

Portfolio Project 2

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Frobern opened the door to escape the strong winds, and was hit with a wall of startled stares and sharp tension instead. He had thought he was arriving on-time, but it seemed as though everyone else had arrived early. Frobern was never one to speak up, so he quietly entered the small building and shut the door, before taking one of the few chairs left, near the front of the room. The wooden chair creaked under the new strain, and it was clear from just looking around that this building had long been left to rot. Up at the front of the room, on a small stage extending out from the wall, sat Valleth, the leader of them all. Not even her chair was new- it had clearly been scavenged from nearby as well, although she had reinforced it with inky-black gadrite crystal. Although it didn't look any more comfortable, it at least looked stable. By her side lay a purple backpack, with patchwork and blood covering the side with straps.

Frobern's eyes wandered some more, first to the other members in attendance- although among all the faces, only a few weren't covered. It seemed as though most of the members were in open contempt of how little tangible progress had been made in the elimination of the Gilded Hunters. They had killed most of the new recruits during initiation, and would likely come to hunt the rest of the rebellion soon enough. At long last, Frobern looked up to the ceiling, expecting to see a collapsing roof- and was greeted with the reason the ramshackle building had been chosen.

Adorning the roof was a thick layer of gadrite crystals, much like the ones adorning Valleth's chair, but much bigger. The crystals made the ceiling look like an unending abyss, but Frobern quickly realized that the unending darkness was not the only illusion the ceiling hid. Along with the crystals coating the roof, there were large stalactite formations spread across the open space, blending in well due to the inky darkness they were adorned with. Two other patterns seemed to exist: every stalactite crystal was sharpened to a point, a deadly weapon ready to fall, and none of them were placed over the stage. It seemed as though some of the members had noticed and moved their chairs, while others refused to give in. Either that, or the crystals had been placed haphazardly, and were only a warning from Valleth to keep things civil.

After a couple minutes of uncomfortable silence, Valleth stood up from her chair and walked to the edge of the stage to address the clearly agitated crowd. "I'd like to thank you all for coming today. As you can see from the empty seats, not all of us were so fortunate... but it's good to keep track of who's still with us." And with just that, the tension in the group was pushed over the edge. One of the masked men stood up, and I could immediately tell from his voice that it was Ruiz. "It was gathering us all together that culled the rebellion in the first place! Did you call us together just so you could finish the job yourself?"

Valleth looked ready to respond, but Ruiz would not be around to hear it. With a sharp crack, three stalactites fell from the ceiling, with one impaling Ruiz and the others slamming into the ground around him, not even shattering. Valleth stood still for a second as everyone began to stand up and back away from the impacts, desperately checking above them to make sure they weren't going to be next. Frobern turned around and looked at the men and women backing away, only to notice that the door was covered in a thick sheet of ice now. As if reading his mind,

Valleth addressed everyone in the room. “I hope you don’t mind that the exit is blocked, but I’d like to make sure we can all be comfortable around each other before we continue working together. Now, if everyone could take a seat again, I have an important announcement.”

After a few minutes, everyone had finished moving their chairs and were sitting down again- albeit it, with their nerves on edge. Everyone who came in with their face covered had abandoned their masks, and one man kept his fist wrapped around his sheathed knife. Valleth either did not notice or did not care, as she had sat back down in her chair while everyone else rearranged theirs. Once everyone was as “happy” as they were going to be, Valleth stood up once again and returned to the front of the stage. “As I was saying before we were interrupted, now that we have gathered everyone, I must inform you of the traitors in our midst. At least one of you has conspired against the rebellion to lead the Gilded Hunters patrols to us.”

“Now, there is a reason why we are short a couple members today.” Valleth walked behind her chair, and the sound of breaking crystals could be heard as she removed something that had been attached to the back. She brought it to the front of the stage and held it high- an ornate, detailed knife. The patterns on it indicated it belonged to someone in the Gilded Hunters 4th patrol. Valleth made sure everyone had a good look before lowering the knife. “Someone here let the Gilded Hunters know where we were going to meet. Someone who, unfortunately, did not survive my rescue efforts.” There was a hint of poison in her words, as if the very thought of this person made her sick. “I believe this person may have been responsible for our other empty chair today... but on the other hand, they might not have been acting alone. And that’s why we are meeting today.”

Frobern looked around at the others, but it didn't seem like anyone else had any idea who was a traitor- if anyone at all. The paranoia and the tension started to mix together, and weapons were being drawn or cast. Crystal daggers made either of ice or gadrite could be seen in the hands of anyone who didn't immediately pull out a traditional knife. Valleth did not seem to appreciate the change in atmosphere, and she stepped off the stage, commanding the attention of everyone as she stepped forward.

Valleth scanned the room. "One other Gilded Hunters patrol was spotted heading for this city, before they had to deal with some... unfortunate circumstances. It will be at least a few days before they have recovered enough soldiers to bolster the holes their wounded have left. I'm not going to wait 'a few days' to find out which of you was bringing a second patrol. If the traitors would like to speak up, this will be over quickly." Froben could feel his stomach dropping as his breath caught in his chest.

The room remained quiet, and Valleth seemed to have decided on a course of action. "I did not have much faith in those of us who were left, but it seems there really is only one path forward if we wish to truly lead this rebellion right." And just like that, the room erupted into chaos. The stalactites shattered, raining large and small crystal shards down, slicing skin and causing everyone to duck while Valleth backed away up to the stage to avoid the debris raining down. Frobern fell to the ground in shock, and covered his head as he was pelted by crystal shards. He heard arrows whiffing overhead and shouting by the door, but nothing understandable. Once the arrows stopped flying by, Frobern took his hands off his head and

tentatively tried to push himself up- only to immediately get his hands torn to shreds on the crystal shards covering the floor. Falling back over in pain, he rubbed the crystal shards off on his shirt and swept his chair clean of shards so he could use it to pull himself up. Once he was finally back on his feet, he looked around, trying to process what had just happened.

The door was a mess of bodies, four members of the rebellion pierced through with arrows and bleeding out, if they weren't already dead. Another had been hit by a falling stalactite while ducking and was pierced through. One of the only other living people left was hunched over in front of the stage, bleeding from the head and trying to pull the ornate knife from her body. The purple backpack had been knocked over, and Valleth calmly walked over and picked up the crossbow, before bashing the woman over the head with it. Frobern watched, terrified, as the woman's body crumpled to the ground.

Valleth began making her way over to Frobern as he started to hesitantly back away. "Frobern, I know it was you who killed the Hunter in disguise among us, and I am grateful, I really am. The ones who died today... were mere guarantees. Assurances that those who haven't proven themselves will not come back to betray us later. But you... you've proven yourself. You killed that traitorous leech. I had intended to make an example of him when he arrived with a patrol, but you made sure he never had a chance to guide them. And for that, I am grateful."

Valleth stepped towards Frobern and grabbed his shoulder. "You look a lot more surprised than I thought you'd be. I knew the patrol was coming already. I was planning to let them get to the

outside of the town first, and leave some crystalline statues as a warning to the rest of the Gilded Hunters... but I saw you dealing with them a couple miles outside the town. That said..."

Valleth's hands began to be covered in pitch black crystals. "I'd like to make one thing clear. I don't care if you're killing Gilded Hunters or traitors, but not letting your leader know is a grave sin. So I will simultaneously reward you, and punish you, for the things you have done."

Valleth lunged forward and dug her crystal-clad fingers into the top of Frobern's head. Frobern screamed in pain and instinctively pushed Valleth away, snapping off large pieces of crystal from her fingers that had become stuck in his skull. With the "seed" planted, Valleth began growing the crystals. Frobern collapsed against the wall and clutched his head as the crystals took root in his skull and began growing into a rough pair of horns. By the end of it, two large chunks of crystal had grown out of his head, and Frobern had blacked out from the pain.

When he woke up, Frobern found himself lying on the floor of the stage, next to Valleth's chair- where she sat, waiting for him to wake up. "Evening. Are you ready to get up now?" With some effort, Frobern pulled himself up, still having a massive headache from his new horns. Valleth handed him a small pouch. "You'll need this. Go to the nearest town, and buy yourself a file to work those crystals down with, so they look intimidating and less... grotesque. Those new 'horns' will be your identifier. The thing that proves that you were the most loyal of all of the rebels. You'll be using that appearance to prove you are the right hand of the cause. After today... we'll need a lot more members. More loyal members, if you wouldn't mind. If you

expect anyone is planning a betrayal, kill them. And remember: let me know immediately, next time. Or I will treat you as a traitor, too.”