

Moonlight Xanadu

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Part I

Killing the Mansion

Chapter I

Killing the Mansion

It is often claimed that one's life flashes before one's eyes when they are dying. And as I sit here with all these wounds, it seems to be true, at least partially, because I indeed am dying, but my life didn't "flash before my very eyes", only the events of the last six hours. It began at one of the many extravagant, some may call them quite decadent, masked soiree. During one of many such a party, befell me a curious encounter. Footsteps I did hear, very calculated, profoundly precise. The type of profoundness that disturbs the mind and seizes attention. Soon the proprietor of the disconcerting step showed herself. She approached and introduced herself as Elisabeth maiden to the Jadewill mansion. I retorted as is expected of me in this company. I was bid to be a guest at yet another gala and of course, with my then lavish manners, I accepted hastily. As soon as I did, without a second word the maiden walked away.

Disappearing in the crowd as abruptly as she had come. At the time I thought nothing of it.

Soon I came about my old friend Clerval with whom I spent most my time, he is a tremendously learned scholar and speaks to that accord, I bear a strange liking to him. Angell was absorbed into this style of life with me as the primary catalyst. Clerval bowed, I rebound with a gesture of the hand and the greeting was over. We exchanged thoughts on the night and Clerval inadvertently mentions Elisabeth's invitation. And so I inquire, "Clerval, did you obey the invitation?". "No, for I fought the invitation and overcame it."

Walking home that night, roaming around former St.-Stephen's tower, I saw a White raven roost, its patchy skin imperceptible through its white veil of feathers. Back home promptly after I retired to my room and bed, I was awoken by a loud reverberation of all six walls and a pleasant illumination coming from across the room, breaking through the blinding darkness. Donned my gown I reach out my hand to the handle of a door that seems to be the source of the glow. The moment my hand makes contact with the door, I find myself before an Elizabeth stood in the doorframe. She beckons me toward my dresser and utters that they shall be waiting outside. Once through my front door, I enter a red and black checkered little lounge, with a sofa in the centre and a newspaper with a wineglass by the side. Sitting down, turning to the page with the wineglass, I notice a drop of wine not from ink had appeared on my page. One glance upward yielded the answer to that question, Clerval was sitting there with a wineglass in his hand, having just spilt some. With haste, I received an apology for the potential danger he had posed to my suit, nevertheless interrupted by a quiet Elisabeth we were each led back out our respective door.

We found ourselves standing in a tremendous amphitheatre headed

by several grand figures. A strikingly tall man, with great muscle, his long silvery hair skillfully done into a wavy ponytail protruding from his ruffled hair, and a beautifully white old shirt, decorated in red by flowery etchings. He greets us with wide gestures, welcoming us to the Jadewill family Mansion. Introduces himself as Astrophel, next pointing to a pair of young girls dressed in little black dresses, whose names are apparently Callidora and Lucilla. The latter seeming slightly off. With the realisation that Callidora is not indeed alive, rather propped up with strings, came a powerful sense of Astrophel's wish of silence about the matter. You've already met Elisabeth, and Saber will show himself in due time. We've invited you here to celebrate Callidora's anniversary, and so we'll partake in a night of games. Each resident having prepared something that you may play, everyone else shall watch and enjoy themselves.

It is midnight, Let the games begin!

Lucian finds himself in a library. Not many people make up the current inhabitants of said library. One does approach Lucian and inquires, "Kind sir, would you mind dividing these digits into two groups?". Lucian replies with, "I shall name them M and F".

1F 2F 3M 4F 5F 6M 7F 8M 9M

"Correct!", exclaims the man, "and for that, I shall shoot you.". "do not be hasty close friend", replies Lucian drawing a sword. But haste did overpower the men, and a shot was fired. Lucian stood there with a bullet wound in his heart, which curiously returned back from whence it came, the damage having healed completely. A shot man dropped the sword and proclaimed, "For now that I am dead, I shall rest my body in this here chalk outline.", and so he did. The shooter was soon arrested for manslaughter. Through a swift trial, with abundant eyewitnesses, he was sentenced to solitary confinement, with madness-alleviating tor-

ture. Lucian died in that prison at age sixty-seven.

Lucian wakes up on a bed, in a familiar room. Green and black flower pattern, of course, this is where he waited before the audition with Astrophel. Checking his pocket watch, Lucian finds it is fifty-nine minutes after midnight, and so stands up from the bed. The lodging promptly rotates around, revealing that Clerval had been resting on the reverse side.

Upon Clervall's awakening from his slumber, the duo is greeted by a familiar sight, a raven had roosted upon the bedhead. It seems that Saber had come to introduce himself. He seems to have as many bandages as he has hairs, a long flowing red cloak hiding surely yet more ravens and to top off the look, he had an animal skull attached to his head. He explains that the next event will be quite simple and that their entire purpose is to banish his pet. This is Strisk, Saber exclaimed soaring to the ceiling and performing a backflip onto it's back.

Clervall stated in his always calm and calming voice, "RUN". We didn't even think, running through the nearest piece of wall into a hallway complex. We managed to evade the beast for a few years, even managing to find some information on how we could be able to dispose of Strisk. He could still be behind any corner, waiting... at any time or thought. Every time he'd catch us, the pain was less unbearable. We tried, but one day, it came. I was on my back, Strisk devouring my body, which instantaneously grew back and repaired. This was quite preferable to running. The physical pain was nothing when compared to what I had suffered through, up to that point, however, it seems that the human psyche can only take so much pain before weakening, if only they made that part immortal as well. But being immortal, wasn't preferable in this situation, it was a curse, to make me able to experience what really mattered to them. As I lay there being feasted upon, in form by Strisk,

in spirit by the rest of Jadewill, contemplating these circumstances, a flash of light appears next to Saber riding on the back of Strisk. The light instantaneously materialises into Callidora, slamming with inhuman force into the side of Strisk's head, knocking off Saber through the sheer force of impact. "I will not let you enjoy another second of this, for what you have done Astrohpel", shouts a very discontent Callidora at the top of her lungs. Before anyone could even begin to contemplate the thought of beginning to consider what to do next, reality around me started to show cracks. Through it I began to see my room, a place I had not seen in an hour and ten minutes or over fifty years, I have no idea. No matter how long it had taken, I was most certainly returning there. Falling bluntly into my recliner.

It started with immense pain, my head started bleeding, I thrashed around for a few minutes. Then, bite marks started to show. I am glad or sad, I don't know, I wished to die, but now I cling to life with all my might, that is the nature of man. As I lay here with all these wounds, I contemplate if I truly won. I would not have survived it by any chance, but Lucilla's death shortened my suffering. Death lead to death. However, this death, was the greatest gift.

Chapter 2

The Will to Tango

"So... what do we do about the book?" said Cordelia looking around the dimly lit room, where several characters sat each in a deep leather armchair, each of their faces illuminated by a fire shimmering in the corner of the room. "Every one of us wants it and if one were to take it by force, the others would quickly overwhelm him" continues Ezekiel. A very old man, his image covered with many a grey hair and scar, in a deep vibrant voice suggests, "Whatever would you crave in return for surrendering it Ezekiel?". Perhaps if the person lost an arm and a leg I might be entertained enough. Saber starts to say something but is swiftly cut off by Ezekiel, "You are in no position to make demands Saber, I'm not afraid to take you on, the only ones here who can make demands except Astrophel is Callidora and Cordelia". "How about two castles then?", says Cordelia. Callidora makes an effort to look in the di-

rection of Cordelia, even though her blindfold makes it a slightly problematic task, "Truly, you would yield your claim for the low price of two castles?". "Each", adds Cordelia. "The proposition is highly reasonable", replies Callidora, but I must conclude this debate for the time being for Astrophel seems to be somewhat Drowsy and I myself would greatly benefit from a slight whiff of fresh air. Cordelia snaps at Cordelia, "And who will guard the book if we're out?". Saber shyly and now with a slightly startled gaze at Ezekiel, suggests "Since Callidora has limited omnipotence she will be able to keep oversight of the book, while I keep an eye on her". "Yep, sounds swell", exclaims Ezekiel driving his palms right into the old carved wooden door; after the loud collision Ezekiel left the room with Cordelia and Saber in tow. Callidora sighs softly and beckons her butler close, whispering in his ear "Sabien, would you mind doing something about that clock, please". Sabien bows deeply and humbly, "Yes, ma'am". "Shall we?", asks Clerval with hand extended towards Callidora. "Thank you, I am able to stand by myself but walking around without colliding with all the walls is the arduous task, safe your care for later.". And so, Clerval and Saber walk slowly, leading Callidora through the halls towards a moonlit corridor with a wall full of windows, all of which are now open.

Ezekiel and Cordelia may have a terrible temper, but they sure know how to make a good draft. The walls are lined with classic wooden carvings with depictions of torture, every stake a different carving. Some are lined with twisted metal reinforcements shaped into giant snake skeletons topped with animal sculptures of a cat, a winged man, a raven and a lion. "Have you ever been here before Callidora?", Clerval inquires. "The Jadewill Mansion's then residents never let anyone enter other than mortals.". "However I heard that you met the family head, what happened to them?", Clerval asked on. Callidora smirking continues,

"After Lucilla Jadewill's death, her sister massacred the Jadewill family in retribution, not much is known about the incident. Though without her father's centuries of wisdom, which I must say he did not express in his manners even slightly, she could not tend to the mansion and wasn't able to carry on her clan's legacy. The Jadewill family was no more.". If you met him... how old are you Callidora? Oh that is no question to ask of a lady like myself. You are utmost correct on that Callidora, I apologize. Callidora turns her head in the general direction of Clerval, informing him that she wants to advise him on a matter very important, "The Jadewill lineage is exceptionally longer than you think and considering the mansion's history the souls it claimed must be incomprehensible. None of us has the business of owning such a thing".

Saber raises his hand to stop the trio. "What might it be Saber?", asks Clerval, "wait... ohh, what is that smell?". "This way", signs Saber. The three run down the corridor to a half-open door. Saber lightly nudges the door with the rear of his hand. "Keep your eyes on the book" shouts Clerval. Callidora gently nodding. Saber catches a glimpse of what is inside and turns around to vomit on the floor. Callidora tenderly addresses the vomiting pile of gibbering nonsense on the floor, "Oh we do have to do something about that weak stomach of yours, now don't we Saber?". Clerval peers inside just to be met with Astrophel's face. Continuing upwards with his gaze he comes to see that his upper body is completely wrapped in spiked chains, shred absolutely to pieces and bleeding. Clerval momentarily pauses pondering whether the part covered in chains is the upper or lower body, considering the chain is attached to the ceiling causing Astrophel's lifeless body to gently sway upside down in the wind coming through the door. Ezekiel, hearing the commotion, tears in and promptly slips on the blood.

Back in the room, now shorter by one very old man.

"So who was it Callidora?", nags Cordelia, "you know who it was... just spill the beans so we can punish them already!". "I will tell you in due time". Ezekiel stands up, "If you aren't telling us them it must've been Sabien acting on your orders, whatever she whispered when we left, must've been the old man's death sentence". Callidora sips a smidgen of tea and as if to herself notes, "Oh how the young gentleman does like to cry wolf. Scon anyone? Tea perhaps?".

"Nevermind", rasps out Callidora sounding quite unsettled, and looking upwards at the ceiling. "What're you on about?", the loud boy tries to bark, before grabbing his head in immesne pain, and seeing the source of the pain, attempted to lash out at it. Just as his hand connected with a shiny cross on the ceiling, with a flash of light, he was gone. Yet instead of him, the center of the room had been filled, by a four-winged being, standing about 3 feet off the floor, with a sword in each hand, flowing white hair, and donning the name Nephilim.

Callidora, in contrast to one's expectations of her, did not greet this stranger to her kind. The being, very slowly extended it's hand towards the book, after which it opened and a slip of paper was taken into Nephilim's hand. Everybody's headaches and a collapsed Cordelia stood up as before, when the being unexisted with yet another great flash of cross-shaped light. Every person save for Callidora had a stunned look on their face, one that reads "What in the nine hells just happened?". Callidora, started calmly explaining,

"That was Nephilim, a collector of souls, for heaven's next age. Humanity is by its nature corrupt, and when the world is beyond the control of the heathens. They start again, anew, this world shall be the 10th hell and Eden will become the new world. But they need the purest of souls to populate new Eden, and so they steal from us. That right is their's to keep, for by definition, it is an act of God.",

and as the clock struck ten, it was midnight, and on the strike of midnight, it was so.

Part II

Chronicles of Astartis

Chapter 3

Manifest Legacy

Standing in this hall, the air is much staler than I had expected, as my consciousness dips slightly, I remember very well... a moment.

I was leaning upon my office door, reading the change-log of current law, looking smart, looking loyal. I was called by the loudspeaker to my superior's office. I scramble through the camp as to not keep him waiting. I enter as is apt for my post, with a salute on my chest and the words "Sir, Fjäderklädd Christopher Gosling reporting". "At ease", he replied "you are no longer my problem, tommorow you are to board the High-train, head for Daemon and report directly to the vice-secretary of the Daemon Overseer Reigenen, I don't know why he requested your presence, however it is his will, you will be on that train tommorow 6 hour sharp", he had nothing more to say to me and I had nothing more to say to him, my salute, right arm firmly resting against my chest, I

bowed low and walked out his door, dismissed I leave.

After my arrival in the tenth ward where Daemon is located, I was directed by the automatic system to my lodgings and allowed some 2 hours of Private Time since the journey was long and couldn't be made within reasonable time. And so I peered across the landscape from my balcony, through the mist just along the horizon, Ward 11 was just about visible. It's exactly as I'd imagined it, all those astonishing buildings were indeed so imposing, even more so helped by the fact that the common folk is usually kept out. With a sip of whiskey I retire to my room.

"Good morning; Look at the sky and wake up to a day prosperous to our nation", they often try to change up the text, but it's always the same crap, one starts to internalize, these morning drills are as despicable as the man that designed them.

I know why the Lord wants to meet with me, and when he does I shall die. The question is how much of this I can take down with me, the answer would come soon enough, but I could improve my odds by finding a couple compatriots.

This group, if we may call it that, would soon come to form, the Overseer had been called off to important duties, this gave me a small amount of leeway to prepare.

Nobody who would be of any use to me would be allowed a stay in Daemon, so I was forced to wander around Wards 6 or lower, despicable places they are, everyone is forced to live in such cramped and unsavory conditions, while the higher ups get all that space. The founding fathers meant well, that is infallible, lower ranking citizens simply have a higher natality, but the high wards keep all the self-regulating statistics low. This used to be a technocracy, but the most fit to rule, wasn't necessarily the most fit to set his own rules. So many years of tiny government degradation, we have to cleanse it. Anyway, for the time being

I was stuck here, the first day, I ran into a young boy, we ran into each other on the street, at first I of course thought I'd been robbed, hurt or some similar. After swiftly checking myself and seeing that he was just distracted by his camera, I started walking away, but the boy just kept staring... that uniform, he's from the Wrelnach, I had little time to do background checks, things were now or never and had to be done quite whimsically, my least favorite way of doing things. I retraced the few steps taken and stood close to him, examining his stature and mannerisms.

Kommunikationschief, Izlaron division of the Wrelnach sir, the boy exclaimed in a significantly stutterful way, while hiding the camera behind his back. I waved my hand dismissively, and asked him for his name. Clerval sir. Clerval who? Clerval Angell, sir, he continued, exhaling quite loudly, grabbing his elbow and hanging his head, looking somewhere on my lower person.

...

At that moment, an idea struck me, and so I inquired, do you take many photos Clerval? Yes sir, I've been photographing everything I can, since I got my first camera. Have you every photographed anything illegal? No sir, I woul... I don't like when people lie to me Clerval. It was a stretch, I had no idea, but the bait worked, Clerval told me about how downright passionate he was about breaking the rules with photography. Then covered his mouth and turned around to leave, I grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged him off. Hopefully the digital overseer would ignore his little confession, since it would be tagged as dealt with by me.

We sifted through his photos, after a lot of time wasted calming him down and explaining I wasn't about to bring him in. After a couple searches we hit my jackpot, he did have photos from Aleksis Reignen's

visit to his division. And plenty enough to build a 3d copy of him, but all we needed was his face. The software required some babysitting, so Me and Clerval stayed up late, in the end he fell asleep in the room I rented, since it wasn't mine, I felt fine leaving him there, disconnecting the camera and taking my PDA, before leaving very early the next day.

That was one thing down, I had already taken care of another years ago. I used to be quite close with a colleague of mine, back in the Strike-Force. Petra Helvete was her name, she was quick and strong on her feet, but stronger in the head, they recognized this, and made her a Mechanist basically the moment she arrived, with additional physical training for later fieldwork. She had closer to accessing some files, that I needed. With her help we managed to snatch a blueprint of Reigen's prosthetic arm. He lost his real one somewhere, and commissioned a replacement at the facility where Petra worked. Wasn't even difficult to convince her, she was always down for no-good.

Now I had once again an old friend to visit, Petra couldn't take leave so suddenly and communicating with her, has a risk anyway, but she didn't leave me empty-handed, apparently she has a friend who doesn't ask questions. I walked into her establishment and somehow she recognized me, Petra probably showed her pictures or spoke about me. Just to be safe, she still initiated the exchange, "What are you here for?". And so I replied, "To leave something by and take something of mine", not my idea she always thinks her catchphrases are so clever. I put my PDA on the counter and she lifted up a very dusty clunky steel box from behind it. I explained to her that I needed her to quickpress a Dragonfly Festival mask for me with a custom face, she obliged and prepared the whole blank, then I sent the extracted model I got from Clerval's photos to the press. Once the woman saw the mask, she got stunned for more than a few moments, then with a shaky hand took it and handed

it to me. "Is that? Is it really...", she started but I quickly replied, "I remember Petra saying you don't ask questions". She smirked slightly but was visibly still upset. "How much do I owe", was as far as I got before her arm shot up to my mouth, then pointed towards the door, and she shouted, "Just get out".

Outside, I checked my PDA, and the situation on the front had resolved itself, Overseers and the Tenno can flashport so he might be ready for me after lunch, I've got all this sorted, so I may as well retire before the big finale.

As I had some time to kill, I walked back to the old hotel to eat, as I was perusing the menu, who else would show up but Clerval, from his expression, I think he slept up until moments earlier. He ushered a Vyper deck onto the table. I asked Clerval to choose a meal for me and he said, "Take the third from the top, I always do, never went wrong". So I ordered it twice and drew a hand from the deck. He... really wasn't a good player, he mostly played light creatures, with fire spells, because he, "enjoyed the chaos it brought to the game", as most of this chaos comes to be when a light creature dies, yes, he saw a lot of it. I usually play a lot of dark, which negates these effects, but I couldn't bring myself to spoil his fun. In the end, I let him win once, at least I managed to create a size 28 green creature, which I would take as a personal achievement as this is the largest I ever managed to make one of my own cards, but against him, it wasn't a big deal.

We ate and we laughed, well, he laughed, but I felt slightly alleviated thanks to him. He had no idea what fate has in store for me today. Then I stood up, payed and left.

Clerval followed me to the high-train station for some reason. And onto the train, he didn't have the authorization to enter Daemon, I sighed and signed off on him. A while after we crossed the border into Dae-

mon, the dreaded message came, there was a time and I had about an hour to use. I walked straight into Reigen's estate, Clerval close in tail. At the end of this corridor was a lift, he can't go in there. Clerval is still behind me and states, "You look like a madman who's going to get himself killed". I pay little attention to him, preparing the items I brought with me, opening the case, and adjusting the prosthetic arm I took from the steel case, dropping it at my side. "I ain't just meeting one lord today", I replied. Clerval grabbed me by the shoulder and turn me around, I used that force to drive my hand directly into the wall in-front of him, prosthetic still adjusting some tidbits here and there. Our faces were very close, almost touching, we both breathed heavily as if just having given a rousing speech. I took my hand and caressed Clerval's cheek before, giving him a slow and deep kiss. I let go when Clerval collapsed on the floor, then I turned around, flipped Clerval's handgun in my left arm and stepped into the elevator.

Once having arrived on the correct floor, I stepped out and shot out the camera and the Overseer's vice-secretary, the room was otherwise empty, and the camera was allowed to glitch and disconnect for a second, I would disable that measure momentarily anyway, so my job should not go interrupted. I put on the mask and begun, "Clearance level Overseer, surveillance footage from satellite SK451". The machine replied, "Facial recognition scan required... Accepted". I browsed through the footage back and forth a bit, what I needed was a video of Aleksis authorizing a high-profile order. I found it eventually, then swiftly extracted sound using motion amplification, his silver decor proved quite adequate for the purpose.

A bunch of voices behind me snap me back to reality. The hall is empty but there's probably a bunch of guards realizing just now that they have a corpse on their hands. But that does not concern me any-

more, a few steps and I'm in Aleksis Reigen's chamber. I walk in, and as expected see Reigen, smugly walking around, brandishing a classical sword, used for honor duels. His chamber is in the shape of a tall dome, with glass all across the ceiling. I exclaim that that is not necessary, since I have already won. He looks extremely puzzled. I want him to understand what is happening to his oh so beloved nation as he watches it happen. You, as the Overseer of Daemon, have a lot of power, that power is manifested in many ways, and of course through your wide array of digital authorizations. But a password, a face recognition scan, and an authorization key hidden in your prosthetic, wasn't enough to stop this country's citizens from besting you. This country was build with ideals, ideals which you and all the officials in Daemon seem to lack. You are the ruin of my people, and that I cannot forgive.

For that purpose I issued an order in your name. Daemon has 105 of thousands of flights both with and without passengers, but all of them, will be heading straight for our capital, I thing some of them may even hit directly where you stand. "That cannot be right, the Tenno will surely catch such a preposterous attempt.". "He will, the Tenno is a powerful entity, but it would be too late, all of the aircraft's are gliding". Every single one of those crafts has a fried circuit board, and is flying high above their recommended altitude, with turned off engines. Unless somebody acts really fast, Lucian shrugs, won't help much anyways, I add as the first loud explosion is heard. Nasty things to crash these plasma engines are, aren't they Overseer? Another explosion is heard, and yet 3 more. Aleksis, runs down for cover and I take his place in the center of the room on a control platform. My arms open wide looking up at the sky, at what beautiful justice I had created. The glass shatters falling down, and raining on me and Aleksis. The smaller fragments might've given us a chance to survive, but no chance, the bigger shards

were basically flaying us. I stood there laughing, until my death.

Part III

Carcass Mountain

In this story, it is quite important to understand that none of the characters speak English unless otherwise stated.

Chapter 4

Highspire, Seychia

Countless cracks and searing pain shoots up Einar's spine, as his back collides with a sharp rock on the ground. The human that did throw him there laughing, above him, tall, deceptively lean yet very strong. A classic tale of highwayman robbery, a few thugs ganging up on a lone traveller to the city. For them it's like skewering fish in a barrel this time of year, we like to have fun and Lady Galatea's birthday celebration is one of the biggest fairs to be hosted in our capital. Though I probably won't get there even if they leave me alone, since urghh... my head feels like somebody is trying to rip it away and I don't think I feel my legs. Some woman from the assailing party seeing my paralysing pain, sees an opportunity to loot my belongings. And as she was reaching over my coat I tried to defiantly defend myself arm and leg to save my possessions. To the surprise of me and thankfully everyone around me, the

woman's clothing vanished, having been replaced by strange black robes. The material was matte but strangely off, it reflected light in ways that didn't seem natural and blue jagged shapes became visible on her skin.

"Witch, it's a witch!", she shouted scampering back, almost slipping before running directly in the direction of her friends. Whom her screaming and change of visage thoroughly convinced to spend no more time hesitating and run like hell as well. Relieved, Einar stood up carefully, shouted a thank you to the mysterious force that saved him, adjusted his flat-cap and attempted to start walking before falling back to the ground. He will be lying here for some time, so let's go look at the capital.

Later, In the city of Highspire in the middle of the spire's gardens, a large crowd is watching Lady Galatea the Beloved's painting display. She sits upon a stool on a stage with a single brush in her hand, a few colours set out on her tripod under her painting of a great cathedral scene. The people in the crowd could smell the wet stone, they could hear the bells ring, and with every grandiose yet precise stroke of Lady Galatea's brush, a bird or petal, flew out of the canvas, either to be carried by the wind or to fly over the heads of onlookers and burst into colorful streaks of light. Her beauty and flowing clear white robe awes everyone in the crowd including Einar, who managed to get the help of some passers by and is now sitting in a chair viewing the splendor, crutches resting against it. And as the show came to a close, and Lady Galatea bowed to the crowd with a smile, they cheered and clapped, retiring afterwards to the City's pubs and inns which brought out all their tables into the streets so that the cheers, dances and music need not stop during the lunch hours.

Einar also went down to eat but didn't enjoy himself for very long, since suddenly, a tall hooded figure grabbed him by the neck and lifted

him up, knocking his chair and cane over. "Lift my curse Wazzack¹, or die here by my hand.", said she. Einar was understandably confused, until the figure swiftly cleared that up. She pulled down her hood to reveal the bandit who had just attacked him, she was forsaken by her clan, for what they called "the plague". Einar couldn't speak, properly, as he was being hung a few feet above ground, but managed to convey "not.... mage". She dropped him to the ground and thought for a bit out loud, "If you had access to magic, you'd've magiced away of whatever already, Huh?". Neither of them had any idea how it worked so Einar shrugged. She tossed Einar's cane at him, still being angry, she did it so that he wouldn't catch it and it hit him in the head. Then she grabbed Einar and lifted him to his feet and extended her hand to greet him with elegant precision. Einar hesitated but, eventually shook her hand, mostly out of fear, since he knew he would have no chance against her in any way. "The name's Kayden and you already know my game."

"What a convenient time for a guard to show up, thought Einar." The guard points to our duo, "By the name of Lady Liliana, you two, come with us, she wants to speak with you". "Great, now they think I'm a criminal because I shook hands with one", thought Einar to himself, but barely had he time to contemplate this, before he heard the sounds of Kayden skittering away behind him, but to his surprise then a rustling of metal and he saw two legs pass inches away from his head, hitting the guard dead in the chest with thundering force, knocking him on his back.

"She decked Antheus", cried one of the other guardsmen. Antheus was the captain of the city guard, and trained his men well and just, gaining a fierce reputation in the process. Seeing their leader, knocked over

¹ A most hateful word for somebody with a connection to magic

so effortlessly surely, struck them hard, which gave Einar and Kayden the few second headstart they needed. Well, at first it was just Kayden, but after a few steps, guilt caught up with her, so she grabbed Einar and dragged him along. Even though Antheus quite literally jumped to his feet, before kicking his weapon from the floor into his hand, Kayden's trick or two almost got her to safety. But climbing the wall wasn't an option for poor Einar, whose injury was underestimated by Kayden, so they fell into the hands of the guards.

To their utmost surprise, both were treated extremely well afterwards. Left to wander beautiful rooms before the Lady returns from the Fairs outside. They even had a view of it all, since the Spire was tall and with many fully glassed walls. Although strangely, most of the servants in the Spire didn't talk much to them. They tended to requests but nothing longer than a simple command went acknowledged by the staff, them going as far as hastening their step when Kayden and Einar spoke to each other. And they agreed that after they deal with whatever this is, they'll join forces to find some kind of healer, since they both kind-of caused each other big problems. Einar thought to himself that it might not necessarily be his fault, but if Kayden wants to help him he won't give up that chance.

When lady Liliana, the Queen of the land arrived with many apologies, and begun to explain. Hmm, back when the guards yelled "In the name of the Lady", they presumed it was a figure of speech for the law, but now, what could she possibly want with them. Liliana sent away all her servants and asked about Kayden's skin condition. We relayed what had happened on the path and with every sentence her face lit up slightly more, seemed though as if she was just mentally ticking of something she already knew or expected. After we finished she asked, "Have you ever heard about the Old King's Visions?". Einar had heard some bits

and parts, "I've heard that the Old King started out as a no-lander and worked up to the King of the biggest country on this continent, after climbing Carcass mountain". "Yes, that is so", continued Lady Liliana, "after he climbed up he saw a prophecy of the future, he brought steam power to his kingdom and gained so much influence he overthrew the royal family. He also had a run in with some nasty people and ended up very much like the two of you, although his wouldbe assailant didn't stick around back then. I want you to go up there and bring down the prophecy, and for my assistance, I wish that you cooperate once you do. You'll get money, horses and maps. But I can't afford to send anyone with you, the Wolves of the East² aren't exactly investigators, but they've been contracted to bring in any unknown individual who would happen to be travelling with my men. I am not the only one after you, but I think I am the kindest you can choose to work with.". Einar thinks for a bit and acquiesces but inquires, "If I am and the Old king was injured, how could we possibly climb the mountain?". "There is a place named Kai's Fountain on the nearby island of Irea", Liliana continues, even bringing up a map on the table, "something happened there that healed the Old King and even let him survive the Duress point³ of Carcass Mountain.". "Now, after a good nights sleep, I want you to go down to the stables, get yourself some horses and ride to Saltwharf, my good friend Captain Titus Shaw will take you further. Don't forget to take your supplies before you leave."

"Good luck."

²A powerful guild of mercenaries.

³Many places in this world manifest with random magical effects, they are dangerous and best avoided

Chapter 5

Saltwharf, Seychia

As boring as that may have been, the journey to Saltwharf was fortunately quite uneventful. But Saltwharf, what a sight to behold, a sprawling harbor, sat atop a slight hill. It is well known for that, the river that flows through the city, flows a few stories below the streets and so many cranes don the above wharfs and silos. Both Einar and Kayden stood up from the carriage to look upon its glory, the wind almost taking Einar's hat, and after they passed through the gate, they ran... well Kayden did, Einar did his slow approximation of a run, directly all the way to the sea, it's a wonder they didn't fall in right away. "Okay, now what?", asks Einar. Kayden shrugs. "I guess, let's go ask around the docks for this Titus Shaw person". Kayden replies, "That could attract some unwanted attention". "Hmm, you're right. Well, um, we could check the tax registry, they have to have a record of what goes in and out.". "You go do

that, Imma go try check if their ain't any sort of underworld here". "Let's not split up Kayden, you know Liliana warned us about that." "Sure let's go to your boring office then, Mr. Taxes."

Fortunately for them, this is one of the perhaps almost too civilised and beareaucracy ridden parts of the world. It seems that the papers here were in order but there was no Titus Shaw among the docked captains, nor among those inbound in the next day or two. Though only two ships were sailing for Irea, Anna-Maria headed by captain William Taylor, and a certain brigantine Bounty of Marcus Lucius. "Perhaps he just isn't here or got caught up in something. Maybe Lady Liliana just misspoke."

So they just go for William Taylor, find him and arrange to travel with him. All this did was lead them to a dark place surrounded by sailors asking why they needed him. It took some convincing to... get themselves killed slower apparently, the sailors and thugs weren't exactly convinced by anything they said. Einar finally dropped the name Lady Liliana, which just made the sailor sigh, stating "Don't lie to us, everybody starts dropping names like that when they're at their end.". But fortunately for our two protagonists, somebody arrived with a loud determined step, turned the corner and there stood somebody in Captain's clothes, a old looking hat from beneath which curly ginger hair escaped. She approached Einar and inquired from her lackeys what sorts of excuses they had for searching for her. "I just heard the last bit, what do you two have to do with Liliana?". Einar took her to the side and explained about how she sent them to Kai's fountain and about the Old King similarities. Halfway through which she held up her hand to stop him, "I know you're from her now", she extends her hand. Einar grabs it and shakes it politely. "I meant payment", exclaims she. Einar gives her the gold they had prepared and she extends her other arm in for a hand-

shake, proclaiming "Titus Shaw, also known legally as William Taylor, helps with some trades, welcome aboard my ship". She raises their hands up and set to her crew that they were not to be harmed and expected to be on the ship. "NOW", her voice stormed, "let's dissolve this here commotion and get to loading some cargo". "Aye, captain", they responded and left. "Now let's get you two to the ship before you get yourself hurt. Follow me.", Shaw beckoned and they walked.

They approached the river and Titus stepped on one of the cargo cranes as it was going down, followed by an Einar-carrying Kayden. They made themselves comfortable and as there was nothing to do, they went to sleep.

For a few days they went to sleep with the setting sun and woke up to the sailor's songs. However, one cold morning, they were jerked awake and tied in a loud commotion. Both of them brought up to the main deck to see a plethora of unfamiliar faces, and some familiar tied up, some gagged. The cargo crates and barrels it turns out contained food and pirates that took over the ship during the night. One of the assailants, probably their leader Einar guesses, speaks up, "Mighty fine crew you got yourself here Shaw, they put up a fight and still look quite optimistic about the whole thing. Let us change that up a bit.". He stands up and shouts to the other pirates, "We're gonna have ourselves a good ol' fashioned Keelhaulin'.". Two of the tied up crewmates, scream and lunge towards him, but he just shoots one of them in the stomach undisturbed, the other having been taken care of similarly by another bystander. The crew saw their beloved captain tied up, and tossed over the bow of the ship. Emerging in a few seconds from the other side, she was pulled up and hung feet-up from one of the ship's cranes. Her torso and hands slashed to the bone, her head too having many bruises, blood covering almost her entire body. The leader had some of the salt reserves brought

up and threw them at her. This thoroughly pissed off the crew but their morale was quite thoroughly devastated.

Part IV

Singles

Chapter 6

When Fire Reigns

Thousands of years of ancestry now lie uncovered, closer than ever, glaring him in the eyes. Inviting the lost soul to take refuge in the few remains of what they once bared. The burdens of all he saw seemed to him as to shift unto his heart, with every step he grew more tired, more scared of this world. One he had helped build, but one he did not want. Vines surround him clutching his feet with all the might of centuries untold as if burdens his own had not been enough to bare. He endures for his journey's end is not far away. What he strives for, had been decades untended to, nature's grasp had dragged its legends deep into the ground. Stairs crumbled under every step he took, countless times he thought he'd fall, but this he did not care for, not for a single moment, he had not another place left to go, no other purpose. On his journey he passed countless statues, nature had taken their faces. Though he

still recognized many, none of them could help him now. The gateway to this sanctuary once-great now lays broken and twisted. His mere presence disturbs this crypt lost in time. He placed his foot unto the tiled balcony which weaved his step into a melody announcing his arrival as it echoed through the crypt. He approaches... gently raising his hand, inciting the rose and vine laden door to open. The scape of rust and degraded wood almost quelling the sounds of falling metal echoed once again throughout the tower. He entered the room, his feet disturbing layers of leaves, ash and dust. He had never come here, he had never been allowed. Overhead, cowering, sat many doves, he greeted them, for now, they shared fate. He passed torn paintings, old carved stone and many crosses. The room had once been decorated with beautiful wallpaper gold-laden with icons of religion and nature, even these were now but a reminder of a bygone world. He approached an old altar on each side of which stood the statue of an angel, one clutching a quill and the other a piece of parchment. He approached and as he knelt down one of the doves flew down unto the altar, raising its head in anticipation. The old man dropped to the ground crying and begged for forgiveness, for the world to be saved, for the world to not suffer for his sins. He pleaded the struggle would come to an end. The dove flew outside the tower from whence the man came and picked an olive branch, then soared off the tower. The old man's soul was at rest, he followed the dove outside and having completed his journey he took a step off the ledge.

Chapter 7

Vojna (Czech)

Quite some time ago, we got an assignment at School to gather some true stories, and weave them anew, so this is it. A few people told me their "war stories" and I put them into this here little ballad.

Přistupte blíže, přistupte blíže a poslechněte si skutečně příběhy. Příběhy, jichž každý desítky může vyprávět a každý z nichž je zajímavější než kdejaká fantazie. Dnes vám povím příběh Miloše Kalky z dob, kdy do zeleného kroje se oblékal a za zvuků polnice se probouzel.

Začínáme hned od začátku, když poprvé přicházel na vojnu, zužovalo ho pomýšlení na zástupy urostlých mužů, každý z nichž může plno strastí a bolestí mu přinést. On totiž vzrostlý nebyl a prát se by mu potíže dělalo. A tak s tímto vědomím svěřil se jednomu z nadřízených, o kterém pouze v dobrém slýchal. Jeho rada byla prostá, „Každý koho

vidíš před sebou, stejně jako ty myšlenky má. Ukážeš li jim jak bránit se umíš, určitě tě rádi na pokoji nechají.“ Vzal si k srdci jeho rady a vyhlížel vhodné chvíle k divadélku svému. Ihned, jakmile viděl někoho podobného vzrůstu, vrhnul se na něj a držel se ho zuby nehty. Sotva minutu trvalo, nežli ho přišly zkrátit a odvést. Chvilí v cele byl a po krátkém rokování s kapitánem, domluvou propuštěn byl, bez úhon až na přezdvíku, kterou si tím vysloužil.

O pár dní později mu zvláštní přišla ta radost a očekávání, které rotou vládlo. A tak tázal se, Jamese, staršího vojína z Anglie, se kterým se stačil spřátelit, na důvod k radosti. Odvěceno mu bylo rychle, že rota mikrovlnku čeká. A skutečně, den poté přišel vyprošený balíček z hůry, rozbalen byl. A obsah umístěn na připravené místo tak, aby se vyjímal a každý kolemjdoucí jej obdivovatí mohl. Všichni byli šťastni z daru, ale to se mělo brzy změnit. Šestý den po příjezdu se krysa v mikrovlnce objevila a každý ví, co mazlíčci pod mikrovlnami dělají. Celý den a celou noc ho ve třech umývali, aby dar zachránili a navečer konečně stroj rozjet se podařilo. K obrovskému překvapení všech, tedy kromě Miloše, teď řečeného Šílenec, zkráceně Šíla, který již další zákeřnost očekával. Tento smutný sled událostí pět dní se opakoval, dokud navečer mikrovlnka zabavena nebyla. Druhého dne před dveřmi majora klečelo 29 vojáků s hlavou u země a o mikrovlnku prosilo. Namísto daru mikrovln dal major nejbližšímu klečícímu vojákovi struhadlo, načež se bezeslova otočil a odkráčel zpět za své dveře, které zabouchl tak silně že by i mrtvého vzbudil. Když James spatřil struhadlo, nežli kdokoli stačil se hnout, předstoupil s ním před své spolubojovníky a zvolal „Zde jest svatý grál naší armády, nyní s tímto klíčem k vítězství, který v ruce držím dobudeme zpět vše, co jsme ztratili“. Stačilo pár vtípků, trochu davové psychózy a už jsme měli nového maskota.

K Šílovu velkému zklamání byl zanedlouho James převelen výše a namísto něj se v kasárnách objevila nová tvář vojína Veršégiho. Vojín Veršégi byl pln různých malých manýrů a výstředností. Jeho řeč by většina zařadila někam mezi Němce a Slováka. Vždy časně k ránu kolem druhé hodiny, se zčistajasna napřímil, na posteli se usadil a svým pofidérním přízvukem s ostravskou intonací hlasitě zvolal “Je třeba zařadit.”. Otočil se k starým plechovým šuplíkům a za obrovského vrzotu a rachotu jeden otevřel a vyjmul cigarety. Stejně utrpení doprovázelo šuplík při zavírání, a to vše jen proto aby mohl po pouhé minutce nebo dvou, odcvrknout nedopalek do davu, kde hlasitý jekot a nadávky označily trefeného nešťastníka. Vojín Veršégi následně uklidil do šuplíku zapalovač za stejné hudby jako když jej vytahoval a opět se odebral ke spánku. Mnohé stížností na něj podány byli, ale zdá se, že k nám byl převelen ze stejných důvodů, z jakých se ho teď snažíme zbavit, zkrátka jsme ho museli trpět. Jednou měl Veršégi službu u opravny Jeepů a nedůvěru v něj vloženou nezklamal. Se slovy “nejazdí, nejazdí, nejazdí” povyhadzoval převodovku, brzdy a polovinu motoru, než jej stačili zastavit už provedl svůj proces se třemi auty, a to poslední zrovna zkoušel. Jeep se rozjel, ale už nezas-tavil, museli počkat, až dojde palivo a poté se do něj pustili dva šikovní bráchové, kteří doma vlastnili opravnu aut. Dlouho do večera opravovali a stihli je uvést do provozu sotva včas, aby se nemuseli poškozené vozy nahlásit, po celou dobu Veršégi jen sledoval a hystericky se smál. Osobně s ním Šíla přišel do kontaktu pouze jednou, a to, když k němu přišel jednoho odpoledne a tázal se, zda si nechce pustit rádio. Šíla přitakal a do minuty toho litoval, neboť Veršégi se vrátil a za zvolání “Jdém si pustit rádio”, upustil starý armádní tranzistor na zem. Od té chvíle Šíla počítal dny do konce vojny výrazně důkladněji.

Po pár letech, kdy oba už dávno propuštění byli, zas Jamese a Miloše

osud dohromady svedl. Na krátkém zájezdu s firmou se potkali a Miloš se mohl konečně dozvědět osudy svého přítele. Jak vyprávěl dostal se zpět domů, odkud putoval do Ameriky, a nakonec dopracoval se až na Americké SEALy. Všechna jeho vyprávění byli tak neuvěřitelná, že každý důkaz vidět chtěl. A důkazy byly, od fotek po odznaky, rád je ukazoval a rád je vytahoval. Tak Miloš navrhl ať mapu si vezme a ať je všechny vede, když se tak náhodou potkali a nikdo z nich s tím nehne. Hned jak James mapu popadl už velel “Kupředu” a jak ukázal směr všichni za ním se vydaly. Sorva mu kdokoli z nich stačil, cvičení jeho bylo na první pohled vidět, ale to, co nikdo nečekal bylo Jamesovo náhlé zastavení. Všichni se ptaly, “Co se děje?”, James jen otočil mapu o sto osmdesát stupňů a středem davu opačným směrem se vydal. James zvolal „Přes silnici je to možné, ale správný voják jde přímo vpřed” a uhnul ze sílice, aby se vydal přes strmou horu a přes její samý vrchol, dovedl nás do cíle. Jásali jsme, dokud jsme nespátřily hodiny. Dvacetiminutová procházka k hotelu se proměnila v čtyřhodinovou štreku přes hory, ale ve chvíli, kdy jsme chtěli Jamesovi ukázat co si myslíme o jeho “Navigaci”, nebyl nikde již k nalezení.