

Amalon:
The Steel Path

Rati Goginashvili



Prologue:

My story is rather simple, yet interesting. I have always wanted to talk to someone about me, my feelings. I grew up in a wealthy family, where I always had had everything. At a young age, my parents gave me away to a richer family, and I've never seen them since. I went on to become a soldier, working for Gilded Juval. It was painful but insightful, it taught me many things, as much as I lost part of my humanity. But, how did this all happen? Well, let's start where it all began, at the age of seventeen, when I joined the military.

Chapter 1: Good soldiers follow orders

‘Guard!’ The captain screamed as he walked into the barracks. We immediately got up and stood straight, like a plank. It was my first day here, everyone seemed nice, most didn’t know what they wanted to be later in life, thus they joined the military. I on the other hand, wanted this life. I wanted to know how to battle, defend myself and maybe teach others. I love learning new things, so this might be the best way to start.

‘Listen up. You are here to dive head first into the military practice. We do this by the Juvali rules, meaning we respect honor, but don’t pay too much attention to it. Fighting is survival, no one plays fair when saving their skin.’ The captain was very strict and had us on the edge constantly. It was difficult to catch a breath, especially during the training. I wondered how the next one would go.

The captain caught a glimpse of a rookie losing their focus.

‘Jandi!’ He screamed.

‘Yessir!’ Jandi responded.

The captain walked up to him: ‘Are you tired?’

Jandi shook his head: ‘No sir!’

‘Do you want to go home?’

‘No sir!’ He answered yet again.

‘Then open your damn eyes son! This isn’t a sleepover at your whore’s house, lose attention and the enemy will catch you off guard.’ He yelled mercilessly.

‘With all due respect, sir-’ Jandi got interrupted.

‘You can shove your respect up your ass, rookie. By the end of this, you will either hate me or be gone back home where you came from!’

I could tell that this wasn’t going to be a walk in the park, this was going to be hell, and a ride I wouldn’t enjoy. However, I was here for it, no way back now.

Once we walked out into the hallway, I could smell the smoke of a trifta, a substance that could be smoked in large quantities without

repercussions. It was very popular amongst the lower class for curing sadness and pain. It smelled disgusting, which many of my colleagues would agree with, seeing as we were too young to smoke. The walls were painted dark green, the sun barely lit up the rooms we resided in. The roof looked moldy with golden glitter, and the floorboards were croaky. Walking out towards field, the trainers were standing by to torture us with their crazy training.

‘Guard!’ One of the trainers screamed. Once we all stood still, one of them walked up to us: ‘Today, cardio and sword training. Forty minutes, then switch.’

All the trainers were wearing a gold colored uniform with a special engraving of a hand clutching a dagger. That’s the symbol of Juyva One division, the one I am going to be joining.

Approximately two minutes later, I was on the field, running and jumping over obstacles. It wasn’t too difficult at the start, but keeping it up for nearly forty minutes made it impossible to finish the parkour every time.

After the excruciating cardio training, I switched over to sword fighting. This was new to me, holding a sword was weird, yet satisfying. The concept of defending myself from enemy attacks by the means of redirecting those attacks, was difficult to grasp, but after a couple tries, I understood it.

‘Mar’Keth, let’s practice some defense and attack maneuvers. First, attack me. Don’t use muscle, use momentum and structure. If your attacks are badly thrown, then they are easy as pie to parry.’ My mentor said.

I tried striking him, but he just redirected my attack, and nearly threw the sword out of my hand.

‘Don’t worry, it’ll come with practice.’ He said.

He then suddenly lunged in for the attack, which I blocked, but couldn’t redirect. He then proceeded to continuously strike my guard over and over again until I couldn’t withstand it and he broke through it.

‘Persistent pressure is sometimes the key to victory. Don’t give them the chance to think, act, and they will have no choice but to respond.’

He returned back to his side and turned to me: ‘Alright, before we wrap it up here, I’d like to give you the feeling of a real fight. Try to use your wits and your sword, to repel my attacks. If you manage to hit me once, you win.’

‘Yessir!’ I replied and readied myself.

My mentor then quickly dashed to me, striking me from my left. I caught that, moving my guard to my left and directing his blow away from me. Once I tried to riposte, he dodged out of the way, ending up behind me. My open back was his target, therefore I turned around and blocked his next attack, and pushed him back. Afterwards, I tried striking, but he started moving around me, so fast I could barely keep track of him. He was cutting corners in such way that striking him was nearly impossible. I couldn’t figure out what to do, so I blindly swung, which completely missed, and instead he swept my legs, dropping me to the ground and pointed his sword at me.

‘You lose, Mar’Keth. Good effort. I’ll see you tomorrow.’ He said.

The sun was burning, but I still had energy, so I went back to the cardio training.

Chapter 2: Eyes in the skies

I blocked and threw the sword out of my trainer's hand, which I followed up with a shoulder bash that knocked him down and proceeded to point my sword at his chin.

'I win.' I said.

That made ten to zero. In the past three years, I have been consistently getting better at sword fighting. I had gotten a medal for sword mastery, and was officially allowed to teach rookies how to wield a sword.

'Well done, Mar'Keth!' Lam'Ter said.

'All thanks to your training, sir!' I replied.

He brushed off the dirt and picked his sword back up to store it in the weapons barrel.

'Mar.' Lam'Ter called me.

'Sir?' I replied.

He turned around, leaning against a nearby makeshift table that demonstrated different weapons.

‘I filed a request to the general.’ He said, taking a short pause. ‘It’s for your promotion to leader of Juyva One division son.’

I couldn’t help but smile, hearing these news was a pleasant surprise. I didn’t know how to lead a squad, I just knew how to follow orders. Which, of course, I’d still have to do, but I’ll have soldiers depending on my callouts, my shots. This was weight on my shoulders, but one I was willing to cope with.

‘Thank you sir! Did he accept the request?’ I asked.

The frown on his face said it all: ‘He is willing to accept it. But, in a week we’ll be going on an expedition outside Juval. If you manage to come back, having everything resolved peacefully, you might get promoted.’

This was unusual. We’d hear of any endeavors at least two weeks in advance, so what had changed now? If it was an emergency, we’d have

been moved out by now. However, this might be a foreign affair, one that needs to be resolved by force or discussions. The former was no problem, but the latter, I wasn't good at.

‘Sure. Where are we going sir?’ I asked.

‘Ljamendor, far north, beyond R'Oth Vilgmeri.’ He answered. ‘For now, go back to your barracks son, I'll call you in tomorrow for specs.’

My eyes widened, ‘specs? Already?’.

He looked at me and smiled: ‘You surpassed my expectations Mar. I've called in Armid'Ro, the specs general to train you. It's time you choose what you want to master.’

I was really happy hearing this. ‘Yessir!’ I replied and went back to my barracks.

The day went by as usual, I spoke with my mates, played cards with them and continued reading one of the books I had with me. I have always loved reading books, or in general, learning new things. I've heard that beyond these walls, there are many wonders that lay dormant, ready to be explored. I can't wait to

visit new shores, who knows what adventures await us there.

In the evening, I was laying on my bed, when I noticed Jandi doing the same.

‘Can’t get sleep?’ I asked, staring at the ceiling.

He chuckled: ‘No, I can’t wait to get back home.’

That’s what was different between me and him, he had somewhere to go, to someone. I, on the other hand, didn’t have anything to return to. My parents couldn’t handle me, I wanted to join the army, they let me, they couldn’t control me. My real parents gave me away at a young age. I remember hearing that they were really poor from the lower class, and found a family willing to adopt me, who were from a higher class. Truth be told, I never really liked any family. No one could understand me, I was different, I had no dreams of becoming something big, I wanted to become myself, my true self. I’d spend nights thinking of my discipline, my own rules, my rights. People in Juval don’t really care about you, only about your money, and so you often have to show them what they don’t want to hear.

‘Do you have someone waiting for you?’ I asked him.

Jandi paused for a moment before answering: ‘Yes, my grandfather. But he’s old, barely able to take care of himself. I don’t want to become a soldier, I hate fighting. But, finishing the three year course rewards you with a house and good money. Only way I can help myself and my grandfather.’

I never knew he had someone to care about. Jandi always seemed a very relaxed and careless person. He wasn’t wrong though, the military did pay well. The drawback was that they could call you back in at any point, seeing as you passed the bootcamp and are ready to fight. Juval hates violence, but were ready to use it if needed.

Times were getting especially tough. Everyone was talking about how the tension between High Valomor and R’Oth Vilgmeri was rising. Apparently, Valomor was threatening to invade the continent. I didn’t know why this was, but I knew that when push would come to shove, I’d get drafted to help Vilgmeri when needed.

‘And you?’ Jandi asked back.

‘No. There is nothing for me. I too am waiting for the paycheck and the house. That way I don’t have to return to my family and pretend to like them.’ I replied.

‘I see...’ he said, ‘are you preparing for our expedition?’

I looked at him: ‘I don’t know how to prepare. I know how to fight, but will that be needed?’

He shrug: ‘I don’t know brother. Only time can tell. Either way, I’ve always got your back.’

I nodded at him and turned away, closing my eyes.

‘Oh, and by the way, good luck on your training tomorrow. Heard you can specialize already, good on you brother!’ Jandi said before going to sleep.

‘Thank you brother.’ I thought to myself, before fading to sleep.

Chapter 3: Clumsy and effective

The sun shone bright this morning, as if to celebrate my spec. I was excited and scared at the same time. This kind of a thing happens only once in a lifetime, and I didn't know how to approach it, I didn't even know what they would have me do.

Once the loud bell outside our barracks rung, we all woke up, gathered our clothing, made our beds and moved out. The nauseating smell of trifta was as always strong in the halls. Upon leaving the door, I diverged from my group, moving towards the higher platform, where the entire base was visible. I had to follow the dusty path to a grey colored staircase, which I followed up about three floors. There, I noticed that the training ground for the specs training was enclosed with metal walls, presumably to make sure nothing goes wrong?

I saw the specs general Armid'Ro standing there together with Lam'Ter, upon noticing me, they

both faced me: ‘Good morning, Private Mar’Keth!’

I moved closer and stood at guard. ‘Sir!’ yelling loudly.

‘Ready Mar?’ Lam’Ter asked.

‘Yessir!’ I answered.

Armid’Ro moved out of the way, revealing a bunch of weapons laid out on a metallic table. Upon further inspection, I saw that there were both long range and close range weapons in the mix. Everything from crossbows, wrist-mounted devices and swords. However, there was one particular weapon that stood out to me. One that was not very suitable for fast-paced battle, but one that could be dangerous in the hands of a well-trained soldier.

‘This one, sir!’ I said, picking up the weapon of my choice.

‘Hah!’ Armid’Ro chuckled, ‘that, right there is a flail, son. Are you sure you are willing to learn this?’

His question perplexed me. I was sure at first, but now I had a doubt in my mind. Would I be able to learn this weapon? What if I end up messing up, or not understanding how to use it?

No, I had to commit to my choice! So, I took the weapon without any further questions.

‘Yessir! I wish you to teach me the arts of the flail.’

Armid’Ro nodded, and took a flail of his own, while Lam’Ter left the scene.

‘Listen here son, the flail is not often trained, considering that it’s clumsy and ineffective. But, let’s see if you can prove me wrong, shall we?’

I nodded. This was my time to shine.

‘First, let’s start with basic swings.’ He said, swinging it away from me.

It was weird seeing a weapon move like that. I had to mind the spacing of the spiked head, lest I’d cut myself. It became really difficult, when he told me how to chain attacks one after another. I ended up hitting my arm a couple times, but overall, it went pretty okay.

‘Well done, son! But, if you are wanting to battle enemies with this weapon alone, then you might as well let the enemy kill you, to not waste time. For that purpose, I’d recommend you wielding a shield as well.’ He exclaimed, handing me a wood shield that was the size of my chest. It was quite heavy, but nothing too difficult to handle.

‘You remember how to push someone with your shoulder don’t you? Now, do just that, but use your shield instead. Obscuring the enemy’s vision will give you the upper hand during combat.’ He explained.

I tried hitting him, which he blocked with his shield, but I followed up with a shield bash, that pushed him, which would allow me to throw another attack.

‘Well done! Now, I’ll throw an attack. I want you to block it with your shield, and throw an attack in return. Make sure to use the momentum of your attack, to then regain control of your weapon.’

I did just that. Countering an attack with the flail was not the easiest thing, but it worked. I just had to continuously keep in motion. But after

hitting my arm a couple more times, I got the hang of it.

‘Alright son. One last duel. Show me what you got!’ Armid’Ro said.

‘Yessir!’ I answered.

I stood ready, and watched him charge at me, throwing his first swing, which I blocked with ease, countering him, which he predicted, and blocked with his own shield, followed by a firm push. Pushing me away, wasn’t enough to throw me off guard:

I quickly recoiled, and spun my flail to generate momentum and faked out the attack by bashing with my shield instead, following it up with a quick blow with a flail.

Armid’Ro quickly blocked it, swiftly punching me with the shield, after which he continued hitting me with his shield, dazing me. After which he followed it up with a fist punch, a hit to my stomach and a spinning flail hit to my chest to finish it off. I dropped to the ground in pain.

‘Well fought, Mar’Keth!’ He said.

I got up, noticing the blood from my nose
flowing like a waterfall.

‘Thank you sir!’ I said standing straight.

It wasn’t long before I felt weak in my legs, and
my eyes shut.

Chapter 4: Bloody discussions

‘I won!’ Iri’Mot said, laying the Gilded card on the ground.

‘Oh come on! You cheated!’ Kinimani called out.

Iri looked at him with a frown: ‘Oh you are just sad because you lost.’

I could see the captain’s gaze, he stared us down amused with a grin on his face. Sailing with comrades has always been fun. The jokes, the games, the talks, all fun activities we’d do when traveling the dark seas.

‘What are you thinking about, Mar?’ Lor’Zam asked. He was a close friend of mine, one that I could trust with no hesitation. He was an exceptional ranger, one with pinpoint accuracy. He trained me with the bow, and I in turn trained him with the sword.

‘Nothing much. We’ve been on the sea for so long now, I’m starting to get bored. I want to get

this over with and go back to the barracks.’ I answered.

Lor’Zam looked at me with a confused face: ‘Barracks? Aren’t you going home soon?’

‘Yes. Good point, I forgot. Feels surreal leaving this place. What am I even going to do at home? Waste away, with no one around.’

Lor chuckled: ‘You’re overthinking it, Mar. It’ll be alright, once I’m done in... three months, we can go out on hunts, spend some time together. Maybe go to taverns at night and get wasted there.’

Lor’Zam has always been convincing. His one word meant so much, and carried so much weight.

‘Sounds lovely, Lor.’ I answered.

After several hours, we finally arrived at our destination. The shores of Ljamendor. Bright and full of life. Hadn’t seen a place like this ever since I last visited Ervenia. The harbor was surprisingly calm, people dragging fish across the pier with full nets. The large amount of twintales and exotic sharks. I’d have loved to

taste their food at some point, but not now. My current mission was to ensure smooth negotiations.

‘Halt!’ I heard a guard yell, ‘State your mission!’

Yuimi’Karth stepped forward. He was our spokesperson, and the one we had to protect, the high value target. He explained something in a language I couldn’t understand, which made it all that more difficult to gauge the situation.

Once the guard nodded yes, Yuimi said to follow, which reassured me.

On the way, we passed markets full of people, buying all kinds of different products, some of which I’ve never seen before. Further up, there were beautiful hills covered with trees and very misty terrain. The sky was clear, no cloud in sight, and the temperature seemed very cozy.

The Ljamendorians stared at us, as we passed through their fields and up towards the large building, where supposedly the negotiations were to be held. Once we got to the gates, Yuimi got checked once again, before allowing us in, and upon entering the building, my jaw dropped.

The interior was beautifully decorated with flowers, jade, and what looked like illimian prisms. It was as if I had walked into a room full of mirrors. The pillars were striped and accentuated the flow of the room, along with the built-in waterfalls that filled the room with life.

‘Yuimi’Karth! Welcome to Ljamendor.’
Someone said from the other side of the room. Upon closer inspection, it looked like another man, who I suspected was the spokesperson of Ljamendor. They got close to one another in the center of the room, where a nicely lit table was set for two. They shook hands and sat down, starting their talk.

I couldn’t understand much, if anything at all. Ljamendorian is a weird sounding language, unlike that of Vilgmerians, it sounds like gibberish. Luckily, I didn’t have to interfere, seeing as the negotiations were going perfectly.

Then, a chef walked out of the room which led to the kitchen. He was holding a large plate with all kinds of dishes on it. He placed it on the table and walked back to the kitchen.

The negotiations went on for another ten minutes, before Yuimi started coughing. Not just any cough, but very hard and persistent coughing. I noticed blood on the cloth he used to cover his mouth. That's when I got to him and pulled him away and told my group to get him ready for immediate departure. Suddenly, the guards closed the doors and shut them. That's when I realized that we got ambushed.

'Assassins!' Yuimi yelled out.

The enemies closed in on us. There were dozens of them, and we were with seven. Lor and Kinimani immediately grabbed their weapons and started fighting. I saw two men charge at me with blades. I dodged one, and the other I blocked with my shield. Turning around, I quickly stabbed the first one, then deflected the other's attack, countering him with a thrust of my blade, which hit him in the chest, dropping him to the ground.

Another three approached me, this time with larger weapons. I threw my blade at one, which he dodged, then took out my flail and charged in towards them. I blocked a hit with the shield,

bashing them in return and hitting them with my flail. Another hit me from behind, but luckily the blade didn't pierce my armor. I turned around and slammed my flail into his head. The last one tried tackling me, but I instead punched him in the throat, and then in the jaw, dropping him to the ground.

I heard a loud groan of one of my soldiers, and once I glanced over, Lor's body hit the floor cold. His eyes were empty, like his soul had left the body. Weird thing was that he didn't have any weapons stuck in him, he just had wounds.

'Careful! They have poison on their blades!'
Iri'Mot yelled out.

'Bastards!' I thought to myself, recollecting myself and charging in for battle. We fought for couple minutes, until the hall went silent. Blood covered the ground. It had mixed with the flow of the waterfalls. The blades polluted the room, and the bodies were piled on top of one another.

Six. Six of my men had died. I had lost my entire squad. I had failed them.

I dropped to my knees. I could feel a tear falling down my cheek. When inspecting my hands, I noticed open wounds from how firmly I had grasped my weapons. My mission was over, the one and only one, but most importantly, I had lost my family.

I grabbed my shield and flail, strapped them to my back and side, and charged through the main gate. Once I broke through, I wanted to make a run towards my ship, but from the distance I could see it set on fire. The entire ship was burning, panic had broken out.

I had to run, I didn't stand a chance against a whole bunch of assassins. Thus I ran, I ran fast, as fast as I could, until my legs couldn't handle it anymore, and I fell to the ground.

I screamed. Not out of physical pain, but mental one. I had nothing to live for, nothing to cherish. I couldn't save anyone's life. If only I was faster and stronger. I could've helped them on time.

I crawled next to a tree and sat up against it. Looking up, the sun was shining right onto me. I took out a small blade sheathed on my side and held it up against my throat.

I sat there, looking into the distance with my blade pointed at my throat.

‘Do it! DO IT COWARD!’ I yelled at myself.

‘YOU DON’T HAVE ANYTHING LEFT! DO IT NOW AND SAVE YOURSELF THE EMBARESSEMENT!’

As much as I tried, and as much as I wanted, I couldn’t get myself to do it. Part of my still wanted to go back, retrieve the corpses and give them a proper burial. I would carry them on my shoulders, one by one if I had to. I had to go back, right now.

I tried getting up, but my legs had given up. I couldn’t move. I tried crawling, but after a couple tries, I blacked out.

The slaughter. Over and over again, I see my soldiers getting killed. Stabbed in the heart, from behind with a poisoned blade; slit throat; broken down till they couldn’t defend themselves anymore. This was my punishment, I deserved this, and as much as I thought that I was dead, I was disappointed to see the light again, as I opened my eyes.

I slowly turned my head to my right, trying to inspect my surroundings, but my head was spinning. I noticed a strange man with a black hood sitting in front of a statue. He then got up and turned around noticing me. He got closer and took his hood off: 'You're alive. Good.'

I fell asleep again.

Chapter 5: Burden of pain

When I opened my eyes, the pain preceded the sight. My head felt like I hit it against a wall, over and over again, until I blacked out. I could barely look around, I slowly turned my head to my side and inspected my surroundings.

The place looked old, lit by candles and fire chalices. In the distance, a man in a black hood sat by a fire, poking a stick at something. The shack I was in, smelled moldy and of wet wood. There were piles of papers and books on the desk next to me. I looked at my legs, they were wrapped in some kind of towel. That's when it hit me, I was without armor, my sword, flail and shield were nowhere to be seen. That's when I tried getting up, but the pain I felt everywhere kept me seated. My grunt attracted the attention of the guy in the black hood. He got up and moved towards me. When he entered the building, he closed the door behind him and took a chair to sit in front of me.

‘Who are you? Where am I? Where’s my gear?’ I asked barely.

He took his hood off, revealing a bald old man with long beard and scars on his lips.

‘Welcome to our home. You are located in Ishmjena, a hidden village between the two Lakes.’ He said, followed with: ‘My name is Ajari. I am one of the Elders. We have never had a guest from Gilded Juval, Mar’Keth. Feel at home, please. I will bring warm kiiri tea.’

He got up and walked towards the door, and before he could leave I asked him: ‘Wait. How do you know my name? And where I’m from?’

He halted, and turned his head to me: ‘Your heart revealed it. Rest now, I’ll be back soon.’

Once he left, I sat there dumbfounded, thinking to myself what I had been caught amidst. Didn’t I end up in a forest? Wasn’t I... My squad... The death of everyone. Why did I run away? Why didn’t I just stay there? Are these people friendly or hostile? I had many questions, but little answers. I had to adapt to my situation, and somehow gather information about all this.

After some time, the man had returned to me with a bowl of a warm concoction, or as per his words ‘kiiri tea’. I had never heard of this type of tea, but I took a small sip. It was surprisingly sweet with a bitter aftertaste, however the pitch black color didn’t look all too natural to me, but I figured I was just overreacting.

‘So, what brought you to these shores?’ He asked.

‘Work.’ I answered stoically.

He nodded: ‘Unfortunate work, then.’

I stopped drinking and looked at him with a frown.

‘What do you know?’ I asked with a more aggressive tone.

‘Depends what your heart hasn’t told us yet. The loss of your squad, the suicide attempt, the feeling of guilt...’ He said.

It felt like he was instigating, getting a reaction out of me, but I didn’t give in.

‘Are you one of the assassins then? Seems like you know everything there is to know.’

He chuckled: ‘One of the Elders sensed your presence, told one of the scouts to investigate. When he found you, he tried bringing you in, but couldn’t lift you up, had to call in other scouts for help. We just about managed to save you.’

Save me? What does he mean save? I wasn’t hit from what I remember.

‘What do you mean save me?’ I asked.

‘You were poisoned.’ He answered.

I was poisoned? But how? I blocked all attacks, and I’m pretty sure that there were no dents in my armor. Maybe if I can retrieve my armor, I could check where I got hit.

‘Who were the assassins?’ I continued.

He shrugged: ‘We do not associate with the others outside this village. I do not know who they are or what their motives were.’

Assassins on a small meeting, this didn’t make sense. It was no big negotiation, or at least that’s what the general said. Even if it were a big deal, there would have been more soldiers from our

part. Did the higher-ups know of something we didn't? Or was it a mere coincidence?

‘Thank you. For everything, I mean. Not to sound ungrateful or anything, but when can I leave?’ I asked.

He took the towels off my legs, which revealed heavily damaged skin. It sent me in a little panic, considering how well I fended them off, this was the last thing I had expected from that fight.

‘Looks like you’ll be staying here tonight. In the morning we can heal you. But till then, I advise you to move around a bit, so your legs get used to walking again.’ He answered.

‘Wait, what do you mean ‘again’? How long have I been sleeping?’

‘Five nights.’ He said.

Five nights. How have I been in coma for five nights? That’s absurd! Nevertheless, I had no choice but to follow his advice.

‘Alright, thank you.’ I said, getting up with his help. My legs started shaking, but I managed to walk around the room.

‘How are you feeling? Everything alright?’ The man asked.

Pain was visible on my face, and no doubt he saw that, but after mere seconds, I managed to overcome it. As long as I kept walking, I didn’t feel the pain, but I knew if I’d stop, it would kick in again.

‘Sonchana bless! Look at you! Good as new. It’s getting late, soon we’ll be having dinner, would you like to join?’ He asked.

‘You’ve done so much for me already, I don’t want to be a nuisance-’ I got interrupted.

‘Ah, please. Let’s get you acquainted with the others.’ He said, gesturing me to follow him.

I sat down with caution, making sure that I didn’t hurt anything.

Moments passed, and I noticed how more people started gathering around the fire. All of them stared at me, some with straight faces, others with a smile. Either way, they didn’t seem hostile.

‘Eat your fill!’ I heard some woman say, bringing out a huge cauldron of food. It was so full, that some of the dish was spilling out of the rusty cauldron. The food looked different than what I was used to in Juval, but it tasted amazing. Much better than what we had in the barracks.

‘Very delicious!’ I pointed out to the kind looking woman who brought us the food. She looked at me with a smile: ‘Blessed be your food.’

Everyone had their head down in their bowls, no one seemed to mind an outlander amidst them. Total contrast with R’Oth Vilgmeri, even with Juval. People there aren’t the kindest, but not as bad as in Vilgmeri, though neither compare to this... clan? I didn’t fully know who they were. By the looks, they had longer sharp ears, long noses and eyes that of a snake. Their hands weren’t shaped like that of a human, but they handled their equipment well. Most of them wore robes and hoods, the types that cover your face. Were they some kind of a religious group? ‘So, what brings you here?’ One of them asked.

I looked at him before answering: ‘Coincidence. I was here on a mission. Ended up here, don’t fully remember how.’

‘There are no coincidences, your destiny led you here. By Tyria’s hand you were guided.’ He exclaimed.

‘Tyria?’ I said confused.

‘The goddess of knowledge.’ A girl next to me answered. ‘Tyria is known to guide people on their path, their destiny.’

‘Oh, that’s a load of nonsense!’ Another one said, ‘these beliefs will drive you mad, if you listen to these lunatics! Tyria was obsessed with knowledge! She wanted to know everything, she wanted to know all there is to learn. This drove her to madness, one that brought her to immortality!’

I am not one for religious stories, but this one had me hooked.

‘She built three libraries, where she tasked six yuthims to read and study all the books in there. The yuthims passed their knowledge down to

their apprentices, who then passed it to theirs. It has been over a hundred generations now!’

‘What happened to them?’ I asked.

‘People feared them.’ The girl next to me continued, ‘the latest apprentices and the yuthims were imprisoned and had their mouths sewn shut, and their hands tied. They may not interact with anyone and are not to be trusted.’

‘Why is that?’ I asked her.

‘Would you trust someone, who knows how to circumvent death?’ She asked me rhetorically.

As much as I didn’t believe a single word of it, I couldn’t help but show intrigue as they spoke. From my understanding, they must be some kind of a tribe surviving out here. But why so isolated? Are they hiding something?

‘Why do you live so isolated?’ I asked the group.

‘Because we are not welcome anywhere else.’ Ajari said. ‘We can feel the pain of others. We practice magic, and not many people like magic.’

So it was like Juval. No magic allowed, complete hatred towards it, followed by isolation.

‘Is it possible to learn such magic?’ I insisted.

‘Teaching I fear, is not possible. Not to you anyways. When removing your armor, I noticed that it was exceptionally heavy, a trait that only magic deflecting metal carries.’ Ajari said.

This felt a little awkward. I didn’t know what to say, it’s not me who constructs the armor for the Silver Army, I didn’t really mind magic all that much.

‘But, I couldn’t help but notice your pain, the burden you carry. You have lost a person, or more. You carry sadness, anger and regret.’ Shura read me perfectly, he wasn’t lying when he said that he was one of the Elders. I’m assuming they’re some kind of elevated beings.

‘These are great emotions, that carry weight and strength. Allow us to put them to use, forge them into your weapon, and you’ll be unstoppable.’ He finished.

‘Forge into a weapon? What are you talking about?’ I asked.

One of the guys brought in my shield and flail, and put it in front of me. Shortly after, three of them sat around me, reaching their hands and touching me.

‘Reach for your weapons, Mar’Keth. Think of your anger and sadness.’ They said.

I could feel something strange in my body, as if something, some kind of energy was flowing through my body, leaving it at once. The pain and anger I felt were slowly dissipating and after a while, nothing was left. Emptiness. As if nothing had happened at all.

‘And there you are.’

Once I came back to my senses, I looked at my weapons, which were now glowing gold.

‘What?’

‘Your burden. Your weapons now.’ Ajari said.

‘But... how? I don’t feel anything. What did you do?’

The three around me, now went back to their seats. This was an unusual occurrence, which made my weapons... stronger? I couldn't figure what was happening to me, and I couldn't describe it either.

‘Remember Mar’Keth: Once you leave this place, there is nowhere else to go. Once you grasp your weapon and shield, everyone will know that you possess magic. Be wary of that! And remember that you never saw us, never spoke to us, you don't even know that we exist. Tomorrow morning, you shall wake up elsewhere, far away. Good luck on your journey.’

I felt weakness crawl into my body as I shut my eyes and fell asleep.

Chapter 6: Enemy of my enemy

Two days had passed since I awoke in a strange place, close to a village. I assumed this is where they had left me after... whatever the hell they had done to me. It wasn't a dream either, because when I took my flail, it started glowing, indicating that their ritual had been successful. I still had no idea what had changed, I wasn't eager to test it out either, but my gut told me that it was nothing good.

One big difference however, was that I couldn't feel sadness. I felt numb inside. It was as if I had been stabbed, but felt no pain. The wound was there, but no trace of struggle.

I didn't have the time to ponder on the past, I had to get to a safe area, maybe seek out a messenger to send on a quest to deliver a message. But... to whom? I couldn't trust anyone at this point. If the base knew about the severity of the operation, why had they sent us? And why so few? It's not like they couldn't spare a couple dozen soldiers, but no, they

specifically chose us. Knowing that I was the leader of my squad, there must've been a reason why we had been sent.

Ahead of me was a village. Relatively small, about a few dozen people lived here by the looks of it. Few were outside, looking after the crops and watching their kids play.

I had approached it, looking around for anyone that seemed knowledgeable about the surroundings.

As I entered the gates, the kids ran away, while the parents eyeballed me from the sidelines. One of them eventually got up and moved towards me, three of his friends following him behind.

'And who are you exactly?' He asked.

I analyzed him. He looked crooked, with a few teeth missing, bunch of scars on the face and eyes, colors of which I had never seen.

'Greetings. I am a mere traveler. I am searching for help.' I answered.

I had realized that I was in my armor. I felt in my element, which relieved any possible stress.

‘I’m sorry, *jike rumfjet eckloza*.’ He answered. I recognized the Ljamendorian, which stood out by its distinct sound, but alas I couldn’t understand a single bit of it.

‘We don’t like money seekers around these parts.’ One of his comrades translated.

‘Money seekers? I’m sorry, you must’ve mistook me for someone else. I do not desire your money, just a couple answers is enough.’ I said.

‘*Pjektro ajhal vjekath!*’ They started talking amongst themselves. The tone sounded aggressive, but I didn’t want to jump to conclusions. From their hand gestures, I assumed that they didn’t want me here, and before this got out of hand, I just nodded and moved back to the gate.

As much as I didn’t know Ljamendorians, they really reminded me of the Vilgmeri. They sound just as aggressive and just as impolite.

As I left the gate, I saw a path, leader further out over the hills. I had no better options, so I decided to follow it, and see where it would lead me.

After about thirty minutes of walking, there was still no building in sight, but the scenery did change: from bright green forest and tall hills, to grim and dark, sinister looking horizon. The sun was getting low, and I started getting thirsty.

Once I reached a good spot, I sat down to take a breather and take in the surroundings. It was weird how I couldn't hear anything, even the birds had gone quiet. I checked my satchel and luckily found a small canteen of water and a ration I had left over. I took the time to consume it and rehydrate, after which I continued forward.

I walked for what felt like hours, but there was no end to the woods. I was starting to get dizzy, and before I knew it, I sensed pain coming from my leg.

'patho!' I yelled as I noticed a snare around my leg. It was made of vines, which by the looks of it had gotten into my leg. It hurt a lot, and proved to be dangerous considering how easily they pierced the Silver Armor.

I crouched and started cutting the vines, one by one until I got my leg loose. I inspected it, but

nothing serious. Light bleeding, but I could treat that with some cloth and pure water.

Suddenly, I heard a noise. Someone was moving through the bushes. I stood vigilant, up until the moment I heard footsteps, which were getting faster by the second. I realized that the attacker was trying to confuse me, but this was child's play. Eventually, they attacked by pouncing at me. After punching them away, I realized that it was an animal, not a person. I readied my sword and stood ready to repel their next attack. The animal stood in the shadows, and was difficult to make out. It then sprinted towards me and jumped, disappearing in thin air and reappearing behind me. I quickly turned, my sword ready to deflect any attack. This worked, and I just managed to shove the animal away. It then got up and turned into a bird, a strange one at that, which flew towards me at a high speed, impairing my vision.

After a little struggle, I managed to grab the beast and throw it to the ground, striking its wing with my sword, impaling it into the ground.

The bird screamed and started flapping. Eventually it realized that it had no way out, and gave up.

I came closer to it, and saw that it was wearing a necklace. As I tried to reach for it, the bird opened its eyes, transforming into a human. They summoned a spear into their hand and tried striking me with it. I moved my head away, dodging their attack.

I got up and moved back, observing the situation. The person on the ground was a woman, dressed up in some kind of tribal clothing, struggling to get my sword out of her arm.

‘Hey, hey! Calm!’ I said approaching her.

She looked at me, her eyes were glowing yellow, looking like a snake.

I slowly moved my hand to the hilt of my sword and took it out of her arm. I looked as she stroked her wound and immediately healed it. She then got up and looked at me.

‘Who are you?’ She asked.

‘Traveler, from afar. I mean no harm.’

‘Assassin! One of them?’ She said aggressively.

I shook my head: ‘No. They wore no such armor. Way lighter and easier to pierce. I too am their enemy.’ I reassured her.

She hid her fangs and put away her spear.

‘Not assassin? Then who?’ She asked.

‘I am trying to figure that out too. Mar’Keth, serving the Silver Army of Gilded Juval. Sorry for the rough introduction. I had to defend myself. It seems like you don’t like the assassins either. Enemy of my enemy...’

She looked confused: ‘You have many enemies?’

‘No, just an expression from my kingdom. Anyways, who are you?’

Chapter 7: Inspiration

‘Wait, guard of nature? What do you guard? Who deliberately comes here to intrude on this territory?’ I asked confused.

Dahra looked at the strange canvas she had hanging in her house, which by the look of it, was some kind of puzzle. It stood out like a sore thumb, seeing as the rest of her interior decoration is very dark brown colored.

‘It is not your concern to know what I do, mortal.’ She said with a dark tone. That’s when I noticed that one of her eyes was dark green. Immediately I wondered if it had something to do with her ‘abilities’.

‘What do you mean ‘mortal’? And I told you my name is Mar’Keth.’ I answered politely.

‘I am partially immortal, but that is beyond your scope. Tell me, what are you here for?’ She asked, carefully observing me from across the room.

I looked at her, and after a short pause I answered: 'Trying to find an ally. I suppose not that we could become allies, that is unless you share the same goals as I do.'

Her facial expression changed from judging to curious. She dragged a chair and sat on it.

'Listen here, Mar'Keth: I do not associate myself with people outside these lands. Here in the Silent Depths nothing survives, unless you are fit for it. And you, are as unfit as it gets. It is my duty to maintain order, and you are currently the main threat here.' She answered calmly.

'I do not mean any harm to anyone. I seek allies to help me find answers. No more than that. I assure you, whatever you have in mind, I am not planning on doing.' I said.

The night passed by quickly, and in the early morning, I was awoken by the birds. It was nice to not have to spend the night in the wild, cold floor was better than moist dirt in the open.

Immediately, I started thinking about the situation I was in: the Silver Army sent me and my squad out on an operation with minimal

surveillance to keep an eye on the HVT. As this was planned ahead, supposedly, they must've known about the stakes, and therefore sent appropriately equipped unit to deal with it.

Question is, did they send specifically us for a reason? Why did it have to be us, and why only seven of us? If they knew the situation was going to get dire, why not reinforce us? Did they do this on purpose? Do they know what we don't? Come to think of it, the Gilded Juvali government is well known for doing shady business, so this wouldn't be off the cards.

'Blessed morning,' Dahra said.

'Blessed morning,' I replied.

'What are you planning on doing?' She asked.

I stood up and faced her: 'Finding answers. I need some way to infiltrate Gilded Juval.'

She chuckled: 'Infiltrate? Aren't you from there? Why not just go back like a normal person?'

I shook my head, raising my eyebrow: 'They sent me here, they expect me to be dead by now. We have not sent any signals in three days, our

squad would have to send them every dawn. By now, reinforcements would have arrived, or they would have sent a search team at least. Since this hasn't happened, I am sure they aren't expecting me or my squad back.'

'I know a potential way out. But it'll cost you.'

She said.

I looked up at her and got closer: 'I'm all ears.'

'Follow.' She said, leading me to a table. There, she glided her hand over it, and made a map appear. She indicated points of interest where I could go and search: Harrdmindor, a lawful place with many helpful contacts, but very pricy; Arimant over the Heaven's Ascent, where I could easily hire sailors to smuggle me off the continent; Yuruban Yaza, a city beyond the horizon where not many reach, perfect for any anonymous way out of here, and finally, Desmati, where shady people did shady business.

'These are your best locations to start searching for answers. Alternatively, you can leave, and not get involved in this.' Dahra said.

‘Thank you sincerely, Dahra. What is this place?’ I asked pointing at the Triad of High Wizards, located far from any other kingdom.

‘That’s the Triad, the three Wizards who keep the harmony of Amalon. Said to be immortal. I do not recommend to go there, they are too arrogant and believe in their ways. You’d need solid proof of whatever you’re fighting for.’ Dahra said.

I nodded: ‘Perfect.’ Thinking to myself where to start. I would need someone to guide me along the way and teach me the ropes. But for now, this was all I had to work with.

‘I appreciate all you have done for me, Dahra. I will no longer bother you. Goodbye.’ I said, leaving the house.

She rushed out with me: ‘Wait. You seem determined to find your brothers’ killers. I admire that. Take this.’ She said handing me a ring. ‘This will warn me when you’re in danger. If you are within my reach, I’ll help.’

I had never seen someone so adamant to help me. Maybe because I just never really trusted

anyone in my life. Glad to see that it was changing.

As I set out, the sun was up high smiling at me. The wind had halted, and the temperature was nice.

‘Alright, first stop: Harrdmindor.’

Chapter 8: Nightmares of the woods

‘I’ve covered quite some ground, should be getting closer to the border of the woods soon.’ I said to myself, hoping to find the courage to keep going. I was very tired and hungry, this along with the continuous questions that plagued my mind, were the doom of me.

Upon reaching atop the hill in front of me, I scouted the area. The woods covered most of it, the sight was blocked by the dark green and red leaves that barely let the sunlight through. The sounds of wild animals echoed through the forest, and with it came shivers, fear of the unknown. I continued forward, marching through the smudgy and icky ground, something you’d only see in the swamps of R’Oth Vilgmeri.

The path ahead was becoming darker. The dense vegetation made it nearly impossible to see what lie ahead. As I approached, I felt a change in the air. It was wet and uncomfortable to breathe, almost like I was breathing air of some cold

mountain peaks. This vision soon ended, when I saw two men standing in front of me. It was unclear to me how they managed to appear there. They materialized there. No, they must've been spying on me. Everyone here is out of their minds it feels like, so I wouldn't be surprised if they'd be like that too.

'Uh, greetings? I am-' I started, but didn't manage to finish, before they attacked me. It was very sudden, so I had little chance to defend myself, seeing as my shield was strapped to my back, and I didn't manage to get hold of my flail fast enough.

I felt a sharp jab in my side, followed by couple swift strikes to my face. I covered and recoiled, creating distance in hopes to take out my shield, but alas they were fast, and managed to keep up with me, and keep the distance closed. It happened so fast, that I didn't even notice the blood coming from my nose, and some from my side. I quickly grabbed my flail and swung it around, forcing them to step back, in doing so giving me enough time to grab my shield.

I saw them unsheathe weapons I had never seen before. They were long at the back and short in front, used it in close quarters. This gave them an immense benefit, seeing as I was unable to counter properly. In just a couple of swings, they got me down to my knees, unable to fight back.

I then realized that one of them had struck me in the side, with the sharp edge of their weapon, creating an opening in my armor. This was the first time I witnessed Silver Army Designated Armor being penetrated by metal. These were no ordinary fighters, they were well trained, better than others I've fought so far.

I recoiled, still thinking how to appropriately fight them, but they were a step ahead of me. By the time I caught a breath, they were at arm's reach, going straight for my throat. I managed to dodge out, kicking one of them in the heel, knocking him down a little, before they got back up and dashed after me. As I turned around, one of them ran into my shield, the other caught on and twirled, kicking me in the head.

I got knocked down, and as I fell to the ground, I felt a sharp pain elude from the back of my head. Seconds after, my vision went dark.

Torment. Heresy. Sudden words that came to mind, unknowingly deafening me, to the point that I couldn't understand my own thoughts. It was as if someone had intentionally placed those images in my head, plaguing my mind. Pain, blood and suffering was all I could hear, people, desperate for air, a drop of water, a single piece of a kireta on their plate, but nevertheless, they stayed in a perpetual agony.

Then I finally managed to open my eyes. They felt heavy, as if I hadn't slept for a long time. I felt something mushy drop from my eyelids, the image I was met with, was a lady being skinned alive, her face being torn open, cut from underneath, cleanly removing her... face. It was unbearable to witness such crime. I tried moving, but realized that I was chained to the wall behind me. I tried bursting my hands free, but it didn't work. I looked around to take in the surroundings. It was dark, red covering the interior. The fireplace was the only thing that kept the room lit, corpses piled next to me, with

blood flowing from them. A collection of masks laid out on the table, but the dim light made it impossible to make out what masks those were. The two tormentors in front of me had their backs turned, which gave me time to think of an escape plan.

From another room, a distant scream sounded through the halls. It reverberated, getting worse the further it traveled. The tormentors finally noticed me, throwing aside their tools and coming closer to me.

‘Release me!’ I demanded. Useless of course, seeing as I was the one in cuffs.

They looked at one another. After a brief delay, one of them grabbed their tool again, coming closer to me.

‘What are you doing? DO NOT COME CLOSER!’ I commanded as I tugged the chain in hopes to break free. Eventually, they made a shallow cut on my hand, letting the blood flow. The other proceeded to taste it. I had never seen such gore and profanity in my life.

They once again looked at one another and proceeded to take the chain off the hook, forcing me on a leash, like an orna.

They led me through the door, leading to an open hall with multiple connecting hallways, leading to unknown locations. We took the one to the right, going up the stairs to a large room full of corpses. Afterwards, they led me out on a rooftop, with open skies and what looked like a bonfire. They threw me forward, making me tumble to my knees. Looking up, I saw a figure wearing a mask covered with a human face. That's when I realized that they used the faces to alter the masks, give them a different personality. This twisted fantasy was beyond my comprehension.

The figure lifted their mask, revealing a face of a man, mutilated and malformed. He wasn't wearing a shirt, which revealed his scars and cuts on the torso, arms and even neck. This led me to believe that he was an important figure within this... cult.

‘Aaaah. Fleesh.’ He said. No, not he. They. When he spoke, I heard multiple voices. It was as if five people were speaking to me at once.

‘Noo. No mere fleesh. I smell it. Hahahaha! I SMELL IT!’ He screamed in his demented voice.

I didn’t say anything back because I was still stunned and trying to understand what his ordeal was. He didn’t look like a normal person. I looked past him, noticing his gear or the ground: A thick jacket and a strange looking tool.

‘Your skin... It is perfect! New face!’ He then yelled again.

‘Unhand me, maniac!’ I yelled back.

His eyes went from excitement to a cold stare. It was piercing, I felt him staring into my soul. The black eyes put an extra layer of terror in his expression.

‘Heresy. Torment. How dare you speak so, inadequate, delusional. Torment. Heresy. Heresy!’ He kept repeating.

He kept running circles around the bonfire. Then he took a corpse and threw it onto the fire:
‘Eizim, feast! More to come! And you, heretic! You are a different one, yes!’

‘You are a lunatic.’ I said.

‘Ooh, I’m sure many would agree. Hahahaha! Calling me a lunatic, yet so blinded in seeking the truth yourself!’ He answered.

I looked at him with wide open eyes: ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Hahahaha! You are so puny, pathetic, useless. Can’t help your comrades! Hahahaha! Dead comrades!’ He screamed.

I was fuming, so infuriating. I knew he was trying to bait out my reaction, but I couldn’t help but to give in. He was a professional at annoying people, that I could tell. I didn’t understand what his intention was, why would he want to make me mad? For his amusement? Just to laugh at me?

He slowly walked towards me. My eyes were focused on the curved, bloodied dagger in his hand.

‘Tell you what, I’m bored. See, killing you would be easy. And I will, soon. But for now, I like seeing you run around like a headless chicken. My kin here, are starving for some fresh blood. You are the perfect match. I give you three moons time to live your last moments. Then, my kin will come for you. Hahahaha! Eizim! Hear me, this man will be offered to you.’

He gave a speech, looking at the sky most of the time. He was mindless and cruel, traits that didn’t add up for someone of his caliber. The weapon he used looked elegant, not one for common soldiers. The clothing was worn, but it looked like one of a mercenary or an assassin. He had to be more than just another freak.

‘Unhand him. Kill him at night during the third moon.’ He commanded the two others that had brought me in. Moments later, I was untied and they showed me the way to my stuff. Once we reached there, I put on my armor and grabbed all my weaponry. Confused, I walked out of there, to meet one of the kin: ‘Turn around.’

I slowly turned and faced the wall. Soon after, they shrouded my vision with cloth, and dragged me somewhere. After some time, we came to a stop, and I felt the grasp on his hand loosen up.

‘I will let go now. Count to twenty, then remove the cloth.’ He commanded.

I adhered, and after twenty seconds, I removed the blindfold. After looking around, I couldn’t observe anything special, they disappeared.

This was by far the scariest encounter I have had yet. I couldn’t comprehend what would happen in the future. Ahead of me, lay three days, before my impending doom. I wouldn’t go down without a fight, but for the first time, I didn’t know if I would come out victorious. It was scary, but somehow, a little thrilling.

I had to gather more information on this maniac, so that I’d be prepared. Maybe the information would be in Harrdmindor, I was close now anyways, I could see the city walls from here. The clear descent revealed a pathway along a river, which led to the gates of Harrdmindor.

Chapter 9: Double crossing

Harrdmindor seemed a nice place in comparison to Jua La Va, or Jua Sai, which says a lot. The capital was full of wonders, starting from street performances where they demonstrate an art of a weapon I had never seen before, to acrobatic stunts that made me think the people were borderline flying. All in all, the first impressions of this place were immaculate.

I looked around for the nearest crowded area, best place to blend in and gather information. And where better to look, than the nearest tavern.

I walked up ahead until I reach a crossroads, which had a sign pointing in different directions. ‘Moon’s Ale’ was written on one of them, and judging by the name, that’s where I was heading, the nearest tavern. After minutes of walking and admiring the clean streets, I finally arrived at the doorstep of the tavern. I walked in and looked around. The heavy thud of my armor attracted unwanted attention.

‘Parrlaklavka yi?’ The bartender asked.

I awkwardly turned my head towards him, nodding and moving closer.

‘Blessed day, sir. I’d like a beer please.’ I asked as I barely managed to sit down on the small bar stool.

The bartender was eyeing me top to bottom. ‘You no look around here?’ He said finally.

‘No, sir. I am not from here.’ I answered.

He nodded, and after a brief moment, took a bottle off the shelf, filling a wooden mug with some king of concoction. Once he finished, he pushed the mug to me: ‘Keyja!’

I didn’t understand what he meant, so I nodded in hopes that it didn’t mean anything bad.

‘Cheers.’ He then said.

‘Ah! Cheer- uh, keyja!’ I answered, guzzling down the drink. The taste was bittersweet, with a somewhat spicy aftertaste. It warmed my throat and gave a pleasant sensation. The interior looks very nice, freshly refurbished, smell of wet wood filled the inside. The sun shone through the

windows, illuminating the interior and reflecting off the bottles of various drinks.

‘Arrtrroina velle terebe yi?’ The bartender asked.

‘I uh...’ I started, but got interrupted by a voice from my side.

‘Where do you come from?’ A woman said.

Upon turning my head to the voice, our eyes met, they were green. She was dressed in white common clothing with leather straps and a green cape with what looked like a hood.

‘Gilded Juval.’ I answered, looking back at the bartender, to which he nodded and said: ‘Gold! Money haha!’

I nodded at him with a smile and looked down at my drink. I remembered the night before, the man I saw. The maniac rather, not a man, a being who is beyond saving, an idiotic follower of a cult, or a leader of one. He seemed to be affiliated with some belief I’m imagining, different than what you’d see in Gilded Juval, seeing as we don’t believe in powers beyond money and politics.

The guy seemed to be collecting faces, using them as masks, interchangeable, like clothes. His flesh was scarred, I wonder if that was from a battle, or his own doing. Either way I don't think I'd enjoy hearing it.

'So, a Juvali? That's interesting, can't say I've seen one of your kin here before. Heard a lot though.' The woman spoke.

I looked at her: 'I'm not surprised. A patriotic Juvali would never set a foot in such a beautiful place, too blinded to see the beauty outside of their own country, and too insightful in greed.'

'Didn't take you for a philosopher.' She responded with a chuckle.

I smiled: 'Hah, no. Not for me, I'm not suited for such thing.'

She got off the bar stool and left a coin on the table, after which she got closer to me.

'Want a tour?' She asked.

'Don't see why not.' I answered and got off the stool too. 'Ah patho!' I whispered.

‘Don’t worry.’ The woman said, tossing a coin to the bartender.

‘Thank you, I’ll repay you.’ I said.

‘Heh, no need.’ She replied.

After a brief moment, we went out the doors. The sun was shining bright, and people around were busy doing chores.

‘C’mon this way.’ The woman said, moving towards some large gate, which led to nature.

Upon arrival, I observed the gate, it was guarded by two guards, dressed in all silver, with interesting weapons design, one I hadn’t seen before. Beyond lay a path that led into the woods.

‘Where are we going?’ I asked, barely keeping up with the woman.

‘Erdrum Forest. The forest of calamity.’ She answered.

‘Sounds interesting. Oh and by the way, I never asked you your name.’ I said.

‘Iris.’ She said

I shook her hand: ‘Mar’Keth.’

The path was long, surrounded by trees, very tall ones at that. The air was fresh, not polluted like in Jua La Va. It was very calm, unlike the shores of Jua Sai and the inner city of Juval. Peace was the main theme, and I was glad I got to experience it. It was almost enough to make me momentarily forget about my fallen comrades.

‘So, Mar’Keth, tell me, who are you? And what have you come to see here, lands so far from your home?’ Iris asked.

‘Nothing much, just exploring, admiring.’ I replied.

She looked at me: ‘In armor?’

‘I’m a soldier. I don’t go anywhere without my armor.’ I said. ‘What about you?’

‘Well, I’m a Harrdmindorian, living a peaceful life of trade and farming. Most of the time I spend feeding animals and delivering goods from one place to another. Whatever time I have left, I spend at the tavern, talking to Yinko.’ She elaborated.

‘Yinko?’ I questioned.

‘The bartender. He’s a good guy, loves to chat and learn.’ She said.

Yinko turned out to be a lot like me. Maybe one day I could move here, and live the rest of my days under the bright sun that shines here, harder than it ever has in Juval.

We had been walking for a while now, and having realized that the gate was out of sight, I deduced that we must be going into the heart of the woods. The sun could now barely enter between the large leaves of the trees, blocking out most of the light.

‘What did you do before m-’ Iris was asking before she suddenly got interrupted by some rough manly voice.

‘Retra aluti kuli!’ Three men emerged from the shadows, and from the looks of it, they weren’t the kind type.

‘What do they want?’ I asked looking over at Iris.

‘Money.’ She responded.

This was going to get messy.

‘Please, friends. Let’s not get too hasty.’ I said with my hands raised. ‘We don’t want trouble.’

The bunch seemed to get more agitated.

‘Raising a hand means that you’d like to fight.’ Iris whispered over my shoulder.

‘Patho.’ I said before lowering my hands.

One of them charged at me, which I dodged by simply moving my shoulder. Another came at me, trying to trust their weapon, which I pushed from the side, and punched him in the face, dropping him to the floor. One of them jumped on my back, and the other ran towards me, hitting me in the face with a blunt object. I recoiled and grabbed the man atop of me by the shoulder, dragging him down and smashing him to the ground. The other threw a punch at my face, after which I looked at him, and punched him back, throwing him back a couple meters.

He landed next to Iris. When he got up, he took out a sharp weapon that looked like a dagger, grabbing Iris and pointing it at her throat.

I moved a little closer, staring him dead in the eye.

‘Don’t bring weapons to a fight, it tends to get bloody.’ I said, unbuckling the chain of my flail, which made it loose enough for me to grab in case of an emergency. Seeing this, the man’s hands started shaking, after which he just pushed Iris towards me and ran off.

‘You okay?’ I asked Iris.

‘Yeah, I’m alright.’ She answered, ‘Thank you!’

I nodded and we continued down the path, which eventually led us out on a gorgeous view. A waterfall of at least twenty meters in height, pouring down, onto a lake. This view was unforgettable and serene.

‘Beautiful isn’t it?’ Iris said.

‘Yeah. Wish I’d have this back home.’ I answered.

A short moment of silence followed, after which Iris said: ‘You must be tired. Come, I know an inn we can rest at. Tomorrow morning I must

return to my home. And you will probably go your own way.'

I nodded: 'Sure, I'd be down for some good rest.'

After a lengthy walk, we finally arrived at the inn she spoke of. It was called Wings of Gods, a small inn which had a couple rooms for rent, of we took one with a double bed. The room was cozy, mainly lit with a light emitted from a large bug.

I took off my armor and lay down on the bed. Iris took off her clothes until her top and bottom remained. Her body was well defined, its shape was so addicting to look at, would make any man salivate. She eventually lay down next to me.

'What a day, haha.' She exclaimed.

'Tough one. Maybe tomorrow will be less troublesome.' I said.

'Hope you're right!' She answered.

At that moment, our eyes interlocked. We didn't break eye contact for a while. It felt like we were

attracted by some magnetic power. I could have sworn that I felt a strong pull from her side, one I couldn't control, it was irresistible.

Without realizing it, I was stroking her outer thigh, moving up to her sides and shoulder, eventually leading to her cheek. Her skin was soft, my hand sank into it, and I firmly gripped her as I leaned in for the kiss.

When our lips interlocked, I felt something that I had never felt before. Relief. I felt free, I felt like I was flying, like tomorrow was going to dawn in a different way. It was as if I felt stronger, mightier, ready to conquer.

I could feel our lips tighten, refusing to release. I then pulled her closer, undressing her top and bottom, firmly grasping her bosom. They felt so soft, I could feel her nipples harden from me touching them. I had never participated in such activities before, but it felt natural, it felt warming, not out of lust, but want and longing.

My hands stroked down to her privates, touching her clitoris, stimulating her further. It didn't take long before I entered her. It was as if I had blacked out. The feeling of being inside her was

something else. It felt warm and cozy. Hugging her while thrusting my pelvis into her felt amazing. Each thrust the sensation of my happiness increased tenfold. This is what it felt like, soaring the skies. Flying high, free from the shackles of the real world. We were in a different realm, one where it was just me and Iris, dancing into the night.

We swapped positions as she sat atop of me, riding me harshly. I observed as her hot breath left her mouth and her beautiful eyes never left mine. She possessed me, or I possessed her. I couldn't tell.

Soon after, my body was getting hotter, I felt it, getting closer to the climax. I put her on the bed, me standing upright, thrusting into her as hard as I could, hearing the noise of our skin clashing, caressing each other, until eventually, I released, and all my longing and pleasure had left all at once, and happiness was at it peak.

Panting, I looked at Iris, but it didn't take long before my vision went blurry and I fainted.

I could tell I was dreaming, but I couldn't wake up. I felt like I couldn't move, I was stuck in

place, helpless, defenseless. Not long before I saw my brother dying one by one right before my very eyes again. I was yelling, but my screams couldn't be heard. I was floating into the void, where no one could hear me. I was a ghost, a phantom of the past, which survived and now had to live with the consequences.

Eventually, my eyes opened up. It took a while for my focus to adjust, but once it did, I noticed my hand bound to the bedside table.

Chapter 10: Revenge

Analyzing my environment revealed two other men in the room, who were writing something on paper. Iris was nowhere in sight. Was she taken? Who are these men? And why am I tied to the bedside table? Sudden question that popped in my head, the more I came back to my senses.

‘He’s alive.’ One of the two said after he saw me wake up.

‘Damn, I-44 is really good at her job then. Thought this guy was done for.’ The other replied.

‘She’s a professional, she doesn’t mess up.’ The first one inquired.

‘Who are you guys?’ I asked angrily.

They both ignored me, looking through the hallway that led into the room. After a brief moment, footsteps were to be heard treading the croaky boards of the inn. Once they reached the door, the footsteps had revealed Iris.

‘Welcome back. Hope you had a good sleep. I brought you some breakfast. Don’t like killing my targets on an empty stomach. I find it inhumane.’ She said, looking at me.

‘Target? Iris what’s going on?’ I asked confused.

‘Shut your mouth!’ One of the men screamed.

Iris rose her hand: ‘No need Jerryl. I hate hearing your voice so much, you shut it. I’ll take care of him.’

‘Yes ma’am!’ Jerryl replied.

So Iris was not in fact a simple merchantwoman, but an undercover operator. And I was the target? How? In Harrdmindor? She is planning on assassinating me, but who hired her? The Juvali? Was my conspiracy correct after all? This was too much for my mind to handle, I was still feeling a bit dizzy.

‘Sorry sweetheart. I know this breaks your heart, but no hard feelings yeah? It’ll be over soon. Until then, eat.’ Iris commanded. ‘After all *yurili ato miryi yoi.*’

‘The dead can’t fill their stomachs’, a common phrase in... Gilded Juval. She was a Juvali. She was an assassin sent from Juval. When? Was she sent on the same day as us? If so, was she told to eliminate any remaining soldier that came out of the negotiations? That must mean that the ambush was prepared. It was all staged. This was a delicate plan to eliminate us from the equation. But why us specifically? Sure we were the strongest division in Silver Army, but what was the point?

My head was boiling, I could barely contain myself. I felt something from within, something about to erupt, something that I couldn’t control. I felt pain, anguish, absolute devastation. I felt empty and betrayed. All these emotions flown into one, creating a chaos within me. And that’s when something changed, I felt my vision expand beyond my usual reach. I could see all around me. I was aware of everything. I felt a surge of strength and focus flowing through me, like someone had injected it.

I dragged my bound hand, breaking the foot of the table and getting up on my feet. One of the men rushed towards me, trying to punch, I

ducked underneath it, grabbed his hand and slammed it over my knee, breaking it in the elbow. The bone of his arm burst through his forearm, spouting blood left and right, screaming in pain. I took him by the neck and slammed my head into his, knocking him unconscious.

Jerryl was next up, taking out his dagger and moving towards me, Iris following behind him. Jerryl lunged at me, thrusting the dagger in my direction. I managed to somehow grab the dagger by its blade, cutting my hand, after which I crushed it, making the blade fall apart into pieces. Now weaponless, Jerryl tried backing off, but I caught him by his foot, dragging him back, but Iris attacked my arm. That, however, didn't stop me from punching her with my other hand, and forcing her off me. I then took Jerryl by the head and slammed it against the frame of the bed four times, completely breaking his nose to the point where it formed a ninety degree angle. The impact must've gotten him on the eye as well, seeing as it was bloodied and darkened.

Iris looked at me, terrified. In desperation, she took out some kind of small daggers, throwing them at me, but I ducked and charged at her,

slinging her over my shoulder and charging into the nearest wall, which cracked from the impact. Once I backed off, she sat there, unable to do anything.

‘Please... d-don’t... I... beg!’ She said while breathing heavily.

I moved over to my shield, upon arming it, it emitted a warm golden glow, which it hadn’t done before. I then went back over to Iris, and slammed the shield into her face. Dazed, she couldn’t speak properly. I slammed the shield into her face yet again, splashing the blood all over the place. Once more, and her jaw broke, leaving half of her face to dangle freely. One more and her eye blacked out, leaving her half blind. Once more, and she was unable to breathe at all, but I continued. I continuously smashed her face until it became unrecognizable. Her skin was mostly peeled off, and the face no longer had a structure.

Unleashing my rage made me feel calmer from the inside, which made the glow of my shield disappear.

‘PATHO!’ I yelled loudly.

Sometime later, I finally left the inn. It was the middle of the day, meaning I didn't have much time. I had to find a carriage or some kind of transportation to displace me. If I was right and Juval plotted something, people might be in danger.

By late afternoon I managed to find a man who transported people for money, just what I needed. He took me further north, dropping me off at what they called the Living Forest. Told me that it was filled with all kinds of creepy things, but from what I have seen, the forest is by far the least creepy thing here.

My next stop were the Okja Cascades. Place where no one can find me. A place that could give me enough time to figure out the plan of action.

Walking through the woods was calming. Birds were chirping, the wind was gently swaying the leaves. It reminded me of walking in the woods in Juval. I missed the place, but now was the worst time to return. So many thing were plaguing my mind, that even common sense seemed rare.

‘Peculiar.’ I heard someone say.

I looked around to see where it came from, but no one was in my visible vicinity. I took my shield and flail and got ready for combat. Moments later, a hooded man with a weird weapon dropped from the trees in front of me.

‘So we meet again, flesh.’ It was that same psycho I had met a day ago.

‘Stay back!’ I yelled.

He chuckled: ‘Adorable. Now, if you don’t mind, sit down, let us talk.’

What? Was he serious? What was his plan? Were we not going to fight?

‘Whatever you’re plotting, I am not falling for it!’ I said.

‘Oh come on. No drama needed. We are no longer at my abode, no need to get dramatic.’ He said.

Confused, I lowered my flail, reattaching it to my belt, and hanging my shield on my back.

Once I sat down, I looked at him in confusion:
‘What is this about?’

‘Well,’ he started, ‘I’ll be honest, I didn’t expect you to end up here. You seem tough, survived for so long. I saw blood on your shield? Half washed, classic. Blood doesn’t wash well off wood, why does no one know that?’

He seemed awfully calm and collected. I didn’t know if that made me reassured or more paranoid.

‘What is it to you?’ I asked.

‘Well I love killing too! Embrace it, you love killing. I myself have killed... thousands I think? All I want to say is, I have eye everywhere, and they tell me that you have been doing quite some work dealing with bandits and assassins. Just wanted to congratulate you!’ He answered in a cheery voice.

‘You’re sick in the head!’ I yelled at him.

‘And you aren’t?’ He responded rhetorically.
‘Alright, maybe our friendship didn’t start off on the right foot? Let’s try this again. Hello, I am Macijek A’Vak, the puppet of god of death. I kill

people for fun and use their faces as my own.
Your turn.'

I looked at him disgusted, and after a long pause
I responded: 'Mar'Keth, soldier of Silver Army,
Gided Juval.'

'Oh! Yes I have heard of your kin, the hungry
type, for money that is. Look, last I heard, all of
your kin are corrupt, so they seem like
unlikeable people, which means that they are
allowed to be removed off the face of Amalon.
Now tell me, are you one of them?' He asked.

'Is that a threat?' I replied with a question.

'Depends on how you deal with problems, and I
think I might have an answer to that.' Macijek
said. 'In fact, I like your approach. Less talking,
more doing. Much like I do. Alright, I have to
head off now, but you still have two days before
we kill you. So make most of it. You can't hide,
we'll find you, so please, either make the chase
worth my time, either throw yourself to us. Now
excuse me, as I have murder to encourage and
my kin's morale to boost.' He finished and
jumped up on a tree branch, after which he
swiftly disappeared.

‘What a maniac.’ I said out loud.

I was about to head forth, when I looked down and found a note. I picked it up and inspected it: a badly handwritten note stated ‘down the path, to the right and straight, Okja Cascades. Two days left.’

Chapter 11: Enchanting wisdom

The walls of the city towered over me. The gate had just opened, and the merchants were setting up shop. It took me a day to get here, meaning that today was my last day before I'd get to see that guy's face again.

My current plan was to seek out the prime building of ministry. One where all the negotiations took place. This place was always busy, greeting guests from faraway kingdoms, including that of Juval. They might have the answers I am seeking.

The streets were not too busy, giving me the chance to observe my surroundings and look out for any points of interest. It didn't take long until I got to the center, and from there, followed the signs that led to the Parliament building.

After walking for another twenty minutes, I finally had arrived. The building was gigantic, with multiple floors and beautifully decorated exterior. It had flora of all kind, dominating the

environment, whilst the gardeners took care of health and shape of the plants.

I ascended the stairs that led to the front door and entered. There, I was greeted with troubled faces, seeing as no one recognized me, I must've looked very out of place.

'Halt!' A guard commanded. 'State your mission!'

I looked at him, he wasn't well armed. The others in the building were staring at me: 'Seeking a man who could answer my questions.'

The guard looked agitated: 'No valid permit to enter! Leave at once!'

They couldn't push me physically, so I had to walk out on my own.

'Patho.' I thought to myself, whilst looking around. After a brief moment, I went to sit down on the nearest bench.

I sank into my thoughts. I was losing sleep over the recent situation. Lost in a country where no one knows who I am, and I don't know what

they want. Damned be, I don't even know what Juvali want. It was supposed to be a simple mission, nothing more, but alas it turned out this way.

‘Carried away?’ I heard someone say. When I looked over, I saw a man wearing a robe, sitting next to me. I didn't recognize them.

‘And you are?’ I asked.

‘That is of no importance, the important part, is what you have come here for?’ He asked.

He looked harmless, so I dropped my guard but stayed alert: ‘I am tired, I don't need complex thoughts right now.’

‘Seems like a normal question to me.’ He said.

‘Besides, I don't think barging into the Parliament looking like a bloodied slaughter machine is a good first impression, don't you think?’

His tone was starting to annoy me, but I was too tired to do anything about it.

‘Look, whoever you are, I don't need a smartass to tell me what I should've done. If you don't

have any business with me, I suggest you leave, before I make you do so.' I warned.

They got up and looked around: 'Good talk, I suppose. But keep in mind, whatever you are seeking, is probably not in there.'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'Answers? In Okja? Pfft, c'mon have you never been here?' He answered chuckling, but seeing my serious face, he understood that I wasn't joking.

'Well I be damned, you really are new here. Well, listen up: people here are corrupt. They act as their wealth dictates. For them, time I money, in a literal sense.' He explained.

'What's the purpose of your visit then?' I insinuated.

He raised his brow: 'You suspect I am one of them? I mean do I look like one of them? No, never. I am here, to gather specific herbs I need for my... research.'

The streets became a little more crowded, and the waves of random conversations started to flood the air.

‘What is your name?’ He asked me.

‘Mar’Keth, from the Silver Army.’ I answered hesitantly.

‘Well, Mar’Keth of the Silver Army, I suggest you keep your secrets to yourself. People here seem a little on the edge. Lately, I’ve been seeing an increase in overseas commotion. The trade has been booming, a little too much even. The docks all around the seas are overworked, yet they are still keeping up, even with the shortage of working hands. This all is a little out of place.’

I listened to every word he said. Now curious, I asked: ‘How do you know so much?’

‘It’s my daily activity to look at things I’m not supposed to. Although I usually mess it up, but trial and error, I suppose.’ He answered with a smile. ‘You said you’re a Juvali? I heard that Jua La Va is going to close docks for several weeks. They didn’t supply a reason. Seems fishy. That

their main trade center, without it, the economy will take a serious hit, and I know for a fact that such a decision is not made overnight. Something grander is at work, and I am itching to find it out.'

'You seem like a busy man.' I said.

'Well, I've got some helping hands back at home, keeping everything running while I'm out here. Speaking of which, the herbalist is going to open her shop in a moment, almost 9th hour. I suggest you move out of here. At the far side of the city, you can find an inn to sleep. Leave this place as soon as you can, and return to Juval before they locked down the docks. Otherwise you might be staying here for a little longer than you'd like to.' He said.

'I'll think about it. By the way, what is your name?' I asked.

He glanced over his shoulder: 'Zo Rei Wu, but you may call me Wu.'

In an instance, he disappeared.

Plans had changed: I now had to establish a connection with Dahra. I need temporary allies

to help me with Macijek's kin. Once we have defeated them, she can help me find the docks and I'll get back to Juval to settle this. Whatever they were hiding, would have to come out eventually.

Chapter 12: Vile road I return to

I looked at the ring on my finger. I formed a fist and held it up high: ‘Dahra, I call out to you!’

I was surrounded by green light, which shot down from the skies, blinding me. After a delay, the light disappeared, and in front of me, Dahra had appeared.

‘You called?’ She asked.

‘Oh, I didn’t think it would work.’ I mumbled, after which I looked up at her. ‘Listen Dahra, I need your help. I might get killed tomorrow.’

She looked at me emotionlessly: ‘And?’

Didn’t expect that to be her reaction. ‘Well, I need your help. With us two, I stand a better chance against those maniacs.’ I said.

She looked at me with a questioning face: ‘Maniacs?... Idiot, don’t tell me you ran into the Brotherhood?’

I myself was confused, I had never heard their clan name, is that what they called themselves?

Weird, I wouldn't really consider them brothers of any kind, they are mostly sick in the head.

'I'm afraid you know the answer to that.' I answered.

She sighed loudly, after which a moment of silence settled in. 'Look, I can help you, but I am no stronger than Macijek A'Vak. He is bound to a god, and he'll be reborn through him if we manage to kill Macijek. At best, we'll delay them, but if they promised to kill you, they'll keep their promise.'

'You've been watching him?' I asked.

'I don't need to watch him, his display is visible no matter where I go. The skinned hung up bodies, the corpses they throw around as warnings. I can't stand those. I haven't been able to find their hideout, burn it to the ground.' She replied.

The skies had been darkened by the clouds and the air grew thin, making it difficult to breathe. I had to cough a little, but Dahra remained unaffected by the air.

We moved along a road that led to the shore. The docks were visible in the distance. They weren't as alive as back home, but nevertheless some movement was at place. Some ships were being loaded with goods before departure.

‘This is my way out. After tomorrow.’ I said while looking at the ships.

‘Why not leave today?’ Dahra asked.

‘They’ll follow me. They are persistent, good at their job. With enemies like those, I’d have trouble hiding, and bringing them back to my homeland is the last thing I want to do.’ I answered.

‘Interesting. Alright, I will help you.’ She said. ‘Also, Two days ago I was trying to reach your ring, but I couldn’t connect to it. Which means only one thing: Macijek was close to you.’

I looked at her with curiosity: ‘Yes, I was talking with him. He seemed a very different person in comparison to the first time I met him.’

‘He is twisted, but somewhat comprehends human emotion. I hardly understand it, but he,

he was a normal human once. I don't know what happened to him, but he became twisted.'

Whatever happened, it turned him into a legend, one that cannot be trifled with. Possessing so much manpower and the ability to set fear in everyone that crosses his path, he is no mere adversary, rather a dangerous foe. However, seeing as he was so generous with not killing me the moment he had the chance, there must be something greater at hand. Something he didn't tell me. Why not end me like the rest of his prey?

'What are you thinking?' Dahra asked.

I shook my head: 'I don't know. Something is wrong, I can feel it. He's so adamant on killing everyone in sight, yet he let me live. There must be a reason for that.'

Silence followed. Both of us were displeased with Macijek's actions. It left us puzzled and distraught. Three days? Too long, why does he need three days? Maybe to prepare? And if so, prepare what? Did he have motives beyond my understanding? Wouldn't surprise me.

‘I do not possess powers like his, but I can take him down if you manage to wound him.’ Dahra said.

‘Wound?’ I asked.

She sat on a nearby rock: ‘Macijek cannot be killed, but he can be wounded. His flesh can only withstand so much pain, until it gives way. That’s what we have to exploit. If you manage to wound him, I can pierce his heart, and destroy it.’

‘Will that kill him?’ I questioned.

‘Maybe’ Dahra answered.

Certainty was a luxury at this point. Nevertheless, it gave hope, and that’s what I was lacking the most.

‘We should camp out in the nearby woods. I dislike being in the open near cities.’ Dahra exclaimed, thus we moved into the deep woods, searching for thin sticks to light the fire in the evening.

Once we had gathered enough wood, we sat down around the soon-to-be campfire.

‘So, ready to leave this place next thing in the morning? After fighting off Macijek of course.’ Dahra asked.

‘Who says I’ll still be alive by then? I have only ever fought enemies that could be killed, I’ve never fought a God before.’ I answered.

She summoned an orb in her hands. It levitated, emitting a light grey color: ‘Let’s see.’

‘What is that?’ I asked.

‘My soul.’ She said. ‘Has the ability to predict the future. Problem is I can’t see what will happen to Macijek tomorrow.’

‘How so?’ I insisted.

‘He’s bound to a God. He doesn’t have a soul of his own, he’s like an empty shell. I can’t see his future.’ She answered.

After a brief delay, I started working on the campfire. Dahra summoned fire and engulfed the sticks in flames. I could see her pondering the soul in her hands. She glanced at me, and then back at the orb, after which the orb dissipated in thin air.

‘Everything alright?’ I asked.

‘I... saw your future.’ She said.

‘And? Do I die tomorrow?’

‘No.’ She said, after a brief delay.

‘Good.’ I responded.

The rest of the afternoon went by quickly, and night fell. The ominous sounds of the leaves shuffling and the harsh wind hitting us from the back, created a rather unsettling atmosphere.

‘Blood for blood.’ I said to myself.

‘And dagger for dagger.’ Dahra filled in.

I looked at her surprised: ‘How do you-’

‘Nature, Mar’Keth. I’m the mother nature, not just here, but everywhere in Amalon.’ Dahra interrupted.

‘Fair.’ I responded.

I looked town, wondering what would come next, and if the fight was near. Either way I had a low chance of survival, but by Dahra’s words, I still live, so I must survive this. Unless they

capture me, torture me, skin me alive and then kill me off later, or burn me. I'd prefer death by a blade over that.

When I looked up, I jumped a little, from seeing Macijek sitting across me, behind the campfire.

'Hello, friend.' Macijek said in a low voice.

I wasn't prepared to see him this soon. I was speechless, and partially unprepared.

'So, it seems that our short-lived friendship is now over. Too bad, I was starting to like you a bit. But do not worry, I will make sure that your face is used as my highest quality material.' I felt like he was mocking me. Making me angry on purpose.

I got up and readied my flail and shield. Dahra was standing next to me with her spear.

'Oh, my apologies, miss nature. I too am very glad to see you, but our business is not with you.' Macijek told Dahra.

'I'll rip you to shreds, you meaningless thorn!' Dahra answered.

Macijek suddenly dashed towards me at immense speed and punched me in my chest. The force was enough to push me backwards a couple of meters. Dahra tried to attack him, but got shot with an arrow in her side, by one of Macijek's kin. I recoiled and attack Macijek, but he dodged every one of my attacks.

In hopes of catching him off guard, I tried moving faster to stay out of his line of sight, that way I could sweep his legs, but that didn't work, he jumped right over it, landing on my leg with immense force. I screamed as he landed, but quickly used my shield to push him off, which he effortlessly dodged by dashing backwards.

I had just now realized that his hands had been behind his back this whole time. That weird weapon of his was still around his waist. Upon closer inspection, I determined that the weapon was of a whip type, both ends were blades, one being a sword, which was sheathed on his hip, and the other, a smaller blade, sheathed on his other hip.

I looked behind me, observing as Dahra fought off against dozens of the kin, and ahead of me

stood Macijek himself, trying to accomplish his goal.

He suddenly threw a small black dagger which impaled the ground next to me. I was confused why he did that, but moments after, he appeared at the dagger's location, punching me in the face. Luckily, my helmet protected me from any damage that would've been dealt to my face.

Macijek then threw another dagger into the air, appearing at its location and throwing some sharp objects in my direction, which I blocked with my shield. Upon landing, he charged towards me, but I ducked and hit him with my flail in the chin, throwing him about a meter into the air.

He swiftly got up: 'Now, we're talking!'

He unsheathed his blades and threw the short end at me. I help up my shield, but he pulled the blade back by the whip that was attached to his waist, and twirled, attacking me with the larger blade, slicing into my armor.

I backed off, but he kept on following me, not letting me breathe. Eventually, I managed to

punch him in the face with my shield, disorienting him. Upon noticing that he was unable to throw an attack, I charged in and hit him with my flail, crushing his skull into the ground. I noticed that my flail had turned golden again.

Macijek stood up, retreating and quickly attacking again with his whip. He was nimble, and managed to outmaneuver me, but his luck ran out when his torso met my flail. I heard a crack of bones as he fell to the ground.

‘Good... Hit’ he said coughing blood. Dahra then took the opportunity to strike him with her spear, making him shriek. The sound was so deafening that I got overwhelmed, I could no longer move and had to get on my knees. Once the shriek was done, I looked up, only to see Dahra standing there, with her spear in the ground.

I got up and walked over to her: ‘Is it over?’

She looked at me, and then hinted towards the tip of her spear. Macijek’s body was gone.

‘Patho.’ I mumbled. After a moment, I noticed that the Brotherhood were just watching us without moving. Confused they were looking at one another. Did we kill Macijek? Was he really dead? I wasn’t certain, but once I moved towards the kin, they ran away into the darkness.

‘I guess we won. You were right, I don’t die after all.’ I said.

‘Yes...’ I heard Dahra say behind me.

Once the sun had lit up the city, and the harbors were operational again, I embarked the first boat out of here, to Juval.

‘I guess this is where we part our ways, Mar’Keth.’ Dahra said.

‘Yeah. It was an honor to fight by your side.’ I replied.

‘Hopefully we’ll meet again, without a murderer chasing you preferably.’ She said.

‘Hope so indeed.’ I responded.

‘May the sails guide you on a safe journey. And good luck finding your answers.’

‘Thank you. I will.’

Chapter 13: Dirty lies

The sight of Jua La Va brought joy to my soul, knowing that I wasn't somewhere unknown, somewhere where a maniac was trying to kill me, or a bunch of assassins trying to terminate me.

Once we the ship arrived at the docks, I got off, half limping. After a couple days of sailing in open air, some of my muscles felt sore, but I was in no condition to let that stop me. I had questions, and they were about to be answered.

'Mar'Keth? Eyja patho! When have you been for so long?' I heard a familiar voice say. Once I looked over, I saw Ejza, an old neighbor that used to give me sweets when I was younger.

'Blessed be your morning Ejza. I'd love to chat, but I am in a rush, so maybe-' She cut me off.

'Eyja Mar'Keth! Look at yourself! All torn up! Come inside, I have bandages and some salves that can help.' She was a sweet woman, and as much as I tried refusing, she insisted, and upon

giving it a second thought, I realized that this might help me in the long run.

After about five minutes, I was sitting on the edge of her bed, getting my wounds treated by her.

‘Patho! What is this?’ She exclaimed as she saw my back. It was covered in cuts and bruises, flesh was barely visible. Same had happened to my arms and hands. At this point, I couldn’t feel it, so it had stopped bothering me.

‘Small turmoil, Ejza. Nothing to worry about.’ I reassured her.

‘Small? Look at you! You are barely standing.’ She slapped my shoulder, resulting in me groaning from pain. ‘See! You have been in battles, and not few!’

‘Yes, Ejza. I am a knight, that’s my job, to fight.’ I said.

‘No! Your job is to protect those who need protection! The military announced that your division would leave for a six days and come back. It has been nearly two weeks! No

spokesperson needs to be protected for that long!’ She answered.

‘How do you know that Ejza?’ I asked.

‘Eyja! Old granny Ejza knows much more than you think! I am about fifty years older, young Mar’Keth.’ She replied.

She was right, couldn’t disagree with her. I was very thankful for her aid, if not her, I couldn’t foresee where I’d collapse in the near future.

After about thirty minutes of chatting, I was patched up, and feeling better already. I thanked Ejza and left to the capital. It was hours away on foot, but luckily I caught a cart that was leaving to center Juval. On the way there, I spoke with some people that were also traveling, some of which offered me food, which I was very happy to receive, seeing as I was starving. I also wouldn’t have minded a good rest, but the nerves kept me awake.

Eventually, I arrived to the center and got dropped off. I had accustomed to the Harrdmindorian air, breathing here was more difficult. Logical, being away from all this

industrial nonsense, smoke and fumes made me realize how bad of an air quality we have in Juval. A thick mist had settled in, making it difficult to see my surroundings, but that didn't hinder me, I knew this place way too well to get lost. After about fifteen minutes of walking, I reached the military zone gates. Two guards at the front stopped me:

'Halt!' One yelled.

'State your name and purpose!' The other followed.

'Mar'Keth of Juyva One. Purposed to return from my mission!' I yelled.

'Juyva One?' I heard one of them mumble.

'Alright. You may proceed!' The other yelled, and flipped the lever which opened the gates.

Passing by them felt weird, almost as if they didn't like me showing up out of nowhere. But why? The Silver Knights are like brothers.

Once I got to the main field, I immediately ran to our training grounds, which split off in two

different sections, one meant for the officers, the other meant for the soldiers.

‘Mar’Keth!’ I heard a very familiar voice, which I immediately recognized to be my captain, Lam’Ter.

‘Sir!’ I rushed to him, grabbed his arm as a gesture of greetings.

‘How? I was told...’ Lam started, but couldn’t finish. By the expression on his face, I figured that what followed was horrifying. ‘I was told you were dead. I was told that the entire Juyva One was wiped out. How did you survive? And why was I never told of your arrival?’

‘Lister, sir. There is something going on, I think someone is working against us from within the military.’ I said.

‘What?’ Lam’Ter asked confused. ‘But why?’

‘I don’t know, sir. I am just as oblivious as you are.’ I answered.

‘Come to think of it, multiple divisions were launched for different tasks. Very few of them returned. I never really thought much of it,

seeing as I am not in charge of dismissing them or assigning them to the post, but it did seem strange how we lost a lot of fresh blood last few weeks.’ Lam’Ter exclaimed.

‘Wait, multiple? You mean to tell me that other divisions were also sent out? For missions abroad?’ I asked.

‘Not all of them, some were locally here in Juval, but got ambushed by-’

‘Assassins.’ I finished his sentence.

‘How do you know?’ He asked.

‘The same happened to us. The negotiations were going great, but then suddenly got jumped by assassins out of nowhere. The weirdest part being, days after I survived, another assassin was sent after me, knowing exactly where I would be, at exactly what time. This can’t be a coincidence, everything fits in just a little too well.’ I explained.

‘Interesting. So what happened to the rest of your div-’ Lam’Ter was interrupted. A sudden gasp of air alerted me that something was wrong,

and it didn't take long before he fell to his knees, revealing two arrows in his back.

I ducked and shoved my arms under his armpits to hold his weight, but I realized that he didn't have long judging by his short breaths.

'Well, well! Isn't this a surprise!' I looked up to meet the eyes of Armid'Ro, our specs general.

'You worthless runt! What do you think you are doing!' I yelled out.

'Lower your bows.' He told the two bowmen standing next to him. 'You son, are one big immovable object. No matter what the obstacle, you persevered through and through. That's determination.'

'Why did you kill him? Why did you kill my family? My brethren that fought so vigilantly beside me, all turned to dust?' I yelled out.

'Oh don't be such a dramatic selfless martyr Mar'Keth. You are a force to be reckoned with, and you know that.' He said in a calm tone.

'Come down here and fight me coward!' I screamed, drawing my shield and flail.

Armid'Ro chuckled, and vaulted over the railing, evening the playing field.

‘Very well.’ He said.

I charged at him with my shield, which he sidestepped and pushed me, unsheathing his blade. He then swung it at me, which I blocked, and returned a blow to his chin with my flail. He stumbled back, with a broken nose.

‘I see you’ve learned a thing or two in Harrdmindor.’ He said, before sticking his hand forward and pulling it back again, which caused me to fling towards him uncontrollably. ‘But not enough!’ He finished his sentence, as he hit me in the throat with the hilt of his sword.

I started hyperventilating, gasping for air as I spasmed and rolled around. Shortly after, I took a boot to the face, knocking me unconscious.

Once I woke up, I was surrounded by walls, locked up in a cage. My armor had been stripped from me, along with my belongings. Ahead of me stood Armid'Ro, staring at his time teller.

‘Ah, perfect. Perfect timing. Hope you had a good sleep.’ He said.

‘Why?’ I asked him, but barely any sound came out.

‘Why? Oh come on Mar’Keth! I thought you’d have seen it by now. How do you feel, waking up, having to deal with all these people that can’t pay their food, let alone their housing. Hm? Doesn’t that make you feel weak? I mean come on, Juvali have been hard at work for centuries and this is what we have come down to? Being slowed down by peasants that can’t live normally?’

I looked at him with disgust as he continued: ‘The death of Aintuli was one of the greatest things to happen to us in the last two hundred years, Mar. Much changes when big symbols are wiped off the world. People lose hope, and that is what we need. We don’t need these poor things, we need pureblood Juvali that can hold their own and be proud that they were born here!’

‘Do you realize how incredibly stupid you sound? You’d bring down the economy of the kingdom, and this wouldn’t be a small blow, this will be a general outrage, protests and a spread

of unhappiness. You are committing mass murder, for what? Money?’ I asked.

‘You are still not getting it Mar’Keth!’

‘Sir!’ A courier entered the hallway. ‘The Valomorian scholar arrived a moment ago at the docks. He’ll be here in an hour.’

‘Splendid! I’ll be with you in a moment.’ Armid’Ro said before looking back at me and continuing. ‘Imagine this: We, the Gilded Juval, are the greatest trade empire in the entirety of Amalon! I mean just imagine the influx of money!’

‘You want money? You have more than enough money! The peasants are in dire need of food, and you are here taking golden baths.’ I said.

‘That filth doesn’t deserve it. Once I speak with the scholar, everything will flow flawlessly into place.’ Armid’Ro exclaimed.

‘What’s your deal with the scholar anyway? Thought you didn’t like the Valomorians?’ I asked.

‘Oh, I don’t. It’ll be a fun little surprise for the Valomorians. You see, I also have invited a Vilgmeri spokesperson, who will oh so tragically murder the scholar, in response to which we will kill the spokesperson, and send a letter to the Valomorians, stating that they have been betrayed by the Vilgmeri.’ He explained with a grin.

‘Sick bastard! What do you think you are doing?’ I yelled.

‘Business, Mar’Keth! I do the brain work, so the others can do the dirty work. I trained in arts of weapons, but before that I was a businessman, I’m much more superior to these filthy beings! Once the Valomorians burst out in rage and attack Vilgmeri, we in turn, will help out our overseas neighbors, by sending in our knights.’

‘What?’

‘The Valomorians won’t stand much of a chance anyway, not with the Four protecting the inner continent. But once they break one of the Four, they’ll swarm the place, maybe even take over Nur Oldamor, a strategical position for them. Then, we come in, sending in our newest

soldiers to the rescue. But they won't stand a chance against the trained scholars and duelists. They'll get eaten alive by those freaks.' Armid'Ro explained.

'And what will that get you?' I asked.

'Me? Nothing. For the Vilgmeri? Time! It'll buy them time to ready up and strike them back. We will count to have helped the Vilgmeri, being the big heroes in the end, and the Valomorians, we'll tell them that we were obliged by our code of honor to help our friends in need, no hard feelings, and asking for reparations. Money, money and money yet again.'

'I will kill you' I said to Armid.

'Oh that's nothing! While that is going on, I will eradicate all the peasants one by one, leaving only the purebloods to rule over Juval. I am a tyrant yes, but think about it Mar'Keth! I will bring back our old values which we have long forgotten.' He said,

'You values have gotten my brothers killed!' I screamed.

‘Oh yes, but that was necessary. You, nor your brethren would understand me. Those who do, I have already bought. Money buys everything, son. Those who I knew would be a problem, I had to scrap from the equation. Ultimately, everyone wants to be rich, that’s why they join the military. And seeing as I am currently the richest head of the military, the government will have a hard time going against my will. It’s just oh so perfect.’

Chapter 14: Steel Path

I sat in the cage contemplating what to do next. Armid'Ro was on his way to greet the guests from across the seas. This would be disastrous for Vilgmeri and Valomor, I couldn't allow this to happen, I had to find a way out of here as soon as possible. Looking down at the floor, I was clueless, I had no way of getting out of here. Raw power wouldn't help against metal bars, would only end up breaking a couple bones in my hand. When I looked up again, I got startled.

'Admirable, Mar'Keth. But what a way to die, rotting in a cell, until you are inevitably killed.' It was Macijek A'Vak.

'You again? Didn't we kill you?' I said.

He chuckled: 'If only you knew how many people said that before.'

'How are you here? Followed me on the ship?' I asked.

'The more important question is how you ended up in this cell?' He returned the question.

I raised my brow: ‘What does it matter to you? Aren’t you here to kill me anyway?’

He laughed louder: ‘Me? Oh come on. No, I don’t work for free.’

Free? What did he mean by that? Was he...

‘Were you hired by Armid’Ro?’ I asked, subconsciously forming fists.

He looked at me with a smile, and after a short pause answered: ‘Yes. But I clearly failed. In Harrdmindor, if you fail your task, you admit it and take punishment for it. But I must say, Mar’Keth of Juyva One, you are one strong man. May death spare those who cross you.’

I sat down on the bench provided in the cell: ‘I’m not sure if I’d have liked to be dead or alive right now. I’m the only one who knows of Armid’s plans and has to stop him, but can’t.’

‘When has a physical barrier stopped you before? Look, Mar’Keth, I don’t help people for free, but it so happens that I found a shield at the wardens office, thought you might need it more than me.’ He said, unlocking a shield, that I

recognized to be mine, from his back and handing it to me.

I looked at him: ‘So, what’s my price?’

‘Remember when we met in the woods, and I told you that we are friends? I wasn’t lying, I like you, you have a fighting spirit, reminds me of myself, about a hundred twelve years ago.’ He answered, while phasing through the metal bars. ‘I’ll live to see your funeral, Mar’Keth. I know when you will die, I have seen it, Dahra has seen it. I knew I was fighting a losing game. Question is, how far are you willing to go, to prove that you aren’t? I’ll see you on the other side.’ He disappeared in an instant.

His words perplexed me, but I didn’t let that slow me down. In one blow, I busted through the bars, alerting the warden, who raised the alarm shortly after seeing me. I quickly walked towards him and two other guards that appeared.

Once I got close enough, one tried striking me, which I ducked and bashed his knee, knocking him down, after which I got punched in the nose, and I replied with a punch of my own immediately after, knocking the second one

down as well. The third pulled out his sword, and tried striking me, but I outmaneuvered him, grabbing his wrist, and hitting him in the face with my shield, dazing him, giving me enough time to grab the sword and stab him.

Having surpassed those three, I continued down the hallway, where I was met with the warden's office, where the rest of my items were stored away. Luckily they had a fresh set of armor in there, which I took, seeing as my armor was destroyed. Upon leaving the facility, I ran as fast as possible to the nearest free horse bound to the fence posts. Once I was on horseback, I rushed out towards the center, knowing that that's where the meeting would take place. The central building of justice is the main meeting point, I had about fifteen minutes to get there. The ride from the docks to here takes about an hour at best, meaning that they might be there already, so the murder might have already happened, if not, the letter to Valomorians has been sent out early, that way it would arrive sooner than if he'd have sent it out after the murder, which would attract the attention of the general population. However, while he'd be resolving

the situation with the public here, the letter would already be on its way to Valomor.

Armid'Ro has everything planned out, so this might very well be the case. I need to be careful, he's a magic user, I don't know what he can do, I also can't fully rely of my armor to protect me.

After the dreadful fifteen minutes, I finally arrived to the building. I quickly got off my horse and rushed in. Upon entering, all the eyes turned to me. The meeting was going on, I caught them in the middle of it.

'Who is this?' The man in the robe asked.

'Oh do not worry, this is one of my soldiers, he must've mixed up the road to the training grounds.' Armid'Ro responded. He was sitting in the middle of the two at a round table.

'You bastard! You two, get out of here, he is planning on killing you both!' I warned the spokespeople.

'Killing us?' The robed man said. I assumed he was the Valomorian.

'What is he talking about Armid'Ro?' The other, which I assumed to be the Vilgmeri, followed.

‘What a fun killer, Mar’Keth.’ He said, after which suddenly both men grabbed their throats, grasping for air.

I dashed to Armid’Ro, bashing him from his chair. I quickly looked over at the other two, but alas they both lay there lifeless.

‘I told you, Mar. Resistance is futile!’ Armid said while getting up. ‘I am simply beyond you, yet you remain unsatiated. Do you wish my blood upon your blade? Another soul taken by you. Because if so, your wish is my command.’

He took out a rapier that was hanging on his side. It was glowing silver, almost like mist was surrounding it. He then swiftly dashed to me, lacerating my armor. I recoiled, keeping my eye on him. When he came in for another strike, I blocked it and redirected his attack, pushing him back, unbuckling my flail and hitting him in the cheek. He hit the ground and bounced up from the force. When I tried to hit him again, he simple rolled out of the way, twirling and dashing to me again, hiding me in the hand and knocking my shield out of my hand. I tried hitting him with my flail, but he dodged out of

the way, and struck back, yet again lacerating my armor.

This happened a couple more times, and on the final hit, he managed to hit me in the arm, forcing me to drop my flail as well. I held my hand against the bleeding arm.

‘Oh Mar’Keth. If only you’d listened.’ He said, as he suddenly threw a bolt of magic at me. I got hit in the chest and froze. I couldn’t move a muscle, I felt so numb.

Armid came closer: ‘So much effort.’ He sliced a part of my chest. ‘So much time.’ He sliced yet again, but this time my shoulder piece. ‘So much blood. Just wasted.’ He then proceeded to thrust the rapier towards me, but I managed to break free from the spell and grab the blade. I felt anger and pain in me, I felt so overwhelmed that I lost control over my actions. I got up and punched Armid with my other hand, launching him back couple meters. I threw the rapier to the side and moved to him. He stuck his hand out towards me, pushing me back. I tried to resist it, but it was stronger than me. Still not strong enough to make me lose my footing. I rushed

straight back to him: he shaped a misty sword and swung it at me, which I dodged and punched him in the face. He then recoiled and formed a bow in his hands, shooting me in the shoulder, which I took out and ran to him. He jumped back and threw a wave of magic at me, which I blocked by standing firmly. He didn't have enough time to cast another ability, before I interrupted him and punched him yet again. He got thrown against the wall behind him, dazing him.

I walked up to him and punched him, then again, then again and again. With every punch, blood splattered on me and the surrounding wall. With every punch, I saw Iris, the memory of my shield cracking her skull as I bashed it in, over and over. This time, it was different, I didn't feel remorse, I felt resentment, hatred and pain. He was responsible, he was a criminal beyond any belief. There was no going back, so I kept punching harder and harder, until my knuckles started hurting so bad, I couldn't feel them.

Armid barely managed to spit out blood:
'What... what will you... achieve'

I could barely understand him, seeing as half of his words were muffled by the blood in his throat.

‘My... death... menial’ He said.

‘Your death achieves restful nights, and lessen the delusion you have inflicted upon so many people.’ I said finally punching him and dislocating his jaw from his head.

It was a bloodbath. It wasn’t new, but I couldn’t get accustomed to it either way. The stench covered the room, making it hard to breathe. I slowly made my way across the room towards the door. Upon opening it, many fled in fear upon the sight of me covered in blood. I couldn’t blame them, I’d have done the same.

Peace at last.

Epilogue:

‘But, what about the letter? Did it reach the Valomorians?’

‘Yes, and it started a war that went on for three days. It took them all their manpower to get into Vilgmeri, the Four wouldn’t fall that easily.’

‘Did you fight in the war?’

‘I took the first ship to Vilgmeri after I killed Armid’Ro. After my arrival, it didn’t take long before the Valomorians attacked. I helped to hold them back. Eventually, they fell back.’

‘Can’t imagine how many people you had to kill.’

‘A lot. Most of them were just young adults. Barely able to control magic. Seeing the light leave their eyes, hurt me, left trauma. Every time I think of taking a life, I get scared, so I drown it out with alcohol.’

‘Well what happened after?’

‘Nothing much. I went back home, got awarded with Bloodgold Medal for honor and heroism. Threw it away soon after. I attended my trainer’s burial. Still pains me to this day’

‘And Macijek? Was he there too?’

‘Macijek... I didn’t see him. But I believe he was. He is always there. Wherever you may go.’

‘That’s creepy... Anyway, what are you doing now?’

‘Freelancing to keep myself busy. Got hired to protect some people that get sent to here as prostitutes.’

‘You guys do human trade?’

‘I don’t, the dirty dealers do. I just keep my nose out of their work. Not my place to say anything. Plus, it’s a form of income for many in Vilgmeri, why would I take that from them?’

‘True.’

‘Stop this right now!’ Was heard across the tavern after someone got attacked.

I could only guess that one of the clients got drunk and was looking for a fight.

‘Hey, it was great chatting with you, but I’ll be heading out now. It seems like a fight is about to break out.’

‘Sure thing. Thanks for listening! Who knows, I might see you again sometime.’

The stranger got up and left the table, I was left alone with my beer, yet again. Some things never change. Maybe it’s better that way, maybe it should stay like that.

Suddenly, a cup flew into my beer, knocking it out of my hands...