, she could pick out details from the world around her.

Was that how other mortals did things?

Could they tell when they had come into being in the middle of a street, bordered on both sides by buildings?

Did they know that the street had been carved rather than paved, scraped by mortal hands into the shell of the enormous beast on which they had settled? And could it be a street if it was part of a living thing? Kha had some doubts, but she had no better words for it yet.

"Street," she said, tasting the phonemes.

"Guards!" someone cried, a note of rising panic in her voice.
"Soldiers! Anyone!"

Kha turned to regard the lone Apelt Lairn sentry, who was backing away with a crossbow raised.

Chapter 8: Conquerors

Kha had never met another person before, and the experience was so gratifying that she swarmed closer, to coil around this wonderful curiosity.

Kha moved quickly, she found, although her sixty three legs got somewhat in the way. Hastily she reabsorbed them, and used some of their matter to grow a face.

Faces were a sign of friendliness.

She grew several more.

"I am Kha," she said in polite reply to the woman shooting her with the crossbow. Then, rapturously, she added: "and I exist."

AXOLOZUG, IKRIX

"And soon you will be no more," said Ikrix blithely, setting aside the viewing mirror. On its surface was an image of a Daemon, framed against a background of sand and stone and heat-distorted air. The thief was sweating, wiping her hand across her brow. She cast a glance upwards, towards some out-of-sight source of illumination, and for a moment it was like she was looking past the Spidermoth queen. It was like she was *ignoring* her.

Grabbing the mirror by its handle, Ikrix smashed its face against the side of a bookshelf. Glass fragments tumbled to the black stone floor.

In their fractured reflection, Ikrix could see only her own features. None of Ereba's.

"Is something the matter?" a voice oozed. It was rich and sophisticated and it seemed to come from everywhere in the expansive library at once. Towering bookshelves, mahogany staircases, and even the glass chandelier overhead thrummed with its resonance.

Irrationally, Ikrix found herself wishing that she could stay forever in that moment, cradled by the sound. The thick oak doors that secluded the library from the rest of her palace seemed more and more welcome every time she visited.

Ikrix did not allow her servants, even her most valuable ones, access to this place. In part this was because she did not want her rivals to learn that she had captured a god, but it was also because

she did not want even her most loyal retainers to when she spoke with it.

Outside the library, she was controlled. Poised. Ruthless.

But when the doors were shut and she was alone with the speaking books, she had no one to manage, no one to intimidate. She felt vulnerable.

That was not a luxury she often had.

She had found that she liked it.

The Ink, if it had sensed this, had never brought it up. It preferred not to talk about the minutiae of governorship or mortal emotion, but Ikrix knew that deep down it cared for her. It had never said as much, but her faith was unwavering.

"That was a momentary lapse of patience," said Ikrix coldly, gesturing to the mirror fragments on the floor. She could hear the lie in her own voice, but she hoped that the Ink could not. "I have other scrying mirrors. Nothing of value was lost."

"Of course," the Ink's voice was soothing. Pages rustled on the shelves. "Very soon, we will both be beyond the reach of anyone that could hurt us."

A book opened and closed on a lectern, the motion uncannily like that of a person's chest rising and falling as she breathed. The slap of the cover against wood was deeply relaxing, and Ikrix found her own breathing falling into rhythm with it.

"The war moves into its middle stages," the Ink continued. "I can feel its progress in the thrum of the Narrative." The god took another deep breath and let it out. Vellum rustled against vellum. "You know, this conflict is so *invigorating*. There is so much loss; so much desire. I will be satiated long before the final act."

"And then you will sweep the heretics aside and claim their prize," said Ikrix, feeling a flash of pride as she did so. This was *her* god that would triumph. Her god, and perhaps more than that.

The Ink was her partner, her counselor, and the only thing thing in her life she had shown itself worthy of her trust. Ever since she had unsealed it twenty years ago, it had not led her astray.

When her sister had tried to usurp her throne, the Ink had known. When her consort had tried to flee to the other spire states, the Ink had known. When Ikrix had ordered their executions, she had cried and the Ink had known that too, but it had said nothing

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to criticise her. That had been worth more to her than all of its advice combined.

The Spidermoth queen straightened up her skirts, which trailed down from where her body trunk met her chitinous thorax. "I do not like to sit idly by," she said bluntly. "It does not befit a proper ruler."

Instead of looking flustered at the remark, like her guardswomen and courtiers often did, the Ink was quiet. It did not mind when she was blunt, and she could be as brusque as she wanted with it without it so much as flicking a page.

Instead of rebuking her, the library chuckled. "If you would like to take a more active role, I shall not dissuade you," it said. "In point of fact, I encourage it." Along one wing of the library, treatises on tactics and strategy spontaneously rearranged themselves as the Ink continued. "The worlds fight, but their commitment to the war is still half-hearted at best. There are still mortal nations that think that they can resolve the Prophecy by committing only a few soldiers and a champion or two. They think that there is not a carrion price to be paid for victory. They will be shown how wrong they are."

"You wish me to fight?" asked Ikrix, surprised to realize that she felt a flash of dread at the idea. "In person? Against the champions of the Five Worlds?"

"I wish," said the Ink evenly, "for the other gods to be goaded. I would like them to invest themselves more heavily in this struggle. After all, the more power they give to their champions, the less they will have at the ready when I make my move."

Ikrix frowned. "How can I goad them? I have spies, but they are mostly embedded in the other spire-states. Recalling them would take time, and—"

"And that is the one thing we do not have in surplus," purred the Ink. "You are right, of course. I think the window is past for such oblique maneuvering. To get the results we want, we must send your navy instead."

"To fight in the war?" asked Ikrix breathlessly. "I thought we didn't need to challenge the others. I thought we were just going to stir them up—"

"And we will," the Ink said, a note of amusement in its tone. "We will stir them up by striking their cities. Their farms. Their homes.

Your forces will be adequate for the purpose. You have, after all, been building them up ever since you assumed your throne.”

“I have been building them up for protection,” said Ikrix nervously. “Protection against the rest of the Ceiling. They justify my rule. I cannot send them away. I have a kingdom to maintain and my own security to consider. Without them, we will both be left vulnerable.”

“The worlds will be your kingdom,” said the Ink smoothly. “The navy will be your security. You and I will travel with them, and what could anyone do to you in the presence of a god?”

Ikrix frowned, but inwardly she felt warm. The Ink had just offered more than its advice. It had told her that it would protect her.

It would never let anyone hurt her.

“What will happen to my spire?” she pressed, although not with much force behind it. “Surely, we will need somewhere to return to during our campaign for periodic resupply.”

“Your spire will still have a fleet,” said the Ink. “Just have your navy collect all those little vessels that gather like hungry gulls in the void below. Repaint them and arm them. Enslave their crews or kick them off into the Drop. A salvage fleet will be sufficient for short-term defense. It will serve as chaff, and if your holdings are invaded, I will warn you of it. Then we will return together and destroy whichever interloper had thought they could catch you unawares, and it will send a message to every traitor in your domain that you are not to be crossed.”

A fierce grin spread across Ikrix’s face.

As a child, she had not smiled much. She had not often had cause to. The moments when she could had always felt frantic, manic.

It had taken a long time, but with the Ink, that was starting to change.

“Where will we go first?” she asked her god.

As she did so, she thought about sun-scorched vistas, oceans of granite and sand, and the face of the only woman who had ever survived defying her.

The face that had made her break her mirror.

“Wherever you wish,” the Ink replied.

CHAPTER 9: THE DOOM THAT CAME TO APELT LAIRN

THE WASTES, HAULA

The vambraces were made of mageworked gold and Haula would have been far happier to steal them than wear them. Twice now, she had considered making her way to one of the palace balconies with a haversack full of whatever the kitchens was serving at that minute, launching herself into the air, and departing Mont Aran with an echoing whipcrack as her hyperspeed kicked in.

It was a pleasant fantasy.

She found herself returning to it every time a courtier stopped by her suite and tried to curry favor with the queen's new champion, or whenever one of the servants called her Haula *of the Horizon*. Part of her wanted to kick Mindry for that little embellishment, but thinking about Mindry was complicated now. Haula couldn't quite muster up anger at the Pangola princess. Just confusion. And perhaps a little fear.

After their chat with the queen, the heir apparent had hauled Haula aside and apologized profusely. Her aunt was a keen military mind, she had explained. Her aunt was very good at exploiting opportunities. Her aunt always made the right decisions for Mont Aran.

Haula had kept her mouth firmly shut and not made any suggestions about where Laitholoathiehl could put her decisions. In return, she had been set up to receive a handsome estate, a title, and a government stipend when the attack on Apelt Lairn ended in victory.

Mindry had no doubts that the attack *would* end in victory, but Haula preferred not to take unnecessary risks. So she had asked for enchanted armor and a platter of roasted capons delivered to her quarters twice daily, in between meals.

The birds had been delicious, braised and tender. Somehow even their bones had been succulent.

The armor, on the other hand, had turned out to be just the vambraces.

Conventionally, vambraces were supposed to protect a woman's forearms from the kinds of cuts an opportunistic opponent might send at them during battle.

Haula did not have forearms.

Vambraces were also supposed to fit snugly once they were laced closed.

These ones could have been worn comfortably as hats.

When she Haula explained this to the queen's armorers, they had nodded sagely, made a few measurements, and suggested that she tie the vambraces around her legs. After all, they had been sized originally for a Gigasborn, and so the width would be just about right.

Faced with a choice between shouting at the queen's armorers and possibly never stopping, or simply leaving the room, Haula had left the room. As long as the vambraces were *on her*, their enchantments would be active and she would be protected, and that would have to be good enough. Only after returning to her guest quarters had she realized that—due to the lack of fingers on her feet—she was unable to lace them shut. Her talons, perfectly suited to disemboweling an attacker or neatly peeling away slices from a roast capon, were not very good at weaving together little leather cords.

Which was why, in the sweltering late afternoon heat on the day of the attack, Haula stood outside Mindry's quarters with the vambraces clutched in one claw while the other rapped on the carved shell frame of the doorway to the princess' antechamber.

Part of Haula knew that the sensible thing to do would have been to simply ring for a servant to carry the message—she had been given an *assortment* of little silver bells for exactly that purpose—but the rest of her had wanted to see the Mindry, if only to demand an explanation for everything.

Time outside the princess' suite passed sluggishly, and no one came to answer the knock, so Haula raised her free foot and knocked again.

There was no door preventing her from entering—only a series of thick, luxurious curtains—but she couldn't bring herself to just walk in. After all, the Beast City's servants strode into *her* quarters

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at all times of day, offering to bathe her, fetch her refreshments, find her a social equal to engage her in a game of chaturanga, or any to suggest number of other inanities. She wouldn't inflict that kind of intrusion on someone else.

Eventually, after her fourth round of knocking, Haula heard footsteps from within. They went straight by the door, continued towards the other side of the antechamber, and only stopped when Haula loudly said "excuse me!" into the drape. Then they slowly retraced their route.

The skein of curtains was pulled aside by a silver arm and a familiar face thrust through.

Haula deflated. Her wings slumped, the tips of her longest pinions trailing on the polished floor of the corridor. During the long wait, sweat beaded on her brow.

She did not usually sweat, but she was accustomed to the open air, where the altitude and motion wicked away moisture and the shimmering sands were far below—not this sweltering mess of tunnels carved superficially into the City Beast's back.

Despite having been involuntarily dressed by servants in what she had been told was the palace's finest, Haula felt bedraggled—a condition that was not being made any better by the Golem at the door.

"Can I help you?" Silver-arms asked brusquely. She was wearing a floor-length cotton dress, its fabric light and airy, and the whole thing was dyed in unthreatening pastels. Her close-cropped, military-standard hair stood up in a way that was jarring to Haula, and her crossbow was nowhere in sight.

Haula swallowed, switching the vambraces awkwardly back and forth between talons. "I want to see Mindry. I mean," she fumbled and one of the vambraces rattled on the floor, "I want to see *princess* Mindry. If she's free."

Silver-arms gave her a critical stare. "Sure," she said. "Now you do." She folded her arms. "Has it occurred to you that her highness might have her own schedule? Maybe she has better things to do than to drop everything now that you've finally stopped ignoring her."

Haula felt her temper rise, her cheeks heating. "What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded. She hardly felt guilty at *all* now

for not remembering Silver-arms' name. "Has she told you she'd prefer not to see me?"

Silver-arms' expression hardened. "After avoiding her for the past several days, I certainly think she'd be within her right to—"

There was a rustle of curtains from across the antechamber and softer footsteps pattered across the shell floor. "Divalsa, is something the matter? Do we have a gues—" Mindry froze, framed behind Silver-arms. "Oh," she said softly. "Haula. Please come in."

Silver-arms pulled back sharply, leaving Haula to fumble her way through the curtained doorway. The drapes had clearly been intended for people with digits, and the few times since arriving that Haula had tried to navigate the ones in her own quarters, she had left the servants with an armload of sewing work to be done.

This time, she only managed to poke two holes in the fabric as she entered.

Mindry's antechamber was larger than most scratch-farmers' houses, and it was much better appointed. It had abundant places to sit, with divans, pillows, low-sitting, skirted tables, as well as pieces of furniture that must have been designed by mistake. One of them looked like three snakes climbing each other, and it didn't seem like it could have supported even an infant's bodyweight.

Mindry waved Haula over to a pair of cushions and settled down on them expertly, her legs folding underneath her so that she perched on her knees.

Haula hunkered down next to them. Then, suddenly aware that this wasn't what a person was supposed to do, awkwardly flopped backwards onto a pillow and landed jarringly on her butt. Mindry wore an expression that was either shocked alarm or outright concern, but she quickly schooled her face.

"Thank you for coming to see me," the heir apparent said. "I am sorry again for the imposition that this has caused you."

At the other end of the room, Silver-arms threw Haula a dark look before vanishing through a another curtained doorway.

"I should be grateful for the opportunity," said Haula, unsure how a person was supposed to respond when a princess apologized to them.

A moment later, she realized that she had made it sound like she wasn't grateful, which was partly true, but also wasn't the kind of thing to admit to anyone with power.

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“Never mind that,” she continued hastily. “I wanted to ask you a favor.”

Mindry looked troubled, but resolute. “I would be glad to help,” she said. “I truly am sorry for involving you in this. The guards change their shift a little after moonrise, and...” She trailed off.

Haula was watching her with her head cocked to one side. “I was going to ask you how to put these damnable metal braces on my legs,” she said carefully, “but now I would really like to know where that sentence was going.”

Mindry looked at the floor. “I thought that you wanted to escape.” Instantly, horrified by what she had said, she looked back up. “Please, pretend I didn’t say that. I meant no aspersions on your honor.”

Haula surprised herself by laughing. “My honor?” She snorted. “There are women with more honor than me picking pockets in the slums. I mean.” She stopped. She hadn’t meant to say that. It made her sound like a monster. “I think we’ve misunderstood each other,” she finished clumsily.

Mindry nodded thoughtfully at that. “I thought you were avoiding me because you meant to leave,” she said. “You hadn’t asked to be pressed into military service, after all. Not even for a generous reward. I assumed you were looking for a way out.”

Haula’s smile was lopsided. “It was nice of you to try to conspire with me. Really, it was,” she said. “I mean that. I wasn’t being backhanded, and I wasn’t avoiding you either.”

Mindry’s scaled brow furrowed in puzzlement. “You didn’t come to see me, nor did you make offers to meet at meal times, nor have you been seen by anyone walking in the royal corner of the gardens. I had assumed you were avoiding me.”

Which was typical noble-logic, Haula thought. When you stayed in your quarters for three days because that’s where the food was, and because everyone seemed to be coming to you, and because on the one occasion you left you got lost and trapped behind the luxuriously draped door of a broom closet, they assumed it was all intended as a personal sleight.

“It’s just been a little overwhelming,” said Haula, which was true. “How does your aunt even know that I’m much of a soldier? It seems bizarre, assigning someone that she’s never met to the vanguard of her strike force.”

Mindry made a wry expression. "I think she thought you might run. Showing up out of nowhere with her impressionable niece, being lauded by the girl as her savior, maybe she figured you were working a con. *This* way, if you ran, she'd have known you'd been lying. And if you stayed and fought and died, then she wouldn't owe you anything. On the other hand, if you survived, her big, dramatic gesture would look even better to the courtiers. It would have seemed prescient. She can be very calculating sometimes."

Haula rolled her eyes and smiled. "Here's hoping I make her look good, then."

Mindry smiled back. "I have no doubt you will. Now," she pointed at the enchanted vambraces, "you said you wanted help with those?"

"Please." Haula stuck out a leg.

Mindry knelt beside her and took one of the vambraces in her hands.

It only took a few minutes for the laces to pull taut and the enchantments to light.

THE WASTES, BUEL

Buel dipped the cloth into the ewer, then pulled it back out. Water streamed from it, running in rivulets back into the clay container as she draped the rag over her brow. The water would have been tepid anywhere else, but letting it run down her face at least gave her the illusion that she was doing something to cope with the heat. After a few blessed seconds, she peeled the cloth away and passed it to the woman on her left, a Lamia that accepted it between pinched fingers and quickly threw it back into the ewer.

When the Lamia dredged it from the vessel, she did so with pinched fingers again, and she wrung it out over her head instead of letting more of the fabric touch her.

Buel snorted in derision. Being a Dragonturtle wasn't contagious. Then she realized the others were staring at her. Stunned by her own behavior, she turned the snort into a coughing fit.

There were not many of the soldiers from Urach left now. Some had fallen to the centipedes in the dark place. Others had fallen in

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battle against the other contenders for the Prophecy. Still others had succumbed to their wounds during the long, grueling march to the place that the Hive had called Apelt Lairn.

Buel was not so sure that it ought to be called a *place*—especially when it had six legs and it plodded under its own power across the flat, baking plain—but she didn’t have a better word. Apelt Lairn was inhabited, and its inhabitants had food and somewhere to get out from under the sun, and that was all that had mattered at the end of the march.

The people of the city had even welcomed them, once they saw the red-and-black standards their army was carrying, and they had let down from the edges of the creature a series of massive baskets made of leather and bone.

Buel and the others from Urach had had to sprint to get aboard them, as Apelt Lairn’s pace carried them skimming along over the surface of the desert, but once they were aboard they had been winched up to stand on a wooden scaffold that hung off the edge of Apelt Lairn’s shell and held at cautious spearpoint by the guards whose purpose it was to process visitors to the city.

“Are these your prisoners?” the guards had asked the soldiers in red and black when they were at last brought up, gesturing to Buel and the other Urachians.

“Not exactly,” an expressionless Harpy had replied. Then she had tipped her head to one side, a stream of bugs had fallen out of her ear, and there had been a lot of screaming for a while.

By the time things had finally settled down, the Hive had controlled the lift station, half a detachment of city guards, and a full twelve miles of a circumference-slum.

The circumference-slum was built at an angle, with its structures clinging to the outermost edges of Apelt Lairn’s shell, and its streets made as much of ladders and they were of stairs. Its houses were all leather and bone, sometimes held by iron nails to the shell, and at other times houses were tethered to other houses—or to a single strong rope that had been thrown off the side. These suspension houses hung like berries from a scrub brush, swaying as the city moved.

None of the women from Urach had wanted to clamber down into one of those, and so they had holed up in a large, multifamily building on the edge instead. The Hive, having already infested the

building's inhabitants, had cleared them out onto the streets while Buel and the others recuperated.

Sleep was all but impossible under these conditions, with the whole slum baking in the sun, but they made do as best they could.

Even so, as soon as the water from the drenched cloth had dried off of Buel's brow, it was replaced by sweat. The inside of the building was stifling, but the Hive had cautioned them not to go out. Sunset was coming soon and the air would grow cooler, the avatar had told them. Until then, it did not want them to reveal where they were.

Their enemies might be scrying for them, the Hive had warned. Some of the other gods had that ability.

But while they waited, the Hive promised, it would build up its forces. Soon, they wouldn't have to worry about anyone.

Buel had done her best not to shudder at that last proclamation, but she had stayed in the house. She had had to.

Luthalla had survived the last several nights in a feverish haze, and she needed constant care. Her wounds were slowly healing, but her breathing was still labored and unsteady. Her complexion was terrible, both sunburned and wan.

And she wasn't the only one.

There were other wounded women from the armies that the Hive had infested, and they needed the rest just as much as anyone else did.

Arguably, they needed it more.

Keeping one of the avatar's bugs inside of them could not have been good for their spirits.

When the war was over, Buel vowed that she would make sure the Hive kept its word and released them. She did not know how she would enforce this, but that problem would have to wait.

For now, the only thing that could matter was winning.

"Blood's touch," swore Dinasia, rolling over on her side. The snakes that made up her hair were in a tangled, snapping frenzy. A few had even begun to molt—a sign of prolonged stress. "Can't sleep a bleeding second, knowing what's out there."

The Medusa sat up, rubbed frantically at her ears, then looked pointedly at her hands as if expecting to find them covered in black-shelled beetles. Some of the women gathered around the ewer threw her sympathetic looks. Buel lowered her gaze.

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“We’ve leashed a monster, you know,” Dinasia continued. “It could decide at any moment to devour us.”

“It hasn’t yet,” said Buel softly.

Dinasia snorted. “That’s all we have to go on, then? I think we should start making earplugs, just in case.”

“That’s not the only way it can get in,” said a Lamia, sopping the wet cloth from the ewer against her face. “Are we supposed to plug up our mouths, noses, and eyes too?”

“Well, at least we wouldn’t have to listen to you complain, Dinasia,” grunted a Dragonnewt, who had also been trying to sleep. “Or isn’t that what we’d use the earplugs for?”

“I think,” ventured another soldier, “that this whole voyage has been doomed from the start. I mean, Scale Nation’s legendary champion tumbles off a cliff right at the outset? We should’ve just gone home. At least then we could’ve died comfortably.”

“I’ll show you dying comfortably,” snapped the Dragonnewt. “When Lady Dorgana gets back, I’ll make you repeat that. Word for word. Right to her face.”

“Please let Lady Dorgana come back,” said the other soldier, rolling her eyes heavenward. “She could be wearing a live scorpion for armor and have a centipede tied like a cravat, and she’d still be less unsettling than that walking mound of beetles. Blood, the way it *talks*—”

“Which way is that?” asked the Hive, spontaneously compiling itself before them. There were a couple of startled shrieks and Dinasia lurched upright, grabbing her halberd off the leather-sheet floor, but the avatar held out one bug-dripping hand in placation. “I’m sorry,” it said deferentially. “We did not meant to startle you. We had thought you would welcome an update on our progress.”

“We would,” said Buel, before anyone else could speak. “Please.”

The Hive fussed with the front of its chest as if it were adjusting the fit of a coat. “Our acquisitions are proceeding apace—”

“Meaning you’ve infested a lot more people,” said Dinasia bluntly.

The Hive’s simulacrum face was expressionless, but if it had been human, Buel thought it might have looked annoyed. “If that is the terminology you would prefer we employ, then yes,” the Hive said crisply. “Most of this district is ours. We will require time to recover our population between outward pushes, but we believe we will

hold complete dominion over this city in a fortnight. So long as we do not spread too aggressively, we are unlikely to elicit an armed response. However, should the situation warrant it, we believe that we could infest the City Beast itself. It requires a few of our drones stationed in the neighborhoods around its head, and then a short descent into the scaffolding around its ear canal, and we are not sure how much time the overall process will take, but—”

“You could control this enormous thing?” asked the Dragonnewt, not disguising her shudder.

“We don’t see why not,” said the Hive. “It is a living, psuedomammalian organism. It has all the same innate vulnerabilities as your kind do, just on a much grander scale.”

Even with bits and pieces of a monastery education, Buel was not sure she had understood all of those words. The parts she did understand sent icy fingers walking down her spine. “All we need to do for now,” she asked the Hive, controlling her voice carefully, “is sit back and wait?”

The avatar looked to one side, its eyes flicking towards something that wasn’t there. When it looked back, its expression was sidelong and hungry. “While you are technically correct,” it began, “there is actually a small problem that we were hoping you might address first.”

“A small problem?” asked Dinasia warily.

“One of the contenders in the war over the Prophecy has recently arrived on this world,” the Hive said. “She is...new here, and this would be an ideal time to eliminate her as a rival. We could send drones against her, but we do not believe they would be adequate. Are you able to fight, Buel?” It turned to regard her with its melting, glittering face.

To Buel’s surprise, she found that the others were looking at her as well. She knew enough of the Scale Nation’s military hierarchy to know that, with Luthalla in poor health, command decisions fell to Dinasia, but the Medusa hadn’t been giving orders since the battle out in the wastes.

Buel felt her stomach lurch.

This was a temporary lapse of command, she told herself. The soldiers were disoriented, confused. They would exercise their authority again shortly.

Slaves did not get to make these judgement calls.

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There was a long pause and no one else spoke, so finally Buel turned back to the Hive. “We’ll go,” she said. “We just need someone to point the way.”

THE WASTES, KHA

The most splendid thing about existence, Kha thought, was that it constantly managed to surprise you.

After the crossbow woman there had come a squad of other women with pikes, and those had also been fascinating to experience. Following the first couple of jabs, Kha had even found that she could contort herself between them, thinning or pulling her substance to one side as the bladed stick came rushing in. Dodging the pikes like this seemed to cause a powerful emotional experience for the pikewomen, and at first Kha was quite jealous of them for that. But then, happily, she discovered that she could *be* jealous, and that was marvellous too.

One of the pikewomen, having clearly been overwhelmed by the experience, made a break for it. Kha rushed after her, intending to ask where she was going, but then the woman tripped, smashing her clay right arm against the shell street, and pieces of it scattered everywhere. She held the remainder, horrified, as Kha came closer, and the expression on her face did not imply that she was enjoying this wide range of sensory experiences like Kha was.

Disquieted, Kha drew back. The other pikewomen circled their fallen comrade and, half-dragging and half-carrying her, retreated around the corner of the next intersection.

Kha was left alone for the moment, studying the pieces of the shattered clay arm.

The arm had not been alive.

Still, she felt a strange sense of fatalism overtake her.

From the moment that arm had existed, it had been vulnerable to gravity and physics and chance. It had inhabited a world that contained streets and rocks and women with crossbows, and no matter how long its owner had lived, its fate had been to one day end up in pieces.

Was that tragic, Kha wondered?

Or was it something else?

Tragedy had its own appeal, she knew. A good tragedy was soft and final, like having the covers tucked in around you at night. A part of her couldn't wait to try it.

But life, she decided, was not to be underrated. She would chase it. She would keep chasing it. And if she ended up like the clay arm in the end, then she would have the joy and tragedy together, their flavors mingled on all her tongues.

"Tongues," she said, and was delighted to realize that she had spoken the word with *the thing that the word was*. "Tongues," she said again, happily.

"Blood's curse, an open door, and the full moon high," breathed someone nearby. "That *has* to be it."

Kha turned to see a woman with snakes for hair pointing at her from the other end of the street. The woman carried a long pole with a thick chopping blade on one end, and behind her a group of other women—most of them also with serpentine features—clambered out of an alleyway.

The alleyway was a narrow crawlspace that had ladder rungs pounded into the floor, so it took them a few moments to all emerge. Kha waited and watched, taking in their features as they came out into the fading light. Haphazardly, she tried to duplicate them.

By focusing her will, she grew a scaled Dragonnewt foot from her forehead. Then a trio of Lamia tails. Then a hand erupted from her chest, and a turtle shell burst out of the end of that.

A mouth formed on the edge of the shell. It ran a long, red tongue over its teeth, and it said "tongues" one last time.

The women recoiled.

One of them, a Dragonturtle, was carrying a slab of Beast-shell paving-stone in each hand. She raised the slabs, but did not throw them. "Are you here to fight in the War of the Prophecy?" she asked sharply.

Kha considered that. She grew another mouth, this one from her forehead, and together the two mouths said "I am here because of the war."

It was the longest, most complete sentence she had ever spoken. She felt a stab of pride.

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“And are there any circumstances under which you would give up and go home?” the Dragonturtle continued, apparently not aware of what a landmark occasion this was.

“Home?” responded Kha. Puzzled, she turned her head in a full rotation. “I am home.”

“But is there—” the Dragonturtle pressed, but by now Kha was too intrigued to stay at arms’ length. She rushed forward and one of the women shouted. Silver flashed in the air.

Kha felt a bright rush of pain.

Looking down at herself in bewilderment, she saw that the snake-woman’s halberd blade had caught her right down the middle, peeling her into two half-connected strips. The edges of the tremendous wound shivered in agony.

I’m beautiful, Kha thought. Then she melded both halves of herself back together and ejected the blade. The halberd, torn from the soldier’s grip, clattered on the street.

“Blood’s curse,” whispered a Lamia. “We can’t fight this.”

“Are we fighting?” asked Kha. She had not played that particular game before. “Is it my turn?”

The others drew back. “We need mages,” one of them hissed.

“We need an open furnace,” said another, gritting her teeth..

“I don’t want to hurt you,” said the Dragonturtle, “but I may have no choice. Please, if you can, concede the war.”

“Concede?” Kha grew several heads. It was the only way she could tilt them all in confusion. “You would like me to concede, but you will not? Is that how war is played? By talking?”

The Dragonturtle frowned, but before she could speak again, there was a grinding sound and a burst of energy flared inside of Kha.

High overhead, a giant hole had just torn open in the sky, bringing the worlds that much closer.

Through the bleed, a fleet of dark, distant shapes began to drift.

Boats, thought Kha, the word coming to her unbidden. *How fascinating.*

She glanced at the Dragonturtle, who had frozen at the new sight, and bowed to the woman politely.

“I must go learn more about boats,” she said, sprouting fifteen pairs of wings. “When I return, we will talk again.”

With a rush of air pressure, the wings all beat at once, flinging Kha into the sky.

THE WASTES, HAULA

“End of the hallway. Left door. Follow me,” Haula barked, and a stream of Mont Araners poured into the corridor. The halls of the enemy city were oddly wider, but the doorway in front of Haula was covered in another of those abominable layers of curtains, and that at least was familiar. This time, she had no qualms about tearing through them.

The fabric shredded, fell, and then she was in someone’s royal suite.

It was just as lavish as Mindry’s had been—with rugs, tapestries, a plate of tiny pistachio pastries, and more silk than any one person could wear.

An old woman, dressed as a servant, was crouched in the middle of the suite, cowering on the floor.

Haula’s first instinct was to begin gathering up the golden statuettes, valuable miniature trees in ornate pots, and carelessly strewn silk cushions that festooned the place, but doggedly she suppressed it.

Usually, when she broke into someone else’s quarters, she did not have an army at her back.

As the Araners fanned out, a part of Haula was amazed by how smoothly the invasion was going. The fighting had been heavy in the streets, but the soldiers of Apelt Lairn barely seemed to have any presence at all inside their own palace.

It was as if they hadn’t considered that, as their rival Beast City passed within spitting distance of their flank, they might be boarded.

Haula had gone over in the first wave, flying with the vanguard, which was composed exclusively of Harpies, raven girls, and others who could cross a few miles of empty space under their own power. They had all descended like a cloud of murder on the palace, swiftly dispatching any opposition, and were now combing the structure to see if they could determine where the real fight was waiting.

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Soon enough, the more heavily armed Golems and Pangola and Gigasborn, who were being transported over by frantically straining litter-bearers, would begin arriving, and then the assault would progress into an occupation. Then Haula would be free to loot and to return home.

Her hands wrapped around her knees, the serving woman on the floor was begging the Araners to spare her life. One of the raven girls told her that she would consider it, then demanded to know where the City's soldiers were.

Haula frowned at that. Whether they were cooperative or not, there was no need to hurt the serving women. She was just moving to put herself between the cowering woman and the soldier when suddenly the servant lunged, her body uncoiling as she caught the raven girl around the shoulders and bore her to the ground.

Perched atop the Araner, she began to cough, spitting something dark and shiny into the raven girl's face.

The other Araners responded immediately. Bows twanged. Arrowshafts hammered home. The serving woman fell, punctured, and the raven girl struggled unsteadily to her feet.

Then a carpet of glittering black spilled out from the serving woman's body, sweeping across the room.

Haula, instinctively, threw herself into the air. Most of the others did as well.

One Harpy, a second too late, began shrieking and clawing at herself. Black, quick-moving things scurried up her legs.

Another Harpy, a wingbeat away, fell over, an arrow buried in her chest.

The raven girl, the one who had been underneath the serving woman, drew another shaft from her side-quiver, set it to her bow, and hauled back on the string.

Haula flickered aside just in time.

The arrow sped past her and smashed against the wall.

Someone screamed a challenge, demanding to know why the raven girl was shooting at them.

Her face perfectly blank, the woman didn't respond.

Whatever was happening, it was clear that the situation had changed. "Withdraw," Haula shouted, slipping into hyperspeed and rocketing out into the hallway. The other soldiers were moments behind her, a flapping, scrambling mess as they tried to pile

through the doorway. Several of them swarmed with the black dots. Others were wounded now, torn at by the talons of their companions.

Haula's wings beat and her muscles strained. She let her hyperspeed burn and shot away from the soldiers as they fell on each other, flying all but blind down the palace's winding corridors, until at last she burst out into the dying light, emerging into the riotous emerald of an enclosed garden.

Its roof was a sheet of glass, but nothing so thick that she couldn't break it.

All she would need to do was flip midair so that she crashed into it talons-first.

She stared up, calculating the angle, and then her focus shifted over from ceiling to sky, where new, foreboding shapes were moving.

They weren't birds, or mage pavillions, or meteors, but something about those drifting silhouettes looked horribly familiar.

Haula unaccountably reminded of the battle in the wastes.

When the fire began to fall, she abruptly knew why.

THE WASTES, IKRIX

Ikrix paced the command deck of her flagship, the Onus of Rule. It had been refitted hastily at her orders, displacing all of its usual command staff. *They* had been relocated to the upper deck so that they could coordinate better with the women who worked the rigging, carried volatile alchemical bundles, and undertook the general operation of the ship.

They had *also* been moved so that they would not trespass in Ikrix's space, since she had relocated her library along with her.

The move from her citadel to the refitted flagship had been the most frightening three hours of her life. With every stack of books that her porters carried, the Ink's presence in her palace had dwindled by degrees. Despite its assurances, she had not known whether it would come back to life when it was rebuilt. Only when she had felt it begin to stir aboard the Onus had she finally begun to breathe properly again.

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When the library had recovered, Ikrix had summoned her most trusted advisors, one by one, to visit her in her new quarters. She had taken each one by the hand, firmly led her to the stacks, and then held her down as the Ink reared up out of the pages and drowned the woman in blackness.

The baptism was tedious but effective. As the kicking of each woman's legs slowed and her resistance stopped, the Ink rewrote the parts of her that professed to be independent.

When the advisor finally died, the Ink resurrected her, new and whole, as a dedicated priestess of the library.

These priestesses, the Ink had explained, could communicate instantly with one another. Each would stand aboard one of the ships and their network would coordinate the movements of the fleet.

The shadowy vapors that had continued to pour off them long after their baptism was finished had been an unintended side effect, but at least there was no doubt as to whether the advisors would be taken seriously by the crews of the other ships.

"The enemy palace is burning," said the Ink smoothly, drawing Ikrix back into the present. "We are, as of yet, unopposed."

The city below them—a sprawling, cumbersome thing—had become their first target by virtue of being right beneath them when they had arrived. Another city plodded along on the other side of it, trudging across whatever blasphemous, inverted Ceiling this world had instead of a Drop.

Ikrix hoped that other city was watching them closely.

After all, it would be next on the agenda.

To build a civilization atop a living creature, Ikrix thought, was revolting. The animal should have been slaughtered and the city built from its bones and skin. Perhaps she would have a chance to correct its citizens mistake.

"What could they possibly do against us?" Ikrix mused, gesturing idly towards the people below. "You told me that none of the other worlds have developed ways to travel the sky. If that is true, then every engagement will be like this."

"Are you worried it might not be sporting?" the Ink asked.

"I'm worried," said Ikrix, smiling widely, "that we might run out of bombs."

The Ink did not appear to notice the wildness glinting in her eyes. "For this to benefit me," it said calmly, "we will not be destroying any of these places utterly. We are merely providing the women of this world with a reason to care about the war. After all, if we kill everyone, who will be left to gnash their teeth and curse us?" There was a hint of wryness in the god's voice. "My priestesses, by the way, are reporting a flock of winged women exiting the city. Skirmishers, probably. Would you like to engage them directly?"

Involuntarily, Ikrix shuddered. Could the Daemon thief be here?

Then she remembered where she was and composed herself. Trying not to be obvious about it, she darted a look towards the shelves.

Had the Ink noticed?

"There is no need to see to it personally," she said, as nonchalauntly as she could. "but ensure the fliers are destroyed."

"Very well," murmured the Ink. "The Alma Mater, Promised Violence, and Benediction of Lead are moving to engage."

Pages rustled.

The stacks themselves seemed to frown.

The Ink's voice came again. "There is a problem. Elsewhere in the fleet, the Obliteration of Cowards is reporting that something is on its wing."

"Have another ship kill it," said Ikrix too quickly.

"Alchemical fire," responded the Ink, "is very not discerning when it comes to its targets."

"Kill it without fire, then," Ikrix snapped. "Of course it would be asinine to use alchemical weapons aboard my ships. They're—" She plunged to a halt.

The Ink had gone quiet, the way Ikrix's mother had used to before she struck someone.

"Do you mean to keep talking?" it asked coldly.

Ikrix felt like the wind had been knocked out of her. Its tone was never like that. "What happened?" she asked.

"The Obliteration," it said, "is now gone."

All around the front edge of the command deck there were viewing windows: thick portholes made of glass. Ikrix rushed to the closest and peered down to where the burning, tumbling shape of The Obliteration of Cowards was spiraling towards the ground.

"What was that?" she demanded. "What did that?"

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Books rattled on their shelves. The chandelier creaked as it swung unsteadily back and forth. “A newborn,” the Ink growled. “Gone now, of course. It realized who it had angered the moment it felt me stir. We will find it later and teach it not to interfere.”

“A newborn?” asked Ikrix, but as she did so, the library shook again. “What do you mean—” she began.

The Ink cut her off sharply. “Our priestess aboard the Benediction has now been lost.”

Ikrix slammed a hand against the wall. “How?” she shouted, and the room rang with her voice.

There was a moment’s pause, and then all at once she felt a wall of psychic pressure sweep into her, forcing her down. Her knees buckled one by one. Her head rang.

Just as suddenly, the pressure let up and she realized that she was looking down at her hands, panting. “Ink?” she asked tremulously.

As if in response, the Onus began to rise rapidly in the air. Ikrix felt a sickening sensation in her gut as the ship put everything in its core into sheer, unmitigated lift.

Grabbing onto the lower rim of the porthole, Ikrix hauled herself up.

And stared.

Beneath them, another of her vessels had come apart, its contents turned into a collection of splintered planks and tumbling crew in the air. And below that...

The city that they had been strafing was up on its hind legs, grimly swatting her ships out of the sky.

And all around it, trailing thick streams of white vapor, blazing chunks of the heavens were beginning to fall.

THE WASTES, BUEL

Buel clung to the railing of the building she had sheltered in. Her legs, owing to the way the entire city had tipped back in the wrong direction, kicked at the ceiling.

“Hive!” she shouted. “Hive! What’s happening?!”

But there was no convenient gathering of beetles, no interceding god to explain why the whole world was suddenly facing the wrong way. Some of the other soldiers, she knew, had managed to get

inside, but she couldn't unsee the faces of those who hadn't felt the tipping in time and had been snatched away into the void.

Wrapping her arms tighter around the railing, Buel tried to pull her feet up too.

There was no telling what would happen next, whether the entire city of Apelt Lairn would fall forward onto its feet or backwards and crush every one of its occupants beneath it.

Balanced as it was, all she could do was hang on.

THE WASTES, KHA

Kha spun away from the burning boat, her wings churning. She had not meant to do that to these people, but she had been so startled by their response. They had flung fire at her, and she had realized too late that that fire could hurt her in a way she did not enjoy.

At its touch, she had panicked.

That fear was inside her still. Quivering. Driving her.

She had only just been born. She did not want to give up existence yet.

Darting between the other ships, Kha felt the presence of three gods becoming aware of each other, stirring, and lashing out.

As the city of Apelt Lairn reared up on its hind legs and swung like a drunken boxer at the surprised fleet, as meteors rained down from the sky, as ships swung and danced between them, the friction between those forces intensified.

The worlds had been created to house a single god each, Kha thought.

Not two. Not three.

And certainly not three at war.

A tear opened in the air before her, showing a high, cold plunge down into a misty mountain range.

Another opened onto a beautiful, wide-banked river.

The energy from each rip invested her until she could barely contain it.

Her wings stuttered. Her body spasmed.

A third tear opened beneath her.

She fell, and it swallowed her up.

CHAPTER 10: WRECKAGE

ETHANTAR, DORGANA

There were glaciers, and they blurred by.

There were rivers, and they blurred by.

There were lush valleys and high peaks and dark, submerged places.

They all blurred by.

Jyashuu opened portals at random as Dorgana ran, muddying their trail. Some led back into places they had visited before. Some led into alien vistas that Dorgana couldn't have imagined existing in *any* world.

She ran through some of them, her skin prickling and her nerves on edge, but all Jyashuu told her was to keep her eyes forward. The thing at their back was worse than anything they might find out here. If they wanted safety, they would have to earn it.

Through catacombs and complexes made of baked clay, Dorgana's feet pounded.

Through mausoleums and palaces.

Through temples and fields and once, for seven terrifying seconds, off the side of a floating wooden thing and through the screaming, vacant air.

Days slipped by. Jyashuu's magic suffused her. Dorgana did not tire.

Finally, she felt more than saw the light from the design on her forehead begin to dim. At that point she decided that either the Lightwings was still behind her, in which case she would be summarily destroyed, or she wasn't, in which case she could collapse.

She hit the soft, rustling grass before she could even consider where she was. Every muscle in her was achingly tired, but she was dimly aware that there was still a piece of her mind reaching out to sense the other contenders.

It did not find any of them in this world.

Her tail lashed, kicking up chunks of dirt, and she groaned.

"Thank you," said Jyashuu, withdrawing stickily from Dorgana's back. "Sincerely and honestly. Thank you."

"Don't thank me," panted Dorgana. "I wouldn't even remember who I was if you hadn't stepped in. The woman with the ears came out of nowhere and did something to my head."

Jyashuu's tone grew grave. "The gods have begun to commit their forces, then. I suspect the ability to compel a woman's rational mind to slough off like chaff in the wind will be the least of what they can bring to bear."

"How are we supposed to fight that?" Dorgana asked, but it wasn't an expression of despair, and she levered herself up onto her forearms as she said it.

She gazed out across the hillside meadow where they had landed. High above, the sky was a molten red. The sun, immense and swollen, was finding its cradle in the distance. "Before the Lightwings and Ears Woman arrived," she said, "I was talking with another champion and she seemed sympathetic. But if the gods are so insidious, they could have corrupted her between then and now. Perhaps the next time we meet, I should kill her right away, before she can talk. Before she can use any new powers. Perhaps that's how I should treat everyone in this war. Is something like that ever be justified?"

Jyashuu's lips drew together into a tight line. "Justified or not, it is an option."

Dorgana pulled herself into a sitting position and began, gingerly, to stretch out. She flexed her feet, rolled her wrists, and rubbed at her aching muscles. "Are there others?" she asked.

"A few," said the Slime. "The connection between a god and a mortal is a tether of energy. It grows stronger as the mortal begins to believe that she is guided or controlled by her patron, and it winds itself deeper into the mortal as she accepts new powers or professes her faith. Because the tether is energy, theoretically, it can be disrupted."

"So we can break the link between a god and a champion?" asked Dorgana, pounding away at a muscle cramp in her leg.

"Not necessarily," said Jyashuu. "It would depend on the strength of the tether, the attitude of the mortal, and a number of other factors. On top of that, it would likely take most of my energy, delivered in a hammerblow, and even then there is no guarantee

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that it would work—or that it wouldn't simply evaporate the mortal. Moreover, there is an exception to the rule. There is a god that does not need a tether. Fortunately, I do not think we are likely to encounter the Restless Depths out here. And in any event, I have previously proven immune to its touch."

"So that's an option," said Dorgana sarcastically. "We can try to break the chain between a god and its champion, possibly free one woman from her patronage, and probably we die in the process."

"I am not optimistic about it either," said Jyashuu. "Fortunately, there are two other possibilities to consider."

"Which are?" Giving up on her stretches, Dorgana lay back in the grass. The air was cold, but somehow not as fierce here as it had been in Urach. It felt gentle and pleasant on her skin. "If either of those options is going back back home and dying in comfort," she said, "you should know that I would never consider it."

"Nor would I," said Jyashaa, a ghost of a smile flitting across her semitransparent face. "One is to find as many of the other contenders as possible and form a coalition with them. An alliance against the destruction of the worlds should be the equal of a single god's avarice."

"And if multiple gods are involved?" A moth, its pale wings beating an unhurried pace, fluttered by. "What if the others have joined in?"

"Then we have our last strategy." Jyashuu jammed a hand into the air, which squelched disconcertingly, and withdrew Dorgana's ax. There was a puff of dry air from the Wastes, and then the rift closed.

Jyashuu dropped the ax into the grass and then knelt alongside it, finger-painting runes along its haft. "When I made my mark on your forehead, allowing you to draw off of my energy," she said, glancing up at Dorgana, "I was conservative with how I structured the glyph. I did not want you to overdraw my reserves and kill me in the process. However, we no longer have the luxury of playing so defensively. Now that Valmetica is involved—"

"Who?" asked Dorgana, seizing upon the unfamiliar word.

"The Lightwings," said Jyashuu. "She complicates things. She will have to be our first priority."

"You know her?" Dorgana pressed.

Jyashuu hesitated, but only for a moment. “Not very well,” she said carefully, like a woman picking her way across a narrow cliffside trail. “We were both there in the beginning, and there was another time when we almost met each other in Sasi. It was during one of my first serious efforts to research the gods, and the experience put me off of that study for a bit.” She paused again. “What you should know about Valmetica is that she is clever, dedicated, and she has a force of will that is unmatched among her peers. If there are any of them left.”

“What do you mean, ‘if’?” asked Dorgana. “What happened to them?”

Jyashuu looked away. “It’s complicated. Unlike mortals, Lightwings do not reproduce, so for every loss they take, their population dwindles permanently. I think it’s important that you understand,” she continued, “that this is part of the fundamental nature of all worlds. Nothing remains the way it is forever. This war will remake reality utterly, but I suspect that if the gods had not grown greedy, then it would have been something else that happened to us in its place. Change comes always, and it destroys the things you love. That is the only universal constant.”

Dorgana thought about that. “It doesn’t have to be,” she said slowly.

Jyashuu paused mid-rune. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean,” Dorgana stopped for a second, gathering her thoughts. The notion was barely formed, and she was not even sure she knew how to articulate it, but she pressed forward anyway. “If I win,” she said, “the power of a Goddess is mine. I will have strength enough to reshape the worlds, to bend them to my own design. Am I correct?”

“You are,” said Jyashuu, and now she was frowning too. Hers was a deeper, more cautionary expression, as if she could sense where this was going and had already decided she didn’t like it.

“So what if I flipped the hourglass?” asked Dorgana. “What if I put everything back the way it was in the beginning?”

“I...” Jyashuu trailed off. She took a quick breath, then started again. “I think this is a conversation for another time. For now, I must concentrate on imbuing your weapon, your armor, and your body with more power. That way, when you are forced to fight again, there will be nothing holding you back.”

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“Didn’t you say it could drain you dry?” asked Dorgana softly.

Jyashuu nodded weakly, but—Dorgana noticed—there was a quiet strength in the way her gelatin shoulders were set. Finishing one rune, she moved on to the next.

“If an old woman must die,” she said, “to ensure that the Five Worlds remain, in the grand scheme of things that is not such a terribly big sacrifice to make.”

THE WASTES, EREBA

There was a hole in the world, and it was fountaining out fire.

Ereba just stared at it, along with the rest of the surviving crew of the Antiquity. Ever since they had left the wreck of their ship following its final, prow-shredding jet across the desert, they had been bombarded by strange sights.

Everywhere they looked, it seemed, there was a place where reality bled. Foreign animals—one of them like a walking fur-rug with three sets of heads—had blundered out onto the sands and, not too far away, a scorpion the size of a market stall was chasing winged rabbits.

But that was nothing compared with the rupture.

Like the other bleeds, it was as if a hole had opened in the air.

Unlike the other bleeds, the hole had not opened onto another place. It had just opened, and the primal flames from the other side that were spilling out into the desert were of no particular color.

Instead they licked at space, and space burned.

“We need to get out of here,” said Tressa matter-of-factly. The huge eyes of the owl on her shoulder shone with panicky agreement.

Off in the distance, a city stood up and began punching boats.

Around it, blazing missiles hammered down, falling from the the star-strewn emptiness where there should have been a Ceiling.

Occasionally the ground quaked.

Each little shudder horrified Ereba, who had once seen whole spires shear off and fall into the Drop. Granted, that had been a long time ago, but that knowledge wasn’t particularly reassuring to her.

It apparently wasn't comforting to the three-headed rug-beast either.

It lowed at the party as they trudged past, its three faces following them as they went. The bat-winged thief-taker looked at it and licked her lips. "If you want, we could probably—" she started to say.

"Forget it. There's no time to stop and butcher it," countered a sailor with grasshopper wings. "Wherever we end up, it'll likely have food. Right?"

"I sincerely hope so," said Tressa. "Perhaps we should just pick a tear," she added pointedly, glancing at the battle that was unfolding on the horizon.

Ereba frowned. "We need to get home," she insisted. This was turning into a constant refrain, but they *couldn't* just run away to some other, safer world. If they did that, the war would leave them behind and someone else would win it. "Maybe there we can commandeer another ship," she said. "So far, none of these ones have led back to the spire, but—ah-hah!" She spun, pointing to a portal. It was freshly opened, like the rest, but it led out into a wide room made of polished black stone. Torches burned on the walls, their fires fed by looped magics, and carved stone benches lined one side, denoting it as an audience chamber. "Here we are!" Ereba shouted. "Through here!"

Side by side, the crew hastened marched the breach. Tressa strode in first, her crimson hair flying out behind her. Ereba followed closer to the middle of the pack, panicky crew pushing hurriedly past her.

She did her best not to jostle them back, since she still wasn't sure if the edges of a bleed were *sharp*.

She didn't want to hurt any of the others, even if their growing anxiety over the all-but-exhausted food-stores in ruins of the Antiquity and their stark terror as they walked across the shifting desert had been grating on her nerves.

However, she would be glad to quit their company for a few hours once they all had her bearings.

From the architecture on the other side, Ereba could tell conclusively that she was in Axolozug. And, because she was standing on stone rather than plunging endlessly into an abyss, that meant she was in one of the settled parts of the Ceiling.

Chapter 10: Wreckage

Which meant, in turn, that it was only a matter of time before she found a market and stole everylast loaf of honeybread they had.

She licked her lips as the procession filed forward. Idly, she wondered which spire they were in. She had spent the last twenty years exclusively in Ikrix's domain, but the other nations had their own quirks. On the other hand, maybe their styles were more universal than she had thought, because this place certainly looked like—

“Freeze, in the name of queen Ikrix!” barked a voice.

The crew of the Antiquity turned.

Behind the mouth of the portal they had come through, the chamber opened out onto a wide parade grounds.

That parade ground was swarming with soldiers in the queen's livery.

Twelve of them, their armor covered in black iron thorns, were approaching at a run.

URACH, VALMETICA

Let the Dragonnewt girl flee.

If that was how she wanted to play things, then Valmetica could no longer afford to chase her. There were too many other variables in play—too many other contenders to kill—to waste time on the woman.

Although, if she was honest with herself, a part of Valmetica *seethed* at the failure. Erasing a single barbarian from the war should have been trivial, but then the old mage had appeared.

She should have known that Jyashuu would be involved in this. Lightwing history was stained by her interference in matters beyond her understanding. The very sight of her had brought Valmetica up short, as every thought in her head made the instantaneous switchover from cold calculation to incandescent rage.

There would be a place in her book for Jyashuu, Valmetica vowed, just as there would be for the dragon girl that carried her.

Two names.

Two epitaphs.

Just not yet.

Calmly, Valmetica stood. The glacier beneath her feet was melting from the waves of power pouring off of her, and the cold mountain air had turned summery and warm.

She was wasting energy.

She released her Halo, letting the coruscating purple ring dissolve into incoherent light. There was nothing to fight out here; just the peaks and the sunset. Far away, she could sense the world where the dragon girl had landed, but she turned her mind forcefully to the locations of the other contenders.

None of the others would be able to split open the seams between worlds.

None of the others would be able to run from her.

If she concentrated, Valmetica could get a brief impression of the other women who were vying for the prophecy. One of them, in Axolozug, had dark hair and broad wings and was very weak indeed. Removing her right now would be safer than letting her go to ground.

With every day that passed, the gods' involvement would grow.

Extending a delicate hand, Valmetica slashed the air open and stepped through into Axolozug.

Immediately, someone screamed. A dozen voices joined in, and there was a loud crash as a cart collided with a fruitseller's stall.

Mage-grown peaches and grub-apples and ripe xomatl rolled across the black stone floor of the indoor marketplace. Children cowered and a butterfly-hound took to the air in a fury of prismatic wingbeats for a moment until its owner, a Spidermoth, expertly netted it with her own fibers.

"Intruder!" someone yelled, and all but one of the screaming commoners fell silent. That last one's cry lingered, growing high and shrill, until someone elbowed the screamer hard enough that she cut off in a fit of spluttering.

"I would advise," Valmetica said into the hush, "that you do not try my patience. Do not approach me. Do not address me. Do not so much as look at me, and our association will be uncomplicated and brief."

Eyes darting, she scanned the market, making sure her words had been heard. All of the commerce around her had stopped. Further out, foot-traffic was beginning to congest as a wave of

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citizens trying frantically to get away collided with a wave of citizens trying frantically to see what all the fuss was about.

To her surprise, Valmetica realized that no one in the sea of bodies was particularly well-dressed. Even for mortals, these women looked bedraggled. Some were gaunt and sunken-cheeked, while others moved with the stumbling, half-aware gait of the perpetually exhausted.

And the *prices*.

Valmetica had never needed currency, but even if she had, she would sooner have killed a stall-owner and seized her produce than pay six golden rounds for a meager grub-apple.

Something else bothered her as well and, as it slowly percolated up from her unconscious thoughts, her nose wrinkled in disgust.

The market reeked.

It stank of animal hide and wood pulp and crushed charcoal, strident notes against a background of desperation and neglect. It was familiar, deeply so, and old instincts called out to her in warning.

Twenty years ago, her sisters in Axolozug had gone to war with the locals. They had done so to prevent the awakening of the world's god, after the key to its prison had somehow been recovered by mortals. Valmetica's sisters in Axolozug had sent several messages to the other Lightwings, telling of the horrible sacrifices they had been forced to make—cutting entire spire-cities from the Ceiling and letting them tumble forever into the Drop below—but in the end, that had not been enough. Their last message had warned of a pervasive smell of ink, and they had begged Valmetica not to come looking for them.

To her shame, she had obeyed.

Like her other sisters, she had studied the gods. It had seemed so important during the worlds' dawn, when those destructive primal forces were still being shackled and the Lightwings were so numerous that they could be fielded in armies.

Once the bindings in place, she and all her sisters had gone from being warriors to scholars, striving to better understand their foes in case they were forced to meet in combat again.

She had learned about how the Everblood fed off of the rapture of those it possessed, but could only manifest its powers when the moon it was bound to rose in the sky.

She had learned about how the Restless Depths had no native magic, only a vast awareness of the organisms that composed its scuttling, multi-part mind.

She had learned about how Nebula could only convert those it had met in person, and about how its powers could only be channelled through a living conduit.

And she had learned about the Ink, whose potential for growth was unrestricted, who fed off of conflict, who could manifest and infect and channel magics as it chose. Afraid of what it could do if it was ever loosed, the Lightwings had locked it so tightly in its prison that no mortal should have ever been able to spring it, by design or by accident.

Free, it moved through written language like a leech through the waters of a still pond.

Free, it would *feast* on this war, growing far beyond the scope of the other gods.

I've made a terrible mistake, Valmetica realized. I should never had listened when they told me to stay away.

The Ink had had unrestricted access to this place for too long.

It had turned the world into a breeding ground for conflict.

Whether the women here worshipped it or not, they had fed it with their suffering. And after twenty years of gorging, it would be too strong now to challenge directly.

Thankfully, Valmetica had other options.

She was standing, right now, in the heart of its power.

She could cut it off at the source.

"We need to report her," a worm-bodied woman was telling a merchant with the transparent wings and pulsating black stinger of a wasp. "The queen's proclamation said as much. There would be strangers among us. The new priesthood should be told."

"The new priesthood," the wasp-woman hissed in reply, "scares me worse than this butterfly-lady does. *You go talk to them.*"

Whether they knew it or not, these women were infected.

Valmetica let her Halo form.

This would be a loss, but not an avoidable one.

So much of the Five Worlds had degraded since their creation five hundred years ago. Fallen, decrepit, it was a miracle she even recognized them in their current state. Seen through that lens, what she was doing here would be a mercy.

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And perhaps the spire-nations of Axolozug would be a suitable funerary monument for her sisters.

Valmetica let her power flow, filling the air with a low, electric hum. Bits of merchandise, stalls, even pets soaked in a small portion of the charge and began to rise off of the ground. Women were running now, making for the hall's exits in a panicking wave.

"If it is any consolation," Valmetica said, "I will try to bring some of you back after the war has been won."

She lifted her hand.

Then there was a tremendous roar and she, along with the rest of the spire, was falling.

EVERYWHERE, KHA

No! she thought, and it rang around the insides of her rapidly expanding mind.

Kha would not die. She would not burn. She would not end her existence yet.

Power throbbed in her, overwhelming thought. She was stretching past her limits. Blazing. Going superluminal.

The energy from the tears was pouring into her.

She couldn't stop it.

It would feed her until she ruptured.

It would fill her until she was only energy, with nothing left of her consciousness.

The only way to survive was to use it up.

So she poured it out into the desert, watching the sand and rock bubble and turn to glass. And she poured it into the sky, knocking the stars loose from their anchors in the heavens. And she almost poured it into the air, but realized at the last second that she would boil herself along with everything else within this world.

Crying out in desperation, she stepped between dimensions.

The freezing cold of the air over Urach hit her like a slap. She embraced the feeling, anchored herself to it.

I am the thing that feels pain, she thought. *I am the awareness at the heart of the struggle. I am alive.*

She let out a wave of power and felt the sky shake as every volcano in the Range erupted. Then she stepped between dimensions again.

Now she was in Sasi, in a vast, black pit where chitinous things the size of townships ran along the walls, hissing and devouring each other.

WHO DARES— began a voice like the wingbeats of a billion flies all tuned to the same frequency, but Kha lashed out blindly and struck it with a wave of energy so forceful that she was almost able to breathe for a second. She was almost able to remember her name.

She stepped between worlds again before the entity could retaliate, and now she was hanging in the air over a vertiginous drop. Below her, tiny ships were fighting to get out of the way as a chunk of black marble the size of an inverted mountain plunged into an endless void.

She almost let out a little sob as the part of her that was able to process such thoughts understood her salvation.

Reaching out with the energy that still, with every passing moment, flooded into her, she caught the spire.

It hung, suspended in the air, bleeding away just enough of her energy for her to regain control.

She drew in another deep breath, sucking it in with her pores, then blasted that breath out as a puff of steam.

The battle within her continued to rage, but—as long as no new tears opened and nothing distracted her—she could weather this. She just needed to cling to the spire, hold it upright, and convert the energy that was pounding through her.

If nothing distracted her, she would be alright.

CHAPTER II: REDEEMERS

AXOLOZUG, EREBA

Ereba was sprinting back towards the portal when the ceiling came down and slapped her.

It knocked the wind from her lungs and left a ringing in her ears that was so loud all she could hear for a few terrible seconds was the collision. Then the tiny bright sparks that were scudding across her vision cleared and she realized that she was lying on her back.

She was lying on her back on the ceiling.

From the way her stomach had sucked back against her spine and the way her hair had become a drifting cloud of purple strands, she could tell that she was falling. Or rather, that the whole spire was falling and she was still inside it.

To her left, a tunnel had been scraped into the black stone by their portal as it had whipped by. It had apparently kept its position in the air as the spire started to fall, which meant it had probably ejected a long spear of stone, furniture, and possibly people into the Wastes.

She did not think she would ever be able to confirm that guess, since the portal was now too far away to fly to.

Even if she could find her way out of the spire, she would likely never see the Wastes again. Instead she would fall and fall until the weight of the spire around her was so great that it pressed the breath from her lungs.

Ereba let out a horrified groan.

That was when the floor swept up to hit her.

With her wings flared, the impact was only half as bad as it could have been. Still, it was jarring, and the impact ran all the way up her legbones.

To Ereba's left, stone benches thundered down from above, smashing themselves apart on the floor. To her right, women in heavy iron armor did the same.

There were a few graceful landings, as crewmembers of the Antiquity broke their falls midair, but several hit just as hard as the benches.

Outside the assembly hall, the parade grounds were empty. The troops that had been practicing there had been snatched away into the sky.

Closer by, the vanguard that had made it inside of the hall was scattered across the floor, lifeless and still. Their armor, powerful as it would have been against blades or arrows, had weighted them like stones.

Ereba froze.

Had they hit the bottom of the Drop?

Her mind raced.

The floor bobbed slightly, tilting underfoot, and she felt her footing become unsteady. The floor was now like the deck of an airship, but without its pitch or traction enchantments.

Was the spire somehow *flying*?

"Someone help her!" a woman shouted, and Ereba turned to find the bat-winged thief-taker kneeling over the body of Tressa. The Lamia's bright red hair was fanned out all around her, almost camouflaging the pool of red liquid that was seeping from her head. Wings beating frantically, the Loop Owl hit the ground beside the captain like a feathered meteor, then sprinted over to fling itself onto her belly. It stood there like a sentinel, making a hissing, hacking noise at any crew member who approached.

"Where's the bleed?" demanded a woman with cicada wings.

"It should be right there!" shouted a sailor with long gliding flaps that ran from her hands to her ankles. "Can anyone see it?"

From high overhead, out of the hole that had been left in the ceiling, a child's ball tumbled. It bounced across the floor for several seconds before coming to a stop amid the ruins of the benches.

It was painted in the dark colors of Ikrix's standard.

Nothing followed after it.

"The bleed's gone," said Ereba softly.

"Someone help her!" the bat-winged woman shouted again, her tone rising in desperation. "She needs a healer!"

Ereba's eyes flicked over to the captain. Without doing a detailed inspection, she could already tell that the cause was lost. In five hundred years, she hadn't seen many women get back up after an

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injury like that. Even with all the doctors in Axolozug clustered around her, the odds of Tressa surviving the next few minutes were vanishingly slim.

Atop her belly, the Loop Owl flattened its body protectively and made a sharp, angry hiss at the thief-taker.

Tressa murmured something. The words were incoherent.

The smart thing to do would be to abandon her.

"She needs a litter," Ereba said. "And we need a way out. Does anyone recognize where we are?"

Cicada Woman held up a hand. "Assembly hall, off of the open-air parade grounds and next to the barracks and the docks."

Several of her crew members, those that weren't still trying to pick themselves up off the floor, blinked at her.

"What?" she said challengingly. "I had a thing with a soldier."

"Docks?" asked Ereba, heading off any other lines of inquiry. "Can you lead us to them?"

For a second, it was like Cicada Woman was no longer there. Her eyes went glassy and unfixed. Her expression slackened. Then she shook herself. "Yes. I can get us there," she said briskly. She paused. "Anyone else who...who survived will also be heading that way. We should move quickly, or the ships will all be taken."

Ereba nodded in affirmation. It made her head swim. Holding a hand to her temples, she turned to the thief-taker. "Litter," she said. "Does anyone have the materials for one?"

There was a flurry of head-shaking. The captain's Loop Owl hopped up and down, beating its wings in panic. The thief-taker tried to shoo it off and it nearly took a chunk out of her finger in return.

Ereba focused her mind. She took a deep breath to calm herself, and then she *lengthened*. "We'll do this the other way," she said as bones and flesh grew out of the back of her hips, interlocking and layering over themselves as a stretcher grew out of her body.

There was a horrible, choking, nauseated noise as one of the other crew members was messily sick on the floor.

"Don't look at me if you don't want to," the Daemoness snapped, "but someone needs to load your captain onto me. I clearly can't do it, and it is absolutely vital that no one jostles her. Do you understand?"

The thief-taker made an involuntary gagging sound, but she and Cicada Woman muscled Tressa onto the stretcher. The Loop Owl snapped and flapped at both of them, but it did not stray from its position on the captain's midsection. It just danced back and forth as if it were going to strike at them until Cicada Woman yelled at it "stop that! We're saving her! You can either help or you can get out of the way!"

Shivering and bewildered, the owl subsided.

As soon as it did, the thief-taker took the handles of the organic stretcher and lifted. Ereba felt a wrenching strain in her lower back, but she held steady and settled into the pull.

She had to carry herself differently with the seven foot structure coming out of her back, and the angle was awkward, but she could move.

She could *run* like this, if necessary.

"Oh, emptiness below me, I can't believe I'm doing this," the thief-taker moaned.

"This is a perfectly normal Daemon thing to do," Ereba replied brusquely. "If you can't handle it, give the bone-handles to someone else."

The thief-taker swallowed and was silent.

"Fine. You," Ereba pointed at Cicada Woman, "lead the way. Everyone else, follow her. I have no idea what happened here or if it's going to happen again, but we can't stay and find out. Help your comrades if you can, but anyone who can't keep up gets left. Understand?"

There was an angry muttering, but it was moderated significantly by terror.

The last of the survivors of the Antiquity were helped to their feet or slung over other women's shoulders and the procession set off towards the docks.

AXOLOZUG, KHA

She could survive this.

Energy rolled off of her, pounded through her, wicked into her like broth into a sop—but she was in control.

She lifted the massive stone thing that she had caught.

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It rose incrementally; its sleek, black surface bobbing in the air.

What was it? she wondered.

How had it gotten there?

“No!” a woman’s voice bellowed from nearby. “I won’t let you interfere!”

More by instinct than by anything else, Kha jerked to one side. Her column of wings all beat together in a single burst and sent her skidding through the air, just as a column of purple lightning roiled through the space she had occupied, carving a wide furrow in the Ceiling far above. Stones tumbled from the cut out into the void, spilling like blood from a wound.

Distracted, Kha’s grip on the spire slipped. It tipped perilously to the left. Painstakingly, she steadied it.

Where had the lightning come from? she wondered.

Was that just the sort of thing that happened here?

Kha grew a series of tongues, each of which was designed to taste a different spectrum of flavors. They licked out, testing for ozone, alchemical vapors, or the dry, fiery taste of magic. Kha’s own magic dominated the tongues’ palettes, but a few of them detected notes of something else.

A god had been here recently, and there was a powerful sorcerer here now.

“Let go of the spire!” the voice snarled, and Kha’s body braided itself in surprise as a woman rose through the air to hover in front of her. The woman had massive golden wings and a stark, unkind expression. Her wings did not beat, seeming fragile and ethereal despite the light that poured off them, but a Halo had formed over her head and a solid black marble block sat underneath her feet. Energy coursed into it, lifting it and lifting the woman atop of it.

“My name is Kha,” said Kha, politely growing a face.

“I don’t care who you are,” replied the other woman coldly. “I can’t afford any more interference. Let the spire fall, or I’ll destroy you along with it.”

Kha considered the ultimatum. It didn’t seem very polite, forcing your own expectations onto another living thing, but maybe that was just another game that people played. Politeness meant pretending that the person you were talking to was you, and then treating that other you as nicely as you could. It was complicated, but Kha thought she had just about mastered it.

And if she had mastered it, she realized, she should start looking for new challenges.

Maybe being inconsiderate could be fun too?

"No," she told the other woman firmly. "I will not."

Then she had to grow a dozen mouths just to grin with.

It was fun!

A bolt of lightning slammed into her, dissolving three of her shoulders.

AXOLOZUG, VALMETICA

Damn the gods for meddling, she thought, and damn this god for existing.

Valmetica didn't know where the godling had come from, but it radiated energy the same way its kin did. It was newborn, thankfully, and its inexperience meant that she could hurt it, but it was also immensely powerful.

If Valmetica had tried to hold onto that falling spire, even for a moment, her magic and her life would have both instantly snuffed out.

This creature—Kha, it had called itself—was doing that without breaking a sweat.

Eyes rippled along one of its flanks, studying her, and she locked gazes with them. Her gift flared, jumping the gap between them to slam into the god.

Against an unprotected mortal, Valmetica could kill with a look.

Against a heavily warded mortal, like the Dragonnewt had been, her enemy was rendered unable to fight.

A god, however...

Kha was laughing and crying and she was doing both at once, from two different mouths, as others opened up all over her. A chorus of disquieting wails, of joy and of pain, resounded in the air.

Valmetica flung a third column of lightning at her, but the godling dodged again.

"Fight me!" Valmetica screamed in frustration.

A corner of the god bulged and grew out into a startlingly lifelike simulacrum of a Dragonturtle. "I don't want to hurt you," it said, and then melted back into the amorphous substance of Kha.

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The stone that Valmetica was floating on began to shiver with the force of her frustration.

The god could dodge a beam. Fine.

She didn't need to be precise.

She filled the air with fire.

AXOLOZUG, DORGANA

They hit the ground together, she and Jyashuu, and then they nearly both tumbled away into the yawning void behind them as the ground *tipped*. Jyashuu shouted, her magic flaring, and their feet locked to the surface underneath them. Barrels, crates, and lengths of rope went flying past. Then the ground righted itself and Dorgana's stomach lurched as they were both nearly thrown onto their faces.

They had arrived on a pier of black stone that jutted out from the side of a structure as big as any mountain in the Range. It seemed to be suspended in space, and the world was lit with a vague, diffuse light that seemed to come from neither a sun nor a moon.

"Where in the Blood's name are we?" breathed Dorgana.

"Axolozug," said Jyashuu curtly. "Don't look down."

Dorgana kept her eyes fixed at head-height. "What's below us?" she asked slowly.

"Nothing," replied Jyashuu.

"Nothing? Then I don't see what the problem is." Dorgana glanced cautiously off the side of the stone pier. "Ah," she said, looking back up.

"Just 'ah'?" asked Jyashuu incredulously.

Dorgana shrugged. "I don't plan on falling. Will your spell keep us from doing that?"

Jyashuu nodded. "As long as we have our feet on a surface, we'll stick to it."

"Then let's move slowly," Dorgana said calmly, "and try not to fall off."

The pier that they were on was one of several. Along many of the others, curious structures of wood and cloth bobbed in the air. Most were uninhabited, and one had been smashed to fragments by an adjacent pier when the ground had tipped, but distant women

clung to a few. Dorgana's eyes focused, boosted by Jyashuu's enchantments, and she could pick out pale, frantic expressions on all of them.

"What's happening here?" she asked, a cold feeling sweeping over her.

"The end of the world," said Jyashuu in reply. The mage's eyes shifted skyward to the distant expanse of black stone that this place had instead of a sky. "This city is supposed to be up there, anchored to what the locals call the Ceiling."

"The Ceiling?" asked Dorgana, but Jyashuu waved the question away.

"We don't have time for this. The Lightwings is nearby. With some reworking of your wards, I can give you flight, and—"

"Wait," said Dorgana. "Is this whole place *inhabited*?"

Jyashuu looked away. "Even if it were, we can't save it," she said softly. "There will be worse losses before this is all over."

The ground bucked beneath them again. A woman with tarantula limbs who had been clinging to the ropes aboard one of the floating wooden structures was flung out into the void.

She wasn't even able to scream before she was gone.

Her body became a speck in the wide expanse.

"The Lightwings is distracted," said Jyashuu, not noticing. "She is fighting another contender for the Prophecy. There is also a third woman nearby, on the outskirts of this spire, and she is involved in the war as well. If we act quickly, we can take out both the Lightwings and her opponent, and leave the woman here to fall to her death. We will never get another opportunity like this."

"How many people?" asked Dorgana, her eyes still on the gargantuan black column of the spire.

Jyashuu's reply was inaudible.

"I didn't catch that," said Dorgana. At the far end of the row of piers, a troop of women was swarming aboard one of the wooden structures. Some of them were carrying each other. Many were wounded.

"How many people are in the Range?" the mage asked.

Dorgana's hands, wrapped around the haft of her ax, curled so tightly that she left claw-marks in the spell-infused wood. "How do we save this place?"

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Jyashuu stared at her, angrily now. “We can’t,” the hermitess barked. “One by one, the worlds will be extinguished. These people are dead already. This is *not* the greatest sacrifice you will make, and you already know what *I’m* willing to pay to see this ended.”

Dorgana felt her breath stop in her lungs.

Once, when she had been much younger, she had taken up arms to protect a settlement on the southern edge of the Range from a tribe of wandering Golems. The Golems had been striking at the town in retaliation for a century of being pushed south across the peaks, their territories swallowed up by the Scale Nation’s advance.

Dorgana had been barely out of girlhood then, but she had been the only person who had shown up to fight. Her instructors had told her that she was gifted, but she had not known the extent of those gifts until she had crushed the Golems with them.

The Scale Nation had declared her a national heroine, but all she had felt was unsatisfied.

It wasn’t that the battle hadn’t been challenging. She had been within a hair’s breadth of annihilation from the very moment the first scouts came into view through the morning mists.

It was that the battle had been *wrong*.

The Golems had not been honorable opponents. They had fought like desperate berserkers when they had realized how quickly the Dragonnewt girl could kill them.

But they had done it because they had been fighting for their families.

In time, and with counsel by a number of Blood-blessed holy women, Dorgana had gotten over her conviction that she should have lost out there on the cold fields, surrounded by the dying and the dead. She had accepted that a heroine was a woman who survived when others did not, and killed when others could not.

She had given great speeches from amphitheaters in the cities about how she had made the Range safe from the Golems, and how there was no nation greater than the Scale.

The cold of the peaks had blown straight through her, and she had replaced her doubts with stoicism.

“If you didn’t think there was something we could do to save these people, you would have said so already,” said Dorgana softly. “We can. You’re just afraid to.”

The pier lurched horribly underneath them. The whole spire dropped a dozen feet in free fall, then stopped again, bobbing in the air.

"Of course I'm afraid to," said Jyashuu. "I'm afraid to *lose*. I'm afraid to see these worlds trussed up and delivered into the waiting hands of an uncaring power that wants nothing more than to rule. Are you not?"

"I am," said Dorgana, "but I won't let an entire people die just to gain an *advantage*."

"You can think all you like that that's a moral position," Jyashuu said, "but when this war ends, the only morals that will matter are the winner's."

"Then if we're planning on winning," Dorgana countered, "this *matters*. How do you think you can save them?"

Jyashuu made a frustrated noise. She looked like she would have stamped her foot if she had had one. "I can open a bleed," she said, "wide enough that when the spire falls, it will fall through it. Wherever it lands, it will land *hard*, and this will exhaust me. It will also hasten the collapse of the worlds. Do you really want to do this?"

Dorgana was no longer sure at all, but she forced herself to nod.

"Then get ready," Jyashuu said. "It won't be gentle."

AXOLOZUG, KHA

Burning.

Her plasm writhed under the onslaught. Her cells screamed and, still screaming, died. She lost features and substance and control. The power flooding her lost focus. The spire slipped from her grasp and fell.

She didn't care.

Energy roared into her and she lashed out with it, striking at her tormentor. Pure arcane force lacerated the Ceiling, shaking other spires from their stone moorings. A long stretch of the Ceiling turned to molten slag, then to burning gas, and then it was gone entirely.

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Unable to see, unable to perceive in any way, the only thing that Kha could feel herself striking was the Ceiling, so she rained blows against it in fear and pain and anger.

It turned out to be only a few miles deep.

Past it, there was something like a membrane, or the shell of an egg.

If she hadn't been burning, Kha would have been curious about that. She would have inspected it, tasted it, brushed millions of momentary fingers over it.

Instead a wave of spite rolled through her, sickening in its intensity.

The burning would not stop, but burning was a physical thing. It relied on physical rules, like the existence of heat and light and matter and air.

She was a god. She could make those physical rules stop.

Gathering up all the energy that was pouring into her, she hurled it at the membrane and there was a soft pop.

Then all of reality went away.

CHAPTER 12: THE DYING OF THE LIGHT

URACH, THE INK

The air over the Range was high and cold and all of the priestesses were screaming.

The psychic backlash from the loss of Axolozug rippled through the Ink, echoing down every coil of language and thought that made up its being.

Some of those coils were wound very deeply into the minds of certain believers.

Of course, the priestesses' were not suffering because the Ink's pain being transferred to them. The Ink transferred nothing of itself to its believers. Even a fraction of itself would have overwhelmed its followers, causing them to detonate in fountains of unconstrained language. Rather, the priestesses were screaming because their suffering—their desire to serve vying against their desire not to be hurt—fed the Ink.

The Ink has been powerfully hungry after losing most of its followers, several of its vessels, and an entire world in the space of a few minutes.

Being forced to retreat from the Beast City had not improved its disposition.

Nor had Ikrix's constant questions about when they would be returning home. The mortal did not seem to understand that her kingdom had been obliterated, and she had stopped listening entirely when the Ink had explained that, but for a single shard of the place that had somehow wound up in the Wastes, Axolozug was gone. Portals that had been opened to it now fountained out reality-eroding jets of flames, refusing to be closed.

But for the royal fleet, everything the mortal had thought she owned was gone.

Her denial was nourishing, but her constant questions were distracting, so the Ink had begun to ignore her. It could

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communicate directly with any of its priestesses, the queen being merely an intermediary, and so it fed them orders and drank their pain and steered the last navy of Axolozug across the mountains of Urach, honing in on the source of the world's power—all the while as the queen badgered it with questions about whether they were still in the Wastes, and when they were going home.

The Ink's pages fluttered in irritation.

Ordinarily, it would have been tempted to bomb some of the cities that were passing underneath it, but Urach was already a wreck. Its skies were sooty and dark. The vapors at ground-level were unbreathable. What light filtered through the miasma was thready and inadequate, and there were bleak pools of smoke that hung in the atmosphere like the heads of nebulous mushrooms, slowly diffusing sideways across the cloud-cluttered sky.

Down on the surface, the peaks of several mountains were simply gone. They had vanished in explosions of debris that had left simmering craters behind.

In some places, magma flowed freely, eating apart glaciers and patches of alpine forest.

Mudslides and glacier-slips had also devoured walled townships.

Thermal lakes had vanished, to be replaced with fields of mist.

Soot fell like rain, and rain fell like ink.

Which was a pleasant aesthetic, even if it was unintentional.

The Ink sent a quick message through its network. Its priestesses, still screaming, relayed the words in choking gasps to the crews, and the fleet changed its course by three degrees to starboard.

They were close now.

The Everblood's lair was at the northern end of the Range: a sunken temple buried under the blazing flows from two previously dormant volcanoes. From the Ink's vantage, it could tell that this was not the first time magma had bled freely through the structure.

The locals had sealed the place up, using the volcanoes to bury it.

The Ink thought that was clever. They had covered their god in burning stone, hoping to keep it dormant.

Now it was covered in burning stone again, and it was rising from its tomb.

During its own time stuck in that damned prison the Lightwings had forced it into, the Ink had made something of a review of its literature concerning the other gods. Every detail, every flaw, every

hint of a weakness for the other divines was preserved in its liquid memory.

When it got out, it had vowed, it would know exactly how to deal with them.

In the beginning, the Lightwings had exploited the animosity between the gods, sealing them even as they fought against each other. Back then, the Ink had made all the same mistakes as its peers. It had ignored the threat of the Lightwings, tried to impose its will upon all the other gods at once, and it had exhausted itself with that effort.

While it had lain in the dark, quiet stasis of its prison, it had mulled over those mistakes and come to a more satisfying conclusion.

If it took out the gods one at a time, gorging itself on the energy of each of their corpses, then the odds would be much more even. In fact, after eating only a couple of bodies, there would be nothing in the worlds that could stop it.

Far below the Ink's fleet, the Everblood was standing up amidst sluggish channels of molten stone. Its natural form was like that of a man, but hundreds of feet high, and instead of skin it had mottled organic plating. Its veins were replaced by enormous fleshy hoses that ran between its joints, and the air around it swam with a medley of spores and raw, electric magic. Any mortal that took in so much as a lungful of the mixture would have been converted into a holy shapechanger when the moon next rose.

But that wasn't all.

In the middle of the Everblood's palms, thick holes had been bored. Each ran with a bilious liquid—not blood, not spit, but a kind of thaumaturgic lubricant. It was a sickly, sludgy orange-brown, and every drop of it was alive.

The Everblood's head scanned the sky, orienting on the Ink's flagship.

You intrude here, deceiver, it said, projecting the thought directly into the Ink's being. **For the two centuries since my liberation, I have been sleeping. Now I am wide awake. If you mean to make mischief for my people, I will burn you from the mind of every mortal in the Five Worlds.**

The Ink fanned the pages in its library in a rustle of bemused contempt. Given time to ready itself, the Everblood could probably

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have made good on that threat. The Ink did not feed on the emotions of unaware animals, and that was exactly what those infected by the Blood became under moonlight. All the Blood would have needed to do was to spread its plague across the worlds, and the Ink would have starved a little bit more with every passing moonrise.

Fortunately, that would not come to pass.

Your people are already mine, said the Ink, calmly. They praise me with their panic, adorn me with their hopes, lavish upon me their despairs and desires. I have an army that carries me around. I have women that scream at my whim. I barely need to stir from my library to conquer, and all you have is your body. Do you really think that you threaten me?

I could wipe you from the sky in an instant, the Everblood rumbled.

But you hold back? That doesn't sound like the god I knew. The Ink's voice was a slithery purr. Tell you what. I'll let you take the first shot.

Leave here, the Blood rumbled.

You won't do it, will you? The Ink's pages swirled, causing the mortal queen in its library to duck as volumes shot from shelf to shelf. The past two centuries have been harder for you than the last twenty years were for me. You can only feed on your believers once every moonrise, but there is never a minute when I'm not feeding. And to add insult to injury, those little fireflies hurt you the worst out of all of us. They did it because they could. Because it was easy. You've been sleeping since then because sleeping was all you could do.

Even now you're stalling me. I think it's cute.

The Ink's laugh was velvet.

In the library, its chandelier swayed.

Still laughing, it sent a simple command to its priestesses, who relayed the order to their crews. Alchemical bundles began to rain from the fleet, breaking over the hulking frame of the Everblood below.

Stop this, thundered the Blood. **I had thought that we had agreed we would resolve our conflict through mortal champions.**

And now you're talking like one of them, the Ink chuckled. *Like a mortal. "Can't we all just get along? What happened to keeping*

your word?" I am keeping my word. I contributed to that nugget of energy that's in the Firmament, just like the rest of you did. And just like the rest of you, I promised I wouldn't compete personally. I never promised I wouldn't kill you.

Do you think you can? The Everblood's voice had become a roar. Each word slammed into the Ink, shaking volumes from the shelves. The titan raised one hand, pointed it at the Onus of Rule, and a beam of light scythed out from the hole in the center of its palm, cutting across the sky. The Onus of Rule danced to one side, but behind it the Promised Violence was not so quick to react. It vanished in a cloud of burning spars and falling crew.

I know the way the worlds work, purred the Ink. I know the truth behind this reality. You're just a sideline in the Narrative. A plot point that gets raised briefly, and then dismissed. There's only one way this can end.

And the Ink stood up.

Every porthole blew out of the bow of the Onus of Rule, exposing the inside of the ship to the sparse, freezing air. Ikrix gasped. She had not been covered in Ink-wards like the rest of her crew; the ones who might be expected to go topside and trim the sails or lob a bomb over the railing. She struggled to fill her lungs.

The Ink did not care. Her gasping was a distraction. A triviality.

The contents of its library plunged out of the side of the flagship, spiraled through the air, and descended upon the Everblood to feed.

THE WASTES, HAULA

"You're alive!" Haula barely had time to flinch before Mindry's arms were thrown around her. As it was, she skidded several steps across the shell floor of the princess' antechamber. One of her claws caught on the carpet, and then they nearly both went over. Haula flapped her wings wildly for balance, and after a moment Mindry pulled back, beaming.

It was hard to reconcile the image of Mindry, smiling, with that of the serving woman that had attacked the vanguard, or the black specks that had swarmed over the other fliers, or the floating vessels that they had fought during their desperate retreat.

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Haula had seen a lot of corpses in her lifetime, and she had seen the aftermaths of many small wars, but she had always been a bystander.

At least, she had until now.

It was less troubling to sit on the periphery and pick at the dead than it was to put them in the ground in the first place, she decided.

"I'm alive," echoed Haula weakly, trying not to think of the way the first ship had burned as it fell from the heavens, or of the beleaguered members of the strike force that had gone with it.

"I'm so glad. I was worried about you," Mindry said, and there was real feeling behind her words. She looked like she wanted to step forward and hug the Harpy again, but she held herself back. Barely.

With her arms held stiff at her waist, she looked like she was hesitating at the entrance to someone's chambers, unsure whether to knock and go in.

"Your aunt decided to keep me," said Haula, unsure what people were supposed to say in these kinds of circumstances.

"She offered me official quarters and a garden," Haula elaborated, trying to fill the momentary silence.

"You were worried she would not?" asked Mindry. She kept her tone light, but there was a look in her eyes that assured Haula this had been a very valid form of worry.

"I would have survived it," said Haula, looking away. Mindry's eyes were too too bright. Her gaze was too direct. She shifted from foot to foot. "At least, I think I would have survived it," she added, "if she banished me."

Mindry pulled over some cushions and sat, gesturing for Haula to do the same. "She would never have banished you," she said reassuringly.

Ah, thought Haula. So I would have been executed.

Out loud, she said "that's good to hear."

"And the support from our god? It was helpful?" Mindry asked.

Haula was not sure how to answer that one. Nearly being evaporated by a horrific volley of white-hot visitors from the sky had not made the vanguard's escape any easier, and a *lot* of Gigasborn and Golem soldiers that had been in the slower, second Mont Aran floatilla had been obliterated before their couriers could turn around and desperately wing-sprint back to safety.

On the other hand, it had stopped the fleet of flying ships from killing all of them, so it had not been all bad.

“The queen assured me that it did good work in paving the way for a second invasion,” Haula said diplomatically. It was a nice way to spin a loss, but hearing those words from the queen had made Haula’s skin prickle.

It had been stupid of her to come back to Mont Aran at all, she decided. There had been no guarantee that Laitholoathiell wouldn’t just hang the blame for the failure on her shoulders and destroy her. In fact, there had been several good indicators that this was exactly what the queen *would* have done—if she hadn’t desperately needed to claim that their rout was actually a win.

Returning to the palace for anything other than a quick snack and a burglary had been almost suicidally stupid, and yet Haula had done it anyway.

She had been taking a lot of unnecessary risks since meeting Mindry.

A part of her had started to worry about that.

As a matter of policy, she didn’t get attached to people. Not to women in the caravanserais. Not to courtesans in the Beast Cities. Not to wayfarers in the Wastes.

Safety and comfort were transitory things, and that included the safety and comfort of someone else’s arms.

If you didn’t take them for granted, it hurt less when you had to steal from them or kill them or leave.

Mindry seemed concerned by something as well, although Haula was sure the subject matter was different. “You know,” the princess said slowly, “Not that I am your word, as I would never so much as imply that, but what you said does not sound like my aunt after a setback. She is usually quite prickly. Were those the exact words she used? You ‘did good work in paving the way for a second invasion?’”

Haula nodded. There had been a few other words, some of them forceful, but they had not been nearly as pointed as she had expected. If anything, the queen had sounded exhausted. Her cheeks had seemed sunken as well, and the spaces under her eyes had been sagging and dark.

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Haula had also not been her first audience of the day, and she had kept that in mind. Some of the other members of the vanguard had struggled back first.

But even with all the cosmetics that a queen surely had access to, she had looked like she had been hit in the face.

Something about those specific changes in her demeanor had bothered Haula, but she couldn't put a talon on what.

"Your aunt seemed distracted," said Haula, which was true.

"She has a lot on her mind," agreed Mindry. "Right now, we all do. But..." She hesitated.

Haula tried to set aside the surge of adrenaline that went jangling through her blood. "What is it?" she asked.

"I'm a little worried about her," said Mindry. "She lost face in this attack, and a few other courtiers have stopped by my chambers since then to tell me about changes in her behavior. It's probably nothing, but since she has publically associated herself with you and since you are the hero of the recent battle, you could request an unscheduled audience with her and she would likely see you right away. Could you do that?" Mindry's scales lay flat, a sign of supplication despite the bluntness of the question. "Could you make sure she's alright?"

Haula swallowed her first response, which would have involved shouting "no!" very loudly and leaving the antechamber at hyperspeed. Instead she said "you're family. Wouldn't she prefer to see you instead?"

Mindry looked down at her hands. "I have something else I must do for Mont Aran's future," she said. "After their success in petitioning the Screaming Sky to come to our aid, I contacted the royal seers to set up another appointment. I have a few questions I would like to ask them, and they are expecting me soon."

So instead I'll send my pet commoner to a spur of the moment chat with the most dangerous woman in the city, Haula thought acidly, but she kept her expression carefully blank. It wasn't Mindry's fault she had been raised in a snake den of politics.

To her surprise, she also found herself saying "alright. I'll do it," out loud.

Inwardly, she swore, but Mindry's face brightened.

"Thank you," said the Pangola, straightening. "It means a lot to me that you would do this for her." She bent down and kissed Haula

quickly on the brow. Then, curtsying, she left the room—and the Harpy's mind awirl.

It seemed to Haula that every time she talked to Mindry, her life got markedly more confusing.

Whatever hold the princess had on her, she vowed, she would have to break it.

Only, first she would have to figure out what it was.

SASI, VALMETICA

The temple was old, and dark, and deep, and it took Valmetica three tries to find its gates. Bleeding, weary, she stepped from portal to portal until she found the massive stone doors, now overgrown with shelf fungi, that marked its entrance. She had killed four spiders and a whipscorpion by this point, blasting them to ash with lances of flame, and she stopped for a moment to lean against the stone and breathe the stale air.

Magic flowed down from her Halo, wreathing her in a shimmer of mauve force, and every so often something small and scuttling tried to scurry into one of her cuts and was cooked to a crisp instead. Maintaining an enchantment like that, as well as parallel spells to ensure that the air she breathed was not superheated as it passed her lips, was draining, but she had survived worse and she didn't have much further to go.

Just one more brief rest, and then she could press on.

As her breathing steadied, she briefly reviewed her condition. Most of her wounds were superficial scratches or minor bruises where sprays of rubble had made it past her shielding, but not all of them.

When Axolozug had ruptured, the otherworldly fires that had consumed it had rushed over her before she could open a portal to escape. Small parts of her were just gone now, vanished as if they had never been. She had been forced to replace them with tiny replicas; patches formed from magic. Piece by piece, her body shone.

Which, of course, attracted attention.

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Out of a side passageway, something with entirely too many legs rushed into view, its antennae lumbering in her direction. Valmetica waved a hand at it and it disintegrated.

It was time to get moving again, she decided, and slipped between the stone doors.

Inside the temple it was dark, but only until she reached out with a thin flow of magic and plugged that into the ceiling. At once, the building hummed to life. Warm, white lights bloomed from the corners of the ceiling and the air warmed by several degrees. The cold humidity of the tunnels evaporated, to be replaced with a dry, gentle breeze as century-old spells vented the stagnant atmosphere and replaced it with a slightly fresher one.

Valmetica gave a sad, wan smile at that.

When Sasi had fallen, her sisters had destroyed the traitors the Depths had planted in their midst, but they had not scuttled the world's temple. After performing the last of the purges, they had been afraid to return. If any of them had come back infected, the process would begin all over again, and even more would die, so instead the structure that had briefly been a god's prison was left to lie silent and empty for more than four hundred years.

But now Valmetica was the only Lightwings left. There was no need to worry what she might do to her sisters if she was taken over by the Depths. She had no sisters left to harm.

Being infested would be a bitter epilogue to her species, but there was one of those every way she turned.

At least here she could go out with a bang.

Valmetica flexed her fingers.

Killing the godling in Axolozug had been costly, but it had been a success she had needed. She had broken the Ink's power and eliminated a powerful rival all in one go, and this had reminded her to stop thinking small.

She was not some mortal mage, forced to think small and watch her limits.

She was the last of the Lightwings.

She didn't defy the gods. She killed them.

And that was why she had come here, to this abandoned temple in Sasi, where the Lightwings' culture was stored.

Properly illuminated, the temple was hauntingly beautiful. Columns of intricately worked stone surrounded a vast rotunda,

and every inch of the floor had been worked with murals depicting the birth of the world and the shackling of the gods. Women Valmetica had known for only a few minutes before they died in the battle following the Creation—and others that she had befriended, fought, scorned, or fallen for over the next fifty years—looked curiously back at her as she walked across their images.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “We should have just killed the gods. Let the Firmament take these worlds. I should have never argued for binding them.”

Her kin did not reply.

The centermost mural depicted Hjorprimul, from the temple at Ethantar, standing back to back with a woman who had died during the first hours when the Ink escaped its containment.

Hjorprimul was lifting up an ornate metal clip on raised palms. The other woman was holding three timeworn pages.

Her name had been Alvittr and her expression was soft and sorrowful.

Don’t do this, she seemed to be saying.

“What else is there left to do?” asked Valmetica.

There was no response.

She stared out into the temple, letting her own words echo back. At the other end, away from the door, there was a darkened archway. Carved with a string of runes on every stone, it seemed to swallow the sound.

Before the Depths had created their Avatar and escaped, there had been a chamber there containing an enormous terrarium.

It had held the Depths and, for fifty years, it had eaten itself.

She could try to force it in there again, but that was not why she was here.

The Depths would not be going back into confinement.

Valmetica knelt at the murals, her fingers touching stone. Five hundred years later, and she still remembered the pattern. Valmetica’s fingers danced carefully, pressing spots seemingly at random, and the stone slid away to reveal a hollow recess underneath.

Inside it was a stack of three papers, timeworn and faded, along with an ornate metal clip.

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Unslinging her codex, Valmetica opened it at the middle and set it down on the ground. Carefully, she transferred the three pages into it, securing them to the tome with the metal clip.

It began to hum.

Valmetica bared her teeth in an expression that would never be a smile, gathered it up, and stood.

She cut a slit in the air and stepped through.

She was deeper in the tunnels now, in a place unworked by mortal hands. The walls were festooned with eggsacks, thick and pulsating. A wave of tiny insects spotted her, swarmed up her legs, and crackled and popped as they tried to scramble into her cuts.

She was heading in the right direction.

She read a line from one of the new pages and the eggsacks all simply liquified, losing cohesion with themselves as millions of spiderlings rained stillborn down onto the floor.

Dollops of ichor fell on the codex, hissed, and boiled away.

“Are you watching, sisters?” she asked the silence that remained. “If there are any of you on the other side, it won’t be long now. One way or another, we will be reunited soon.”

A pile of post-organic sludge peeled away and hit the ground with a wet slap.

Valmetica slashed another hole in the air and stepped into an enormous cavern—and onto a carpet of writhing arm-length millipedes that seemed to run for several miles in every direction.

She read another word from the inserted pages.

Every millipede ossified, the twisting billions turning into a bizarre bas relief underfoot. The deafening drone of their marching legs, countless individual feet scrabbling against numberless translucent carapaces, died away instantly.

Opening a third bleed, Valmetica stared through it onto a narrow stretch of webbing over a vast pit. At the bottom, something as long as a river trundled through the dark, feasting on carrion. Its bristles swung instantly in her direction, and its thoughts pounded into her head.

WHO INTRUDES? the Depths asked, its mandibles parting.

Valmetica rested her index finger on the next word in the insert.

Word was not the exact term, as each one was the recording of an echo, the playback from one of the tones that had ushered in the Creation.

Word was just a stand-in for something that could write and unwrite local reality.

“Watch closely, sisters,” Valmetica said, her eyes roving across the page. “I’m going to show you how to kill a god.”

THE WASTES, BUEL

“She’s in here,” the Hive said, its little homunculus of bugs waving Buel into a leather tent on the outskirts of the slums. “Our drones found her on a minaret.”

Buel nodded absently. It seemed that no matter where she looked, there were bodies, so she was trying not to look anywhere at all. The streets of Apelt Lairn were covered in drag-marks and wreckage, or else they were bare in the places where buildings had simply been uprooted.

Still, it was better to gaze at them than to see the corpses being dragged into alleyways so the Hive could discreetly swell its numbers, or to risk looking into the slack eyes of the women who were dragging them.

The Hive loved a catastrophe. There was nothing better for letting it swoop in and restore order, it had told her.

From the delight in its buzzing voice, it had not seemed to realize that she was not comforted by this.

Buel ducked under the doorflap of the leather tent, glad to bed out of the streets. It was baking-hot inside, and she could feel the sweat immediately beginning to bead on her skin. Although night had come, it had yet to provide even the smallest measure of relief.

At this temperature, the wounded suffered most of all.

And there were many wounded.

The citizens of Apelt Lairn had not been expecting the city to stand up and fight the sky. They had not been expecting a coup or an invasion.

They had also not been expecting the heavens to drop flaming jars and glowing metal berserkers into their midst.

The soldiers of Apelt Lairn had been able to resist being routed; especially once the Hive had established enough control to direct their forces, maneuvering warriors and magi from problem-site to

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problem-site with a deftness that a mortal general could never have matched.

However, the toll on their city had been dire. Some of the meteors had even punched through the Beast's shell, leaving ugly, self-cauterized wounds in the ancient flesh beneath.

The Beast moaned occasionally now, the sound trembling out across the Wastes.

When it cried out, there was nothing else for the women atop its back to do than to slam their hands over their ears and wait for the sound to end.

Buel had helped as best she could with the carnage, but after a minute her hands had begun shaking. After an hour her own shell had felt like a leaden weight draped over her back.

She had pressed on, and in doing so she had realized just how few of the soldiers from home were still alive.

"Blood's touch," Luthalla gasped, dragging Buel back to the present.

Luthalla was the tent's only casualty, and she had clearly been tended to recently. In addition to redressing her older wounds, there was a large bandage made of expensive curtains wound around her middle. Its center was dark and damp.

"We were able to extract her from the minaret once we found her," the Hive said, its homunculus lingering by the door, "but there are limits to the healing that her body will take."

"Then let me sit with her," said Buel, and she sank down beside the Gorgones' bed of scavenged fabrics.

"You may call us when you need us," said the Hive. Then its body burst apart in a wave of insects and dispersed. Luthalla tried to pull back from it, but all she was able to do was shrink into her bedding. The insects avoided her, streaming back out of the tent in two orderly columns.

"We never should have accepted that thing's aid," she said weakly.

"It's our best chance at victory," responded Buel, moving to inspect Luthalla's wounds. The Hive had graciously left a small pile of clean rags by the ramshackle bedside, along with a sloshing clay jar full of a ferociously strong fruit liquor. The monasteries used something similar for the washing of wounds, and Buel had specifically requested it, but from the smell of Luthalla's breath it

seemed like the Gorgoiness had reached a different conclusion about what it was there for.

"Is it worth it to win like this?" Luthalla asked.

Buel, who was gathering up clean rags to change her dressing, stopped cold. "The goddess will remake the world," she said, quoting the prophecy. "When we win, you will be able to undo everything that happened today."

She would have said more, but she was cut off by Luthalla's laugh. They both looked startled at the noise. Then Luthallas spat a thick goblet of blood onto the floor by the bedside. "I will be able to?" she asked incredulously.

"You will survive this," said Buel, not looking her in the eyes.

"That wasn't what I was talking about," said Luthalla. "That bug-creature is *your* pet. I haven't been in charge of the troops since I got wounded during that first fight on the sands."

Buel took a breath and let it out slowly. "Actually, Dinasia is gone," she began. "She was thrown when Apelt Lairn bucked. The Hive hasn't found her yet, but none of us can imagine she survived the fall."

Luthalla gritted her teeth. "I wasn't talking about acting-Lieutenant Dinasia," she said. "Do you really think *you* aren't in command?"

Buel felt her stomach clench, but she fought the wave of sickness down.

She was safe out here. She could stop any message that Luthalla sent back to Urach.

Whatever she did here, no one could hurt her family because of it.

Still, the old conditioning wouldn't break. "I'm not permitted to be," she said softly.

Luthalla laughed again. Harshly. Bitterly. "Are you insane, or are you just toying with me?" she asked, shifting the bedding beneath her so that she could sit up straighter. "At this point, I could believe either one." She stared at the Dragonturtle, challenge in her eyes.

"Am I *toying with you*?" Whatever Buel had been about to say, it was replaced with bewilderment. The bundle of clean rags fell from her hands. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Saints entombed," groaned Luthalla. "When you killed those centipedes, and again when you fought your way into that enclave

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in the dark place, I was terrified that you were going to turn on us as soon as you had a chance. When you didn't, I thought you were biding your time. Now," she shook her head, as if that might somehow knock the answer loose, "I don't know what to think. You really didn't kill Dorgana?"

"What?" Buel said, echoing herself. "Why would I kill lady Dorgana?"

Luthalla looked uneasy. "In your position, *I* would have," she said bluntly.

Buel pulled back sharply. To even be near a statement like that was treason. "Why?" she hissed.

"For what the Dragonnewts have done to you," said Luthalla, the words spilling out of her in a flood of incredulity. "Obviously. Are you saying you wouldn't kill us if you could get away with it?"

"Why would you even ask that?" Buel breathed.

"Oh, you mean because Dragonturtles don't fight back?" The words were almost mocking now. Curiosity and disbelief warred across in Luthalla's eyes. "You and I both know what a lie that is."

"Dragonturtles *don't* fight *anyone*!" Buel was startled by her own conviction. She realized a moment later that she had slammed one hand on the floor. Heat rose in her cheeks. She didn't care.

"You root out our families for even the *perception* of disobedience. You've thrown women off of peaks for failing to be *deferential enough*. Don't you dare pretend we threaten you," Buel snarled. She was breathing hard, her hands curled into fists. The angles were there with her, showing every trajectory in the room. Unbidden, they told her that she could crush Luthalla's face with the clay jug.

She was horrified by how easy it had been to calculate that.

She really was an abomination.

No other Dragonturtle would ever think of something like—

"We throw you off the mountain," said Luthalla coldly, "because we need to be sure that you'll die on impact. You can regenerate from other wounds, and we've lost executioners because we tried to be ceremonial and do things with a blade."

Buel stared. "What do you mean, you've lost—"

"Shut up and let me explain why you're wrong!" Luthalla shouted. Her face had gone pale, likely from the way the outburst had just moved her ribs, and she gulped down a breath of air and

just stared at Buel, steadying herself. "Do you know why I was assigned to this mission? Why I was given a position just below that of the National Heroine? Don't answer me," she continued sourly. "I'm still talking."

Buel felt a great fury settling slowly around her, but she stayed silent.

"I performed a great service for the Scale Nation," said Luthalla. "Actually, that's 'perform'. Present tense. It wasn't just a one-time thing." Turning her head to the side, she spat emphatically, then grabbed the jug of fruit liquor and raised it to her lips for a trembling series of gulps. When she set it back down, the liquid sloshed noisily within.

"I'm one of the women they call when a Dragonturtle turns on her mistresses," Luthalla continued, looking at Buel levelly. "And I don't mean when she jostles her corner of the palanquin or eats with a knife or sings the songs the herds women are all supposed to have forgotten. I've seen the damage your kind can do when you care to. It would make even an abbot shudder."

Buel didn't feel any of the words register.

There was a roaring sound where her thoughts should have been.

"How could you not have known that some Dragonturtles *kill* nobles?" asked Luthalla. "I thought you *all* knew that. We destroy you when you fight back because of *what you can do to us when you try*. If not for women like me, the Scale Nation would have been *yours* a hundred years ago. *So why would you let someone like me live?*"

Buel carried no knife, but her short, thick fingernails would be sufficient. Out on the trails they were mostly used for climbing or digging for roots, but sometimes a walla was so wounded or sick that it could not recover.

Sometimes waiting respectfully for it to die would slow the rest of the herd.

During those times, girls were taught by their mothers how to reach up underneath its throat folds, sing a slow song to quiet it, and then rip it a sudden, spilling, thrashing death.

The process was quick, lasting only a few seconds.

It was scarcely cruel at all.

Buel stood up to her full height and Luthalla instinctively bared her throat in challenge.

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“This is how you think I think?” asked Buel, barely hanging onto the ragged edges of her temper. “*You* certainly would have killed the others already. I believe that. But I’m not you. Do you want to know what I’m going to do instead?”

Luthalla’s body was shaking, but she nodded.

Buel leaned in and, with everything she had, she let out a single, ear-piercing scream.

Then she turned and walked away, the tent flaps slapping closed behind her as she vanished into the night.

THE WASTES, MINDRY

Queen Laitholoathiehl’s seers met Mindry at the entrance to the observatory. They were dressed in voluminous blue robes with patterns of constellations sewn in silver thread into the fabric. One of the two women, a Gigasborn, looked like a rolled-up tent in her outfit. The garment had been approximately sized for her, but she was also ten feet tall and rippling with muscles and had to hunch when she passed through doorways. On the bridge of her nose, she wore two pieces of glass bound together with a thin filament of copper, and she squinted down at the princess as she arrived.

The Gigasborn’s companion was a much smaller Golem, whose arms were full of scrolls. She looked no less ridiculous in her official outfit, and Mindry wondered briefly if both seers had been assigned their robes as part of a power play by her aunt before remembering that the seers were mostly autonomous from the throne. They delivered messages and answered questions for their ruler, but otherwise they were left alone with their charts and instruments and the nightly company of the stars.

“Princess Mindrastey’alooradurella,” said the Golem, butchering the royal name terribly. “We’re so glad you had the time to meet with us. Following our previous successes, we’ve made the most astonishing breakthrough.” She turn on her heel, waving Mindry after her as she strode into the observatory. “Come, come,” she called, and both the princess and the Gigasborn followed. “It’ll be much easier to show you than to simply talk about it.”

In some ways, Mindry found interacting with the seers to be refreshing. They never stood much on formality. In fact, they barely

seemed to understand the concept. They would always get straight to the point of a conversation, and then, once they were there, they would rattle on for hours, regardless of whether a person wanted to listen.

Mindry had never really fathomed their lectures about the nature of the stars or about how the heavens were a single concave plate that sat with its edges touching the borders of the Wastes, but the seers were very animated about these topics.

Her weekly lessons with them had been one of the better parts of her childhood.

As Mindry followed the women into the observatory's main chamber, the walls rose high on either side of them. The observatory had been built to match the architecture of the heavens, domed and high-ceilinged, only it had been carved into the back of a massive creature rather than settled atop a flat, baking plain. There was only one central room, and in the middle of its ceiling there was a hole that let in the night sky.

Through it, the vast, light-scattered blackness above could be seen.

Dominating the center of the chamber, right under the hole, was a long, enchanted tube that the seers used to study the sky. It was as wide across as thirty Mindrys linking hands.

The Nyctoscope, as they had named it, could supposedly predict when a new star was forming or when an old star was ready to fall, but the seers were ignoring it. Instead, their eyes were on a comparatively smaller structure that lay behind it.

Made of convoluted interlocked rings and orbs, the metal heap behind the Nyctoscope had only recently been dredged out of the palace vaults and brought to the observatory. Palace scribes had called it the orrery, citing a word written on a card that had been left with the device, but no one—not even the seers—knew the origin of the name.

It was through the orrery that the seers had begun to claim they could commune with the Sky, and Mindry was forced to admit that evidence had borne out their findings.

"We've given some thought to the queen's requests," the Gigasborn was saying as they circled past the Nyctoscope, "and we think we might be able to improve upon our original supplication protocols. This is a recent development of course, and we have sent

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messengers to the queen, but we have not heard back—which is terribly unusual. A few hours ago, directly following our combat field-test, Tabylltha went in person and we haven't heard from her since."

Tabylltha was the third of the seers, a soft-spoken Angel who tended not to look people she was talking to, but she was very polite and unlike the other seers did not often get caught up in exciting tangents about things like what the darkness was made of.

She was used for communication with anyone who *didn't* stare at the night sky for a living.

"What is this improvement?" asked Mindry, doing her best to keep the conversation on track.

Her aunt was fine, she had decided. Laithy was just sulking, the way she sometimes did after a loss.

"We think that instead of beckoning a lot of little meteors," said the Golem enthusiastically, not noticing Mindry's change in expression, "we can call down a really big one. I mean, absolutely massive. But it's so big that we're still re-checking our calculations."

"And we haven't tried it out yet," interjected the Gigasborn, "because we're not sure what a meteor like that would do."

"I mean, we've been having debates about how thick the ground is," elaborated the Golem. "*She* thinks there's places where it's only a hundred feet thick and a big enough object falling from the top of the heavens' dome might punch through into the void on the other side. *I*, obviously, think the ground is two miles thick everywhere, which we could establish with some circumspect digging if queen Laithy ever permitted us to hire enough laborers to perform an adequate test."

"Don't call her queen Laithy," said Mindry, hurriedly snapping back to the present. "She really doesn't like that."

The seers looked at each other in confusion. After a moment, the Gigasborn said "it takes a really long time to say the rest of her name," in a tone that Mindry doubted would have forestalled an execution.

"Look," Mindry said, fumbling awkwardly for the point, "however thick the ground is or isn't, what would happen if a meteor went straight through?"

The two seers looked at each other. "It might be that people and places would sometimes just get pulled into it," the Golem said

carefully. "I mean, that's not so bad. They'd fall forever, but with a long enough rope, maybe we could get them back out."

Something was perilously wrong about the logic of that statement, but Mindry wasn't sure she had the time to unpack it.

"What's the other alternative?" she asked.

The Gigasborn crossed her gargantuan arms over her chest. "The alternative," she said, "is that dropping a big enough rock from high enough up rips a hole in the Firmament. That's like a stars-beyond-the-stars kind of thing, only it's full of fire. Fire that unmakes you."

"Fire that *unmakes* you?" asked Mindry sharply. "So what would that do to us *here*?"

The Gigasborn hesitated. "Sort of what it says it does?"

"There's a small chance," continued the Golem, in a please-don't-get-mad kind of tone, "that we've discovered a way to end the world."

URACH, THE INK

Satisfied, the Ink pulled back from the husk that had once been the Everblood. Power coursed through it. Power and pleasure.

It was an almost indescribable feeling, having just eaten a god. And it had cost the Ink so *little*.

The fleet had survived, as had the Spidermoth queen.

As the Ink had streamed back into its library aboard the Onus, it had plastered papers across the portholes, then slowly equalized the air pressure in the cabin. Ikrix had gasped and stared bug-eyed at the casual display of power, but the Ink did not care.

It was flush—no, it was *riotous* with energy. Why play conservatively when the Narrative itself sang with its name?

The Ink had been careful not to destroy the Everblood's body entirely, as a world could not exist for so long without its god, but it *had* drained the stupid thing's body to the lees. Only a faint pulse of divinity remained within the fallen shell—just enough to continue to lend substance to Urach, but not enough to matter.

Not at this stage of things.

Ikrix was still on the floor and her eyes were wet as she stared up at the library's returning pages. This was curious to the Ink, but not curious enough to hold its attention for more than a second. It

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knew how to incite emotions and how to feed off them, but who cared *why* mortals felt things like adoration and sadness?

"You're alive," Ikrix was burbling. "Oh, thank you. Thank you. You're alive."

The Ink was, and would continue to be, forever. It didn't see why this should matter to the queen. She existed, after all, purely as a placeholder. The War of the Prophecy had been very carefully designed so that the gods could only enter it by proxy. *If* the war moved into its final stages, and *if* the Ink had not devoured all the other gods by then, then Ikrix would be the cat's paw that stole their victory out from underneath them.

Apart from that role, she could safely be ignored.

Settling back onto its shelves, the Ink considered its next move. It had enough energy now to go toe-to-toe with any of the other gods, but it could not afford to be careless. Not yet. A battle that it only barely won would be just as disastrous as a battle that it lost.

That pyrrhic victory would leave it stalled, unable to directly contest the other divinities, reliant on its fleet and on its queen until the fears and desires of the mortals strengthened it again.

And there were fewer desires today than there had been the day before. The populations of the worlds were dwindling. Axolozug, in its entirety, was gone. The others would soon follow after.

As the other gods began to truly cut loose, ruptures in the boundaries of the worlds would let in the catastrophic energies of the Firmament.

All of which meant that the Ink was now a *predator*. It would need to move from god to god, killing and feasting quickly, without being wounded too gravely in the process. Even if it was more than strong enough to kill a healthy god, its next target needed to be almost as weak as the Everblood had been.

This ruled out Nebula, which was spiteful and cunning and would refuse any stand-up fight that it thought it might lose. It also ruled out the Restless Depths, which would think nothing of taking its attacker with it.

So that left the new god.

The Screaming Sky.

The Ink knew little about it, but that was a pleasant change of pace. The Sky had not done anything yet to *make* itself noteworthy.

Therefore it was neither particularly powerful nor particularly experienced.

Which made it perfect.

Humming to itself, its chandelier swaying in time, the Ink sent a new order to its priestesses.

They would be returning to the Wastes, and this time they would strike at the heart of its god.

And thanks to a series of message scrolls that had just been written by a pair of seers, the Ink even knew where that god was.

An orrery was a strange choice for a god's physical body. It couldn't even fight back.

The Ink's pages rustled in anticipation.

Victory would be sweet.

And also, if the Everblood had been anything to go by, savory as well.

THE WASTES, BUEL

The sand crunched beneath Buel's feet. Clusters of bodies and debris dotted the bare landscape. Every few minutes, one of the Beast City's legs would come thunderously down, sending a shudder through the earth as it plodded away across the desert.

Buel had not informed the Hive that she was leaving. She had not left word with any of the survivors. She had simply let herself down on a lift, slowly playing out rope as the carriage swung in the air, until she was standing on firm ground again.

It uneased her, to see a place so flat, but it was better than spending another moment aboard that creature.

Here, perhaps, the churning inside her would still.

With nothing else to do, she walked between pockets of masonry and leather, wood and flesh, combing the wreckage for survivors. The Hive had already made a cursory investigation of it, but the trail of crushed homes and terminated lives stretched for several hours to the east.

Buel could afford to be thorough.

She lifted up a ceiling beam, letting moonlight spill into the hollow underneath, and then set it back down again with a sigh. The Golem beneath it had bled out hours ago.

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She moved on.

A little hill of masonry was unoccupied—although flies swarmed around it, attending the obliterated remains of a fruitseller's cart.

A Gigasborn, still clutching a railing, lay a hundred feet away from the balcony that railing had been attached to.

An Angel, wings spread, lay dead on a patch of granite. Of what had killed her, there was no sign, but she looked peaceful. Buel did not disturb her.

"S a terrible place," said a voice from the dark, making Buel jump. She was unarmed, but the sight of the speaker did not reassure her, and so she grabbed a double-handful of sand, called the angles, and shifted her weight onto her back foot, making ready for the attack.

"The up-above here's all scorchy-toasty on your skin," the stranger continued, "an' you can't finds a proper wall any whichways you fix your peepers. Not to mention there's these big ceiling-crawlers trudge-trudge-trudgin' 'cross the floor, shakin' women's bone-cables straight out of their backs. An' all these deaders don't even have the tawdry-blightness t' carry a gulp o' somethin' t' burn me throat."

"What," said Buel. It wasn't even a full question. She stared at the flapping chest-head of the girl that had strolled up to her out of the dark like a merchant at market, and what was the only word that could percolate up through her alternating layers of panic, confusion, and fear.

"Tawdry-blightness? 's sort of a rhymmin' slang, right?" said the girl, the lid on her head clacking as she talked. "It means 'po-liteness', which is like not stabbin' anyones untills you knows them. I s'pose it'd be real bag-hildering t' anyone not knowin' the ways of speech t' hear rhymmin' slang without a proper explanation, but i' t'all rolls easier offa the tongue."

"I..." Buel blinked. "I know what politeness is. You don't have to explain that to me."

"Oh!" The girl straightened. "Another scholar!"

"What do you mean, 'another scholar'?" asked Buel warily. If she stared out into the dark, she could see now that the girl was not alone. There were others like her, slowly picking their way across the sand towards the conversation. From far away, their features

were vague, and Buel found herself wondering if that would change once they got close up.

"You even looks like her," said the girl philosophically. "Lil' face-triangles all a'clustered squinchy-close. So serious, too."

"Face-triangles?" asked Buel. she raised a hand to touch her cheek. "You mean my scales?"

"If that's what you wants me to call 'em, I can ex-or-cize some tawdry-brightness an' preferentially espouse your wordification," said the girl. "Scales isn't exactly..." she paused. "'s not got the sound of a poet's word, right? Not tryin' t' be difficult or nothin', but face-triangles 's much better."

"I...will consider that," said Buel carefully. Then, before the girl could interject with anything else, she asked "who is this person I look like?"

The girl looked downcast. "'s this scholar I met. We're all searchin' for her. Name's Dorgana, an' she really looks an awful lot like you. You sisters or somethin'?"

"Her name's Dorgana?" asked Buel sharply. Unconsciously, she realized she had raised one of her handfuls of sand.

The girl took an involuntary step back.

Forcing the emotion from her face, Buel lowered her hand and let the grit run out between her fingers.

"My name's Kismet," said the girl uncertainly. She had a blade at her waist, Buel realized, but she hadn't reached for it at any point during the conversation, even when she'd started her. "'s a much more normal name," Kismet continued, "if that helps you t' calms down."

"Where did you see her?" asked Buel. "Dorgana, I mean."

"'s inna magic palace, few sleeps ago," said Kismet. "You know her?"

Buel ignored the question. "Where did she go?"

"'s what I'm tryin' t' find out, right?" The lid on Kismet's head bucked uneasily. "So, you've seen her?"

"No." Buel shook her head. "Neither has the Hive," she added, before she could decide whether that was a good idea.

Kismet's reaction was instantaneous. She flung herself back, knife sliding out of its battered sheath. When she landed, it was in a cat-stance, blade raised, ready to do violence.

"You got ones in you!" she screamed. "Infest'd! Infest'd!"

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The cry was echoed by the others, who pelted forward out of the dark. Now Buel could see clearly the composition of their bodies. Some were made of gelatin, others of insect-parts, others inexplicably of furniture. The angles were among them all, showing targets and trajectories, but Buel drew a deep breath and yelled "I'm not infested!"

Most of Kismet's kin were clutching farming equipment, rusting and neglected, and they skidded into each other as the front rank stopped.

The front rank had stopped because Kismet had held out a hand.

"That's jus' what a scribblin'd make you say," said the girl warily. "But we were wrong about Dorgana, too," she hedged. "How d'you know about the Hive?" she demanded, waving her knife to emphasize the question.

"How do *you*?" Buel countered. "It told me it's only been here for a few days." Then the realization sank in. "Where are you from?" she asked.

Kismet's head flapped, as if the question was ridiculous. "Sasi," she said, "where there's a proper ceiling an' proper walls an' bugs can get in your ear while you're sleepin' if you haven't built th' fire ring high enough an' then you go aroun' tryin' t' sticks 'em in the ears o' everyone else unless they catches you at it an' stakes you down an' burns you."

Buel felt her throat close for a second. "The Hive's in your world?" she asked.

"The Hive *is* our world," said Kismet. "'s in everything that's not big an' got too many legs an' likes t' eat us. 's why we don' go near the towns much. 's in all the towns. Don' get close to civ-a-li-za-tion, don' get scribbled, I always say."

"How long has it been like this?" Buel breathed.

"Me ma's ma used t' tell stories t' me ma, 'for the whipscorpion got 'er, an' the stories were all about how her ma only used t' only have t' deal with eight-legses an' ceiling-crawlers an' silverfish an' the like," Kismet said.

"So a hundred years? A hundred and fifty years?" guessed Buel.

"Wha's a 'year'?" asked Kismet. "An' what's your connection t' the Hive, anyway? How come it ain't scribbled ya yet?"

"Our connection is a simple service contract," said a carefully even voice.

There was a hiss like a river flowing over gravel, and Buel turned to see the avatar's body compiling itself on the sand.

Kismet screamed and threw her knife, which passed harmlessly through it. She turned to run, but the Hive knelt and touched one hand to the ground and a ring of beetles raced out from the point of contact, encircling both Buel and the strangers from Sasi.

"Don't run," it droned. "We are quite pleased to collect the last of you. No harm will come in our care; we promise you that. It is simply more effective to farm you than to keep relying on wild-caught, so you will be brought quite painlessly into the fold."

"Hive," said Buel sharply. "What is the meaning of this?"

"The resolution of some old business," said the Hive. "We apologize if it discomforts you to watch the colonization process. We will give you time to turn away."

Kismet began yelling, staring wildly at the ring of bugs. She looked like she was trying to decide whether she could leap past it without any of them getting on her—and if she could outrun them once she landed.

The Hive rippled with activity. "Well?" it asked Buel pointedly. "Are you going to turn away?"

"You don't need them," said Buel. "Let them go."

The Hive's avatar's head cocked to the side. "We'd taken you for a pragmatist," it said. "Were we wrong? Every body we incorporate brings the war closer to a satisfying resolution for all parties involved. Would you deny us a weapon against the other heroines, women who would think nothing of cutting you and these other women down where you stand?"

"How much good can a handful of half-starved, sunburned barbarians do you?" Buel asked incredulously. "Are *these* women are supposed to fight shapeshifters and Beast Cities and whatever else the worlds throw at us?"

"They may be held in reserve," the Hive said. "We may need to replenish population numbers following our victory, in order to prevent a scenario in which inbreeding prematurely ends the new world."

Buel stared. "They're not your possessions. You're not keeping *any* of them after the war ends. And you're not *breeding* anyone. I thought that this was understood. I thought we had agreed—"

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“We need each other,” said the Hive. There was almost a defensiveness in its buzzing. “Cooperation paves the road to our victory.”

Buel felt the angles changing, detaching from Kismet’s kin and settling around the avatar. Each beetle was a point of data. A single movement.

Even if they all broke towards her, she could stop them.

“That wasn’t an answer,” said Buel coldly.

“Are we not deserving of happiness? Of growth? Of hosts?” asked the Hive.

Buel felt the pit drop out of her stomach. “Did you *lie* to me about how you were going to treat my people?”

The Hive, in as far as its alien face could be read, seemed genuinely confused by her response. “Even though we have not claimed you,” it said, “we share the same purpose, so it is as if we are both of the same colony. But all these other women, both in the city and on the ground, are not your people. They are not the same colony. Some of them would have killed you if they had thought they could get away with it. Why would you seek leniency for them?”

Buel glanced at Kismet. The girl’s expression was terrified.

“Why would I seek leniency for another colony?” asked Buel. She frowned. “I’ll explain it to you if I can, but you have to leave them alone. At least while you listen.”

The Hive nodded slowly, but not in a way that necessarily indicated agreement. “We have other stratagems in play,” it said, “so talk quickly. We will give your reasoning a chance, but not an exaggerated one. Individual drones make mistakes sometimes, and when a bee dances poorly, the rest of the swarm dies.”

THE WASTES, HAULA

Haula had not taken off the enchanted bracelets since returning to the city.

Partly this was because she could not get them off by herself and she was loathe to ask her servants to take on the task.

However, the hackles on the back of her neck were also lifted, and they had been lifted ever since she had announced that she

wished to speak with the queen. The Gigasborn page standing at the audience hall's door had looked slack and emotionless at the news, her expression suggesting a lack of sleep the night before, but she had disinterestedly waved Haula inside.

Now, as the doors closed behind her, that feeling of unease only intensified.

The chamber was cavernously empty. Its vacant benches looked skeletal in the torchlight.

Where were the courtiers?

Where were the ambassadors?

Where were the guards?

But for Laitholoathiell, there was no one else around.

"Approach," the queen called out, and Haula did, moving to the point where the benches stopped and the long sweep of floor between the audience and the throne began. "Closer," said Laitholoathiell imperiously.

Haula's request should have been denied, she knew.

There was no way that Mindry could have been right about the queen wanting to see her.

Seeing a single discredited wasteland Harpy would never be a better use of her time than conferring with her advisors or plotting the next move against Apelt Lairn.

Haula walked up to the dais, her talons clicking awkwardly on the carved floor.

"Closer," said Laitholoathiell again.

Haula moved forward, drawn by the Pangola's voice, stopping at ten feet. And then at five. And then at three.

"Closer," hissed Laitholoathiell.

Haula balked.

Instinctively, she took a step back.

The queen's eyes were glassy and unfocused. She was no longer lounging in her chair, but had instead sunken into it. Her claws did not drum on the edges.

She only seemed to be half aware of the world around her.

"Your majesty?" asked Haula quietly.

"You won't come any closer?" said the queen.

Haula shook her head.

There was a dusty, rattling sigh. "I don't have time to carry on two conversations at once," said Laitholoathiell, "so I'll be brief."

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Before Haula could ask what she meant by that, two streams of glittering black tears began to pour from the queen's eyes, scurry down her arms, and fan out across the floor.

CHAPTER 13: UNRAVELLING

SASI, VALMETICA

Skin streaming with violet light, golden wings blazing behind her, Valmetica descended into the pit.

Where she passed, webbing caught fire in sheets. Eight-legged things withdrew to the walls or burned along with their transparent mesh.

Valmetica spoke a single word and a wave of force washed out from her, smearing every insect in the cavern into a pulpy mess.

Every insect but one.

YOU BRING THE OLD WEAPONS. YOU REEK OF CREATION. LITTLE FIREFLY, YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT WE WILL NOT RETURN TO THE JAR. YOUR ERA WAS BRIEF, AND IT WILL NEVER COME AGAIN.

The Depths' mandibles moved independently of the words. Its head rose up out of the dark, a perfectly articulated chitinous abattoir on the end of a sinuous, segmented body. Swaying slowly from side to side, it watched the Lightwings in anticipation.

How much of its body there was, Valmetica couldn't tell, but the part she could see was longer than most kingdoms.

"I don't care." Her voice rang in the silence left by the word of power. "I mourned my sisters when Sasi fell, and I mourned them when Urach fell, and I mourned them when Axolozug fell. There is no water left behind my eyes. This is not about restoring anyone to glory."

Her finger drifted to the next entry in the index and she read that word aloud.

It was an echo of the first movement, the little tremble of energy in the Firmament that had stirred the worlds into cause and effect.

Hearing it, the Depths slammed its head against the side of the pit.

There was nothing gentle about the motion. It was unconstrained, unencumbered by self-preservation. A spasm ran through its legs and it slammed its head against the stone again.

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YOU CANNOT CONTROL ME FOR LONG, the god's voice blared. SIMPLE TRICKERY IS NOT ENOUGH TO OVERCOME THE HEART OF THIS WORLD.

"Let me be clear: I am not binding you. This is an execution. There is nothing left here that I care to preserve." Valmetica read a transcription of the echo of the first wisp of heat and a wave of steam poured up from the pit. It had a scent like sun-spoiled shrimp and hissed out from underneath the Depths' armored plates as the god boiled in its own skin.

The cavern shuddered as the Depths slammed its head once more against the wall.

WHAT WILL YOU DO WHEN YOU RUN OUT OF WORDS, FIREFLY? it rumbled. HOW WILL YOU FIGHT ME THEN?

"With my magic. With my fists. With my teeth, if necessary." Valmetica read an echo of the first act of destruction, a piece of Creation collapsing back into chaos. Voidfire poured from a rent in the air, engulfing the bottom of the pit.

The voidfire gave off no light, but the Depths' coils churned, vast lengths of them lifting briefly into view as they slowly corroded into nonexistence.

After a few minutes, the jet of voidfire tapered off with a puff.

The Depths, still steaming, half-erased, began to smash its head against the wall.

"I don't believe it will come to using my teeth," Valmetica said.

THE WASTES, BUEL

The insects of the Hive glittered in the moonlight. They were not moving forward yet, but they tumbled and clambered over one another, their legs scrabbling endlessly as they each tried to climb.

Buel wondered if they each understood the futility of what they were trying to accomplish, and then she wondered if that was perhaps the point.

"You don't care about the individual parts of you," she said slowly. "Is that correct?"

The Hive cocked its head. "There are no individual parts. There is only us."

"If a beetle dies, you feel nothing?" Buel asked.

"If a few thousand die, we feel it," said the Hive. "But a single beetle does not trouble us. It is a matter of degree. So long as the majority thrives, small losses are insignificant."

"And what if a beetle sickens?" pressed Buel.

"The others tear it apart," returned the Hive.

"And if this sickens them in turn?" Buel asked.

The Hive's crawling suggestions of eyes became expressionless. It was impossible to tell whether she had intrigued it or provoked it. "If that were to happen," it buzzed slowly, "then I suppose we would perish. Every beetle killed would mean several more that needed to be killed, so we would kill until all that was left of us was the infection. Where are you going with this?"

The chill of the night air seemed to have sunk into her shell, but Buel had spent a lifetime in the mountains. She barely even noticed. "What if you could cure the beetle instead?" she asked. "Even if it would be costly, would you do it?"

"You think these women are infected?" asked the Hive, skepticism in the vibration of a million tiny wings.

"I think claiming them would be like infecting yourself," said Buel.

"We can tell when a host is healthy," said the Hive. "And we appreciate your concern, but this will not hurt us. With every drone, we are strengthened."

Kismet took a step back.

Her family was huddled together at the center of the circle, rakes and trowels held at the ready.

Buel forced herself to remain calm. "Your drones never fight you?" she asked.

"For a time," said the Hive. "It is distracting, but eventually they accept their condition and the irritation stops."

"These women would never stop fighting you," said Buel, and the Hive, which had begun to swell forward, paused again.

"Compassion is a noble trait," buzzed the simulacrum. "When we revealed ourselves to you, we chose well. Nevertheless, we believe we understand our business better than you do. It will be no trouble to integrate these women. We have broken stronger wills with ease."

Buel's hands clenched.

This wasn't working.

Chapter 13: Unravelling

Politeness and reason might have convinced another woman, someone who could look at a new situation and *learn*, but the avatar of the Depths had already divided the world into two categories: itself and everything else.

Buel wondered if it saw her as just an adjunct to itself—a voice in its head. That was the only way it had ever addressed her.

“If you try to inhabit these women,” said Buel suddenly, “I’ll kill any beetles you send.”

The Hive rose up, its simulacrum lifted as high as it would go until chunks of itself were raining to the ground at its feet, unsupported by the rest of the clinging, climbing mass.

“You will not,” it said starkly.

“If I have no other choice, I will fight you.” The angles had picked out each bug, outlining in exquisite detail the pattern of movements that would be required to destroy them. “Will you listen to me now?”

The state of the Five Worlds sat like poison in her stomach.

This was a foolish place to make a stand, but she felt exhausted now of everything but defiance.

“We think you misunderstand the central metaphor,” the Hive buzzed. “Your ability to lash out at your benefactor, to deny us an opportunity to swell our numbers, is like your hypothetical disease. A-coloniality is a sickness. It weakens us.” Its face was flat, not with anger but disappointment. “To return to your earlier question, we are willing to cure it. Even if it costs us. Perhaps some time as a drone will teach you perspective.”

The glittering tide flooded forward and Buel was there to meet it.

THE WASTES, MINDRY

“Can you *un*-discover it?” Mindry asked, horrified. Then, without trying to address the logic of the previous statement, she blurted out the next thing that came to mind. “Can it be used on other worlds?”

The Gigasborn scholar just shook her head. “The burning metal can only be called down from the dome of the Sky.”

“And no,” continued her companion, the Golem, “I don’t think we can erase the knowledge of what we can do. We could burn our

notes and maybe recall our messengers, but we would still know what we'd learned, and short of killing us—”

She came to an abrupt halt, her eyes fixed somewhere just past Mindry.

“I would never do that,” Mindry said emphatically. “Obviously, it’s better for us to know about this than it is for one of the other cities, or one of the other contenders in the War of the Prophecy to be able to call down the metal beings. Please, though. I beg you to keep quiet about this. Do not speak of it to anyone. Or in front of anyone. Courtiers or servants. Soldiers or guardswomen. Do you understand?”

The Golem barely seemed to be listening. Her eyes were on the ceiling aperture high overhead, beyond the nose of the Nyctoscope, where a large circle of starlight should have been streaming into the observatory.

Over the last few seconds, the inside of the observatory had darkened noticeably.

“New stars?” whispered the Golem in awe. Her expression was spellbound, as if discovering that she could obliterate the Wastes paled in comparison to whatever she was seeing out there in the night.

Breaking away from the seers, Mindry raced to the Nyctoscope’s podium and stared directly up.

She stared at a fleet of dark shapes that hung overhead.

“Oh. Oh, no,” Mindry whispered.

Flaming bundles began spilling from the shapes, trickling down towards the Beast City.

“A meteor shower?” mused the Gigasborn. “We didn’t call for one. At least, I don’t think we did...”

“You’d better,” cried Mindry, a note of panic entering her voice, “and sound the alarms while you’re at it. We’re being invaded.”

There was a screech from nearby, the sound of talons raking against the shell floor, and Haula tumbled to a stop a few feet away. “How did you know?” she demanded, out of breath, her wings trembling at her sides.

Numbly, Mindry just pointed upwards. The Harpy followed the direction of her claw and swore.

“Them too?” she asked. “I must be cursed.”

“What do you mean, ‘them too?’” demanded Mindry.

Chapter 13: Unravelling

Haula turned to respond, but was cut off by a commotion at the entrance to the observatory. A squad of soldiers, Angels and raven girls, poured in. Some had short, light halberds meant for twisting around in midair. Others had short bows and slings. All of their weapons were at the ready, and none of them looked like they had changed out of their uniforms since the battle at Apelt Lairn.

"I'm alright," Mindry shouted at them. "The threat is up there."

She pointed again, but none of the soldiers took their eyes off her. They began to fan out across the chamber.

"They're not on our side," said Haula tersely.

Mindry shook her head. "Nonsense. I've known these women since I was a child. They are as loyal as—"

An arrow leapt across the room and buried itself in the Gigasborn seer's throat. She crumpled to her knees, clawing at the fletches.

"No. They're not," snapped Haula. "Get behind something. Now."

THE WASTES, BUEL

As long as the Hive didn't touch her for more than an instant, she would be fine.

The angles, swarming thicker than she had ever seen them, crashed over her, and then there was no more room in her head for anything but movement. She spun and stomped and ducked her head. The substance of the Hive broke over her, and she killed it as it came.

"Stop this." Its voice thrummed through the beetles. "You are better than this. You have sacrificed of yourself three times to save a woman that you should have simply allowed to die. You did this because it was your role to do so. You did this because a drone does not think. It serves the colony. And you were noble. You embraced that truth. You—"

Buel didn't reply. To open her mouth would have put her at greater risk.

Dimly, she was aware that the others behind her—Kismet and her kin—were scattering, trying to slip the circle.

She hoped they would succeed.

If one of them was infested, that woman would grab for her. The extra weight could slow Buel down, complicating her movements, and then it would be a choice of either killing the other woman or succumbing to the Hive's embrace.

And Buel did not want to kill anyone else.

Obliterated mats of writhing beetles fell from the soles of her feet and she twisted, her circles grew wider and wider until she had slipped the grasp of the encroaching wall of insects.

A moment later, the Hive collapsed.

She spun in place, swatting and stamping, but instead of mounding up and rushing her, the Avatar's beetles had subsided into a spasming mess.

But for the intermittent twitching, they looked like heaps of black dirt strewn across the sand.

Buel retreated, crushing bugs underfoot as she went, but she was not pursued.

Had she somehow broken its magic?

No, she realised after a moment.

Something else had.

The beetles were silent, but she could hear the Hive's voice coming from some of Kismet's family.

The avatar of the Restless Depths was screaming.

SASI, VALMETICA

YOU WON'T KILL ALL OF ME, the Depths was raging. EVEN IF I PERISH HERE, AS LONG AS AN ASPECT OF ME REMAINS, YOU WILL LOSE YOUR WAR.

The Depths had not tolerated the voidfire well.

Nor the plates being flayed from its back.

Nor the essence being extracted from its body and funnelled away into the Firmament.

Valmetica read another word, and then another, and then she paused to catch her breath while the space containing the god's body braided itself into a tiny knot, inverted itself, and exploded.

What remained was a carpet of twitching, unrecognizable pieces, but still the Depths continued to speak.

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THIS IS FUTILE, it rasped. YOU AND I BOTH KNOW THIS. SAVE YOUR ENERGIES TO CONTEST THE INK. I WASN'T THE ONLY ONE THAT KILLED YOUR SISTERS. *IT* SUFFOCATED AND STAINED THEM. *IT* CUT AND FOLDED AND MANGLED THEM. IS IT NOT MORE DESERVING OF YOUR WRATH—

Valmetica spat.

The gobbet of white vanished into the mist.

“Are you begging?” she asked, mildly amused. “Are you entreating me to spare you?”

For the first time, there was hesitation in the god's voice. I DO NOT BEG, it said in a way that sounded unsure if this was the correct answer.

Its pieces, sprayed all across the chamber, were slowly beginning to pull themselves together.

“Shame,” said Valmetica. “Let me know when that changes.”

She read another word.

Parts of the Depths turned to stone. Others to vapor. Others melted and flowed as pools of glossy, sickly liquid.

A shudder went through it.

WOULD IT DO ME ANY GOOD IF I DID? the Depths asked. WOULD YOU FIGHT THE OTHER GODS INSTEAD?

“No,” said Valmetica, “but it would have the satisfaction of knowing I'd made you face just a tiny fraction of the helplessness that you forced on my sisters. I know it's petty, but,” she read another word. Shockwaves rippled out through the pit. “Here we are.”

YOU WILL DIE WITH ME, groaned the Depths, its pieces twisting in agony. THIS WORLD WILL COME APART. CUT A HOLE TO LEAVE, AND I WILL COLLAPSE IT IN ON YOU.

Valmetica shrugged. She was standing at the bottom of the pit now, the lowest place in a world of subterranean monsters, but there was nothing left in it that could threaten her.

The only struggle that had mattered in her life had ended days ago, with Hildr and Hjorprimul.

I hope this is enough, sisters, she thought bitterly. A god for your grave-marker. The world for your tomb.

Out loud, she said “I've already lived through the death of Axolozug. No woman should be made to see the end of the world

twice. The first time is hideous, an affront to the way that life should be, but the second?" She read five words in sequence, leaving the walls of the world plastered with bug innards. "The second time, it's just boring."

The Depths made a long, low sound, inarticulate and sad, as its hold on its body was released.

Then the pit was quiet.

"Maybe it's better this way," she whispered.

The walls between words were straining. The Depths had not lied.

But she could still choose the resolution to her own story.

Flipping to the final page in her codex, she flicked her fingers, conjured her quill, and wrote her own name on the page.

The book was complete now. A record of every Lightwings that had lived, and every Lightwings that had died.

"Do you like it?" she asked as the boundaries separating Sasi from the Firmament buckled.

There was no reply.

The second world ended in silence.

THE WASTES, HAULA

Everyone was shouting and Haula was doing her best to ignore it. "Stay back," she grunted, and she blurred.

A bow tore itself out a raven girl's grip. A pair of slingstones were slapped aside midair. An Angel fell back, neck twisted at a sickening angle, and Haula reappeared over the intruders, nocking a single arrow into the bow she had stolen and loosing it smoothly at another Angel. This one ducked and the arrowhead struck sparks as it skittered across the floor.

"Haula, stop!" Mindry was yelling, rushing forward. "There's been a misunderstanding. They're here to help me!"

She fell to the ground, her feet going out from under her, and an arrow from the soldiers whickered through the space where her head had been. Haula reappeared a few feet away, tensed her legs, and launched back into the air. "Get behind something!" she shouted again.

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By the orrery, the surviving seer was kneeling at her companion's side. She was shaking the Gigasborn, calling her name, and blood was spraying in pulses from the Gigasborn's neck. Each one was a little weaker than the last.

At the other end of the room, by the entrance, tiny black specks were trickling out of the dead Angel. Like liquid running down an incline, they streamed towards towards Mindry.

Haula circled, looking for something to stall them with. Oil, salt, netting. Nothing useful.

There were only benches upon benches, piled with metal measuring tools.

And there was the Nyctoscope.

To keep it from swaying while Mont Aran walked, the scope had been weighed with boxes of sand and tethered with ropes to the ceiling.

One after another, the ropes parted as Haula hit them at speed. She took another pass, looping around the outside of the observatory, and crashed into the top of the scope. Sand spilled from the boxes around the base and, with a long, final groan the Nyctoscope tipped.

It hit the floor is a symphony of shattering panes of glass, then began to roll the wrong way across the chamber, towards Mindry.

At the same time, the first of the alchemical bundles must have hit Mont Aran's head because the Beast reared.

The entire observatory tipped, the Nyctoscope rolling back towards the entrance.

Mindry flailed, grabbed for a handhold, and missed. Tumbling end over end, she fell towards the hallway.

Haula hit her just before a passing workbench could, pressing her against the rounded observatory wall as more debris thundered by. The Nyctoscope, changing direction, bounced through those of the queen's soldiers that were unlucky enough to get in its way and hit the doorway, shedding a cascade of glass fragments into the hall.

"We're leaving," Haula grunted, wings beating hard as she tried to both maintain her balance and also pin down Mindry, who was struggling unthinkingly against her claws. "Stop that!" she yelled at the princess, but the sound was drowned out by a bellow from the City Beast, which went right through her bones.

There was a shudder as Mont Aran landed on all fours again.

The Golem seer, who had been clinging to the edge of the orrery, settled back on the ground. The Nyctoscope, bent from its collision with the door, swung in a wide arc and hit the right side wall, then rolled once more, its base slamming to a final stop only a few feet from the seer.

Who hadn't even noticed it.

Instead, she was praying. Not over her fallen companion, but over the *orrery*.

A pair of Angels flitted back through the entrance to the observatory, their hands empty of weapons but their eyes threateningly vacant, and Haula turned to face them. She tried to muster up the energy to strike at them, but her wings felt like lead. Using her power must have burned up the last of the capons. She was *famished*.

Gamely she clenched her talons and made ready to leap forward.

And stopped as a crossbow bolt punched through one of the soldiers.

Silver-arms sprinted into the chamber, launched herself into the air, and collided midair with the second. They hit the ground together, the Golem swinging with her crossbow, raining down blows with the stock. The Angel, dazed from the impacts, barely seemed to resist.

"Divalsa!" yelled Mindry, and the bodyguard looked up. As she did so, something small and skittering slid darted from the Angel's mouth, ran up the Golem's chest, and vanished into her ear.

Silver-arms stiffened and her expression went slack.

"Stars and craters," muttered Haula as Silver-arms slapped a bolt into her crossbow and yanked it back to the catch. "She's not with us anymore!" she shouted, flattening herself against the floor.

The projectile did not miss.

It caught Haula in the right wing, tearing away pinions and blowing through the flesh to hit the wall behind her. Haula hissed. Mindry screamed. And a burning alchemical bundle plunged straight through the opening in the observatory roof, smashing open on the floor between them.

There was a moment's pause, as everyone but the praying seer reconsidered their courses of action.

Fire rolled out across the floor on a carpet of oil, devouring the beetles that had been making for the princess. Within seconds, a

Chapter 13: Unravelling

hellish gulf had separated both sides of the conflict from each other.

Silver-arms loaded another bolt.

“What’s wrong with her?” asked Mindry, aghast.

Haula just shook her head. “No time to explain. It’s not fixable. And it’s not just her. The other soldiers would’ve caught me in if they hadn’t started having convulsions outside of the throne room. It didn’t last for long, and I have no clue if it’s going to happen again. You need to get out of here.”

“Me?” Mindry sounded taken aback. “This isn’t *your* fight. I dragged you into it. *You* should leave. I’ll talk to Divalsa. She won’t come after you. I’ll figure out what’s going on, and—”

Haula slammed into her, narrowly knocking them other out of the way of another bolt.

“I can’t fly far,” said Haula sourly, picking herself back up, “and it wouldn’t matter even if I could. If the Prophecy’s right, then everything’s ending. It certainly looks that way from here.”

Mindry gazed across the flames at Silver-arms, who was out of bolts now and was simply standing, staring back at them. A few raven girls struggled into the chamber after her.

They all studied the alchemical fire, considering.

The heat from the flames was blisteringly intense, but the oil that the fire rode on had not spread far enough to touch either the soldiers or the princess. It licked at one edge of the orrery, but the surviving seer kept ignoring it, knees bent, still praying.

“If it is indeed the end of this world,” said Mindry softly, “you shouldn’t have to die with it.”

Haula stared at her. “Please don’t treat me like I’m some kind of saint,” the Harpy said curtly. Blood was oozing from the bolthole in her wing, staining the feathers. “If the world went by shouldn’ts, I wouldn’t exist.”

“If you didn’t exist,” said Mindry, “I’d become Goddess just to make sure you did.”

“That doesn’t actually make any—” Haula began, but stopped. It was sweet all the same, and it put her off-balance in a way that a room full of fire, hostile guards, and her own impending mortality had not.

Maybe *that* was why she had stuck with the princess.

When merchants and soldiers and armies couldn’t, the Pangola challenged her.

Even the Wastes couldn't claim it did that anymore.

"The City's going to buck again," said Mindry, matter-of-factly, as a tremor ran through the floor. "You can't take off while carrying me, can you?"

Haula shook her head.

"What about just gliding?" asked Mindry, and Haula looked back up sharply.

"What are you thinking?" she asked quickly, a tiny shiver of hope rising through her chest.

"There's no time," said the Pangola, curling into a ball. Her face and hands vanished beneath her overlapping scale-plates. Her voice was muffled by her own body. "When we tip, go out the door and down the hall to the south, there's a balcony. I'll be moving fast when I hit it, and the railing's flimsy. Can you catch me?"

"What?" Haula's eyes went wide. "What does it look like from the air? How am I even supposed to reach you? Princess, there's a *hole in my wing*."

But there was no time for a reply.

Mont Aran lurched up onto its hind legs and Mindry fell away, dropping through the flames and into the hallway beyond, and then she was out of sight.

THE WASTES, BUEL

Buel ran.

At her side was Kismet, and with them were some of the women from her family. Their feet pounded the sand.

Behind them lay Apelt Lairn, the six women who had fallen to the bugs, and the enraged body of the Hive.

It had only lost control of itself for a minute.

Now it was awake again and crowing about how complete it felt, about how the old, superfluous parts of its colony had been carved away. About how there was no Depths to govern it. No hoary, venomous predator lairing in a hole in the earth, making every decision based upon appetite.

The present belonged to the Hive, and the future would be colonized.

Chapter 13: Unravelling

“s absolutely bark-stayving,” said Kismet breathlessly. “t keep arguin’ with a scholar like you, I mean,” the girl clarified, her head flapping open as she ran. “Th’ god o’ th’ scribblins knew it was outmatched, right? So it weren’t even willin’ t’ listen when you spoke.”

“Please, just keep running,” wheezed Buel.

Dragonurtles were not sprinters. They could march for a month straight with a whole smithy on their backs, but they’d never beat anyone in a race.

...or maybe that was another fiction.

Buel shook her head. There were other, more pressing, matters to tend to before deciding which of her beliefs she needed to unlearn.

Up ahead, she could see a place where the desert turned to familiar rocky scree.

Urach.

“There!” she panted, pointing. It was dark on the other side of the portal, almost like a charcoal portrait of the place rather than the world itself, but she didn’t care.

She burst through.

She burst through into smoke and ashen snow.

She skidded to a stop, a strangled cry twisting out of her throat.

While she’d been away, Urach had been burned to the ground.

THE WASTES, HAULA

I can’t do this.

Haula flapped. Air rushed through the hole in her right wing. She *lumbered*.

I can’t do this.

Hyperspeed quickened her thoughts. Quickened her worries. Gave birth to whole litters of doubts she hadn’t known she had.

Fire rained down around her.

Mont Aran was burning.

I can’t do this.

Her eyes roved out over the palace grounds, trying to pick out the balcony Mindry had been referring to.

She would only have one chance at this.

One chance, and then Mindry would be slammed lifelessly against the side of a building, or roll uncontrollably through the streets, or tumble over the edge.

I can't do this.

The City was roaring, slamming back down on its forelegs. It had prey in its jaws.

Splintering, burning wood was falling in heaps from the sky. With it came thick sailcloth boluses and the screaming shapes of insectoid women.

I can't do this, thought Haula, and then: *there she is*.

The compact, scaled ball that was Mindry shot out into the air, starlight shining off of her. She was just below Haula, launching out over a garden of pomegranates and pear trees.

Haula pitched forward, more falling than flying. Her claws closed awkwardly around the princess. Her wings beat.

Gravity seized them both and yanked her down.

She fought it, straining, streaking across the Mont Aran skyline, royalty clasped in her feet.

Mindry unbalanced just enough to clutch at her leg, and the princess' eyes were wide in wonder.

But not at her, Haula realized.

She was looking up and past her, into the sky where a star as big as a Beast City had appeared.

It lay low in the atmosphere, fire wreathed it, and it was sinking.

"I can't do this," Haula whispered.

All around her, she could see portals opening. Some fountained out a strange almost-fire. Others let out swirls of smoke.

One seemed to have opened into a greenhouse—although it was entirely without walls. There was only lush foliage as far as the eye could see.

Haula oriented on it.

"I can't do this," she said.

"You *can*," said Mindry fiercely.

Haula was flying the way a chicken did, slapping desperately at the air in the hopes that it would give her points for effort. It wouldn't, and this was hopeless.

Fifty feet.

Forty feet.

Chapter 13: Unravelling

Haula's wings burned, but the portal was right there, opened wide. Soft grasses welcomed them both on the other side.

"I can do this," she said.

Then her right wing failed, and they tumbled down into smoke and ashes instead.

CHAPTER 14: FALLS THE SHADOW

THE FIRMAMENT, KHA

Kha had never created a world before.

If she was completely honest with herself, she hadn't even meant to create one this time. It had happened purely on automatic. As Axolozug had imploded, flooding with voidfire, her body had reacted to that rush of change-energy and accreted a shell of certainties around itself.

Outside her world, Kha could feel the Firmament ripping at the edges, but she found it didn't trouble her.

She was a thing born of flux.

Chaos was her portfolio and change was her domain.

Even as it tried to destroy what she had built, the Firmament fed her.

Its energy was not as satisfying as the flow of power that had been released every time a hole was ripped between the Five Worlds, but it was more constant. More gentle. Almost like a mother's touch.

Kha had never had a mother before.

It was pleasant to think of the Firmament that way.

For a while, she simply drifted. Surrounded by her world, Kha hugged her legs and arms and tails and stingers and tendrils and eyestalks to herself, and just let herself *be*.

It was quiet out in the Firmament, if the raging energies of creation and destruction weren't counted as sounds, and Kha found that shaping the properties of a fledgling worldlet was strangely relaxing.

Her newformed dimension was only as big around as a small cottage, but it had blue grasses, amber skies, a green lake, and a single tree. Those were the essentials, Kha thought.

Chapter 14: Falls The Shadow

As she washed her twelve faces with water from the lake, her burns faded. The ruined patches on her body regrew. She wriggled and spun in the air, feeling refreshed.

Sensing its creator's mood, the single tree wriggled too, its nineteen pink arms waving asynchronously. She smiled at it, and it cooed back.

Would it get lonely? Kha wondered idly.

The thought sobered her abruptly.

As long as she stayed out here, the Firmament would give her enough energy to live on, but not enough to grow. In order to create another tree, she would first have to dissolve the lake, or the grass, or the sky.

There was only so much reality to go around.

Unless she harvested more power from somewhere else.

If she extended her awareness out into the Firmament, she could feel the parts that were left of the Five Worlds orbiting nearby. Between the two surviving worlds, a nugget of radiant power bobbed, suspended in its own divine shell.

The prize for the victor of the Prophecy War.

Although it was made of divine substance, the nugget was not self-aware; not like Kha.

It did not snarl at her or retaliate when she tried to study it. It did not ask her her name or any questions about what *being* was like—even though Kha knew she could answer them wisely.

After more than a day of existence, she had become a veteran at it.

But the nugget simply hung in the seething voidfire, sealed with a condition lock, neither living nor dead.

It was a dreaming piece of god-plasm; a waiting potentiality. And soon, the seal that held it shut would break.

As the last of the Five Worlds ruptured, it would open, and then the first creature to enter it would inherit its power.

Kha thought about what she could do with that energy.

Then movement in the Firmament caught her attention and the question was forgotten.

There was a scrap of reality, a piece of matter still defined by a code of physical rules, out there in the flux. It had just been ejected by the collapse of the second world and it was speeding through the Firmament, its path close to hers.

Without thinking, Kha extended tendrils out beyond the borders of her world and grabbed it, yanking it in one fluid motion past the outer skin of her homegrown dimension. She let go just as quickly, plunging her tendrils into the pool so that they could heal from their exposure to the raw fires of the Firmament.

As Kha did this, the foreign thing lay on the grass steaming. Lingering patches of voidfire clung to it, eating away at its substance. After a moment's consideration, Kha grabbed it and dunked it into the lake as well.

The waters would restore anything to its proper form, no matter how much of it had burned away in the Firmament. Kha had designed them this way.

She held the scrap of cosmic ejecta down in the emerald depths for several minutes, then dredged it back out.

She had to slap pairs of hands over her mouths to keep them from screaming in horror.

The scrap was a woman, pale blue skinned and with confection-pink hair. Out of her back grew two glowing, golden wings.

They had last met in Axolozug.

Kha's memories were overcome with fire.

"No," said the godling, withdrawing back against the world's only tree. The tree's fleshy hands clasped across her protectively, but she already knew that *nothing* could save her from this monster. Nothing.

It lived only to kill.

"No, please," Kha whispered.

The Lightwings stirred, groaned, and opened her eyes.

"Where—" she grunted muzzily, then she froze.

With a panicky shout, she leapt to her feet, seized her power, and a pale violet Aura sheathed her. She gestured at Kha and a tiny puff of sparks scattered across the blue grass. She gestured again and this time there was a thin jet of smoke.

"What in the worlds?" The Lightwings glanced at her hand, then frantically reached up and ran her fingers through the air over her head. No Halo passed between them.

"Stay where you are," barked Kha. Taking no chances, she had withdrawn into the sky.

"Don't come near me!" the Lightwings shouted back. Her hands darted over her clothing, looking for something, and Kha realized

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that she was no longer carrying the heavy tome that she had been holding during their last encounter.

Darting back, the Lightwings flexed her hands and a momentary shell of mauve light formed in front of her.

It lasted for three seconds, and then it faded.

The two women stared warily at each other.

“What did you do to my magic?” demanded the Lightwings.

That was a ridiculous question, thought Kha. She could no more determine how much magic the Lightwings was able to draw on than the other gods could in *their* worlds. Magic was drawn from the world, not the god. If a god wanted to prevent a spell from going off, its best bet was to kill the caster.

“Your magic is channeled from ambient energies,” Kha said, acutely aware that she was explaining this to a woman who had existed for many more days than she had. Should the Lightwings have known this? Did mortals not innately understand how the dimensions worked? “There isn’t very much ambient energy in here,” Kha elaborated, in case the other woman was confused.

“In here?” Kha’s guest asked. Then she looked around and her eyes suddenly narrowed. “What’s wrong with the horizon?” she asked, pointing at where the yellow-orange sky met the lawn.

“Nothing’s wrong with it!” said Kha, defensively. She hadn’t had enough experience with other horizons to be truly confident in saying this, but she was certain that it was rude to come into someone else’s world and insult its features. She grew a long, sinuous neck in rebuke. Her neck stretched all the way out, sprouted a face, and stared right into the Lightwings’ eyes. “There’s nothing wrong with my horizons.”

“With *your* horizons? Oh, gates of death.” The Lightwings’s Aura sputtered and faded again. “You *made* all this?”

Kha was *not* mollified. Her head rotated a full three hundred and sixty degrees. “You are not being very polite to someone who just fished you out of the Firmament.”

The Lightwings stared. “You pulled me out?” she asked incredulously. “Why?”

Kha grew feathers, ruffled them, and then let them merge seamlessly back into her skin. “I wouldn’t have saved you if I’d know it was *you*,” she said huffily.

"So then kick me back out," goaded the Lightwings, folding her arms. "Finish me off. I'm ready."

"No," said Kha forcefully, and was surprised by her automatic response.

It wasn't that she didn't want the Lightwings out of her world *right away*, but the idea of giving her what she wanted was galling.

The Lightwings had attacked Kha for no reason at all.

At the very least she wanted an explanation for that, and Kha wasn't going to jettison her until she had one.

The Lightwings, for her part, looked very confused. "Why?" she asked incredulously. "I tried to *kill you*. I thought I'd *succeeded*."

"You didn't," snapped Kha, putting a bit of *so there* into her tone. "And you won't," she continued. "So you shouldn't try it again."

"But you won't kill me now because...?" The Lightwings trailed off expectantly.

Kha pondered that.

What would a mortal say? she wondered.

Her limited association with them had not provided her with a very consistent pattern of behavior.

Mostly they seemed to scream and attack, or scream and run, and on all other occasions they just expected things of her.

Maybe they were like little gods, but instead of being strengthened from specific kinds of mortal behavior, they fed off of unreasonableness.

"I won't kill you because I won't kill you," Kha finished lamely, not having come to an answer.

The Lightwings regarded her suspiciously. "That's not an answer."

Kha erupted in arms, all of them waving in exasperation. "What am I *supposed* to say?" she asked pointedly.

The Lightwings continued to stare at her, and then unexpectedly barked out a laugh. "I just killed one of your kind," she said, disbelieving. "I tried my level best to kill *you*. Why are you asking me for advice?"

"You killed one of my kind?" Slowly, Kha settled back onto the ground. "I don't think that is true. I am the only one of my kind."

"You're a god," said the Lightwings coldly. "And there's still far too many of you out there."

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"There's a lot of me," Kha agreed, her body rippling with a flurry of new limbs, emerging and being reabsorbed by her plasm. "But there's not a lot of me's. There's only one."

"There's plenty of *gods*," the Lightwings clarified.

Kha shrugged. "Those are not me."

"I guess not," said the Lightwings, in a way that mean she didn't believe it. "Do you have a name?" she asked, after a long pause.

"Kha," said Kha, cautiously. The syllable still tasted sweet.

"I'm called Valmetica," said the Lightwings. She didn't extend a hand, but her demeanor seemed to soften slightly. "As long as I'm still alive, I'm going to need to get back to the Five Worlds. I have unfinished business there," she said brusquely. "I can't do that on my own, so I must ask you: do you mean to keep me imprisoned here?"

Kha thought about it, but quickly dismissed the idea. Her world was too new. Too weak. When a god left its world, the Firmament instantly began to eat away at it, eroding it back into the primal, undifferentiated fire that made up everything else in existence.

If the god left its world for too long, the world would rupture.

Imprisoning Valmetica and leaving would be no different than throwing the Lightwings out into the flux, and Kha had already said she was not going to do that.

Was this how mortals lived? she wondered. Constantly hemmed in by their own snap-decisions?

That seemed far more trouble than it was worth, but perhaps she didn't fully understand mortals yet.

"When the time is right," Kha said, "I will be going back to the Five Worlds. You may come with me."

Valmetica looked at her, worried. "When will that be?" she demanded. "How long should I expect to wait?"

"It will be a little bit more than an hour, and a little less than a week," said Kha, guessing. "But there is grass here. And a tree. And a lake. The time will pass quickly."

Valmetica folded her arms. "Not quickly enough," she said harshly.

"Maybe," admitted Kha. "So to make it go by faster, why don't you tell me why you tried to kill me?"

ETHANTAR, PASSALAS AND ABERGAUL

The throne room was being rebuilt.

Domus crawled lazily across the valley, unbuilding and rebuilding itself as it went. Pieces of the throne room were still lofting lazily through the air above it, so Passalas and Abergaul had settled for a temporary command pavillion instead. While not as grand as the throne room, the pavillion had all the same amenities—from convenient bowls of woodland nuts and marshbright to servants on standby with chilled wine, honeysweet in its cups—without the trophies of Felista the Thirteenth's rule looking down on them from the walls.

That the cool wind sometimes blew through the tent, rustling the pages of dozens of scouting reports and mercantile briefs, was of little consequence to the Mistresses of the Coin and Dagger. Especially since they would both be retiring those titles very soon.

Duarchy was an awkward, stitched-together sort of word, but calling someone a Duarch was less demeaning than co-Empress, and their plans were already well underway to take the Pride's shabby hereditary monarchy and turn it into the only political power in Ethantar.

Already, skirmishers were descending into the valleys of the Hawks, where they would burn every village they could reach, slaughter the inhabitants, and leave signs to implicate the Toads in the massacre.

Once the two other nations were again at war with each other, the Pride would need to do little more than to keep the flames stoked until both of their rivals were burned out.

Then there would be a quick march, an even quicker subjugation, and land would be parceled out to the loyal Prideswomen soldiers.

There might even be a ceremony and a presentation of medals to the Duarchs.

Abergaul was just lifting a cup of wine to her lips, grinning lazily, when she saw Passalas freeze.

The gray-furred Mistress of the Dagger had been glancing up from a bit of hastily scrawled intelligence-work when something had caught her eye on the other side of the pavillion. Evidently whatever had caught her eye had kept it, because her mouth wasn't

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moving and she was staring like she'd seen a ghost. Puzzled, Abergaul turned to look.

Her chair scraped on the flagstones and Passalas startled at the sound, but there was nothing in sight.

Beyond the canvas awning, at the far edge of the square stood a perimeter of newly promoted royal guardswomen deflecting foot-traffic back into the adjoining streets. The new guardswomen's greenness showed in the way they held themselves, but Passalas had insisted that the old palace guards were to be summarily transferred to the front lines.

This had been the best way to prevent anyone with unjustifiably fond memories of the absent queen from attempting a coup. A rebellion would have been misguided and easily suppressed, but both Duarchs had agreed that it would be more drama than the start of their rule really warranted.

Satisfied that the other woman must have been reacting to a mistake on the training ground, Abergaul finished her sip of wine, turned back to Passalas and resumed her smile.

Really, sending the useless little queen to die in that dismal-sounding temple had been the best decision they had ever made.

Despite the satisfaction that the memory gave her, Abergaul frowned. Passalas was staring at her now, and her eyes were wide in something that might have actually been terror.

Had she spilled wine on herself?

Was there a bee in her hair?

Had she been *poisoned*?

Abergaul felt her own throat, but there was no telltale swelling. There was no unexpected warmth to her skin or lack of clarity in her thinking.

She wouldn't have been a proper target for assassination anyway. Killing the Mistress of the Coin would momentarily upend the entire economy, and no one wanted that.

So why was Passalas staring?

"Is something the matter?" Abergaul asked the other Duarch delicately.

Passalas just pointed, one claw jabbing at something just past the Abergaul's shoulder. She threw a quick look back, but again there was nothing.

She sank forward, resting her arms on the table, and stared at the Mistress of the Dagger. "Are you messing with me?" she asked.

It had, after all, been a long few days. Maybe this kind of thing was a source of levity in the espionage world. It would be better than finding someone had put a marsh-rat in her bedroll, the way they did in the army, she supposed.

Well, whatever it was, she could ignore it.

"If we can get back to work," said Abergaul, shifting a stone paperweight back off of a stack of mercantile briefs, "maybe we can start to talk about the effect that the wave of plunder will have on locally produced goods?"

A hand had clamped over the back of her neck. The cold points of claws rested lightly on her skin.

"Yes. Let's," said a very familiar voice from right beside her ear. "What effect *will* plunder have?"

"Queen Felista," Abergaul stammered. "We had thought—that is, Passalas and I had thought," she took a moment to think by gulping in a breath. "We believed that your disappearance had been the work of enemy agents. Since you vanished up that mountain path, we have been working tirelessly to keep your territories governed and your armies engaged in the defense of the realm. So let me be the first to tell you what a relief it is—"

"I asked you a question, Mistress of the Coin," said the queen. Abergaul's eyes slid back, trying to get a glimpse of the woman behind her. Seeing the motion, Felista leaned forward, bringing her face within inches of Abergaul's. The advisor barely bit back a scream.

Felista's eyes were black pits. There was no white left in them. Little flecks of light whirled in the dark and something that was neither an iris nor a pupil turned in a slow orbit.

"What effect will plunder have on locally produced goods?" asked the queen.

"Well," Abergaul drew a ragged breath. "In the short term there will be a brief period of unrest, as women of the Pride will be able to buy plundered goods more cheaply than forged ones, but that could be offset by us selling farmland to conquering soldiers in return for their plunder. That way the crown takes control of the plundered assets, the soldiers are rewarded, and our artisans face no hardship. If anything, the smithies benefit from the sudden

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demand for farm tools.” She was babbling, but she couldn’t help it. One good squeeze of the queen’s claws and all the red in her body would be spilling out on the table and floor.

“That sounds very reasonable,” said Felista, relaxing her grip slightly. “Pray, tell me where the farmland comes from?”

Abergaul gulped. Sweat beaded on her brow, matting in her gold and black fur. “Obviously, our intelligence had been wrong—” she began.

Felista squeezed and Abergaul felt a single claw go in. There was a burning rush of pain and a crimson trickle began to wend its way down the front of her neck.

“We can address that in a moment,” said Felista. Her voice had developed a curious cadence. Her manner and bearing were nothing at all like they had been when she had left, but the rational part of Abergaul’s mind was too busy gibbering in terror to properly analyze that. “First, why don’t you tell me where the farmland comes from?” Felista breathed.

“It would be seized,” said Abergaul, struggling to shape the words around the clawpoint in the front of her throat. Her blood was oozing, not spurting, and she knew that was supposed to be a good sign, but what if that changed when the queen withdrew her hand?

What if simply talking brought the edge of an artery up against that claw?

“Seized from whom?” asked Felista. Her tone was warm and sweet and understanding, like that of a confidant or a friend.

“The Toads and the Hawks,” gasped Abergaul.

The claws withdrew.

Instantly, Abergaul slapped her own hands to her throat, ready to stifle the first arterial spray, but it didn’t come.

She thanked the Nebula for that. Although she had never been a particularly religious woman, this was seeming like a good place to start.

All the while, Passalas was doing her best impression of a statue.

“I’m sorry to have put you to all that unnecessary work,” the queen said, hardly seeming to notice Abergaul’s racing heart or her bone-white blanch, “but a plan for plunder will not be required. Instead, I will need you to assemble all of the Pride’s soldiers. That includes the trainees that you have blocking traffic at the edges of this public square.”

“My queen, we can’t simply—” Abergaul began automatically. Too late, she realized her mistake.

“Can’t?” Felista asked. The word was barren of inflection. “Twice I’ve asked for my armies from you, and twice you’ve denied me,” she said calmly. “Do you mean to do it a third time?”

“No, my queen,” Abergaul said, the words coming out so fast that they were almost an unrecognizable jumble. “Where shall I direct the soldiers?”

“Where shall *you* direct them?” Felista echoed, bending low. She circled the chair, slowly. After a moment she raised a hand and Abergaul flinched, but at the last second the Mistress of the Coin held desperately still. The queen reached forward and, as gently as a lover, stroked under her chin. “I’m afraid you misunderstand. You won’t be required for this.”

There was a sudden vacancy where Abergaul remembered her throat being. The air felt strange on it, cold and raw.

Her face was numb.

But her chest was warm.

Had the sun come back out from behind its cloud cover?

Abergaul realized her feet were wet, which was strange. Her wine was still on the table. Curious, she reached for it, and that was when her lower body failed and she tumbled lifelessly to the floor.

Felista stepped gracefully past the cooling corpse, flicking ruby droplets from her claws. Her dress was torn all over, ruined by battle-damage to the point where it was hardly wearable, but in that moment she looked to Passalas like every inch the queen that her mother had been.

“You sent me up the mountain to die,” said Felista.

There was a time for fiction, Passalas ardently believed, but that time was *not* when your enemy already knew every lie had been planning to tell.

“We did,” she said simply.

Felista nodded curtly at that. If she was disappointed with that answer, it did not show on her face.

“Luckily for the Pride,” she said, “I met a powerful ally in the temple. It blessed me with powers beyond your comprehension—and it showed me the stark truth of the worlds. In the end, we mortals are all so little as to be meaningless, so it matters not what we do to each other. A red ant and a black ant

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struggle together, their jaws locked. We do not care if they fight honorably. To us, they are just something under foot. And so, to the universe, *are we*.”

Passalas kept absolutely still.

Felista gazed off briefly into empty space, then turned back to her. “Once upon a time,” she said, “I had reservations about certain things. About using my powers. About making people obey. You know,” she added, “I still remember clearly all the times you tried to talk me into taking a firmer hand with the Pride and all the times I tried to explain to you why that would be wrong.”

“My queen,” said Passalas. It was a ritual response. An acknowledgement that she had been heard.

It was produced not by Passalas’ throat, but by the kind of utter compliance that only ever came from terror.

“You were doing the right thing,” Felista continued. “Had I listened to you, I would have broken the other nations to my will. I would have owned this world, completely, within a few years. I would have been able to march all of Ethantar’s armies into that horrible barren place on the other side of the portal, and I would have won the war before the other contenders knew they were even fighting.”

“My queen,” said Passalas again, although now there was uncertainty coloring the words.

“I owe you my thanks,” said Felista, “and I owe you an apology.”

Passalas felt a wave of gratitude wash through her. As long as she didn’t look at the body of the Mistress of the Coin, she could think of this as an opportunity. Being the second in command to the kind of ruler Felista had just become was not as good as being a Duarch, but it was much better than being an advisor to the kind of ruler that Felista *had been*.

And besides, the sweetness of survival was headier than any cup of wine.

“Thank you my queen,” Passalas said shakily. She felt almost giddy. “I have always been working for you. Even before your ascension, I knew you would grow into the ruler our citizens needed. That was why I ensured your succession to the throne. Your mother—”

Felista didn’t actually seem to move.

One moment she was facing her and the next she was behind Passalas' back.

"My mother?" she asked and her voice was perfectly level.

She had overstepped herself, Passalas realized. Felista assuredly *did not* want to hear the specific details of her succession. Passalas backpedaled. "Your mother brought a wonderful daughter into this world," she said, "and—"

She reeled in her seat. Something had hit her. Something that sang through her veins and jangled down every nerve.

Her eyes opened wide. She loved Felista. She always had.

How could she lie to the woman she loved?

"I had your mother killed," Passalas said without preamble. "She was unstable. And dangerous. She was dangerous to the Pride as well as to me. But I'm so glad that I did it. You grew up far stronger than I could have imagined—"

Felista's hand struck her, closed-fist, across the jaw.

It was like being roundhoused by an avalanche. She spilled from her seat, sprawling on the ground.

It was sweet and agonizing and Passalas felt the side of her face beginning to go numb. Shaking, she raised her fingers to it, treasuring the feeling.

Felista had *shared this* with her.

"I was going to keep you," the queen was saying to herself, her voice hushed in amazement. "After all of this, I was going to keep you. Can you believe that?" She knelt down by Passalas' side. "How could any one person be so utterly hideous?"

Passalas did not know.

She wished she could explain all the things she now hated about herself to the queen, because then maybe the other woman's sorrow would stop, and that was the only thing that mattered in any of the worlds, but the list of Passalas' crimes and moral failings was suddenly so long as to be inexpressible.

It clawed at her tongue when she tried to speak it. It twisted through her innards. Her shame was so vast that it stood outside of her, waiting by her side to be recognized.

Passalas sobbed. It would be better if she simply stopped breathing. This would not undo the harm she had caused to Felista, but it would at least take away her own awareness of it.

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With one hand she closed her own mouth, and with the other she pinched shut her nose.

A flicker of doubt seemed to run over Felista's face. "Stop that," she said sharply, and Passalas involuntarily complied.

"You're going to live with the memory of what you did," the queen said, "at least until I remake the world. Then I will bring back my mother and I will bring back Abergaul and I will erase our entire stupid, blood-drenched history, and I will make it so all you cretins cannot scheme and backstab each other and *kill all the people I care for!*" Felista was shaking. "Drail will be stepping in to take over the armies. The troops will be marshalled, we will march, and we will destroy the other contenders for the prophecy. You will give Drail all possible assistance. Do you understand?"

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Passalas nodded.

"The Toads and the Hawks," added Felista, "will rally and march with you. Their leaders will *adore* me, and you will treat them like sisters. Do you understand?"

Again, Passalas nodded.

"I hate you," said Felista softly, her hands coiled into fists. "Even once I've fixed you, I don't think I'll be able to forget that."

She stood and, with a gesture, cut a hole in the air. It led into a different valley, one that Passalas recognized as enemy territory.

"Not that long ago," the queen said, "I fought a tornado made of teeth." She spat on the ground and stepped through. "*It* would have served me better as an advisor."

Then the rift closed and she was gone.

URACH, BUEL

The monastery gateposts were scratched and crumbling, but they were still intact, and that was all that mattered to Buel.

She did not know how long she had been walking for, but the whole world seemed to have taken on a murky impermanence. If her feet hadn't known the slopes, she was certain she would have plunged to her death with the whole procession of Sasian women following right after.

Blood knew, she had come across more than a few corpses out in the ashcloud twilight that now made up the Range. Merchants and

herdswomen, commoners and nobles alike, they lay now at the bottoms of ravines or half-covered in magma-flow.

Some were little more than heaps amid the gray sediment that was settling over everything like a blanket.

Always when she found them, Buel stopped and brushed them off, but not once had she discovered any of them were still living.

From the dead, she and the Sasians took clothing and food and waterskins. It was not sacrilege when it was a necessity. Even with a harvested tunic wrapped over her nose and mouth, Buel could not breathe comfortably, but she felt a stab of pity every time she looked back at one of the Sasian Slime-women. The ambient gray had pervaded even their flesh, flakes of it drifting in suspension through the gelatin, and even for the non-Slimes there was no covering made by mortal hands that could keep all the ash out.

It was like the finest sand. It slipped into cracks so thin as to be almost imaginary and it turned the entire procession into one more detail-less smudge against a backdrop of tedium.

Buel's only defense against the slow sapping of her will to push on was the unreality of what had happened to her world.

The Urach that she had left had been frost-touched and *vital*. It had been full of the coldest, clearest blues. The ragged blooms of wind-season wildflowers had been little riots of color against the dark shale and dessicated yellow-brown grass of the middle-altitudes.

All of that had been eradicated; replaced with loss and smoke.

Buel had turned her back for a moment and the world she had known had vanished.

Even Kismet had seemed at a loss for words.

After the first few hair-raising hours of scrambling away from the bleed—never at any moment sure how close the Hive was to finding them—the Mimic girl had fallen completely silent. Now she walked like the rest of the procession, following Buel's footprints, her head down and her shoulders slumped.

When they had passed their first dead caravan, Kismet had taken a burlap sack of gritty Groundnips off of a walla, dumped it out, and pulled the fabric over her head, covering the chest against the drifting soot.

Buel did not think the look would elicit anything other than stark terror out of anyone who saw the bag-headed Mimic

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shambling out of the ashfall at them, but it had killed the last vestige of conversation, and Buel had found that she was surprisingly grateful for that.

It was easier to press on when she didn't have to think about what to a foreigner who didn't understand what the Range had been.

I suppose the break is over, she mused, running her hand over a series of deep gouges in the stone gateposts. Her fingers moved higher, brushing away a layer of soot, and she peered myopically at the pictorial name of the monastery.

The three characters for *Clouds Beneath Dreaming* were written in forget-me-not-blue paint on the post.

This was not a monastery she recognized, and the scratches at the gate were fresh. That was a bad sign. Either attacks were more common out here, or the wild Infected had gone berserk recently.

Neither option appealed to her.

Proper etiquette would have been to announce herself, and a brass bell sat on a stand just outside the gate for just that purpose, but the clapper had been torn from its mouth and the metal was marked with what looked like the indentations of teeth.

Moreover, the gate that should have spanned the two stone posts had been knocked inward. *That* should have been repaired with the dawn—and there was no Blood-saint or abbottess alive who didn't know for an objective *fact* when dawn was.

The gate's disrepair was jarring. It meant that no one left in the monastery cared whether things outside could get in.

Is it night right now? wondered Buel, and a shiver crawled down the back of her shell.

Beneath the ash, she couldn't tell.

No one risked being out on the slopes at night.

If they couldn't reach the next settlement in a day, they found a waystation or a monastery or a herder camp before sundown—or else they found a cave and sat in the absolute darkness, with whatever weapon they had at hand pointed out at the moonlight, and did not sleep until the sun was safely back in the sky.

Buel's family, when they were delayed by a calving or an injury and could not make it to shelter in time, had built tall fires out of every combustible thing they could find, worn every scrap of

contraband silver jewelry they owned, and sat in a grim picket around the herd.

When at last they had heard the howling, they had trussed up an old sow and thrown it panicked and lowing downslope.

The sounds of savagery that followed had been long and grisly, but the Blood's children hadn't usually troubled them after that.

Usually.

"Come with me," said Buel, moving past the gateposts. "We're going inside."

The Sasians followed after her, shuffling across the cobbled courtyard and navigating around the vague hunches of outbuildings as they rose up out of the gray. Monasteries tended to have similar layouts, and Buel picked her way through the calves-deep ash, kicking up somber flurries of it until they were at the door to the main hall.

In case the perimeter walls and wards failed, or in case of invasion, the inner structures were all built like fortresses as well. They had wooden gates that could be barred, fist-wide holes for slingstones to be whirled through, and viewing slits high overhead so that the holy women could study the invaders from a position of safety.

Not that monasteries were invaded very often.

Any siege that lasted more than a day usually turned into a slaughter as the holy women simply declined to lock themselves behind silver bars at sundown. The opposing force, unless they fled to shelter, was then caught, eviscerated, and eaten.

Still, a quick raid during the day could sometimes enrich a company of starving bandits, and so precautions were taken.

That the door to the hall had been left wide open a cause for significant concern.

The inside of the building was dark, but it was that was by design. Small gaps in the roof, designed to let the moonlight in, had instead led to large piles of ash resting beneath them like crouching sentinels.

Nothing in the hall moved.

Instead, it rang with the kind of glacial silence that only came when the wind fell away in the middle of a blizzard.

"In," said Buel, and the shivering, weary Sasians compiled. They began to brush themselves off immediately, smearing their features

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with gray and white, but shedding a respectable volume of soot from the hair, clothes, and shoulders. Kismet took off her bag and shook it, prompting a wave of dismayed yelps and started shouts from the women who were in the path of the ash cloud that came out of it.

The sounds echoed harshly in the hall, rebounding off of cold, still architecture, and Buel called for the other women to be quiet.

"We don't know who's in here," she hissed. "We don't even know what *time* it is."

Kismet looked at Buel like the Dragonturtle had just eaten some particularly inadvisable mushrooms. "What's *that* matter?" she asked, staring at the intensity of Buel's reaction.

This left Buel with the unenviable task of trying to figure out how to explain the Everblood to someone who had only just recently seen the moon for the first time.

"You know how you've got scribblins?" she asked Kismet cautiously.

"I certainly *don't* got scribblins," said the Mimic defensively. "But I knows you meant t' say that in a met-yew-phorical sense."

Buel took a breath. Counted to five. Let it out.

"We've got something like that here," she said, "but it's much bigger and it tears people to shreds at night."

"That's..." Kismet boggled. "How d'you *live* under those conditions?" she asked in a hush. "Soot an' pits everywhere an' dirty great moon-enlarged scribblins' that burrow-burrow-burrow into your tiny little ears. That's... that's mon'strous."

"They're not scribblins," Buel began, but she let it go with a sigh. "Never mind," she said. "If we haven't heard anything yet, then maybe we're alone."

"Or maybe not," said Kismet, pointing to the other end of the hall, where an archway leading deeper into the complex was glowing with a pale blue light.

"Give me your knife," said Buel immediately, sticking her hand out.

Kismet jerked back. "Get your own," she squawked, her hand dropping to cover the grip. "'s me ma's."

"Giant scribblins!" said Buel emphatically, pointing towards the archway. The Mimic girl hesitated.

Before she could turn over the blade, however, a figure slithered into view; tall and semi-liquid and bathed in blue light.

"Jyashuu!" shouted Kismet and she bolted forward before Buel could stop her.

URACH, BUEL

They sat around a fire, its flames licking at furniture and tapestries, at straw and shattered pews and the contents of reliquaries. There was no abbottess around to contest this burning and, even as a part of Buel recoiled at the casual desecration, the rest of her was glad for the warmth.

Urach had never been this cold before. Not when the days were long and the storms settled rarely on the lower plateaus.

Kismet had probably never been this cold in her life. She was hunched and staring, the flames reflecting off her head. A thick walla-hide carpet had been draped around her shoulders.

During the long march, Buel had scarcely noticed the temperature.

Now that they were stopped, she couldn't think about anything but.

Was it just going to keep getting colder, she wondered, until even the air and the stones froze?

If she asked the question aloud, she realized, there was a good chance that one of the strangers at the fire might answer.

Deciding that she would rather not know, she kept her mouth shut.

Most of the others were also quiet; both the Sasians and the women in the Slime mage's party. There had been a brief attempt at introductions at first, but then rations and ash-free water had been shared out and they had all lapsed into their own personal silences.

Even *Kismet*, who seemed to run off of some kind of internal reservoir of enthusiasm and misunderstanding, was keeping quiet.

This gave Buel time to study the others.

Despite the sooty smears and haggard expressions, she thought she recognized some of the other women.

The winged barbarian and her curiously scaled, non-reptilian companion would not meet the Dragonturtle's eyes. They had been

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there at the battle on the sands, and they seemed to recognize her in turn. Both kept throwing looks her way.

Buel tried to keep her movements non-threatening, but she let the angles settle into place just in case.

The Wastelanders had given their names to the group as Haula and Mindry, but that told Buel nothing. There was no culture, no system of values implied by the sounds. Theirs weren't names like Buel—which meant Prudence—or Luthalla, which meant Contempt For The Sinful. They were just noise.

At least, they were if she was *lucky*.

For all Buel knew, their names might have meant Betrayal and Duplicity.

And she knew even less about the other women.

Except for Jyashuu, the Slime, the rest of them seemed to be one group, a small gathering of avians and insectoids dressed in tight, minimally covering wrappings or long, voluminous coats.

They were hovering as much by the fire as they were by the body of a flame-haired Lamia that was stretched out on the floor. The Lamia appeared to be breathing, but only barely. Arcane glyphs flickered in and out of being in the air around her as a series of spells worked to keep her among the living.

Ignoring this ambient magic completely, an owl lay curled up on her chest, its head resting against the unconscious woman's throat.

Every so often one of the other women would say something softly to the Slime mage, who would nod and whisper back reassuringly. Why they needed to be reassured, Buel was not sure. They were all heavily armed with blades and bandoliers of thick glass vials, and one of them—a purple-haired woman named Ereba—was making a stiletto dance between her fingers.

Mostly, they all seemed to be waiting for something.

For a while, Buel could only guess at what that was.

Then she heard the footsteps at the entrance to the hall.

A tall, gray woman strode in out of the ashfall. Her back was ramrod straight and she carried herself proudly, even if she looked haggard. She had a proper tail, and she carried a long two-handed ax in a familiar one-handed grip.

She shook herself, like a walla pup wading out of a hot spring, and as the soot billowed off of her Buel realized who she was.

"We're safe here," Dorgana said, approaching the fire. "For a little while, at least. You were right about the Everblood being dead, Jyashuu, but I think it sent every saint and holy woman into a frenzy. They're still sleeping it off. Maybe until moonrise. How long do we have before the world collapses?"

The Slime mage, Jyashuu, straightened. "Did you find what I asked you to look for?" she asked. "Was there a temple in the caldera?"

"Actually, there was a body," Dorgana said. "It was massive. I didn't even realize I was walking on it at first. Still, it didn't stir or try to crush me."

A complicated sequence of emotions shot across Jyashuu's face, then her composure slammed back into place, cutting them off. "You stood on it?" she asked.

"It would have been impossible to know it was there otherwise. Looking down from the nearest peak was the next best thing to useless with all this ash in the air. I must have criss-crossed that whole three-mountain area a dozen times before I realized it was underneath me." Dorgana frowned.

Into the brief silence, Jyashuu started to ask something that sounded to Buel like "did you breathe?", but then the Dragonnewt's eyes suddenly widened and she turned to the Sasians.

"Kismet!" she exclaimed. The air around her blurred and suddenly she was right beside the fire, staring in wonder at the Mimic girl. "I thought you were..." she trailed off awkwardly.

Kismet pulled her improvised carpet-robe tighter around her shoulders. "Not hardly," she huffed, although there wasn't much enthusiasm behind the words. "Might've lost touch for a few sleeps, but then we all fought a god an' Buel was stompin' an' yellin' an' we stood up t' it too, but we had t' sprint skittery-quick through a hole in the air so as it didn' get the rest of us an' now I'm freezin', 'cause your world's right an' proper cold. But it's not so bad," she continued, "because Jyashuu said that there's whole worlds dead, an' not bein' able t' feel the tippy-bits o' my footfingers 's not nearly so bad as not bein' able t' feel my anythin' 'cause I'm not born-an'-bred."

"Footfingers?" asked Dorgana wearily. "Born-and-bred?" Then she stopped. "Wait a minute," she exclaimed. "Buel?"

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Buel looked her straight in the eyes. The Dragonnewt, surprised by this, half-lifted her ax before she realized what she had done. Frowning, she looked down at her hands and lowered the weapon.

"I'm glad you're alright," Dorgana said. "After we got separated, I didn't think I would see you again. Has it been hard here in Urach?"

"I wouldn't know," Buel replied levelly. "I haven't been in Urach."

Dorgana's eyebrows lifted. "You followed me?"

"For a short time," said Buel, "I owned a city."

"For a short time in the dark place?" asked Dorgana. Then something in the phrasing caught her attention. "You *owned* a city? You personally? What happened to the soldiers?"

"They're probably still there," said Buel. "A god got involved. I left."

Dorgana flinched. Then her face colored. "You abandoned them?" she asked gently.

Buel nodded. Dorgana was staring at her, but Buel wasn't flinching. She wasn't looking away. "The god probably controls them now," she said. "That or they're dead."

Involuntary color bloomed in Dorgana's cheeks, brightening in the firelight. Moving suddenly, she snarled and hurled her ax into the far wall. It sunk to the haft in the stonework and stayed there, quivering.

The other women all looked bewildered—all but Jyashuu, who had unobtrusively embraced her Aura.

Buel's hands were empty, but she didn't look down at them. Her eyes were still on Dorgana.

And on the angles that had filled the space around her.

How many nobles knew the things Luthalla had known?

How many of them saw the Dragonturtles as slaves, and how many as a threat?

Or did it even matter?

Weren't they all, by action and inaction, complicit?

Dorgana, tightly controlled Dorgana, looked ashamed at her outburst. The heat drained out of her and she stared down at the ground. "I'm sorry," she said. "It was wrong of me to expect otherwise. I just saw you and Kismet and I thought that maybe the others might somehow have..." She trailed away.

Jyashuu rose from her seat and oozed between the two women. "It's alright," she said. "We can bring them back. We still have options left to us."

"Do we?" asked Dorgana, in a tone that dared the mage to contradict her. "You're the expert," she continued. "Tell me how this plays out."

Jyashuu sighed. "While you were out, did you find any portals into Sasi, Axolozug, or the Wastes?"

"The dark place, the high place, or the flat place?" asked Dorgana. "No. Just holes that led elsewhere in the Range, or ones that opened onto beautiful meadows, or ones that were vomiting out fire."

"I suspect," said Jyashuu, "that they were on fire because those worlds no longer exist." Before that could properly sink in, she kept going. "The Prophecy, as you all know, is vaguely worded. Its exact language is almost useless to us, and I suspect that's by design. It's not meant to explain anything. Not really. It's just supposed to get us fighting. The gods knew when they started all this how the winner of the contest would be chosen, and I suspect finally know what that is." She paused. "It's attrition. Mortals cannot exist outside of the worlds. We would burn in the fires the Firmament. Therefore, only when the last world has been extinguished can the winner be selected. This all but prevents a mortal from winning on her own, which is probably why the gods agreed to it. It also forces them to protect their chosen champions, and the fact that they've bothered to use mortals at all tells us that they are somehow ineligible to win the war themselves."

"Wait a moment. When the last of the worlds is extinguished?" asked Mindry from her place by the fire. Her eyes were red-veined and raw in a way that suggested she had either been sleeping poorly or crying recently. Or both. "Everyone is going to die so that they can resolve a *contest*?"

"Gods don't think like we do," said Jyashuu. "They'd rather break the worlds than share them."

"So we're just supposed to wait for the rest of the worlds to end?" asked Dorgana. "Then we make our move?"

"For everyone else here," Jyashuu said, "that might be the safest. But for you, there's still time to eliminate some of the other contenders. A god does not always die with its world, nor does it

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die as thoroughly as a mortal might. The still-intact body of the Everblood is proof. I expect that there's more than just Nebula still at work out there."

"And the remaining gods are either here in the Range or else they're in the grassy place?" Dorgana pressed.

Jyashuu nodded.

"Fine," said Dorgana, and she threw an unreadable look at Buel. "I guess there isn't time to talk, then. I'll come back to check on you when I can, but maybe if I can find the other champions first and take them out, we can stave off the end."

"Maybe," echoed Jyashuu.

Dorgana blurred and vanished. Her ax was gone as well.

Buel realized that she had been shaking with anger for the last couple minutes.. That every fiber in her body had wanted to pick that fight.

Now that Dorgana was gone, she just felt exhausted.

Jyashuu turned away from her, back to the group around the fire. "Now that Dorgana is gone," she said briskly, "I'm also going to need to explain some things to you all. I'm going to need to do it quickly, and after that, we're going to need to move as fast as we can across the mountains. There's something I'd like to see, and I'd like to see it before moonrise. Do you understand?"

She was met with silence and confused expressions.

Jyashuu bit her lower lip. "I may have miscalculated when I sent Dorgana out to scout the Range. Nothing I said just now was false, but there's also a good chance the Everblood is not as dead as I had thought. If that's the case, then my champion may have inadvertently exposed herself to its influence when she walked on it." She glanced at Buel. "I understand that *you* would call it the holy gift, but another word for what it is might be 'spore-based lycanthropy'. Contracted directly from the Everblood, there's no telling what it will do to her. We can't rely on her anymore." She took a breath. "Still, even though most of my magic is now bound up in Dorgana, who may well turn into a shapechanging berserker at next moonrise, the discovery of the Blood's physical form presents us with an opportunity."

"An opportunity for what? To be torn into bloody pieces when your pet snake-knight comes back?" asked Ereba, looking up sharply from where she was warming her hands against the fire.

"This wouldn't be the first time she tried to go after me, you know."

Jyashuu sighed. "She was ensorcelled. These things happen."

"These things happen to *whom*?" demanded a bat-winged girl from behind Ereba. "*These things happen to whom*? I'm only here because *she* tried to rob me," she jerked a thumb back towards the Daemoness, "and because that made her give me a job." She pointed at the sleeping woman with the red hair.

"Well, you can thank me a little more politely, then," said Ereba, "because home's *gone* and you're still alive."

At that, Mindry gave a startled sob and Haula wrapped a wing around her. Half the women turned to stare at them, but Buel pivoted to face Jyashuu.

"I know I'm coming into this a little late," she said, "but what do you mean by an opportunity?"

Jyashuu looked at her levelly. "Think of a mostly-dead god like an unlocked house; one where the owner isn't coming back."

Buel looked lost. "We're going to hide in an empty god until the war is over?"

"Hide?" Jyashuu shook her head. "Child, no. We're hiding only in the sense that a warrior hides beneath her armor."

ETHANTAR, IKRIX

Ikrix stared at the paper-covered portholes and tried to imagine the fleet that hung suspended in the air on the other side. It would be ragged, she decided. Many of the finest frigates would have been lost to enemy action, but the survivors would still be flying their colors proudly. The crews would still bustle about their work. The priestesses would maintain order and proper worship of the Ink, and no one would doubt that theirs was a queen worth dying for.

Anxiety had balled itself up in her guts and Ikrix resisted the urge to rip away one of the paper scabs and expose the raw, bleeding truth. The Ink had already told her, not gently, not to touch the windows. It had explained that they were patched with its own body, and that it did not need her looking outside.

It would keep her safe, it had promised, and in the meantime there was no need to trouble herself with the progress of the war.

Ikrix paced, scuttling from one end of the library to the other.

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Aside from brief bursts of contact, the Ink was mostly silent now, administering to the fleet. When Ikrix asked its opinion on something, mostly it ignored her. When it did respond, the answer was brusque.

To pass the time, she knew that she could sit and read its pages. The words of its books would rearrange themselves as she studied them, telling stories of romance and adventure, of treachery and justice, of hundreds of other worlds.

But Ikrix did not think any of them were real.

Most were simply too fanciful to be believed. They told of places where everyone lived within a vast pool of water, or places where the streets were lit with bottled lightning, or places where the only queen anyone worshipped was a face printed on a rectangle of green paper. Other stories sounded more like records of the War of the Prophecy, but with all the important parts changed. Some followed a quilled woman named Ciaris, from a city Ikrix had never heard of.

And none of them were about *her*.

Why not? she wondered.

When she had been younger, before her ascension to the throne, she had loved to write records of her future rule. They had been full of adoring subjects and counselors, all praising the way she governed, with only the occasional back-stabbing wretch thrown in for spice.

After she had truly become queen, the adoring subjects and counselors had never seemed to manifest. Instead, her rule had provided her with a seemingly endless supply of back-stabbing wretches.

She sniffed disdainfully and resumed staring at the opaque sheets that covered the portholes.

In the end, her hardship had turned out to be a boon. Driven to prove herself as a competent monarch, she had captured the Daemoness Ereba, found the Ink in the tome that the thief had been carrying, and nursed the god back to health first with the contents of her royal library, then with the works of storytellers from the streets, and finally with the tales that her handmaidens extracted from Ereba.

That particular wretch had cemented her rule, she mused.

But somehow her life had continued to be made of only criticism and hardship.

"Why won't you talk to me?" she asked the library, aware that she sounded sullen but unable to stop herself.

The Ink would reassure her, she knew. It always had.

Pages fanned irritably and a volume on a lectern fell open to the index. "Tell me," the Ink said smoothly, "do you know anything about hit-and-run tactics?"

Ikrix stared. "That wasn't really what I had wanted to talk about." She was glad to hear it address her again, but being aboard the Onus of Rule had made her sick of tactics and strategy. She just wanted to be done with this war.

Maybe after she had won the Ink wouldn't sound so harried.

She missed the way it had spoken to her when she had first come to visit it between her meetings. She missed the way the entire library had seemed to come alive in gratitude in her presence.

Spending all of her time in its cabin now, alone with its volumes but not its mind, was bittersweet.

But more on the bitter side. Less on the sweet.

"We are involved in some complicated maneuvering," the Ink was saying. "Hit and run tactics are relevant right now."

"But surely, you can let your priestesses handle that," said Ikrix. "We could talk about something else. I could tell you a story."

She wanted to sound honeyed. She had read plenty of stories where the honeyed voices of centipede maidens or cricket washerwomen had charmed the fairest suitors in the land.

A queen should sound even sweeter, she reasoned, because a queen had more to lose.

Instead of honey, her voice was flustered and sharp.

Luckily, the Ink didn't seem to notice. "The priestesses," said the god, "do as I tell them, but they're not very imaginative. When I try to leave them to their own devices, we lose ships."

"We've lost more ships?" breathed Ikrix.

Pages all around the library fanned in a momentary storm. "Due to restrictions on how many vessels we could cram through a single bleed into Ethantar, several were still in the Wastes when the meteor hit."

"The meteor?" Ikrix asked, alarmed.

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“A work of pure foolishness,” the Ink said disdainfully. The chandelier strained and lashed on its tether like a cat’s tail. “The god of that worthless place tried to take us with it. I denied it the opportunity and it died in the process. We lost the Benediction of Lead and the Alma Mater, but we were probably too far away for you to feel the blast.”

Ikrix’s mouth opened in horror, but the Ink wasn’t done.

“Of course,” it continued, “not long after we’d arrived here, the Benevolent Overlord’s Righteous and Incandescent Savagery broke ranks with its sister ships and escaped into Urach. I believe it was hosting a part of the Avatar of the Depths. How *that* creature invaded the crew, I can only guess.”

“It’s gone?” asked Ikrix.

“If we’re lucky,” said the Ink. “But for the moment that is academic, because we are engaged with what appears to be an entire nation of dirt grubbing, pitchfork wielding, hawklady farmers.” The god paused. “Your fleet, it should be noted, is perfectly adequate against things that are below us and moving slowly, but not—and this is important—any use at all against swarms of winged lunatics. They’ve already eliminated the crew from the Silken Garrotte and the Witty Retort—although they haven’t the least idea of what to do with those boats. So if I sound distracted,” it purred, its voice cloying with false concern, “it’s because I’m trying to decide whether it’s worth taking to the air personally to cleanse the sky of mortals. Now, do you have any input when it comes to hit and run tactics?”

Wordless, Ikrix just shook her head.

“Good,” said the Ink. “Then you can shut up.”

Why was the Ink treating her this way?

Instead of answering her unspoken question, the library fell silent. Beneath her feet, Ikrix felt the flagship laboriously begin to turn as it started another mid-air maneuver, but her mind was miles away from the war in the skies.

What did she need to do to make it pay attention to her again?

URACH, BUEL

The trek to the final resting place of the dead god of Urach was made easy by Jyashuu, who cut open the air for them to march through—first onto a series of plateaus, and then onto a murky, ash-muffled overlook over what Buel supposed, in more normal weather, would have been the broad surface of a dormant caldera.

Right now, red streaks like burning veins glowed through the haze, their trceries visible even in the distance.

“It’s down there,” said Jyashuu, but she didn’t open another portal yet.

On the way over, she had explained the nature of the war in detail to the other women.

She had done this doggedly, despite almost constant interruption.

Some of it had been from Ereba. Other times it had been from the women that followed her, carrying between them the unconscious flame-haired Lamia on a particularly durable piece of tapestry. Kismet had spoken up frequently, especially when a piece of information sounded particularly outlandish to her, and Haula and Mindry had raised their voices only once or twice.

In the end, though, it had seemed to Buel that Jyashuu could have told them anything and they would have had no choice but to believe it.

The worlds were failing. Of that, there could be no doubt.

Everything else, every bit of justification and blame, was secondary to saving them.

While Buel had been engrossed in her own thoughts, Jyashuu had been moving down the line of stopped women, using her fingers to draw a quick mark on each’s forehead. When she got to Buel, she said “this may change how you breathe a little, but don’t pay it much mind.” Then her touch was cool and damp.

Buel almost shuddered when the magic asserted itself.

Her lungs stopped working, but she found that she didn’t care.

She was not growing lightheaded. Nor did she find that she needed to inhale in order to speak.

“What did you do?” she asked the Slime.

Chapter 14: Falls The Shadow

"It's a little bit of protection that I should have thought of earlier," Jyashuu said. "With this, anything the Blood's body might emit shouldn't be able to find its way into you. Now, follow me." She cut a rift in the air and stepped through.

Buel followed and found herself standing atop a god.

Gods were surprisingly spongy underfoot. A faint mist of something other than ash stirred from the body with every experimental step and Buel was abruptly glad that she no longer needed to breathe.

"Ah. Thought so," said Jyashuu, poking at the broad expanse of mottled godflesh. "This will do."

"We're gonna wears it, right?" asked Kismet dubiously. "'s a bit big."

"You'll fit," said Jyashuu. "It's more of a spiritual transfer than a physical one." She looked up. "I won't be able to accompany you, of course. And, since my magics are currently being channeled to Dorgana, I'll need something to serve as a temporary source of power. Would any of you be in possession of a powerful artefact?"

That last question seemed to be addressed specifically to Haula, and the Harpy reluctantly began trying to fish a large pair of large metal vambraces off of her legs. Mindry, moving quickly, knelt beside her and helped.

Jyashuu daubed the bands with another series of markings, then closed her eyes to concentrate. The markings began to glow. "You might feel a brief sense of dislocation," she said.

Ereba raised an eyebrow. "What do you think the odds are," she said, "that *anyone's* ever done something like this before."

"Right?" snorted Kismet. "Bet you a hunk a' meatfungus to a barrowload a' gallows spores she's makin' this up as she goes along."

"I am indeed," said Jyashuu, eyes still closed, "but the principles are simple. It's just that no one's ever really had the opportunity to apply them. Apart from the Lightwings, perhaps, and they didn't generally see eye to eye with me."

"So when's it supposed t' kick in?" asked one of Kismet's kinswomen.

"Probably around now," said Jyashuu.

The assembled women waited a moment.

"I don't really think it's working—" began Ereba.

Everything went black.

CHAPTER 15: FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM

URACH, BUEL, MINDRY, HAULA, TRESSA, EREBA, KISMET, SOME OTHER WOMEN, AND AN OWL

It was dark and empty inside of the god.

Buel couldn't see. She couldn't feel her face. She couldn't move her limbs or even open her mouth.

It was like waking in the night, perfectly aware, only to find that the rest of her body was immobile.

Deprived of any agency to act, a part of her wanted to sink into sleep. To let the helplessness enfold her and drag her down to a place where she could rest until she was able to move again.

She fought against it.

"Can anyone else hear me?" she asked.

The words rang inside of the Everblood.

"Where am I?" a worried voice asked. It was not one that Buel had heard before. Its accent was almost courtly, with a sly edge underneath. "Is this death?"

There was a general muttering. Ereba's voice cut through the discomforted noise. "I hope not," the Daemoness said. "Can't move, though. How about you, Tressa?"

"Same," said the first woman. "Where are we?" she repeated.

Buel still wasn't certain if they could hear her, so she said "we're inside a god," as loudly as she could, and there was a lull in the chatter. "Were you the unconscious woman with the red hair?" she asked after a beat.

"Still am, I suspect," said Tressa. "If this is a dream, it's a rather annoying one. Are we still in Axolozug?"

There was a chorus of 'no's, a few 'maybe's, and one very loud, decisive 'yes'.

There was also a soft, plaintive hoot.

Chapter 15: For Thine Is the Kingdom

"The owl's in here with us too, isn't it?" said Ereba.

In the darkness, wings rustled.

"What about everyone else?" Buel asked. If she reached out with her mind, she found that she could almost feel the texture of the space by thinking hard enough. It was clammy and cool, the way the forehead of a woman felt when she was dying of the wasting cough. Buel quickly stopped thinking quite so hard. "Did only some of us survive the transfer?" she asked.

"Transfer?" This was Kismet's voice. "You mean some of us might'a not been able t' handle puttin' on th' godcoat?"

There was a flurry of worried voices as the Mimic's kin embarked on a frenzied discussion of whether they were all there. All of them participated at full-volume, and it took Kismet shouting at them for a few minutes before they all calmed down.

Eventually, they subsided into wondering if being inside the body of the Everblood meant that they were now scribblins, a philosophical quandary that was beyond Buel, so she asked instead if Mindry and Haula could hear her.

"We can," said Haula, "but we can't move. Can anyone else move?"

There was another chorus of "no"s, a "maybe", and a hoot.

"Can anyone else feel their own body?" asked Tressa.

More "no"s followed.

"Does anyone think that the ooze-woman botched the ritual, and now we're stuck in here?" asked Ereba.

The thought had occurred to Buel, but she heard the edge of panic rising in the Daemoness' voice and quickly intervened. "Let's not jump to any conclusions," she said into the silence. "Right now, we're safe. We've got plenty of time to figure things out. Just take a breath and calm down."

"None of us are breathing," whimpered Mindry.

A wave of shouting engulfed the space.

Buel tried to shut it out, walling her mind off from the noise, but she had no way of partitioning herself from the other voices. Each one sounded as if it were coming from right beside her.

In desperation, she bellowed "Jyashuu!" and the clamor came to an awkward, trailing stop.

"I'm here," announced a soft voice, "although by talking to you, I am using energy I cannot ill afford to waste. We cannot speak for

Urach, Buel, Mindry, Haula, Tressa, Ereba, Kismet,
Some Other Women, And An Owl

long. Dorgana has engaged the enemy and my capacity is already being taxed."

"What happened to us?" asked Buel.

There was a pause, then Jyashuu said "the ritual has worked as intended. You are inside the Everblood's corpse. I have positioned you so that when the Blood animates, you will be able to control its actions. The twenty eight of you should overpower its instincts easily. After that, it should go where you tell it to, and it should kill who you tell it to kill."

"What do you mean, *when* it animates?" asked Ereba.

Jyashuu sounded guilty. "The Blood's body is temporarily depleted of power," she said carefully. "We should all be grateful for that. If it hadn't been depleted, we wouldn't have even been able to attempt a joining of mortal and divine psyches." The hermitess paused. "Still, without power, the Everblood cannot move. So, until something happens that would energize the god, I am afraid that you will be stuck here."

"What?" gasped Mindry. "Pull us back out!"

"That would be complicated," Jyashuu said, a touch ruefully. "I am sorry, but your discomfort will only last for a little while. When the Everblood reanimates, you might be surprised by how much power floods in."

"Which means what, exactly?" asked Ereba suspiciously. "Where does the power come from?"

"The Everblood feeds on violence," said Jyashuu. "Specifically, it feeds on the violence that is done by those who have been transformed by its curse. The stronger the transformation, the more gratuitous the violence, the more energy flows in."

"Can we have that in mortal language?" asked Tressa dubiously.

"We're waiting on the moon to rise," explained the Slime, "and Dorgana to transform."

"How do you know for certain that she was cursed?" asked Buel, a horrible sense of dread creeping over her.

"I don't," the hermitess admitted. "But we don't have the time to discuss it further. I took a gamble here, and it will either pay off or it won't."

Her presence withdrew.

Kismet coughed. "Well, that's a load a'—"

ETHANTAR, THE INK

The queen was sulking, sitting in a corner of the library with her front legs crossed, and staring sullenly at the shelves.

This suited the Ink just fine, because at least now she was keeping quiet. The Ink had lost all tolerance for her distractions over the last several hours, as it had been spending the better part of those hours keeping them both alive.

And it wasn't even fighting another god yet.

The problem with invading Ethantar, the Ink fumed, had turned out to be its mortals. In this world, with its pastoral hills and its fresh-flowing streams and its docile farm animals, they had bred like maddened rabbits. Only by waging constant war on each other had they managed to keep their populations below the point of collapse, and those wars had ensured that most of the damned creatures had some kind of military experience.

Within hours of the fleet's arrival, sky-darkening swarms of hawk-winged skirmishers had risen to engage them. They had flocked around the ships, whittling away at the deck crews, and every time the Ink had cut a hole into the air and attempted a tactical retreat, the fleet had to been forced to narrow itself down into a thin little line to crawl through that bleed, exposing the entire procession to further predation by the Hawks.

The Ink could have ripped open a larger tear, of course, but even small tears weakened the fabric of a world. Ripping a bleed wide enough to let the fleet comfortably through would have put Ethantar on the edge of collapse.

The Ink had narrowly avoided being caught in the middle of the Wastes' rupturing. It was in no hurry to repeat the experience.

So it had guided its fleet through banks of clouds, up into places where the air was uninhabitably thin and cold, and then snaked them along a path that took them past the nesting grounds of leathery-winged high-altitude predators, doing its best to wear away at its pursuers.

The hawk women, however, did not behave like a normal army. They did not fall back to rest once it was clear that the Ink was only going to continue its evasive maneuvers. Instead they flew after the fleet like zealots, flapping until they tired and fell from the sky.

Bit by bit, their numbers were thinning, but they had still forced losses upon the fleet, and they had kept the Ink from approaching the local power's lair. If they could hold it off for long enough, some other surviving power would be able to take a shot at Nebula, and that was something the Ink could not abide.

You and I both know I could turn you into a husk, the Ink thought. Still, it mused, I give you points for consistency. Five hundred years a coward, and that's what you'll die as. The course of the Narrative has already decided. The ascension will not be yours.

Out in the cold air, a squad of surviving Hawks caught the frigate Whimsical Sarcasm as it swung too wide on a maneuver, falling desperately on the captain, priestess, and crew. Those women made a valiant effort to repel their borders, and blades were lifted, winged bodies cascading over the rails. Still, one of the Hawks managed to sink a pilum into the neck of the ship's priestess and her blood washed black across the deck. The Ink snarled, a sound like the tearing of vellum, as it was forced to abandon the vessel to its captain's leadership.

The Ink gnashed its bindings.

With its captain in charge, the Whimsical Sarcasm would be as useless now as if it weren't crewed at all.

Worse, in trying to tire out the Hawks, the fleet had ended up on the outer edge of the world from the mountaintop temple where Nebula's body was coiled.

It was time, it decided, to reconsider its strategy.

If it cut straight across the valleys, it could be at the temple by twilight.

And if the remaining Hawks followed, they would be dead of exhaustion long before then.

Any losses the fleet would take in the interim were irrelevant.

Nothing of value is ever won through cowardice, the Ink thought, signalling another turn. I will feed on Nebula. I will annihilate the other gods' champions. Ethantar will burn, and then I will rebuild the worlds as they should have been, aligned with the Narrative's flow.

Its pages whirled.

Every distraction, every mundane bit of trivia about altitude and velocity and fleet composition, evaporated from its mind.

Its victory was inevitable.

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It had been promised this.

And in a corner of the library, deaf to its thoughts, Ikrix stood still and silent, waiting for their journey to end.

ETHANTAR, FELISTA

“Archers, bows on the horizon.” Felista strode down the ranks of the Toads, blinking from captain to captain to relay the news. They all stood on the edge of a long, fertile plateau with their bare, bulbous green toes in the dirt.

Their captains claimed that this helped them to keep their grip on the earth and made for steadier, more even shots. Felista had never heard anything like that before, but there was a lot she didn’t know about these people, and forcing them to shoot the way Prideswomen did would have meant throwing five hundred years of their own development out the window.

When she had set about beguiling them, she had decided at the outset that she would not permit anything to compromise the abilities of her new, fanatically loyal, soldiers. If they had told her they could only shoot properly while hanging upside-down, she would have ordered her followers to build them a trellis. No nation produced better archers than the Toads.

Even Prideswomen soldiers spoke respectfully about them. They said that a Toad’s bow was ten feet from end to end, that it was coaxed out of a tree rather than carved, and that each one housed a demon.

Up close, Felista could see that the bows were only six feet, but they certainly *shot* like they had been possessed by something from outside the Worlds.

“When you see the shapes in the sky cross Bladefurrow Valley, loose your first round,” she said, addressing the army of Mirewomen. “Don’t stop until the sky is empty, your bows are dry, or the enemy has passed overhead and is on its way to the Temple. I have troops waiting in the next valley. They would prefer not to be skewered. Am I clear?”

Having been stripped of the ability to even question her orders, the Toads cried out in rapturous unison.

They were an odd people, Felista reflected. Even under her thrall, they proved clever and defiant. Fiercely individualistic, their clan matriarchs had bickered with one another over how best to serve her. Supernatural allure or not, she had been forced to reason with them, explaining as much as she knew about the threat that was coming to Ethantar.

Only then, when it had been clear that their choices were to band together or perish, had they shouldered their bows and begun to march.

What must it be like to rule a nation of them? Felista wondered.

She found that she looked forward to speaking with them at greater length after the worlds had been reformed.

The Toads stood in proud, straight lines; their eyes on the horizon and their toes in the loam. They wrapped knobbly fingers around the grips of their bows and waited for the enemy to show.

Whether they would be sufficient or not no longer mattered. Felista had no more time to waste. Flickering, she vanished from the plateau and reappeared three valleys away, at the base of the staircase leading up to the Temple of the Inward Sky.

A procession of women was winding its way up the steps, sometimes prodded along by pickets of Prideswomen guards who were lining the way. There had not been enough time for Felista to use her powers on every woman in the land—not when she had needed to loyalize all of the Hawks and Toads so quickly—and so she had been forced to leave certain tasks to the power structures that were already in place.

One of those tasks had been the creation of an enhanced defensive force for Nebula.

The old priestesses of the Inward Sky had not liked the idea of every commoner being rounded up and forced up the slope, but that had been the only way Felista could think of to make them useful in the upcoming conflict. Once the horror had drained from the priestesses faces, they had protested—first with impassioned rhetoric and then with shocking violence. They had been joined in great numbers by citizens who balked at the idea of being forced into pacts with an inhuman power, but their rebellion had been short-lived. It had had neither the training nor the weapons to stand up to the Pride's massed armies.

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She was doing the right thing, she told herself. She was making every sacrifice necessary to preserve the existence of Ethantar.

But when she thought those kinds of things, she heard them in Nebula's voice, and she was no longer sure if she believed herself.

Thankfully, she didn't have much to think about beyond logistics now. With the mass conversion underway, there was no longer any need for her to visit the Temple of the Inward Sky. Cataloguing and communicating with all of its new acquisitions was time-consuming for the god.

Shakily, Felista told herself that the only horrors that were occurring on the mountain were happening by design, then she flickered again.

An instant later, she stood in the valley beneath the Toads' plateau, in the heart of a milling mess of mages. They were all brightly colored, wearing robes in every hue of the visible spectrum. An effort had been made to impose military discipline upon their ranks, but the wild magi of the foothills did not march with the armies of the Pride. They did not even truly consider themselves Prideswomen. Instead, they represented five centuries of independent arcane traditions, each passed from mentor to student, and every one followed a slightly different code of dress and ethics.

Several years ago, Abergaul had proposed a measure that would have made non-state magework illegal and all mages, by default, the property of the queen's armies. At the time, Felista had thought the measure barbaric and unnecessary, but now she was having an easier time seeing its merits.

"Arcanists, you know your orders?" she called out. It was as much a question as a command.

The assembled women nodded, shouted, or let off little puffs of brightly colored sparks as was their wont.

"Right," said Felista. Then, raising her voice, she yelled "everyone to my left, your responsibility is to shield your comrades on the ground. Everyone to my right, your responsibility is to bring down the enemy. Work in squads and coordinate your vollies. Can you do this?"

This time there was a muttering, a susurrus of petty complaints and shooshed questions that passed through the particolored mob, but Felista had wasted enough time on the mages already.

“When I can,” said Felista, “I will send Drail to check on you. Obey her as you would me.”

She stepped forward and flickered again, landing on a different mountaintop.

The Minotaur was there, standing implacably in the cold. Her eyes whirled with the dark of distant galaxies.

“Are you ready?” Felista asked tentatively.

The Minotaur breathed out, steam rolling out from her nostrils to be snatched away by the thin, dry air. She had not spoken since their first visit to the Temple.

“Whatever Nebula did to you,” Felista said softly, “I’ll put you back to the way you were before.”

Drail looked back at her, but there was no comprehension in her eyes.

There was about as much humanity in them as there was in the night sky.

Far away, the sun was sinking into its cradle between the mountains. A freezing wind howled over the slopes.

Outlined against the sunset were the black dots of the intruders’ fleet.

Felista had visited the ships only briefly, just long enough to understand what they were and what lived within them. She had stood on their decks and felt the wind lash through her hair and the piece of Nebula’s power that rested inside her had reached out and sensed the presence of the Ink.

It had felt like running her fingers over the surface of a cold, still pond. Instantly she had known that, by herself, she could not fight it.

But maybe, with all the armies in Ethantar, she could.

ETHANTAR, THE INK

The Axolozug navy’s campaign was not going well.

The Whimsical Sarcasm was still keeping up with the fleet, following it the way a butterfly-dog did an owner who hadn’t given it water. It limped through the skies, turning awkwardly and too late whenever the fleet changed its heading.

The Ink lamented again the loss of its priestess.

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A wounded ship belonged in the front where it could absorb the first losses, but there was no way now to tell the Whimsical Sarcasm that.

And it was much too late for that kind of repositioning anyway.

The Ink grimaced as the first volley of arrows hit its vanguard. Even though it had taken the fleet up into the lower end of the stratosphere, there were still losses. The wooden shafts leapt from the worthless ranks of mortals on the plateau below and somehow hurtled past the point where they should have slackened, stalled in the air, and then fallen back down on the archers.

Instead, they kept going at full force and buried themselves to the fletches in rigging, in hull planking, and throats.

A cry went out among the crews and chemical bundles were rushed to the sides, but the Ink quickly sent a message to belay the bombardment. The inconvenience of losing a few women to the freakish toad-things on the plateau would just have to be borne. There were not a lot of the alchemical bombs left, and a stationary mortal army was not worth wasting ammunition on.

When the second volley came and some of the arrowheads were on fire, the Ink quickly changed its mind, but by then it was too late.

Within minutes, its navy was burning the same color as the sunset.

ETHANTAR, DORGANA

It was dusk when Dorgana reached the Temple of the Inward Sky. As fast as she could run, she was still limited by the speed of mortal conversation, and every woman in this dimension seemed to be fanatically devoted to keeping the location of its god, the Nebula, secret from invaders.

Only by chance as the evening fell had she stopped to free a trio of veiled women from what looked like half a battalion of local soldiers. The veiled women, sobbing, had pointed her in the right direction and told her that no one ought to talk to their god, and begged Dorgana to spare their sisters from being forced into an audience with it.

That was an easy idea for an Urachian to process. Even the most devout laywoman was uncomfortable with the idea of staying in a monastery past dark. When the moon rose and the howling carried across the mountainside, the faithful rolled up tighter in their blankets and kept one eye on the door.

She had certainly spent more than a few nights awake, just listening, as a slow, steady chill worked its way down her spine.

Dorgana smiled wanly at the thought of home. Then the expression shifted and became a wince.

What had happened to the Range was unconscionable.

Outrage and sorrow chased each other through her subconscious, stumbling over military victories and memories of her girlhood and of teachers who were almost certainly dead now.

Forcefully, she reminded herself that she could weep once the worlds were fixed. For the time being, there were more pressing matters at hand than her memories.

There was the temple. And there was the god inside of it.

Even at the base of the stairs, she could feel Nebula calling her. It was like a voice from another room, so soft as to be almost inaudible, and she felt the overwhelming urge to move closer to it to try and pick out the words.

She girded her mind against the voice and immediately the pressure eased, but it seemed to have already caught thousands of other women. A seemingly unending procession of commoners was marching up the slope past her, entranced.

In a few places, there were guardswomen with spears that stood at the edge of the trail, nudging anyone who wavered for more than a few seconds along with the butts of their weapons. But elsewhere, those guardswomen had joined the line, swept up in its momentum.

In their glassy eyes, Dorgana could see they too had been captivated by what waited at the top.

Whatever was going on up there, it was clear that it was the work of Urach's enemies. These women, civilian or not, represented a much greater threat to the surviving members of the Scale Nation than a tribe of displaced Golems ever had.

So why was she hesitating?

Putting aside her reluctance, Dorgana gathered a breath into her throat and released it as a roar. She angled the blast up into the

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heavens, away from the women, and it brought the line to a halt. A pair of soldiers, shaken from their trance, stepped out of the line towards her, readying their weapons.

Dorgana's next roar was at ground level and it sent the soldiers tumbling back down the path.

Some crashed against the wall, breaking bones. Others collided with the people next to them. Others were swept off of the slope.

Dorgana's stomach roiled, but she told herself that there was no other option. She roared again and again, the sound now flinging pilgrims off of the steps to the temple.

Guards came at her, spearpoints only half-visible in the fading light, but she didn't even need her ax to take care of them.

Jyashuu's gift was flooding through her muscles, bolstering everything she did. She was the champion of Urach, amplified to fight the gods, and she was invincible.

With just a flick of her fingers, she could shatter a blade. If she missed an incoming strike, it skittered right off of her. She barely felt the spearpoints when they rasped against her scales, and their blades came away dull.

When she moved, even the wind had trouble keeping up. If she ran flat-out, there was a crash like thunder that rolled out behind her, a terrible booming that heralded her coming.

It was exhilarating to let the magic boil out from her every strike, but even so she tried to keep an even pace.

This energy was borrowed, she reminded herself. If she took too much at once, it would kill Jyashuu.

And then she would have nothing. She would be a mortal standing alone and unaided against the gods. She would be a crimson stain on their path to victory.

But only if she was foolish, or slow, or inadequately vicious.

She bellowed, and Ethantarians went flying away.

Despite being here, on the doorstep of Ethantar's god, none of the other contenders for the Prophecy had showed. She had arrived here during the day, but now it was almost moonrise.

Where are you? she lashed out in her mind. *Will you hide until the worlds end?*

A pressure began at the back of her spine. It started as a tickle, and then an itch, and then a white-hot pulse. And still she could feel its intensity building with every passing moment.

It was like fury, but self-sustaining.

It was like madness, but *pure*.

Is this Jyashuu's gift? she wondered, and as she did she caught a cluster of shapes in her periphery. The shapes had the bodies of Ethantarian women, and they were dressed as commoners, but there was something distinctly wrong with the way they carried themselves.

Most of the other civilians were fleeing now, turning the stone path into a panicked tangle downslope. For the handful that had survived her barrage of shouts but that hadn't made it past her, their sandals were flapping as they bolted up the steps towards the temple, shoving at each other violently as they fought to be the first to the top.

The shapes were moving in neither direction. Dorgana squinted in the low-light, Jyashuu's enchantments sharpening her senses, and she realized that they all had eyes like inky wells. Stars and pale orbs turned in slow rotation where their irises should have been.

And they had appeared in Dorgana's blindspot without having apparently moved there.

One of them, a quill-covered redhead dressed in white robes, bowed. "An intruder," she said. Or at least, a voice said those words from the vicinity of her mouth. The voice was a rich tenor, and sounded like it was on the verge of laughing. "Tell me, gods' pawn," it said. "Which power are you aligned with?"

Dorgana gritted her teeth.

Were these women *all* Nebula's champions?

Was it *manufacturing* them?

As the thought settled in her head, another group of five women stepped out of thin air.

The heat at the back of Dorgana's spine continued to build.

These Ethantarians reminded her of Ears Woman. She bared her teeth automatically at the thought.

"I'm not aligned with any power," she said. "I fight for my nation."

Quill Woman cocked her head to one side. "You and I both know that's not true," the voice chuckled from her vocal chords. "You do not move like a mortal. You do not fight like a mortal. If you were just a woman with an ax, you would not be worth the attention of my proxies."

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Dorgana's shoulder blades had become suddenly itchy. Her tail felt like lead. Her mind whirled, and she forced herself to stand steady, to ignore the itching, and to answer the question.

"I am supported by the ancient sorceress Jyashuu," she said, trying to concentrate. She needed to decide where she would need to strike when the Ethantarians finally came at her. The place she had to hit wouldn't be wherever the woman were. It would be wherever they were going to jump to. "Her magic has been mixed with my blood," she continued, and now the words felt strange in her mouth. They sounds were coming out shredded. Distorted. "We fight as one," she slurred, her vision becoming a hazy mess.

"Just a woman's magic?" Quill Woman asked, amazed. Then her brow furrowed. "Strange," she said. "I thought I saw something else in you."

Dorgana wanted to ask her what she meant by that, but a spasm passed through her. Even with all of her arcane enhancements, the pain was overwhelming. Her guts felt like they wanted to crawl out of her throat. Her head rang like a struck gong.

What is wrong with me?

In the distance, the first crease of the moon inched into view.

Silver light spilled onto the land.

And Dorgana *changed*.

URACH, BUEL, MINDRY, HAULA, TRESSA,
EREBA, KISMET, SOME OTHER WOMEN,
AND AN OWL

Buel could see.

Blood and changing flesh, *she could see*.

Her eyelids fluttered open and she felt the mountain air on her skin and a low, rolling voice said from somewhere behind her "am I dreaming?" but that was unimportant because the world was back. Even surrounded by ash and under a sky of lead, the apocalyptic dreariness was better than that inescapable, immobile darkness had been.

Urach, Buel, Mindry, Haula, Tressa, Ereba, Kismet, Some Other Women, And An Owl

Luxuriating in her new mobility, Buel stood up and was then abruptly alarmed by how high that simple motion had caused her to rise. Her neck was now level with a plateau.

She looked down at her hands and saw through the murk that they had become mottled and golden-brown, the color of leaf mast in a mountaintop grove. The hands had the right number of digits, but there were holes in the centers of both of her palms. A thin dribble of sickly-looking fluid bled out of them, and she felt the undefinable urge to try to push outward from it.

Tentatively, she raised a palm towards the sky and surrendered to the impulse, just a little bit.

Bright light stabbed out as a single, coherent lance of brilliant energy shot into the heavens. The rush from discharging it exhausted her and she slumped hard against the plateau to keep from falling over.

Her heart was hammering. Her breathing was ragged.

She was breathing again, she realized. She had to, in order to keep from graying out.

“Don’t do that again!” a tiny voice shouted, and Buel turned her head to see a speck of pale blue was perched atop her left shoulder. “You’re barely recharged,” said the Slime belligerently, “and you’re going to need everything you have for what’s to come.”

“Jyashuu?” asked Buel and her voice seemed to project in every direction, rolling across the Range, without having been spoken.

“Yes,” the tiny woman shouted back. “Could you please hold still? I need to get into position.”

Buel held still.

In return, she got to experience the sensation of the Slime painstakingly slug-inching herself across the wide expanse of Buel’s new left shoulder, up the left side of her neck, and finally into a more stable spot atop her left ear—or whatever passed for her left ear in this new shape.

Her right hand quavered several times as she fought the impulse to swat at Jyashuu, who now felt more like an insect than a powerful sorceress.

Finally, the Slime said “you can move now,” at a more reasonable volume, and Buel straightened.

“Thought I was going to swat her,” murmured a voice from inside her head, and she almost fell back against the plateau.

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Jyashuu shouted in alarm, but Buel could still feel her clinging to the ear. She turned her question inward.

"You're all still in here?" she asked.

There was a chorus of yeses.

"And the owl?" she ventured.

There was a purr like the kind a cat might make, if the cat in question had a beak, feathers, and was also mildly ill.

"Alright," said Tressa. "Glad you're all still with me. Where am I taking us?"

Buel blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You're excused," said Tressa, "but if the woman clinging to our ear is right, then time is short and we don't have much time for bickering. Now that I've got us standing upright, where are we going?"

"There's no other gods here," said Jyashuu into everyone's ear, "so we're going to need to travel to Ethantar. That will mean opening up a bleed big enough for you to walk through. It will take some energy, but as soon as you feel ready for the task, I can talk you through it."

"Hold on a moment," said Tressa. "I think there's something we need to sort out internally. I'm hearing a lot of people acting like I'm not the one who's piloting."

A volley of objections had come from both sides of Buel's mind, the arguments and counterpoints firing off so quickly that she felt the strong urge to shake her head just to clear it.

"Stop that!" yelled Jyashuu, right into the side of her skull. "I can hear all of you, and I don't understand a word of what you're saying. What's happening in there?"

"We're not sure who's in control," said Haula diplomatically.

"They're not convinced that it's me," said Ereba, less diplomatically.

"Well, then let's find out," Jyashuu said. "Haula, raise your right arm."

Buel's right arm stayed at her side. After a moment, she experimentally raised her left instead.

"Okay," said Jyashuu, drawing out the sound of the O to a suitably skeptical length. "Who did that?"

"I did," said Haula. "I was feeling contrary."

“No!” said Kismet, doing the mental equivalent of stamping her foot. “I raised it! You don’t get to go sayin’ that you’re the one’s been put in charge o’ this towerin’ massive godbody when I’m the one what’s controllin’ the arm. See?”

Buel waved her left arm, testing to make sure that it was actually hers. The Mimic girl sounded convinced, but...

“Oh, no,” Tressa breathed. “Are we *all* in control?”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

Finally, Jyashuu said “I’ve never put twenty eight people in one body before, so don’t expect me to know every little detail of how this works. However, it sounds like you’re controlling the body without thinking about it, and it’s doing what you all want it to, so maybe it doesn’t matter.”

Buel wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

She looked at her hands again.

Or maybe she looked at everyone else’s hands.

Or maybe everyone had just looked at hers.

“Maybe we should just open that portal,” said Mindry. “I really don’t want to think about this any more than I have to.”

“That sounds wise,” said Jyashuu. “Are you ready? There won’t be any coming back after this. Not that the ritual wasn’t already the point of no return...”

Buel frowned.

What did that mean?

“I’m ready,” said Ereba, before Buel could finish the thought.

“Let’s go.”

Reluctantly, Buel raised her hands and began to rip apart the air.

THE FIRMAMENT, KHA

“It needs a better name than ‘the Nugget,’” said Valmetica critically. She was staring out the—for want of a better word—window that Kha had replaced the lake with. The window, a floating pane of glass bordered by delicately painted eggshell-white wood, afforded a look out into the shifting chaos of the Firmament.

If she stared hard enough into it, she could peer through the swirling voidfire at the two undulating shapes of the surviving worlds.

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From this perspective, the worlds hardly looked like places where people lived.

If Valmetica had seen them without context, she would have been more likely to guess that they were two prismatic amoeba that were locked in an extremely messy, no-personal-boundaries kiss. As she watched, one of them seemed to distort and deflate, its edges growing undefined.

A few seconds later, it ruptured.

That was Urach, she thought. *I just watched the death of another world.*

Being snatched out of the jaws of death by a god had made the simple act of existing surreal. The neon protoplasms and colorless fire on the other side of the window weren't helping, but if she let herself stop and think about the details of what was happening, she was certain her mind would fracture. She let the news of Urach's obliteration pass right through her and tried to treat cruising through the Firmament as if this was simply a normal thing that happened to people.

"I like 'the Nugget,'" said Kha, waving out the window at the bundle of blazing energy and then growing a long, tubular mouth to continue the conversation. "It's descriptive," she said through her tube-mouth. "And I like the syllables. Nug-get. There's two of them, and they are both perfect."

Valmetica shifted her attention to the object of the Prophecy, which was shining as it orbited around the last surviving world.

It *did* look like a nugget, but nugget didn't sound like the sort of thing anyone was supposed to call a near-critical mass of god-power.

"You're sure that we're going to get there first?" asked Valmetica, changing the subject.

As best as she could tell by looking out the window, they seemed to be making good progress across the Firmament. They would be at the Nugget's edge within a few hours.

Kha had warned her that moving too quickly through the Firmament was risky and explained that the trip would rapidly erode her world, which was the only thing that was sheltering them from the voidfire that surrounded it. If they moved any faster, the world would burst. On the flip side, if they moved too slowly, the

other gods would wrap up their affairs and claim the Nugget before Kha or Valmetica could reach it.

The right pace, Kha had concluded, would be so fast that it left the world stripped to the bone, but not so fast that it exploded.

Stripped to the bone, it wouldn't hold together for long after they arrived, but that was an acceptable risk.

As long as the other contenders didn't take their time in opening the Nugget, Kha's world wouldn't prematurely breach, spilling both its passengers unprotected out into the Firmament.

"I have made a reasonable guess as to the timing," said Kha.

Valmetica scowled.

Was this reasonable, or was it one of the most insane things the godling had done yet?

"What happens when we arrive?" she asked. "Assuming you timed things correctly, of course."

Kha shrugged three of her shoulders. "We live or we die," she said ambivalently. "Coming here was impulsive of me. Im-pul-sive."

"No," said Valmetica. "That's not what I was trying to ask." She hesitated, then pressed on. As long as they were under a temporary truce, it would be good to know how the godling would react to this. "Let's say we both get there at the same time, ahead of everyone else. We're going to try to kill each other, right?"

"Why?" asked Kha, her voice curious. "Do you still hate me?"

How was a person supposed to answer that?

"I don't hate you specifically," said Valmetica. "I hate what you represent."

Kha turned an unusual color and twisted in the air. "I am not what I represent," she said. "So there is nothing here to hate."

Valmetica blinked.

Before she could ask Kha to explain, the godling continued. "If we arrive, and you fight me," she said, "and I kill you, what do you want me to make in my world?"

"*What?*" The word ripped itself out of Valmetica, faster than thought.

"If I kill you," repeated Kha slowly, "and you do not become goddess, what do you want me to make?"

"You're offering me a favor?" asked Valmetica flatly. "Is this a trick?"

"Do you know any?" asked Kha. "Can you teach me them?"

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Valmetica rolled her eyes. “That’s simple wordplay. It doesn’t answer the question.”

“Yes,” said Kha.

Valmetica narrowed her eyes.

Was that the godling genuinely misunderstanding her, or had it become terrifyingly smart over the course of just a few days?

Maybe it was better to just answer honestly.

Without her index, she wasn’t even sure if she had much chance against it, but maybe the energies of the Nugget would be easier to draw on than the energies of this world were—

—and there she was again, using that idiotic name, even in the privacy of her own head.

“I want you to bring back the Lightwings,” she said before she could stop herself.

“The rest of them,” asked Kha, “or do *you* want to be brought back as well?”

Valmetica listened hard. There was no mockery in the godling’s tone.

But she had to be sure.

“Are you serious?” she asked.

Kha nodded.

“Why would you do that?” Valmetica demanded. “I tried to kill you.”

“You did,” said Kha, “and I still exist. So, would you like me to remake you if you fail a second time?”

Valmetica stared back out the window.

It felt like the trip to the Nugget was going to be a lot longer than just a few hours

The fires of the Firmament roiled outside, eating away at the world as it flew.

ETHANTAR, THE INK

Onwards the fleet went, even as it burned.

Folly’s Pursuit, Illuminator, and the Whimsical Sarcasm had all been lost by the fifth volley, and still the arrows kept coming. Wave after wave, burning and sharp, they drummed against the hulls of the ships of Ikrix’s navy.

Unable to find a time when the rush of arrows slackened, any crew member who went to put out a fire that started on the underside of one of the ships did so at the cost of her own life.

Sometimes the Ink risked a priestess this way, maneuvering it like a marionette between the missiles.

Mostly, it didn't bother.

It waited and it fumed.

And still the arrows kept coming.

Had these women cut down a forest just for the ammunition? it asked itself.

Had they spent their entire lives drilling just to be able to nock and loose so quickly?

How had they even made bows that could fling a missile so far? How could their arrows gather enough force to punch through wooden planks?

The Ink gnashed its pages as the Implacable Murderess and the Bulwark succumbed to the flames.

It maneuvered the burning bodies of the Fragment of Spire and the RLS Legacy to screen itself against the volleys, hunkered down in its library, and waited, waited until finally the hail of arrows slackened.

Then its pages rippled in unison as it let out a relieved hiss.

Even a nation of mortals was no match for it.

It was still intact. It still had its pet queen. It still had the ragged remainder of its fleet.

And now it had something else.

It could sense through the Narrative that Urach had collapsed; that its broken wreck of a comatose god had somehow made its way to Ethantar, ripping open a tear so wide that its homeworld had collapsed behind it. The Ink almost considered turning around to devour the rest of the Everblood, but the titan was far away.

The Ink would have had go back across the plateau of archers, or else swing wide around it and waste even more time, which would have been playing right into Nebula's hands.

No, it decided. It would press on.

But if it needed a snack, it knew where to find one.

As the navy pressed forward, a valley opened up beneath the fleet. Beyond it lay the mountaintop where the Nebula's prison had been built.

Chapter 15: For Thine Is the Kingdom

And where it was living still.

The Ink snarled in derision, and then it froze.

While it had been distracted by the archers, the moon had risen, and bright silver light was flooding across the land.

It was almost picturesque, but for the waiting army of mages it illuminated below.

The Ink had barely sent the order to turn when the first bolt of lightning stabbed upward and annihilated the Fragment of Spite.

ETHANTAR, DORGANA

There was no Dorgana. There was no Urach. There was no body. There was no mind.

There was only the fury.

She lunged.

Rationally, the Quill Woman should have been able to dodge her. She should have just vanished and reappeared elsewhere like Ears Woman had been able to do. Dorgana was still a physical being. She was bound by the dictates of space. Quill Woman could have used Nebula's gifts and been on the other side of Ethantar in an instant.

But she was too busy screaming.

Dorgana hit her with her shoulder. Her claws flashed and her prey went over backwards, Quill Woman's head connecting with the mountain, and teeth like ivory flashed in the night as Dorgana thrashed the body back and forth in her jaws.

She let it fly, skidding to a stop against the stairs, and then she howled.

The song, amplified by her own innate powers and by Jyashuu's gifts, rippled out in a shockwave.

The other disciples of Nebula were flung into the air. Some used their powers and vanished. Others disappeared over the side of the slope.

So did most of the Ethantarians still on the path, the ones still fighting to get to the temple, and the dome of the temple itself. The golden top tore free of its moorings and spun, its insides mirrored and strange, through the air to crash out of sight on the other side of the peak.

Dorgana took in a sweet, vicious breath and howled again.

This time in challenge.

She could no longer feel Nebula's pull on her. She could no longer feel any inclination to run up the carved steps to the decapitated temple, except to challenge the god in its own lair.

Her breath was burning. Her knees bent the wrong way. Her tail had lengthened and straightened and ended now whip-thin in a spike of bone.

And she had wings.

Let the others fight her now. She would *devour* them.

Launching herself forward, she bounded up the stairs, her four wickedly clawed feet scraping gouges from the stone. She took the steps twelve in a bound.

She was barely fazed when the Minotaur appeared in her way.

The fading bits of her that remembered having two legs instead of four recognized the woman, but they recognized her as an enemy, and that was enough for the Blood's curse in her veins. She threw herself at the Minotaur and, at the last second, flared her wings, stopped short, and let her tail scythe out.

It passed whipcrack quick through the place where the Minotaur had been, describing a full arc. Then she snapped it back, angling it at the space just behind her own shoulder blades.

There was a thump as hooves hit her upper back, a dagger's cold blade was rammed against her spine, and then her tail-spike shot over her shoulder and punched straight through the Minotaur, impaling it through the middle. Dorgana whipped her tail from side to side, slamming it twice against the sides of the stairs, and then she flicked it away down the steps.

Even as she howled again, her wound reknit, ejecting the knife.

The knife was not silver.

It was not even worth acknowledging.

She took two more bounds up the stairs, slaver running from her jaws as she thought about the god-prey at the top. From behind her someone began to wail, and Dorgana paused.

Jets of steam rolled out from her nostrils, but she turned her head on its long neck, looking back across her body to where Ears Woman was crouched beside the broken Minotaur, her shoulders shaking in rage.

The Foxcat was saying something. She was straightening.

A wave of adoration broke over Dorgana.

Chapter 15: For Thine Is the Kingdom

She had been a bad pet. She had been a bad pet. She had been a bad pet.

She didn't care.

Moving at speeds amplified by both mage and god, she hit the Foxcat in a tangle of wings and teeth.

ETHANTAR, FELISTA

The creature moved so quickly that for a moment, Felista wasn't even sure she had seen it.

Even if she had, it was supposed to be the sort of thing that only existed in myths.

It should have been haunting the highest reaches of the mountains, preying on disobedient children.

There should have been *no such thing* as wyverns.

Before it could strike, Felista blinked away. Nebula's power enfolded her and she reappeared several valleys to the south. The lowland air was warm and rich with soil-scent.

She took a ragged breath and tried not to sob.

She had left Drail behind. She had to go back.

Space folded a second time and she was back on the stairs.

The wyvern had not moved from its position, except to casually finish Drail. Its muzzle was now stained dark with the Minotaur's blood.

Felista's body trembled. "You were dead the moment you crossed me," she hissed, and she blinked away again, this time only travelling a few hundred feet.

She wanted the creature to see her.

That was how she was going to have her revenge.

ETHANTAR, DORGANA

Dorgana gave in to the hunt.

She ran, flat out, keeping pace with her prey despite its unusual abilities. The Foxcat flickered down the mountain, across the valley, through woodlands and rivers, and always Dorgana was there

behind her. The vestiges of her mortal mind wondered if Ears Woman was playing with her, but the beast didn't care.

When her prey took to the skies, Dorgana followed.

When her prey landed amidst a massive air battle, with wooden birds raining down fire on an army of mages, Dorgana felt a thrill far stronger than fear.

The cacophony of the battle and the overwhelming scent of ozone from the mages' lightning strikes was distracting, but the Blood's curse was good at single-mindedness. Dorgana batted a cluster of sailors over the nearest railing and howled at Felista.

She poured all the force of her power and her enchantments down the beast's throat and out into chaos.

Ships ruptured and fell from the skies.

The Foxcat blinked away again.

ETHANTAR, THE INK

For a minute, the battle had almost been going well.

Sure, Diving Swallow had been lost, as had Falcon's Claw in the initial round of thaumaturgic precision-lightning strikes, but the mages were a disorganized rabble. All of them seemed to have devoted themselves to attacking. None of them were bothering to protect the rest from the firebombs that began to fall from the fleet.

In some places, mage-lightning struck the bundles prematurely, unfolding sheets of fire in the air. Although they fell more slowly than the bombs, they still settled inexorably over the mages, charring entire swathes of the battlefield.

This was not where the Ink *wanted* to be by this point. It would rather have been cracking Nebula's body open and sucking out the marrow, but it told itself that this delay was momentary.

All problems involving mortals were momentary.

And then the damned Wyvern struck.

The Ink screamed in alarm, its pages scattering as the Onus of Rule came apart. It barely had time to stir from its shelves and slam into a protective ball around Ikrix before the howl-propelled splinters pelted across it.

The sound, loud and long, hung in the air, and the Ink screamed right along with it.

Chapter 15: For Thine Is the Kingdom

Then the fleet broke apart.

Crew and sails and cracked fragments of mast plunged down at the army of mages, who were now realizing that the aftermath of an airship battle was not the kind of victory to be caught underneath.

The RLS legacy, cracked down the middle and venting flames, struck the earth and detonated as its hold full of alchemical parcels ignited. Shrapnel and dirt fountained from it, raining back into the sky.

In her cushioned enclosure inside of the Ink, Ikrix began crying out in fear.

What's happening? she asked.

Are we winning?

Are you alright?

Ignoring her, the Ink tuned in to a new thrum in the Narrative and realized that its plans had changed. It would not be feeding off of Nebula, and it didn't need to wait around for the fall of Ethantar. All it was doing by prolonging the conflict was giving opportunities to its enemies.

As the Wyvern and the pawn of the Nebula fought in the air above, as the army of mages died in the valley below, the Ink folded another layer of protection around Ikrix and flexed talons made of paper.

Little bleeds were already appearing in the skin of the world. They did this whenever the gods went head-to-head, but the Ink could *accelerate* that process.

It could wound Ethantar until the world came apart.

Words scrawling across its body, sheets of loose vellum flapping in the air, the Ink tore at the fabric of the dimension until, with a deafening crack, the last of the Five Worlds broke like an egg.

CHAPTER 16: REVERENCE AND FURY

THE FIRMAMENT, VALMETICA

“It’s opening,” said Kha.

Valmetica stared out the window.

The Nugget was peeling back, layer by layer, into a kind of shining platform. Although the energies of creation and change crashed over it, a thin dome of silver energy blanketed one side and, past that barrier, the voidfire did not intrude.

In the way it was unfurling, the Nugget looked almost floral. Radiant petals opened out from the core, revealing a pearl of blinding energy right in the center. The whole platform might be miles across, but the pearl illuminated it with ease. It shone like the sun.

Even glancing at it left after-images in her retinas.

“What are we supposed to do when we get there?” she asked, blinking away the spots.

Kha shrugged. “Touch the thing at the center?” Her tone was distracted—which might have meant she was concentrating on steering her world towards the Nugget, or it might have meant that a particularly interesting thought had just occurred to her and she had stopped paying attention to the conversation. “The gods will probably have told their champions what to do,” she continued vaguely. “Maybe you can try to copy them? I’m just going to touch the thing at the center.”

Valmetica sighed and went back to staring out the window.

Magical power was streaming out of the open Nugget, washing through the void. Valmetica could feel slivers of it slithering by. As they passed, her Halo stuttered back to life, then flared—stronger for a few seconds than it had been before in her life. She quickly wove a spell over her eyes to cut down on the glare, then wrapped herself in a sheet of arcane force, reinforcing it with glyphs of permanency in case her power deserted her again.

Chapter 16: Reverence And Fury

It did not.

Still, the magewrought armor felt like it would be inadequate against a god, so she replicated the spell. She cast it again and again, adding layer after layer to the enchantment, marvelling at how easy this was.

Kha watched with mild interest.

I'm preparing to fight her, thought Valmetica, *and she's just letting me do it.*

Guilt stabbed at her.

Before she knew it, she had said "Kha, I—".

The godling had turned one quizzical stalk-eye to look at her.

Valmetica frowned. She was being ridiculous. If her enemy gave her an advantage, she should use it.

"It was nothing," she said. "Never mind."

"Okay," said Kha amicably.

Something about the godling's tone made the word rankle in Valmetica's mind. Her frown deepened. She didn't care about fairness, she reminded herself. She cared about victory. The gods showed compassion only as a trick, a way to bind mortals to their will.

She was better than that. She was—

"Actually, no," she said. "It was something. If I kill you..."

She stopped. Kha had grown a host of eyestalks, all of which had swiveled to stare at her in interest.

"Yes?" said the godling.

Valmetica swallowed.

I never asked her to do me any favors...

She pushed forward. "Kha, if I kill you, and you don't become the goddess, what would you like me to make?"

Kha spun slowly mid-air, all of her mass rolling as she rotated to inspect the Lightwings with all her eyes. Her faces—all twelve of them, intermixed with eyes—blushed. "You *do* care," she said brightly.

Valmetica shook her head, as much to rid herself of the visual as to deny the godling's claim. "I *don't* care. It's just a question. You asked it of me. Now I'm asking it of you. Do you want me to bring you back if I kill you?"

Kha hovered, considering, for a moment.

Then she said "no."

Valmetica stared. She felt a flash of anger, then shame, and then relief. She should have expected this.

"So you're the only one who gets to take the moral high-ground?" she asked derisively. "You'd deign to bring me back, but you won't bother asking for it in return?"

"No," said Kha, sounding confused. "I was not trying to hurt you. Making choices is the most important part of existing, but those choices are never perfect. If I had said 'yes', and if you honored your word, I would get to keep existing, and that would be good. But I said 'no' because that way I could make a different request."

"What," asked Valmetica, incredulously, "is worth more to you than your life?"

"Lots of things," said Kha.

"That's not really an answer," the Lightwings said dubiously.

"Yes, it is," insisted Kha. "I wasn't dodging the question. I was being specific. I want you to make lots of things. If you recreate me, it would take a lot of energy. The power of a newly minted goddess is not unlimited, and that same energy could be used to make something else. Or a lot of something elses. Non-existence is," she stopped for a moment, searching for the right words and giving up when she didn't find them, "the most horrible thing I can imagine," she said decisively. "Worse than that, there is an infinite number of people that do not exist, and that is horrible. So I want you to save a few of them. Take my energy and make them real. That way they can breathe and float and taste words and grow tongues. If, I mean," she paused, "if you decide to honor my request."

Valmetica was quiet..

"In any case," Kha said, "the question might be moot. Moot," she repeated, tasting the word.

"What? Why?" demanded Valmetica, exasperated. Was this all the elaborate set-up for a joke?

Apparently it was.

Kha gestured to the window. On the edge of the Nugget's platform, a titan made of folded paper was hauling itself out of the swirling Firmament.

"Our timing was off," she said solemnly. "We will be arriving too late."

THE PLATFORM, THE INK

Although the Ink's body was full of stories that described what it was like to touch with hands of flesh, see with mortal eyes, or hear the sounds that mortals could perceive, the Ink had never felt any of those sensations.

It had harvested each turn of phrase from a thing that a mortal writer had felt, and recorded, and thereby given to the god.

Despite being made up of all those words, the Ink had considered itself beneath experiencing the universe the mortal way—as a mewling, morbid, temporary thing, confined to scant handful of sensory spectra.

But when it came up over the lip of the glowing silver platform, it could swear it *tasted* victory.

Stray papers fluttered behind it as it stood, and stretched, and flexed its claws.

The pearl core of the Nugget was still several miles away, at the center of the platform, but the Ink was here first, and it had its queen locked in the compartment inside its chest.

Perhaps, it thought wryly, I am the only one here.

Perhaps it was the only one that had even survived of Ethantar.

It strode forward casually, letting a saunter enter its step. This would be *so* easy.

Then paranoia quickened in its pages. Maybe it was too easy.

Reaching out with its senses, the Ink brushed the Narrative, the primal current that ran through all things. The Narrative had always been easy for the Ink to access, and the Ink had exploited that connection, periodically glancing at the shape of the present.

This time, however, when it peered into the Narrative, it recoiled in alarm.

The flow of events had somehow gotten *twisted*.

The Ink's victory was not assured.

Nebula's was.

A half a mile away, a Foxcat woman was crawling up over the edge of the platform. Her clothing was lavish but tattered, the sort that might have belonged to a noblewoman if there had still been property to own or serfs to work it. Voidfire covered her, wreathing her body in a colorless shimmer, and even as she climbed to her

feet, she was fading. In a few seconds, she would be gone completely, erased by the untempered energies of the Firmament.

Unfortunately, a few seconds was enough.

She was the chosen of Nebula, after all.

Space bent and she was gone. The Ink turned and spotted her again at the center of the platform. She was standing beneath the pearl of light, reaching up to clasp it.

No! screamed the Ink, and it struck out, smearing a streak across the Narrative. The future, moments ago codified, was blotted out and reset.

From the other end of the platform, a shaft of blinding light lanced out. It struck Nebula's champion and sent her spinning, smoking, flying away.

And the Everblood climbed into view.

It was wounded. Trembling. Completely unable to threaten another god.

But it had done its work. The Foxcat was eliminated. The path to the pearl was open again.

Even though the near-future had been left unreadable, the Ink felt a rush of relief. Better to have some uncertainty than to give the next world to an enemy god.

And besides: there was no way now that it could lose.

Nebula was useless without its pawn. Its body had made its way onto the platform as a churning vortex of darkness and stars, but without a mortal champion to claim the prize, all it could do was to wait in the wings while the next world was awarded to its betters.

Even if it had been the Ink's equal in combat, it couldn't get to the platform's core.

None of the five gods could.

Up ahead, a raised silver boundary circle ran around the center of the platform. It was a part of the platform's design, created by an agreement between the five gods when they had pooled their energies to forge the Nugget.

To keep their contest fair, they had ensured that the boundary line wouldn't allow any of its makers past its edge.

Coming up to it, the Ink ran its fingers over the barrier. Energy crackled and pushed back at then intrusion, drawing off the well of god-power at the Nugget's center.

Chapter 16: Reverence And Fury

Signatory to the compact, said an emotionless voice, *you are not permitted beyond this boundary.*

The Ink rustled in satisfaction. Reaching up briskly, it tore open its own chest. Pages fluttered down from the wound to form a staircase. It led, sheet by sheet, from the hollow cavity inside down to the silver floor of the platform.

Ikrix stepped out onto the staircase uncertainly.

“Don’t hesitate,” snapped the Ink. “Run. We will talk again after you’ve ascended. For now, do as I’ve coached you and remember your promises.”

Ikrix didn’t move, so the Ink gave her a push. It wasn’t gentle, but then this wasn’t a time for gentleness. The queen reeled from the force behind it, eight legs scrabbling to keep her footing on the stairs.

She turned and stared at the Ink.

It couldn’t read her expression, but that didn’t matter. She had obeyed before. She would obey now. The Ink folded its pages back into place and hissed “whatever it is you want to say, save it for later.”

She *still* didn’t move, just stared up at it, her eyes shining. “Go!” the Ink boomed, angry now. The queen took off, sprinting towards the core.

The diameter of the warded area was a couple of miles across. It would take some time for the mortal to clinch its victory, so the Ink settled onto its haunches to wait.

Normally it would peer into the Narrative during times like this, checking the future for threats, but the smeared part was unreadable. Unalterable. And that was fine.

The war would be over soon.

The new world would be a factory of suffering. It wouldn’t be pain-based, because that was boring and mortals grew deadened to it after a while, but there would be *want* and frustrated desires and the Ink would grow fat on its people’s emotions.

In time, it would become more than just a god.

It would escape past the Firmament to a place it had once glimpsed in the Narrative, where things of unguessable creativity and malice dwelled. And it would infiltrate their designs.

At the other end of the platform, the Everblood was on its hands and knees. One of those hands smoked from where it had fired the

beam that had taken Nebula's champion out of the running. Ichorous fluid dripped from a hole in the center of the palm.

The Ink almost laughed.

Although it hadn't paid much attention to them, on the margins of the Narrative there were stories almost as interesting as its own. That the Everblood should still be alive—wounded, depleted, and useless, but alive—was incredible.

The god-titan stumbled upright, barely able to keep its feet. Plodding forward drunkenly, it walked until it hit the warding ring, then bounced off.

Like a bareknuckle brawler in a losing round, the Everblood shook its head vigorously, stared down at the perimeter of the exclusion zone, and swayed. It pawed uselessly at the air, unable to understand what was keeping it from its prize.

This time the Ink *did* laugh.

There were few things more enjoyable than the helplessness of a rival.

THE PLATFORM, JYASHUU

Jyashuu was dying.

When Ethantar had ruptured she had not been sure what she would find in the fires outside the last remaining world, so she had clung to the Everblood's neck, covering herself with a meager bubble of force.

It hadn't lasted for even a second.

Every exposed inch of her had flashed into agony. She had felt her plasm boiling away. The runes that she had painted on Dorgana, transferring her magic to the Dragonnewt, had ensured that she had nothing but scraps left to draw on.

And the strain of Dorgana's sudden and desperate leeching of her power had almost killed her outright.

Now she lay all but lifeless on the edge of the platform. The Everblood was just beyond her, but it might as well have been worlds away. At least then there would still have been worlds, not just this barren disk at the end of all things.

Chapter 16: Reverence And Fury

Speaking was too much effort, so Jyashuu lay in silence. If she tried, she could coax her thoughts back into coherence, but she couldn't force her mouth to move.

She wasn't sure if she even still had a mouth.

But she had to hold on for Dorgana's sake. For as long as she could, she would clutch at the ragged thread of her own life.

When she died, it would take Dorgana's powers with her. Then the struggle would truly be over.

The women inside the Everblood were at best a feint; a distraction. She would not leave the Dragonnewt warrior—that is, if she was not lost, freewheeling in that colorless, burning void—helpless before the might of the gods.

She would persist, even when every fluid ounce of her wanted to die.

Though it hurt, she gritted her plasm and told death to wait.

THE PLATFORM, BUEL, MINDRY, HAULA, TRESSA, EREBA, KISMET, SOME OTHER WOMEN, AND AN OWL

There was no energy left in the Everblood.

Buel banged a fist on the wall of force in front of her, but it didn't yield. Instead, words rang through her head:

Signatory to the compact, you are not permitted beyond this boundary.

"I didn't sign anything!" Ereba yelled, and the words echoed through Buel's mind. "Let us in!"

Buel slumped.

"We came so far," said Mindry softly, "and we don't even know why we're going to lose."

"Who does it think we are?" demanded Haula, her voice low and threatening.

It thinks you're me, murmured a low voice. At best it sounded only half awake, like a woman turning over to mumble in her dreams.

It was not a woman's voice, however. It was not a mortal's voice at all.

The Platform, Buel, Mindry, Haula, Tressa, Ereba,
Kismet, Some Other Women, And An Owl

It does not understand that we are many, the presence continued.
The mind within the barrier sees only our skin.

"Scribbles an' leeches!" squawked Kismet. "What *else* is in here with us?"

Buel froze, listening to the silence, but the voice did not come back. "I think it's the Everblood," she said finally. "It...sounds the way I used to imagine it would."

"Like a lady with throat-spores?" asked Kismet flatly. "An' somehow it's keepin' us from catchin' up with that spidery woman up ahead?"

"That seems to be the case," observed Tressa.

"Well," suggested Ereba. "If we can't get through as we are, why don't we climb out and go on foot?"

Buel tried to open up her own body and step outside of it.

It was exactly as impossible as it sounded.

"Did that work?" Ereba asked. "Was anyone able to get out?"

Buel studied the ground at her feet. None of the other women were there.

"Maybe there's a hatch," said Tressa doubtfully. "Can anyone feel a lever or a hinge or something like that? I mean, even if I have to cut my way out, I'm sure there's a way—"

"No," said Buel. "I don't know that there is."

There was a brief silence inside her head.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Haula slowly.

"Did Jyashuu actually say she was putting our bodies in here?" queried Buel, "or did she just *imply* it? You all heard her, right? 'It's more of a spiritual transfer than a physical one'? And then she called it a 'joining of psyches' and said that it would be complicated to reverse. Where do you think we are? Our bodies, that is. What do you think happened to them?"

Tressa let out a disbelieving hiss of breath. There was a series of equally distressed sounds from the Axolozug crew and from the Sasians.

"Stars and Sky," said Mindry. "They were in Urach."

"Which ripped apart," said Buel, "the moment we left it."

THE PLATFORM, KHA

The grass was screaming. The sky was screaming. The tree was screaming.

Kha's world was coming apart at the seams.

For a moment, the Firmament was all around her, burning and unwriting as her world split open, and then she was surrounded by air again. Her feet, all five of them, hit the surface of the platform at speed. It had more friction than she would have expected from a thing made of silver light, and she skidded, coming to a stop on her face.

Valmetica was only a few feet behind her, although the Lightwings was on a different trajectory, and she hit at a different angle. Her body cushioned by her magic, she hit and bounced, skipping like a stone across a pond as she shot across the platform.

It seemed prudent to Kha not to wait around until the Lightwings got her bearings, so she slithered forward on her belly, heading towards the centerspace and growing more tiny legs as she went.

She could see the other gods through her forest of eyestalks. The Ink, the Everblood, and Nebula all turned towards her in surprise, but as she swarmed past them, gliding up and over a raised ring that demarcated the inner half of the platform from the perimeter. As she passed the ring, she felt a ripple of energy roll over her.

Unaligned godling, said a voice in her head. *The compact does not forbid your entry. You may pass.*

"Thank you?" she told the air, but there wasn't really the time to stop and politely wait for a reply. The only other woman in the inner circle was already halfway to the core.

The Spidermoth was moving quickly. Kha knew that *she* was faster, but she did not know if that would matter. The other woman's lead was substantial. Only through direct interference could be be taken out of the running.

Kha considered growing a fire-breathing pouch in her throat, or perhaps a selection of venomous quills on her tails. One quick volley, followed by a highly pressurized blast of flames, and the race would be over.

It was what Valmetica would have done in her place.

Curiously, Kha found that that was enough to convince her to look for another way.

“Excuse me!” she shouted. The Spidermoth craned her head just enough to look over her shoulder, shrieked, and began to run faster. “Excuse me!” yelled Kha again, enlarging her vocal cords to amplify the sound. It rolled out of her newformed mouth in an almost subsonic wave of bass. “I want to talk to you about something.”

The Spidermoth kept running. Kha figured that in this context that was basically the same as saying “go on,” even if neither of those words had been used.

“See,” said Kha doggedly, “I know you want to be the next goddess, but I was wondering if that’s maybe because you don’t know what *other* people would do with those powers. For example, I was hoping to—”

The Spidermoth screamed again and veered off from her course, causing Kha some momentary confusion.

What did that mean in the coded language of the chase? Was the Spidermoth letting her take the lead? Did she want Kha to follow her?

Had she given up?

Kha hadn’t even gotten to any of her really *good* logic yet, so she hoped it wasn’t that last one. Talking with Valmetica had been an enriching experience, and Kha felt like she had learned so much about the ways mortals thought. She had been hoping for a bit more of a challenge, but she supposed she wasn’t going to complain, since thinking of a proper complaint would distract her from paying her attention to her surroundings, and—

What was that sound?

It was almost a roaring, and she remembered it vividly from somewhere else.

Home?

She rifled through her memories, grateful that there weren’t very many of them, and decided it sounded like one of the ships that had attacked her in the Wastes.

But what would one of those be doing here?

And what would it be doing this close to the ground?

Her eyestalks rolled up just as the Benevolent Overlord’s Righteous and Incandescent Savagery flew by, streaming voidfire, to smash against the platform a hundred feet in front of her.

Chapter 16: Reverence And Fury

Kha ducked, flattening herself to milimeter thickness to avoid the wall of fire that washed out from the wreck. It was almost preternaturally hot, charring the silver surface of the platform, and Kha felt her flesh welt up with angry burns just from the brief contact with it.

She straightened, regrowing skin over her wounds. The air around her was a sweltering fugue. The ship was a crackling charcoal skeleton. Everything but its hold had been consumed in the blast.

As Kha watched in horror, a thick wooden panel fell off the side of the hold, exposing a smoke-filled interior. It was crammed with bodies, all unburnt, all watching her through the swirling gray, and all with the exact same expression on their faces.

Their expressions slack, the crew came flooding out, and with them came a glittering tide of beetles.

THE PLATFORM, BUEL, MINDRY, HAULA, TRESSA, EREBA, KISMET, SOME OTHER WOMEN, AND AN OWL

“Let us in!” Mindry shouted as Buel hammered on the warding line. “You have to let us in!”

Signatory to the compact, you are not permitted beyond this boundary, said the voice in Buel’s head.

“I’m not a signatory to anything!” yelled Mindry. “I’m not the Everblood.”

Signatory to the compact, your identity has been pre-registered. You are recognized and forbidden from trespass, the voice said implacably.

“The Everblood’s *in* here,” shouted Tressa, “but it’s not in control. You have to let us through.”

Signatory to the compact, your argument requires clarification. I am programmed to disallow entrance only by specific configurations of divinity. What do you mean by “us”? What do you mean by “the Everblood’s in here?”

Buel felt her heart lunge into her throat. “The Everblood is dead,” she said quickly. “Or at least, it’s nearly dead. We’re inhabiting its

The Platform, Buel, Mindry, Haula, Tressa, Ereba, Kismet, Some Other Women, And An Owl

body, but we're not the Everblood. We only look like it. You have to let us in."

Processing, said the voice. *Please wait.*

Past the invisible wall, Buel could see an airship had landed near the center of the silver platform. Crew members were swarming out of the wreck, engaging the winged woman-spider, a shifting ball of wings and mouths that had also just arrived, and—was that a Lightwings?

Buel focused the Everblood's eyes, magnifying the image, and saw that not just people were fleeing the shipwreck.

"Scribblins," breathed Kismet.

A figure formed itself out of the beetles and waded into the fray.

Further input required, said the voice of the barrier, coming back from wherever it had gone. Its tone was still brisk and businesslike. *You are not the same Everblood that signed the compact*, it said uncomfortably. *Therefore, I can conclude that it would be permissible for me to allow you access to the inner circuit.* However, it hesitated, its voice seeming to shake, *the broader precedent is troubling. If you can wear the body of the Everblood but not be the Everblood, is any being truly the same as they were yesterday? Is any being the same as they were a moment ago? Or is every living entity merely an imperfect copy of itself, slowly iterating, until it is destroyed?* The voice was growing frantic. *Can this boundary truly be said to exclude anyone? it asked. Or am I predicated on a logic that never made sense in the first place?*

"Actually, that's an' interestin' philosophical—" Kismet began, but Buel was too quick for her.

"You let in *the Hive!*" she snapped. "And you're still keeping us out?"

Oh, said the voice somberly. *I hadn't really thought...*

There was a pause, and then Buel fell onto her hands and knees as the barrier deactivated.

I've made a terrible error, said the voice, *and I will be turning myself off. I cannot make amends for what I have done, but I can at least prevent further malfunction. You're free to go now. All of you are.*

"Wait," said Haula. "What does it mean by 'all of you'?"

In the near distance, a whirling black vortex swept down on the Hive and its minions as Nebula entered the fray.

THE PLATFORM, NEBULA

Being a god, Nebula did not believe in miracles.

It believed in cleverness. It believed in overwhelming force. And it believed in exploiting every opportunity it was given.

With its newly converted pawns dead in Ethantar and its champion a charred body slowly eroding from reality on the silver surface of the platform, it had been forced to wait, and watch, and gnash its spiral arms while the Ink's gambit unfolded.

Thankfully, the gnashing had kept those arms nice and sharp.

The Hive's hosts were as chaff before it.

Nebula touched them and they were teleported. Not all to the same place. Nor all in the same configuration. They were just generally... *teleported*.

Arms, legs, heads, and torsos, they were distributed randomly across the platform.

The Hive's avatar shied away from Nebula's expansive body, rolling back on a carpet of bugs to retreat behind the fires of the still-blazing ship. Nebula chuckled.

The Depths would have been a threat, but their flunky wasn't. Nebula didn't bother finishing the avatar. Without weaklings, there was no point in being strong. Maybe it would even keep the Hive around when it had made its new world, Nebula mused. The creature wouldn't be kept in any position of influence, of course, but it would make for a wonderful form of entertainment.

After all, who didn't like stepping on bugs? It was satisfying to watch them scurry.

With the crew of the ship dead, Nebula drifted over to the platform's center. The little pearl of god-energy that was floating there hardly seemed like it should have been worth the risk, especially considering how close Nebula had come to being exterminated, but there was no point crying over spilled blood. Nebula licked out a tendril to take the prize.

Instead, its arm bounced off of a wall of mauve light.

Mortal magic?

The wall was thick and layered, completely enclosing the pearl under a violet dome, but mortal magic was nothing compared to divine power. Mortals rendered the energies of the worlds into

magic, but Gods rendered the energies of the Firmament into worlds. The shield covering the pearl might as well have been made of glass.

Nebula struck the wall with a single arm. Spiderweb cracks scattered across it. The Lightwings that had thrown up the shield was now backing away, her wings half-furled in fear.

"Inadequate," Nebula rumbled at her. "Inferior. You're barely worth the time it would take to eviscerate you."

"Odd," purred a familiar voice from behind the god. "I was thinking the same thing myself."

White-hot pain flooded Nebula as one of its arms was shredded away.

Papers spun through the air around it, insults rippling in black script across the sheets.

"And here I was worried," said the Ink, "that I might not get to devour you before this was over." A second blast of pages flensed away another of Nebula's arms. "That was silly of me. The Narrative always provides."

THE PLATFORM, VALMETICA

A second lease on life and an opportunity to kill another god?

Maybe this was the afterlife. Maybe death had been kinder to her than she deserved.

Digging deep into her power, Valmetica reinforced the shell around the pearl. Her Halo was no longer a thin circlet of violet light. It was a coruscating vortex. She hardly even needed to think to draw on her power. She simply thought, and the magic complied.

The shell hardened and grew, burgeoning out from a cracked dome into layers of steel-and-stone strata. Any one of them could have shrugged off a collision from an airship. Together, they would hold off a direct assault from a god.

At least for a little while.

Valmetica was under no illusions that, if she made a play for the pearl herself, both gods wouldn't instantly kill her. However, as long as Nebula was still alive, the Ink couldn't afford to waste the energy on cracking the shell.

And that hesitation was something she could punish.

Chapter 16: Reverence And Fury

Disdainfully, she flicked a bolt of lightning at the Ink. A cluster of its pages caught fire, burning to ash in the air, but it remained locked in combat with Nebula. The wound hadn't even gotten its attention.

But throwing the bolt had been as easy as breathing.

Even while maintaining the shell, she had felt none of the usual drain that came with channeling too much spellcraft, so she modified the spell. She rewrote a few key parameters, taking out the limitations she had placed on how much energy it was allowed to draw from her Halo.

This time when she cast, the bolt split midair, forking into two rushing lines of tangled, sun-white energy. Those bolts split as well, and their branches split in turn, and a fractal swarm of lightning bolts gouged a burning hole out of the Ink's side.

Instantly new papers rushed in, filling the gap. The god's talons continued to tear at the vague, star-strewn mass of Nebula, but the Ink rotated its origami head to regard Valmetica for a cold moment. "Careful whom you antagonize, little firefly," it said icily, "lest it become worthy of my time."

"Try it," said Valmetica, "and Nebula will rip you apart."

She stared pointedly at the other god.

Instead of drawing itself up and thrashing its arm-stumps and affirming the threat it posed, Nebula seized the opportunity to try and flee. Leaking star-stuff, it tried to rip a bleed open, crawling towards the breach as it fought desperately to be anywhere but in the Ink's presence.

Its exposed back was an expanse of stars, and the Ink's talons sank in just as easily as if they had been flesh. One of those claws dug deep, caught something dark and vaguely spheroid, and pulled it dripping out of the god.

The Ink threw the orb disdainfully down on the floor, and it rolled away, painting a blackened slime-trail across the platform.

"You won't be leaving this time," the Ink purred. "Nor will you be swooping in to steal the prize from me when I stop and pluck off this little firefly's wings. Our business concludes now."

Nebula trembled. Its arms were mauled, ragged stumps. Its cosmos orbited around nothing. There was a vacant hole where the axis mundi should have been. Space bled in black rivers from its body, leaking across the platform in thin rivers of displaced stars.

Gripping Nebula on both sides, the Ink began tearing a crease down the center of its back. Nebula screamed, constellations burbling out from the wound.

The Ink lowered its head and began drinking the stars. Its paper teeth were stained black. It burred in pleasure.

Valmetica struck.

Rather than bother with fire or lightning again, she simply dumped every scrap of energy from her Halo into the air around the god, spiking its temperature from breathable to blast-furnace hot. The Ink's entire body caught fire, flames breaking out of its tomes and missives and scrolls, lapping at bindings and cases. Gold lacquer dripped and ran and smoke rolled off of its shoulders, temporarily obscuring its body.

The Ink roared in surprise.

Darting back, Valmetica threw up a shield around herself and braced for the counterstroke.

But it didn't come.

Out of the wall of smoke, burning pages drifted. They fell haphazardly onto the surface of the platform like a dejected late-spring rain.

Then Nebula lumbered out of the haze, limping, leaking, to collapse in an obsidian heap at the edge. It rolled a planetary eye towards Valmetica, and she almost thought she could see a begging expression in the celestial orb.

As coldly as she could, she said "wait your turn," and shifted her attention to the Nugget.

The energy radiating off of the Nugget was incredible, she thought in wonder. Her Halo churned, gathering speed until it was a wine-dark vortex.

She waved a hand towards the Ink and the smoke dispersed, revealing a heap of half-burned trash.

The god didn't so much as twitch.

Still, she decided, it was better to be certain.

Valmetica raised her hands, ready to cover it in a final consuming jet of fire, and felt a sudden pressure on the back of her neck.

It was a collar, pressing tight against the skin. And it was *sharp*.

Chapter 16: Reverence And Fury

Reaching back, she tried to yank it away, but she couldn't get her fingers around it. There was nothing to grab onto. It had flattened itself perfectly against her skin.

Because it was a piece of paper, she realized.

"It's the moments like this," the Ink said, the heap of charred texts reassembling themselves into its body, "that justify the boring, tedious slog that the rest of this war has been. You almost surprised me, little firefly. I actually had to improvise a defense instead of simply overpowering you. I think I even *learned* something." The Ink's voice echoed mockingly across the platform. "To show my appreciation, I'm going to teach you something in return. Do you know how many pounds of pressure it takes to piece mortal skin?"

Valmetica felt another white-hot slash draw itself across the back of her neck. A trickle of something that was too warm for perspiration began to spill down her back, winding its way between her wings.

"No need to answer," the Ink continued. "I'm sure you're well-read, but it's the practicum that really makes a lesson stick. Let's review, firefly. What happens when a mortal annoys a god?"

Valmetica gritted her teeth and withdrew her hand from the page on the back of her neck. The Ink could kill her quicker than she could rip it away. Even if she could have gotten a good grip on it, it would have just shredded her fingers.

Only the Ink's pathological need to gloat was keeping her alive.

"Keep talking," snarled Valmetica. "See how that works out for you."

The Ink drew another papercut across the back of her neck. "You know," it said mildly, "this is a single page. That's really all you're worth in the end. A scrap of doggerel." It slashed her again. "So," it went on, "one might wonder why a creature like you even exists. It's certainly not to oppose me. If the Narrative had intended you for that role, it would have made you a bit more durable. No," this time Valmetica let out an involuntary hiss from the pain of the cut, "little firefly, I am forced to conclude that you exist for the same reason as any of these other mortals: entertainment."

"You might be able to kill me," Valmetica forced out from between her teeth, "but you're not going to do it by talking."

"Oh?" the Ink purred. "Did I say I was going to kill you yet?" Its body dissolved into a whirlwind of pages and swirled closer,

settling back into its hominid form a few feet away. It towered over Valmetica. It was taller even than the shell she had built over the pearl. "You die on my time. Until then, why don't we chat about your sisters. After all," its pages rustled, "who doesn't like hearing about family?"

Valmetica felt her expression go perfectly neutral.

With the page on her neck, she couldn't risk looking back to see how close the Everblood was to the center of the platform, or whether any survivors were still alive near the wrecked ship, or where Kha had gotten to the pearl. All Valmetica could do was to wait and hope that one of them intervened.

"Even the worst of my sisters was worth more than than every god in the Five Worlds," she told the Ink coldly. "You'll burn for what you did to them."

"I already have," said the Ink languidly. "It didn't take. And really, I'm hurt. To think you don't consider me family? After all these years? We both know that there's more than a little Lightwings blood in me."

Valmetica didn't feel herself dropping the shield that surrounded the pearl. It just happened.

Other women sometimes talked about anger like it was a warming thing. Like it heated the blood or it turned breath into hot air.

Valmetica didn't feel warm.

She felt like all the warmth in her body had left with the blood that was still running down her back.

She shivered, although not from discomfort. This was a limbering-up. A rehearsal for violence.

"I hope that was a good line," she said, "because it's the last thing anyone's going to hear from you."

If she couldn't scrape the page from the back of her neck, then so be it.

Stepping into the Ink, she pulled in every ounce of energy she could hold and turned it into fire.

THE PLATFORM, THE INK

The Ink vanished in the blast, a quarter of its body turning instantly to ash. The rest of its swirling papers it was able to extinguish with a thought, but even so, the *indignity* of the wound stung a thousandfold worse than the damage. It could recoup its pagemass easily by devouring Nebula, but the knowledge that it had allowed an insipid, mewling *firefly* to choose the time and manner of her death was a stark reminder to the Ink that it was not omnipotent.

Not yet.

The Lightwings' body had somehow remained intact, despite being at the heart of the explosion. It was covered in burns, but none were so grave as to show bone beneath, The Ink's pages churning in complex patterns, it bent low to inspect the mortal. If there was still some life in her corpse, then perhaps it could briefly revive her and kill her again—

A tornado of force hit the Ink from behind. Instantly, it reversed its head and found that it was staring into the gaping abyss of Nebula.

The ragged edges of the galaxy pulsed with hatred.

The wounded god had decided to try for another round.

Bit by bit, it was teleporting pages of the Ink to the distant ends of the platform. The pages shot back, fast as arrows, but there was still a lot of space for them to cover. Nebula's attack was laughable, but if it was able to displace enough of the Ink's body that the Ink could no longer hold it, it could make a grab for the unguarded pearl.

"You know," snarled the Ink, "I was being gentle before." It dug into Nebula's center-mass with both folded hands. "I wanted us *both* to get everything we could out of the moment of your death. I wanted drama and remorse. I wanted *genuine feelings*. It seems revoltingly cheap to do it this way. In a just universe, there would have been years for you to beg, but I don't have time, so..."

The Ink's legs dissolved. Then its body.

Its hands melted away as it crammed itself into Nebula's wounds.

There was a rustle of pages from within the other god, and then Nebula exploded.

The Ink reassembled itself and stood where Ethantar's god had been, still dripping with parts of the cosmos. "Now that *that's* done with," it said, turning back to Valmetica's body. "Let's revisit you."

"You leave her be!" screamed a thousand throats, and a ball of mouths and claws hit the Ink from the side.

The Ink flung itself apart, instantly recompiling a few hundred feet away, but not all of its pages made the trip.

A creature like an amoeba floated where it had been, savaging the few sheets it had caught in its jaws until the words ran off them like blood.

It was the godling that had attacked Ikrix's fleet.

"You do not have permission to take this woman's life," said the godling, forming itself briefly into the shape of a mortal. The mortal had dark blue hair and one of its arms was a flipper, but it was a good approximation of what mortals usually looked like. "I forbid it," the godling continued.

It was standing right beside the ruined remains of Nebula, the Ink noted, but it did not seem to be moving to feed.

That was interesting.

The Ink exploded, reforming itself behind the godling, and sliced through its plasm with paper talons. The godling split down the middle, yanked away from the Ink, and merged both halves back together with a terrible *glorping* sound.

One side of the godling grabbed a sheaf of papers from the Ink and began chewing it to shreds. The other formed a pair of arms and set about breaking the spine of an especially heavy book.

"What are you?" asked the Ink, momentarily fascinated. There had *not* been any sign of the godling's significance in the Narrative, but this was twice now that the creature had crossed the Ink's path. "Where did you come from?"

"I am Kha," said the godling arrogantly. "And I exist. That is all you need to know."

Was there time to wring an answer out of the creature?

The Ink glanced back across the platform to where the Everblood was pulling itself, hand over hand, towards the pearl. The broken god had gotten closer, but at the speed it was moving, it was hardly worth considering, much less dealing with.

Meanwhile the Hive—at least, those parts of it that had survived Nebula's attack—was scavenging for scraps of the detonated galaxy.

Chapter 16: Reverence And Fury

It was safe to ignore as well. Even if the jumped-up avatar somehow ate every remaining piece of Nebula, it still wouldn't have a fraction of the power necessary to overwhelm the Ink and claim the pearl.

And on the other side of the Hive...?

The Ink creased a smile.

All it needed to do was to hold Kha's attention for a few minutes, and then it would have *plenty* of time to study the godling's biology in detail.

"Any way I cut you," the Ink asked pleasantly, "you'll just reform?"

"Oh, yes," said Kha brightly. "It will be very inconvenient for you."

"What if I absorb you instead?" asked the Ink.

Kha went pale. Albinism swept across her plasm until she was almost camouflaged against the platform.

"Would you like me to explain how I'm going to do that?" continued the Ink, its manner obsequious. "I can repel liquids from my pages, but I can also do the reverse. After all, how else am I supposed to write on myself?" It paused, its papers rustling in dry laughter. "By the way, little godling," it said innocently, "how much of you is liquid?"

Kha drew back, her plasm swirling. She grew stingers and bristles everywhere that she had space. Mouths snapped out from her midsection, their jaws thick with ivory teeth.

"You don't like that?" the Ink purred. "Well, no matter. I've stalled you long enough. Ikrix, now!"

Beneath the unshielded pearl, the Spidermoth queen stood, arms reaching up to receive the power of the goddess.

Even in the chaos of the airship crash, the Ink had never once wondered whether she was still alive.

It would always know where to find her, because its will and hers were bound together as one.

She was its champion. She was marked indelibly with its favor.

She was...

She was hesitating.

"What are you doing?" snapped the Ink. "Seize the pearl. Finalize our rule."

Ikrix had paused, her hands almost-but-not-quite touching the glowing orb. There was a strange light in her eyes, and it was not

the reflection from the shining heart of the last piece of creation energy in the universe.

It was fear.

"There's something I've been wondering," said Ikrix, her voice so soft that it barely carried.

The Ink had to strain to hear it. Its pages fluttered with impatience.

"Now's not the time for questions," it said. "Seize the pearl."

"No, I," the queen stopped. Swallowed. Her eyes were wet.

Why? thought the Ink, seething. *Why do mortals do that? Even when there are clearly more important things for them to do than to feed me their emotions, they insist on these ridiculous displays.*

"I want to tell you something," said Ikrix, "and I want to ask a question in return. Ever since I first met you, I've always felt like you understood me. Your library's been the only place I truly felt safe, and I know things have been tough for you lately, and that's why you haven't been able to talk to me much, and you've had a lot on your mind, too, and that's why you're sometimes unkind to me, but I know that's all going to get better. It's just, what if *everything* changes between us? I can't stand that thought, and I've been trying to tell you that, but you won't listen, and maybe I didn't know how to say it before now. If becoming the goddess means giving up on how you would talk to me, or the stories I would tell you, or the way I felt surrounded by your shelves, I don't want that. When I almost died in Urach, I realized that I couldn't keep this all in. You needed to know it. You needed to because I—"

"Shut," hissed the Ink, enunciating every phoneme, "up. Grab the pearl, finish the war, or I swear I'll do it myself. Over your body if I have to, you pitiful, noisy, whinging waste of skin."

"—love you," finished Ikrix. She broke off. She closed her mouth slowly. She licked her lips, tongue probing over where tracteries of tears had just run. The light in her eyes had changed again. "Was I wrong about you?" she asked herself, and there was a trembling in her voice that was like the shaking of a spire as it came loose from its socket in the Ceiling.

"Just grab the pearl," said the Ink, mollifyingly. "We can talk about this later."

"No, I," Ikrix hesitated. She hiccuped. Her tears had resumed flowing. "I don't really think we can."

Chapter 16: Reverence And Fury

And she began to march forward, towards the Ink, away from the pearl. Her voice rose, starting as a whisper and continuing until she was screaming.

“How dare you,” she shrieked, her voice resonant with anger. “How dare you downplay me? All my life, I have gotten *nothing* that I wanted. Only obligations, guilt, failed expectations, spite, and *open rebellion from my subjects*. Even when I put their heads on pikes, no one celebrated me. No one sang in the streets because I had stopped the riots, or ended the food crisis, or recalled the armies to pacify the kingdom. No one told me what a good job I’d done; only that I hadn’t done enough. And when I executed a few of my advisors, then no one would tell me *anything at all*. They just stared at me and tried to repeat back at me the things that I’d said. Do you know how boring that is? How useless that made me feel? How useless I’ve felt for my *entire life*? I thought you were different, but now you’re treating me like some lovesick girl!”

Snarling, the Ink tuned her out.

The queen had been a mistake. It had used too much of its influence on her. It had pushed her too hard, made her desires too strong and irrational.

And now she was broken.

She was still devoted to the Ink, utterly and completely, but her devotion had eclipsed her usefulness.

It flicked one hand and a dart made of paper shot across the platform.

Mid-word, Ikrix stumbled and fell.

The dart was buried to the hilt in her eye. Red burred from the wound.

“Fine,” said the Ink. “I’ll do what I should have done at the start. I’ll ascend without mortal help.” It withdrew the page from the queen’s skull and sent it fluttering towards the pearl.

It felt anticlimactic to win like this, but the Ink was much too exhausted to complain any more. In fact, the first thing it would do with the power of the goddess, it decided, was to build itself a new body. A grander body. A body made of wires and electricity, of thought and of images and code, all spanning the new world in a single massive network.

It had grown quite bored of being a floating library.

And besides, its old body *itched*.

It itched worse with every passing second, actually.

The sensation kept building and building, welling up inside the god, and the Ink's remote page, now only twenty feet from the pearl, slipped suddenly from the air.

Holes had opened in it.

They continued to open, engulfing it.

Within seconds, the page was destroyed.

The Ink looked down at itself.

Its body was covered in beetles, each chewing diligently at its pages, their numbers swelling with every bite of godstuff they siphoned away.

Frenzied, the Ink fought back, dragging the moisture out of the Hive's drones. Hundreds of dessicated beetles rained like sand from its flanks. But the Ink's power was dwindling and there were already too many to kill.

A rising column of scuttling, chitinous death swarmed over it, and the Ink was obliterated.

The Hive took its place.

THE PLATFORM, KHA

"Don't even think about moving," said the Hive, staring down at Kha. "We'd cover you in an instant. There'd be nothing left but bones. Assuming you even have those."

"Not always," said Kha truthfully. "Growing bones makes me feel like I have something stuck in my throat."

"Then there'd be nothing left of you," said the Hive, recovering its momentum. It paused. "In deference to your willingness to die for your mortal friend, we will make you this offer once. If you stand aside, you will be granted a place in the new world."

It's lyin', thundered a voice from nearby. The Hive turned its multitudinous head to regard the newcomer. The Everblood had crawled to within a few hundred feet of the center. It was resting on its hands and knees, gasping for air that it couldn't breathe. **All the Depths 's ever been wantin' is t' feed**, it continued. **It'd be feedin' on you, physically or met-yew-phorically, before you could blink.**

Both Kha and the Hive stared at the Everblood.

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“Aren’t you...supposed to be from Urach?” Kha asked the god delicately.

She did not know *everything* about the other gods, but Valmetica had been very emphatic about certain key points.

I **am**, said the Everblood, now in a flat, Urachian accent.

A shudder seemed to roll through the Avatar of the Restless Depths.

“Buel?” the Hive asked, its edges rippling. Entire sheets of insects, each a raft of clinging bugs as big around as a person, fell from the avatar’s sides. Beetles ran in a whirling circle around its base, like bees orbiting a broken hive. “Why is the Everblood speaking with your voice?”

It’s complicated, said the Everblood.

“We understand complicated quite well,” said the Hive. “Now that we are a god, entire vistas of thought are open to us that had previously been closed. We want you to know, if you are in there, that we regret our earlier behavior towards you. We hope you do not think less of us for it.”

The Everblood was quiet.

“For what it is worth,” continued the Hive gently, “we now know we should have infested you from the start. We could have only controlled your actions when you seemed likely to act against our interests, and permitted you free will the rest of the time. We are sorry we did not decide to do that. It has put us on opposite sides. Perhaps even made opposite colonies of us. Our differences may be irreconcilable.”

Oh, I’m so glad you’ve got that figured out, said an Axolozugian voice from inside the Everblood. **That’s definitely where you went wrong. Ceiling and Drop, Buel. Are all gods lunatics?**

Just the ones I’ve met, the Everblood said to itself.

“Whatever has happened to you,” said the Hive, “if any part of Buel is in there, we will make to her the same offer as we did to this godling. Stand aside, and you will be reborn. Meddle, and you will be destroyed. We regret that we must issue an ultimatum, but the hour grows late and the worlds must be remade. So, which is it?”

The Everblood tried to stand. Its knees and ankles flexed, straightened, and failed under the strain.

It was left kneeling.

The Hive turned back to Kha.

Kha's body churned, growing hundreds of tiny beaks. It churned again, and she was covered with carnivorous blossoms. It churned again, desperately. Every self-defense measure she could think of was inadequate against the Hive.

She settled to the ground, defeated.

"Good," said the Hive, and flowed forward. "You know your place."

"What about me?" slurred a different Urachian voice. "You going to waste my time asking me if I know *my* place, or are we going to get right to the part that counts?"

Dorgana spat on the ground, flexed her claws, and waded into the Hive.

THE PLATFORM, DORGANA

The holy curse raced like fire through her veins, but it was not in control. Not completely. Without a moon in the sky over the Platform, the curse couldn't decide whether it was awake or asleep, so her body felt half-changed and wrong.

It had taken much too long for her to struggle out of that hideous, burning chasm between worlds, and the Everblood's gift had fought her all the way, but now she had control. Her right arm was a wing, bent and shrivelled, but her left had claws as thick as knives and her tail still had the wyvern's wicked bone-spike on the end.

It had worked on mortals. It would suffice for bugs. And with Jyashuu's magic and the Blood's feral blessing warring within her, she was invincible.

What could a pillar of insects do to her in this state?

She roared, and the Hive imploded. A whole crater exploded out of its midsection, the beetles flattened into disparate clumps of wings and legs and ichor. She roared again, and a section of its base compressed like a giant foot had come down on top of it.

The Hive cocked back a hand and threw it at Dorgana, but she met it midair with a roar and it turned into squirming, scrabbling, dying things on the ground at her feet.

Chapter 16: Reverence And Fury

“That’s all you got?” she asked pugnaciously, her tail lashing, scraping scars in the platform’s surface. “The first god I fight,” she went on, “and you’re less of a threat than the mortals.”

The Hive fanned out cautiously, moving to encircle her, but she simply leapt away. She landed on the other side of the avatar and began to walk briskly towards the pearl.

“If it makes you feel any better,” she said over her shoulder, “Whatever you are, I’ll bring you back when I’m goddess. All the gods and all the mortals that this thoughtless conflict has killed, I’m going to restore. I’m not even going to remain in charge. I’m just going to fix things so that you can’t fight each other again, and then—”

Whatever she was going to say next was lost in the sound of the Hive drawing its entire body up and slamming down on her.

She vanished under a pressing mass so deep that even her roars were drowned out by the billionfold scrabbling of articulated legs.

THE PLATFORM, JYASHUU

Jyashuu coughed.

She coughed blood or plasm or whatever it was that she was made of. The technicality no longer mattered to her.

Nothing mattered to her.

She had given so much to the Five Worlds.

She couldn’t see the fight through the haze of pain that sheathed her senses. Either her champions had the leverage they needed to win, or they had never had a chance in the first place.

She could go quietly now.

She had made her amends.

She had paid her debts.

It would have to be enough, she told herself, even though there was a part of her that still rebelled.

In curiosity, she had sprung the first god free of its prison, but that sin was erased now.

She was free of it.

The worlds had passed into oblivion and so, finally, could she.

Jyashuu closed her eyes.

The Platform, Buel, Mindry, Haula, Tressa, Ereba, Kismet, Some Other Women, And An Owl

The gates would open, she thought. The afterlife would appear before her eyes.

Consciousness slipped from her.

There was only silence.

THE PLATFORM, BUEL, MINDRY, HAULA, TRESSA, EREBA, KISMET, SOME OTHER WOMEN, AND AN OWL

"Blood and moonlight," whispered Buel.

"How are we supposed to fight that?" Ereba demanded. "What do we have that it can't *instantly* counter?"

Buel scanned the platform. On the other side of the thrashing mass of bugs was the floating mouth-thing that had fought the Ink. It was currently looking on in horror. As the Hive continued to grapple with its prey, the mouth thing drifted around the far edge of the conflict, coming to a stop in front of Buel's face.

Weakly, Buel raised one hand in defense. If it was going to devour her, at least she could wound it in the process. And if emitting that beam from her hand caused her to pass out, maybe she wouldn't even feel the pain of her godflesh being ripped away.

But rather than rush at her, the mouth thing said "wait, please."

Buel wanted to believe that she had cautiously lowered her hand, but it had probably fallen to the ground more from exhaustion than anything else. "What do you want?" she asked the mouth-thing quietly.

"My name is Kha," it said. "And I would like to know why there are so many of you in there. Your condition does not seem common for gods, and it does not match what I have been told about the Everblood."

"Is that really important?" groaned Buel.

"If it isn't," said Kha, "I doubt you will be annoyed over it for long." One long eyestalk threw a look back at the Hive, which was still thrashing. "So, what happened to you?"

"A sorceress put us in here," said Mindry.

"But she neglected to give us any power," added Tressa. "So we're stuck like this. Useless."

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Kha seemed to think about that. "Was it easy?" she asked.

"How should we know?" said Haula angrily. "She drew some runes and told us half-truths and that was it. We were left in the dark."

"Figuratively and literally," Tressa said.

"Mm," said Kha. She snaked out a long tendril and grabbed the badly burned body of the Lightwings from where it lay just outside of the Hive's perimeter. The Lightwings looked worse than any wounded Buel had ever seen. Her head lolled brokenly.

Kha pulled her closer, dragging her over the surface of the platform.

The Hive did not seem to notice.

"Can you show me the symbols?" asked Kha, coming to a stop.

"She drew them on our heads," said Buel flatly. "I didn't see them."

But I did, said a voice from inside.

Unbidden, Buel lifted her hand again and began to scratch with her fingers strange patterns on the platform's surface. Kha floated over to study them, then drifted back. The Lightwings dangled from her grip like a ragdoll.

Over by where Dorgana had been, the Hive's motions were subsiding. It began drawing itself back up into a man-shape. Although it had been diminished, It was only missing a little of its mass.

A bone-spiked tail hung out of the center column, bare down to the skeleton.

"I think I can save us," said Kha, "but I need you to hold still, and I need you to accept the Lightwings."

"What do you mean, 'accept the Lightwings'?" began Ereba warily, but Haula hissed at her to be quiet.

"It doesn't matter," said the Harpy. "And we don't have time for an explanation."

"Fine," said Buel. She reoriented on Kha. "Whatever you need to do, do it."

The Hive ejected Dorgana's bones and it began to stream towards the pearl at the center of the platform.

Kha wrapped herself around the Lightwings and shaped the first of the symbols with herself.

THE PLATFORM, THE HIVE

Totality was a noble goal.

To take the worlds from chaos to order, that was the only thing any true god should aspire to.

The bloodshed along the way had been regrettable, but a colony could not expand without pushing against the territories of its rivals. That was simply the way of things. Those that could not unify properly were to be exterminated.

Reaching the pearl, the Hive was struck by how small the core of energy was. It blazed with light, but it was barely a pinprick against the bulk of the platform.

The five gods had created all of *this* just to house a single blazing speck?

The Hive reached a hand out to touch the pearl and the smell of smoke flooded through it. The scent was thick and rank, like charred meat.

The Hive hesitated. Had the pearl burned it? It raised its hand to study it, and found that the hand was gone.

Not absorbed back into its mass.

Just *gone*.

The smell of smoke intensified.

Abruptly, it realized it had lost cohesion. Holes had opened in its body. Flashes of light had strobed, faster than thinking. Faster than its component parts could register.

It was no longer standing.

Its base had been cut out from underneath it.

Its composite legs had been burned away.

As fast as it could, it reached up with a tendril of beetles to snatch at the pearl, but the tendril vanished in another a flash of light and smoke.

Heavy footsteps shook the platform.

A giant was standing.

A shadow fell across the Hive.

With millions of multifaceted eyes, the Hive stared up.

And the Everblood stared down.

It was suddenly so hard for the Hive to *think*.

Language drifted on the edge of its comprehension.

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It had been bigger than it was now, it knew. It had dreamed tremendous dreams and fought terrible adversaries and reasoned with a mind made of millions of scurrying pieces.

Now it didn't even know where it was.

It didn't know who it was.

It needed to feed. It knew that. First it would find some carrion, and then it would build itself a burrow.

After a few generations, the understanding would return. It would be restored.

Looking for a corpse to eat, the tide of surviving bugs rolled off.

Do you think we should stand here and gloat? asked a voice from inside the Everblood. **Any of you want to give some other contender the chance to snatch the victory from our hands?**

No, said several other voices angrily.

The Everblood's hand swept down and grabbed the pearl.

There was a retina-searing flash of light and then the platform, the pearl, the titan, and the Hive were gone.

They were replaced with an expanse of perfect void.

The Second Creation had begun.

CHAPTER 17: WHAT KIND NEW WORLD

HOLDFAST

In the beginning there was darkness, and so Buel made the light. The light shone through an empty expanse, and so she made earth. The earth was parched and bare, and so she covered it in water. The water hid the earth from view, and so she scooped some of the dirt together and made topography. The newly risen landmasses looked like scabs against the perfect blue of the planet, and so she scattered them with seeds. From the seeds grew life, blooming and pure. Crystalline and strange.

Metal flowers covered the planet.

Quickly Buel added an atmosphere and relegated the metal flowers to a single continent far in the southern ocean, geographically isolated to prevent their spread.

The flowers had been a mistake.

She tried to remove them, and the effort failed.

She frowned, but her new powers were not of un-creation. She could only design, never redact. The flowers coughed out parasitic metal pollen, and she ringed their continent with fierce circular winds to ensure that none of it would escape.

Being a goddess was harder than it had seemed.

Maybe making mortals would be easier

Buel reached out to try her hand at making people and there was a discreet cough from beside her.

"Just diving right in?" said a wry voice. "You're not even going to ask what we'd like to see in this place?"

Tressa adjusted her hat. She was standing silhouetted against the night sky, her body an incredibly detailed constellation. The stars picked out every part of her, from the way her hair moved to the designs that had been carved into the buttons on her jacket.

Behind her, her crew stepped out of the dark, a shimmering crowd of stars.

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One by one, the other women who had been sealed into the Everblood began to appear.

Kha and the Lightwings were the last to arrive, and the Lightwings looked haggard even in her divinity. “This is Valmetica,” said the godling, waving twelve arms towards her companion in introduction. “She’s nicer than she seems.”

Valmetica threw a dark look at Kha, but she turned to face Buel. “It seems we’ve *all* become the goddess of the prophecy,” she said bluntly. “Are we going to be able to handle that, or are we going to kill each other?”

There was more weariness than challenge in her eyes, but those weren’t peaceful words. Buel felt the angles stir within her.

She forced them back down.

“I thought I was alone here,” she said. Not embarrassed. Just stating the facts. She gestured to the unfinished world beneath them. “I got this started, but there’s less energy in being a goddess than I had thought there would be. I don’t know if I can make any more big changes. I can’t rewrite the laws of magic or divinity. I can’t change the temperature fire burns at, or the warmth the sun shines with, or how round a circle is. I certainly can’t create a second world for the rest of you to shape.”

“Me neither,” said Tressa. “I *felt* that energy leaving me when you were using it. I bet we’re all drawing it from the same source.”

There was a wave of angry muttering. It was interrupted by Mindry.

“Wait a minute,” said the Pangola. “There’s still plenty of energy left in us for small changes, and there’s a lot we can create on the surface of this world. If we fight over this, we’ll burn through what’s left of our energy and accomplish *nothing*.”

There was a surprising fierceness to the way she spoke, and Haula smiled at her. “She’s right,” the Harpy said passionately. “Not that I like sharing, but it’s better than being cast burning from the heavens, or whatever it is angry co-goddesses do to each other. We can each take a turn, and then decide what to do with whatever energy’s left.”

Buel felt suddenly possessive of what she had built. It was *her* world, after all. *She* had been the one to pilot the Everblood to victory. She *deserved* this...

Except, everyone else had also thought they were controlling the god.

Could she really say for certain that this had been her story, and everyone else had just been the supporting cast?

"Fine," she said, more bitterly than she had expected to, "but I'll go first."

No one spoke up to gainsay her.

Reaching out, she grabbed a handful of earth from where the water met the land. It was rich and pliable in her fingers, and effortlessly she shaped it into tiny forms. Within minutes, she had made thousands of them.

They looked almost like people, but there were details missing. They had no wings or horns or scales, no chitinous carapaces or multiple legs or bodies made of furniture. They had no prehensile tongues, no quills and no stingers. They were simply...

Bare.

Buel leaned in and breathed on them. The bodies shook as they animated, as the souls of the women from Urach, snatched from the moment before their death, were translated into these paltry, half-made shells. Lamias and Gorgonesses, Dragonturtles and Dragonnewts, there was no telling them apart now. They were one people. Indivisible. Indistinguishable.

"What did you do to them?" asked Kha, wide-eyed.

"That's not right," said Haula sharply.

"It's my choice," said Buel. "Who's next?"

Tressa was. She found a wide, fertile plain and planted trees across it. They erupted from the soil, growing until they hit the lower clouds, becoming an arbor of giants. Creatures sprang into being—an entire ecosystem unfurling in minutes across their trunks—as parasitic vines and gibbering simians and centipede-snakes chased each other through intertwining branches while gargantuan reptile-birds built their nests in the highest bowers.

"Why a forest—" Ereba began, but Tressa shushed her.

Tracing her fingertips over the tops of the tallest trees, she let divine energy flow from twigs to taproots. The trees that she brushed swelled outward, quickening. One split at the top, portions of its trunk peeling back like the petals of a flower. Covered in sap, an airship rose out of its heart.

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The ship was barely a skiff, its sails damp and new, but a breeze rushed over it and it wriggled in the air current, then leapt into the open sky. Dozens of others followed.

Ereba's mouth hung open.

"Who's next?" said Tressa, turning away.

There was a clamor as her crew rushed to the fore, filling the world with natural resources. Deep deposits of ore, clusters of crystal, cold, sweet rivers, plentiful hunting, perfect farmland, well-ventilated caverns, and thousands of kinds of herbs for every type of ache bloomed across the surface of the land.

As they huddled in conference, trying to decide what luxury to add next, a bat-winged woman stood apart from their number. "You're thinking too small," she said and ripped a massive column out of the depths of the earth, molding it from molten gold and steel and glass. She spared no detail, crafting statuary, furniture, wading pools, and viewing balconies as she turned it from a crude spike into a fully realized city.

Digging down, she built deep vaults beneath it and filled them with arcane and technological wonders. She built others full of manuals that explained the magical and scientific theories needed to operate them, but even that wasn't enough.

She took every piece of language from the worlds that had come before, every story, every song, every note written between lovers, and she etched them into the walls of the empty city.

Regarding it critically, she stepped back and dusted off her hands. "Now the people of this world have a reason to grow," she said. "Who's next?"

No one seemed to come forward, but there was a soft *pop* and several thousand snow-white shapes manifested in a meadow. Each one was somewhere between six and eight feet tall, with talons and wings.

They did not have the faces or body-parts of people.

Instead, their eyes were luminously huge, their beaks were wickedly curved, and they looked exactly like...owls.

There was a soft, satisfied hoot from somewhere in the mob of goddesses.

Down in the meadow, one of the owls began scratching and pecking purposefully at the dirt. Soon the others joined in, and in a short while a sprawling burrow-city was forming.

"That's beautiful, Athenia," said Tressa warmly. The Loop Owl made a gribbling noise. It wasn't exactly 'who's next?', but it would have to suffice.

"No one's touching all that water?" asked Kha, coming forward.

Buel shook her head. In Urach, water was a thing that was kept contained, cupped between mountain peaks or carried in buckets or trapped in meltwater pools beneath a glacier.

If she was perfectly honest with herself, seeing how much of it there was and how fully it had surrounded the land intimidated her a little.

It didn't seem to trouble Kha in the slightest.

The godling rubbed seventeen of her hands together and wriggling creatures fell from where her fingers met, plunging into the sea.

Some had the appearance of insects, with claws and antennae. Others were scaled and flat, with gills and tails. They looked like fish, but not the kind that could be found in a mountain stream.

A few were as wide as houses.

Others were wider.

"Hmm," said Kha, sounding dissatisfied. Experimentally, she made a fish the size of a city. Then she made a predatory snail the size of a continent. "Somewhere in the middle, then," she said to herself and began to fill the ocean with leviathans. Some sank down to the deepest trenches. Others swam in the midwaters. Still others lurked by the shorelines, lunging out of the water to drag vegetation and rocks and newly-made animals off of the coasts. "That's better," she muttered to herself, then opened up the stone at the bottom of the deepest ocean trench and hollowed out a lair. "I'll grow into it," she said, stepping back. "Next?"

"What do you mean, you'll grow into it?" demanded Buel.

"The ocean is a good place for a god to be," said Kha matter-of-factly. "No one will bother me thoughtlessly, but I can still be reached."

Buel frowned. "I don't think this world should have gods."

A murmur of discontent went through the goddesses.

"Even us?" asked Ereba.

"Especially us," said Buel and, before anyone could protest, she added "you saw what happened to the last five. How is this going to be any different? Do any of us *know* Kha? She helped us to win

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because it was advantageous to her. If we want this world to last, we shouldn't turn her loose on it. And we should make ourselves back into mortals when we're done. The gods had their chance. If this world burns, it won't be because we were arrogant or careless and left ourselves in charge. It will be the fault of mortals and mortals will be able to fix it."

"I'm not sure I agree," said Ereba.

Nor do I, rumbled a voice from among them.

To the side of the assembled goddesses, the stars swirled and another body took shape. It had broad shoulders, flat features, and thick, mottled celestial flesh. Organic hoses ran like worms through it.

No world can survive without gods, the Everblood said. **Like us or not, we are the loom that weaves your reality. We are the force that preserves it.**

"Like you preserved the last one?" asked Buel sharply.

It is our nature to fight, said the Everblood, **but it was the Lightwings that kept us apart. We were isolated for so long that, when we did fight, it was apocalyptic. Here, on a single world where we are all checked by the powers of our neighbors, we will not be able to indulge so deeply. This place could survive for thousands of years.**

"That's not good enough," said Buel heatedly.

"I'm inclined to agree," said Valmetica, pushing to the front. "You don't get to blame this on us. The Five Worlds lasted as long as they did *because* we imprisoned you. We've never needed you; just the forces you represent. It's a shame that those forces were greedy, vicious, and cowardly, or else we'd still have our homes."

"Can we fix that?" asked Haula. "Could we strip the personalities from the gods and just make them...*forces*?"

That would not be wise, said the Everblood. **We do much more than you know.**

"I bet we could," said Tressa slowly. "The god wouldn't sound so nervous otherwise."

"Well," said Valmetica. "Is everyone in favor?"

"Hardly," said Ereba. "Whatever we do to the Everblood, we need to talk about this. There's a lot of good that could come from remaining as goddesses, and—"

The Everblood struck. Before anyone could stop it, it grabbed the world, willing change upon it.

Temples mushroomed from out of the bedrock. Small gods writhed into being. Divinities struggled out of cracks in the land.

Valmetica caught the Everblood in the face with a solid right cross, knocking it away from the globe. It staggered across the night sky, and, before it could find its balance, Buel lowered her head and bulled into it. The angles were all around her, and she followed their guidance, tearing the pieces of light from its body. With the first handful, its body went slack. With the next, its voice died. With the third, all that was left of it was an outline.

And an echo of its voice, condemning the women that had killed it.

When the Quiet comes, it said, you will regret your crimes against us.

The words quickly faded into silence.

Buel took the remains of the god and pinned them in the sky over the world. "Check my work?" she said to Valmetica, but the Lightwings just shrugged.

"It'll either be fine or it won't," said Valmetica. "I've never taken the personality out of a god. I don't know what it changes."

"Then we should make a few more, just in case," said Buel.

To her surprise, Valmetica stepped directly in front of Kha. "Not this one," she said. "You can recreate the old gods by stitching together the stars, or you can make new ones in that same style, but you're not getting her."

Buel frowned. "I don't want to hurt her. I barely even know her."

Valmetica eyed the remains of the Everblood.

"I've had a stressful couple of days," said Buel carefully. "And I've known the Everblood all my life. Or at least, I thought I did. The important thing is that we shouldn't have living, thinking gods on this world. We might be fine as goddesses for a few years. We might be fine for a few centuries. But what happens when we start to fight? What happens when we decide we would all be better off if one of us wasn't around? After what we all just went through, do any of you want to take that kind of chance with this place?"

No one did.

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"Then when this is finished," said Buel, "we will all incarnate. Every one of us." She kept her voice level. "You can be powerful, Kha. You can be immortal. But you can't stay a god."

She stared down at the tiny divinities, the scraps of power that the Everblood had scattered over the surface, and scowled.

She couldn't destroy them.

She would just have to ensure that the mortals of the world were strong enough to resist the gods' influence.

"Do you understand?" she asked Kha, looking back up from the globe. "Or do you need me to explain further?"

"I understand," said Kha, stepping out from behind Valmetica's wings, "but all I have ever been is a god." She folded her hands peacefully together. "I will not hurt your creation, but I will not give up my nature. I'm sorry, Buel." She grew a perfect face, all of its proportions even and its features regular. She smiled sadly at Valmetica. "Thank you, Lightwings," she said. "I hope you will forgive me."

Then she dove into the globe, her body shrinking as she fell.

She landed like a meteorite and sank into the depths of the ocean.

Buel stared, her hands grasping at the air.

Valmetica let out a long, ragged breath. "I don't think she means the world harm," she said slowly. "And maybe she'll even keep it alive, if these lobotomized constellations don't work," she added. "I don't think we should retaliate against her."

Without a word, Buel turned her back on the other goddesses and began assembling another lobotomized god out of stars. This one looked like a young woman, but the parts of her body were all shaped like folds of paper.

"Who's next?" asked Valmetica lightly, turning away from Buel.

Ereba stepped forward.

"We should pick up where we left off," the Daemoness said, and she scattered groups of women across the globe. She imbued each with the soul of a woman from the Five Worlds, but stripped away the soul's memories so that it could not recall its own death.

"Next?" said Ereba.

Not looking at Buel, Kismet came forward and made a race of thin-boned, pale women, giving them the power to psychically

bond with giant insects. Then she made several herds of giant insects to choose from.

Kismet's kin came forward and built a city that floated inside of a constantly churning electrical storm—its lightning bolts preferring bug-flesh to water and metal—having had the *opposite* of their leader's idea.

Mindry, fascinated by the ocean, built tremendous domed cities atop the backs of some of the creatures that Kha had created. She filled those cities with women reincarnated from the Wastes, placing her aunt in the seat of power inside the largest one.

Haula, not meeting Mindry's eyes, built a vast desert by the shore.

Fog wrapped around its edges and a perimeter of flowers bloomed there, their roots fed by the mist.

All the while, Buel continued assembling broken replicas of the gods.

"I think that's enough," Valmetica said at last, flicking a glance over towards Buel. "If you're that worried about her, I have another way of keeping the gods in line."

Towers grew from Haula's desert. Lights shone from within them. Forges and spellworks bubbled up from the ground.

And they were all peopled by Lightwings.

Pressing the tip of her pinky finger to the desert, Valmetica wrote in the sand.

Give the gods no quarter. Make sure their followers can never rest.

When you see a priestess, hunt her to the ends of the earth.

Only then can you be safe.

Buel left her task long enough to scan over the words, but instead of looking relieved, she seemed sickened. "Was that necessary?" she asked.

"It will keep the powers of the gods, such as they are, in check," Valmetica said.

Buel turned back to her task.

The silence that followed was strained.

Mindry coughed politely, breaking it. "So, is that it?" she asked. "Now we just will ourselves to be mortal again, and we explore the world on foot?"

"We don't have much power left," said Tressa.

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"Then we should do it now," said Valmetica.

"Wait," said Buel.

The other women stared at her.

"What if we're wrong?" she asked softly. "What if all we've done has just been to set this world up for another collapse?"

It was such a change of tone that the other goddesses looked back and forth between each other nervously.

"I don't really see how we can prevent that," said Ereba. "We've done everything we can think of. If it isn't enough, that's not our fault."

"What if we wait," ventured Mindry, "and watch? And if something breaks, we can correct it?"

"Isn't that perilously close to remaining as goddesses?" asked Valmetica. "Are you okay with that, Buel?"

Buel looked down at the world. It lay beneath her, fragile and vast.

"It took Urach centuries to go wrong," she said, "but maybe the signs were there at the outset. We could wait for a few hundred years, just to be safe."

"A few *hundred*?" asked Haula.

"It'll pass quickly," said Buel. "We'll sleep the whole time."

"Where?" demanded Ereba. "Up here in the sky?"

Buel shook her head. She reached out with her thumb and forefinger and molded a mountain so that each of their faces was depicted on its slopes. At its base, she carved words in the stone.

When we are needed, have your sorceresses awaken us.

Until then, we rest.

"We will inhabit the mountain," she said, "until the faces erode, or until we are woken. On that day, we will incarnate again. That way we can preserve our power in case something goes seriously wrong, but we cannot fight each other in the meantime. Is anyone opposed to that?"

The goddesses were silent.

"Very well," said Buel. "Then let's do this together."

As one, they poured themselves down from the heavens and into the mountains, leaving glowing trails of starstuff in their wake.

And that was how, on the first day, the heavens descended to merge with the land and the world of Holdfast was born.

BONUS CONTENT

BONUS STORY #1: AN AFTERNOON TEA

| *Commissioned By Burnt Bread*

Author's Note: *Welcome to the bonus section! The following stories take place in the broader universe of The War of The Prophecy, but involve different characters and are generally different in tone. Each bonus story was commissioned by a generous backer, and the prompt for this piece was to write something light, fluffy, and romantic.*

It was barely late-morning and Tulla had all her petals in a fluster. The first rack of scones had come off of the baking stone like briquettes and she wasn't sure where she was supposed to get enough honey for a second batch.

To make matters worse, the cream wasn't clotting. The nanny goat had run off. The fire was smokey from the damp wood she had put on it and the grass and sitting stones were soggy from the last night's rain.

Shading her eyes, Tulla stared up. The skies were still overcast and only a few pinpricks of sunlight were punching through the oppressive gray.

At least the jam was fine. You had to have good jam for a proper tea, and the clay pot of the stuff—dark and berry-rich—had come from a caravan a few days back.

The caravans always had the finest products. They trundled over the plains here at the world's edge, bringing jam and metal cookware and other wonders from city to city. Tulla had traded six whole marblefox pelts for the jam, and the pelts' ears and tentacles had been perfectly intact. She ached to try a bite, but no. Not yet. The berry-sweetness would keep.

For now, she had to make sure everything else was ready.

The clotted cream would be the easiest to fix, she decided. She stoppered up the gourd she was keeping it in, shook it lightly, and then hit it twice with her Evil Eye.

She shook it once more, just for good measure, and set it aside while three of her vines whipped over to her mortar and pestle. She still had half a sack of oats left over from her last attempt. If she ground them finely enough they would suffice for a second batch of scones. The other ingredients were scant, but that was fine. She was determined and clever. She would make this work. Enough jam would disguise the lack of honey.

It had to.

Tulla didn't go courting very often, but this guest was worth impressing.

She did not know where Nyctis, the raven woman, hailed from. They had not talked together about nations—this new fad that was sweeping the grasslands and putting everyone at each other's throats—but that was okay with Tulla.

She had left the cities to live in the wild back when the world's tribes were still turning into kingdoms, and she had not regretted the decision. She was an herbalist, not a warrior, and if she was going to contribute something to the world, it would not be the pruning away of women's lives like roses from a thicket.

Nyctis usually wore a tabard with a rising sun on it and carried a cured leather messenger's pouch, so it was possible she had different thoughts on the matter, but this did not bother Tulla. Everyone lived by their own opinions. She just hoped that hers wouldn't be a difficult gulf for the raven woman to cross, since she dearly wanted to kiss Nyctis.

Flushing, she channeled her ardor into oat grinding, fire-stoking, and herb-bundling. Soon she had a host of twine-wrapped bundles and a fine grist of oat-meal. Mixing the meal with spring water, she stirred until it was thick.

Much too thick, actually.

She had ground too much of the meal, and now the water-to-meal ratio was skewed. Worse, her remaining water was destined for the kettle. If she wanted more, the spring that she had gathered it from was deep in the wooded verge. She would not be able to go there and come back in time.

And she couldn't steal water from the kettle. What if Nyctis was especially thirsty? She couldn't very well say "tough luck. Have another scone."

Bonus Story #1: An Afternoon Tea

Frowning, she kneaded the meal, wracking her brain as she did. The meal was gritty and pliable in her hands, and the freshly-stoked fire was feeble and smoky. The flames licked at the morning air asthmatically, giving off only the faintest brush of heat.

If she spooned the meal out as hearty dollops onto the cooking stone, it wouldn't bake all the way through without burning the edges. She'd have to spread it out thinly instead. Maybe if she made it extra wide, that would make up for how thin it was going to have to be?

The mix hissed and crackled as it hit the improvised stovetop.

It was too late now to take it back.

There was a dark-winged shape in the near sky, circling towards the smoke, a bit of windblown char against the gray clouds. Heart leaping into her throat, Tulla waved her vines. The shape dipped in the air, circling lower, and the Alarune's heart hit a triple-beat.

She set her bronze kettle on its hook over the flames and began frantically sweeping dew off of the sitting stones. Moments later, Nyctis hit the ground, back-winging hard as her talons shredded through the sod.

Even in that spray of dirt and grass, she was beautiful. From her bare, scaly legs to her midnight pinions, she was effortless grace dressed in wings.

Tulla resisted the urge to rush up to her; resisted thinking about what it would be like to stretch up on tiptoes, face tilted and upturned, lips meeting lips in a fiery press.

She didn't succeed very thoroughly.

"Good afternoon," she said shakily, blushing to her roots as she thought about being enfolded by feathers.

"Good afternoon," said Nyctis. Her voice was like licorice, sweetly strange. Her wings were still flexing and settling after the flight, and she took a seat on one of the rocks Tulla had not been able to brush clean. She didn't seem to notice the damp. "It's nice to see you again."

"It's nice to see you," squeaked Tulla. She felt her face heat, her blush brightening by degrees, but a whiff of something acrid caught her attention and she spun back towards the fire. Deftly she snatched her odd, too-thin scones off of the cooking stone and stacked them on a wooden platter.

She stole a discreet look at their undersides as she did this and was relieved to find that they had escaped burning, if only narrowly. They were browned, streaked lightly with black lines, but they would be edible.

Probably.

"Please, have a seat," Tulla started to say, turning back around, but then her mouth snapped closed. Nyctis was already sitting. That had been an inane thing to say. "What would you like to drink?" she blurted to cover the mistake, and then blushed again.

She had invited the raven woman over for tea.

She had to stop *just saying things* out of panic.

"Tea is fine," Nyctis said, unfazed.

Her movements hurried and jerky, Tulla threw a bundle into a rough clay cup, poured from the almost-boiling kettle to cover the herbs, and passed the mug to her date.

Nyctis smiled, wrapping it in her hands. "It gets cold up there," she said conversationally. "This is nice."

"It gets cold down here too," said Tulla, before she could proof the sentence for double-meanings. *Keep talking! Salvage it!* she thought. "Mostly at night," she added helplessly.

Nyctis lifted a single perfect, sable eyebrow.

"Because during the day the sun warms everything up," Tulla stumbled on. Inwardly, she sighed.

The jam would be her salvation. It had to be.

It would be so delicious, so perfect, that her conversational flailing would tumble into the past, a bad memory lost to amid the folds of time.

"Can I fix you a scone?" Tulla asked innocently.

"Please," said Nyctis, taking a sip of tea.

Tulla grabbed a smaller wooden plate, threw one of the flat, pliable, oversize scones onto it, popped open the urn of jam, spread a thick layer of its contents over the scone.

Then she stared at it in horror.

It wasn't cloudfruit or saintscalp or sedgeberry jam.

It was...

Tomato jam?

Tulla whipped a vine lighting-fast from jar to mouth, moving it so quickly that it made the air crack, and as the flavor hit her she felt her face fall.

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The contents of the jar were savory.

This was a disaster.

Maybe she could drown them out with the clotted cream.

Opening the gourd, she shook it over the scone and stared in helplessness as curds came raining out.

She had overdone that too. The second Evil Eye had been too much. It had curdled the cream.

The thin scone was now dressed in savory tomato jam, covered in cheese curds, and almost certainly inedible.

"That looks delicious," said Nyctis unwittingly. "Thank you."

Tulla trembled.

She sank down in the grass, setting the plate down leadenly at her side.

She opened her mouth to apologize for ruining the scone, for ruining the tea, and instead opened it all the way in shock as Nyctis sat down beside her. The raven woman was taller and scrawnier than she was, but this close up her body was warm—almost fiercely furnace-hot—and her expression was calculated, daring.

"Stop worrying," she said. "I'm here because I want to be. And because I think you're cute."

And then, before Tulla could stop her, she picked up the scone and took a bite.

Nyctis' eyes widened. "This is amazing," she said in surprise. "What do you call this?"

Tulla blinked. "It's not really a scone," she said dazedly. "It's not really anything. It's more like a piece of a couple different things. I didn't make it intentionally. It's really just—"

"Well, this 'piece of' is incredible," Nyctis cut in smoothly. "And you should stop being embarrassed. Or worried." Leaning in, she kissed the Alarune on her cheek. "This is the perfect tea. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

After a moment, Tulla returned the kiss.

BONUS STORY #2: BOUND

| *Commissioned by Miakoda*

Author's Note: *Writing commissioned pieces is an interesting experience, and it's one that I hugely enjoy. Sometimes the prompt for a commission is a single short sentence. Sometimes it's a few paragraphs, and sometimes it's a full outline. Nevertheless, each commission is a bit of a curveball, and keeps me from getting complacent.*

Bound is set on Holdfast, and takes place at exactly the same time as the Holdfast book.

I

It was a cool, midsummer dusk, the fire had turned to ashes, and all the grasses of the Sigh were rippling in the wind. It was dangerous to kindle this close to the tall sea of sawgrass, but Thalia didn't care. The weight of the collar around her neck was firm and anchoring—something to keep her tied to the present, even if all she wanted to do was run. Her legs, the four of them, itched and her flanks ached for the rhythm of a trot, but stretching them one at a time, she forced herself to remain calm. She let her left hand wrap around the front of the collar for comfort and as she did so, she studied the horizon.

The Rakshasa would be out there somewhere in the falling dark, but haring off after them unprepared would be the same as letting them get away.

Their raiders knew this territory. They knew they would be pursued. They would be taking the appropriate precautions. They would be posting guards.

If Thalia was going to bring her mistress back, it would be because she knew enough to think rather than to simply react.

Kneeling down on her front hooves, she put her hands to the shorter, cropped grass that bordered the Sigh. Willing her Aura to

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life, she fed magic into the ground, bleeding her aether until a patch of earth rumbled and stood up.

It looked humanoid, but it was made entirely out of damp loam. Its head and the tops of its arms were crowned with short, scrubby tufts of grass and shot through with long, interweaving roots. Its legs crawled with earthworms and grubs. Out of its belly, a mole peered, blinking in the dim light.

“Geos,” said Thalís, “Good evening,” and she bowed.

It was always best to be polite to the spirits of the land. They were as powerful as she was, but they were powerful in a different way. They could do things she couldn’t, and so she needed their cooperation.

She couldn’t compel Geos, but she could ask it for favors—if it was disposed to grant them.

Geos bowed to her in return, although it was a very slight bow; a cocked-at-the-waist half-a-gesture. It was a concession of a superior to a supplicant paying it due homage. “Thalia,” Geos said, its lips dripping with soil, “I am called and I answer. What would you ask of me?”

Still bowing from her upper waist, Thalia straightened her legs. Her hair—long and plaited in a single bright-copper braid—dangled down past her face, but still she didn’t look up. “I would entreat you for aid, noble spirit,” she said, then she risked a glance past her hair.

The elemental was watching her patiently. Its posture was relaxed, but there was a kind of gravity to it that made it hard to look at anything else. “What would you have of me?” asked Geos. “And what would you offer?” it added, its voice a slow settling sound, like dirt trickling into a grave.

Thalia thought about the elemental’s choice of words, and about her mistress, Rhiannon, in the hands of the Rakshasa. The Rakshasa had no love for the daughters of the Bare, and they would treat the princess as a bargaining chip at best.

Again, Thalia’s hands went to her collar, and again a shiver ran through her dun flanks. One by one, she lifted her feet and put them back down until the urge settled.

“This morning,” she said, “the Rakshasa came to our camp. Our warriors circled the tents, but my mistress was not inside. She had gone past the picket to gather new flowers for me.” Thalia paused,

remembering the princess' touch, hands like ghosts as they had braided silver-blue blossoms into her hair. "I was only half awake, so she told me not to go with her. She told me I was beautiful when I was blinking away sleep, and that she wanted to see that again when she returned." She looked at the ground. "Mistress Rhiannon was taken before anyone had even realized she was gone."

"And you wish me to recover her?" asked Geos.

"No," said Thalia. "I wish you to bring me to her. I am responsible for this. I will see it made right."

"And your people?" asked Geos, tilting its head to one side.

"What do they think of this?"

The Bare were not Thalia's people. She knew this because she could still remember her mother—an enormous Appaloosa Centaur—before the smaller, pink-skinned Bare had come with their collars and their spears. It hurt to think any further back than that, and so Thalia didn't try, but she knew that some time later the Bare had forged the disc of iron that circled her neck, and then they had given her to the daughter of their tribe—Rhiannon.

The Bare were paltry, fragile things. They had only two legs, but there was enough cruelty in them to make up the difference. Their emotions were sudden, forceful bursts, and they feared anything they thought might be stronger than they were; which was everything else in the world.

They had given Thalia to Rhiannon, hoping that having a Centaur as a servant would make the little woman look especially fearsome to the other tribes. If they had known the real consequences of their actions, Thalia had no doubt that she would have been put on the auction block instead.

"The Bare," said Thalia, "did not give me permission to leave."

In fact, they had blamed her for allowing the princess to be taken in the first place. As soon as the abduction had been discovered, they had tethered Thalia to a post, winding a leather cord through the ring at the front of her collar and hobbling her feet with stiff, cutting straps.

It had taken her hours to coax a hawk down from the sky, bind it with an oath, and have it gnaw through the tethers. Even then, it had watched her with the same wariness that she felt towards the Bare—like this might all be an elaborate excuse to perpetrate some unguessed cruelty on its winged form.

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The hawk's reaction, when she let it go, had been one of relief.

The Bare's reaction, when she had galloped out of their camp, had been to throw spells and spears at her back.

None of them had hit—but then none of them *could have*. By that point she had already sworn to save Rhiannon, and nothing—not blood or fear or spite—would make her break her word.

“The Bare are the daughters of this land,” said Geos. “They walk across me. They make sacrifices to me. In death, they are given unto me. I should abide by their wishes. I should return you to them.”

Thalia felt a tightening in her throat. She opened her mouth to object, but the spirit continued talking.

“However,” it said, “their last Pact Mistress died over a decade ago, and now you have the craft. They may not trust you, but you serve their interests. You may have every reason to hate them, but your heart ties you together with their princess. It would be wrong of me not to acknowledge the bonds that keep you tethered to their prosperity. I will track the Rakshasa for you,” it paused, “but I will need nourishment in return. A bowlful of your blood, poured onto the soil at dawn, every day for the next ten days. Is that a reasonable exchange?” it asked, raising one dark eyebrow.

Thalia thought about the sacrifice, about blood running down her fingers, and nodded.

She would bring Rhiannon back, even if it was to *her* people, the Bare.

For her mistress' safety, no price too high to pay.

2

“Wake.”

The word came with a splash of water across the face, a needless waste in lands where water pooled only rarely. Where rainclouds were things to be hunted.

Rhiannon opened her eyes. She flexed her fingers. She was not trussed, but that mattered little. She was surrounded by Rakshasa, sitting on a Rakshasa Fox-horse, with nowhere to run but the open plains.

She trusted her legs and she was swift as windblown earth during the footraces and circle-sprints that came on festival days, but she could not outrun the Rakshasa. Not without somewhere to run to, and the horizon was a molten weight all around her.

Still, she would not show fear.

Water dripping down her cheeks, saturating her hair, wicking off into the dry morning air as she stared into the face of the Rakshasa who had been sent to rouse her. It had the shuffling lope of its kind, with jaw-tusks for rooting in the soil and a thin pelt of oily black hair. It was painted in whorls of blue dye, descending spirals that showed the track its life was prophesied to take. Rhiannon had not been taught to read the designs perfectly, but she could recognize the ones that foretold kills. They fed into jagged, bare lines that symbolized the Bare.

Ever since the initial grab, when she had been thrown by her legs over a Rakshasa warrior's back, Rhiannon had felt little fear. There was fear in the back of her head, like the fading bite of a blackfly, but it never quite made it to the front of her thoughts.

Even now, knowing that the Rakshasa could kill her with ease if they desired it, fear hardly managed to register.

"I'm awake," she said curtly. "What do you want?"

The Rakshasa before her let out a low whuff of breath. Its eyes narrowed. She had antagonized it. It was considering its response. "I could slap you from your mount and leave you," it said after a moment. "But that will not keep you civil, will it?"

"You took me from my people," said Rhiannon.

The creature stared at her, cocking its head. Finally, it laughed. "I would think your people wouldn't be bothered by the taking of someone's daughter," it said, "but I suppose you only care when it's one of your peltless whelps that gets stolen." The Rakshasa snorted explosively, the air rushing out so hard that it caused the Fox-horse to jolt. "Your people's hypocrisy forces us to take action. Our wise-women told us to balance the scales, so for every child that you have taken from us, we will take three of your tribe's daughters."

Rhiannon had no idea of what to say to that, so she just stared back at it, meeting its eyes.

Unexpectedly, it passed her a drinking-skin. The contents sloshed as she accepted it, and when she cracked the cap, she smelled the tang of fermented milk.

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“Drink,” said the Rakshasa. “I will not have you dying of malnutrition on the way, even if your death *is* foretold on my hide.”

The Rakshasa turned to lumber away, shifting its bodyweight on its knuckles in order to adopt the strange, sidelong gait that its kind favored, but Rhiannon called back out to it. “Wait,” she said.

It paused, throwing a look over its shoulder. “We will not negotiate,” it said. “Time and again, your people have proven too untrustworthy for that. You ambush and you kill. Even your giving feels like taking. For years you have traded us murder for our daughters, so let me propose a different exchange: run, and I will simply tie your feet. You do not get out of this so easily, child of the Bare.”

“I don’t want to negotiate,” said Rhiannon. “I want to know your name.”

“Valer,” said the beast, after a pause. “My name is Valer. I am mother of Laytal and Garuv, both gone to your tribe.” It made a gesture with its hands. The earth split open beside it and a figure made of stone and fire wriggled up from the gap. Around them, the other Rakshasa in the warband—fifteen in total—stopped and made signs of reverence and forbidding. “This is Fotia,” continued Valer. “She is made from my oath of vengeance, sworn to burn as I do. She serves my tribe faithfully, so long as I make the required sacrifices.” Valer’s eyes narrowed. “If your people come after us, they will burn.”

Rhiannon took a pull on the skin of milk, then wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. “You’re not the only one to bind a spirit,” she said. “And it’s not my *people* you should be worried about.”

3

Thalia held her palm over the depression she had scraped in the earth. Thick, dark blood welled from the wound she had bitten, slowly filling the scoop of bare dirt. With her other hand, she massaged her arm, encouraging the flow. Blood welled to the top of the indent and there was a satisfied noise from underneath the soil.

She had not brought a bowl with her when she had fled the encampment.

Picking itself up out of the scrubland dust, Geos made an ironic bow. "Good morning, bond-holder," it said. "Are you ready to continue?"

Thalia straightened and trotted over to the edge of the Sigh, where the tall grasses waved. She stripped several of the long, abrasive fronds from their stalks and bound them around her right hand, staunching the flow of blood. It did not completely stem the seeping red, but that would have required cloth and she did not have any.

All she was permitted to wear were the flowers in her hair.

She kicked in frustration and the ground and switched her tail, long black hair snapping in the air even though there were no flies to ward away.

Rhiannon had played at dressing her once, and there had been a curious freedom in that. Her upper body caged by that handwoven shirt, she had felt powerful. She had felt real.

"Let's go, Geos," she said before the memory could pull her any further back. Before she could begin to dream about a woman she might never see again. "I'm ready if you are."

"I don't sleep," said Geos, "and I don't grow bored. I'm always ready." It sank back into the earth, leaving a trail of disturbed topsoil as it raced forward into the Sigh.

Thalia followed it, parting the grasses with cautious hands. Crossing the Sigh was treacherous, even with a spirit to help her navigate, but the tall grass would slow down the Rakshasa as well.

And it would mask her approach.

The Sigh was vast, probably as big as the oceans that the Bare's other slaves sometimes told stories about. It had spots where the grass only grew to hock-height, natural islands amidst the swaying sea, but the rest of it was up to her withers or higher. If she moved carefully in the deepest regions, the way it rippled around her body would seem a quirk of the wind.

She would be on the Rakshasa before they could stop her.

Thalia's teeth clenched. She was not a fighter. The Bare wouldn't have allowed that even if Rhiannon hadn't thought her too sweet to know the fundamentals of the closed hand, spell, or spear.

But it didn't matter.

Her body knew the way that violence worked, even if she had never been called to use it, and her hind hooves itched.

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She shook her head, letting her braid lash her bare shoulders. It would be another half a day's walk, at least, before she caught up with the Rakshasa. Her mouth burned and her eyes felt dry from lack of water, but she had undergone worse deprivation than this and she would gladly face it again—so long as it brought her mistress back.

It had been the hardest thing in the world, forcing herself to get a few hours of sleep during the night. Knowing that Rhiannon was not safe had set her to fighting herself, tormenting her own half-awake thoughts with visions of the the princess' treatment at the hands of her enemies.

Rhiannon was not like Thalia. She was not accustomed to hardship. She was the sweet thing that she saw somehow in Thalia, and these lands were not kind to sweetness. The wind blew and burned and eroded everything that mattered about a person until only a ghost of her good intentions remained.

"Something's troubling you," said Geos, emerging from the soil to walk beside her. It strode through the grass, forcing stalks aside like a plowblade gliding through the sod.

Thalia nodded in acknowledgement to the spirit, but did not face it dead-on. "Something is," she said carefully, "but I am not looking to place myself in your debt."

Geos huffed, its breath rich with loam-scent. "It would not be much of a debt," it said haughtily.

"And I am still not interested. I know how you work," Thalia added, glancing over at the earth spirit, "and I know how much blood I can spill. As it is, I will not be well after the ten days are done."

Geos' face did something interesting then. The expression was impossible to read, more so than its usual one. "You knew this already," it said, "and you didn't even try to haggle."

"I don't think you understand me," said Thalia. "You could have asked for five bowls, twice a day, every day and I would have paid it."

"That would have been a bad bargain," Geos rumbled.

"And I would have paid it," Thalia repeated, forging ahead through a thick curtain of grasses, the fronds rapsing against her flanks. "Mistress Rhiannon was taken by her enemies. It was my fault. I am bound to put this right, no matter what it costs me."

"You say that, but this is not about guilt," observed the spirit.

Thalia looked at the ground. "It's not *only* about guilt. Mistress loves me."

"And how do you feel about her?" asked Geos quietly.

Panic flashed across Thalia's eyes. She looked away. "That's less important," she said.

"You are not just her loyal servant," said Geos.

"I am not," said Thalia. She stared ahead defiantly.

"I can respect that," said Geos after a moment. Its voice had softened. Its features were less edged. "There is no less a pact between you and your mistress," it said, "than the one that binds me to her tribe. It is only the conditions that are different."

Thalia thought about the way that Rhiannon's shoulders had shivered when she had first dared Thalia to kiss her—knowing all the while that she could have said 'no'. Knowing that she could have declined and backed away and that neither of them would have ever have been able to say anything about it to the warriors of the tribe.

Knowing that there was power and expectation behind the dare, but never force.

"If I tell you about it," said Thalia, "will you leave me alone?" Her tail flicked again, nervously.

"You've already told me everything," said the earth spirit, "and it is more than I expected. I will not renegotiate our agreement, but I will offer you this. If you fight against the Rakshasa, I will fight as well. I will not require another bargain. Your oaths are my oaths, for a time."

"Thank you," said Thalia, her cheeks feeling strangely hot. She had never shared with another being the truth of what passed between her and Rhiannon. It stung at her, making her want to shrink away, but it made her proud too. "I will agree to those terms," she said.

Valer took a pull from her drinking hide and re-capped it, letting it fall to swing at her side. The drinking hide was tied to the leather

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harness that crossed her chest and the weight of it tugged less than it had when the day's journey began.

She did not like crossing the Sigh, even with her kinswomen fanned out around her, a Foxhorse draped with provisions, and Fotia beneath the earth, waiting to burst into violence.

She did not like the looming of the grasses or the song that the wind sang when it churned through them. Every whisper bespoke an ambush. Every note in the susurrus was one of unease.

She couldn't wait to be on the first Skipping Stone. Their mile-wide bald rock surfaces made for perfect campsites, but more than that they gave a clear field of view. She would have traded half her luck to be there right now.

The back of her neck itched with the feeling of being observed.

It wasn't that the raid had been too easy. She didn't question when things were too easy, lest the gods take their luck back.

It was the suggestion that their captive had planted during the early hours of the morning—that the Bare were not pursuing because they had already set their champion to the task—that was making her worry.

Valer could fight the Bare. In fact, she welcomed it. A few bodies left in the grass would be a start towards the debt she owed them.

But she could not fight the *feeling* of an ambush.

She wished they had taken one of the wisewomen with them, although that was not the way that things were done. The wisewomen did not raid, and the warriors could not order them to. A society where the warriors decided what was right and the wisewomen obeyed would have been no better than that of the Bare.

Valer snorted in distaste at the notion and moved to the Foxhorse to check on the prisoner.

The other fifteen Rakshasa were fanned out in a loose perimeter around her, but the Bare princess did not seem to be planning an escape. She was watching the sky, studying the occasional movements of birds and the slow crawl of a distant floating city across the blue.

The prisoner did look back down as Valer drew near. She straightened her shoulders and adjusted her seat on the Foxhorse's back, but she did not say anything. Valer scowled.

“No one is coming for you, princess,” Valer said roughly. It did not make her feel better to cow a prisoner this way, but it was all she had. It was this or to simply accept her situation, and the latter did not appeal.

She would not have made a terribly good wisewoman.

Intimidated or not, Rhiannon met her gaze for a long moment, then stared back at the sky. The wind whipped through her hair, sending loose strands fluttering behind her ears.

The ears of the Bare were such grotesque, stunted things. Too much of them emerged from the head, making them a liability in a fight. Maybe that was why the Bare fought many of their battles with magic.

This princess was either not especially good at manipulating aether, or else she was a coward. She had not resisted them when they grabbed her. She had not pelted them with lightning or fire or called a Halo or given any indication that she knew how to fight.

Stop worrying, Valer thought. *All is well. Do not refuse what the gods have given you.*

It had been fully dark when they had detoured into the Sigh. No one had been following them.

To catch up now, an agent of the Bare would have had to track them over the barren plains through most of the night, then follow their trail through the Sigh, while never coming close enough to be spotted. She would have needed to move like the wind, lurk like a foldwolf, and track like a spirit.

The Bare could not do that.

Out in the wild, they could scarcely survive on their own.

Her people were safe.

Leaving the princess alone, Valer made her rounds, talking to each of the warriors in the band. They shared stories, jokes, and reassurances. They spoke about what they would do when they returned to the tribe—about what would happen to the unresolved pieces of their tattoos. Many bore the bright blue daub of a success, a piece of their tattoo-stories that had merged with reality, although there had been no killing on this foray. The spiraling kill-prophecies that covered every member of the band would need to be given back to the gods if they weren’t realized soon, lest those destinies turn sour and work against the wearers.

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Valer tried not to think about that. It was bad luck to dwell on bad luck, a cycle from which there could be no escape. She kept her eyes straight ahead, trying not to think about how similar this was to what the Bare woman was doing.

Only a little longer, she thought, and this will be over.

They were passing through a low place in the Sigh, where the grasses were only up to Valer's neck, when catastrophe struck. The wind rose high, making a sound like a scream, and then there was the dull thud of an impact from the back of the circle of Rakshasa.

Valer turned to see the body of one of her warriors hurtle through the grasses, tumbling end over end. Where the woman had been standing, a Centaur was rearing, her fore-hooves windmilling in the air. No sooner had Valer begun to shout the alarm than the intruder's hooves hit the ground, she turned, and bolted away.

Wind raked over the tall grasses, covering her escape.

Valer swore. It was wrong to curse, to denigrate the gods like that, but what else could this be than god-sent rotten luck?

The Sigh was full of strangenesses. It housed monsters and bandits and marauders, and maybe a marauder was what had hit them. The Centaur had not tried to take anything from them, but Valer had heard that the constant wind and shifting grass could do strange things to a woman's mind.

The Centaur might not have been rational.

Moving to inspect the woman the Centaur had kicked, Valer's breath caught in her throat. Their attacker had lined up the shot well, and put her whole bodyweight behind it. There was a hoofprint on the warrior's upper left chest, already purpling with a bruise, but that one didn't matter. There was another hoofprint on the warrior's forehead, her neck was tilted at a sickly angle, and she was dead.

Valer let out a low moan.

She could not call Fotia to start a funeral pyre. Not without setting fire to the Sigh.

Nor could she afford the time to grieve.

Stripping the warrior of everything but her charms and her tattoos, Valer added the woman's scant possessions to the Foxhorse's burden. Then she and the others drew back into a narrow circle around the Foxhorse and their captive. They waited,

not speaking, while the sun crawled two increments across the horizon.

Finally, still without saying a word, they turned and began to walk again.

All the while, their captive princess continued staring at the sky. She did not seem afraid.

Valer scowled. The Centaur was not an agent of the Bare. No slave would fight for them and the Bare were incapable of treating the other species as anything other than slaves.

It didn't matter what the princess thought, she decided. The journey would be over in a few days and then the only thing that would matter in the prisoner's life would be the wellbeing of the Rakshasa wisewomen.

5

It was mid-afternoon when disaster came again.

They were wading through a dense shoal of grasses when one of the warriors in front vanished. Valer blinked, thinking the warrior had been obscured by a ripple in the Sigh, but then two more disappeared, soil fountaining into the air from where they had been. She whirled, looking for the source of the attack, but saw nothing.

The hair on the back of her neck prickled and, moving on instinct, she threw herself to the side as a pair of thick, earthen arms reached up from the ground to grab the place where her ankles had been..

"Spirit!" someone bellowed and four of the surviving warriors lit up their Auras, hurling waves of force at the half-emerged being. It shot back into the ground, but not before grabbing another of the warriors and dragging her down into the soil.

Valer almost climbed aboard the Foxhorse, but if she broke, she knew her warriors would follow suit. She fought down her panic and yelled "forward!" Watching the ground for motion, she broke a path through the thick grasses, snapping and stamping at the stalks until the shoal thinned and the dense stalks fell away, becoming first a fringe of scrubgrass and then the rock of the first Skipping Stone.

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She almost threw herself to the ground in relief.

There were places like this all throughout the Sigh, but they were not common. "Fotia," she bellowed, running out onto the rock island, "I invoke you!"

The other warriors pushed through the grass fringe, forcing the Foxhorse along in front of them, and Valer saw that they had been even further diminished. There were only eight left. Eight out of fifteen.

She howled, as much in disbelief as in anguish, and Fotia thrashed its way out of a crack in the rock. At the Skipping Stone's edges, fissures ran through its surface, all growing with short grasses. These grasses burned and blackened where Fotia's incandescent skin touched them, throwing bits of ash skyward into the wind.

"Onto the rock!" Valer kept shouting, but the others needed no further prompting.

The Skipping Stone was wide. It was almost a mile around, by Valer's guess, and they were just at the edge. She moved away from the grassy fringe, still watching the ground. She had fought against spirits before, but never under these circumstances. Before, it had always been during a raid whereby the violence ended as soon as the defenders summoned theirs, or during battle in an open field where there were others to keep their attention.

She did not know whether the earth spirit could burrow through rock. Now that Fotia was out, she wasn't sure it would try, but it was better to be suspicious than dead.

Dead like so many of her warriors had just become.

"Fotia, is it still here?" Valer barked.

The fire spirit shimmered. "It is below, stopped by the stone," it said, its voice almost emotionless. "Its bond-holder is out in the grasses," it added, crackling lips curling up into an ashen smile.

"Its bond-holder?" demanded Valer, staring out at the Sigh, her eyes wild. "The Centaur?"

"Perhaps," said Fotia, folding its arms across its chest. "I can read the Auras of spirits better than I can of mortals. Without seeing the bond-holder, I do not know what manner of creature it is."

"I know who she is," said Rhiannon, her arms folded across her chest. She looked sickened by the violence, but she was fighting that feeling, keeping her expression neutral. "You would be better off

letting me go,” she added, letting the wind carry the words out into the Sigh. “No one else needs to get hurt.”

“These are bandits?” demanded Valer, rounding on the princess. “Friends of your people?”

Rhiannon shook her head. “There is no ‘these,’” she said archly. “It’s just one woman, and she’s here to save me.”

“Just one woman.” Valer barked a laugh. It sounded high and harsh to her own ears.

“One woman and a spirit,” corrected Rhiannon, “and I don’t think she wants to fight you. If you let me go—”

Valer cut her off. “Fotia,” she said, turning towards the fire spirit, “what would happen if I sent you out into the grasses?”

Fotia frowned. “I would likely end up fighting the earth spirit,” it said, not sounding thrilled at the prospect.

“But what if I just had you touch the grass?” asked Valer.

The spirit’s frown deepened—and then melted into an expression of pleasure. “The Sigh would burn,” it said. “For a while, at least, until the rains came. I would do that for free,” it added, eyes wild.

Valer looked out across the rock face. There was more than enough room on the Stone to keep her people back from the flames. They would just have to wait out the burn, and then they could cross the rest of the way with ease.

“It’s a deal,” said Valer, leading her warriors, the Foxhorse, and the prisoner atop it back from the edge. “Burn her out. When she’s dead, the earth spirit will leave as well.”

6

Thalia felt more than smelled the first trace of smoke. It was so familiar, yet so out of place in the Sigh, that her whole body tensed. She wrinkled her nose, trying to confirm it, and then a whole waft of it drifted across her face, bringing with it the unmistakable scent of burning grass.

Her feet kicked at the ground and she bucked instinctively, ready to run.

How had the Sigh caught fire? There hadn’t been a storm in days. Was this one of its infamous travelling infernos, which crawled

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endlessly across the Sight until a god or a storm or a weather mage put it out, or was this the work of the Rakshasa?

Geos hauled itself up from the ground, dusting crickets off of its shoulders. "They have a spirit," it said, "and they're standing on rock. I can't take them the easy way anymore."

"Two bowls at sunrise," said Thalia, "for the next eleven days, and you come with me onto the rock."

The earth spirit cocked its head at her. "Do you think I am negotiating?" it asked.

Thalia kicked at the earth. Every muscle in her wanted to run. "I will not back down," she said, feeling the promise she had made become almost tangible between her fingers. She could twist it or break it or strengthen it. She chose the latter and felt a rush of energy roll through her. The exhaustion of the pursuit was gone. The doubt in her heart over killing the Rakshasa was reduced to just a shadow. "I am not asking you to sacrifice yourself, just to give me the chance to break my mistress free."

"If you are truly serious about that," rumbled the spirit, "then follow me through the flames."

It lumbered forward and all at once the grasses were burning around them. Thalia felt a final jolt of the instinctual urge to flee, but she forced it aside. "I will not give up now," she said, her magic reacting to the words. They became her armor as she plunged forward into the fire, the heat scorching her skin, but she did not stop until she was standing on the other side, smoke rolling off of her hide, the tip of her braid aflame.

In front of her was another spirit. It was not Geos. It was made out of stone and lava and grinning predation.

It reached for her. As it did so, Geos thundered into it, knocking it to the ground. Limbs of soil lifted and swung and the fire spirit thrashed beneath the blows.

Thalia danced to one side, her hooves clacking on the stone, trying to get a better view through the blowing smoke. As she did, the wind shifted, showing nine Rakshasa in a semicircle blocking her way.

Behind them, atop an animal with long, tufted ears and a sunset-red fur coat, was Rhiannon.

The wind turned again.

At her back, the heat-wash was fierce.

Thalia closed a hand over her hair, smothering the burning tip of her braid with her wounded palm. Still the Rakshasa did not move.

On the stone beside her, the two spirits were trading punches, but she forced herself to look away from them. The outcome of their fight would be meaningless if the Rakshasa rushed her—but between their warriors and the spreading fire, she had nowhere to go.

Nowhere but forward.

Raising a single fetlock, Thalia bowed to the leader of the band. The Rakshasa looked like it had been about to attack, but it held its body perfectly still. Then, ever so slightly, it inclined its own head in scant acknowledgement.

“You must know that you’re not getting out of this,” it said over the rhythmic smack of fists of dirt echoing off a face made of magma. “Polite as you may be, I will not allow you to murder my companions and walk away.”

“Then I will die if I must,” returned Thalia, “but I am not leaving my mistress as your captive.”

Smoke blew across the space between them and the whole of the Sigh seemed alive with the crackling of flames. The leader of the Rakshasa stilted its head, seeming to see her in a new light. “Our captive is Bare. You must know what that means.”

“I do,” said Thalia, gesturing to the collar around her neck. “I am her slave.”

The Rakshasa looked alarmed, its lips drawing back around its tusks. “I will not let you kill her,” it said hastily, as if trying to smother its own misgivings. “She is promised to our wisewomen. I will not contradict them.”

Thalia felt a flash of anger at that. “I am not here to hurt her,” she said harshly. She kicked at the rock, her shod hooves striking sparks.

“Then what is it you want?” the Rakshasa demanded, its voice low. “If it was freedom, you could have left us in peace. If it was shelter, you could have followed us peacefully across the Sigh and we would have provided it. The enemies of the Bare are our friends. Now seven women are dead for nothing.”

Another curtain of smoke blew between them. The heat behind Thalia intensified and, when the choking gray haze finally thinned, she could see the band of Rakshasa had moved closer.

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"I do not need shelter," said Thalia. "The shelter of my mistress' shadow is enough for me." Cinders swirled past her face. "I do not need freedom." She danced out of the way of a windblown rush of flames. "I am free every time her arms surround me." She hesitated, but it was too late to keep the words back.

They were already waiting beneath her breath, impending on her lips.

"I am free," she continued, "because my mistress would unlock my collar if I asked, even though the rest of her tribe would be terrified of an unbound Centaur. She would do it even though I would need to run before they caught me, and even though she would never see me again."

The Rakshasa all looked horrified at this. Thalia took a breath of air like a gulp of water and waited.

The Rakshasa's leader seemed to be struggling to get a grip on its words. Smoke blew across its eyes and it narrowed them, squinting through the haze. Finally, it said "you are broken. They have tamed you inside and out."

"If that is the way you see it," said Thalia.

At her side, there was a ripping sound and a sudden, sickening snap. The humanoid lump of magma stood up, soil sheeting off of its shoulders. On the stone beneath it was a heap of unmoving dirt.

The leader of the Rakshasa shook its head again, as if trying to dismiss a thought. "I do not want to kill you," it said. "It would contaminate me." It paused. "You are not a warrior. You are a victim. If you leave, we will not pursue you."

Thalia glanced sidelong into the fire. The heat was almost blinding and the band of flames was thick, but she could draw strength from the vows she had sworn.

Geos was gone, but her abilities had never *just* been about forging pacts with spirits.

Hope rose like a lump in her throat.

She could feel the underlying nature of the Rakshasa leader's offer hanging in the air between them.

It was just as much a bargain as the one she had made with Geos.

For a moment, she could even see it. It looked almost like a weaving. A knot beneath her fingers.

She pulled it tight.

"I accept your offer," she said, and she charged.

Two of the Rakshasa immediately flared their Auras, reaching for magic to throw at her, but the Auras stuttered and died as her pact wound around them, strangling the aether flow.

Another Rakshasa beat the ground and flung itself towards her, but was ripped away by a hook of invisible energy.

The leader of the band stood in her path, body braced, ready to take her charge on its tusks, but Thalia's legs kicked the stone and she soared overhead, landing behind it.

She didn't bother to look back.

She kept running.

On the back of the strange beast that was accompanying the Rakshasa, Rhiannon sat. She looked smug and scared and elated, all at the same time.

She looked horrified by Thalia's injuries, but also awed.

Thalia had never shown her her full strength.

Thalia was not dainty. She was not gentle. She was none of the things the princess complimented her for being.

But the battlefield was not a place to humor her mistress' illusions.

Swinging the Bare woman off of the animal's back, she slung her onto her own. Then she bolted for the far side of the Stone.

There were cries from behind them as the Rakshasa tried to follow, only to be brought up short by the binding force of their leader's promise.

There was a similarly stifled roar from their spirit, caged by the same limitations as its bond-holder.

Thalia didn't care.

With her mistress' arms wrapped around her waist, she shot across the Skipping Stone, hooves drumming like thunder.

At the other end, the grasses were still unburnt. The flames had not yet circled the rock. It was most of a mile away, but a mile was nothing to a Centaur.

Rhiannon's arms squeezed tight, digging into Thalia's ribs as a spell shot by overhead.

Then they were back into the Sigh, grass whipping past Thalia's face, and they were gone.

It was on the start of the third day that the storms came. The clouds had been hunching on the horizon for hours like black, bloated ticks.

With the smoke from the burn permeating everything from earth to grass to sky, it had been hard to know for certain that storms was what they were. Then they had ripped open and the water had come sheeting down and Thalia had just laughed, holding her hands out, feeling the cold rain break against her smoke-smeared face.

With the wind still chasing them across the Sigh, the fire had been close behind for most of the last day. But now the tempest swallowed them, dampening the smoke, and she came to a halt.

Her feet felt numb. She had been moving at an almost continuous trot since leaving the Skipping Stone, and they had not found another place to shelter since.

She had not slept, had not eaten, had not had more than a few swallows from the pouch of fermented milk Rhiannon had taken with her.

She had never had reason to run like this among the Bare, but to her body it had been, if not easy, then natural. Like breathing.

As the water washed over them both, Rhiannon began to shiver. Thalia knelt, letting the woman down, and she positioned herself in the way of the pelting rain. It spattered against her flank and ran down her back, but the feeling of it was invigorating. She cupped her hands and drank from the storm, then drank again.

Then the next thing she knew, she was lying in the grass, staring up at the sky, blinking herself awake.

The storm had abated somewhat, diminished to a cold spattering and, from the texture of the light, Thalia guessed that it was nearing evening. Her mistress lay curled up with her, sheltered under the crook of her arm. Rhiannon's breathing was a soft, quick counterpoint to the slow roll of Thalia's own breaths.

Thalia shifted, making sure not to accidentally hurt her mistress. It was difficult being several times the size of her sleeping partner. She felt like a woman raising a hunting-lynx kitten; careful not to move too quickly lest she roll onto it by mistake.

Now fully awake, Thalia's stomach growled. The noise was thunderous, but somehow Rhiannon remained asleep.

They would have to eat soon, she thought, although that would not be a problem. Once the storm cleared, Thalia could bind a hawk and share in its kills. A big, tromping thing like her would be sure to flush game across the grassland, and the hawk's eyes and speed would turn it into a hunting arrow. The notion of eating the kills raw did not appeal to Thalia, but a cookfire was not an option, and she had long ago made her peace with making do.

Even if they found another Skipping Stone, they would probably be best served avoiding it. A cookfire on the rock's surface wasn't worth the risk. The Rakshasa might not have been able to give chase immediately, but it would be unpleasant if their paths crossed again.

It was best to stay out here, where the maps were all liars and the wind and grasses erased all tracks.

Out in the Sight, they could wander forever, never seeing civilization again.

And would that be a bad thing? Thalia wondered. She shifted, trying to get some sensation back into her left arm, and Rhiannon's eyes fluttered open. She twisted, wrapping her arms around Thalia's upper body.

"Thank you," she said, planting a kiss on Thalia's collarbone.

Thalia felt her face flush. It was the most they had spoken since Rhiannon's abduction.

"Don't thank me," she said carefully. "We still have to get back to your home."

There was a strange shine in her mistress' eyes, and it wasn't just the rain water. "Do we?" the princess asked softly.

Thalia almost snorted in alarm. Her eyes and nostrils were wide in shock.

Rhiannon kissed her again.

"They won't thank you for bringing me back," the princess said softly. "We both know that. They would be shamed by it, a slave succeeding where they failed."

Thalia nodded. "I will do what I have to, then."

Her mistress' eyes blazed. "You will do as I tell you to. We are *not* going back." And she buried her damp head into the crook under the Centaur's chin. "If they think I'm dead, let them. They would

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have married me off to someone else anyway. And I don't want someone else." Her fingers dug into Thalia's skin—just shallow enough that they didn't draw blood, but with more than casual force behind them. "We're not going back."

Thalia shivered, though not from the cold. She had felt more sure facing down the Rakshasa than she did now, her mistress in her arms.

"They are your kin—" she began, but Rhiannon yanked hard on her collar, interrupting the thought.

"They are not," said the smaller woman. "And I don't care about kin." She swallowed hard. "I didn't have the courage to think about leaving before. But now that I'm gone..." She held close to Thalia's broad chest. "It isn't the bonds tied around us that matter. It's the ones we choose to tie around ourselves. Those bind us tighter than any cord ever could."

And despite being lost, despite the rain, despite the cold, Thalia felt like a morning firepit that had just been raked, its coals exposed to the air.

If time itself had been a spirit, she would have promised it anything just to go away, and let the moment stretch into forever.

BONUS STORY #3: PROMISES KEPT

| *Commissioned by Burnt Bread*

Author's Note: *It's not that I like writing dark stories. It's just that dark is much easier to write. So when Bread challenged me to write something fluffy, upbeat, and romantic, I spent a good long while staring at my screen trying to figure out how to do that.*

This was my first attempt, and it takes place directly following The Prophecy War, but in a very different corner of the Firmament.

I managed to keep it upbeat, but somehow I couldn't make it fluffy, so An Afternoon Tea got written as well.

I

Adelissa stared at the cosmograph, her worry-lines buckling into a familiar frown. The known space of the Firmament roiled in the basin before her, tendrils of simulated void-fire licking at the edges of the enchanted stone bowl. She could see all the way to distant Shangri-Urath in the cosmograph, and what she saw troubled her. The worlds were dying faster than they were being born.

Just now, while she watched, a cluster in the southern arm had gone from five worlds to one. To a lay-person, a woman living on those worlds, that would have been a catastrophic loss.

For her, it was cause to write a memo.

Adelissa's chair rolled across the floor, its enchantments sending it hovering over discarded books and derelict teacups. Her writing desk was only a few paces from the cosmograph, but standing wasted time. It was easier just to push...and coast.

Fishing a bright white plume from where it rested, its beak drinking at the inkwell, she dashed off a message to Interdimensional Operations.

Bonus Story #3: Promises Kept

Net loss of four in Five Worlds section, she scribbled. Cause unknown. Consequences unlikely to be immediate, but this phenomenon keeps creeping up the arm towards us. It is reasonable to assume we are in danger.

She paused. No one liked being to that. She would have to soften the tone a little more for Operations to consider it.

We still have plenty of time to act, she wrote, and, without knowing the root cause of these apocalypsi, it is wise not to move too rashly. Hence, I advise that a team be sent to assess the area where the Five Worlds were. Perhaps by surveying the surviving world, we can glean clues as to the nature of this problem.

She paused again. Technically, she had some authority here. Second Underkeeper of the Lexography was not a title to be sneezed at.

It just wouldn't be convincing to Ops.

Her short, downy wings fluttered in frustration. She had been sending these letters ever since she had detected the pattern of disappearances during her days as Sixth Underkeeper of the Lexography, and every one of them had been ignored.

Signing the letter as a civilian wouldn't be any better. The Lightwings in Ops had memorized her name by now.

Officially, she was only an amateur cosmographer and she knew that that counted against her. Ops had its own in-house cosmographers, humorless women who only studied in great detail the worlds that were nearby; the ones in Geas-adjacent space.

The ones that were thus far untouched by the Diminishing.

Technically, the phenomenon hadn't been named yet. *Technically*, it wasn't even confirmed to be real. But she couldn't think of it without the capital letter.

Bit by bit, known space was depopulating.

If that wasn't reason to bend the rules a little, then nothing was.

Adelissa bit her lower lip. She leaned over the page, black ringlets crowding forward, and put her hand on the spot where her signature would be.

No Underkeeper would lie on an official missive. The Lexography chose its employees for their meekness, their diligence, and their utter lack of imagination. After all, how else would the Firmament be properly surveyed, and documented, and fathomed? A single liar, embellishing a single report, would obliterate her own

credibility. Which, in turn, would force thousands of worlds to be re-surveyed and do great damage to the project.

Or, Adelissa thought, *it would save Geas.*

Survey teams were often dispatched quickly. A recall order given too late wouldn't have time to catch up to them in the Firmament.

All she needed to do was to pick a name that was important enough that it wouldn't be questioned for a day or two and then she would get the breakthrough she needed.

Fifth Overcaptain of Operations, Muriel Laurelholm, she signed, hardly daring to look at the words as she wrote them. Come and see me if you have any questions, but only after you have acted on this matter.

Her wrist quivered and she returned the pen to its inkwell before it could scatter any dark drops over the sheet. Leaning in close, she blew to dry the ink, then she rolled the paper up, imbued it with magic, and tossed it towards the window.

It streaked out of her private library and into the afternoon sunshine, darting upwards and vanishing into the sky in the direction of the Operations Spire.

Blowing out an anxious breath, Adelissa kicked out and spun in her chair, arms and knees tucked in tight.

This was her moment. This was when everything would change.

Outside, imported songbirds were singing, and the whole world felt sweet.

2

She spent another hour trying to continue her studies, but she was too jittery for it.

She was only required at the Lexography for twelve days out of the week. The remaining three were hers to do with as she wished, and so she usually used them for study.

Perhaps she was boring, she thought, but it didn't matter. What she was doing was important.

Or rather, it *had* been.

Now it was done.

Blinking bleary eyes, Adelissa rolled her chair back from the cosmograph and stood up. The blood rushed to her head and she

Bonus Story #3: Promises Kept

swayed, but her wings beat and she clung to the back of the chair until the dizziness went away.

How long had it been since she had last gotten up? Hours? Days?

She shifted her feet and something crunched under them.

Looking down, she saw the ruins of a teacup. It was one of many, part of a small carpet of neglected saucers and porcelain vessels that ringed the chair, sepia stains dried onto their bowls.

She frowned.

Had the Gilded not been clearing them away?

For that matter, why had they stopped bringing them to her?

Her throat was parched and her head was swimming with an insufficiency of both sleep and tea. She scrubbed at her eyes, dimly remembering giving the Gilded the order that she was not to be disturbed.

That probably explained the mess.

Normally, the Gilded were fastidious. They would pick up a cup and saucer the minute she set it down—regardless of how full her teacup was—or they would re-shelve books that she had deliberately left in the parlor where they were convenient. The Gilded were as old as the world, and they lived to serve, so convincing them *not* to clean had been harder than telling them to just leave her alone for a while.

She had gone with the path of least resistance.

Because of the Gilded, most of Geas' city-sprawl was shining and spotless. Its alabaster compounds and manicured estates glowed in the dawn and the dusk.

By contrast, the inside of Adelissa's library was a wasteland.

Crossing it meant picking her way over the book-and-tea-set clutter, but she moved gingerly and when she had finally gotten to the huge gold-embossed wooden doors at the far end, she threw them open to reveal a trio of Gilded waiting in the main hall.

The Gilded were suits of armor, golden and veiled. There was no one inside them and they didn't speak, but these ones were carrying cleaning rags and buckets for the dishes, which toned down their ominous appearance.

The leadmost suit looked at Adelissa expectantly.

"I won't be back until fifteenth chime," she said imperiously. "Don't touch the cosmograph. Everything else is fair game."

The lead Gilded didn't respond. It just stood there as the other two filed past her towards the clutter. She stepped around it, walking across the polished tiles towards the front door.

Every estate on Geas had its own Gilded, and most Lightwings with a role in the world's government had an estate. The pristine tenement buildings which rubbed shoulders in the poorer parts of the planetary sprawl, were no less well-tended. They were each patrolled by regiments of municipal Gilded, and trash was whisked away the moment it touched the ground.

Adelissa had heard that on other worlds this was not the case, and she wondered how they got by.

The Gilded wanted only to serve, and most Lightwings wanted desperately to avoid menial labor, so theirs was a good long-term arrangement. One of the hazards of living forever was that eventually the minutiae of day-to-day life started to bore you so terribly that you couldn't stand it, and when a Lightwings grew old enough, she stopped brewing her own tea, cooking, or—in extreme cases—even dressing herself. Fortunately, the Gilded were always there to step in.

Adelissa was not the oldest woman on Geas, but she had been around for a while. Her body was in its prime, like every other Lightwings, having stopped its aging right at the end of adolescence. Still, for a moment as she paused by the door, she felt ancient.

Her study of the cosmograph had been a good diversion. It had kept her focused, goal-oriented, and engaged with the world in a way that her work at the Lexography did not.

Without it, she felt unanchored.

Rummaging around in the walk-in closet by the front door, she found a jacket trimmed in magna-rabbit fur, an import from the Eastern Arm, and shrugged into it. It would be a few weeks still until the Cold Season on Geas properly started, but there was still a crispness to the air, and she needed to go out.

She needed to see her other touchstone.

It would help her get by until she found something to replace her study of the Diminishing.

The Lillyblossom was a teahouse, one of several thousand in Geas' city-sprawl, but Adelissa didn't go there to drink.

Every cup held a complex arrangement of bright flowers, their braided stalks slowly untangling as they stretched out in the steeping water, but Adelissa wasn't looking at the constellation of pink-and-blue that was unfurling in hers.

"Would you like anything else?" asked Maltesa, the waitress, her wings sticking out the back of her white blouse. She had her hair pulled back in a brisk ponytail and she was dressed casually, her demeanor somewhere in between friendly and distracted.

She always waited on this section of the teahouse, and so Adelissa always sat there.

"I'm fine. Thank you," Adelissa said, after slightly too long of a pause. She blushed and covered it with a gulp of tea. "This is really good," she added, not tasting it.

Maltesa smiled politely. "Just let me know," she said, collecting the menu and then bustling away to the next table down the row.

Adelissa didn't prevent herself from turning to watch the other Lightwings go.

She had never worked up the nerve to actually *talk* to Maltesa—at least, not about anything more substantial than the price of bramblesweet or saintroot blossoms—but she was fine with that. It was nice enough just to exist on the same world with Maltesa.

There were unearthly beauties all across the Firmament, but none of them had a charcoal stain on the right corner of their apron or walked with such an easy sense of purpose.

Even if that purpose was delivering a small tray of lavender biscuits to the two women at table fourteen.

Adelissa let out a sigh.

The clovenbloom tea looks nice, she thought. It's got cooling properties and a delicate floral finish. I'd love another cup. And to rest my head against your shoulder.

There were plenty of Lightwings that flirting came naturally to. She wasn't one of them.

Lifting her cup to her mouth, Adelissa took another flavorless sip.

You could just kiss her, said a voice in her head, much louder than her own thoughts had been.

Shrieking slightly, she dropped her cup. It bounded off the side of the table, turned end-over-end, and hit the floor with a crunch of breaking bone-china. Sweet, fragrant water spilled over the tiles.

It was darker in the teahouse than in the alley outside. Beeswax candles burned behind paper lanterns, lighting the place with a warm glow, and Adelissa felt their heat in her blush. Frantically, she grabbed her napkin and began mopping at the mess.

Honestly, it would be easy, said the voice again.

Adelissa froze mid-mop. "Who's there?" she hissed.

On this world, do you have the concept of the fairy godmother? asked the voice. Its tone was polite, if very self-assured, and now Adelissa was *certain* that it wasn't her own thoughts.

"No," she said softly. Already, other patrons were turning back to their tea and Maltesa was hastening over to sweep up the mess.

"Thank you," said the waitress, accepting the sopping napkin and handful of shards from Adelissa as if that were the sort of thing anyone actually wanted to be handed.

If you don't have fairy godmothers, said the voice in Adelissa's head, *then you can think of me as a loose collection of unkept promises gathered hungrily in the dark. That is, after all, what I am.*

Adelissa pulled back, shifting away from Maltesa. If she looked, she could see down the other Lightwings' blouse, and that was not a distraction that she wanted right now.

Not with a stray god in her brain.

"What do you want?" she asked quietly, moving her lips as little as she could. Maltesa glanced up, but Adelissa was able to play it cool by clamping her hands to the table and staring fixedly in the opposite direction, which was the ceiling.

Masterful, said the god dryly. They both waited as Maltesa finished up and moved away towards the kitchen.

"I'm not good at this, okay?" said Adelissa testily. "And I'm not trying to change anything, either. I like drinking tea here. I don't want to make it weird. *More importantly,* what are you doing in my head? Visiting divinities are supposed to make contact with the Diplomatic Mediums. You're not allowed out in the city otherwise,

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even disembodied. And especially not without an official escort. If you don't have a way to talk to the department of Diplomatic Mediumship, I could write them a letter of introduction, but that might be complicated by—"

By your recent violation of your oath as an Underkeeper of the Lexography? the god asked.

"It was only a small forgery," snapped Adelissa, "and how do you know about that? How long have you been in here?"

Operations doesn't think it's a small forgery, said the god. *And I just got here. I wasn't snooping. I happen to be able to see people's oaths.*

"You see people's oaths," said Adelissa flatly.

Everywhere, replied the god. *I can see the small one that you broke by spurning the rules of your profession and I can see the bigger one you upheld by acting on your convictions in service to a cause that you believe matters. However,* it added, *the forgery is not the sole reason that I am here.*

"Then why are you here?" asked Adelissa, exasperated.

I care about promises, said the god. *My assigned Medium did not. She left me alone for a few hours and I snuck out.*

"And now you're using your newfound freedom to harass Underkeepers in tea-houses?" said Adelissa flatly.

I'm using it to speak with you, said the god, *because you have an oath that needs safeguarding. It is being threatened by both your hesitation and by the danger to your safety.*

Adelissa's brow furrowed. "By the danger to my safety?"

By your impending death, the god clarified.

"By my impending death?!" blurted Adelissa. Heads turned her way again, and she glared back at them until the other women found something else to look at. "What do you mean," she hissed quietly, "that it's being threatened by my impending death?"

It's exactly what it sounds like, said the god with a bland sort of calm that made Adelissa's fingernails itch. *However, we're nearly out of time. For the sake of expediency, I must ask that you grab your waitress and jump out the window now, if you please.*

"Excuse me?!" Adelissa demanded, the worlds ringing in the air. Past the point of caring, she slapped the table for emphasis. "She's not my waitress, and if you think that I'm just going to—"

She stopped.

The door of the teashop jangled with bells as it swung open and three Lightwings in the regulation black-and-gold trenchcoats of Operations filed in.

That's a coincidence, Adelissa told herself.

It most certainly is not, the god replied.

The leader of the three women was tall and straight-backed. She carried herself like she was either about to waltz or go to war she and hadn't decided yet which one it was going to be.

Her name, Adelissa knew, was Muriel. She knew this because Muriel Laurelholm, Fifth Overcaptain of Operations, was the head of Operations' Impropriety Prevention division.

Anyone who had seen a poster on a wall in the city knew who Muriel was.

She was a hardliner with an intimidating reputation, and so her name had seemed like the perfect one to sign..

The other two Lightwings also looked like capable bruisers. One had short, spiked black hair. The other was a thin blonde with lacquered nails and a steel stud in her nose. Neither wore the sort of expression that suggested they were happy to be in there.

Serious crime was rare on all parts of Geas outside of the Firmament Port, where outsiders were allowed to roam more freely, but the world's population was almost exclusively Lightwings, and Lightwings were naturally packed with magic. When a Lightwings went bad, she went *very* bad, and so arrests were made quickly, efficiently, and with overwhelming force.

Bringing down a rogue with minimal damage to the city wasn't easy, but Impropriety Prevention hired only the toughest to serve as their muscle.

They're not here for me, Adelissa thought.

They're definitely here for you, the god said.

"Second Underkeeper of the Lexography, Adelissa Flores?" asked Muriel, her tone clinical. Heads turned. The head of prevention was addressing the teashop at large, her eyes roving over the scant mid-afternoon crowd, and Adelissa had to fight to keep the instinctive guilt off of her face.

This was all happening too fast.

If she was going to be found out, it should have been days later.

Was it possible that this was about something else?

It's not, said the god.

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“Second Underkeeper Adelissa Flores,” repeated Muriel. “Arcane surveillance has tracked your aether-signature to this establishment. In a few minutes, a paper-golem will arrive from Lexography with an image of your likeness. Please do us a favor and cooperate. You are only wanted for a few short questions.”

Obviously don't cooperate, said the god. *Signal for more tea.*

“Why should I trust you?” Adelissa whispered.

I'm doing this on my own time, at considerable risk, said the god.

“That's not a reason to trust you,” snapped Adelissa. “Just to feel badly for you.”

Do you want to spend the next three centuries inside of a cell? the god asked.

“That's not even a reasonable punishment for forgery!” Adelissa threw up her hands in the air. “I'm going to lose my position,” she said. “I've accepted that. But I'm not going to the Honeycomb for signing someone else's name on a note.”

Her cheeks were red with frustration and she took a breath to cool herself down. It was only then that she realized she had been shouting.

“Ma'am,” said Muriel. She and her bruisers were standing next to the table.

If you follow my instructions very closely, said the god, *you can still get out of this.*

“Fine,” said Adelissa. “But tell me what your name is.”

Muriel raised an eyebrow.

“Not you.” Adelissa waved a hand distractedly. “I know who you are. Anyway, I can't keep calling you 'god'. I don't worship you, and I didn't invite you in. You're a squatter at best.”

At this, Muriel took an immediate step back. Over her head, a Halo shimmered into being. The patrons of the tea shop variously shouted in alarm, froze, or broke for the exits. The two bruisers let them go.

“Are you possessed?” Muriel asked cautiously. Violet lightning crackled around the fringes of her Halo.

When a god was caught joy-riding an unwilling mortal, the consequences were strict. The god was ejected from Geas, forbidden to return.

It would be easy for Adelissa to say that she had been possessed and that was why she had forged the signature. It would ruin her

credibility on all further arguments with Operations, but she might get out of this with her career intact. The notion that Impropriety had come here specifically to arrest her was ludicrous, so she didn't need to feel threatened.

With just a word, she could still make all her troubles go away...

Forsworn, said the god. *That's what I'm called. 'The Forsworn' if you're feeling formal.*

Adelissa cursed inwardly.

She couldn't very well sell it out now that she knew its name.

And it *had* been trying to help her, in its own fashion.

Maybe there was another way to resolve this.

"What do you want of me?" she asked Muriel.

The Overcaptain stared at her, as if trying to see past her skin to the aetheric body underneath; the place where the god dwelt. "I want you to surrender this mortal to me," she said, loudly enough that her voice carried to the remaining patrons who had hunkered down behind tables, chairs, and—in one case—a decorative paper screen. "You will be confined to a Medium Penitent for interrogation, but if you cooperate, you will not be harmed.

"And what about the mortal?" asked Adelissa.

"She's not your concern," said Muriel. "Do we have a deal?"

If you try to stall, said the Forsworn, *this woman is going to run out of patience. She is going to contain the situation forcefully, and that will be bad for you. It paused. I would like you to run. Do you think you can evade her on your own? There are alleyways behind this establishment and the lawkeepers on your world prefer to gather their forces before pursuing anyone there, rather than plunging into a blind, headlong chase.*

Adelissa started to open her mouth.

Do not, shouted the god, *answer me out loud. Do you need my help in escaping? Blink once for yes, twice for no.*

Adelissa blinked once.

And are you willing to open your mind to me? the god asked more levelly. *Without your permission, my powers here are limited. Will you let me operate your body for a short time?*

Adelissa blinked twice, very emphatically.

Well, do you have a better idea? asked the god.

Two more blinks.

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Muriel stared. At her sides, both of the bruisers had also lit up their Halos. “You’re communicating with it,” Muriel said suddenly, the realization dawning. “We’re not talking to the god, we’re talking to the Lexographer.” Her magic flared.

We don’t have time for this, said the Forsworn. *Your oath will be fulfilled, whether you wish it or not.*

Adelissa felt her limbs go instantly numb. It was as if she had slept on them the wrong way, but her legs didn’t collapse out from under her. Instead, her right hand rose up unbidden. Her Halo sizzled into being, churning stronger than it ever had before, and the sensation of that much power running through her was strange and unsettling.

Muriel, taking the Halo as a sign of intent, lobbed a bolt of lightning at Adelissa’s head. The Underkeeper shrieked and ducked, the lightning melting a hole in the window behind her.

The Forsworn’s counterstroke was a rippling dome of force. It came down over the three Impropriety officers like a teacup over a fly, caging them underneath.

The tingling in her limbs ebbed and Adelissa turned to run out into the street, but an unseen force spun her around.

Wait, said the Forsworn. *We need the waitress!*

Maltessa had bolted the moment Muriel’s Halo had turned on, breaking for the kitchen. Her body moving on its own, Adelissa sprinted after her, catching her by the door into the alleyway outside. Adelissa’s hand, without her steering it, grabbed Maltessa’s right wrist. There was a moment of resistance as Adelissa pulled, and then Maltessa pivoted, her closed fist catching Adelissa in the middle of the forehead.

Stars exploded in the Underkeeper’s vision and she reeled back, pressing a hand to her head.

“What was that for?” she shouted at the Forsworn.

“I could say the same!” Maltessa said, snatching a kettle off a nearby rack and brandishing it defensively at Adelissa. Her own Halo churned slowly to life.

“It wasn’t me! I’m not doing this!” said Adelissa, fighting to regain control of herself. “It’s a god! I’m being ridden!”

We need her, said the Forsaken. *There’s no time left to explain. I’m invoking her vows. She’s coming with us.*

“What vows?” demanded Adelissa. Her voice had gone high and panicky at some point in the past minute, but she didn’t care.

This woman works in the service industry. She has an implicit obligation to her customers. I can compel that and—would you stop interrupting me when I’m trying to save your life?

From inside the dining room, there was a thunderous roar. Adelissa felt her containment barrier rupture and a wave of backfired magical force rolled through her mind, causing her to stagger. Behind her, the entire teahouse shook from the energy release. Ladles and strainers fell from their racks in the kitchen. Bunches of fragrant herbs dropped unceremoniously onto the floor.

Adelissa felt something uncoil from inside of her and a rush of energy flooded into the dining room.

The rumbling stopped.

That should hold them for the moment, said the Forsworn. *They have oaths, too, difficult though they may be to grasp without your permission. I invoked as much of them as I could.*

“I really don’t know what that means,” mumbled Adelissa.

Neither did Maltessa, but she hadn’t stuck around to say anything about it. Her footsteps thundered away, sensible working shoes slapping the cobblestones of the alley as she fled.

From the kitchen, there came a scream of frustrated rage—either from Muriel or the bruisers—and Adelisa decided that waiting to find out wasn’t worth the consequences.

Her forehead still smarting, she pelted after the waitress, leaving behind the teahouse for the maze of pristine alleyways beyond.

4

Still ridden by the Forsworn, Adelissa followed Maltessa down the switchback turns and sudden flights of stairs that plagued the network of alleyways. She did not typically spend a lot of time running, jumping, or performing any sort of physical activity and soon her breathing was labored and her lungs were burning. Nevertheless, she stumbled on, even as her pulse hammered against the inside of her chest.

It was better than thinking about what might be behind her.

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It was better than realizing that, even after she slowed down, she still wouldn't be safe.

Over the centuries, Impropriety Prevention had gotten very good at hunting down Geas' society's rare criminals. They might be slow to pursue when they thought a target was dangerous, but they were relentless.

They would find her again. It was inevitable.

Eventually, as small bright spots were swimming across Adelissa's vision and her breath was more rasp than heave, Maltessa began to slow. She came to a gradual stop, resting one hand on the wall as she began to breathe deeply.

Adelissa came to a stop too, but it was an on-the-ground-and-rolling-on-her-back sort.

She couldn't remember the last time she had moved like this. Her every inhale was fire. Her every exhale an explosion.

Maltessa turned to stare at her, and for a second she thought the waitress was going to run again, but the other Lightwings' expression was a mix of wonder and pity, fear and sympathy.

Once you can stand up, said the Forsworn, you should ask her if she's seeing anyone.

"Excuse me?" wheezed Adelissa.

We might not have a lot of time, said the god. If they're going to kick me off-world, I want to resolve this first. So, ask her if she's seeing anyone. Does she like Lexographers? Is chasing her out of her restaurant a deal-breaker? It will be much more difficult to ask these things after you have been imprisoned or destroyed.

Not having the breath to reply the way she wanted to, Adelissa kicked her feet and shook her head. Maltessa's expression shifted another notch towards sympathy.

It was probably easier to be afraid of a god-possessed criminal in a tea-shop than an out-of-breath bookwork having an asthma attack at her feet.

"This is not," Adelissa wheezed, "a fit. I'm not crazy," she coughed, "I'm just possessed. And I'm *not* kissing anyone without their permission," she continued, drawing in a huge breath and letting it out in a definitely-attractive-and-not-at-all-off-putting honk. "*And it's rude to ask people out when they're fearing for their life.*"

The Forsworn muttered something that didn't make it to conscious thought.

Maltesa's eyebrows went up.

Adelissa dragged in another breath. Her heart-rate was slowing, beat by juddery beat.

Her face, she knew, was a blotchy mess of peach and red. But it wasn't embarrassment. She was beyond that now. She was in a country embarrassment didn't even send its diplomats to.

"That wasn't to you," she said forcefully, turning her head towards Maltesa. "And for what it's worth, I'm sorry you're mixed up in this. Whatever this is. I sort of need to figure that out, and I've got a god in my head that keeps giving me terrible suggestions, so could you give me a minute?" Without waiting for a reply, she rolled over onto her back and stared up at the sky.

Through the thin slit of the alleyway, she could see the distant blue overhead. Swarms of flying papers—golemized messages, missives, despatches, and letters—trundled through the low clouds and plumes of chimney smoke.

Any one of those golems might have been a charcoal sketch of her face and a reward for information leading to her arrest.

She sighed.

How was she supposed to talk to the Forsworn about *anything*? Every time she tried, things just got worse.

For that matter, how was she supposed to talk to it without having to keep explaining that she wasn't talking to Maltesa; she was addressing the cosmic hitch-hiker that had settled itself into her head?

She rolled to face the alley wall.

"Forsworn," she told the alabaster brickwork. "I'm not going to ask her out. That moment is past. It was probably past even before you dug your magic into her, or whatever it was you did. I don't know why you're here, or why you've taken an interest in me, but maybe you should just give up and move on. I can get out of this on my own."

The god snorted. *Giving up*, it said, *is the reason that I'm here*.

"That doesn't make any sense," said Adelissa, to an audience of mortar and stone.

I don't know how long I can keep protecting you, the Forsworn said, its tone growing serious. *Your life is in danger. But your oath*,

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the one that you swore to yourself, is also imperiled. One way you could uphold it is by asking her out. You should do that now, while you still have the chance.

"I already told you," said Adelissa, "I'm not doing it. Not unless you can give me a better reason than 'you have to.'"

It's the right thing to do? offered the god.

Adelissa snorted. "Gods always say that."

It is, insisted the Forsworn. *You just haven't accepted it—*

From the other side of the alley, Maltessa cleared her throat.

"I don't usually get kidnapped on workdays," she said carefully.

"This is the first time, really, so you tell me if this isn't how this is supposed to go, but you sound like you need help."

Adelissa rolled over, facing back towards the waitress. "Both of us do," she said bluntly.

The Forsworn was cautiously silent.

"I'm not just a waitress, you know," said Maltessa. "I'm saving up for a license."

"I didn't know that," said Adelissa, acutely aware that this was the longest conversation they had ever had together. "'What are you going to be licensed in?'"

"Diplomatic Mediumship," said the waitress. "And since you're being possessed by a god, maybe I can help."

"The god's not my only problem," Adelissa said.

Malteria frowned. "That's not why Impropriety is after you?"

"I might have forged an official signature," said Adelissa.

On a world where most crime topped out at jaywalking, that felt like something of a confession. Still, Malteria didn't so much as ruffle her wings.

"That's it?" she asked. "This seems disproportionate. They sent a squad just for that?"

Adelissa slumped onto her back. "I only forged it because they kept ignoring my letters. Operations needs to be aware of the problems facing the greater Firmament, especially if they might become our problems in a few centuries' time. I—" she paused. "I'm an amateur cosmographer," she said, "but I know what I'm seeing. It's important and they weren't listening, so I pretended to be someone they'd listen to—at least long enough to verify that what I was seeing was correct."

It all came out much more impassioned than she had meant for it to, and now Maltesa was regarding her strangely. "Alright," the waitress said. "I don't think I'm going back to my shift for a while, and it sounds like we need a safer place to talk. If Improprity wants you, they're going to start cordoning off the district. If they don't already have a lock on your aetheric signature, of course."

I've made a few changes to it while you were talking, said the Forsworn helpfully, prompting a. *It will take them a little while to refine their search.*

Adelissa stared. A person's aether signature was as personal as a fingerprint.

You didn't change someone's fingerprints without telling them first.

Of course, if the god could put it back the way it was, Adelissa would be trackable again.

"They won't be able to track me," she said resignedly. "The god's meddling again. It's handled." She paused. "I don't know what to do about the cordon, though. Those don't come up very often in cosmography."

Malteria smiled, looking a touch self-satisfied. "They do in diplomacy," she said. "I spend a lot of time in the Firmament Port. That should be a safe enough place to hide, if we can get there. You ready to stand up again?"

Adelissa nodded. The waitress held out a hand, she took it, and was hauled to her feet. The other Lightwings was surprisingly strong. Adelissa forced away another blush.

"By the way," said Maltesa, "what's your name?"

"It's Adelissa," said the Underkeeper.

"I'm Maltesa," said the waitress. "Have you spent any time in the Weave?"

Adelissa frowned. "Why would I? I'm not Gilded."

Maltesa's smile broadened. "Common misconception," she said. "They're not the only ones allowed in. I use it when I don't feel like flying. Follow me." And, leading the way down the alley, she crawled head-first into a trash chute and disappeared from view.

The Weave was technically part of Geas, but it was not a part where Lightwings ever went. Its tunnels were deeper and cleaner than any of the alleyways overhead, and—far from the noises of the city—they echoed only with the sound of the visitors' footsteps.

When Geas had been first wrought from the Firmament, the original hundred Lightwings that had created it—refugees from the Northern Arm—had planned out its cities meticulously. They had laid out commercial sectors and academic districts and even planned the Port and the Cosmic Defense Parade Grounds, for the scant military that the world still maintained. However, underneath all of those places, they had also woven a network of municipal tunnels as complex as a heap of unravelled yarn. The tunnels in the tangle had no clear exits, no marked passageways, and no markets or residential spaces.

They were for the Gilded, who knew them like the backs of their empty, golden sabatons.

The Weave was barren of everyone else, even Lightwings who might have considered it as a shortcut, because its tunnels were completely unmarked. Each looked the same as the others, and efforts to put signs on the walls or mark them with chalk were vigorously opposed by the Gilded, who swarmed out of side-tunnels to scrub away the changes.

A Lightwings that ventured too far into the tunnels stood a very real risk of getting so lost that she might never come out.

Maltessa didn't seem to have gotten the memo.

"Once you've memorized the right parts," she said as she took a right at a crossroads that looked no different from the seventeen other crossroads they had already passed through, "it turns into the fastest way to get around. They don't cover it in the classes, but if you're a student, you can pay some of the older diplomats to teach you. Most of them eventually accept postings on other worlds, and they don't want the knowledge of how to navigate this part of Geas dying out."

Adelissa nodded like she wasn't sight-unseen placing her life in the hands of the waitress. She had been trying to act calm in the alley, but now that the adrenaline from the confrontation in the

teahouse had ebbed, she was nervously fidgeting with her fingernails, trying to keep from thinking about how long it would take Maltessa to realize it if they made a wrong turn.

"Don't do that," said Maltessa, as Adelissa started to bite her fingernails. "You'll leave microscopic bits behind and the Gilded get antsy whenever anyone leave stuff in their tunnels."

Adelissa pulled her fingers away from her mouth so fast that she nearly hit her elbow on the wall. "Microscopic?" she asked, in a startled squeak.

Maltessa shrugged. "It's a word some diplomats use. It's the opposite of cosmographic. It's things that are so small that only the Gilded care about them."

"Oh." Adelissa forced herself to breathe normally.

She's really smart, mused the Forsworn. You'd make a good match. You should tell her th—

"Shut up!" Adelissa snapped, then she colored. "Not you," she said. "The god. It was being unhelpful."

"Have you tried asking it why it wants you to..." Maltessa trailed off delicately. She didn't let her tone change, but her wings beat in a way that suggested awkwardness. "Why it wants you to do what it wants you to do?" she finished.

"It hasn't been very clear about its motivations," said Adelissa. "Just that I have to do it. It's important. Etcetera."

"So this isn't how you usually pick people up?" asked Maltessa innocently.

"I don't ever—" Adelissa began. "I mean," she stumbled, "I date all the time. Obviously. I am not a total shut-in. I go out constantly, and I often think about things that aren't books or universes." She stopped again.

Maltessa was laughing.

It was a silvery sound, free and pleasant. Entirely without judgement.

Adelissa's stomach did a curious sort of roll.

"I really am sorry about this," Adelissa said earnestly.

Maltessa shrugged. "Whatever this is," she replied, "it's not boring. And you're in way more trouble than I am. But all the same, apology accepted. Just don't do it again and we're good." She flashed a grin.

"I wasn't planning to," said Adelissa.

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“Then we’re fine,” said Maltesa, coming to a halt. There was a chute midway up the left wall, and it led up and to their right. It was a sheer ascent, with no handholds or obvious markings to indicate that it even went anywhere, but it seemed to have significance to the waitress. “After you?” Maltesa ventured.

Adelissa needed no prompting. Grunting, she clambered into the chute, put her hands against the walls, and began to haul herself up. From overhead, she could hear the sound of foot-traffic, and it was sweeter than any music.

6

This is not where I wanted to be, said the Forsworn. It had been growing increasingly sullen since they had emerged into an alley behind the Diplomatic Salon, a twelve story hexagonal complex in the middle of the Firmament Port. The exterior of the building was alabaster, like everything else on Geas, but the interior was pastel and plush and looked utterly alien compared with the high ceilings and strong arches that were prevalent in the city. The functionaries, a mix of Lightwings and offworlders dressed in similarly warm, mild tones, had taken one look at Adelissa and let the three of them in without asking for ID.

That was their policy with unlicensed gods, Maltesa had explained. No questions were asked. No rebuke was given. They were just glad that the stray was back in their facility, rather than out on the streets, jumping from mind-to-mind among the locals, causing an inter-dimensional incident.

Nevertheless, the Forsworn wasn’t thrilled with this change.

They’re going to stick me with an escort, it grumbled. *They won’t let me possess anyone else. You were supposed to be the first. a nice, easy case. Quick to resolve. Just kiss her, don’t get killed by the woman with the austere face, and I can move on to the next one.*

Adelissa tuned it out.

A woman who looked like half of a snake joined to the wingless upper body of a regular person brought a small tray of snacks to their table, then bustled away, her coils swishing side-to-side.

They had been assigned a seat on the third floor, in a corner lounge where the foot-traffic was low and the clientele seemed to

consist mostly of off-duty Mediums swapping stories and throwing wary looks at the newcomers. The snacks were elaborate and foreign, ranging from sweetened goat milk over crushed ice to a little disc of egg-custard dressed with green nuts and rose petals.

Maltessa grabbed one of the latter, popped it into her mouth, and chewed. “They don’t usually let me in here,” she said, “since I’m still a student, but if you’re in the company of a god or an official diplomat, then all bets are off.”

Adelissa eyed the ice-dessert, but she didn’t reach for it. “What do we do now?” she asked. “Even if Impropiety can’t track us easily, someone will find us eventually. Then they’ll do...whatever it is they’re going to do, for whatever reasons they’re going to do it for.”

Maltessa nodded. “This *can’t* be just about a forgery. I mean,” she paused, “you used magic on them, so obviously now it’s much more than a forgery. And there’s a rogue god involved and...” she huffed out a breath. “But never mind all that. We’re not trapped, and we’re not helpless. We’re exactly where we want to be.”

Adelissa raised an eyebrow.

“We’re mostly where we want to be,” Maltessa amended. “We’re surrounded by resources.”

Adelissa glanced at the tray of snacks.

“Better than that,” said the waitress, helping herself to another disc of custard. “When you’re ready, let’s go talk to the other Mediums.”

7

Of the the ones that were in the complex instead of leading long processions of guards and minders as they toured their gods through the city, only a few Mediums were currently hosting a divine presence in their bodies.

Of those, only a handful were available to talk to the acting host of the Forsworn.

However, the *assigned* host of the Forsworn was touring the city with Operations, aiding them in tracking the god—and that detail made Adelissa interesting enough that a handful of Mediums

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consented to meet with her later that hour, in a conference chamber at the heart of the complex.

A handful of gods was plenty, according to Maltessa, and it was only a start.

Despite not advertising their meeting to the complex at large, the Gilded had somehow found out about it and made sure that the conference room was lavishly prepared in advance. The furniture was cozy and abundant. Five seats had been pulled into an intimate circle. There was even a side table dressed with drinks and appetizers.

A pair of Gilded stood just outside—ready to tidy up the moment the room’s occupants were done.

Adelissa hadn’t touched the refreshments, but her stomach was too knotted up to rumble. Underkeepers didn’t have a lot of face-to-face meetings with important audiences and her voice felt like it wanted to crawl back down her throat, find a place to perch among her kidneys, and lair there for the next few weeks.

Throwing a caviar cracker down after it hadn’t felt like a winning idea.

“Shall we begin?” asked Devania, the assigned and acting host of the River Dragons. She was a short, thickset woman with faded wings and a utilitarian sense of dress and she put measurable pauses between each of her words. When her god interrupted her to explain that it was not *all* of the River Dragons, obviously, just one pack from one world, Adelissa realized why Devania spoke that way.

Devania rolled her eyes at this, all the while elaborating in the Dragons’ voice about how gods often called themselves things like the Everblood or the Nexus, but rarely they were more than a single world’s worth of Everblood or Nexus energy, until Lumiere interrupted her.

“That’s all very interesting,” said Lumiere, the second diplomat, “but perhaps we could keep to the matter at hand?” As she said this, she smiled, and Devania quickly flashed her a hand-sign for gratitude.

Lumiere was the most blandly beautiful woman Adelissa had ever seen. Her body was perfectly proportional in a way that would have made mathematicians jealous, she didn’t have a single freckle or sunspot, and her wings were stark, snowy white in contrast to

her sepia skin. She was dressed professionally in ceremonial ceramic armor and not so much as a strand of her hair was out of place.

She had already introduced her god as Uniformity, and Maltesa had nodded as if that were an obvious conclusion when she did.

“What is the matter at hand?” asked the third host, Zelia, interrupting Adelissa’s train of thought.

Zelia represented the Many, which was a confederation of lesser spirits. Twice Zelia was forced to stop as internal arguments broke out, and she ended both by yelling at herself. When the spirits had finally calmed down, she straightened her clothes and said “I understand that it is a matter of urgency, and that it involves all visiting gods, but you haven’t been very forthcoming with us.” Her hair was askew and she looked harried, but she gave the impression that this was her normal. “It would have been better to give us the details up front and let us choose whether to attend this little soiree on our own,” she said, then she took a seat in a richly upholstered chair, gazing challengingly up at Adelissa.

Adelissa swallowed nervously.

Maltesa had coached her on what to say. She had even memorized the words, but all *that* had done was to make them feel mechanical. Would the diplomats listen to her if she just *droned* at them, or would they walk out, find a window, and send a magically galvanized letter off to Impropriety Prevention to tell them where to find her?

“I’m sorry, I...” said Adelissa. She swallowed again. Her throat felt as dry as sand. “I don’t do this a lot. Thank you for meeting with me.” Her voice sounded strange to her own ears. “The Forsworn and I appreciate you taking the time to do this, especially because time is precious to me right now.”

This announcement got her a trio of curious looks, so she pressed on. “Operations is currently looking for me.” She said. “They mean to pull the Forsworn out of me and put me in a cell. At least, that’s the Forsworn’s best guess.”

Devania’s expression went stern and Zelia’s became a mask of concern.

Lumiere frowned like she was studying a particularly complex arcanistry problem and said “do they have a reason for wanting to jail you? The rights of an embodied god on diplomatic territory,

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even a wrongfully embodied god with a consenting host, are well codified and protected. Divines wouldn't agree to leave their spirit-bodies behind at the gates if they didn't think they would be treated reasonably on-world." She paused significantly. "We may need more context."

Adelissa gulped. "You already know that I'm not a Medium. The Forsworn is here by its own choice, and Impropriety is only looking for *it* because they're looking for me. When they first came after me, they didn't know I was hosting a god. I didn't know that either. It surprised both of us, I think."

The room's temperature seemed to tumble several degrees.

"So, why was Impropriety after *you*?" asked Zelia, much too lightly.

"I signed someone else's name on a letter," said Adelissa.

"That's *it*?" said Devania. She frowned. "Where were you when Impropriety tried to arrest you?"

"I was in a teahouse," said Adelissa, "off of 4th Vertical and 2nd Lateral. The Lillyblossom. The Forsworn used its powers on them and—"

Stop. This is not what the kind of thing you want to get stuck talking about, the god said sharply.

Adelissa's mouth snapped shut.

You are not a creature of politics, the Forsworn continued. *They will not feel the need to listen to you, but they will heed me. They swim in the opinions of gods every day, and they will be sympathetic to mine. Repeat what I say.*

Adelissa nodded.

"I am speaking now on behalf of the Forsworn, keeper of oaths, patron of neglected promises and sworn enemy of hypocrites," she said, echoing the god's words. "You are doing yourselves a disservice if you are worrying about this woman's credentials. She is my concern, not yours. If you are not deeply troubled by the precedent Impropriety is setting, then you are not thinking. They are treating my involvement as incidental. They care first about taking my host into custody, and second about the opinions of a god. This place that is supposed to be safe for our kind, and yet they will come here to enforce a disproportionate punishment for a trivial crime. If we do not object to this kind of behavior,

immediately and as a group, what makes you think they won't do this to one of you later?" Adelissa drew a breath.

The Forsworn didn't need to breathe, and so it just kept talking, and it took Adelissa a moment to catch up with it. "Have none of you ever snuck out without an official escort?" she said hastily. "Do you really want Impropriety coming back here and ripping you out of your Medium in retaliation?"

Devania's expression hardened, but it was Zelia that spoke. "You brought us here for a slippery slope argument?" she asked, eyebrow raised imperiously. "Your host made a mistake, and she's being punished for it. You apparently made a mistake too, in choosing her. That's not our concern."

Devania frowned, turning to her companion. "If the bottom of the hypothetical slope is all brambles and fire, it's worth watching where we step," she said. "If the Forsworn's claim is correct, this is bad, no matter whose fault it is."

"What assurances do we have," asked Lumiere, "that Impropriety Prevention really means to confront you here?"

"We only have to wait," said Adelissa, forcing a confidence she didn't feel. "All I'm asking is that you wait with me. Act as witnesses. Ensure that Impropriety can't get away with something just because they weren't observed. Would you do this for me? For your gods?"

Devania was nodding and Lumiere seemed to be considering the prospect, but Zelia looked unconvinced. "My gods are arguing," she said, "and on occasions like this, I have temporary, revocable permission to speak as one of their number. There are a lot of things I could be doing right now, from politicking to sleeping. The Firmament is vast. Many new gods pass through the Port every day, and many of them become my responsibilities. I could be mingling with representatives of the Greentide or the Restless Depths, and I—"

All at once, there was a commotion at the door.

Armor creaked and veils swished as one of the Gilded was violently shoved aside.

Muriel strode into the room, flanked on either side by her two bruisers from before.

Those bruisers had been joined by ten others.

There was a hiss of indrawn breath from Zelia as she stopped midword.

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Devania's expression drew into a scowl. "We were in a meeting," she said.

"Sorry to interrupt," said Muriel blithely. "We won't be here long. We just need to wrap up the little matter of a thaumaturgic assault on one of our agents, and then you can have your god back—returned, of course, to its appointed Medium."

"Thaumaturgic assault?" asked Zelia in alarm.

"It was a barrier!" shouted Adelissa. "I didn't touch you!"

"I can vouch for her," Maltessa said, weighing in. "She really doesn't want to be a part of this."

But now now the Mediums' Halos were lit up, as were those of the women from Impropriety. Sluggish violet circles swirled above the heads of most of the women in the room, all crackling with trceries of purple lightning.

"Let's be calm about this," Devania said.

No, said the Forsworn slyly, *let's not. Do I have your permission, Lexographer?*

"Yes," Adelissa said.

Its power uncoiled.

She felt the rush of divine energy whip out of her, flinging itself across the room and wrapping over the Impropriety team. Their expressions went in an instant from cold, implacable judgement to revulsion and horror. And then they froze that way.

One of the bruisers dropped to her knees. Another made a strangled sort of noise.

"What did you do to them?" demanded Zelia in a hush.

"It wasn't me," said Adelissa. "It was the Forsworn again. It invoked their guilt, I think? Or something like that."

Close enough, said the god.

The bruisers were still locked in place. Their faces looked almost paralyzed, their expressions masks slathered on by an amateur plasterer.

Muriel lifted her arms slowly to stare at her hands.

The three attending Mediums exchanged the kind of look that said "are we going to get blamed for this?"

And still the bruisers didn't move.

Instead, a piece of Muriel's uniform unravelled. It had looked like nothing more than a stray seam when it was part of her sleeve, but

now it was wriggling wormlike, inching up her shoulder to coil by her ear.

It appeared to be a single ribbon, dyed alternately in bands of white and gold.

It also undulated like a serpent, moving of its own free will.

Adelissa stared.

It wasn't radiating magic, which meant that its powers came from somewhere else.

And if it didn't use magic, but it could move about on its own, then it was of divine origin.

Operations—apart from the occasional collection, disembodiment, and punishment of a rogue—had little to do with the gods. Operations and the gods were all but enemies.

Moreover, gods in their own bodies were unheard of outside of the Port. They were *illegal* outside of the Port.

Muriel didn't seem to be treating the ribbon like it was a threat. She barely seemed aware of its presence.

The scrap of fabric shivered and wound around her neck. It made a sound like rustling, or like whispering. Her Halo quickened.

"What in the empty heavens is that?" demanded Devania.

"We all know what that is," said Lumiere forcefully—although as far as Adelissa was concerned, this was a lie.

Shakily, Muriel raised her hands to the roof.

"Don't let her—!" Zelia started to shout, but by then it was too late. Magic slammed into the ceiling, transmuting the alabaster into sand. Dust poured down, enveloping the room in a choking, billowing cloud.

Adelissa dropped to the floor, hands over her head. With her magic, she called a shield into being and cowered under it until the obscuring clouds began to settle.

Through the haze, she could see the Mediums and the bruisers and Maltessa, but no Muriel. The woman was gone—as was the animated ribbon.

Zelia had produced a notepad from somewhere and a charcoal pencil to go with it. Blinking against the swirling dust, she scribbled down a message, folded it into a paper glider, and chucked it into the air. Magic lashed out from her Halo to infuse it, and it sped out through the hole in the roof.

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Devania and Lumiere were following suit, golemizing missives and flinging them after it.

Adelissa coughed, dust plumeing away from her. “What just happened?” she wheezed.

“That was a Silken,” said Maltessa. She whirled on the bruisers, outrage apparently overwhelming her hesitation. “What are *they* doing here?”

8

Despite all of its regulations, despite centuries of evolving interdimensional policy, there was only one broad classification of gods that was denied access to Geas. They were a spiritual infection, a plague of misdirections and sabotage that fed off of thwarted schemes and misunderstanding.

They did not see themselves as malicious, but nevertheless they brought the death of worlds.

They were the Silken, gods of manipulation.

When a Silken arrived in the Firmament Port, it was met with an army. Even one ribbon was enough to warrant that response. In the past, they had been told in no uncertain terms to leave or be destroyed. Now they were simply destroyed.

Whatever stories they tried to tell, standing orders were to ignore them and to see that anyone who heard more than a couple sentences was reassigned to a posting off-world.

It only took a little wriggle of their language in the ears of the right woman to create a criminal, a saboteur, an enemy of the state.

A Lightwings who heard more than that could not help but bring catastrophe to those around her.

On the rare occasions that a Silken was found elsewhere in the city, it was reported instantly to Operations. Teams cordoned off the area in a five block radius.

Apparently those precautions hadn't been sufficient.

Soaring on wings of paper, the Mediums sent messages to circulate through the streets, seeking out every Diplomatic Medium within an hour's flight of the complex.

Muriel's bruisers, still paralyzed, were consigned to a spare lounge. A squad of guards was placed on the door and a Medium

was left to stand with them, her god at the ready in case they fought free of whatever had been done to them.

They did not appear to be stirring, which was as much a frustration as a relief. Trying to keep them in custody against their wishes would have been difficulty.

It would also have raised questions about jurisdiction that none of the Mediums wanted to answer.

As new Mediums filtered into the conference room, now with a stylish skylight that went through the floor of the three chambers above it, Adelissa and Maltessa were all but swept aside to make room as the newcomers came in on a discussion that was by turns riotous with confusion, fear, and anger.

"You know, this really wasn't how I thought today was going to go," said Maltessa, lounging against the wall. She was trying just slightly too hard to be nonchalant, but Adelissa found it reassuring all the same.

They had retreated to the space by the now dust-covered tray of hors d'ouvres, which was being soundly ignored for a myriad of reasons by the crowd of god-infused Lightwings that was slowly filling the room.

"I'm sorry about this," said Adelissa. She wasn't sure when she'd last had anything more substantial than a half-cup of tea, and her thoughts felt like they were swimming through her head. "I didn't mean to drag you into this," she added, "and I didn't know what was happening, or have much control over it...but those are excuses." She looked at the ground. "I really do feel awful."

"And you're really not to blame," said Maltessa mildly. "It's your god's fault if it's anyone's. Has it even explained to you even why it sought you out?"

"It said it's upholding a promise," said Adelissa, "but I haven't made any promises lately. Not the kind that matter."

You did, said the Forsworn emphatically. *And they're all the kind that matter.*

"I did not!" snapped Adelissa. "I'm pretty sure I would have remembered swearing to kiss someone I barely know."

It's not about kissing, said the Forsworn.

"Oh, *that's* an about-face," Adelissa thundered. "What about all that stuff before?!"

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It's not just about kissing, insisted the god. Kissing is simply the easiest way to fulfill the oath that you swore.

"What oath?" barked Adelissa, folding her arms.

To stop letting fear hold you back, said the god. For a moment this morning, I saw you shining so brightly. I saw it from across the city, from inside the Port, from inside my host, and it was a revelation. By the time I caught up to you, you were already telling yourself that it had been too risky to forge that signature, that you should never do something like it again, that you should lay low until they caught you and then just accept the consequences. You prayed that you wouldn't be caught, rather than planning for ways to stand up to your department. You tried to distract yourself from thinking about it, and you distracted yourself by thinking of reasons to never talk to this woman. To never ask if you could kiss her. To never risk your loneliness for a chance at joy.

"So you tried to push me out of my comfort zone," said Adelissa flatly.

Into risk and danger and kissing, agreed the god. Did it work?

"Two out of three isn't bad," the Underkeeper said, and sighed.

"In any event, the moment's past. It would be completely awkward now to ask, and I'm not even sure I want to—"

Maltesa's hand tapped her lightly on the shoulder.

Adelissa looked up to face her.

"Do you want to go out some time?" the Lightwings asked. "I mean," she continued, calmly folding her wings, "without gods, or crime, or international politics. Dinner, somewhere that doesn't serve tea? And maybe then I can figure out if the events of the day have given me a syndrome or if I actually think you're kind of cute?"

Adelissa's expression went still. "You don't have to do that."

"I'm not doing it for you," said Maltesa. "This has been the weirdest day I've had in the past half-century. Minus the great, world-shaping peril, I wouldn't mind another one like it."

"This isn't what things are usually like for me," Adelissa stammered.

"So that's a 'no', then?" Maltesa asked, too-lightly.

Mortal, if you don't tell her—

"No!" said Adelissa harshly. "Sorry," she amended. "No, it's not a 'no'. The god's just making it hard for me to think."

"But not impossible," said Maltesa contemplatively. "You'd make a good Medium."

"I—" Adelissa gave up. "Next Crestday. You pick the place?"

"Sure. How about the Braided Daisy—" said Maltesa into a surprisingly loud silence. She frowned as the words rang out across the room. The roar of the other Mediums' discussion had died away.

Both of them turned to find the gathered Lightwings facing them.

Lumiere stood at the front of the crowd. "We're going to Operations," she said without preamble. "We need to know if this is an isolated incident, and we can't just ask them if everything is alright. We will be travelling in force, and we think you would be useful. Would you like to accompany us?"

Adelissa gulped, but she steeled herself.

This was important, and the words of the Forsworn were still ringing in her head.

"Yes," she said.

9

She walked with Maltesa in the middle of the mob of Mediums, moving in a traffic-halting cluster down the center of the road. It seemed like every god-occupied Medium on-world was there in the press of bodies, although rationally Adelissa knew that would have been ridiculous.

No message, no matter how dire, could have gotten *every* diplomat to take it seriously.

Still, the numbers were daunting, and around the Mediums marched a living wall of guards.

It was illegal for the gods to walk the city without minders, so the guards had turned out in force.

As had Operations.

Lightwings in uniform lined the streets, their Halos on display. None of them were brazen enough to begin working a spell—not in view of the Mediums, who together represented several hundred worlds' worth of gods—but there was a tension in the air so palpable that it sent foot-traffic scattering out of the way.

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The shortest route to the Spire didn't take long to travel alone on foot when the crowds were thin, but none of those conditions applied this time.

The Mediums and their escorts were jostled and forced to squeeze through narrow alleys when the streets began to be blockaded, and then to clamber over the blockades, marching through the ranks of Operations, as it became clear that there was no unobstructed path left to the spire.

The relative silence that this all happened in only added to the spectacle.

The diplomats' destination was always visible on the skyline. Built by magecraft, it was a towering bronze spine rising into the lower sky, overlooking all of Geas. It was built that way as a symbol of Operations' power, but also out of convenience. Flying couriers and golemized messages congested the airspace around it, looking from a distance like a swarm of gnats turning in crazed circles.

As the Mediums drew closer, the golems buzzed over their formation, taking sketches and delivering warnings.

A piece of paper landed in Adelissa's hands and she read it.

"Stop. This is disruptive," it said.

Another one followed shortly after: "charges will not be pressed if you return to the Firmament Port. We can resolve our differences through proper channels, rather than out in the streets like Western-arm barbarians."

The Mediums marched on.

The base of the Spire was a wide, ornate complex. It was gated at every entry-point and each gate had a picket of Operations women stationed out front.

From the middle of the mob, it was impossible to tell what the women were saying to the diplomats, but word went back that Adelissa was needed at the front and the crowd parted in front of her. Hands at her back pushed her forward until she was finally expelled into a small neutral zone between the Mediums and the picket. Devania and Lumiere were there as well, and Devania was engaged in a fiery argument with the Operations agents.

Lumiere smiled as Adelissa stepped forward, and her expression was almost predatory. "That thing your god did in the conference room," she said conversationally. "I don't suppose it could do it again?"

Adelissa opened her mouth to ask, but already the Forsworn was *uncoiling*. She felt a wave of energy leave her to crash over the picket and the women instantly went slack. It took Devania only a little effort to move them aside.

From that point on, Adelissa marched in the front.

They crossed the grounds of the Spire complex and they strode into the building proper. All the while, the Forsworn was invoking duties and guilts, leaving the women of Operations standing mute and catatonic.

Had the host of the River Dragons been leading the procession, there would have been floodwaters and mudslides and the appearance of a small war being waged between Operations and the gods.

That small war would have instantly blossomed into a larger war as other Lightwings took notice, and it would have ended with the destruction of Geas or the eviction of the gods.

That would have been catastrophic, but with the Forsworn in front, things were quiet, peaceful, and quick. An alarm was raised early on, but no aggressive spells were cast. No one even shouted—for more than a few seconds at a time, at least.

They proceeded up the Spire's bright, polished metal stairs, clearing floor after floor as they pressed up towards the middle of the stalk. The decor inside was expensive and severe, using gold and glass to accent the omnipresent bronze. Most of its rooms were wide open spaces dominated by their own emptiness, and so when the Mediums opened a door and found one packed to the seams with sheets and ribbons which wriggled as if they had been woken from slumber, there was an audible indrawing of breath.

A ribbon fluttered forward and latched itself onto Zelia's neck. The diplomat's magic flared and turned it to ashes—but by then the whole room was emptying out onto them, the Silken hissing tantalizing lies, and the battle was joined.

IO

By the end of the day, smoke was gouting out of the upper reaches of the Spire and shreds of burning silk were spiraling down through the air. The Silken had built themselves a network of

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nests—each looking like a ruptured laundry hamper—at the tower's chokepoints, but in the end they had all been flammable.

Eventually, when the Mediums had returned to the lower floors, it had seemed like all of Operations was waiting for them there. The Operations women stood in a single, tense wall of bodies—Halos spinning as they studied the diplomats for signs of the ribbons.

When none were found, Operations' ranks parted and they let the god-hosts through.

No words were exchanged.

The diplomats had stepped on Operations' toes, and they had done it because Operations had been compromised.

This would become a matter for letters and memos, reports and inspections. The full extent of the Silken's damages would likely take decades to uncover, nested as they had been in the city's nerve-center. The main colonies had been burned away but, one way or another, the effects of their influence would be felt eventually.

And if there were women on Geas that were still compromised, if Muriel had not fled through the Port, then the Silken's next move could be anything.

To hedge their bets, the Forsworn was asked to remain with Adelissa, at least for the time being. Meanwhile, the Mediums began meeting as a council, and the balance of power in the city shifted into a new equilibrium between the Port and the Spire.

Fearing that Operations' assessors might have carried brood-ribbons to other worlds, the diplomats discreetly commissioned a few teams of their own guards to investigate the possibility of an outbreak. In a show of gratitude, they agreed to send one deep into the Southern Arm where the Five Worlds had previously been, even though it was unlikely that any of the Silken would think to head there.

The news had been a surprising balm to Adelissa. The events of the day had shaken her, but like Geas' politics, she also felt like she had been pulled into a new rhythm. Her position as Second Underkeeper and her accompanying estate were rescinded, but she was given quarters in the diplomatic complex, where Maltesa was happy to visit her.

Their date, as it turned out, was not a disaster.

And, after a few months, eventually the Forsworn stopped being smug about it.