

Blades In Blue I

Achilles Esca

Why is she here? She's ruining everything, Achilles complained to himself. The stranger girl stood out, unfamiliar and out of place. Everything else was in order, and exactly how he wanted.

His plate was just the way he liked- three pastries in a triangle, one with custard, one with pine nuts, one with apricot, and a jar of maple butter in the center. Next to it sat a chalice of peach cider, aged to perfection with cinnamon and cardamom, the same way his mother liked it. She was across the banquet table, along with his sister as they shared a platter of venison and rye. Beside them was his little brother, chasing and catching butterflies in an old glass jar. Half a dozen guards dressed in gold armor stood by watching. They were fierce and seasoned, half wielding spears and half wielding swords, each with a blue banner wrapped across their chest from their torso to their shoulder. The lush meadow clearing was sunny and quiet- aside from the laughter and conversation. He felt this strange sensation, like he was overjoyed to be alive. There was nothing that could ruin this moment, or at least he thought.

It wasn't just the girl's face that was unfamiliar- it was everything. She did not look, dress, or act like anyone he had ever seen. Her hair was silky and long, flowing over her slender shoulders and down her back with a graceful choppy elegance. A sleek, dark yet colorful shade of navy blue tinted her hair, a liquid night sky cascading down to the ending strands where the deep blue dissolved into vibrant hues of violet, cyan, and indigo, branching off in different directions. She wore a hooded cloak that looked like a canvas and a wool tunic meshed into one, tattered with splotches of rustic paint around the edges of her sleeves and the bottom of her collar. Past the bottom of her collar was a strange metal lining that followed the edge of her coat down to its end around her lower waist.

There were many questions he wanted to ask- "Why are you here?", "Where did you get those clothes?", or "How did you get your hair to look like that?". However his peace mattered more than his curiosity, so he stayed silent. Maybe if he ignored her long enough she would just disappear, and his blissful quiet would remain undisturbed.

"What are you wearing?" she asked, disturbing the quiet. *What am I wearing?* Achilles was perplexed, and the question shocked him out of his silence. He was not the person here who needed to explain his fashion choices, but he decided to play along. He gripped his tunic, a garment colored with royal blues, and pulled it forward for her to see.

"It's a tunic. The Sacrosanct wear it," he said proudly as if that wasn't common knowledge. She kneeled, looking down to inspect it.

"What's that symbol? Is that a unicorn?"

"A what?"

She pointed at the emblem ingrained on his tunic- a golden yellow emblem of a helmed horse and a cross with a sword pointing from the top of its head, ending right below where the mane began.

"Oh! That's just a horse. It's the Sacrosanct's coat of arms" he proudly stated, puzzled by why she didn't recognize it. *She must have grown up under a rock.*

"Why's there a cross behind the horse?"

"It represents the Sacrosanct's commitment to the blessing of light from-"

"Sorry, that was a silly question." She cut him off, her attention jumping from one item to another. "What are you eat-"

"Who are you?"

She paused, then let out a chuckle. "Right, I probably should have started with that. My name is Amelie, and I am a..., how should I put it"

"A Journeyman?" He jumped in, then immediately regretted not saying journeywoman instead.

Amelie's eyes lit up as she smiled, clearly impressed. "Yes! Kind of. More like a tourist."

"A tourist?" Now he felt like the one who grew up under a rock.

"Yeah. It's people who like to visit places I guess."

I guess? She doesn't even understand the words she's saying. "So you're just here on an adventure then?"

She laughed, pulled out a chair close to him, and sat down. "Sure, I guess. I'm here for other things as well"

"Such as?"

"Such as..." She took a second to ponder her answer. "I'm also a jailbreaker and a researcher."

A *jailbreaker*? He knew about the jailers- the guards, the wardens who work over them, and the sentinel who works over them. Maybe the royalty made it a role after half a dozen squads were captured at the Battle of Maverick Castle. "What do you research? Magic?"

"Kind of, more like engineering and chemistry". She scanned his face for any signs of comprehension and found none. "Or I guess, blacksmithing and alchemy"

"Oh, I see, you study both?" That was impressive. Men had worked their whole lives to be either, and she was just both? Either she was a prodigy, or something was off. Very few people in the Commonwealth could score two roles, let alone someone of her youth.

"Yeah, sometimes I do even more." She let out a sly endearing smile. "Is that your family over there?" She pointed across the table.

"Ah, yes!" Achilles's tone jumped in energy and excitement. "That's my little brother Kieran over there, the one chasing bugs, he's a bit of a wild animal, most tribesmen are." He laughed, there were few things that brought him more joy than watching his brother do, well, anything. "My older sister Artemis is over there" He pointed to the opposite end of the table, where the rest of his family was too engrossed in their food and conversation to notice the girl. "She's a commander, she leads the vanguard on their missions. They say she's one of the greatest military minds of all time." There was a hint of pride in his voice. "Next to her is my mother, the one in the blue dress." He needn't say anything else, the reverence in his voice told Amelie enough.

"Your brother's a tribesperson? I thought your family were knights. Are people both?"

"That's because, um..." His cheerful tone in his voice swiftly turned into concern and confusion.

"Nevermind, don't worry about that, I didn't mean to stress you out," Amelie warmly said, swiftly changing the subject.

"Stress?" Achilles questioned.

"It's- actually nevermind" She paused for a second, nervously brushed some of her navy strands back past her ear, then continued. "Why are you here?" She asked, with a warm but curious inflection.

Why am I here? She's the one who just showed up out of nowhere, Achilles thought to himself. "I am... enjoying time with my family." Achilles said, speaking much slower, his voice riddled with uncertainty.

"Okay," She seemed discontent with his response. "But, sorry for being blunt, but..." She looked around, at the guards, at the table, at his family, at the food, at his clothes, and at his face. "Why are you actually here?"

What? I just answered! His jaw clenched, and he moved his hands from his plating, rested them on the top of his knees, and turned his eyes away from her. *Who is this person? She just appears, with some ridiculous hair speaking absolute nonsense, and pestering me with these silly questions! How did she even find us here? Why are the guards not doing anything? She's ruining it all! It was perfect, everything was perfect!* Achilles rambled in his mind. *I just answered that question, what do I even say? I'm enjoying time with my family. I'm enjoying good food with my noble accomplished family. I'm enjoying...* His thoughts, the facts he knew for certain, turned into guesses. He glanced up at her face with a stern expression. "I already answered that question. Now, if you don't leave me alone..." Nervousness began racking up in his voice as his demeanor shifted. "I will call the guards and have you removed. I swear it." He turned his head to the soldiers and began to raise one of his hands to call them over, but she quickly grabbed his hand and brought it down to the table. Her skin felt smooth like porcelain, and it soothed Achilles' nerves as her fingers pressed into his hand. His eyes darted back to her, and he grew silent, but he was quick to bring his hand away from her and back to rest on top of his knees.

"What's the last thing you remember?" She asked, slowly and sincerely. His nails began to dig into the top of his kneecaps. His breath grew rapid and laboured.

"I am, I was... wait, I think I'm confused" His eyes began to drift down toward the ground, his mind stopped racing and just froze.

"Listen, what do you— look at me" She commanded gently. He slowly turned his head to her, his face riddled with uncertainty and confusion. "What's the last thing you remember before coming to this area? Before sitting down, before coming to this clearing, what's the last thing you remember!?"

"I uhhh—, I think" He took a minute to recall, each second he grew more upset. "I remember water. Yes, there was water." His eyes began to swell up with tears, and his nails dug so hard into his knees that they began to tear the fabric of his trousers.

"So, you remember water?" She looked extremely concerned, yet curious. "Water, okay. Were you in the water?"

"... Yes" His voice began to break, and his right leg started jittering and bouncing up and down. Blood began to seep out where his nails had been digging.

"Okay, what were you doing in the water"

"I was... I was drowning. I think I'm dying." He spoke in terrified upset whispers, his leg bouncing fast enough to shake the entire banquet table, but no one seemed to notice. His head dropped and hung down. He began to panic as he lifted the hands he was just using to tear into his legs and raised them to his head, wrapping them around his skull to form a cocoon and he slammed his elbows into the tabletop as his thoughts spiraled. "I'm uhhhhh..." He let out a defeated chuckle. "I'm unsure what to do. This might be it." His voice dropped with each word he said as he resigned himself to whatever fate was in store for him. Not a single guard even looked in their direction, and his brother was still running around in the field, and his sister and mother were still blabbering about nonsense, but Amelie took notice.

"Listen, look at me." She said again, then rose with enough speed to knock her chair backward into the grass. She paced over to where he was sitting and wrenched his arms away from his head. She stood over him as he turned to look up. "You're still here. You're still able to talk to me. You just held an entire conversation." Achilles didn't respond, he just nodded. She sat on top of the table, getting closer, as her voice became soft

and cheery. "That means you're still alive. Not just surviving, but you're alive!"

"Yes!" He finally spoke again, this time with a slight semblance of newfound purpose and hope.

"As long as you are you, as long as you can think, and dream, as long as your mind is intact, there's still hope. You understand? It doesn't matter how much water is in your lungs, you're still here, you're talking to me, your mind is still working, you are still you!"

"You're right, you... you are right!" His jaw unclenched, and his breathing slowed.

"What are you going to do now?" She asked, clearly hoping for a specific answer.

How could I be so pathetic? His mind screamed internally. A fall in water was enough to make him surrender his will? He was a bladesman, a warrior, and possessed all the bravery and valor that came with. "I'm going to live. I'm going to win!" He proclaimed, with a strength he had not felt in a long time. Despite knowing that it was probably a lie, he was content knowing he would at least try, and in the worst case, die honorably, sword in hand.

"Good, good! I'm very proud of you. Now, Achilles" She looked at him, with a strong sense of admiration. "Wake up!"

He awoke to a sea of darkness. A deep blue liquid abyss had digested him whole. It drained the juices in his eyes, the strength in his limbs, and the air in his lungs as it swallowed him, dragging him down to the waterbed below. His eyes could only make out a few things, though whether this was because of the water's darkness or him being dazed was unknown. He could make out swimming arrows, their triangle heads and v-shaped tails starkly stood out as they gracefully floated past him. Great red clouds followed closely behind the tails, spreading thinner and thinner as they travelled. Soon enough, the clouds had dispersed and become part of the sea, its red completely dissolving in the blue, disappearing and leaving almost no trace in the water that had consumed it.

Achilles kicked his legs, feeling strength come back to his limbs as he floated upward a bit. His lungs were beginning to cry, and his throat began to scream. He kicked harder, then even harder, then faster. The more he kicked, the faster the arrows came and the more vibrant the red clouds had become. The more he kicked, the more lonely and isolated he realized he was. But was that a bad thing?

Up there was hell. Boys cut in half by machines, men devoured by monsters, ships engulfed in flames with the crew still inside. It was hot, loud, and chaotic.

What about here? This was cold, quiet, and almost peaceful. Nothing happens here. Here was purgatory.

Achilles heard out his lungs' cries. Time was running out. He could stay here for the rest of time, or go up, and find out what the hell was like for himself. He was being weighed down, by the blades attached to his belt and the heels of his boots, by the black leather armor and its furs that had become sponges, by the throwing knives and chains that he carried on his back. *Lose the gear*, he told himself. *Or else, there's little chance I make it up there.* He began to unfasten his belt, but stopped himself. *No. No gear means I can't fight. If I can't fight, I may as well stay here.* There was only a small chance he would live with his gear, but a chance was all Achilles ever wanted.

A chance to fight, a chance to get justice, a chance to serve his people, and a chance to not go out in his first battle before he even touched solid ground. He kicked and flailed his arms with all his might. Complex thoughts die when you stop breathing for so long. He just told himself one simple thing as he desperately clawed his way to the surface. *I'll fight them. I'll fight them until I die, and I'm still alive.* He made out a few shadows in the distance and began to hear the noise on the surface. He heard what sounded like a drawbridge being raised or a gate being opened, a grinding gear making a *thump* sound. *Thump thump thump.*

Achilles thought it was his own heart until he saw its shadows in the distance through the water. Bolts flew from the sky into a great warship. The warship was large and refined, with rows of catapults in the back, and a great watermill in the back that propelled it forward, and on the sides lay great red and blue banners that draped over the side, concealing the cannons that hid behind the colorful tapestry. No feat of naval

carpentry could change what the bolt did to the ship's body however, first losing the sails and then the deck and then the hull. He could see shadowy figures clamor and jump overboard as the ship was shredded to gibs. The finest ship their people had seen or built, chopped to pieces by some turret.

He was almost there, almost free, but his vision began to go black. His mind did as well, and his arms were loosely flailing and his legs were barely kicking, as if they could barely remember their original instructions. By the time his hand broke the water's surface, he could see nothing, hear nothing, and his mind said the same thing over and over. *Fight back. Fight ba-*

His head exploded out of the water. Without thinking, he opened his mouth as wide as he could and felt the air rush through his veins. His vision returned, and so did his mind. He looked around- arrows still flew, corpses littered the water's surface like fish. Huge explosions appeared in the water as boulders rained from above, and any body caught in the explosions got turned to red mist. The horrified crew of the destroyed ship screamed and panicked, some of them swimming downwards to face drowning instead of the Reaver's bolts and boulders.

There were no places to run, and only one place to attack. *Gorestorm Castle*. A few setbacks wouldn't change the mission. They would seize the stronghold. They would kill the Architect. They would raise the Commonwealth's banner over the walls and declare victory over the unstoppable Corruption. They would all return home as either heroes or martyrs.

Achilles used what little strength he had left to crawl through the water to the shores. Exhausted, he fell forward, hands on his knees panting, his soaked boots digging into the ground. The shores were a dark gray, almost black, clay covering that buffered the castle walls and the water. Some parts of the clay were colored crimson, and you could see the ground keep souvenirs of the tragedy- fallen blades, burnt pieces of leather, fragments of skull- all lay under the bank half covered like seashells on a beach.

"Captain!? Kieran!? Anyone!?" Achilles cried out, but the only response he heard was the beating gears of crossbow turrets and the sounds of boulders slamming against the clay and waters. Each loud sound made him jolt out of fear, not out of fear of

dying, but the fear of being killed without even getting to see the enemy face to face. To be put down without a fight, or even a whimper- just a piece of meat scraped off the board by a big butcher's blade much larger than him and very far away- that was truly horror. He staggered his way through the beach's graveyard, walking with a strange sensation in his head that was a concoction between passionate frustration and indifferent shock. "CAPTAIN!? CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

This time as he shouted, words did not come out, only water did as he fell to the ground, coughing up the mixture of blood and lakewater and nastily spat it out onto the clay. He staggered forward, vision doubled and legs almost buckling under the weight of his weapons. He stared straight at the body of a boy who could not have been any less than three years younger than Achilles was, though body was an overstatement. His torso was ripped off, either by a boulder or a Reaver's axe, and his helmet loosely fell over his face as if to hide its grotesque state from onlookers.

Achilles picked up his fallen allies helmet and held it up to his eyes, doing so quickly before letting the dead boy's face drop into the mud so no one would have to see it. The return of rage gave power back to his whole body. *Another boy you murdered an Architect*, he thought to himself. *I'll be keeping count for when I find you.*

The helmet was a monster's skull, its upper jaw serving as the brim and the fangs serving as the shell, and its fatty tissues serving as the liner. The helmet's two eyeless eyeholes stared and taunted at him. Achilles wanted to carry a helmet with him, either on his head or at his side, to preserve at least some token of the boy's short existence. But the skull helmet was ominous, sinister, and grotesque. It made Achilles feel barbaric, so much so he dropped it to the ground in contempt. He saw another helmet in the distance, this time on a living person, and on a man instead of a boy. He first could make out a light blue plume that stuck out of the top. Its visor was open and the luster from the silver shell made it easy to spot from a distance. He could make out two figures alongside the helmet man with the blue plume, three people in total standing and talking and pointing. Out of the other two, one wore a blue cloak, the other had seemed to lose most of his armor, and had a massive black-eye. Achilles was filled with

dismay when he realized none of them wore black furs or a skull helmet.

He should have called out, but instead just wandered closer, the distant unintelligible talking drawing him in like a moth to a flame. He wanted so badly to hear someone's voice, not screams for help or groans in agony, but spoken words. Even when he got close enough to hear what they were saying, he still kept silent, despite knowing how badly he would startle them. He just wanted to hear a conversation, it could be about the war, about their families, about their country, or even about the bread they had this morning, and it would still mean everything.

"You hear the gears on those things?" The man with the blue plume referred to the giant crossbow turrets that had been tearing them apart, half in frustration and half in awe. "So fast, so smooth, so *rhythmic*. I've been counting, that's 30 shots in a row with no pause, no delay, not even a squeak from its cogs. Our's can't even go two shots without sounding like a dying horse."

"You have to hand it to this *Architect*. I've never seen craftsmanship like this before." A second knight responded, clad in chainmail and a blue cloak draped over his body. The third knight stood silent, just looking off in the horizon as he saw ships get blended to boards in the distance. "They think we can beat this with a few fancy ships and a bunch of barbarians? What the hell was high command thinking?" The cloaked knight continued.

"That's enough, if good equipment determined victory our armies would be led by smiths and builders. Besides, don't give *the Architect* all the credit, his engineers do most of the work."

"Engineers? What the hell is that?" the cloaked knight asked. "Did you hit your head when the ship crashed?"

Blue plume scoffed. "It's what they're calling them now apparently. The guys who build *that shit*." He pointed upwards at the distant crossbow turret in the distance. "I heard they'll have cannons doing the same thing here in a few weeks, which is probably why they said we need to take it now. This is getting too crazy, even for a seasoned captain like myself."

Achilles got even closer, to the point where he could make out the symbols on their chests- a horse with a sword coming from its mane.

"Yes yes we get it, you're an anointed knight and an experienced captain. How do you manage to bring it up at a time like this?" The cloaked man groaned and muttered under his breath. "Why call them engineers? I thought we just called them blacksmiths or craftsmen."

"Well, smiths only really work with metal, and craftsmen are just anyone smart enough to tie two sticks together. Those things," He pointed up again. "Those used to be siege engines. So there you have it, engin--"

"*Engineers.*" Achilles finally spoke. His voice was soft yet assertive, and carried an underlying harshness in his overall gentle tone. The three of them jolted, blue-plume spun around startled, before letting out a huge sigh of relief.

"You were here the whole fucking time?"

"No captain. Just a minute ago." Achilles quietly responded.

"Do you know how fucking hard we were looking for you?" the captain roared.

"No."

"That's good because..." The captain placed his hand on Achilles' shoulder. "We weren't." His angry face turned into a smile and then he started laughing so hard he was wheezing. *It's not even that funny*, Achilles thought to himself as he brushed the captain's hand off his shoulder. The captain finally stopped laughing before speaking to Achilles again. "But we were totally about to, seriously. We thought we were fucked if I'm being honest- no chance of getting over these walls without a bladeslinger. And how do you know about engineers anyway? I just overheard some scholar talk at headquarters."

The cloaked soldier chimed in a sassy tone. "Wise guess- he probably knows it because you just said it."

"Well, you hear the way the kid just said it? *Engineers.*" He mocked Achilles' brooding voice. "He said it like he just figured something out."

"Well he always fucking talks like that." The soldier motioned to Achilles.

The captain cut him off. "You've heard the word before, isn't *that* right?" He spoke as if this inquiry took precedence over the fact that they stood in an active warzone.

"That's right."

"From who?"

"I don't remember." he lied. "Where's my brother? I can't find him."

"Not a whole lot of finding anyone right now, not even the enemy." The captain grumbled. "He must have scaled the walls with the rest of the bladeslingers in the advance squad. Though they went silent, they might have all been captured."

That was more than enough than what Achilles needed to hear. He tightened his grip around his chains and blades and walked over to the captain. "We need to get him- get *them*- back."

"Hey!" the cloaked soldier called out. "There's Sacrosanct men here. We're not risking divine blood for blades and barbarians, you're supposed to bleed for us anyway, remember? Don't forget your place?"

"You little bitch." The rest of the knights were stunned, but not as stunned as Achilles. He had never talked back to them like that, to anyone like that, not ever. It made him feel good, even in this battlefield where nothing went his way, he could have just a little control.

"Who are you calling little, *boy*." The cloaked soldier spat out. "You're half a decade younger and greener than grass."

Achilles gave him a light shove, and pushed the soldier back way harder than he had intended. "I'm getting my brother back, just try and stop me, *boy*." He began to storm off towards the drawbridge in the distance, where men desperately held up shields to try and cross before being taken out by one of the many mounted defenses on the castle walls.

"Achilles, stop. *STOP!*" Captain yelled. Achilles turned around. "We're not just going in there."

"I'm getting my brother back, one way or another. None of this would have happened if you let him in the same squad as me like I asked." His voice carried more sorrow than anger, as much as Achilles tried to hide it. "I'm finding him" He mumbled honestly.

"You're not going in there." the captain repeated.

"I'm getting him back! Who cares if you all don't see him or me as valuable, I don't care!" Achilles spoke louder here than he had in his whole life.

The captain grabbed him by the elbow and pulled him back. "I didn't say we're leaving him behind, I just said you're not going in there." He pointed at the bridge. "You would never make

it across. We want him back? We do it the smart way, the right way, understand? Remember what I always said, never attack with--"

"Without a decoy."

"Right. Now right now, I hate to say it but," he pointed across at the doomed charging at the drawbridge. "That's our decoy. Let's make sure they're not dying for nothing. Clear?"

Achilles nodded.

"Good, you still have your blades and chains? How about your boots?"

"I got them, and..." he felt around his steel boots, pulled a small lever that made a clicking sound, then felt the jagged metal edges underneath. Maybe dulled a bit and rusted, but still sharp enough to make his fingers bleed by merely grazing them. "Boots are good too."

"Okay, good." The captain turned to look at his other two men. The quiet one still just stood there, saying and doing nothing, the cloaked one glared at Achilles, exhausted and frustrated. "You two, get crossbows. Achilles, can you skate up the wall?"

Achilles looked up. It had to have been at least 50 feet high, and it wasn't flat either. The walls went in and out, protruding in some areas with small watch towers embedded in the side, making the already hard task almost impossible. "No way, maybe my brother could, but that's too tall, and it's not flat enough either. I can maybe rappel up, I still have my chains and blades, though I'll be a sitting duck."

"We'll cover you." The captain motioned towards his crossbow wielding men. The captain was dressed in steel armor, had a great sword and shield strapped to his back, one side of his torso held a lamp so bright you could barely tell it was surrounded by glass, and on the other side was a flare launcher, it looked like a miniature crossbow but with a barrel where the bow would normally be. He unfastened the flare launcher and held it in his hand.

"You're defending me with that? I thought it wasn't meant for combat." Achilles protested.

"Whoever said that was never hit by one!" The captain insisted. "Trust me."

"What happened to your arrows? You use them all?"

"Fell out when our ship crashed. They belong to the lake now."

Fucks sake. Achilles grumbled to himself. He tied a lightweight chain around his blade, and chucked it at the castle wall near the top, but not too close to where the defenders could loose it with their hands. Its tip was sharp enough to dig straight into the stone brick. He then gripped the chains tightly and prepared to scale up the wall.

"Before you go," the captain tossed him a small bag. Achilles caught it and took a look inside, it was filled with small bombs, with tiny blue horses painted on the front. "In case there's a turret up there, it's not heavy is it?"

"No." Achilles lied.

"Don't worry kid!" The cloaked soldier called out. "I'm a good shot, I'm a very good shot."

"Shut up and don't let me die." Achilles took one step, then another. He was too angry to notice how his legs shook like mad with each step. It was frankly a miracle they didn't just snap in two. The first ten feet steps were easy, by the twentieth, his body barely kept up with his mind. Hours of running during army drills, swinging swords in barracks until his arms wanted to fall off, swimming through a lake full of bodies- he had started to get used to mindbreakingly hard labor.

Suddenly, he heard crawling, and out one of the watchtowers a group of three giant spiders began crawling out. *Those aren't watchtowers, those are hatcheries!* Achilles began to panic. They had guarded the entire fortress without putting a single man on the frontlines. He struggled to walk- it wasn't natural for a person to be walking straight upwards across a wall- but for the spiders, walking across the wall was as easy as breathing. They came at him quickly. Achilles kept one hand on the chain and kept the other hovering around his blade.

"Don't panic! Don't let go, we got them!" The captain cried out. Achilles saw one spider get pinned to the wall by a bolt by its abdomen, its legs spun around like a pinwheel. A second spider got close, but that other bolt went straight through its head and it fell off to the side. A third spider got close however, Achilles could see the purple venom secreting from its fangs as he desperately tried to run up the wall and grab his blades. One bolt flew at it and missed by a foot, the second

missed by even more, and the bolt didn't even stick to the wall, instead ricocheting off the brick and falling below.

"What the hell are you aiming at?" The captain yelled.

"I'm sorry, I'm trying sir!" The quiet soldier finally spoke. Achilles could vaguely hear him desperately try to load the next bolt.

"Hang on, I can get it from here." the captain shouted.

The spider got even closer, and it scared Achilles enough to lose his footing. He spun and kicked around, suspended in the air, waving his blade in the air as the spider hissed. The creature prepared to lunge, but a flaming glowing rock hit it before it could. The rock made the screeching sound of a falcon before it engulfed the spider in flames- the spider screeched as it fell onto the clay ground below.

"Got it! Alright keep going, you're almost at the top!"

His hands were shaking by the time one of his feet hit the ledge. The first thing he noticed was the smell- the rot made him wanna wretch off the side of the ledge. The second thing he noticed was the hissing. He scanned left and right, and saw that he was not alone on the ledge- one more giant spider had joined him, its front legs bent forward as it prepared to charge.

"Achilles, are you okay!? Can we come up!?" The captain yelled in the distance. The spider began to approach, and Achilles unsheathed his blade. It was rustic, colored a dark grayish-black that grew crimson near the edges, its edges were like teeth that curved slightly inward, and the teeth lined the steel from tip to the handle on one side of the blade.

"Achilles!?"

"Hang on!" Achilles shouted, then took a deep breath and held it. The spider jumped and lunged, but it tore in two as Achilles hacked it in half with one swing midair. The spider's intestines got caught and skewered by the teeth- they were larger than any other spider's he had seen, especially its venom glands.

"Are you alright?"

"Boy, answer goddamnit!"

He grumbled and went over to the ledge "I'm fine! I'm gonna scout the walkway, in the meantime..." he untied the chain from his blade and wrapped one end around a piece of the parapet. "Start climbing, we'll be here for you at the top." He waited for the men to nod before he rushed down the walkway's east

wing. He first ran past the hatchery, the clicking made his skin crawl as he quickly chucked a bomb through its door, the entire building shuddered as the clicking came to a stop. The more he ran, the more dead bladeslingers he saw. He saw them collapsed with arrows or swords through their bellies, their furs sponging blood as their corpses lay across the walkway. *Two, three, four, five... six seven eight. I'm coming for you, Architect. Me and my brother. You'll be wrapped up like a present for the King by sunrise.*

Finally, some sounds rang out- not the usual sound of gears turning and catapults launching, but the clanging of blades, coming from a small guardhouse.

He heard the sound of a piece of steel going through someone's stomach as he entered, and the first thing he saw was his brother sitting on the ground. By his side, a body thud to the ground. The body went limp, it belonged to a silver-haired man with gray clammy skin. It was dressed in dark purple armor, made from crystals. The killer stood tall, panting, with an ecstatic smile on his face. "Oh..." the killer said. His eyes were scarlet red, in the darkness they looked like they were glowing. His skin was pale and white. His furs were tattered, his body covered in tattoos- red warpainting of blades and crosses. Outside of the leather breastplate that covered his shoulders and the top of his upper torso, his ink-black trousers and his helmet that looked to be a skull of some demonic beast, he was almost bare. His arms and waist were slender and lean, accompanied with prominent shapely muscles. The muscles carried large red veins, that had grown larger and more vibrant in the heat of battle, that went throughout his limbs like the green lines in a fresh leaf. "What do we have here?" he asked.

Perfect Star I

Noami Lapel

She remembered the first time she had stepped foot on the skybridges. She remembered the creaking of the wood, the way its unstable ropes would shake and make the planks swing, seeing a pebble fall off the bridge into the abyss below. An abyss—that's what they all called it, even though they knew there had to be something below. Blanketed by clouds, no one could get a glimpse of what was happening underneath. When anything fell, the white-gray mass that carried pink, orange, and purple hues would devour it whole. She would always be afraid. As a child, she could make it past the first few planks before running back to safety in terror. A few months later, she would try again, and made it a few planks further. They said the bridge got angrier the closer you got to the end. If it was this angry at her before she got halfway, how could she possibly make it to the other side? *The other children are brave, she would tell herself. Braver than you.* Soon, half of the others could walk across the entire bridge, then most of the others, and before she knew it, all the children could cross except her. She always thought father would be furious and ashamed, but each time she ran back to his arms from the bridge, whether it was from the start or from halfway, he would look at her and smile.

"Fear not." Her father told her. "The bridge may shake and swing, but it will hold its form for centuries. They are unbreakable. Monsters and men have tried alike. As long as the walker remains planted at their feet, and their mind remains steady, they can cross. It may take minutes, it may take hours, but they will."

"Have you seen many people fall before?" She asked him.

"Yes." He admitted. Father did not lie. "But the bridge has a mind and soul of its own. Those who fall tread on it with no respect. This is why the monsters cannot cross. It feels their ill will and throws them down. They don't step with gentleness or care or modesty, they tread on its planks with pride,

stomping on it with their blind anger and vengeful rage. The bridge can sense these things- they say the Designer made them before the Corruption to only allow heroes across. This is how it knows when the walkers are scared or weak or cruel or unworthy. The hero is not afraid. The hero has no evil. The hero walks across without second thoughts or doubts. The possibility of failing never crosses the hero's mind, unlike the monster, who knows his being is not worthy of passage. This is why the hero crosses, and the monster does not."

"What if I am a monster father? Or, what if I'm not a hero? What if I cross and it finds me afraid or unworthy and throws me into the clouds like mother?"

Father placed a hand on her shoulder and sighed. "Your mother was brave, and was just. She had made hard decisions, and they weighed heavily on her soul. She felt guilt and shame and grief and loss. She was not ready to cross that day, yet when she looked upon her people starved and sickly and in dire need of respite, she tried to cross anyway." It was the only time father seemed sad, yet a few seconds later, that sweet smile came back. "Your mother- she's a stubborn woman. Not doing the right thing would have killed her more than that bridge did."

And so she crossed. She told herself she would make it a third-way, and when she did, she wanted to cheer but knew no applause was in order until she had made land. So she made it halfway. The bridge's wooden planks began to groan and moan. *Was it angry?* If she ran back, the fear would come, and the fear would make it angrier. So she moved forward. The planks would now dip down as she walked, as if she was stepping on scales. Now the bridge began to swing.

"Keep going! I know you can do it! You're a true *hero* now girl!" Father shouted. The rest of her people joined him. She turned back, just for a moment. The picture of the cheering parents and the children, the children who thought her to be the biggest coward they had seen, looked at her with smiles. The picture burned into her mind, her heart, and her soul. She smiled with them, and walked. The bridge could cry out, it could swing, its planks could fall from the sky into the white abyss, and her with it. She would smile, no matter how afraid she was, she would smile until she touched the ground, she decided, and when she reached the ground on the other side, she kept smiling long after. The next time she crossed it, it was as if she was

walking across a patch of grass outside her den- effortlessly and without fear.

Since then, she has crossed many bridges and onto many skylands. Some were roamed, some were not. Some had monsters, some had not. Some presented great gifts for its visitors, others had only spiteful hazards and cunning traps.

They could try and stop her if they dared. The bridges, the skylands, the monsters- she would smile all the same. And the more she smiled, with more ease she crossed. The bridges of oakwood, marble, skyglass, and starsteel could rebel, but they could never win. Not against one who was fierce in her joyousness, and brave in her anxieties. Not against Noami.

She was older now, much wiser and stronger than ever before. She believed she could brave every bridge in the aether. Maybe that was a myth, but that's all she needed- a good myth, a good notion of delusion that could fuel her fleeting feelings of immortality. Now she braved the meteorite bridge.

This was the first time she felt truly afraid in a long while. In the past the sudden jolts of fear would come and go, sometimes when the bridge shook violently, or when the monsters would come out from a place she could not expect, but this time, the fear and uncertainty lingered in her mind like a song that would loop in her head over and over and over again, impossible to ignore yet infuriating to acknowledge. She had been away from home, from father, from anyone, longer than ever before. She was roaming outside, past the filled out edges of their maps. Was she looking for materials, for food? Was she looking for others, the other clans and civilizations her people swore were out there? Maybe she needed to satiate her curiosities, or maybe she needed an escape from it all for once. It did not matter anymore, for now she was lost, and now she *must* return.

She didn't think of the fear, she couldn't think of fear- once she acknowledged it, it would be let in, and then she could not cross. This crossing would be a difficult one. She was weary and tired and, though she could never say it out loud in her head, she was afraid. She carried a bag of loose parts- bolts and old gears and shafts and pins and rivets, and above the bag and across her shoulderblades was a carrying yoke- a large stick with two buckets on both ends. In one bucket, melted comet filled it all the way to the brim. The other bucket was only half full, carrying stardust, a light blue powder that glowed.

Attached to her trouser's waistband was a mace, its head crafted from the heart of a meteor, glowing a vicious and angry red-brown. Also attached was her most prized and important possession- several rolled up scrolls, all strung together by string. The string was double and triple and quadruple knotted. She couldn't place it in her bag- the scrolls could crumple and be crushed by the parts and lose their form. The scroll's presence hit her with extreme anxiety- she could fall and be at peace with it, but should the scrolls fall with her, she knew she would fall screaming in anguish.

The bridge was crafted of melted meteor and glass, a translucent amalgamation whose steps were not in planks but in a staircase that went up, met a flat, and then went back down. She stepped up, awaiting anxiously for rebellion or death, but instead, nothing happened. The bridge maintained its form. She climbed the steps one by one, carefully balancing the carrying yoke the entire time, as she waited for the bridge's response, and received none. This process continued until she reached the flat. This bridge was different, and not just because it was docile. It had a sort of ambience- like it was more of a great welcome mat. Lanterns with pink nebulous flames inside welcomed her arrival, hung from the trusses and beams that loomed overhead. A small wooden blockade made of rotted old planks stood in her path. She took out her meteor hammer and slammed against the wood, a small orange seismic wave shot out as the wood exploded into splinters. As she walked more across the flat, she noticed a sign behind her, past the blockade.

It faced outwards, not towards where she came from but to the skyland she was travelling to. It read

Use your weapon to destroy the obstacle.

No shit. She thought to herself. It was peculiar, but she just kept walking and began to descend down the steps.

An overwhelming nervousness went up and down her spine as she reached the last three steps. *This is it?* It seemed impossible to believe. Had this been the first bridge she saw, she could have made her first crossing before she was six. When she stepped onto the land, her hand began to hover over the mace.

Monsters could hide in shrubberies, in ruined dens, in shadowy corners in ways a mind could not predict before or truly comprehend after. But this time, she could just tell, there would be no monsters, nor traps nor hazards. Marble structures and pillars littered the skyland, some half destroyed, others almost entirely destroyed. The ground was of pristine stone- shiny and smooth and glistening- and small streams of water had carved pathways into it and travelled across up until the skyland's edge where it tumbled off into the abyss. As she roamed, she found old marble statues, not of men but of what looked to be machines. Some seemed to resemble old catapults or ballistas, but it was hard to tell- they held a form foreign and unseen to her, barely holding any real similar features to anything she had seen before. She could tell a destroyed tower when she saw one, however, and ran to dig into their broken down bodies.

The sun was setting. She must move fast. She pushed her hand inside one, and pulled out a swivel. Another one had a gear near its base that had almost fallen out. Another had a few rivets that she ripped out, blistering her hand as she did so. Besides all the marble statues and old towers was the source of the streams, a big pool oozing clear pristine water lay at the top of a marble platform.

Curiosity would be the death of her some day. The sun was almost set by now. She had no time but all the urge in the world. She vaulted up the platform and inspected the pool.

She had to gaze at it for several seconds before she could process what she was seeing. In that pool, almost completely submerged, with the exception of the face, was a boy. Sound asleep, his hair was a delicate auburn, and his sunkissed skin was dotted with freckles. He had a slender nose and smooth rounded face, wearing a plain worn-down white tunic. She pulled him out of the pool, and dropped his soaked and unconscious body beside a pillar before inspecting his belongings.

He had a small satchel strapped to his chest, but when she opened it she saw nothing but a gaping black pit inside. She couldn't help but reach into it, half expecting for the void to chop her whole hand off, but something strange happened when her hand was inside. She could just tell, even though it made no sense somehow she just knew that there was a book inside, and somehow she knew she just had to grab it and take a look. She

pulled her hand out of the dark pit and a big thick book, with an old leather cover that read *Compendium*.

The moon began to rise. *I need to make a tower and build a shelter*, she thought to herself, but the more she stared at the book, the more the urge and curiosity began to control her. She opened it.

The first page read *Units*. *Units?* She just had to keep flipping. The next page read *Terra Woodlands- Rescue Ranger*. *Armed with bow and quiver, boomerangs, and hornet nests. Identifiable by their green cloaks and netted suits, which they use to protect themselves from stingers*. She kept reading. *Sacrosanct Meadows- LightSeeker*. *Armed with swords, shields, crossbows, flash-lanterns, and flares. Identifiable with their glowing blue armor and tempered glass weapons*.

Mantlum Caverns- Spelunker. *Armed with sharpened shovels, pickaxes and skis*.

Suddenly, the ink on the page erased itself, and was rewritten.

Mantlum Caverns- Spelunker. *Armed with sharpened shovels, pickaxes, skis, and musket rifles*.

She stared in confusion for a few seconds, before flipping to a random part of the book. *Crimson Wastelands- home of the wartribes, the wastes are filled with the skeletal remains of gigantic beasts, ash and clay, and jungles, where trees with marrow for trunks and blood their leaves' chlorium. Its inhabitants, the Crimson, harness the power of death- blood, blade, and bone. The peoples develop a hunting and warmongering culture, and weapons are fashioned from the sharp talons and teeth of fallen beasts*.

Suddenly, a sound made her slam the book shut. The quiet fluttering of wings, distant, subtle, yet unignorable. It was worse than a monster, it was a chimera, and it was coming for her and this unconscious boy. She paced around the skyland, looking for the destroyed marble structures that had the most promise. Some were too old, some were too small, others looked too complicated- not reinstatable in such a short time.

Why did I waste so much time with that book? She berated herself. She finally found one with promise- it was big, it looked strong, and many of the marble pieces were still intact. She got to work- slamming marble parts into the decrepit remains, and using the parts to stick it back together.

She put gears together to make a cogwork, placed shafts to keep the structure intact, and used the bucket of melted comet as an adhesive to force parts together. The fluttering grew louder, but she knew she would make it. By the time she could hear the clattering of its fangs, the tower was almost complete. Its cogwork stuck out on the side, propelling forwards a system that was beyond comprehension- Father always told her that you can never understand every part of the tower. You can try to piece together what each component does, how the gears and the shafts and the stardust somehow give life to a magical mechanical wonder, but it would be useless. When you build the tower, there's an intuition- a sort of instinct- that takes over, you can just tell where things will go and that certain parts will get certain effects. Towers that have more gears will focus on speed, towers that are shorter and need more bolts will have more power. It was a process that needed skill, practice, and what Father calls the "spirit of the tower maker". It could not be taught or understood through a set of rules or instructions.

When the structure was complete, she found the two capsules that each tower had. She took the bucket from the yoke and dropped all the stardust inside. Normally, she would only give half, but she could tell from the beating of the wings that she would need to give this one her all. She rummaged through her scrolls, desperately trying to choose. She looked up at the tower- its top held a sort of gemstone looking object, but it was not a gem but rather a sort of half-glass half-marble concoction. This tower was tall, which was good- the taller ones had more range, and range was best against the winged creatures. She picked out her sniper's scroll, where the enchanted text written on it specialized in precision and crippling the opponent rather than going straight for the kill.

She manically sprinted away from the completed tower as the chimera began to peer over the skyland's horizon. It had what looked to be a dozen wings, six on each side of its grotesque body. The wings were layered over each other- from a distance, it would look like an eloquently made paper handfan rather than a behemoth's parts. The chimera had a disgusting long abdomen, it was tubular, segmented, and scaly. Each segment grew darker as it neared the end, where a giant stinger lay. Its head was large, with big giant eyes, and two giant fangs. The chimera was

worm-white, but had pulsing pink veins that went throughout, including its wings, its segmented body, and even the stinger.

As expected, it didn't go for her- it was too smart for that. It first went for the tower, the tall structure in the distance, whose rock-glass head seemed to swivel in its direction. Naomi ran to the sleeping boy, then turned to watch the chaos unfold.

The chimera dove, but a giant dark-red laser tore off one of its wings, and it crashlanded to the ground before rising again for a second charge. Her scroll was written well, and this tower had the Chimera's whole playbook. As it began to rise, a second laser blast hit its stinger, burning off half of it, as the other half dangled off the Chimera's body.

The chimera would charge, and with its lopsided stinger, smash a piece of the tower. It was smart enough not to go for the rock-glass crystal- if it got that close it would be cut in half. Likewise, the tower was smart enough not to go for the Chimera's heavily scaly and armored head. Naomi sighed a breath of relief- had she chosen her lethal scroll, a stinger likely would have impaled her by now.

Suddenly, the boy began to cough, and Naomi, despite the madness unfolding, she kneeled down to inspect him. As the monster and the monument clashed, the boy opened his eyes.

Sporting Circle I

Cecilia Northwood

She always listened to gossip, but not because she cared for drama or discussing people. Gossip were lies stacked on top of lies with only a small truth hidden at the bottom, and each time it's heard and repeated a new layer of deception is added. People's jealousies and delusions control gossip more than the truth. So why listen?

It did say something about character, not of the person they were speaking about, but the speaker themselves. It speaks to their gullibility, their social connections, and most importantly, their true perceptions about the person being spoken about. When someone speaks about someone else, they say nothing about that person but everything about themselves.

"I heard he spies things beyond our imagination." One of them said, speaking in awe and wonder. A young boy, and she could somehow already tell- enthusiastic, idealistic, filled with dreams. She couldn't stand looking at his pretentious scholar uniform. "It gives him military and political genius."

"That's a given." A templar in purple armor answered, his helmet on the ground. The crystalmail was refurbished and shined. "But it's not truly his vision that makes him so great, it's his might. They say his liege fought and beat every Reaver lord himself before taking the throne." The templar had muscle and size, with a big frame. Though clearly young, his beard was thick for his age, and clearly untrimmed. Another boy trying his best at playing a man, who thinks strength is the most definitive trait a person has.

"You're both wrong." A shrewd man, clearly older than them both, answered. He wore an old captain uniform, his violet eyes looked hardened, tried, and tested. *Must be a conservative veteran, loyal to his liege*, she thought to herself. "It's neither about strength nor intellect. You wish to know the real reason?" The other two listeners nodded, the man looked to Blanca, and she nodded as well. "Tis because he is *ruthless*. He

leaves no foe breathing, nor is he shy of getting his hands dirtied."

"Blasphemy!" The dreamer yelled. "The Archlord fights with honor, and mercy."

"No, tis true." The purple templar said in agreement. "I wouldn't expect anything less of my liege. He destroys any opposition."

The three bickering was of no interest to her. What was, was that fourth middle-aged man who just sat in the corner. His eyes sunk, back hunched over, long oily silver hair that loosely drooped over parts of his face. She interrupted the three bickerers and called out to him. "And you sir, in the corner." Her voice was curious, full of wonder, and suspiciously sweet. "What do you believe?"

"Believe about what?" The voice was cranky and reluctant, as if he knew the entire conversation ahead of time and was bored to repeat it.

"About his liege! Of course" She acted excited to talk about it, as if his liege's mere title gave her a burst of joy.

"His liege..." The sunken man rose, the old dirty robe dropped as he did so. *Magician's uniform... must be part of the autonomous turret construction programme, no he looks disgusted by something, he must be from the monster spawning hatcheries.* She couldn't blame him, making those beings would cause her some distress as well- tampering with nature as if she owned it. "His liege is-" He quickly lowered his voice as he could hear the rest of the templars slowly approach the room's entrance staircase. "His liege is *mad*. Totally crazed, insane, and delusional. He kills not with strength but with the arcane, the product of centuries of toiling and unnatural experimentations. That and his gifts from the *voyagers*."

"How dare you!" The dreamer's voice cracked as he screamed in protest. "You're the only mad man present in this castle!"

"Palace." The older respectful ex-captain corrected him. A distinct correction of course- palace was a much more praiseworthy title than castle, it looked a bit better and had slightly better furniture after all. He stared down the sunken stranger. "In what hell would you know? I will not tolerate this nobody to make snides about his liege."

"Nor will I." The templar rose to his feet as well, drawing an iridium sword as he did so. "I will have you hacked to pieces should you speak another sentence of slander."

She felt a bit of relief, but was still a little worried. She stood out well in the crowd, she was the only girl and not as arrogantly and outwardly spoken as the others. This would often be disadvantageous, but here, there was only one selected official for the result, so standing out in any way would give her an opportunity. She was older than the dreamer but younger than the others, she was well dressed in armor tailored perfectly for her frame, and made sure to sport the king's colors and symbols over it. Compared to the others, she would appear as more easygoing, youthful, apart from the one who was akin to a child, and generally enjoyable company. She did worry about the weary man. He was either a liability or a replacement- should he be as reckless as he was earlier, he would get killed by the king's guards and rouse suspicion on all of us, or worse, use his clearly enhanced knowledge of the king to gain a severe advantage. He was clearly somewhat more intelligent than the others as well. She considered doing nothing and hoping the templar would kill him, removing a dangerous piece of competition and reducing the candidate number to four, but it would look poorly on all of them should the king arrive to find a corpse in his halls.

"Sirs?" She tried to shush them. "How about we wait until his liege gets here? Afterwards, we can see who is right and who is wrong, which I'm sure this tired man will be. And sir?" She asked the weary man. He looked back at her. "Let us also try to refrain from speaking about his liege or any of the voyagers as well." She gave him a cheery smile. He looked away, whether out of shame, disrespect, or nervousness, she did not know.

"Hail Karroy!" A templar who burst the door open shouted.

"HAIL KARROY!" Everyone in the room, save the sunken man, and each one of his liege's six personal templar guards, shouted at the same time. His liege did not notice the one absent cheer, for his state was perplexingly offputting and dismal. He was clearly at least a decade older than she had thought- his late 50s at the youngest. He walked with strain, using a stick with an amethyst at its head as its handle to help him walk. He drooled where he went, with a hatchet he seemed he could barely hold onto. He was strangely muscular, with a physique and size

not fit for someone his age. His purple royal robes were too small, and could barely cover his surprisingly bulky frame. His skin was extremely clammy, stretchy, and covered in spots.

"What are we doing here?" King Karroy asked. "Why are these strangers in my room? Deal with them you lunatics!"

"My liege, those are the candidates you chose."

"I... chose?" His eyes were slightly bloodshot. He looked confused and angry. "For what, an afternoon picnic?" He panted as he spoke.

"No my liege, for..." The templar sighed and leaned down slightly, and lowered his tone in a quieter but still distinct volume. "For case blue..."

The king suddenly jolted his head upwards. "Shut up!" He smacked the templar on his head, his fist denting it and hitting the soldier on his dome, making a comical *bonk* sound. The templar yelped in pain and staggered backwards. "Why the hells are you speaking of it here, you fucking fool? You want them all to know about it? Did you all hear?" The king asked the applicants.

"We did, sir!" The loyal dreamer volunteered before she could say anything. Naomi had to force herself from groaning in disappointment. Now the king knew, and he had reason to imprison them all if he wished, or worse.

"Sir? Sir!? SIR!?" The king spat out, so outraged he choked on his spit a little. "The next time you address me, you will say *my liege*." He said with disgust. "Understand!? Have you no respect for prestige or royalty?"

"No, no, no my liege!"

"No? Are you moronic? Are you simple?"

"No my liege!" he profusely apologized.

"No? Then you're not wary of our customs since you are not one of us! Can you believe this men?" The king shouted. "A traitor among us in disguise! Dispatch him now!" All the templars drew their metal.

"No my liege, I am so sorry my liege." The scholar begged. "I just wished to serve you my liege, I got carried away my liege, please."

"Alright then, serve. Answer me, are you a sacrosanct in disguise?"

"No sir, not at all!" he cried out.

"Prove it. You're a scholar right?"

He straightened his voice. "Yes my liege."

"In what?"

"In history and military strategy, my liege."

"History then, huh? How many years ago was it that Lord Humblederry captured and held the river Nox during the Neolithic-Classical era?"

"I-I don't know that!" the boy proclaimed. Suddenly, a flash of darkness erupted from the amethyst-stick, and the boy suddenly was reduced to his screaming shadow on the wall when the purple mist cleared. The black shadow was permanently etched into the wall, no matter which way the light shone. Where the boy was, a small pile of ashes now lay.

"Ha! You thought this was a walking stick?" He cackled. "I catch them coming each time- godforsaken Sacrosanct spies. They can change their skins, you know, I've witnessed it before. They can change the color of their face and length of their hair in an instant. But they cannot change their degenerate culture, and their revolting lack of true noble civilization. Now, does anybody here know how long Humblederry held that river?"

"I do, my liege!" The seasoned captain stood up. "23 years."

For the first time since she first saw him, the king smiled, quite deviously. "That's right. This one must be one of us, unlike that sorry dead piece of shit over there. Who the hell doesn't know about Lord Humblederry?"

"Are you an avid student of history my liege?" Cecilia asked gently and with a feigned innocence.

"No, mainly just Lord Humblederry, he was a great man and owns an amazing collection of liquor!" he admitted. He turned to face the captain again. "Now you have a strong knowledge of history, but what of your prowess in battle?"

"Better than almost any man living, my liege." He took a great war axe from behind his back. "Allow me to prove my skills to you, firsthand."

"Go on then. Prove it." He motioned to the tallest one of his men. He took off his helm, revealing the rugged face of a middle-aged man, with choppy silver hair and a scar that took out one of his eyes. He wielded a shiny crystal sword, and his armor was so shiny Naomi could almost see a perfect reflection of herself in its shoulder blades. "This is Sir William Lionhart!"

"My liege, that's William." The tall templar pointed to one of the other men. "My name is Sir Oakmont Dickinson-"

"Shut the hell up." The king's voice was stern. "This warrior, whose name is not important, is a tried and tested veteran. He is famous for his valor at the Ambush of Ashrend and the Defence of Blackguard Castle. He's cut down over a hundred men, suffering only one wound to his eye throughout."

I can beat him, I think. Naomi thought to herself. She felt around her weapons holsters- a mace with crystals for spikes, an iridium bow, and a small dagger. *Let's see how the captain fares first.* "My liege," she said, "we would love to prove our skill in battle with this renowned warrior." She gazed at the captain. "We would be eager to prove our worth to you, firsthand."

The captain stammered, then collected himself. "Tis true! My liege, allow me to duel your warrior!"

"No!" the templar cried. "Let me best your man, and show you my strength and skill!"

"Alright, alright, alright." The king had grown tired and bored. "Old one, you go first. You and Sir Dick swordfight." He laughed especially hard. "Fail to defeat him in solo combat, and you will be disqualified from the position."

"As you command, my liege." The older captain walked up to the warrior and swung his axe at his head. The warrior ducked under it, and kicked the captain so hard he flung across the room. A huge thud was heard as he bounced off the wall and landed on the ground, and he did not get up.

"Oh. I had such high hopes." The king said sarcastically. "*Disqualified!*" Another blast of darkness came out from the king's stick, and the captain joined the scholar as a black portrait on the wall. His ashes didn't even make a pile, and dispersed randomly across the floor.

Oh gods, Cecilia thought to herself. He's going to kill everyone except the winner of the position, isn't he? The king's soldiers had already blurted out the operation name, so they would probably all need to die except whoever was most qualified. Killing the scholar showed he was paranoid, but killing the captain showed her that the king just enjoyed violence.

The warrior laughed, sadistically and cruelly. "No way that sob thought he had a chance." He pointed at the shadow on the

wall, and the king began cackling with him. "He didn't even get to swing more than once!"

"Fret not- I will be swinging plenty." The purple templar moved in on the warrior without warning, swinging rapidly and ferociously. The first caught the warrior offguard, the second almost made him stagger to his feet, but the third he saw coming, and he deflected it with one blow before quickly giving another swing, dehanding the challenger.

She never got used to melees- politics, giving commands, even shooting arrows at men in the distance- it never got as bad hand-to-hand combat. The maimed body parts were hard to watch, but the screams- that was worse. The templar screamed in shame and pain. "No!" he yelled, then fell to his knees, the blood dripping from his handless sockets onto the marble floor.

"He thought he had a chance." The warrior called out to the king. "He got kind of close."

"So close." The king jeered. "Too bad."

Then, predictably, a flash of darkness later and the kneeling soldier's last moments were now a token on the wall, a sizable pile of ashes lay where he once knelt. *I can't beat him*, her mind raced. *What am I going to do?*

"Now you, go." The king motioned to her. "What the hell am I going to do if they all lose. I guess we could find another batch."

"We already did that twice, my liege." One of his men said.

"Well, third time's the charm, as they say."

She began to walk towards the warrior. He looked at her deviously and impatiently, licking his gross lips as she approached. She feigned a trip over the dead templars sword, and fell right at the ashes, letting out a scared yelp as she did so.

The whole room erupted with laughter, and she quietly grabbed a small handful of the ashes with her left hand as she shamefully got up. "If you give up now, I'll let you serve as my handmaiden!" The king cried out.

She approached slowly, pretending to shake and jitter as she did so. "Let's get this over with." The warrior said as he ran up to her and swung. She used her right hand to block the swing with her mace, but he was clearly much greater in strength, and pushed her weapon down as the sword began to reach her shoulder. "Its easier to block with two hands, *girl*."

She used her free left hand to throw the ashes in his eyes. He yelped and staggered backwards, and lowered his blade momentarily. In a flash, she lunged on him and began to jab her dagger in his head.

"Die. Die DIE!" She yelled as she stabbed him in the head over and over. It was like cutting a watermelon- once you get through the crust, the inside is much easier. Splashes of blood splattered over her and her clothes as she relentlessly dug into him. She knew he was dead, and the more she stabbed the more disgusted she felt, but the king wanted a show, and she would give him one. The room fell silent by her tenth stab, and after the fifteenth, she finally threw her dagger to the side and turned to face the king, and curtsied.

"My liege." She said, saltily.

At first, the king's face was one of shock, but it quickly turned to one of pure bliss and childlike excitement. "Oh my gods- that was perfect. Did you see that? She killed him, he fought in a dozen brutal battles and now he's fucking dead! In three seconds!" He snickered, then began to almost choke on his laughter.

Noticing a window of opportunity, the sunken weary man grabbed his blade and lunged at the king, managing to get inches away before his guards could react. Without thinking and through pure reflex, Cecilia drew her bow and shot him midair. He fell to the ground, coughing up blood as the king gazed on his dying body with disgust. Cecilia thought about how fast she did it, and why she did it- she didn't think about the king's madness and how it might serve everyone should he be gone, or how it was her duty as a civil servant to lay her life down in the king's defense. She only thought about how with the weary man gone, there was only one person the job could go to.

"Thought you could best me, did you!" The king cheered as if he did anything. "Foolish coward. I would turn you into a shadow, but that would be too merciful for a dog like you." He kicked the bleeding man in the head as he gave out his last breath. The king turned to Cecilia. "It appears we have a selection!" He walked towards her. "A woman too, eh? Well, it's important to keep... *an open-mind!*" He gestured to the dead warrior's corpse, whose head was ripped open by her dagger.

She didn't find it funny, but cackled extra hard. "Open mind! That's a good one, my liege. I would be honored to kill

like that in his majesty's service." She wanted to throw up a little as she said it.

"Perfect. Show her the operation!" Two men nodded and walked over to gears with chains on the wall and began to turn them. A rumbling sound was heard, and up above a big map pinned to a piece of flatwood began to be lowered by chains, until it hung slightly off the ground. "My greatest strategic masterpiece- greater than Ashrend and Castle Blackguard combined. *Case Blue*! Our plan to dry the Sacroscant from its resources and bring their entire empire toppling down!"

"Wonderful!" one of the men cried out.

"It's perfect!" another one said before the whole room erupted in applause. Cecilia joined them, putting on her best impression of a child tasting nectar for the first time and clapping with eager excitement. The clapping lasted quite long, for nobody wanted to be the first one to stop.

Looking closely, she saw a great big map of all of the Commonwealth, and their gains in its territory.

The Commonwealth was starkly split up into its six main kingdoms- the idyllic meadows and towns of the Sacrosanct, the bloody wastelands of the Crimson, the sky isles of the Nimbus, the seaborne islands of the Brynic, the caverns of the Mantlum, and the woods of the Terra.

Her people's land lay to the South, far beyond the map's reach. It was populated by deep purple valleys and monsters, though the Reavers had no problem turning it into the greatest civilization ever seen in the known world, The known world, or as her superiors sometimes called it, *Ober Ost*, consisted of seven territories, five belonging to the Commonwealth, two originally belonging to the Corruption- her hometown, from which it started, and the Nimbus Sky Isles, of which they had since conquered. Truthfully however, their people's influence was much more spread out- they had immediate footholds in the islands to the North and the great deserts to the east and west, as well as the underground and aether.

The Sacrosanct, who held the capital and dominion over the other four (formerly five)- were easily the most protected. Landlocked and centralized, the Sacrosanct meadows were buffered on all sides by their subject states- the Sea to the North, the Quarry to the West, the Sky Isles to the East, the Wastelands to the Southwest and the Forest to the Southeast.

Each territory had its own color for its outlined map. Any land held by the glorious Calaminity was purple, the empirical Sacrosanct a bright blue, the barbaric Crimson a vibrant red, the seafaring Brinyc a pastel orange, the subterranean Mantlum a muddled gray, the wild Terra a deep green, and the skyfaring Nimbus, which was colored yellow, or used to be.

All of the Nimbus Isles had been captured, its land now darkened purple on the map with the Corruption's coat of arms pinned over it- a spider's head and fangs with the moon in the backdrop- save for a small portion of land allocated for its now in exile royal family. The fall of the Nimbus Isles close to a century ago has so far gone down as the greatest victory in Corruption history. An entire subject state of the Sacrosanct, now firmly in the hands of the Reavers and their glorious conquest. Their resources- the strong winds, the clouds of the aether, the stardust from the sky- all were theirs now. Their victories did not lessen elsewhere either.

They had taken Ashrend a few years prior, enveloping a massive chunk of the Crimson lands, and their gains showed no signs of stopping. Gorestorm Fortress lay firmly in their hands, as did many of the villages and hunting grounds that the Reavers pried from the Commonwealth in the last few offensives. In the woods, they had gotten a strong foothold in the south of the forest, holding a good fifth of the Hallow's land. Similar strides could be seen in the seaborne isles and the frozen quarry. In the sea, the Corruption approached from the north, slowly but surely hopping island to island as it neared the shoreline. In the quarries, the Corruption emerged from below, taking tunnel systems, caverns, and ravines, turning the underground to their side. In the three aforementioned territories, the Reavers held on to each of their strongholds- Pearlstone, Seamoath, and Frostcore respectively.

They were winning, and by no short shot. Six of the seven great strongholds now lay in the hands of the Corruption- only the Mosaic Shell remained untouched by the Reavers, as it lay deep in Sacrosanct territory, impossible to reach without at least knocking one more subject state out of the war, which at this rate, would not prove difficult. This was briefly an option when the Sky Isles fell near a century ago, but the Sacrosanct immediately fortified Aether's Landing, making a land invasion from that point practically impossible.

"Case Blue is the final nail in the Sacroscant's coffin. Our offensives in the last five years have brought four strongholds from their side to ours! Now, the defensive strength lies in our hands, and it will free a great many men from the defensive lines that we can use for this operation- the seizure of crucial supplies needed to feed the Sacrosanct's war machine. The first step is to seize the Greenhouse clearing." The king pointed to a spot on the map board- a grouping of house-like symbols.

She already understood- Greenhouse Clearing was the primary producer of herbs for the Commonwealth. The herbs were needed for healing, for curing blights among crops, and most importantly, elixirs. Most elixirs were recreational, making the user blissful, excited, or imaginative. Others were practical, some would temporarily give stamina, speed up wound recovery, and in one unique case, can give the drinker temporary sense of the four cardinal directions no matter how lost they were. The most important one, as far as she was aware, were warmth elixirs. Most of the *Ober Ost* was not freezing, or even remotely cold- the Ebonridge Valleys, her homeland, were only slightly chillier than the Commonwealth yet still managed to be the second coldest territory. The only cold territory was the Quarry, where the mine's entrance was covered in salt and snow, and it only became truly freezing in the depths.

In the depths were most of the Commonwealth's metals- steel, silver, gold, platinum, and titanium- as well as their gemstones like sapphires and diamonds. The spelunkers at the quarry toil hard, through frostridden and monster infested tunnels, from dawn until dusk. Before, they used to spend almost a half of that time building shelters, starting fires, and maintaining their mobile sources of warmth- torches and hotrocks. The warmth elixirs improved the situation drastically, giving them much more time to dig into the earth, and half as many men were lost to frost from that point on.

"Once we take the Greenhouse Clearing with the men and monsters we withdraw from our defensive reserves, we can cripple the Sacroscant by depriving those alcoholics of their favorite drinks! Oh, and of course, weaken their army as well." The King explained.

"Wonderful, my liege! And after that, will we be taking the quarry?" She said as if she didn't already know. Taking their

warmth would make taking the Quarry much easier, and taking the quarry would truly put an end to the Sacroscant and their pathetic tyrannical empire.

"The quarry?" The king asked.

"Yes, my liege. Taking the warmth from their elixir supplies would leave the Mantlum's spelunking crews exposed to attack, and if we push them out of the caverns all of the metal will be ours, and the royal army will fall apart." She said with confidence. It was common sense- no army can function without metal for their weapons and armor, not in this day and age.

"That is... a good idea." The king admitted. "Not as good as mine, however! Instead, we will be focusing all our efforts near the sea."

What. Why. "May I ask why, my liege?" She politely and gently asked.

"Our greatest ship, the *Oceanwolf*, has great cannons that have longer range than anything we have seen before. Should we take the sea, we can rain darkness on Elysium itself. That will serve them right for the raids on Ebonridge! The Sacroscant see themselves invincible, we need to show them they are not, and that any attack against our lands will be paid back tenfold! Afterwards, with this brutal psychological defeat, we will march from the shoreline down to Aether's Landing, where we will destroy the landing grounds and lead the Corruption from the Nimbus all the way into the heart of the Commonwealth! That is the power of the Corruption, and that is the power of King Karrow!" Again, the entire room erupted in applause. Naomi joined them with outward excitement and concealed contempt.

"Bravo! Bravo my liege!" One of the men called out.

"Stupendis! Brilliant!"

That's unbelievably stupid. She thought to herself. *Maybe I can change his mind after the greenhouses fall.* "What will my role in this be, my liege?"

"Your role, sweet one, will be to take control of this special offensive force. The taskmaster of Case Blue! You will walk the warpath outlined here." He took a large quill with bright blue ink. He outlined one line that came from the Southern edge of the map and followed up and into Greenhouse Clearing. The next line he drew came from the Northern edge, when came through a chain of islands all the way to the shore, and he drew a massive X, with the words *Oceanwolf* scribbled next

to it. He then ecstatically drew a bunch of explosion symbols on the Sacrosanct capital in Elysium, the Mosaic Shell. Next, he drew the third line, which extended from both the shoreline and Greenhouse Clearing into Aether's landing. Finally, he drew an arrow, way bigger than was needed, from the floating isles into the Elysium, where he maddingly drew a bunch of scribble lines. She swore she could hear him giggling like an academy girl as he did so. "There you have it. My ultimate masterpiece, the downfall of the Icarus! I'll have that whole inbred family on spikes by next summer!"

She just stood there, dazed, an inauthentic smile frozen on her face when she stared at the crazed dream that the king called a warplan. The deafening applause faded into the backdrop as her mind began to spin. What if the Oceanwolf gets sunk in the sea campaign? What if the Greenhouse Clearing gets retaken during the sea campaign? How will they even win the sea campaign, the most fruitless campaign of the war in the last five years? She put her anxieties aside, and began to slowly clap along with everyone else.

The Travelling Merchant I

Reese Archibald

Reese couldn't decide which part he hated more: the tedious logistical problems of battle planning, or having to kiss the feet of pompous royalty when they arrived. It was ironic because Reese was a royal, but that made him feel uniquely qualified to dislike them. As annoying as he could be, the Icarus were a different level of pretentious that even he could never hope to match.

"Are you even paying attention?!" the Vanguard commander barked.

Reese completely forgot they were planning a counter attack. Frankly, had he known that battle planning was this much of a nuisance he would have chosen a different career path. The worst part was that it was almost always done at night, and consistently interfered with Reese's precious nightly drinking and reading time.

"Apologies my lady," Reese responded. "Can you repeat the plan again, I got a bit lost."

She let out a tired exhale, and much of her patience had gone with it. "Maybe this wouldn't be so difficult if you had helped me with this earlier."

"Look, I was busy."

"Busy with books?" she asked mockingly.

"Exactly. Would you rather an illiterate donkey build your weapons?" Reese knew that as impressive as her flashy battle tactics were, none of them would work if he wasn't so phenomenal at his job.

"Is having a literate donkey that much better?" She jokingly returned. Reese chuckled and she briefly smiled, before catching herself and immediately putting on a stern serious face. *One day I'll get to her*, Reese told himself. This whole plan was a ridiculous gamble, but then again, so was their marriage.

Reese was a prince, the next Duke of the Oasis, and the Aventari were second highest in status after the Sacrosanct. This was partly because they looked the most "civilized" compared to their neighbors in the Commonwealth, but likely more so due to their contributions to the Commonwealth's technology. The Archibald family recently created lever-action crossbows and explosive ballistas for the Sacrosanct, and Reese's new project would reshape warfare entirely.

It was almost unheard of- different peoples from different territories marrying- but Reese felt new things were always the most rewarding. It was especially unheard of considering what people she was from- the Warsaw. Their vicious tribes, their disheveled ink black hair, their menacing deep red colors, and their vicious war-mongering customs were not always the best look. But Reese and the rest of the Archibald family had been so critical to the Commonwealth's success that it bought him quite a bit of leeway when it came to social perceptions.

Besides, he had never really understood the poor perception of the Warsaw anyway. He looked at his wife, dressed in the beautiful vibrant red cloth and rich black furs of a true barbarian warrior, covering the upper half of her torso as blood-red tattoos resembling sharp blades followed from where the cloth and furs ended and traced the edges of her obliques down to the bottom of her abdomen. Over that lay the royal cloak, and its self-righteous blue coloring, which covered the gorgeous battle garments in a wrapper of cultural appeasement. She had been forced to don one since the Icarus seized political control of all internal military affairs in the wake of the invasion. Their relentless drilling meant that most if not all of them were in incredible physical condition, and his wife Artemis was no exception. *That is what a woman should look like*, Reese thought to himself. Her fierce striking features were a breath of fresh air compared to the tame, plain-face, properly-dressed women here at Astapor.

But his unique tastes were hardly the main motivation of the marriage- it was because of her position. As Generalissimo of the Vanguard, most mystic artifacts that get retrieved usually end up going through her, and he needed to get as many as he could before the Icarus put their dirty spoiled fingers all over them. Being close to her meant a strong alliance between the crown jewel of the military and the head research

divisions in the Commonwealth. More importantly to Reese however, it meant denying the Icarus their match between Prince Arryk and Artemis. The thought of those self righteous lordlings "civillizing" her with their superficial customs and blue tapestries made his stomach turn.

Artemis placed her hands flat on the tabletop where a big map of the Woodland Frontier, which encompassed the southern part of the Crimson wastelands and the west border of the Terra Forest. The Reavers had pushed their way up to the main river crossing in the wastelands- the Redstone Bridge, which lay to the West of the forest border. She looked discontently at the battle lines on the map. "The plan won't work, it will take too long. The Reaver's have taken Ashrend and most of the river basins in the Crimson, and are going to take the Redstone bridge at this rate. They are pushing back the Garrison, and will annihilate them all if we don't act now." Her voice became unnerved and urgent. "If we lose any more land in the Crimson it will be days before we can mount another offensive. We don't have time to wait, we need to do something immediately. Which means we need a new plan."

Reese understood how important defending the Crimson was, but he knew the real reason why she was so upset. "You're worried about Kieran."

"I'm worried about Achilles," Artemis answered. "Kieran is gifted but young, they'll keep him in the backline and he's smart enough to avoid trouble."

"Achilles is smart too," Reese said. "Well, when he thinks." He always thought the boy had more merit than people gave him.

"Which isn't very often is it? He gets emotional, and likes to play the hero. He's young but just old enough to land basically any position that everyone else is too scared to take. He'll get himself killed." she explained.

He saw her point- Achilles was a sweet sentimental yet strong-minded boy, obsessed with courage and honor. That being said, while he had a mind for warfare, having a stomach for it is a completely different matter. He belonged in a lab with Reese, not on the battlefield. It was like giving a poet a sword. Artemis on the other hand was built for war. She wasn't just good at tactics and strategy- her personality was designed for winning battles. She was creative, competitive, patient,

bold, ruthless, and cold. Unlike other lords, she had no problem abandoning conventional tactics and social values when it was necessary, and she was exceptional at using her environment to her advantage. Most of all, she was good with people- she could read them and understand what they wanted and what they were thinking. She could easily trick people to do what she wants- both enemy soldiers and her own.

But her cold rationale was slipping, and with both her brothers on the line, no one could blame her. He walked beside her, wrapping his arms around her waist and lay his head on her shoulder. "Look, I know you're worried. I am too, you know how much those boys mean to me. If anything happened to them I-" Artemis turned her head to him, giving him *that* look. He immediately dropped the sentence. "If keeping the Crimson basins is the first priority, perhaps we should move our forces near the river pits by the Redstone bridge as soon as possible." It was the most obvious choice, but it was the most obvious choice for a reason. Terrain shapes warfare, and the Crimson was no exception. The ash-filled rivers have been running so long in the wastelands that they eroded the ground into depressions, offering perfect natural cover from the enemy. Men huddle up in the pits, lobbing projectiles at each other to soften defenses before charging in to take on the enemy in melee combat. In this case, if they get all their men into the river pits as soon as possible, the Reavers shouldn't be able to soften the defenses for a charge in time before day breaks. It was a decent plan, but he knew Artemis hated doing the obvious. "We can hold them off until morning-"

"That's exactly what they want us to do" she snapped back. "We throw all our forces at the bridge and they'll just go around and take land elsewhere. Then in the morning we have to spend the whole day taking the Crimson back, and they'll just push us to the same spot the next night. We need an actual plan before the Icarus get here." There was despair in her voice, but it wasn't a bad thing. Other commanders always sound so confident, and it's usually because they overlooked a small detail that later bites them in the ass. Artemis was always concerned about something- some random event that could go wrong, some grand plan the enemy was cooking up. The concern in her voice meant she was ready for the worst.

"Then what do we do? We don't have enough strength to mount a counter attack at the bridge" Reese expressed his concerns, knowing fairly well she would have some sort of magical solution to get around it. Before she could answer however, two royal men walked in.

One was tall, with neat combed over long golden blonde hair, a small button nose, piercing blue eyes, a clean shaven chiseled face, and a pleasurable smile, and looked to be in his late teens. He wore half silver half gold plated armor, with a blue cloak marked with the Sacrosanct insignia- a golden horse with a sword emerging from below its mane. He looked the polar opposite of Reese- like other Aventuri he had olive tan skin, and chestnut brown hair. Reese's hair was completely unkempt, overgrown, and messy as it crudely went in every direction. His eyes were a dark brown, under them lay prominently large dark circles. Unlike other lords, he didn't wear robes or a cloak or any of that flashy nonsense. He wore a simple crude linen undershirt, and over it wore a yellow doublet- the colors of the Astapor, representing the desert's sands and the lightning's strikes.

The man had a silver halberd strapped to his back, it had a gold glowing sphere near the tip- an artifact. He had another artifact, a bow with sapphire blue handles and a glowing blue sphere right where the arrow normally rests.

Next to him was a younger man of the same height, his unkempt auburn hair was loosely tied into a bun, with strands poking out and falling over his face. His eyes were blue as well, though much less striking and much more subtle. His face was sharp yet smooth, and the rest of his facial features he borrowed from the other man. Like his comrade, he was fashioned in shining armor with a blue banner fastened over it. Near his waist sat a shiny sheathe holding a slate-blue sword with a sapphire handle. Reese immediately recognized it- the Excalibur, the sword that glows in the darkness, and the most valuable artifact in the entire Commonwealth.

"Prince Mycah, Prince Arryk" Artemis welcomed them in a warm tone, then made a poor attempt at a curtsy.

"Prince Mycah" Reese welcomed him as well, with a little less enthusiasm and a lot more sarcasm than his wife. He turned to Arryk, and welcomed him in the most plausibly deniable

condescending tone he could. "Lord Arryk". He then proceeded to do the shittiest bow of all time.

"Prince Arryk" the brat corrected him, "You'll address me as--"

"Why don't we get started with business." Mycah cut his brother off in a warm, pleasant tone. He walked over to the table and lay his arms on the tabletop. "What's your plan to fix this?" He looked to Artemis for answers. She ignored his gaze, instead intensely staring at the map that lay flat on the table, pondering. A few seconds went by before she turned her head to the prince and finally answered him.

"We're going to send half our troops to board our river boats and make way though Redstone River"

"To reinforce the bridge?" Arryk confidently chimed in.

"No, we'll land West of the bridge" Artemis quickly shut him down.

"How will we hold the bridge?" Arryk pretentiously questioned.

"We won't, we'll give it to them."

Mycah was put off, he dropped the peasantry in his voice and began berating the general. "Your orders were to halt the enemy advance. Giving them the most important bridge in the Commonwealth South doesn't really accomplish that, does it?"

Artemis held her contempt in the back of her throat as she calmly responded. "Would you rather halt the enemy, or destroy them? We send half the troops to land west of the bridge, the other half will attack from the Terra Forest and make a spearhead towards the bridge from the East. I'll order the Garrison to fall back past the bridge, and by the time Reavers fully take the bridge they'll be pincerred from the south and the Garrison will hold the north. They'll be trapped on the bridge, and once day breaks so will the Reavers." Confidence and conviction returned to her voice. "We'll annihilate them completely and definitely, and then we can spend the next few days mounting an offensive while they're still licking their wounds."

Mycah smiled, his pleasantries had miraculously returned. "Excellent work General. I'm sure you will need help attacking from the Terra Forest. Prince Arryk will help."

"I will?" Arryk complained.

"You wanted to make amends for the loss of Maverick Castle? This is a fine opportunity to do so." Mycah grilled his younger brother. It was so satisfying to see that stupid entitled boy actually be forced to do something that it almost made Reese forget that Mycah was a stupid entitled boy as well.

"Those are my men. The templars are under my control. I am a prince. I'm not just some dog called to heel when you need it." Arryk fought back, "We have our own mission as well, can't we ask Maverick to--"

"It's Prince Maverick. You think being related to us means you don't have to address us with respect!? You will do as you are commanded and bring your templars to the Hallow to assist the Vanguard." Mycah barked. "You think you can ask Maverick to do your dirty work? He made a big mistake entrusting his namesake with an imbecile like you. Do not disappoint him, or me, again." All of Mycah's charm was gone now, his voice descending into spite and bitterness as he chastised his little brother.

"Why don't I show you fine princes what Astapor has been designing for the war effort." Reese was more than eager to change the topic of conversation- he was equally excited to show off his new inventions as he was to stop the two man-children from bickering in his home. "If you follow me, I'm certain the new tools we have created will be of great interest to the Icarus family." Reese grabbed a sealed satchel embroidered with a grand telescope that had lightning bolts etched on the front- the coat of arms of the Aventari- as he made his way to the exit.

The two princes and the Generalissimo followed Reese outside the tent into the sands outside the Astapor palace. Though Artemis would never admit it, Reese knew she was slightly happy that their marriage moved her base of operations from the ashy wastelands of the Crimson to the gorgeous sands of the Oasis. The sands were smooth, fine-grained, and uniformly granular, colored in a warm light beige. Palm trees lined the horizon, as the beautiful landscape managed to be untouched by warfare, unlike the other less fortunate territories in the Commonwealth. Though the Oasis was normally scenic and serene, it was no stranger to turbulent weather- specifically, intense thunderstorms rocked the territory every week or so. However these storms did nothing but improve the landscape- the lighting

struck the sands so much that it formed giant glass crystalline shapes out of them, and these pointy glass structures that emerged out of the sand ended up being a crown jewel of the territories's aesthetic allure. As they went outside the princes, as much as they tried to hide it, were gawking at the beautiful glass structures and architecture that surrounded them.

They made their way to a target range, where an alley of straw dummies porcupined with arrows awaited them. Reese opened the satchel and unveiled his prized possession. It had a wooden stock, past that lay a trigger- the same one the crossbows had been fashioned with. Above it lay a lever, and past that lay a giant metal barrel with a small metal point that rested on its mouth. Right below the lever and above the trigger was a glowing electric capsule- it has been months since the Aventuri managed to harness the true power of lightning, and weapons have been all the better for it.

"This is a Lever-Action Repeater" Reese proudly proclaimed, like a child showing off a toy. He put the wooden stock up to his shoulder, and leveled it so the barrel was in line with his eye. He pointed the barrel towards a target dummy, and pulled the trigger as the dummy's head exploded in a mess of straw.

The other three stepped back in awe- weapon demonstrations were the few times Reese could catch his wife being surprised.

"What did that do? It shot something? An arrow? Stone? Metal?" Arryk joyously and curiously questioned, a newfound respect for Reese evident in his voice.

"No, not an arrow. Not stone or metal either." Reese calmly but excitedly responded. He yanked his arm against the barrel and split it open, then moved his hand to the ground, grabbed a handful of sand and dropped it into the barrel.

"Didn't know sand could kill people now." Mycah joked.

"No, not sand." Reese responded in a confident, and calculated tone. He shot the weapon again, but this time into the ground. He then kneeled, and picked the projectile off the ground. He showed off the glass shard to the two princes, before showing it to his wife, sure to catch the impressed look on her face before she stowed it away. "See the lighting capsule ignites when the lever is activated, and it unleashes heat and turns the sand to glass as it's launched out of the barrel. The lightning shoots out in a way to ensure the glass always comes

out as a shard". He did a couple of flips and spins with the repeater in his hands before giving it to Mycah so he could test it himself. The prince uneasily held the stock against his shoulder and aimed down range.

"There's a metal pointer at the end of the barrel. Shows you where the projectile will land, assuming you're within thirty paces of your target. We called it a 'crosshair'." Reese proclaimed, before tossing the Prince the sealed satchel.

"Satisfied?"

"Most definitely." Mycah said, holding the repeater in one hand as he caught the satchel with the other, with glee written all over his face. *I wonder how many puppies he's going to use that on when he gets back,* Reese thought to himself. "Well done Reese." Mycah patted him on the back as he and Arryk began to walk out, but Reese couldn't help himself and grabbed Arryk's lower arm before they could leave.

"I appreciate you helping my wife out, she really benefits from a strong astute leader under her command. I'm sure this will be nothing like Maverick Castle, as long as you remember not to run away this time." Reese mocked as Artemis put her face in her palm.

"I'm sure your savage could use all the assistance she can get. How fortunate of her that the Icarus don't mind helping out the needy." Reese winced, an insult to him he didn't mind, but an insult to her was another matter entirely. "Excellent work on the weapon Reese, but though you get all the credit, you don't do all the work, do you?" Reese knew exactly who Arryk was talking about, and did nothing but glare at the Prince as he and his brother left the range.

Light the way I

Arryk Icarus

You can do this, Arryk monologued in his head as he stared himself down in the mirror. *You look great*, he told himself. His face was smooth, his skin looked as if it was porcelain- the milk soap and herbal washes had paid off. His beautiful glowing blue eyes and meticulously stylized blonde hair would make sure the grace he had on the inside was also present on the outside. He delicately cleared his throat and shuffled his hands around, trying out different positions. He tried leaving them hanging by his sides as he usually did- *No, too awkward*. He tried crossing his arms- *No, too serious*. He tried clasping his hands together in front of him- *No, too meek*. He then tried clasping his hands together behind his back. *There we go*, he said to himself in his head, *this is how a prince general should look*. He put on a charming smile in the mirror, then played with his hair for five minutes until each strand fell perfectly onto his face before reciting his speech.

"I am Prince Icarus, the accomplished general of the templars! I call upon you, men of the forest, of the capital, of the... the..." His charming smile dropped into a face of frustration as his voice mumbled and trailed off. A crisp sound rang loud throughout the room as Arryk smacked himself in the face, hard enough to leave a red mark on his right cheek. *Pull yourself together, you're a Prince remember?* Arryk took another deep breath before dramatically clearing his throat again. "I am Prince Icarus, the accomplished general of the templars! I call upon you, men of the forest, of the capital, of the Commonwealth! We may come from different families, eat different suppers, sing different songs at our weddings, say different farewells at funerals, but we suffer all the same!". He then

dramatically unsheathed his sword, the *Excalibur*, and then pointed it at a random corner in the room. "Those monsters, those vicious villains, those *Reavers*! They take our land, they burn our houses to the ground, they butcher men, women, and children alike! And they won't stop there- they won't stop until your friends, your parents, your siblings, your children, are all *dead in the ground*! But I, Prince Arryk Icarus, hero of the Battle of the Meadowshire, will end their ocelot- I mean onslaugh-" Arryk sharply exhaled in frustration, then slapped himself in the face four times, each harder than the last. His cheeks stung hard, and wore red handprints. *You are the Prince, brother of the new King Maverick, son of the great Percius*, he thought to himself. He took another breath, and began speaking out loud.

"You can do this! They all look up to you, they all love you! You wield the hero's sword." *That's it! These forest dwellers never even see a royal lord, let alone the great handsome Prince Icarus! And when they see me, a young dashing prince with the hero's sword, they will follow me no matter what!* Suddenly, the door swung open, and Arryk embarrassingly panicked and spun around.

"Knock damnit, how many times do I have to tell you!" he barked.

"Sorry my Prince. I know you don't like being disturbed when you're talking to yourself." the young templar in the door frame said. He was Sacrosanct as well- he had short light brown hair and shiny blue eyes, though one was covered by an eyepatch. He had a spikeball flail attached to his waist along with a rapier, a crossbow stowed on his back, and wore refurbished leather armor. The flail had light blue hues that emitted from the ball- Arryk pulled some strings to ensure his right hand man had an artifact, just like him.

"I wasn't- show some damn respect!" he angrily barked. "Don't forget who you're talking to!" He stared at the boy awkwardly for a few seconds before they erupted with laughter. They always did this when they argued- they did it when he knocked Arryk on his ass the first time they sparred, or when Arryk got caught stealing his snacks after training day at the academy, or when Arryk accidentally broke their boat in sailing class.

"Felix," Arryk said, "I have some good news for you."

"Good news? For me? Did you get us all wine?" Felix asked.

"No!" Arryk exclaimed. Felix always had an obsession with royal wine- one day in military academy Arryk snuck a crate of peach wine from Maverick's cellar and shared it with the rest of the class. Felix was always a "work hard play hard" type of man, the working hard he got from the academy, but the playing hard he got from Arryk. "This is serious Felix. It's not wine, or candies, or smoking resins." This was always the most frustrating part of talking to Felix- he took everything seriously besides Arryk.

Felix dropped his smile and straightened his face. "Alright what is it, my prince?" he asked in a respectful tone.

"Felix, as you know we're performing a pincer attack with the Vanguard, and if Artemis is right, we'll annihilate them and the templars will be redeemed and we will become a revered force once again! I only got this far because of you." Arryk had spoken with a natural flow and sincerity that was absent during his mirror recitation. It was no lie- Felix was the reason Arryk had made it this far. Felix had vanquished more Reaver's than anyone in the Templars, crafted a technique with the sword that turned their army of ragtag peasants into respectable fighters, and consistently gave sound advice in military matters. But it wasn't just his skills that Arryk had respect for, it was his person. Felix was reasonable, wise, and most importantly, saw a potential in the prince that no one else had.

Maverick's going to kill me, Arryk thought to himself, but for some reason, that didn't scare him in this moment. He loudly cleared his throat and unsheathed the excalibur before placing it on Felix's shoulders. "Felix, I, Prince Icarus, hereby name you Grand Taskmaster of the templars, and by proxy, their next commander as well."

Felix shuddered in shock, and immediately fell to one knee. "My prince...", Felix swallowed hard as he spoke with a heavy gratitude. "You do me an honor, a great honor, one that no one in my line has or will ever experience." His words were heavy and said with a nervous unsteadiness Arryk had never heard from the strong-minded boy before. It wasn't surprising, while each military branch had a commander or chief, much of the work was still left to their war cabinet. In the cabinet there was the reconmaster, who led all the survey missions, the armsmaster, who took charge of which weapons they brought and which went to

which soldiers, and above all of them, stood the taskmaster. They were second in command, organizing all major decisions involving logistics, tactics, and strategy that the commander wasn't able to. Not only that, but in the event the commander falls or is injured, they take over as the leader of the regiment. Felix breathed heavily as he stayed in his kneeling position, half out of elation and half out of nervousness.

Arryk smiled, but he questioned if it was because his friend was happy or because he still had the power to make him feel that way. "You recall that day we met, outside that tavern?"

Felix's laughter broke through the professional demeanor he had put on. "I recall when I found my prince passed out, covered in mud while his brothers drank with the maidens." The fact that Felix didn't mention that Arryk was crying as well was proof that Arryk had chosen the right man.

Arryk spoke with a somber genuinity. "I spent the whole day with my family, their silver plates and fine meals, their golden jewelry, their servants who do all our chores for us. But when you brought inside, and I sat on your fathers shitty old bed and ate stale bread out of my bare hands with some moldy cheese, and spent the morning helping you and your father cleaning vomit and spilled ale off the floor, I felt happier and more cared about then that I had my entire life. I don't care what my family will have to say about naming the son of a blacksmith taskmaster, the sun will set in the east before I would deprive my most loyal friend of his rightful hard earned honor. I believe the gods made us meet in that alley that day, and gods will give us leave to bring glory back to our army's name, and I'll feel happy doing that with you too." Arryk joyously capped off his monologue as Felix stood up, grasped the prince's arm, and the prince grasped back hard.

"You have a speech, don't you?" Felix asked. "You better not mess this up, I'm not ready to serve as commander if you start a mob again."

Somehow, Arryk felt confident, it was almost as if some of the joy seeped out of Felix and into him. "I do," he said with pride.

"You ready? Got it memorized?" Felix skeptically asked.

"As much as I need to." Arryk replied.

The pair walked outside the crude spare room in the dwelling's local mess hall and made their way to the yard. Arryk had a kick in his step as he excitedly strode, Felix trudged behind him with a quiet steady pace.

Scores of well-equipped soldiers and civilians with old dusty weapons awaited their arrival when Arryk dramatically barged open the doors.

"Arryk the Prince!" Felix yelled with booming volume and an undying conviction.

The crowd was made of three groups, Arryk's templars stood in the front-left, the Rangers to their right, and the villagers stood behind them. The templars, dressed in their iconic chainmail and armed with their standard issue rapiers and crossbows, loudly cheered as they welcomed Arryk onto the podium. Arryk smiled back and spread his arms wide out to embrace his men's love, but as he turned his eyes from his men to the locals, he was hit with a heart-wrenching disappointment.

The rangers looked weary and tired. They were still wearing their classic green cloaks, but most had shown signs of wear and tear, brown from mud, ripe with holes, some were even charred. They had huge black eyebags and tired dead stares as they looked back at the golden prince. Most had their fingers wrapped around and glued to their old wooden bows, though Arryk couldn't tell if it was out of anger or out of habit. It wouldn't matter much regardless- most of the men had near empty quivers. The local village conscripts were made mostly of men, but there were a considerable number of women who stood as clerics and archers, equipped with small pouches filled with herbs and composite bows made from bark and vine. The village men mostly held clubs, small wooden blades, and woodcutter axes made of stone. They all had slim limbs, malnourished faces, and eyes that were each either lifeless or seething with rage. Many who were in no fighting condition- the elderly, the children, the pregnant- still joined the crowd to bid their soldiers and family farewell.

Why are they not cheering? Don't they see me? Arryk asked himself. Then he understood- the forest dwellers were always said to be patient and peaceful, they were simply waiting for him to begin his speech. Arryk mentally prided himself on his open mindedness before he cleared his throat. "Men, oh and

woman, and... children I suppose..., we come from different peoples and places, yet here we stand united!"

"Yes!" The templars ecstatically cheered. The cheers noticeably were less loud among the other members of the audience.

"We have a common enemy to face! It is fortunate for you that the royal crown has sent its finest soldiers to help the Terra and all its inhabitants" Arryk's voice boomed with an undeterred determination. Cheers once again rang from the front left of the crowd. "With the finest soldiers, comes finer experience. The templars offer not only their men and equipment, but their expertise in military strategy as well!"

"Will they teach us how to run away as fast as them?" a crowd member jeered, and laughter among the villagers soon followed. The jeerer came from the villagers, he carried heavy black bags under his eyes, burnt clothes on his back, and a small child in his arms. The templars glared at the heckler, though he stood unfazed. Part of Arryk wanted to have Felix drag that man out of the crowd and cut out his tongue in front of the whole audience, but that would be unseemingly of a prince. Arryk had promised Felix that he wouldn't cause a riot so he took the slight on the shoulder and kept going.

"We will work together! Not as soldiers strung together by politics, but as united people of the Commonwealth defending our rightful lands from a monstrous force! Now I understand that you all have been fighting, some for days, some for weeks, some for months! And it feels like no matter how many we fight back, victory seems out of reach." Arryk raised his hand to his mouth and stifled his artificial sorrow. Then, he lowered his hands as his face brought back his charming charismatic demeanor. "Fret not! Our royal strategists have devised a plan- we work in tandem with the Vanguard and King Maverick's Paladins to pincer the bulk of the Reavers! Our role in this operation is to pierce the forest the Reavers hold by the Pinestone Ravine, then from there, we will strike the East as the Vanguard strikes from the West and Maverick strikes from the sky! After this triumph, the Reavers will be battered, and from there, our true victory will begin! Not a victory of a battle, but of a war!"

"Wait, what!?" The jeerer yelled. "We're pushing forward? And not even forward in our home, but in someone else's? Are you insane?"

"My home was burned to the ground! The Reavers are at our doorstep, yet you ask us to die in a place we don't even know?" a woman next to the jeerer shouted. The rest of the villager crowd agreed.

"No!" Arryk protested. "This operation will, in the long term, help the war effort, and will help the crown defeat our enemy! And a victory for the crown is a victory for all!" Arryk proudly proclaimed.

"What victory is that? We are barely surviving as it is, you send us all in some battle in some foreign land?" Markus, the leader of the rangers, had stood up and joined the hecklers. His cloak was a richer green, displaying a deep dark moss colored engraving of a great willow tree. A glowing-green netsuit covered his skin. "If Maverick wants us all to die anyway, we should all die here, bow in hand!"

Arryk barked back with a frustration building in his throat. "Maverick doesn't want you to die- none of us want *any* of you to die! And you won't, this offensive is not some thoughtless hail mary." Arryk insisted. "This plan will succeed- with your help of course!" He stammered to correct himself. "And you won't be using bows or any wooden forest weapons, we are no longer waging defensive guerilla warfare, the templars will provide silver high-grade swords and spears for all you to use! We have vigorously trained and well-bred horses and pegasuses from the Lancesteed, and we will charge at them with a strength they would never expect!"

The crowd yelled out in anger, while all the militia stood up to quell the crowd. "Lose our wooden weapons!?" the jeerer shouted. The jeerer put his child down on the ground, the woman next to him quickly scooped the child up as the jeerer began walking forward. "First you want us to die in some land beyond our forest, then you ask us to set aside the weapons we have known for generations?" The jeerer stepped closer and closer to Arryk's podium, receiving stares of anger from the templars and of respect from the rangers.

"Have you no respect for our culture? Do you royal lords look down upon us that much? What of our women, what would they fight with?" the jeerer asked.

"They can use our swords as well!" Arryk proudly exclaimed. A quiet yet sharp smacking sound rang from the podium as Felix's face went straight into his palm. *Oh shit, you idiot*, Arryk

berated himself. The bows were originally the woman's weapon for the forest dwellers. Women were gatherers and foragers who needed to defend themselves from beasts afar, and anytime they had to go to battle women would do so with a bow and quiver.

"Woman holding swords? They have wielded bows since the beginning of time, just as our men will wield wood and stone weapons of the forest!" the jeerer yelled. The rest of the villagers and rangers clamored in agreement.

Seriously? Who the hell actually cares? Arryk thought to himself. "We are simply using the best tools for the job! I understand how your feeling--"

"You understand how we're feeling? You?" The jeerer had jumped up on the podium. Now that he was closer, the tears and burns on his old battered clothes were more apparent. Felix's hand subtly hovered over the handle of his rapier as the jeerer walked closer to Arryk. "Does he understand how you all are feeling as well?" The jeerer delivered the question to the rest of the crowd, of which they responded with a resounding "No!".

Felix paced over and stood between the two, and whispered into Arryk's ear. "This isn't going well. Maybe you should let me take over for a bit."

"No... no I can fix this" Arryk whispered back. Though, he frankly had no idea how to save this travesty. Maverick would surely brand him if their entire plan failed because Arryk couldn't convince a band of villagers and forest fighters to do their job. Anxiety and frustration and fear began to jet through his veins. *What would my sister do?* He pondered. She was always so good at convincing people to do what she wanted. Vesper would tell him to be straightforward, logical- to appeal to what they really want. What did they want? They obviously didn't want him, or his plan, or even his men and weapons. *What did they want?* Arryk asked himself. He stared at the jeerer, his worn down clothes, his dead yet bitter eyes. Arryk remembered the child he was holding earlier.

"Why don't you listen to your babysitter?" the jeerer mocked and laughed.

Arryk put on a hard stern face and aggressively paced towards the broken man. "You want me to be honest with you? With all of you!?" His voice erupted with a blunt, impatient, and genuine coldness in its inflection, but with it, a sense of genuinity. "I'll give you the same advice that you would get

from any rational person with a basic survival instinct. Start thinking about your survival now, and your family's. You're *losing*. You're *all losing*- badly I might add. You fought heroically, to the last man, to the last fiber of energy in your bodies, and where has that gotten you? Each night you go into battle, loud and proud and vicious, and come back as wounded broken defeatists without a single thing to show for your valor in battle. What happened to the last village that you all lost to the Reavers? How many people there survived?"

"... None" the Jeerer bitterly admitted.

"Exactly. None. And that's exactly what's going to happen to every forest dweller in this crowd if we don't turn this war around. We aren't fighting bandits or warriors, the Reavers will kill *everybody*. They'll kill you!" Arryk pointed at a random member of the crowd. "And you!" He pointed to another. "And you!" he pointed at a tired boy- the boy's little sister and mother silently stood beside him. "And they won't just kill the soldiers, will they? They'll kill your parents, your siblings, your children, and enslave the rest, then they'll burn your homes and forests to the ground so those slaves have somewhere to toil. Is that what you all want?"

"You heckle me because I won't let you die with your customary weapons in your familiar homes, but will your children care what weapons their parents held when they fell if the Reavers come to slaughter them?"

"... No" the jeerer confessed, and quiet yet noticeable murmurs of agreement echoed throughout the crowd.

"I need you all to stop asking yourselves how you want to die and what notions of glory or honor you want to carry with you when you do so. I need you all to instead ask yourselves, 'What's going to happen if we don't win the war we are obviously losing', 'What's going to happen to my family', 'What's going to happen to my home?'. The crown wants all the Reavers dead, and we're willing to deal with you all to make it happen. You all call me a coward, and weak. Sure, whatever. You probably also wish King Maverick was here instead. But he's not, and he won't be. Now I am here, with a division of trained troops, generals with experience in strategy, an arsenal of fresh titanium weapons, a strong monetary backing from the crown, mounts, grounded and flying, from the Lancesteed, and a much stronger desire to shed Reaver blood. They may have us beat if you look

at a map, but their forces are spread thin, their supply lines extended long, and all we need is a big kick to make their house of cards come crashing down.

We have the kick, this is a plan several major military branches have sanctioned and are actively participating in, and if the kick succeeds- which it will if you help me- the Reavers will be weakened everywhere and the war will shift in our favor. I am *respectfully* asking you to join me." Arryk now pointed at the jeerer, but his body and voice still addressed the crowd. "Will you help this tired dying man, and help him die in a way he wants, followed swiftly by your wife and children!? Or will you help me, and actually *kill* those sons of bitches that have ruined your lives!?"

"I stand behind you!" a soldier in the templars loudly cried.

"I will stand behind you!" an emaciated woman cried out, her voice barely carrying enough strength to finish her sentence.

The rangers turned to their leader. Markus looked back in a bleak acceptance. "I have no love for this cowardly prince, you all know that." Markus admitted to his men. "But a coward saves his own skin, and I'm sure the rest of the crown will skin him alive if he loses this battle as well. We need to set aside our pride for our families, for our homes! I will do my duty to protect the forest and its people, and I will stand behind Prince Arryk."

"Arryk the Prince!" Felix shouted in triumph.

"ARRYK THE PRINCE!" The templars shouted, followed by the Rangers, with notably less volume, then finally, with a much weaker enthusiasm, followed by the villagers.

Arryk widely held his arms out to bask in the audience's reluctant glory. *Good job Prince*, Arryk told himself. He smiled at Felix. Felix still looked like he wanted to kill him, but still couldn't help but smile back.

Blades In Blue II

Achilles Esca

"Who are you?" Achilles asked.

"Who am I?" The killer flamboyantly pointed back at him. His hands both carried heavy scarring- slashes, bruises, and burns. "Who are you?"

"My name is Achilles sir. First Bladeslinger of the fifth battalion in the Royal Conservation Corp." Achilles answered.

"Oh? And does Achilles have a last name?"

Achilles grimaced. "Esca. I'm the son." he said reluctantly.

"Ah. *Esca's son.*"

Achilles quickly changed the topic. "Have you seen my brother, about a year younger, about the same height, more bulky figure, big eyes. Also a bladeslinger, he scaled the wall with the others earlier, part of the third Bladeslinger Battalion. You're in that battalion, aren't you?"

"You're the son? *The son?* What's this about a brother then?" Achilles hated his voice. It was sultry and wry. "I've only ever heard of one Esca. Well, one Esca that's still alive, that is."

Achilles groaned, out loud and by accident. "I know you know who I'm talking about. The warden's child. Kieran Barrow."

"And not Kieran Esca." He found some joy in the easy revelation.

"No shit. Doesn't make him not my brother."

"Only half not, right?" A wicked smile crept on the killer's face.

Achilles stormed up to him. The killer was taller, and clearly stronger, not to mention surrounded by corpses, but Achilles couldn't care less. "Whats going to happen to that smile if I put my blade through your heart?" Achille gave him a soft punch in the chest. "Will it turn upside-down as you die, or will your corpse wear it for eternity, like a jester?."

"You want your brother? You should have just looked around first." The killer laughed. Achilles spun around, desperately searching for his face among the corpses. Only then did he realize the boy sitting flat against the wall, completely dazed

and unmoving, and also, in all states but mental, completely alive.

"Kieran!" Achilles ran up to him and leaned down, grabbing him by his black furs and shaking him. "Is he in shock?"

"If you're asking if he's completely useless, then yes." The killer kicked his brother in the leg, and his brother had no response. Not a word, not a flinch, his leg just bounced in the direction it was pushed. "Gods, I kill a whole room full of these fuckers and he sits there, daydreaming. They told me he was one of the finest Bladeslingers of our generation! What a load of horseshit."

"He's in shock." Achilles spoke heavily. *One more word from this man, and I may lose it.* "Kieran, are you in there?" No response. Achilles turned to face the killer. "You killed all of these men?" Whether that included the dead Bladeslingers, Achilles hoped to find out.

"I did most of them. The Reavers of course, not my comrades." The killer gestured to his fallen kin with his muscular arm. "They jumped us first, filled the room with darkness and the Reavers fell from the ceiling. I think your brother and I are the only survivors- well, if you can call *that* surviving." He gave a look to Kieran's motionless body.

Achilles ignored the quip. "They dropped darkness? How did you kill them all then?"

The killer pointed to his slender ears. "You never kill a man with your eyes closed? Your brother hasn't apparently."

Achilles was impressed, but refused to show it. He knelt down and got face to face with his brother. "Kieran. It's me. I'm here. How are you doing?"

"Mother." Kieran said, staring through Achilles.

"Mother?" Achilles wanted to slap him. *He's lost it. I suppose it's been a few years since he's seen me but...*

Achilles began to shake him even more. "Snap out of it! We're storming the fortress! You need to help us win, so we can save mother and go home!"

"Fortress?" Kieran's face was a bit bulkier than Achilles, as was his body. His gear was cleaner, more refurbished, and his eyes looked more like coals than rubies, unlike Achilles.

"Wheres mother?"

Achilles wanted to scream.

"Just put him down and be done with it. The boy's in no state to continue life."

"My captain will get here soon, and he'll put a flare in your head if I ask him to. My *Sacroscant* captain, I might add, so he would get away with it."

"He can only get away with it if he succeeds with it, and based on how that went with the last guys who aimed for me," he nonchalantly kicked one of the Reaver corpses, "I think the chances are low. Besides, flares aren't meant for killing anyway."

"You sure? Have you ever been hit with one?"

"Of course not. How do you get hit by a flaming rock, that's embarrassing." Achilles didn't respond, still kneeling and inspecting his brother. The killer groaned and impatiently paced around the room. "Fine, go on with your glorified therapy session, I'll wait right here to meet this captain of yours."

What the fuck is he talking about, Achilles thought to himself before continuing to bring his brother back to the physical world. "Mother is not home. We don't know where she is. She could be with the Reavers, you remember them, right?"

Kieran's voice grew brutal. "Of course," he spat out.

"Okay, and we joined different squads, remember? You're with the bladeslingers, then I joined the Royal Corps, and we haven't seen each other since training, right?"

"Right." His stare was still blank.

"And, now we are here, to retake the fortress, for justice, glory, and freedom." Suddenly, Achilles became devout and proud in his words. "We are going to avenge our fallen, and punish the invaders. We are going to save mother and free our people from the Corruption, and we are going to come back home as heroes--"

"Okay, okay, okay. Shut the hell up." Kieran smiled. Achilles hugged him hard. They had been waiting for this day for a long time. "First time I see you in three years and you're yapping up a storm." Kieran said.

"Three years and you already don't recognize me?" Achilles was slightly hurt. He recognized Kieran easily. "It's the shock, I suppose."

"Not just that." Kieran said as Achilles helped him to his feet. "I swear you were way uglier."

"Very funny. Who the hell is that?"

"Viche. You don't know him?"

He looked back, startled, before spinning back and speaking in a much lower tone. "That's Viche? He's right here? Why?"

"When they said he would be joining us, we all thought we were saved. 'We can't die with Bloodsport on our side! ', 'He hasn't been bested in combat once his whole life! '. And he wasn't bested, he won. And we all died anyway!" Kieran sounded distraught. He was laughing a little, like it was all a massive prank being played on him.

Viche was famous for killing, and not just Reavers. Monsters, beasts, outlaws, pirates, and even Sacrosanct Knights and other Bladeslingers. They said he almost killed the King. Tore through the royal guards like paper, and only was stopped because he cut a knight so viciously in half that the blood splattered all over his eyes, blinding him. That was the first fight he had lost, they said it was one against a hundred and it was still close. It was in that rebellion where he earned most of his notoriety- he had placed the makeshift marrow crown on the Usurper's head, and transformed the Wastelands into his personal surveillance state. Him and the usurper killed half the critics (or slanderers, as he called them), priests, Commonwealth loyalists, Sacrosanct officials, and foreign migrants, and exiled the other half to the Aether, a fate arguably worse than death. When the rebel state ultimately lost, all of the conspirators, including the usurper, were hung, and their bodies laid swinging outside the Mosaic Shell for months.

Viche was the only one spared, instead staring at a dungeon wall for a year. They let him out when the Reavers invaded, with a royal pardon and all. It was one thing watching this creep gloat about death and Achilles' family, it was another realizing he was the biggest stain of the monarchy and his hometown's honor, a war criminal wandering free because people valued pragmatism over justice. Achilles wanted to spit in his face, but preferred living just enough to not do so.

"Still want to put a blade through my heart, boy?"

"Would if I could." he spat.

"What if I said the same?" Viche began to walk up to Achilles. His breaths were heavy, as were his footsteps. Everyone smelled horrible in war, but he was something else- his long greasy hair looked like it hadn't seen water in years, and his breath was a disgusting concoction of old food, tainted water, and something else that was beyond description. "Would if

I could- and I definitely could." Viche began to push his blade into Achilles breastplate, almost breaking the black leather. "You have balls. All the other guys look at me and start worshipping me like I'm their lord or they piss their pants but you, you are something else. It's entertaining. It's the only reason I haven't cut you and half after all the shit you've been speaking. But you're starting to get a lot more annoying than entertaining, and once you cross that line..."

Achilles realized he could die any second in this fortress. Why even bother being afraid? "If you kill me, do you promise to take a bath after?"

"What the hell is going on here?" The captain's voice rang out as he entered the guardhouse. Behind him followed the other two Sacrosanct soldiers, who had both finished climbing the chain. "Achilles! Are you starting fights again?"

"No fight sir." Achilles glared at the monster. "No fight at all."

"Who the hell are you-" The captain grabbed Viche's shoulder and turned him around. "Holy shit!" A newfound hope had found his voice. "We may win this thing! You know who this is?"

"A no good murderer, and an enemy of the crown." Achilles spat out.

"Achilles, shut up!" Kieran said in a low tone. "Yes sir, we know."

"I don't. Who is this?" The cloaked soldier said.

"That's Viche, Eidrick." Achilles explained.

Eidrick let out an ecstatic gasp. "Maybe we haven't lost after all."

"We were never lost in the first place," Achilles corrected him. "Let's finish this mission."

"The greenie is right. The crown has placed immense faith in this operation- to capture the Gorestorm Fortress in the name of the Icarus, and, most importantly," He held up a detailed drawing of a disheveled, grotesque man. There was nothing in the drawing that Achilles had not heard of before, but seeing it, even in an artist's rendition, made him sick to his stomach. Frostbite had taken half the man's face. It made his skin blotched with black patches, where the little gray color on his skin was leached out by the cold. Where the skin met the patches of the dead and cold, it became crusty and swollen. In the black patches, you could see a bit of flesh was taken out. It did a

number on one of the man's eyes, where the skin around his empty socket was flaky. His hair was similar, with the majority on the left side being almost torn off, his scalp as visible as his dying strands of silver hair. "This man" The captain had continued, now lecturing the entire group of survivors. "The architect is closer to us than ever before. He designed the machines that killed our friends, and he'll keep designing more until we put an arrow in his skull. We take the fortress and kill him, and the Corruption loses one of its greatest assets."

"That's not all." Achilles chimed in. "They say this man's laboratory is filled with the skulls of our people, that he used them as playthings for his rituals. They say he feeds our comrades to monsters, and that he uses prisoners as target practice for his sentries. He did all of these things, and now sits on his golden chair with nice soft cushions while we drown and starve out here. He doesn't deserve those nice things. He deserves to be wrapped in chains, and handed to the Icarus to receive the *King's Justice*. It's up to us to avenge our fallen, and dispense punishment!" He said with a newfound resolve.

The men murmured in agreement. The captain looked at Achilles, surprised but proud, before continuing. "I couldn't have said it better myself. Our comrades have secured a beachhead, and we can now Now the final wave of ships is making arbor

Our final wave of ships have now been grounded, and our comrades have secured a beachhead besides the castle gates. The enemy has no idea we are here. When the rest of the Royal forces launch their assault, we will take advantage of the chaos and infiltrate deeper in their defenses, find the Architect and capture or kill him." He began to lecture Synge and Kieran. "We'll know when the assault happens, they'll likely fire a wave of firework rockets in the air. The showers will blind and burn defenders, as the rest of them charge through the gates."

"Blind?" Kieran asked. "That's not going to do shit against the sentries."

"I know, it's just procedure." The captain explained. "Either way, it's good for morale. Now, when the wave comes, we'll move past this wall and get through the courtyard, then make it to the great hall. The Architect must be there- we find him, then seize him, or kill him if need be. Once that's done, we fire a flare off the rooftop of the hall, calling the royal

skyguard to seize the fortress." The captain sat on the ground, and got a chug from his flask. Whether it was water or wine, Achilles didn't know for sure, but could probably guess. "I'll stand watch." He walked up the stairs in the guardhouse, where the second floor had an overlook over the rest of the wall. Once he finished climbing the steps, Synge began to speak.

"What now then? We walk the wall and kill the guards?"

"We wait." Eidrick explained.

"Where's the fun in that? You hear those explosions? Hunting season has begun. There's no use waiting."

"You want to go out there, in broad daylight? Being good with blades won't do you much when their sentries take you off the wall with one blast." said Eidrick. "You may be a good fighter, but Captain Tavick has a good mind for strategy."

"We have muscle, and mind." Achilles said happily and hopefully.

"That's not to mention your brother." Tavick added. "They say he's a prodigy with the bladeslinger kit- a budding talent. That's the duke's son for you." Achilles smiled at his brother.

"Achilles, you're the duke's son?" The black-eyed third soldier asked. It was the first word he uttered since making it up the wall.

"No, just Kieran."

"Who's your father then?"

"Some nobody. Didn't get to see him much"

"So when were you drafted boy?" Edrick asked Kieran.

"Almost as soon as I was old enough to hold a blade. After Gorestorm fell, they ran down the recruitment age. Before it was just men above seventeen who were forced to serve, then it was practically every boy in the village with working legs. I was scared, and I didn't want to kill anyone. But the royal soldiers told us that the Reavers had carried off all the villagers at Ashrend into slavery. Suddenly, being angry was easier than being scared."

"It was similar for me." Black-eye spoke. "My parents ran a mount ranch, when the recruiters came and grabbed all the able bodied men and boys, my father thought I would be safe. 'They need mounts then they need men.' he told me, and I could contribute more to the cause breeding horses and pegasi. But I had a sister, and they figured that a middle aged man, his wife and a daughter can run things just fine, and soon enough I was

in the Conservation Corps. Father gave me his best horse and hugged me goodbye as I left."

"I was drafted a bit sooner than him, by a couple months" Eidrick explained. "I remember when the squad first started out, there were eight of us, the captain included. We were down to half from our first two battles before Achilles joined us. And now we're here."

"There's five of you?" Kieran asked.

"Were five. When our ship got destroyed, he got killed instantly. He was just unlucky. The other four we lost- they were just weak, not suited for war. They could barely hold swords right, and fought like little girls." Eidrick grimaced. "They should have been farmers, or ranchers like this one here." He gestured to black-eye. "Instead they died, and I don't think a single one of them killed a single Reaver before they did. I thought Achilles died too, but the Captain insisted he was alive somehow. I didn't believe it. How could someone survive that?"

Eidrick turned to Achilles. "Not sure you remember it, but when our ship got hit, you flew into the water and sank so fast I didn't even have time to call your name. We should have taken off all our gear before we beached. I thought the Captain was delusional when he said you could have lived. Guess I was wrong."

"I don't remember it. I remember waking and swimming." Achilles explained. "The Captain cares for his men. I'm sure it was hard seeing so many of them die."

"He seems an honorable man." Kieran agreed. "When was he drafted?"

"A while ago, he was the son of a tailor at that point. He was very young too, but that didn't stop them from throwing a sword in his hand." Eidrick explained. "Became captain after he won his two battles."

"He beat the Reavers twice as a footman?" Achilles said in awe.

"No." Eidrick laughed. "He fought you guys." He pointed his finger at Achilles, Kieran, and Synge. "He's been a soldier for a long time. It must be strange for him- fighting among the barbarians he used to kill."

Achilles' face dropped. "I didn't know he fought in the rebellion. He never mentioned that to me."

"Guess he thought you would get mad at him." Eidrick explained. "He killed a lot of barbarians, you know." He chuckled. "No longer your hero, is he?"

"Why would that change anything? If anything, it proves his worth as a soldier." Achilles explained. "We were wrong, we were dishonorable and uncivilized and tried to reject the grace of his majesty. He did the right thing and struck us down." Synge sat and glared, Eidrick smiled, while Kieran sat solemnly.

"Well, when were you drafted then?" Black-eye asked. "How did you get into our Sacrosanct squadron? I thought that was reserved for the tribeleaders."

"I didn't get drafted. I volunteered." Achilles explained.

All but Synge were surprised. Eidrick seemed almost angry. "You volunteered for this shit? Why? You actually wanted to experience this? This hell?"

Black-eye agreed. "I would have given anything to stay home. I would have given the army as many pegasi and horses as they wished, I would have given them the whole ranch for god's sake."

"I didn't know you volunteered." Kieran said. "I thought you just got drafted earlier than me because you were older. You said you wanted to be a smith someday, why did you give that up?"

"The *Designer* and the *Goddess* created us to serve the holy creed by upholding heroism and dispensing justice. To be heroic is to be courageous and put your body on the frontline for the holy order. And what better place to help dispense justice than by destroying those monstrous invaders in the field? My father was a butcher, who ended poor creatures and spent his days killing them and chopping them to pieces. I'm not like him. The only people I'm killing are those that truly deserve it, and I'll risk my life to make sure they don't just get away with the suffering they inflicted on good, innocent people."

"That's still insane." Eidrick insisted. "You can't change anything. Your one barbarian boy against a whole army of fuckers ten times more powerful than you."

Before he could defend himself, Synge spoke. "Don't you be too hard on the boy, now. Never question a man's inclination to step forward."

"Did you step forward, sir?" Kieran asked.

"I did. For this battle, and my first one." said Synge.

"This battle? You got a choice?" asked Kieran.

"I did, the crown trusted my skills enough to let me choose. They knew I was no coward. They told me about several battles. Ones in the ocean, ones in the woods, ones under the ground. But then, they mentioned a battle, in the Crimson's frontier."

"You came to be close to home?" Kieran asked.

"Ha! Some men fight for home and country, but I am no such man. They called the others 'valiant attacks' or 'brave resistances'- basic fights, not worthy of my attention. But when they described Gorestorm Castle, they called it a 'Desperate Assault' and 'A last ditch, with little hope of success'. I asked them, 'What do you mean last ditch or desperate?'. That's when the prince came close. I always love secrets, not because I like hiding things, but because it means they see me in great importance. I love them even more because they think I'll actually keep them to myself." Synge laughed.

"Go on." Achilles said anxiously. "What did he tell you?"

"He told me it a suicide mission!" Synge laughed even harder.

"A what!?" Black-eye screamed in terror. "Am I going to die in this godforsaken place, surrounded by Reavers and Barbarians? I want to go home!" He yelled and clamored as Kieran tried to calm him down.

"He's joking, he doesn't mean it. If it were on, he wouldn't be here." Kieran suddenly turned slowly to Synge, horrified. "Right?"

"Why come if its a suicide mission?" Achilles asked.

"Everyone loves being the best." Synge said. "It's comforting- no matter how shitty of a person you are, no matter how many mistakes you make, you have that piece of honor that sticks with you. No matter what you do, what other people have to say, you can confidently go up and tell them 'You may be right, but I will always be better than you at this one thing'. Gives you something to dangle over them, that no matter what they do, you're still on top. It's such a comforting thought that Lords spend stacks of coin and dedicate their little baby lordlings lives to it- sparring with seasoned knights, lessons in swordfighting, horseback riding, archery, hiring them squires to put on their armor before they play in their little fancy tourneys. Let me tell you how to truly be the best. Talent, real

talent, can't be just taught. It can't be bought or trained. It must be experienced. In order to be better than everyone else, you have to do something nobody else will do." Synge looked up to see if the others were still following- their curious faces were begging the man to tell them more.

"I never understood this as a child. To be honest, I was never good at anything." Synge chuckled as he spoke "I couldn't hunt- I was too loud and scared the animals. I couldn't learn a trade- I didn't have the gold or the mind for it. I could barely farm or fish- I lacked the patience. My village leader would always chastise me, saying 'Why aren't you good at anything', 'Why can't you do your job', 'How can a useless boy like you provide for our community'." Synge spoke with immense spite, as if he was describing hell. "Then one day, the village leader asked everyone for volunteers in the war, and I saw that no one else had the guts to raise their hand so I thought 'Perfect- this is my moment' before I raised mine. The leader laughed, said I wouldn't survive a day, that I would come crawling back begging at his feet to stay here. I told him we would see about that, and the next day me and another two dozen boys- who the leader handpicked and forced into the army- went off to war. Those boys had the most training- their parents were wealthier so they could afford sparring lessons, expensive weapons, whatever else their rich fathers thought would help them survive. Those boys jeered and laughed at me, called me an idiot for volunteering, they couldn't imagine that a scrawny little kid like me would just throw his life away. They said that they were strong and experienced, that they would be fine, but me? The enemy would eat me alive. One of the other older boys, much kinder than the rest, told me he had fought before. He said it was hell, that he witnessed men screaming in pain, that he watched friends die horrible deaths, that he had trouble sleeping from the memories of killing people begging for mercy. He begged me to run away, that I could start fresh in a new village and no one would remember or come after me. I told him that was pathetic and he told me that being pathetic is preferable over being in a war. Soon after I said no a big wave of enemy cavalry came over a hill in the distance, charging at us in glistening armor on pearl-white coated horses with giant blue lances. We were outnumbered and outmatched. The terrified older boys took out their expensive shiny weapons. They all

stood shaking, some of them even dropped their blades as they pulled them out! But my hands didn't shake, and I pulled out my blade just fine." Synge's voice went from melancholy to excitement as he whipped out a small rusty knife from his trousers. "And this," he said as he waved it in the air for the other men could see "was all I had. I remember the battle well, but there's something else I remember even more. When the village elder's face dropped in disbelief as he saw that I was the only one of the twenty something boys he had sent out to return, covered in blood with a giant smile on my face, that's when I thought 'Finally. A job I'm cut out for.'. Then I went back to old life- the toiling, the slaving. No action, no glory, no thrill of competition at its highest stakes. So soon after I crawled back to the elder and begged at his feet 'Send me back!'. That's what it takes to be the best. You don't buy it, you don't choose it, it calls and you answer. And when you answer, and the call was truly meant for you, you'll soon realize you were a fool for trying to do anything else! What other's call a suicide mission is what I call a fulfilling experience for the daring." Synge spoke with a prideful gleeful nostalgia. The other men looked on, completely mesmerized.

"Achilles, come up here!" The captain called out from above. Achilles walked up the steps while the rest of the men began to obsess over Synge like they were excited little girls.

On the upper level, the floor was littered with trapdoors, and a big window overlooked the wall and the war outside.

"Captain? How can I help?"

"Butcher?" Captain laughed. "You're just lying now?"

"It's not a lie, in a way." Achilles answered.

"You should stop lying to them."

"It was no lie- my father was a vicious butcher who *disgusts* me. I grew up surrounded by violent barbarians that *disgust* me. We should be civilized people, with class and honor." A growing angst emerged in his voice. "The holy Designer created us to seek freedom and justice, to be heroes even if it kills us, not to cower and do nothing until lords come and force us to. It's our duty."

"Then you're lying to yourself." The Captain told him. "Do you ever wonder why I went out of my way to bring a Crimson 'Barbarian' onto my squad?"

"You needed a Bladeslinger." Achilles answered calmly.

"I suppose I needed one. The same way I needed a Ranger from the Woods or a Sailor from the Isles. But let's say I really needed a Bladeslinger and n. I could have got one of the wartribe leaders, or one of their sons, or one of the sons of the newer Crimson Lords that the Commonwealth propped up everywhere. They had proper training already, not to mention better equipment. That doesn't impress me, I've seen enough battles to know that drilling in a yard and sparring with an instructor can't prepare you for the madness of warfare.

When I went to your village, it was as if I walked into a ghost town. There were chickens, and horses, and farming plots, stores were still open, yet I couldn't find a single boy for battle. They were all hiding, scared I would draft them to service, all but one" The captain smiled and pointed at Achilles.

"Is that why you called me up here?" Achilles scoffed. "To let me know that there were better options but you just felt bad."

The captain smiled, almost like he was getting nostalgic. "I asked you why you wanted to join. You said some of the same shit you said earlier- you want to seek freedom for the people, you want to dispense justice to enemies of peace, you want to loyally serve the crown and prove your worth."

"And you were profoundly touched and let me join?"

Captain Tavick laughed. "I was three seconds away from telling you to beat it, but then it occurred to me- in a whole village full of people, only one actually volunteered and it was you. That had to mean something. When I asked you what you wish to accomplish, that's when I made up my mind." Achilles let out a sheepish smile. He had almost forgotten what he was like when he was younger. The captain continued. "'We can't let them get away with it' and 'They don't get to prosper while innocents suffer'. That wasn't just anger in your voice, it was hate. We all hate them, sure, but you, it was something else. Especially when you talked about your mom... who could blame you? I'd hate them too."

"I'm getting her back. It wasn't not hate, it's hope. I still have hope, unlike everyone else in my village apparently."

"Hope? Hope for that new world? A world with all the Reavers in chains- isn't that a thought to behold. A world purged of corruption, with you and your mommy and your sister

and your brother by your side, a lord of a civilized Crimson world. Is there a beautiful Sacroscant girl by your side too, with watercolor eyes and in a royal dress?"

Achilles looked away, flustered. "No." He lied.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe it's hope. Or maybe you're wrong and it's nothing but hate, it frankly doesn't matter which as long as it's something. Everyone needs to go to war for something. Most do it for their survival, because someone threw a sword in their hand and told them to march. Some do it for glory, or their family's prestige. But you, I can just tell you have a real purpose for why you march into war, even if you don't truly understand it. I'll take that over training and gear and nobility. I guess that psycho down there had a point."

"You're telling me this now?" Achilles got frustrated. "Why now? What's the point? What the hell am I supposed to do with this?"

For the first time ever, the Captain looked sad. He looked angry, bored, tired, and happy, but never sad. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have taken advantage of your dreams. I should have turned you away. When I saw how you trained, I saw your passion, your ferocity, and your will- I made things even worse. I pushed you, told you the dreams could be reached if you just kept fighting, that the only good Reaver was a dead Reaver and you would have to kill them all, that your mom could be saved if as long as we fought hard and won. I should have been more honest with you about the reality of this world. I told myself I was doing my duty as well, to turn boys into weapons."

"Why now?" Achilles repeated.

"Because." The Captain said it was obvious. "You and I might very well not see the next sunrise. I wanted to get it off my chest. Confess my sins, I suppose. I'm sorry."

"You should only apologize for giving up. I don't care about reality. Here's a reality for you- I'm going to route Corruption from every corner in this world. Then I'm freeing my mother along with every other innocent held in their shackles. Then I'm going to make each of those *monsters* suffer what they inflicted tenfold. Then I'm coming home a hero, hailed by Crimson and Sacroscant alike."

The captain chuckled and held out his arms. "What can I say? I knew it." Suddenly, a giant light blue flash of light crept through the window. Loud explosions followed, and the

flashes clashed against the walls and exploded into white light. The captain pulled Achilles away from the window before he got blinded.

"You know what that means." Captain said. He stood up, and drew his sword made from tempered glass. It emitted a blue hue that sorely lit up the room.

Achilles cracked his neck, raced down the staircase and yelled to his comrades. "It's time!"