The Men of Gordon

Francis Carter

Book 1

Eldric Freeman

01

May 9, 535

“Thanks for helping me out, Eldric.” Buddy Jones loaded the last boxes into his wagon and looked back at his store. “I can’t believe I’m finally leaving this old dump.”

Eldric Freeman chuckled. “I’m sure the buildings’ll be much nicer down in Arlington, won’t they? I’ll make a trip out to you sometime whenever I’ve got the money, promise.”

“Ah, you don’t gotta do that. Spend your money on something nice for once.” Buddy walked back into his store with Eldric not far behind. Buddy’s family had owned the general store for three generations, and as such, they had seen many come and go from Heldenstadt’s Market District. Inside was a small, naturally lit room with empty bookshelves that used to hold all kinds of goods but now sat collecting dust. In the middle was a counter that used to hold a register but now only had a teapot and two cups. A stool sat on either side of the counter, so they sat.

Buddy poured Eldric and himself a cup of tea. They sat in silence for a few minutes while sipping quietly from their respective cups.

Eldric had always enjoyed coming to Buddy’s store. Although shallow, the main reason for this was due to how Buddy treated him. Eldric’s family had lived in the Red-Light District of the empire’s capital for as long as he could remember. Although his father had worked for the Empire’s Legislative Court, their family’s reputation dwindled to a pulp simply because of where they lived. Many would see those who lived in the R.L.D as barbaric, criminals, and lesser people, but not Buddy. Buddy’s family would often visit the district with high-quality food and goods to distribute to the lowest class of people. It was there that Eldric and Buddy grew close and became close friends.

Eldric was the first to break the silence. “So, what will happen to the store once you’ve gone? I can’t imagine it’d feel good to see it go to someone else.”

Buddy placed his cup down on the countertop. “Sure, of course, it won’t feel good. But from a young age, I was taught that change is good. I’ll go to Arlington and set up a new shop. Meet new people and allow that place to go a generation or three. I’d been thinking about it for some time now, and I feel this is the right time to do so. I’d have preferred to go to, say, Rivercrest, on account of it being the trade center of Alcrest, but the northern countries aren’t exactly the greatest of places right now.”

“Right, it’s even under Reinbose right now, or so the rumors say.” Eldric finished his cup of tea and placed it beside the teapot. Buddy picked up the pot as if he were to fill up the cup, but Eldric declined with a wave of his hand.

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve heard too. Arlington’s stayed neutral to the whole thing, even from the beginning, so it’ll be good to get away from the mess that is this war.”

“Yeah, I can imagine.” Eldric looked outside the store through the large glass windows to see children running up and down the street.

“You know,” Buddy took a sip of his tea. “Why don’t you come with me? You and I could set up shop together, and we could make it big. It’s not like you have anything here; Einrich despises you.”

“The entirety of Einrich?” Eldric remarked in a joking manner. “I doubt everyone in the Market District alone has even met me.”

“They may not hate you, you. But they hate the idea of you.”

Eldric looked outside the store once more. One of the children playing outside must have tripped and fallen as his mother was standing over him, nursing him to health. “That may be the case, but I’m not going to run because of it. And even to that point, not everyone hates the idea of me. For starters, there’s you.”

“And next week I won’t be in the country.”

“Well, um, there’s my father.”

“Yeah, your father. The drunkard that doesn’t even give you the time of day. Face it, Eldric, I know your mentality is to persevere until the end of time but isn’t it good sometimes to take the easy way through life? Taking the path less traveled will only tire the feet. Wouldn’t you want to take a nap at a rest stop occasionally?”

Eldric thought for a moment. “Even if it tires my feet, I’d rather have a blistered sole than cushioned one.” Eldric stood from his stool. “Don’t get me wrong; your offer is one that I don’t decline lightly. Maybe you’re right, and maybe I don’t have anything here. But that doesn’t mean I can’t make something out of the nothing.”

Buddy sighed and looked down at his watch. “Well then, I best be off.” Buddy finished his cup of tea and took the tea set to the back room. “It should take a day and a half to reach the bay and then a short distance across the channel. Everything is set to go. Thank you for your help.” Buddy came from the back room with a suitcase in hand, likely with the tea set inside, and stuck his hand out to Eldric. “It may not have been long, but it was good to know you.”

Eldric shook Buddy’s hand. “Hey, what’s with the sappy attitude? This ain’t gonna be the last time we see each other. I guarantee it.”

“Right.”

The two stepped outside, and Buddy locked the front door for the last time. He looked up at it for a minute or two before turning towards the wagon. Buddy placed the suitcase in the back of the wagon and locked it up. He climbed onto the front of the wagon, where a horse stood waiting to get going. “Well, my door will always be open if you ever decide to swing by. You’re sure you don’t want to join me?”

“Do snowflakes fall in the winter?”

“Not in the Red-Light District.” With a tip of his hat, the horse took off, and Buddy was gone, leaving only a dust cloud in his wake.

Eldric stood in front of the store until the wagon was entirely out of view. The children and mother who had been here had since left, probably to patch up the kid’s knee or something like that, and Eldric began his walk home.

The distance between the Market District and the Red-Light District offered Eldric a forty-five-minute walk through the Middle Districts comprised of the middle class of Heldenstadt. Because of his nearly daily walks, he had become somewhat known to the frequents of his route and would often get scoffed at because of his heritage. It didn’t bother him, though, as he had become accustomed to the way people treated him and expected no more.

Heldenstadt’s streets were narrow and winding. Except for a few town squares along his route, there was little room for more than two wagons going both directions along the road. The buildings lining the street were connected in a snakelike fashion, with the occasional break in the snake for an alley. Some would have a balcony overlooking the road below, and many who did hung their laundry for drying.

Despite being just shy after noon, there weren’t many on the street. Many children were likely in school while their fathers went out to their places of work. Those Eldric did see always went as far away as possible when passing him out of fear of being mugged or something along those lines. Still, Eldric paid no mind to it.

Then, along the road, Eldric noticed a man. He did not cringe at the sight of him. Instead, he leaned closer. He was a shorter man, extremely built. He wore what appeared to be the country’s military uniform, a purple jacket with a deep blue accent running up and down the entire body. He didn’t wear a hat, which seemed strange as all the militants Eldric had seen always wore hats. While he barely passed out any flyers, you couldn’t not notice him, given his thunderous and deep voice.

“SACRIFICE YOUR ARMS TO THE GREATER GOOD OF THE GREAT EINRICH EMPIRE! LIVE UP TO YOUR HONOR AS A CITIZEN OF THIS GREAT NATION AND FIGHT THE REPUBLIC DOGS!” He repeated those sentences with slight variations over and over.

*Oh, how convenient.* Eldric thought. *Just as one opportunity closes, another shoves itself right into my face. I’m either the luckiest man alive, or Ein above is out to get me.*

Eldric walked up to the shorter man, and the height difference became more apparent. Eldric wasn’t by any means a tall man, but the loud short soldier made him seem like a giant. “All right, you’ve enticed me.”

“WHAT A NOBLE MAN WE FIND OURSELVES IN THE MIDST OF! HE’S READY TO FIGHT NOBLY FOR HIS COUNTRY AND DESTROY THE REPUBLIC DOGS!”

“All right, dude, you have me right in front of you. We don’t need to shout like I’m halfway across Alcrest.”

“Apologies. You’re one of only three who have shown interest in destroying the republic. I just wish to make an example of you to the crowd of sheep. Even then, the two who’d come before you only did so as a prank at my expense. I was unaware of the number of republican sympathizers within the capital city alone. Fighting nobly on the front lines in Rivercrest will do that to you.”

“Ok, let’s not spill our entire backstory. Do soldiers make a lot of money?”

The short man raised an eyebrow. “Whatever do you mean? Of course, they make money! I’m starting to think you’re another one of those pranksters who-“

“Ok, that’s great.” Eldric quickly interrupted the man after hearing the information he needed. “How do I join?”

The man scoffed. “Well, I’ve never seen a less noble soldier than you. If money’s all you’re after, the guardian force fits you.”

“Guardian Force?”

“What, you’ve never heard of them? They line the border between the Land of Solitude and us, and all they do is sit on their asses all day waiting for the next attack from the Men of Gordon, even though all of them are dead, if not close to death by now.”

“And, this is shameful to be a part of?”

“Of course! There isn’t anything less noble than joining the military to be a part of the Guardian Force. Rather than killing republic dogs, you wait for a task force to attack that might not have even existed, to begin with! So, yeah, a place like that is perfect for money-hungry traitors like yourself.” The man shoved the flyer into Eldric’s chest. “If you want to join anything, period, show up to the training grounds over in the Sur District, on the southern portion of the capital, in two days’ time. It's like a tryout but for only the noblest.”

Eldric looked at the flyer. On it was a date and time along with the location of the training grounds below patriotic jargon used solely to entice unsuspecting individuals. There was an image of the empire’s crest in the middle: a purple and blue design with a white owl as the centerpiece. Looking back up at the man, Eldric thanked him and crumpled the flyer into his pocket.

He continued walking, turning down some more roads and eventually making it to a town square, where the road opened up to a large open area with shops, people, and a fountain that marked the middle of the court. Eldric sat down at the fountain for a quick breather and watched the children who weren’t old enough for school run around. He could see nine total, four boys and five girls. All seemed to be siblings or friends, and their mothers sat at a table across the way conversing about popular middle-class topics. Once he sat down, however, the mothers frantically called their children away from the square.

*Figures.* Eldric thought. He turned to the fountain, which continued to spurt water out.

He turned back around to watch as the children fought against their mothers, now pleading to head back to their homes. This wasn’t anything new to Eldric, so he paid no mind to it.

Wait a minute.

Eldric counted the children once more. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8…

There were only eight children.

Eldric quickly rose to his feet and glanced around the square. There were only so many places that the child could have gone, and it hadn’t been so long since he had last seen him, so he eliminated the four roads that outstretched from the square. There would be no way the child would be in the store the mothers situated themselves. If that were the case, he wouldn’t be missing, so Eldric eliminated that option.

“Is something the matter, sir?”

Eldric jolted around to find the source of the voice he heard. The boy who had disappeared moments before was now standing in front of him. The boy wore brown suspenders holding khaki shorts over his white button-down shirt. He donned a flat cap and black dress shoes with shin-high socks to complete the outfit.

“You look unwell. Is everything all right?” The boy asked once more. His face showed visible concern.

Eldric laughed to himself and put his hand to his forehead. “No, no, nothing is the matter.” He looked back up towards the mothers, still fighting their children about heading home. “I just thought I’d forgotten something, that’s all.”

The boy looked relieved for a moment before smiling at Eldric. “You’re awful considerate, aren’t ya?” The boy jumped down from the fountain and ran towards the mothers, now tugging on the children’s arms to get going.

Eldric looked back to the fountain. It kept spurting water as if nothing had happened to begin with. By now, the mothers and their children were well into the depths of the street, far away from Eldric. He looked up from the fountain and continued to trek home.

Although the shortest route to the Red-Light District was to follow the women, Eldric opted to take a slightly longer way so as not to appear to be following them. The roads seemed similar, but now with a bit of variation. Rather than snaking buildings with the occasional balcony, there were now separate homes with a gated yard in front. Rather than narrow winding roads, they became straight and wide. This wider road saw more people than the narrow road, likely because of the importance of a road this large.

At the end of the road was a T-intersection, in which, right in the center, was a chapel for the Church of Hrofth. Since before the Great Calamity, the church had been in existence and worshiped the deity of light, Ein. The chapel wasn’t the largest, as the closer to the Einrich Palace you got, the larger the chapel was. If nothing else, it was a good way of locating yourself within the empire’s large capital city.

Service had just ended as many men, women, and children were exiting the chapel, with the priest standing in front wishing everyone a wonderful day. Not wanting to be seen, Eldric sidelined the street and rounded the corner at an immense speed. Once he had done so, he turned around to look at the chapel once more. He saw the families exiting, no more than five per group, and saw the children along with their parents joyfully resuming their daily activities. Eldric wasn’t a family man, but he couldn’t help but feel jealous.

Eldric never knew his mother. According to his father, just a year following his moving to the Red-Light District, he met her at a bar, and they hit it off. Once Eldric was born, however, she thrust all of the work onto him and disappeared. Eldric had no idea how much of his stories to believe, but he did know that he had never even seen photos of her, so the story isn’t entirely unlikely.

His father, on the other hand, was a complete drunkard. Once holding a respectable position on the Legislative Court in Heldenstadt, he had been framed for something terrible. Because of that, he was stripped of his entire estate and title, forcing him to enter the Red-Light District. This, however, is also all according to him, so how much of it was true can’t be said.

Eldric had stood there for too long, as people were starting to notice and become wary of him. Even here, he had been known as a Red-Light District citizen.

*How the hell does word get around so quickly?* Eldric wondered.

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Eldric continued his walk home once more, finally reaching the entrance to the Red-Light District while it was still light out. The opening was not welcoming, as a singular, dilapidated gate created the only actual door for the district. The difference in housing was noticeable as well. Rather than the long snaking rows of homes, or the larger detached houses, the Red-Light District had stout, run-down buildings that couldn’t pass as houses even if they tried. The district was never the prettiest, with the occasional two-story apartment complex dotting the scenery. There were no roads, just different pathways that intertwined the buildings leading from one place to another. Before heading home, Eldric’s first thought was to check Louie’s, a popular bar in the district.

Louie’s was situated deep in the district and had been around since before the lights flashed red. It was the only reasonably stable building and thus the most popular with the locals, Eldric’s father included.

Upon entering Louie’s, Eldric was greeted by several older men and women he’d grown to know. The bar had an orange tint to it, likely due to the color of the lights he used to illuminate the room. The bar itself ran along the back wall with several bar chairs, all filled with people. In the middle of the room were tables, each populated by people.

Without needing to look hard, Eldric found the man he’d come looking for, George Freeman, his father.

George had sat at the bar and was surrounded by men and women alike, seemingly attracted to *something* he had in him. “I’ll get another round of beers for the lovely folks here, Louie!”

Louie, shining the glasses that had been previously used, sighed as he noticed Eldric enter. “As much as I’d love to indulge, I believe you have company.”

“Company!?” George exclaimed, glancing all around him. Finally noticing Eldric, they looked each other in the eyes with silence. George turned back to the bar. “Oh, hello, Eldric.”

One of the men who sat next to George got up to make room for Eldric, who sat in his place. “Hello, Dad.”

The two sat in silence for what felt like hours. Eldric and his father had become somewhat famous due to their relationship, and everyone present at the bar knew that. The voices of chatter slowly died to a silent hum, the only sound hearable being the sounds of Louie shining the glasses.

“Have you come to chew me out again like every other time you enter this goddamn bar?” George grabbed his glass of beer and took a sip. “I’ll tell you right now that nothing you say ain’t gonna change shit!” He turned to Eldric and stuck his finger into Eldric’s chest. “So, I don’t need to hear any horseshit out of you, you hear me?”

“I hear you, and that’s not what I’ve come to say, not this time.”

George turned back to the countertop and took another long sip of his beer. “Oh, really? So, what is it you’ve come to tell me?”

“I just thought I’d tell you that I’ll be leaving tomorrow for the Sur District to join the military. That’s all.” Eldric got up from his chair to leave. Not two steps from the bar, George jumped up and grabbed his shoulder. Eldric turned his head to face him. “Oh, do you have something to say about- “

Not a moment late, George had punched Eldric across the face, knocking him down to the ground. “How stupid of a stupid son did Ein give me?!” He screamed. “Why would you want to fight for this god-forsaken country of ours? What in Ein’s name did it do for you? Kick you to the ground? Belittle you and treat you like some animal? Is that the country you want to stand for?” George threw his hands in the air while Eldric struggled to stand. “And here I thought my son wasn’t entirely braindead. Take a look around you, Eldric. Do you know where we live?”

Eldric looked at his father, dumbfounded.

“That was a question for you, you good-for-nothing son of mine!”

“The… The Red-Light District.”

George bent down and picked Eldric up by the collar. “Very good. We live in the Red-Light District. Do you know what that means?”

Eldric did not reply.

“It means we are the lowest of the low. Not much more valuable than a five-kilogram pig. To the people of Einrich, we’re no better than the republic themselves. Hell, I wouldn’t blame ‘em if they let the president of the damn place walk given a choice to get rid of one of us.” George let go of Eldric’s collar as he glared into his eyes. “You want to fight for those people? The people that betrayed us? That left us here to die?”

Eldric did not reply.

“And now he’s gone mute.” George turned and stepped back towards the countertop. “We are discussing this at length tonight. I don’t want to see you until then. Get out of my sight.”

Eldric left Louie’s and began the short walk home. Unlike outside the district, the grog in the air caused the sun to disappear at nearly every point of the day, so he couldn’t tell if it was still daylight or if the sun had set. Either way, he was to head home.

Eldric and his father lived on the second floor of one of the apartment complexes scattered about the district. Inside the home was a single room with a bathroom in one of the back corners. The big room housed enough room for a table, and a kitchenette lined the entrance hallway. There was a singular window on the back wall looking into more grog. There was no back door, just the express front door, a severe fire hazard should the apartment building go up in flames.

*That said, so is every other building in this damn place*. Eldric thought.

Eldric had a few books that Buddy had given him over the years, and so while he waited for his father to come home, he decided to pick up a book and start rereading it.

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Time passed, and Eldric had grown tired of waiting. After setting aside his belongings into a bag he owned for the trip he’d make the following day, he laid down on his mattress on the ground and dozed off, hoping his father wouldn’t wake him the next day.

The following morning, Eldric awoke to his father slumped over on the table. It appeared that he arrived sometime after Eldric had fallen asleep and passed out drunk upon the table before he could get a word out. Although Eldric didn’t know what time it was, he knew it would be a full day’s travel to make it to the Sur District, situated in the heart of the capital, near the Palace District.

Eldric put the book he began rereading the previous night into his bag and made for the door.

‘Cough, cough.’

Behind him, Eldric saw his father rise from the table as he wiped the drool off his face. “Oh, morning, Dad.” Eldric attempted to make a break for the door but was interrupted.

“Eldric, before you go, let me get a word in.” George rubbed his head furiously. “First of all, what I said last night were my real thoughts. I don’t think this is a good idea at all. I don’t know if the Jones kid gave you this inspiration or what. But what I do know is that you’re making a mistake.”

Eldric sighed. “Dad, I know what-“

“Hold on.” George stuck his hand out as if telling Eldric to stop. “I wasn’t finished. I may think this is a mistake, but frankly, I don’t know what I’m right and wrong about anymore. This is a mistake in my eyes, but it could also be the greatest success you’ve ever had. You don’t have my support, not even a sliver of it. But what I want you to know is that I won’t stop you from doing the things you want to do. I recognize that you’ve got me beat in more categories than one, including happiness, and I’m not sure where it comes from.”

George sat once more at the table. “As a father, I’ve failed you more than I’ve failed myself. I drink all day and get pissed with every little move you make as if I’m no better. There is no atoning for the mistakes I’ve made, and part of me wants to let you go to do just that.” George looked out the back window and then at his hands. “But then there’s another part of me that wants to persevere. I don’t know where that part of me comes from, as I thought I lost it long ago, but it seems that it’s come back for this reason alone.”

He looked back up at Eldric. “Should you decide to go, I won’t support it, but I’ll do my best to accept it.” George stood up and stepped up to Eldric, grabbing both of his shoulders. “But, should you decide to stay, I’ll do my best to atone for my unforgivable sins. I’ll raise you to be the best son a father could ask for. I’ll tell you everything I know, introduce you to the people I call my friends, and I’ll… I’ll…” George let go of Eldric’s shoulders.

“Dad,” Eldric began, “I understand what you want to do, but before you’d be able to raise me in the ‘correct’ way before you can begin to atone, you have to look at yourself first. Fix the things wrong with you before you can fix the issues in others. I’m sorry, but I’m heading out.”

“Right.” George stepped back and sat down once again at the table. “Well, best of luck then. I did always enjoy talking to you.”

“Thanks,” Eldric replied.

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The trip from Eldric’s home to the Sur District was just about as eventful as his trip from the Market District to the Red-Light District, though the change in building style was much more drastic. The further he got from the Red-Light District, the more Eldric noticed the increasing size of the buildings. He had rarely been out this close to the Palace District, and because of that, many were not quick to judge based on his appearance alone.

The streets went from broad to more expansive, the houses gained gated yards the size of buildings in the R.L.D, and the people went from wearing everyday clothes to fancy chapel clothes as if they were a regular attire. Women wore parasols and large dresses while the men donned straight tuxedos. Children and teenagers wore similar clothing, though less refined given their age.

The streets were more populated as well, likely due to many upper-class citizens not needing to attend schooling. The roadside saw street painters, musicians, and the like entertaining the empire’s nobles. The center of the street was carved in half by a line of trees, each in the full bloom of the summer season. Parks were more abundant as well. A grassy open field would show itself with many noblemen and women enjoying their time with games, picnics, or conversation every few homes.

When Eldric arrived at the Sur District, the sun had already set. He did not care where he’d spend the night as long as it was a place to lay his head. He brought no money and thus could not stay at any inns, so he found one of the parks and laid down on the grass.

The sky was filled with stars. There was no space on the canvas above him, no matter where Eldric looked. In the distance, a chapel bell could be heard. The voices of a crowd were slowly diminishing as people returned to their homes, and in the end, all Eldric could listen to was the wind blowing through his hair and his breathing.

As much as he wanted to pull out his book and begin reading, as he often did before falling asleep, he knew that the little light he was working with would not be enough, so he closed his eyes and dozed off.

Eldric was awoken by the sun and noises of birds, the chapel, and the early morning crowd. He reached into his pocket and took out the flyer he had been given. It had a location of the training grounds. He didn’t know what the address meant, so when he reached the street, he asked a man walking by where the training grounds were located, and the man pointed him in the right direction. After thanking him, Eldric made for the settings that would determine his future.

The training grounds were a large rectangular grass field gated on all ends. In one portion of the grounds was a sandpit, likely for training for the desert. There were already people standing in the middle. Most were conversing with one another, some were stretching, and others were running in place or doing exercises to prepare.

At the front of the grounds was a ticket box used to admit candidates. Eldric walked up to the box and put his flyer in front of the woman running admittance. She glanced at him and sighed as she grabbed a piece of paper and a pen.

“Write your name on the line. Remember the number next to it.”

The paper he had been shown showed several signatures already, with numbers next to them. *Probably for keeping track of people*. Eldric thought. He wrote his name next to the number 301 and stepped into the grounds.

Looking to his left, he saw several bags lined on top of one another. Eldric put his bag down next to the rest and made his way to the ground’s center.

*Given my number was 301, there are probably three hundred others trying to join, but it doesn’t look like there are even one hundred.*

Eldric found a space to sit down, and he watched as everyone warmed up for the tryouts.

“Man, I didn’t expect there to be this many people.” A voice came from Eldric’s left. A tall man walked to him from the ticket box and stuck his hand out. “Kastor Gregor, number 302, a pleasure to meet you.”

Eldric stood up and shook his hand. “Eldric Freeman, 301.” Kastor’s height was much larger than Eldric had initially thought, nearly an entire head’s length taller than him.

“Oh! 301, then! It looks like we’re number neighbors!” Kastor laughed. “In all seriousness, do you really think there are three hundred people here? I was looking around, and it doesn’t seem like it.”

Eldric glanced back towards the crowd. While there were undoubtedly many people, there were nowhere near enough for three hundred. “Yeah, I was thinking the same thing,” He replied. “But even then, it isn’t a huge deal. It makes it easier for us to get in then.”

Kastor laughed again. His laugh sounded forced to Eldric, and it was so loud you could probably hear it in Reinbose. “So,” Kastor sat down, Eldric following suit. “Which branch are you trying to go out for?”

“To be frank with you, I don’t think I have anywhere in mind. I’m just looking to get in, get paid, and get out.”

“Ah,” Kastor looked back towards the ticket box. A few more came through the gates and situated on the grassy field. “So, I guess the Guardian Force would be for you, then.”

“Yeah, that’s the second time I’ve been told about that thing. Is it really that bad to join it and not be on the front lines?”

“Hmm… I don’t know.” Kastor turned to Eldric. “I guess purists will say it’s a disgrace to go out for it, but the way I see it, you’re still putting in work no matter what you do.”

*Ah*. Eldric stood up and noticed a few people starting to gather in a cluster. “What do you think is going on there?”

Kastor stood up. “I’m not sure. Let’s go check it out.”

They raced over to the group, where they found a pocket in the middle for two men who appeared to be fighting. The crowd circled the two was rowdy and barbaric, pushing and shoving each other as they all wanted a better view. Eldric, used to these situations in Louie’s, was able to snake his way to the inside of the circle.

The first man was severely beaten. He had blonde hair and wore a white tank top drenched in sweat. With no sleeves, anyone could see he wasn’t the most muscular man in the world, but he wasn’t a toothpick either.

The other, a much more muscular man, wore a tank top as well, though colored in maroon. He had barely any bruises and looked like he had just woken up with how little sweat came from his pores.

“Come on, Rietveld!” The muscular guy called out. “Is this what your traitorous family raised you to be?!” He lunged forward at the blonde man, carrying his entire weight. When the blonde dodged, he crashed into the front few spectators.

The blonde man held a defensive stance with his hands, using his lighter weight to his advantage. “I’m not here to instigate any fights, Henry. Let’s just calm down and wait for the captain to get here.”

The muscular man got up and scoffed at the blonde. “There you go again with your annoying, people-pleasing attitude that somehow allowed you to live this long.” He exclaimed, pointing his finger toward him. “Well, not this time. Mommy isn’t here to protect you no more.” He raised his arms and turned towards the crowd. “Fine spectators of the crowd, the man who stands before you today is none other than a Rietveld! He is no more than a traitorous scum whose ancestor revolted against this great empire and created the dogs of the republic we know today!”

The crowd erupted in noise that couldn’t be deciphered.

“Now,” The muscular man continued, slowly walking towards the other contender. “How far has the empire fallen such that we now allowed traitors amongst our kind? To fight for us!” He stopped a foot away from the blonde and spoke directly to him, much quieter than before. “And who’s to say that he won’t just turn on his tail and run to the republic once on the front lines?”

That line got the blonde man riled up as he jumped forward to the behemoth. However, before he could make contact, the muscular man grabbed his hand by the wrist, threw him to the ground, and planted his foot onto his chest. “This is what dogs like you deserve.” He mumbled as he drove his foot deeper into his chest.

“ENOUGH!”

A booming voice came from outside the crowd. It broke up and showed a uniformed man standing at attention. The muscular man stood dumbfounded for a moment before saluting the uniformed man. The blonde coughed a few times as he slowly rose from the ground.

The man in uniform walked up to the two. “Henry Kistler, and Leonard Rietveld.” He reached into his front breast pocket and pulled out a small note. “I was told that I was getting a strange crowd today, but I apparently wasn’t briefed enough.” He mumbled to himself before putting the note back in his pocket.

The uniformed man clapped twice and ordered everyone to stand at attention in line. Not a second passed, and the crowd was frantically racing to their spots. Eldric found Kastor out of the group and stood next to him as the rest of the crowd formed a straight line.

The man walked up and down the line, inspecting each candidate and their build. In front of Eldric and Kastor, he pulled his note out and nodded twice before putting it away and continuing down the line. Once he had made it to the end, he walked to the center and positioned himself a distance away from everyone else to allow them to see him.

His dull eyes scanned the crowd in front of him as if the examination had already begun. Standing firm, he placed his hands behind his back, puffing his chest outwards in confidence. Despite being part of the imperial uniform, he bore no cap, and in its place was a bald head. His face was unshaven with a large scar that ran vertically to the top of his head.

“Good morning, candidates. My name is Malik Asante, and I am a captain for the Guardian Force along the border between the Einrich Empire and the Land of Solitude, and your examiner this morning.”

Amongst the crowd, there were a few murmurs, mostly out of disbelief that the supposed weakest branch of the military was in charge of the examinations.

Someone a few people to Eldric’s right spoke up.

“The Guardian Force?” He laughed. “This must be a joke, why would anyone from them come out and bother with us? Shouldn’t you be bumming around the border wall and-”

Before he could finish his sentence, Asante pulled out a handgun and sent a bullet at the candidate’s feet. The ground exploded as the contender jumped back in fear. Asante, now wearing a smug look across his face, twirled his gun and placed it back in his holster.

“Apologies, it appears my gun has misfired. Such a shame that is, happens from time to time. Do you mind repeating what you said? I was, unfortunately, unable to hear it.”

Standing back in his place, the outspoken applicant shook his head in silence. Asante nodded and began speaking once again.

“I’m aware many of you have a poor vision of the mighty Guardian Force, but I should illustrate to you the purposes of this examination. If, we, the Guardian Force, are the weakest of the branches of Einrich’s military, then should we determine to deem you unworthy, it wouldn’t be unfit for the ‘more prestigious’ branches to refuse to even glance your way. The purposes of these examinations are to weed out the significant from the insignificant. The talented from the untalented.” He began to pace back and forth in front of the line of candidates. “The examinations will comprise of two phases, both of which will occur today. This means that each and every one of you standing before me will know the outcome of their trials by sundown. Do I make myself clear?”

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“I will now begin the explanation of the first phase.” Asante nodded to his left, cueing a soldier to run and hand him a gun, similar to a rifle. After thanking him, Asante spoke once more. “The first phase will be a mock battle, in which you will be using these.” He held the gun high for everyone present to see. “These rifles are not real, and thus will not cause any fatalities. You will group into squads of four and face against another four of random choosing. For your squad to secure a victory in the mock battle, all you’d need to do is eliminate or cause the surrenders of each member in the opposing squad.”

Asante pointed to the candidate he had previously fired at and requested that he stand next to him. After a slight hesitation, the applicant stepped forward and stood to Asante’s right, facing him the whole time.

“To eliminate the opposition, you must fire your rifle at a target. Inside each of the rifles are pellets with a dyed powder that will show upon your clothing, so don’t even try to think about ‘cheating death’. Should you hit your target in a fatal area,” Asante paused and pointed the rifle towards the outspoken aspirant’s head. “In other words, the head, the chest, and so on, the target will be eliminated. Now, your target will be injured if you hit your target in a non-fatal area, the arms, the legs, and so on. Two injuries will equal an elimination. I would advise against randomly firing in all directions, as eliminating members of your team is entirely possible and is guaranteed to happen to one of you. I should note that elimination does not equate to elimination from military selection. What will, however, is not abiding by the rules of the game. If you continue to fight or attempt to eliminate an opponent after you’ve been eliminated, you will be exempt from entering the military for good.”

Asante set the rifle on the ground. “Everything you may use to your advantage is allowed. Strategy, sacrifices, anything. As long as you don’t completely kill off your opponents, everything is allowed. Broken bones, fractures, and anything of the sort will simply show that the person is not fit for this prestigious military. Tripping, bruising, and injuries like those will be allowed. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yessir!”

“Good. Then I trust you to create your squads. Come to anyone in uniform within the hour, or you will be disqualified from examinations.”

Asante picked the rifle from the ground and walked towards the ticket booth. Floods of uniformed men came onto the field with clipboards in hand, and the once orderly group of candidates began separating themselves frantically.

“All right,” Kastor said, stretching his long arms into the air. “All we need to do is find two more.”

Eldric put his hand to his chin. “I’m thinking we should get that Leonard Rietveld from the fight earlier.”

Kastor laughed. “Really? You want a republic traitor on our squad? What’s the reason behind that?!”

“Think about it for a second. Captain Asante said that the matches were randomly chosen, but I can’t imagine the groups would be *completely* random. That Henry Kistler fellow clearly had some history with Leonard, and that would make his group easier to fight.”

Kastor looked up to the sky, deep in thought. “Why’s that?”

“From what I could tell from Henry’s behavior, he isn’t exactly the smartest guy around. Because of that, we can use his obsession with getting Leonard eliminated to our advantage.”

*Hmmm…* Kastor scanned the crowd for Leonard and found him laying off to the side, no one bothering to come near him. “Didn’t you see how he fought, though? The guy can barely put up a fight; all he can do is dodge! It’d be a guaranteed death on our part.”

“That’s just it, Kastor.” Eldric pulled him aside to a part of the field without any grass and began drawing in the dirt. “Leonard’s dodging ability will allow us to work with him as a team. Mock battles are all about testing how well a team can work together, and Henry’s confidence in being able to eliminate Leonard will cause his team to fall apart completely. As long as we can work around that very detail, we’d be able to pull ahead, no matter who our fourth person is.”

Kastor drew a deep sigh. “Stan, I don’t know if this plan of yours is extremely smart or extremely stupid, but I’ll go along with it ‘cause I can’t think of any better. Let’s go recruit Rietveld.”

The two of them walked up towards the sprawling Leonard. His eyes were shut as bruises covered his skin. He now wore a lime-colored wool shirt over his tank top, his pants showing a dirtied maroon scheme.

Eldric bent down to get closer to the beaten man. “Leonard Rietveld?”

Leonard rubbed his eyes for a moment before looking at Eldric. The distance between the two shocked him as he quickly jumped up and backed away from them.

“W-What do you want?” He asked.

Eldric stood up and stepped towards Rietveld. “We were told to get in squads of four. You want to team up with us?”

Rietveld held a face of disbelief. He glanced back and forth between Eldric and the exceptionally tall Kastor before looking around him. “This isn’t some sick joke, is it?”

Kastor snapped his fingers in Leonard’s direction. “Does it sound like a joke? We’re asking you to join us, and it’s not like you’ve got any other options, does it?”

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “Okay, I’ll join you guys. Why pick me though? Wouldn’t my name cause you harm?”

“We’ll discuss that later,” Eldric remarked. “For now, we need to focus on getting a fourth man.

“I hear you require of a fourth?” A voice came from behind Eldric and Kastor. They turned around to see a man slightly taller than Eldric with a symmetrical, handsome face. His chiseled chin provided depth to his perfectly sized neck, and his muscles defined themselves through his black long-sleeved shirt. He wore gray pants and a black belt to complete the outfit of a minimalist and wore his hair in a classy, fashionable way.

“The name’s Erick, Erick Newborn. I hope I’m not overstepping my boundaries too much, but I couldn’t help overhearing the need for a fourth member? I’m fairly confident in my sniping abilities, so I should be able to help. If you’ll allow me, of course.”

Kastor turned towards Eldric. “I don’t know about you, but this guy could compensate up for Leonard’s… lacking abilities.” He whispered.

“As I said, it doesn’t matter who the fourth is, as long as they cooperate,” Eldric mumbled. “Why, of course, we have room for you!” Eldric clapped his hands together and stepped towards Erick. “This should be enough for our team to succeed; good to be working with you, Leonard, Erick.”

“S-Sure,” Leonard replied.

Erick shook Eldric’s hand confidently. “You can count on me!”

Kastor reported the four of their names to one of the uniformed men while Eldric explained his strategy to Erick and Leonard. The two seemed to understand what he was aiming for and agreed wholeheartedly to the plan.

After an hour passed, and Asante called forward all the participants. He requested they stand to the side of the field as it began to shake the ground. A moment later, mechanical doors powered by steam swung open to show a staircase that led beneath the ground. The stairs showed severe age as rust covered almost every possible inch of them.

“Follow me.” Asante led the large group down the stairs, and soon it became clear why he did. Beneath the ground was a sprawling forest topped by trees brushing the ceiling everyone was on previously. The roof had large lights that illuminated the enormous underground room fully. After a long walk down the stairs, Asante guided the group to a waiting area carved out of the wall.

“This will be the grounds on which you will partake under the first phase. As you can see, it is simulated to both look and feel like a forest, and in a moment, I will shut off the ceiling lights to make it as dark as night. Both teams will be asked to stand opposite one another and begin their advancement simultaneously. Use it to your advantage. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yessir!”

With a nod, Asante looked up and swung his finger around, slowly dimming the lights to a near pitch-black level. There was some illumination, likely to simulate the moon at night. Turning back to the crowd, he whipped a clipboard from his inside coat pocket and called teams up to begin their mock battle.

\* \* \*

“Freeman, Gregor, Rietveld, and Newborn, please come see me. Freeman, Gregor, Rietveld, and Newborn.”

The four quickly stood up and responded to Asante’s request. Once they reached him, he ushered them to his left, where another squad could be seen, preparing themselves for battle.

“It is uncustomary, but there’s been a request that I’m letting fall on your ears,” Asante began. “Simply put, Kistler requested you four be his opponent. You’ll have a choice to go against them as he had requested or take the random bout. Either choice you make, you will be the next in the forest.”

Without hesitation, Eldric accepted to take Kistler’s request. He looked back at Kastor and gave him a thumbs up.

The four of them walked up to Kistler’s squad and introduced themselves. Henry had picked up three people appearing to have more brawn than brains. Two identical men who appeared to be clones of the outspoken man from earlier stood by a somewhat average-looking individual.

“I’m the captain of the squad, Henry Kistler. I have no need for the three who don’t matter. I’ll be taking out Rietveld.” Henry didn’t bother sticking his hand out to shake, instead scoffing and continuing to warm up.

The next man to step up appeared normal apart from his face. He was much shorter than Eldric and wore a tight outfit, designed specially to move around in. He had jet black hair, and his skin was a lighter color than Eldric was used to. Unlike Kistler, he shook Eldric’s, Kastor’s, and Erick’s hands but didn’t bother with Leonard. His face wore a goofy grin that spread from ear to ear as he shook each person’s hand. “I’m Hagen Miura. Best of luck to you all. You’re gonna need it.” With those brief words and a chuckle, Hagen stepped back to join Henry in warming up.

The two identical men stood forward next, one of whom, Eldric guessed, was the outspoken individual from earlier. They took a bow instead of shaking hands. “We’re the Leicester brothers,” they said in unison. One of the brothers grew a beard while the other was cleanshaven, marking the only noticeable difference between the two down to their clothing.

The bearded twin looked up from his bow. “I’m Ryan,” he stated. “The older of the two. This is my brother Liam. We wish you the best of luck.” With a confident smile, the two joined their squad leader and began a discussion out of ear’s range.

Not a moment after their introductions ended, Asante called the teams to their sides. They were told to follow the walls around until they met with a uniformed member of the examination team.

“You guys go ahead,” Eldric began, “I have something I have to ask Asante.”

Kastor and the others exchanged glances of confusion before agreeing and beginning their hike.

Once they were out of view, Eldric walked up to Asante, who had been reading his clipboard that had the list of all of the applicants.

“Sir?”

Looking up from his notes, Asante looked Eldric up and down before speaking. “Freeman. What is it? Keep it brief.”

“Yes, sir. You see, I’m curious to why we’re doing a mock battle first, before any testing of strength or endurance. Isn’t it customary that those types of tests come first?”

Asante continued to look into Eldric’s eyes before looking off into the forest and putting the clipboard by his side. “Freeman, what’s your application number?”

“I believe it was 301, sir.”

“Indeed it was. Now, take a look around you. Do you see three hundred people?”

Eldric shook his head.

“Exactly. Now, to make things simple and clear. There is a phase before this that does exactly what you describe. However, everyone present here had already passed that phase by the time they’d arrived here. As for how and why I won’t tell you. I’m sure you’d be able to come to a decent conclusion, though.”

Eldric nodded before thanking Asante. He had begun to run towards his side before being stopped by a hand on his shoulder.

“You’re perceptive, Freeman,” Asante began in a low, deep voice. “Don’t let that get to your head. You might bite off more than you can chew.”

Asante lifted his hand and shooed Eldric away. He followed the same path his team took and saw the man in uniform, as he was told. He wore the same as Asante, but unlike Asante, he had a cap and goggles, likely to see clearly in the dark.

“You will wait here until you hear the signal.” The uniformed man looked up and waved towards the ceiling. Afterward, he handed the four of them their rifles and guided them through the machine’s operations.

While waiting for the signal, Eldric pulled the other three aside. “We’ll enter together. Should something go awry, you’ll follow my orders. Okay?”

“You can count on us!” Erick exclaimed, putting his hand on Eldric’s shoulder and issuing him a thumbs up.

“Well, what about Henry?” Leonard questioned. “He won’t exactly be an easy target to take care of.”

“I’ve got that taken care of,” Eldric responded. “Just follow my orders, and we’ll win this thing.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Kastor replied, smacking Eldric’s back. “Let’s go kick some ass!”

A sound rang through the underground forest, somewhat like a bell. Eldric recognized it as the signal, and the four rushed into the trees without notice.

The uneven terrain and vines hanging from the trees above caused the four of them to move slower than they were capable of, but Eldric had grown accustomed to the rough ground from his years in the Red-Light District. Kastor followed behind Eldric, glancing left and right, looking for any of the four. Erick and Leonard were far behind Kastor but not entirely out of view, running side by side to check each other’s blind spots.

Because the forest was underground, there was very little in the way of ambient sound, lending any artificial noise to appear louder than normal. What did exist, however, were noises from the ground above. While silenced, it caused enough of a stir that the underground facility wasn’t entirely silent.

Eldric held his rifle in one hand as he used the other to vault over fallen trees and other objects lying in his way.

“Get down!” Eldric whispered behind him as he jumped to the ground. Kastor, Leonard, and Erick followed suit as the sound of guns firing rang in the jungle moments later.

By now, Eldric’s eyes had adjusted to the darker atmosphere of the facility, and he began glancing his head all around, looking for something he could use to get his squad out of the pickle they found themselves in. He noticed that the sounds of the firing guns had not gotten any closer, so he anticipated a frontal attack by a second force soon.

He turned on his side and noticed a tree with branches that hung low. Turning back towards Kastor, he nodded his head towards the tree. Kastor took a moment to decipher what he had meant but understood within seconds. He nudged Erick, and the two began crawling towards that tree. Kastor used his hands as a stepstool as Erick climbed to the lowest branch, and soon the two were in the tree, climbing ever higher to the tallest trees.

Once they had reached their full height for the trees, Eldric nodded and turned his head towards Leonard. “I want you to stand up,” Eldric ordered.

“What!?” Leonard crawled closer to Eldric. “Are you insane? That’s suicide!”

“Trust me on this. You won’t be shot at.” Eldric turned towards the source of the gunfire, their shots never seizing. “I have no doubt in my mind that Kistler told whoever is shooting those bullets to stop shooting once they have sight of you.”

“And you want me to take this gamble!?”

“Did you, or did you not agree to take my orders. I’m telling you right now that you will not be shot at.”

Leonard clicked his tongue and looked at the ground. “Fine,” he said with a sigh. He crawled a distance away from Eldric and stood up quickly so that the shooters would have time to react. As Eldric had predicted, the bullets that had rung continuously throughout the past few minutes stopped their attack.

Puzzled, Leonard turned to Eldric, still strewn about the ground. Just then, the sound of snapping branches from above had reached Eldric’s ears. With a loud thump, a prominent figure pinned Leonard to the ground, causing him to lose his rifle.

“Got you now, bitch.”

\* \* \*

At the top of the trees, the branches were easy for Kastor and Erick to traverse. The bullets' firing allowed them to find the shooters’ general area quickly. They were much farther than Kastor had initially thought, and jumping from branch to branch offered a significant decrease in speed. Erick wasn’t far behind, glancing behind his back every so often to check the blind spots.

Without warning, the gunfire seized, causing the two to stop.

“Damn,” Kastor whispered. “Eldric must’ve done something.”

“We’ll let him and Leonard take care of things on their end.” Erick crouched down on his branch. “I trust Freeman has a plan of sorts, and should we fail to do our job, it could all fall apart.”

“Right, but how are we going to find whoever was shooting?”

Erick thought for a moment. “They could see us from that far of a distance, right? I can’t imagine they’d be blind to us from this close.” He pointed towards the ground. “Let’s say one of us jumps down, and the other goes after the target?”

Kastor processed what Erick had proposed before agreeing, offering to jump down as the bait. Erick jumped a few trees ahead of Kastor to get a head start. “On three,” Kastor whispered. “One, two-”

Without warning, a rock pelted Kastor in the chest, causing him to lose his rifle. With his little reaction time, he quickly gripped onto the branch, hoping to pull himself back up, but it wasn’t enough. He fell through the branches down the tall tree, slamming his back upon the ground.

Erick, noticing what had happened, looked for the source of the rock. Just below him was Ryan, the older of the twins, aiming his gun toward the falling Kastor. Erick quickly cocked his gun and pointed it at Ryan. Before he fired, however, he promptly changed his target from Ryan to Ryan’s rifle, firing a split second after the adjustment. Erick’s bullet shot through the air with precision, hitting the barrel of Ryan’s rifle, causing it to be flung from his fingertips. Not a moment later, he began his descent from the trees.

Kastor lay for a moment as he tried to catch his breath from the incredible fall. Opening his eyes, he noticed a figure lunge at him from the corner of his vision. Reacting almost instantaneously, he rolled to the side and hoisted himself to the ground, stumbling for a bit before catching his balance. Ryan stood some three meters from Kastor, fist dirtied from the ground he struck just moments before.

The two stood in silence as they both caught their breath. Kastor gripped his stomach as he held back whatever breakfast he had this morning while Ryan put his fists into the air in a battle-ready stance. After a deep breath, Kastor did the same and the two jumped toward each other.

Erick reached the ground and pointed his rifle towards the ensuing fistfight, but the two combatants were moving too quickly for him to get a good aim at Ryan. Just as the two ducked behind a tree, two bullets whizzed past his ear, causing him to dart to the ground quickly. Glancing toward the shots, he saw Hagen and Liam standing side to side as they bolted to cover behind a tree.

“So,” Erick mumbled to himself. “This is how it’s going to be, huh?”

Erick crawled to the nearest tree and repeated the actions Eldric ordered him to do, climb to the top of the branches. With relative ease, he reached the blind spot of Hagen and Liam, allowing him to rise through the branches quickly. Once he had reached a safe height to jump down from, he leaped through the branches to position himself behind the targets.

Below, he could see as they began firing towards his previous position. Just before he was to leap to the ground, Hagen made an advance forward for a reason Erick couldn’t discern. Seeing this as a better opportunity than ever, he dropped from the low-hanging branch and, in a swift motion, bolted Liam in the back of the head.

As Liam stood up to head out of the forest, Erick advanced in Hagen’s direction, ducking behind trees whenever possible. He made considerable distance before spotting him and aiming the rifle at his head, firing with confidence immediately after.

To Erick’s surprise, Hagen dodged the bullet from his blind spot, rapidly turning around to make eye contact.

Hagen began to laugh hysterically. “So there is someone like me out there, huh?”

“What are you talking about?” Erick cocked his rifle once more and pointed it towards Hagen.

“I mean your confidence.” Hagen sat down with his legs crossed. “Very rarely have I met a man with as much confidence to match my own. In all honesty, it’s perfect.”

Seeing an opening in Hagen’s defense, Erick quickly pulled the trigger in his direction. With immense speed, Hagen leaped into the air as he dodged the bullet and proceeded to seat himself once more on a large rock.

“You know,” Hagen said with a sly grin. “The more you shoot, the more you’ll make a mockery of yourself. I’ll just dodge it anyway. You, on the other hand…”

In less than a second, Hagen cocked his gun, aimed it at Erick, and fired his bullet, landing square on his shoulder. Erick didn’t even have time to blink.

“Couldn’t even dodge a moving wagon.” Hagen stood on top of the rock and laughed to himself once more. “That confidence is being used disproportionately to your skill, but you intrigue me.”

Erick scoffed at Hagen. “Are you making a mockery of me? Come down and fight!”

Hagen tried to hold back his laughter but was unsuccessful, breaking out in tears from how hilarious he found Erick’s words. Once he gained his composure, he responded. “Short answer? Yeah, I’m mocking you. You clearly have no or very little training, but your confidence and sheer intuition have at least intrigued me. For that, I’ll reward you.”

Hagen opened the cartridge holder on his rifle, tossing his bullets off to the side, followed by his rifle. “I’ll go into this fight with absolutely zero weapons,” he said, showing his hands to Erick. “If you can hit me before I get bored of you, I’ll let you finish me off. I won’t fight back, but if I get bored of you, well, let’s just say that you won’t be in this mock battle for much longer. Sound fair?”

Hagen dropped from the rock and began jumping in place, readying himself for the ensuing battle.

Erick held his rifle steadily while never losing eyesight of Hagen, whose mocking grin never left. His tight suit rubbed against itself, creating the only sound between them. Erick peered around him through the corners of his eyes to formulate a plan when he noticed a large tree to his left. The tree looked identical to the others, but he caught it because of its position and angle.

Pointing his rifle directly at the tree, Erick shot a bullet without a moment’s thought.

“What-“ Hagen questioned his actions before bending over backward. The bullet had bounced off the tree and aimed right for his stomach. Bending forward to stand straight, he laughed as he jumped into the trees with supernatural strength.

Erick followed him up as he continued to fire with precision. Despite his inhuman aim, Hagen continued to dodge as he danced around him with egotistical flair. He jumped off the barks of trees as he appeared to fly through the trees; all the while, Erick couldn’t get so much as an inch near his body.

Hagen took the bark off the trees and threw it back to Erick as he continued to chuckle to himself. Erick dodged his slow attacks, but the dodging took away from his incredible aim.

Then, Hagen stopped.

Erick was behind a few branches and aimed his rifle at his face but didn’t fire.

“I’ll stand still for three seconds,” Hagen said as he outstretched his arms.

“Three.”

Thinking it was a trick, Erick looked around him for any traps. He began shooting the vines that hung from above them.

“Two.”

Still believing it to be a trap, Erick shot the bark of the trees around him. Compared to the bark on the ground, this was much thinner, allowing the bullets from the rifle to go straight through it. Shards of wood flew through the air as he shot every possible tree around them.

“One.”

Erick aimed his rifle at Hagen and took a shot at the soonest possible moment. He watched as the bullet appeared to move in slow motion towards his opponent’s face. Just before it did, however…

“Zero.”

Hagen dropped from the trees to the ground below, just narrowly missing the bullet by mere inches. Erick reacted quickly as he jumped from the branches in suit, using the branch he was on to propel himself to meet Miura.

Landing, he found himself in point-blank range of Hagen. Quickly raising his gun to fire, Hagen swiped it aside. In reaction to his target’s actions, Erick swung his opposite elbow, hoping to hit him in the face, but Hagen quickly ducked underneath his attack. He slid beneath Erick’s legs and appeared on the other side. Erick swung his rifle around, but with one hand, Hagen stopped his action as he struggled to bring it to his face.

“You bitch,” Erick grunted.

“Oh, you’re great fun!” Hagen chuckled as he dropped his hand, allowing Erick to swing his gun around with too much strength that he fired on the other side of his head. Stopping in his tracks, Erick attempted to bring the rifle back to Hagen’s head as Hagen planted his hands on Erick’s shoulders, vaulting over him, laughing hysterically.

As Erick slowly brought his gun around to meet his opponent, Hagen leaped into the air and began jumping all around Erick, leaving behind the marks of wind on the bushes caused by his incredible speed. Erick attempted to follow him but was so consumed with getting an aim on Miura that he couldn’t keep up. He then felt a sharp pain in his back, then his chest. Hagen began to leap towards him to chew away his stamina by attacking his vital points slowly.

“As strong as your confidence is,” Hagen began. “Your weakness is just as apparent.” Hagen’s voice echoed through the forest as his extreme speed created a sound bubble encasing Erick. “You get too consumed with one idea, and until you complete that idea, success or not, you become engrossed with it. Tunnel-vision, if you will.”

Erick was slowly losing speed and could barely keep up with Hagen’s movements. The blows he received only made things worse for him, and he closed his eyes, hoping for an idea to come.

As he continued to receive blows, he thought about the words Hagen spoke to him and how he could use that to his advantage. As he thought, he noticed a pattern of the blows he received. He formulated a plan and opened his eyes.

Erick waited a moment to get his timing right, and when he anticipated Hagen to strike, he jumped in the air, gun in hand. Pointing it downwards, he saw Hagen miss his target attempting to slow himself to a halt. With one last burst of energy, he pulled the trigger of his gun, recoiling him backward in the air.

Once he landed on the ground, he picked himself up and aimed his gun in the direction Hagen was flying. He quickly broke out into a sprint, hoping to get Hagen while he’s slowed. Suddenly, he tripped over something obscured by the bushes, his gun slipping out of his hands as he fell onto his stomach. He quickly turned to his back to see what he had tripped over and jumped to his feet.

Hagen was lying on the ground beside him.

Erick jumped to his feet and riffled through the grass in search of his gun. He swiftly found it and pointed it at the fallen over Miura.

Before he could shoot, however, Miura stuck his hands in the air. “I surrender,” he said, chuckling. “You win. I have lost.”

\* \* \*

“You think you could run from me, bitch?” Henry dug his foot deeper into Leonard’s chest. “As if you’d be able to run from me, less so your past!” He slammed the butt of his gun into Leonard’s face. “You know, Rietveld,” He hit Leonard’s face again. “Your allies were all rather smart, leaving you alone to face me.” Again. “I knew that kid. What was his name? Foreman? Was a smart one.” Again. “The rest? Maybe not so much, but that Foreman kid sure proved his worth.”

Henry continued to slam his gun into Leonard’s face, all the while Leonard looked in Eldric’s direction for help.

Eldric wasn’t there.

In the time Henry took to pin Leonard, Eldric had escaped from the scene like a dog with its tail through its legs.

Henry lifted his foot from Leonard’s chest and hoisted him by his collar, pinning him against a nearby tree.

“I’ll admit, though,” Henry chuckled. “I wasn’t expecting you to be tossed away this easily!” He dropped Leonard, who crumpled to the ground. “It looks like the Rietvelds, despite being oh so apologetic for their traitorous ways, still can’t catch a break from us normal folk.”

“You’re wrong,” Leonard mumbled under his breath.

“What?” Henry laughed at Leonard, slamming his heel into the blonde man’s shoulder. “Have you forgotten what your family did to us? To Einrich? Without you, there would be no war! Your great-whatever the fuck-grandpa Meinir was a traitorous scum, and that blood runs deep through your veins.” Henry slammed his foot several more times. “It’s your blood, your family, that spawned that devil of a nation and caused millions of great Einrich men to die at the hands of demons. It is because of you that all of this is happening.”

“Meinir may have been my ancestor,” Leonard stated. “But that doesn’t make me a traitor.”

Henry lifted his foot. “You know,” He began bitterly. “I’m starting to get sick and tired of that stuck-up, good-for-nothing attitude of yours.” Henry stuck his rifle at Leonard’s forehead. “I think a real bullet through your skull ought to be the right punishment for a traitor like you.”

Henry cocked his gun and smiled devilishly.

“Goodbye-”

Before pulling the trigger, a figure swung in on a vine, smearing his foot across Henry’s face and knocking him to the ground. As Henry attempted to collect himself and react, that same foot had planted itself firmly on his rifle.

Leonard’s face lit up. “Eldric!!”

“Sorry for taking so long,” Eldric replied. “Good thing these vines can hold my weight.”

“Foreman!” Henry tried to stand up, but Eldric planted his second foot on Kistler’s chest.

“Sorry, it’s Freeman, and you should really pull the trigger while you have the chance. Talking for so long only leaves you more vulnerable.”

Henry clicked his tongue and laid his head on the ground as he put his hands up in defeat, letting go of his rifle in the process. Eldric picked it up with his foot and tossed it aside. He turned back to Leonard and stepped off Henry’s chest.

“All right,” Eldric said, walking towards Leonard. “Let’s catch up with Kastor and Erick. Hopefully, they’re still around.”

Leonard did not respond. His relieved face quickly drew a worried look.

“What’s wrong? We got Henry to-“

Without warning, Eldric felt his breath being squeezed out of him. Henry had jumped up and put him in a chokehold while he wasn’t looking. Eldric fell to his knees as he tried to pull himself from the grasp. The more he struggled, however, the harder Henry tugged on his neck. Without anything else to do, he reached out to Leonard, coughing as he gasped for air.

Leonard couldn’t move. He was stunned silent as he looked at Henry’s devilish smile wipe the consciousness off Eldric. If he stood idly by, maybe Henry would let him surrender nicely. He took a step back. Henry looked Leonard in the eyes, and his smile grew more prominent. Eldric was slowing his movements and gasped for less and less air.

“Leonard-“

Leonard jumped as Eldric’s one word reached his ears. His slipping consciousness was more visible than ever before. Henry wasn’t letting up as he increased his grip on Eldric’s neck. As he watched the scene play in front of him, he gripped his rifle harder. With a deep breath, he quickly raised his rifle at Henry.

Henry’s smile dropped, and he stared right at Leonard. “You want to appear as a savior now, Rietveld?” He exclaimed. “Eliminating me won’t absolve your family’s sins, just step away and don’t get involved like you were always meant to do!”

Leonard tightened his grip even further, placing his finger on the trigger. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “I really didn’t want to do this.”

Closing his eyes, he pulled the trigger. The bullet flew and hit Henry in the chest, a fatal hit. Despite being shot, he continued to choke Eldric. With a last gasp for air, Eldric slumped over as he went unconscious.

Henry took his arms away from Eldric and glared at Leonard as he slowly rose from the ground. He took a step toward Leonard before lunging towards him with outstretched hands. Just before he reached Leonard, a large figure dropped from the trees above. Leonard fell back onto the ground as he watched a uniformed man take bindings and wrap them around Henry’s hands. Without a word, he pulled him from the ground and walked him out of the forest, Henry shouting like a child the whole time.

Once Henry was out of sight, another uniformed man dropped from the trees.

“The mock battle is over,” he began, taking the rifle out of Leonard’s hands, “You will follow me now.”

03

“…man”

“Mr. Free…”

“Mr. Freeman!”

Eldric awoke with a gasp of air as he sat up from the ground. Looking around him, he found himself in a clearing within the forest, surrounded by the members of his squad. Before he could open his mouth to ask what was going on, a large hand covered his face while he was pulled from the ground. Jolting his head around, he saw a large man wearing the same clothing as the soldier he had seen before the battle began. He peered back towards his group and noticed that each had a soldier of their own behind them as if they were each under arrest. In front of him stood the tall officer who had officiated the battle.

“Ah, good. You’re finally awake.” Asante grabbed Eldric by the arm and pulled him to his feet. “Now that we’re all here, I can begin.”

As Asante stepped aside, Eldric noticed that Hagen and Henry were both in the clearing, looking just as confused as everyone else.

“Now, before anything else, I would like to clarify where exactly we are.” Asante turned to his left and nodded, prompting the dim artificial moonlight to turn into bright white light. “We are still underground,” he said, “but we are not in the same facility as before so as not to interrupt the proceedings of the trials. So don’t get any ideas of running away.”

Asante retrieved a notebook from his front uniform pocket and began flipping through the pages. The notebook had no words on the cover or back and was leatherbound, perhaps unique to Asante’s collection, Eldric thought. Once Asante found his page, he promptly closed the small booklet and returned it to his pocket.

“Allow me to reintroduce myself once more,” Asante began again, “my name is Captain Malik Asante, head of the Imperial Guardian Force’s Erdenjist Branch, and your trials are finished.”

The first to react to those words was Henry, who leaped from the soldier’s grasp at Asante. Before reaching him, Asante kicked him in his stomach, sending him to the ground.

After coughing his spit, Henry yelled at the officer. “The fuck you mean we’re done?! The battle hasn’t even been finished. I’m still in! Hagen’s still in! This fight is still going on!”

Asante laughed to himself, causing the soldiers around him to chuckle as well. “Would you like to know why this trial is over?” Asante questioned, “I’ll tell you why.” Pulling out his notebook once more, Asante flipped to the last page and began reading from it. “Henry Kistler, applicant 38. Notes: In addition to using real lead bullets, which is cause enough for immediate elimination and imprisonment, Kistler refused to adhere to the needs of his teammates, instead proceeding to assault the opponents on his own, leaving his team in the dust. Recommendation: Immediate removal from the trials.”

Henry scoffed and attempted to stand but was held down by a soldier. “That little diary of yours ain’t shit.”

“Oh, is it now?” Asante grinned. “You know what? You’re right! The notebook forgot to include that you surrendered to Mr. Freeman but continued to fight. If I’m not mistaken, that is a blatant defiance of the rules and is enough to remove you from the trials, as if we needed another reason to do so.”

Eldric turned to his teammates and exchanged smiles, almost laughing at the humiliated Kistler. Asante noticed this and turned to face the team.

“Do not think you lot are here because you’re saints,” Asante stated to Eldric and the others as he moved to Kastor, “Kastor Gregor, applicant 302, while quick on his feet, his reaction time was abysmal, especially when it came to an unknown enemy, losing his gun with less than five shots taken at it.” He then stepped in front of Eldric. “Eldric Freeman, applicant 301, despite being a Red-Light citizen, showed leadership prowess when it counted but lacked in common sense. Did not finish Mr. Kistler off when he had the chance, causing further damage had this not been a trial.” Asante looked up from his notebook. “And I will add that you were putting Rietveld’s life on the line with your stunt, and that is not leadership; it’s idiotic and self-destructive.” Moving past Erick, he stood in front of Leonard. “Leonard Rietveld, applicant 76, did not shoot Mr. Kistler when he had the chance, showing feeble quick-thinking ability, expected of a Rietveld.”

As Asante moved away from Leonard, Hagen laughed to himself.

“Is something the matter, Mr. Miura?” Asante was now directly in front of the short man, who couldn’t stop laughing.

Hagen caught his breath and stared at him. “So, what?” He began, bearing a devilish grin, “the only reason we’re here is that we sucked ass? Come on, officer, surely you understand better than I that the six of us aren’t the bottom of the barrel, so what’s the real reason?”

Asante ignored the taunt and continued reading from his notebook. “Hagen Miura, applicant 1. Notes: This is not a game.” After stating this, he closed his notebook and returned it to his front pocket.

“So that’s my only reason, then?” Hagen laughed so loudly that Eldric wondered if the other applicants in the original room could hear him. “Talk about half-assed. Now I know this has nothing to do with my level because I know I could beat you ten rounds in a row before you knock me out. This isn’t a game? Then stop creating rules like it is one, you doofus! In a real fight, there are no stakes apart from life or death. If you’re going to be miserable the entire fight, then you’re better off dead.” Hagen continued to laugh as Asante stepped away from him and ordered the soldiers to hold Eldric and the others in a straight line.

Once Hagen had shut up—not without the help of a soldier—Asante continued his speech. “Each of you performed quite terribly in this mock battle, and I believe I’ve illustrated to each of you why. You may not be at the bottom of the barrel, but you’re damn near brushing it.”

Eldric looked at his feet. He knew what was coming next and was ready to hear the words. His father would likely scold him for leaving, and his daily trips to the middle districts would probably end forever. Before he could begin planning his next step, Asante continued.

“That said!” he yelled, lifting Eldric’s head with his voice alone, “each of you has shown qualities that I was looking for in a soldier. You will not know these qualities, nor why I was looking for them, but it is because of these qualities which you possess that I am taking you under my supervision at the Imperial Guardian Force’s Erdenjist Branch. You will be trained throughout this month and the ones following and will be positioned alongside the inside of the border for the remainder of the year, with the possibility of being promoted to the outer or upper border.”

\* \* \*

Asante led Eldric and the others to the surface, where the sun was still shining brightly on the open field they had found themselves hours before. Next to the ticket booth that Eldric had visited when he first arrived was a stagecoach that was usually reserved for the nobles.

The coach was big enough to hold ten and bore the imperial colors purple and blue. The windows were tinted a dark gray and lined with golden paint. The three horses that sat in front of the carriage made no sound as the driver read a newspaper in silence.

“This coach will take you lot to Erdenjist. The travel time is an estimated three days, but this coach will take you there in two and a half. You will stop in Westbrook, about a half-day trip outside your destination. I will not be in attendance when you arrive, but Commander Antonov will welcome you.”

Henry opened his mouth to speak, but Asante put his hand up. “Before you ask your questions, I’ll answer them for you. First, this is your only opportunity to get involved with the military. No other branches will take you from now until the end of time. Second, where this carriage comes from is none of your business. Third, you’re free to walk away from this offer if you wish, but once the carriage leaves, your opportunity will go right with it. You will not be let in if you show up in Erdenjist a month from now. Fourth, and finally, clothes, food, and beverages will be supplied during the trip and in Erdenjist, so there is no need to return home. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Asante opened the carriage door before stepping away from the group and returning underground to the training facility. Eldric looked at the others to gauge their reactions to the information they’d received. Kastor stood dumbfounded while Leonard and Erick were already discussing their next move. Hagen had already entered the carriage, looking under the seats and in the overhead baskets. Henry, meanwhile, had no words to say. Eldric expected more vulgar screams from the stout man, but none came out. With a rage, Henry stormed away from the group and returned to the ticket booth, presumably asking to reenter the underground facility.

“I’ll be heading out in fifteen minutes,” the carriage driver said, looking away from his newspaper. The driver wore a white uniform with a black-brimmed cap. His shoes were worn, and his face was young with visible signs of stress. His hair was hidden beneath his cap but connected to an earnest attempt at a beard. “Whether all six of you get in or none do, I’m leaving when I’m leaving. My clock doesn’t revolve around you.” With his few words, he returned to reading his newspaper.

Eldric knew his decision already. No matter if it was just him and the mysterious Hagen, he was to take the opportunity and leave the capital once and for all. *Ideally,* he thought, *I’ll climb the ladder and become a captain. I’ll finally rid myself of the title of Red-Light citizen, and I can start fresh.* He stepped towards the carriage but was stopped by a tug of his shirt.

“You’re going?” Kastor asked as he turned around.

Eldric nodded.

“Well, then I’ll go too. I wasn’t convinced with that commander’s pitch, but I’m all for new experiences, right?”

Eldric entered the carriage, which was much bigger inside than he thought. Hagen had already claimed his spot in the far corner, and he welcomed the two. The seats were a soft red fabric, and the walls a dark brown. Above the seats were baskets for what he could only imagine housed baggage. Kastor hunched over as he attempted to avoid a head injury, eventually sitting on the other end of the coach from Hagen, next to the door. Eldric sat down across the aisle from Kastor, his legs having very little room for movement.

“It’s nice,” Kastor mentioned, still looking around the stagecoach, “I could live here for a month and still have the energy to go longer.”

Hagen eagerly slid down the seat and put himself next to Kastor. This was the first time Eldric got a good look at Hagen. He still wore his dark suit, but it had visible texture changes around the shoulders, knees, and other joints. His hair was a darker shade of Black, complementing his smaller eyes and thinner complexion. “You say that now, but once we’re a day into the trip, you’ll be begging to get out. I’ve ridden a fair share of these myself throughout the continent. They never get fun.”

“All right, Mr. Ambassador for the Empire, calm down. I was pointing out how it looked nice.”

The next to enter were Leonard and Erick, who sat down on Eldric’s side. Hagen flashed Erick a smile but didn’t get one in response. Leonard didn’t look anyone in the eyes. Instead, he opted to look outside the window at Henry, who had yet to enter the carriage.

“Do you think he’ll come?” Leonard questioned.

“Hard to tell,” Hagen replied.

With those few words from Hagen, the carriage driver jumped down from his seat and stood by the door. “Last call.”

“Fine.” Henry walked up to the driver and pushed him away from the door, stepping in and closing it himself. He sat next to Hagen and across from Leonard, regrettably.

Eldric exchanged glances with Erick and Leonard. The carriage driver’s frustration could be heard from outside before the entire carriage started to move. Eldric looked outside the window as he saw the Sur District's tall buildings turn into the Market District's tiny houses. Soon enough, the carriage reached the edge of the city where great walls stood. Eldric had only seen these walls from a distance before, so seeing them up close was a surreal experience. After the guards checked with the driver about his destination, they were off again into the great plains of Einrich.

Eldric had never been outside the city before. He had no reason to. Everything he had known was inside the city walls, so escaping to the outside was never something that went on his mind. He continued to look out his window and saw plains that extended as far as his eye could see.

“I’m surprised you came,” Kastor mentioned, looking at Henry. “I thought you wanted to be on the front lines.”

Henry scoffed. “Of course I did. Being put in the lowest of the low is a blow my family will never recover from. But running away is a blow even lower than that. I can’t believe the Guardian Force is still around; there is literally no point in them existing! The fight’s up north, not on our border. It’s just wasted manpower, but our leaders are too blind to see even that.”

“Isn’t it to protect from the Men of Gordon?” Leonard questioned.

Henry smashed his foot onto Leonard’s. “You seriously believe that they exist?!” He laughed so loud that the small carriage shook. “I took you to be a fool but not stoop to that level! The Men of Gordon were an old wives’ tale to get kids to behave. There’s no way that people capable of destroying entire countries ever existed. Not a hundred years ago, not today, not ever.”

“The Men of Gordon?” Eldric had only heard of them a handful of times but never really knew what they were. His father refrained from the topic, and those in the Red-Light District were never ones to discuss the matter. All he’d heard about them was from Buddy and how they were the most powerful force on the continent before they secluded themselves from the world.

“I think you’re sorely mistaken,” Hagen stated as he leaned forward. He still bore his devilish grin that had seemed never to go away. “They were very much real; some are alive, even today.”

Kastor thought to himself. “Weren’t they formed at the start of the war? It’s hard to say they survived over a hundred years. Nobody’s lived that long.”

“Oh, it’s possible. In fact, their being alive is why we’re fighting in the north.”

“Now I know you’re full of shit.” Henry stood up, his head brushing up against the ceiling of the carriage. “The reason we’re fighting in the north is for resources. Wargia’s mountains hold scarce resources, and being able to control them is necessary for world domination. The republic wants power and is trying to take control through force.”

“Yes, resources are one of the reasons for the war’s existence, but why not fight Reinbose head-on?” Hagen crossed his arms and ushered Henry to sit down. “Does it not strike you as interesting? The point is that the Men of Gordon were made a hundred years ago in the Second Alcrestian War by the Einrich Empire, pushed Reinbose back, then proceeded to *attack* their very creator and end the war by the creation of the Land of Solitude. We moved north because we didn’t want to risk going through Solitude. The resources were just a benefit to that. And, hey, from what I hear, we’ve finally made some ground up in Rivercrest. The war is turning around for us!”

“Second Alcrestian War?” Eldric asked Hagen. “When was that?

“You seriously don’t know? I guess it would make sense considering your background. The Second War started a hundred years ago when Reinbose invaded our land. It ended just five years later when the Men of Gordon were created. The Northern War we’re fighting in has been going on for sixteen years and has been a relative stalemate.”

“And what of the first?” After Eldric had asked this question, everyone turned towards Leonard, who had shifted his gaze outside the window.

“The First Alcrestian War was when Meinir Rietveld and the Reinbose Revolution rebelled against Einrich. Creating the Reinbose Republic.” Leonard looked down at his feet.

“Yeah,” Henry chuckled. “All you gotta know about that first war is that this fucker’s family is the reason for it. How’s it feel, Rietveld—knowing that you’ve got millions of dead bodies on your hands?”

Kastor sighed. “Well, that was a great history lesson, but you’re saying we’re just protecting Einrich from the supposed attack from the Men of Gordon? Wasn’t the whole story that they won’t attack us unless we go to them first?”

*Hmm…* Hagen thought to himself, pressing his finger to his chin.

“Well, I agree with Leonard that the Guardian Force is protecting something,” Eldric said, “but not Einrich. I mean, isn’t it odd that we’re the only ones selected for the Guardian Force? That test was special as well. There’s something else that we’re not being told.”

“Special test?” Erick spoke for the first time. “What do you mean, Eldric?”

“Well, before the mock battle, I spoke with Asante. I had a few questions for him. Didn’t you guys think it was strange that we didn’t have a basic aptitude test? Like, we didn’t test our endurance or strength, just went straight into combat.”

“I don’t think that’s weird,” Henry replied hastily. “Combat is the easiest way to determine whether someone’s ready for the front lines or not.”

“We’re in a war; it makes sense that we’d skip a step or two,” Kastor agreed.

“That’s what I thought, but why would they send Asante? He’s never on the front lines. How would he know what’s best to go? I asked Asante about it, and from his response, it sounds like they were looking specifically for Guardian Force members.”

Henry snickered. “I never thought I’d hear a more stupid thing than what Miura said a second ago, but here we are. The lowest group in the military had the grounds to search out people to join them specifically? Get real! We’re at the bottom of the barrel, and they need to weed us out before we’re even close to being up north, which is obviously never going to happen! There’s no need for silly conspiracies. We’re all fucked. I’m gonna get some shuteye, don’t wake me up.” With his few comments, he leaned back into his seat and closed his eyes, instantly falling asleep.

Eldric went quiet. He had been almost sure they were looking for Guardian Force members, but maybe he had been wrong. Perhaps they were the bottom of the barrel, and they were looking for another branch. Regardless, he was happy that he had made it at all and that he’d be able to get paid. He looked outside once again as the carriage passed a small village. There was no sign telling the name; it was only a road leading into the village center.

“Nobody lives there anymore,” Kastor mentioned, looking out the window as well. “I had family who knew people there; they all moved into the city or out of the country due to the war.”

Eldric didn’t reply. As the carriage moved away from the abandoned village, he looked back inside to see that everyone had shut their eyes, save for Kastor, who had pulled a book from above the seat and begun to read it.

Knowing there was nothing more for him to do, Eldric followed suit and shut his eyes, hoping to get a little sleep.

\* \* \*

The journey was, indeed, very long. There was the occasional stop to get food or to stretch the legs in a small village, but for the most part, the trip comprised sleeping, periodic conversation, and silence.

They were about half days treck from Westbrook.

“I’m curious, Henry.” Erick had been reading a book he bought from a small town along the way. He closed it before looking at Henry. Only the two of them and Eldric had been awake. The rest had been asleep for some time, as it was the middle of the night. “Where does your hatred of Leonard come from?”

“I thought I made it clear that I hate stupid questions,” Henry began. He had his elbow on the windowsill and had been watching the trees pass as the carriage took them late into the night.

“Is it such a stupid question?” Erick stood, rubbing his head against the carriage ceiling as he put his book away into his suitcase above the seats.

“Yeah, it is. If you must know, it’s because of what his family did. Without them, none of us would be in this mess.”

“Is that the case? I was under the impression that we were in this because of our actions alone.”

“Not this mess, specifically, the war as a whole. Leonard’s great-ancestor started the revolution leading to Reinbose. I thought we went over this?”

“We did, but-“

“So it’s a stupid question. You already had your answer a day ago.”

“So you hate his ancestor but not him?”

Henry took his elbow off the windowsill and glared at Erick. Eldric, meanwhile, had not looked at either due to not wanting to butt into their conversation. He did, however, keep listening.

“If you ask another stupid question, I will end this carriage ride prematurely for you.”

With that, Erick said not another word. Eldric was tempted to keep pushing the issue but felt it was best that he did not. Instead, he turned to Erick and asked him about his family.

“We’re straight down the middle. My family came from Arlington generations ago, and because we’re not ‘pure Einrich blood,’ we haven’t been able to get very far. You said you were part of the Red-Light District, yeah?”

“I never said it myself. It seems that it was common knowledge by the time I’d made my appearance. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” Erick laid his head back and closed his eyes. “I just mentioned it because you don’t seem like the type to be from there.”

Eldric knew that there was this stigma against those from where he lived. Either they were thugs, rapists, or murderers. Nobody would expect to step into the district and get out alive. It was one of the reasons for never revealing his home to Buddy until much later. If he had led with that, people would gain this perceived notion that he was out to ruin their lives. At least, that’s what he believed.

Looking over at Henry, Eldric fully grasped how built he was. He had seen him from a distance before the mock battle and again during it, but he never got to take a full look at how his body was built. His broad shoulders pierced through his dark jacket, and his legs were defined perfectly through his pants. Henry glanced at Eldric, causing his eyes to turn back outside.

\* \* \*

Westbrook was a town situated on a lake. Its main road traversed the entire town, meaning one could see the lake from the entrance. Compared to the small farming villages, it was the largest town Eldric had seen since leaving the capital. Citizens stood outside as they watched the carriage slowly drive through the central street, passing by shops, houses, taverns, and guard posts. When the carriage turned down a side street, the number of onlookers diminished, and the buildings surrounding them turned entirely into houses. Eventually, the carriage stopped in front of a large house with a gate and front yard space.

The driver opened the carriage door and ushered the group to exit the vehicle, assuring them that their luggage would also be brought inside. Stepping around to the left of the carriage, Eldric was in awe of the size of the house. It supported three floors and windows plenty. As it was evening, the lights adorning the house shone brighter than the rest of the village. Its front gate bore a crest with a large letter A, presumed to be for Commander Antonov.

As if on cue.

“Velcome, gentlemen!” The gate opened to reveal a man about Eldric’s height with open arms. He had a full head of hair and wore the imperial uniform Asante had worn. His gray mustache was strewn across his entire face, and his eyes were wide and blue. “I am Commander Timofei Antonov. Head of Vestbrook militant branch of Imperial Army and Ambassador for Imperial Guardian Force, how do you do?”

His speech held a strange accent, which Eldric had not heard before. His r’s were rolled, and his w’s were sharpened. Looking around at his peers, he noticed their faces appeared taken aback.

“Ah, yes,” Antonov began once again. “My accent is strange, no? I come from island in Bay of Regivald, and accent is side effect. I assure you, is much better than vhen I first come.” He put his arms down at his side. “You have questions, no? Come. Zere vill be answering over dinner.”

\* \* \*

The inside of the mansion seemed larger than on the outside. A gigantic chandelier hung from the ceiling, and servants lined the edges of the walls. Antonov directed the group to the dining room, where servants were also waiting.

“Zese vill be personal servants to you. Ask anything, zey vill do incredible vork. Do not vorry for your bags. Zey is in rooms already. Now, let us discuss over vaiting for our dinner.”

The dining room was large, with a high ceiling and a large table in the center. The table could support up to twelve, so when the group sat down, it looked like they were missing half their party. It was set with fine silverware that reflected Eldric’s face at him. In the center were several candlesticks, which had all been lit. At the ends of the room, there were cupboards with paintings of people above them. The first painting was of a singular man. He bore the imperial uniform and held a face of confidence.

The second painting was of a group of fifty or so men, all appearing to be in their twenties. They, too, bore the imperial uniform, though it was slightly different, offering a main coloring scheme of black with a blue secondary, as opposed to the standard purple and blue.

“Has painting caught your eye?” Antonov asked him.

Eldric, not wanting to appear rude, nodded in affirmation.

“Interesting painting, no? Apparently, vas painted from famous painter in Vestbrook. But painter is not what is unique about it.” Antonov walked to the painting and put his hands behind his back. “Zose in painting, apparently, are Men of Gordon.”

Eldric rose from his seat. “So they were real?”

Antonov, turning back to the table, shrugged. “Is hard to say. Painting vas hundred years ago painted. Plus, is only painting of Men of Gordon. None ozers exist. Personally, I zink zey exist. Or, is to say, I hope.”

“Why in the hell would you hope people of mass destruction exist?” Henry blurted.

As Antonov sat in his seat at the table’s end, he placed his hands next to his plate. “Who can say? Perhaps zere is need for saviors.”

After Antonov finished his thought, servants came from another room with trays of food and placed them about the center of the table. Smaller offerings of vegetables and baked goods surrounded large portions of chicken, beef, and boar.

The commander stretched his arms forward over the table.   
“Please, have lots of food. Is ze best you find in all of Vestbrook.”

With those words, everyone began taking food from the center. Eldric looked to his sides and saw Kastor and Erick pile their plate with an abundance of food, while he kept things light with everything he knew he could finish.

\* \* \*

About thirty minutes into the dinner.

“I’ve got a question,” Hagen asked as he wiped his face with a napkin. “What does the ‘Ambassador for the Imperial Guardian Force’ do?”

“I see. How to put?” The commander thought for a while, leaving everyone silent for the several minutes he took. “You are recruits. I cover second leg of trip you took, see you make Erdenjist. All recruits come to me, go zrough me. Make sense?”

Hagen nodded his head.

“Wait a minute,” Henry stated firmly as he dropped his utensils on his plate. “If you take in all the recruits, then where the hell are the rest of them? Surely we can’t be all there is.”

“Oh, you are.”

Almost as if it were second nature, Antonov affirmed Henry’s suspicions. He went back to eating like there was nothing strange about it. Eldric exchanged glances with Kastor, who was just as baffled as everyone else.

Leonard spoke.

“Why are there so few of us? I get there’s a war going on, but isn’t the force still one of the more important ones?”

Having finished his plate, Antonov handed it to one of the servants, who promptly took it to the back room. “Guardian Force has no need for many. Only few come each year. You are most ve’ve had in seven years.” The commander stood from his seat and called his servants to the dining room. “Vas lovely dinner vith you all. I must tend to duties, so servants vill escort you to rooms vhen finished vith dinner. After, house is yours. Explore to hearts content, but no zird floor. Zird floor is out-of-bounds and, if caught, is jail sentence of many years.” After bidding everyone good night, Antonov walked off with two servants.

Everyone ate in silence after the commander’s departure. Eldric looked around the table and noticed that the servants left in the room had moved away from the walls to right behind everyone.

“Not used to the noble life, huh, Freeman?” Henry laughed as he put his napkin on his plate and stood. “Well, enjoy it! It’s probably the closest to the noble life you’d ever get, not that I’d expect a Red-Lighter to know that.” With those parting words, Henry bid good night to everyone and led the servant away from the dining room.

Erick was the next to leave, expressing his exhaustion from the trip. As he was going, he gave Eldric some parting words. *Don’t let it get to you. That’s the Kistler family for you.*

“Aw, the fun people are gone,” Hagen said as he stood up. “No offense, guys. I’m sure you’re fun too.” He left without another word.

It wasn’t long before Eldric was thinking about leaving as well. To his left, Kastor had been finishing his meal as well, and Leonard looked like he’d been done the entire time.

“You guys want to explore this place?” Kastor asked as he stood up. “I feel like we should take advantage of our downtime while we have it.”

“You two can explore,” Eldric said as he wiped his face of the final pieces of food. “I’m going to take advantage of the downtime by sleeping in a bed.”

Eldric turned around and asked the servant to take him to his room. He told Kastor and Leonard he’d see them the next day and followed the servant to the large foyer in the center of the house. The foyer had ceilings as high as the house’s entranceway, and two large staircases led up to the second floor. Candles were lit across the railing to allow for light to illuminate the home. Following the servant upstairs, Eldric turned around to see a large window overlooking the street outside and the lake beyond that.

“How long have you worked in this house?” Eldric asked the servant, who wore a black tuxedo and white gloves. He was slightly shorter than Eldric and looked much younger.

“Only three months,” the servant replied as they reached the top of the stairs. He led Eldric down a hallway with several closed rooms. There was an open room that looked like a lounge space, but Eldric did not pry.

“What made you come here?”

The servant remained quiet before making his decision to answer. “It was the only option I had. I fled Wargia. I’m not the only one, either. Westbrook is full of people like me. Even some from Rivercrest are here. I couldn’t imagine what they feel.” He stopped next to a closed door and took out a key. Unlocking the door, he stepped inside. “This is your room.”

The room was quite sizeable, almost as big as Eldric’s entire home in the Red-Light District. A bed was positioned at the wall to his right and straight ahead was a large window draped with curtains. At the opposite end of the room, a desk stood with an unlit candle on it. The servant walked over to the desk and lit the candle, illuminating the room. He apologized that there weren’t more advanced lights as in the city, but Eldric didn’t mind. The moonlight had already illuminated the room, but the candle allowed Eldric to greater appreciate the room more.

The walls were patterned with intricate wallpaper, and the floor was wooden with a carpet in the center. There was a painting of another person Eldric didn’t know above the bed, and around the walls were various cupboards and closets.

Handing Eldric the key he’d used moments earlier, the servant instructed him to use the lock and unlock the door. “I’ll be outside the door for two more hours before heading to bed. Please do not hesitate to ask if you have any questions.”

“Thank you, uh-”

“Alf. Alf Villads.”

“Thank you, Alf.” Eldric closed his door and locked it using the key he was given. He looked around his room once more and noticed the luggage which had been on the back of the carriage was sitting on one of the cupboards. Looking inside it, he saw a single set of clothes. He set aside what he thought would look good for the next day—a white button-down, black pants, and a tan vest. After setting those aside, he noticed a nightgown at the bottom of the luggage and changed into it.

He walked over to the window where he could see over all of the houses. The moon’s light provided a glimpse of what the village looked like during the day. On the other side of the lake, he saw the lights of another village, much smaller than Westbrook.

After closing the window curtains, he turned to his bed and laid down, nearly passing out. Eldric had never felt better in any bed he’d laid in. The mattress below was like laying on a bed of clouds, and after tucking himself under the sheets, he felt a moment of serenity before falling asleep.

\* \* \*

The following day, Eldric was awakened by the opening of his curtains and the sunlight hitting him in his face. The servant from the night before instructed that he go to the foyer in thirty minutes, for they were to head for Erdenjist.

Exiting the warmth of the bed, Eldric changed out of his nightgown and into the clothes he had set aside from the night before. The servant offered to help, but Eldric waved him off, saying he’d never needed help.

After following the servant down to the first floor, he noticed that he’d been the last to arrive in the foyer. Everyone had been wearing the same clothes as he had, which he found strange, but he didn’t think about it too much. Alternatively, Eldric noticed Antonov, who had worn his Imperial uniform again, bearing the hat he’d seen the other soldiers wear.

“Sleep well, Freeman?” Henry grinned. “I bet that’s the best sleep you’ll ever get in your life.”

Eldric didn’t even bother to reply.

“Good morning, Sir Eldric Freeman!” Antonov said happily. “Now zat all are here, let us go!” The commander led the group out of his home to a carriage much larger than the carriage they took to Westbrook. “Zis my personal carriage. Ve vill take to Erdenjist.

Everyone piled into the carriage in the same order they went the first time around, the only exception being Antonov sitting next to Henry. Soon after the driver closed the door, the carriage began moving.

Eldric looked out the window and saw the servant he talked with waving his hand. Eldric waved back at him. *May your future be better than your past.*

\* \* \*

The trip to Erdenjist was very similar to the journey to Westbrook. Long periods of silence with the occasional conversation, lots of reading from everyone, and several hours of looking out the window. The trip was significantly shorter, only lasting a few hours from end to end.

About an hour out of Erdenjist, Kastor spotted the single sign that they were getting close to their destination. The wall.

Towering over the border between Einrich and the Land of Solitude, the wall stood one hundred meters tall and cast a shadow down on the land below. It bestowed a light gray color and went as far as the eye could see.

“After training is finished,” Antonov began as he continued to look out the window. “You vork inside of vall. After few years, vork top of vall, few years later, vork outside of vall.”

As the carriage approached the town of Erdenjist, the wall’s presence became even more prominent. Its shadow encompassed the town and made everything look like it was the middle of the night. The town was less a town and more a military base, containing barracks and cafeterias in place of townhomes and restaurants. There was the occasional citizen, but the town appeared devoid of life, with empty streets and homes.

The carriage continued to the back of the town, where it stopped right in front of the wall. Antonov exited the vehicle, and everyone followed. A brick building was in front of them with three people outside. Antonov ran up to them and saluted. They did the same. While Eldric did not recognize the men to the left and right, he’d become very acquainted with the man in the center.

“Welcome, soldiers!” The man in the center shouted. “This is the Erdenjist branch of the Imperial Guardian Force. I am Captain Malik Asante, your branch head, and your training will begin now!”

04

May 14, 535

Eldric was startled awake by a booming siren that blared throughout the town of Erdenjist. He jolted up and knocked his head against the bunk bed above him. He rubbed the spot he hurt as Kastor jumped from the top bunk and ran over to the wooden dresser on the other side of the room.

The previous day, Eldric and the others were shown around their new barracks where he and Kastor now shared a room. The barracks themselves were considerably less comfortable than the mansion in Westbrook, and nothing about the building was noteworthy except its immense height. Eldric and Kastor slept on the 7th floor, the recruit floor. The room was small but had enough room for everything they needed: a bunk bed in the corner where they could sleep, a dresser on the other side of the room, and a small mirror above that dresser. The bathrooms were communal, which Eldric was accustomed to from back in the Red-Light District. After a quick shower, Eldric changed into his new uniform. It was the same uniform all Einrich soldiers wore: a purple jacket with yellow buttons and deep blue accents, with pants to match.

As he exited the bathroom he had to duck out of the way of several recruits who dashed to the staircase. Henry and Hagen were among them, so Eldric quickly ran to his room to drop off his old clothing and then sprinted to the staircase.

Once he reached the bottom, Kastor, Erick, and Leonard were waiting for him.

“Took you long enough,” Kastor said.

“Sorry, sorry.” Eldric walked up to them and clapped his hand together in an apologetic way.

“We were supposed to head to that brick building, right?” Erick asked.

“That’s where everyone was headed,” Kastor responded, “I saw Hagen and Henry ahead of us as well.”

The four ran over to the brick building where a group of soldiers lined up in front of the building. They followed suit, standing at the ready for whoever was to show up.

After a few minutes of waiting, Asante walked to the front of the group carrying a clipboard. He flipped through the first few pages before returning to the front and handing the clipboard to one of the soldiers standing beside him. He wore a long brown trench coat, buttoned with big black buttons down the center. He wore a black cap with a yellow band around the sides with the crest of Einrich embroidered on the front. When he turned to face the crowd, he saluted them and got the same in response.

“Today is your first day of basic training!” Asante yelled, “Should you prove capable, you will move to regular training in a month, and then advanced training the month after that. The elite of you shall succeed in three months time and be positioned along the wall. The rest of you will continue to train until we deem necessary. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir!” the crowd yelled.

“Good! If he calls your name,” he said, pointing to the soldier he gave the clipboard to, “You will be coming with me, the rest of you will remain here and another commander will oversee you.” Asante proceeded to name several soldier’s names off. The group was not huge, only around 40 stood beside him in anticipation of their name being called.

“Freeman!”

With a jolt, Eldric heard his name. He adjusted his stance and stood straight up. He listened to the few names Asante said before he finished, Kastor, Hagen, and Erick’s among them. As soon as he finished reading his names, he walked alongside the building and prompted the group to follow him. As Eldric stepped away, he waved goodbye to Leonard, who clearly did not like that he was put with Henry.

“This is the Guardian Force headquarters,” Asante said as he pointed to the building with his thumb. “On your first day of deployment, you’ll gain clearance to step inside to receive your rifles and caps.” As he finished, he rounded the corner and presented two soldiers with large boxes in front of them. “Until then,” Asante began, placing his hand on one of the boxes, “You will use these Enigma pistols. They’re reliable enough in battle, power enough to kill, and good enough for training. Come forward and retrieve yours.”

The group filed into two lines in front of the two boxes. As the line slowly moved forward, Kastor, who was behind Eldric in line, whispered into his ear. “I heard if you lose your gun they don’t replace it and you are kicked out of the Guardian Force.”

Eldric pushed him aside. “I won’t lose it regardless.” When he reached the front of the line, a soldier clad in the imperial uniform he wore handed him a small grey gun. It had black streaks running along the sides of it, and the trigger was a deep purple. Eldric’s hand felt the weight of the metal as the gun sat in his hand. On the side inscribed the make of the gun ‘Enigma’, just as Asante had said.

Once everyone had received their Enigma, Asante stepped forward once more. “Let’s head to the grounds!” He led the young group away from the brick building and a ways away from any buildings at all to a large field surrounded by a wooden fence.

“These are the grounds. Every day for a week you will report to this location at 6 o’clock every morning, and train in the physical arts until sundown. Next week, the other group will have this location and you will learn tactics in the classroom. If anyone is late, we will spend an extra three hours in the dark training to make sure it never happens again. Do I make myself clear!”

“Yes, sir!” The group yelled.

“Good! Pair up with another. There’s an odd number of you, so I’ll pair up with whoever is extra.”

Kastor smacked Eldric in the back. “Let’s ride, partner!”

Eldric smirked and nodded.

Soon, the whole group was split into different groups. To Eldric’s surprise, Erick and Hagen were not paired with one another. Instead, Hagen had been left alone and was now paired with Asante. Erick’s partner was a stout brown-haired man with a large mustache and round nose. He wore a smug look on his freckled face as Erick awkwardly stood tall next to him.

“Today, we will be focusing on basic hand-to-hand combat. As it is the first day, I expect no more than one lucky takedown out of the lot of you. If you are cornered, you may tap out and your opponent has won. Punching the head is not allowed, otherwise, proceed.”

Eldric was surprised at how few instructions Asante gave to the group, and before he knew it Kastor was standing at the ready.

“I ain’t gonna lose, Eldric, I’ve been sparring with my siblings all my life.”

Smiling, Eldric did the same. Once they were both ready, they charged at one another, swapping blow for blow. Kastor’s hands were quick as he dotted Eldric in spots he never knew could hurt as badly as they did. He staggered back and forth, and like a stream Kastor slid up close and locked his arms around Eldric’s neck, kicking the back of his legs to toss him to the ground.

Eldric tapped out and the two rose to their feet. “Where was this precision in the mock battle?” He asked jokingly.

“I become completely useless when guns get involved, never had them growin up. Unarmed though? I think I’m one of the best.”

The next round of fights repeated like clockwork. The two would exchange blows before Kastor would take advantage of an unfair position Eldric would wind up in. They went round after round, the final score being 18-4 in Kastor’s favor.

“I think it’s time to take a break,” Kastor said out of breath. “We’ve worked pretty hard I think.”

“I’ll say,” Eldric replied sarcastically. “And here I thought I’d do fine enough coming from the RLD.”

Kastor shrugged. “I’ve been training in real combat tactics for years now, it doesn’t surprise me that they can beat street-trained tactics.”

Eldric rolled his eyes and sat on the grass. Other groups were beginning to wear themselves out as well and followed suit. One group that hadn’t finished once was Erick and the stout boy. They’d gathered a small group of recruits cheering on the ensuing fight as they constantly got themselves in and out of chokeholds, knocked each other down, and exchanged blows.

Hagen and Asante had taken their fight to the clear opposite side of the grounds, with no end in sight for their battle either. Eldric was more interested in that battle considering Hagen’s mysterious speed. He watched as the two dodged each other’s attacks smoothly, like a dance with one another. They used the environment around them, Hagen jumping from ground to fence and then fence to ground in one swift movement.

As Eldric turned his head back to Erick’s fight, it looked to be near its conclusion. The stout boy had been knocked clean to the ground, and he struggled to get back up. The crowd erupted in cheers as Erick was surrounded by people congratulating him on his incredible victory. Kastor had been among them, and the two exchanged words before heading Eldric’s way.

“That sucked the life out of me,” Erick said, flopping to the ground.

“You came out on top, that’s all that matters!” Kastor exclaimed, giving a thumbs up.

Erick laughed. “It shouldn’t have taken as long as it did, I’ll admit. But it felt good to win.”

Kastor and Erick exchanged some banter as Eldric looked over to see how Hagen’s fight had gone, but to his surprise both him and Asante had vanished.

“Worried about me?”

Eldric jumped. Hagen had appeared out of thin air behind him and bore a large smile on his face.

“Sorry, Eldric, but I lost to the Captain. Looks like he still holds the upper hand after all.” He wiped his brow and adjusted his hair. “How’d you do, Erick?”

“I beat him after 11 years!” Erick said not moving an inch.

Hagen chuckled. “There are more to fights than simply brawling your way. I think you exemplify those qualities very well.”

Erick did not respond.

Soon, the group heard a loud gunshot coming from across the field. Asante had been there and expected everyone to come to him. Without noticing, the fights had taken the majority of the day, and the sun was well past noon.

Once the group of recruits had lined up in front of Asante, he returned his handgun to its holster. “We will now have a lunch break and return for more training.”

Eldric was getting used to Asante’s few words, and followed him like the rest of the group to the cookhouse.

\* \* \*

The second half of the day went just about as smoothly as the first half. Eldric was paired with a stranger, the two sparred against one another, and quickly Eldric was beginning to learn tactics taught to him by his peers and occasionally by Asante. Eventually, the sun ducked behind the large wall and the recruits were instructed to head to the cookhouse once more for their dinner, and then to return to the barracks to rest.

When they returned to their room after dinner, Eldric and Kastor could not fall asleep without discussing their day. The two changed into their pajamas and then pulled a chair from the hallway in order to engage in conversation.

“I didn’t realize training would be as relaxed as it is,” Kastor noted.

“Yeah, I’m sure they have something planned and are watching our every move.”

“You say that as if you’re acting like they are, Mr. ‘I’ll sit on the ground and watch others fight’.”

Eldric chuckled. “My head needed a little break from constant slamming against the ground, thanks to the younger brother over here.”

The two sat in silence as they heard other recruits talking in the room next to them. Their muffled voices soon rose and a loud argument ensued, causing Eldric and Kastor to laugh.

“How many siblings do you have?” Eldric asked.

“Two younger sisters and an older brother. They give me a lot of shit to deal with but I’m proud of them.”

“You come from the Middle District, right?”

“Yeah, we’re not a very rich family but we get by. I’m hoping my involvement in the military gives them some sort of relaxation knowing that I’m paid for. My last thing I want is for my parents to be concerned I won’t survive another day because they can’t afford it. I was talking with Erick about it, he comes from the Middle District as well, a family of mechanics I believe, and he’s here for the same reason.”

“To support your family?”

“Yeah, I mean, my parents have done *so much* for me, that if I did nothing for them I’d feel like I’m cheating them out of a happy life. Of course, they’d never admit that, but I can’t help but feel that I need to do what I can.”

“Do you know where Leonard and the others come from?”

“Hagen I’m not too sure,” Kastor said, rubbing his chin, “But I know that Leonard comes from the lower district. Not from a lack of money, far from it. The Rietvelds are some of the most successful people in the empire. If they wanted to go join the nobles, they could do so in a heartbeat.”

“So why don’t they?”

Kastor looked at Eldric with a dumbfounded look. “His ancestor committed the greatest act of treason against the state. Regardless of how great his family may be, they can’t erase that sin from their history. It’ll always be a stain on their back, no matter where they go. In fact, that’s why Leonard’s here to begin with. Every male in the Rietveld family must serve at least five years in the military, or so they say. Leonard couldn’t hold a gun to save his life, less so protect the nation, but because his last name holds so much power to it, there’s a lot that stems from it.”

“I guess I can understand where he’s coming from.” Eldric thought about his time in the Red-Light District. How, because of his heritage, he was forced to live in the slums for his entire life. Forced to pick the scraps off the ground in order to survive.

“Kistler’s a different story. His family is close with the royal family. I think the Kistler’s were originally from Arlington and rebelled against them in the First Alcrestian War to help Einrich, something like that. You’d have to ask Henry, he’s more likely to know than I.” Kastor flipped his chair backwards and propped his elbows on the back. “As far as I know, Henry’s got some crazy money back home.”

“Not enough to buy him better manners at least.”

Kastor laughed. “What about you? You obviously want to get out of the RLD but is there more than that? What about your family?”

“It’s just me and my father, but he barely works and is a drunkard most of the time I’m around. He constantly tells me he’s going to quit, but quitting time never comes around. Instead, he goes right back to his old habits of being overly apologetic and sincere, just to ruin it with a bottle of whiskey.”

“So why not run away? I’m not saying it was *wrong* of you to join the military or anything, but if all you want is to leave the RLD, what’s stopping you from hopping on a boat to Arlington, or Balcesteria, or Mondal?”

Eldric thought about Buddy and his offer. How everything would’ve been so simple if he’d just accepted that offer. He’d never have to join any military, never have to pick up a gun, just simple living in the Arlington countryside. “I think it’s because I think I hold some responsibility to him. Regardless of where I go, he’s going to drink himself away in a bar in the RLD whether I do something or I don’t. This is an easy way to make money while being close enough to still help him when necessary.”

“That’s fine and all, but what’re you going to do afterwards? I mean, let’s say you get the money, you go back to Heldenstadt, then what? I doubt you’re going to want to head back to the RLD for any reason, so are you going to have your father move in with you?”

“I’ll figure it out when I get there.” Eldric paced over to the lone window the room had and looked down at the street below. Several deployed soldiers were swapping with their night-shift replacements, heading either straight to the barracks or to the cookhouse. The night had gotten dark and the air was still.

“Well, I’m off to bed,” Kastor said, casting the chair to the corner and climbing to his top bunk. “Day 1 down, who knows how many more to go!

Eldric chuckled as he put out the light. “Day 2, here we come.”

\* \* \*

The remainder of the week proceeded as it did the first day. Eldric and Kastor would awaken to the swarm of recruits heading to the grounds, they would train for a few hours before lunch and then a few more after that until dinner. They’d head to sleep, and repeat the process all over again.

When Sunday came around, Eldric, Kastor and the others were directed to a small building close to the wall containing a single classroom and nothing else. The classroom had long wooden tables that split the room and a large chalkboard in the front with various maps upon it.

Erick and Kastor sat next to Eldric in the classroom and they were both as bored as the other. When everyone had filed into the room, an officer stepped to the chalkboard in the front and prompted the recruits to stand and salute.

“I am Captain Schenk, same rank as Asante.” The man was clearly very tired and had giant purple bags under his eyes. When he spoke, his words trailed off into oblivion as he sighed in between sentences. “Some of you we’ve met, others this is our first time. I’m to oversee your tactics teachings and the other things, I guess.” He scratched his head and turned to the board. Beginning to ramble things off as he wrote upon it.

Erick nudged Eldric’s shoulder. Eldric, nearly falling asleep from the monotone speaking of Schenk, turned to Erick who had written on his notebook in front of him. ‘*Give me your gun*’. Eldric looked at Erick with a confused expression. Erick rolled his eyes and wrote once more on the paper. ‘*I can modify it to make it better and more powerful*’. Eldric turned to his own paper.

‘*What’re you gonna do?*’

‘*Modify it, obviously*’.

‘*I know, I mean how*’.

Erick thought. He tapped his pen on his chin several times before returning to the paper. *‘Faster bullets*’.

‘*That’s it?*’

Erick rubbed his forehead. ‘*If it was a rifle I could easily do more, there’s only so much I can do with a pistol!*’

‘*Can you have it done by the next time we’ll need it?*’

‘*Give me three days*’.

Eldric looked back up at the chalkboard, which had a slew of writing he couldn’t understand. The captain was discussing something revolving the history of Einrich, but Eldric couldn’t care less about whatever it was he was saying. Eventually, he slid his pistol into Erick’s hands under the table and gave him a small thumbs-up. Erick nodded in return and the two returned, or rather, joined the class for the first time.

“-also on top of the wall are these wooden lowering machines,” Schenk said in a monotone drawl. “They are hand operated by whoever is on top of the wall, and must be lowered to the ground in its entirety before being raised once more. Honestly, you’ll probably never have to use them unless you spend a decade in the Guardian Force.” Schenk stepped in front of a map of the wall, which showcased the inside and all the various rooms. “Now, who can tell me how many floors the wall has?” Nobody wanted to answer this man’s questions. “Anyone? Anyone? It’s eight. Eight floors. Depending on skill and use, you will be on a designated floor.”

Looking around, Eldric saw some of his fellow classmates nod their heads as they fought the urge to dose off. Kastor was well asleep at this time, and Hagen was reading a book he brought to class himself.

The captain asked several more unanswered questions before giving up and beginning another Einrich history lesson, this one more irrelevant than the last. Erick anxiously fidgeted with Eldric’s gun, excited to begin work on it.

When classes finished, Eldric and the others stayed behind in the classroom as the rest of the recruits filed through the back doors. The rest of the day was more of the same—Schenk asking questions that no one would answer, him then proceeding to talk about some unimportant topic, and then asking more questions.

“I thought this was supposed to be tactics!” Kastor exclaimed slouching across the table in front of him.

“That was possibly the most uninteresting lecture I’d ever sat through,” Erick said as he stuck Eldric’s gun into his bag.

“You expect them to teach anything of worth?” Hagen closed his book and rose from his seat. “All they want you to know is what your specific position is doing, which won’t come until you’re assigned it. This is purely semantics. Things they do to say they do it.”

“Still doesn’t make it any better,” Kastor rose from the table and followed suit as Hagen stepped away and made haste to the back doors. Eldric and Erick followed a pace behind them.

Outside the building, the group found Leonard waiting for them. “How were classes?” he asked. Eldric couldn’t tell if it was a genuine question or mere sarcasm.

Kastor and Leonard caught up as Hagen and Erick continued to the barracks, talking about something out of Eldric’s earshot. He stayed back with Leonard and Kastor and the three went to the cookhouse to get some dinner.

At dinner, Leonard explained his troubles with Henry and how he’d chosen him as his partner for sparring. Eldric didn’t need the details Leonard wouldn’t provide, but he could imagine a similar scene to that of the training grounds back in the capital. As Leonard went on, Kastor joked about his weakness, and the night was good.

\* \* \*

The following weeks were more of the same. Every week Eldric would practice physical training at the grounds, and every other week he’d fall asleep in Schenk’s classroom. May passed, as did June and July. As August came to a close, the weather began to cool and the training became more intense. The classroom remained the same, and Eldric remained bored in it. Erick’s upgrades allowed Eldric to perform better in the weaponry training, but aside from that he’d performed as average as one could.

Soon, September came, and Eldric was called to be deployed.

05

September 3, 535

Eldric awoke to the regular siren he heard all throughout his training. Three months allowed him to become familiar with the siren and his body adapted to the short rests he would often get.

Exiting his rough mattress, he exchanged brief words with Kastor, whose first day it was as well. Hanging from his bunk bed was the uniform he’d seen so many wear before him, and today was the day he’d finally dawn the outfit with the purpose of taking it to work.

Slipping his hands into the sleeves of the long-sleeved purple jacket felt almost euphoric as Eldric would never see the Red-Light District again. He buttoned the two ends with gold buttons and slipped on his pants. He was never given the hat, so the pants and jacket were all there was to his uniform. He reached for the holster which held his pistol, and strapped it to his belt.

Along the wall inside his room, Eldric observed a map that designated his position along the wall, along with Kastor’s and his other roommates’. He left the room with Kastor to head to the brick building they’d first arrived at three months prior. That was where they’d receive their hats and official assignments.

The late summer morning air was dry and cool. Tired soldiers walked in files to the wall where a vehicle would take them to their post. Just in front of that vehicle was the brick building, later known as the Guardian Force’s Headquarters, where Eldric and Kastor were heading and where Asante was waiting.

Despite going to it many times throughout his time in Erdenjist, Eldric had never been inside the stout headquarters building. He never had clearance. Finally being able to see the inside filled him with excitement and anxiety.

Inside the headquarters was quite extraordinary. It had a tiled floor and beautiful wall designs. Eldric and Kastor were directed down a leftward hallway to a large conference room, where Hagen, Henry, and Erick had already been waiting. They joined the rest in line and waited for Asante to show.

“Attention!” A voice shouted from behind them. “Captain Asante of the Guardian Force reports on duty!”

“Good morning, sir!” Everyone shouted without turning around.

Still bearing no hat, Asante walked to the front of the room with the two soldiers in tow. He saluted to the group, who did the same in return.

“Gentlemen,” Asante began in a calm, deep voice. “When you first arrived, you were all terrible. Quite possibly the worst recruits we’ve had. But that wasn’t the reason we’d recruited you, was it? We recruited you six, knowing your potential, and your growth has proved that to me and to the rest of the force. Commend yourselves.” The two assistants began clapping, and Asante joined them. Nobody else was in the room to clap along. “You will now receive your Imperial Caps, a sign of your dignity and strength. You will also receive your rifles, symbolizing your commitment to the Guardian Force and the Einrich Empire as a whole. Once you receive your caps and rifles, you will be dismissed from my presence and report to the transportation vessel. Understood?”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Asante ushered the soldiers to hand the hats to everyone, and they did as they were told. When Eldric received his hat, he noticed the Imperial Emblem square in the middle. An owl with four stars around it symbolizing the four provinces of the Empire. He dawned the cap and shook Asante’s hand before leaving the headquarters building and making way for the transportation vessel along the wall.

“We did it!” Kastor exclaimed with excitement. “Finally, days with nothing but rest are ahead of us!”

“Maybe for you punks,” Henry shouted from behind them. “I’m not looking to stay in this goddamn dump for too long. Soon they’ll see I’m fit for the front lines.”

“I’m just happy to have a decent positioning,” Erick mentioned, running up to Eldric and Kastor. He’d gained a lot of muscle, making his previous self almost unrecognizable. “Oh, and I’ll work on your rifles when we have a day off, I’ve already got ideas stirring in my head.” He took out his rifle and began to look at his in all sorts of directions before suddenly stopping and turning to the group. “I forgot to ask, I’m in sector 8F; what about you guys?”

“Oh, would you look at that, wall neighbors!” Hagen walked in step with Henry. “Maybe one day he’ll defeat me in a fight. He’s got all the opportunities now!”

“All right let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Erick said as he punched Hagen in the stomach. I’ve beaten you once before. It’ll happen again, I assure you.”

“Oh, yeah, you guys are on top of the wall.” Eldric had learned the number of a sector associated with the floor of the wall they were to work, with 8 being the top of the wall. He’d realized there was a need for snipers atop the wall, and Erick and Hagen fit those roles perfectly. “I’m surprised to see you pick up sniping, Hagen.”

“I am as well,” Hagen said, bearing his usual grin. “But I wanted to be where Erick was, so the role came second.”

As they continued to walk away from the building, the group caught a glimpse of Leonard. He’d bulked up over the three months of training, but still found himself a month behind the rest in regular training and was not stationed like the rest of them. “Congrats on deployment, guys!” Leonard said, mostly to Kastor and Eldric, “Where are you guys stationed?”

“I’m in 1A,” Kastor replied regrettably. “Eldric’s down in 1L.”

“Suits him well. Red-Lighters have no right to be with the rest of the normal folk!” Henry cackled as he ran ahead of the group. “I hope I never see you all again!” He sprinted away and jumped on the transportation vessel, disappearing almost instantly.

The transportation vessel supported nearly twenty soldiers and glided along the bottom of the wall at an incredible speed to get people to where they were going. Several vehicles ran at the beginning and end of every day but never ran throughout. If you had an issue, you were to resolve it yourself before sundown, when the night shift worked.

Eldric’s assignment, 1L, was very close to Erdenjist and was the first sector to the south. Sectors A-K were directly north of the city and would be where the rest of the group went. After bidding goodbye to them, Eldric jumped on the southbound transportation vessel and requested a drop-off at 1L. After the vessel filled up, it started moving at a speed that made Eldric’s face feel like it was peeling off. Looking away from the vessel, he noticed the grassy area of Erdenjist turn into a desolate desert filled with very little life.

Suddenly stopping at a random point in the desolate wasteland, Eldric was told that this was 1L and his assignment. He stepped off the vessel. After he was entirely off the vessel, it sprinted off, causing a gust of wind to knock him over.

Despite being the sector directly south of Erdenjist, Eldric couldn’t see a single sign of civilization in any direction aside from the towering wall beside him. A few more vessels would speed past Eldric over the next few minutes before suddenly not appearing anymore.

The sun rose above the horizon and shined directly in his eyes. Its light cast his shadow up a good portion of the wall, but that slowly shrunk over time as the sun rose higher in the sky.

The procedure on the inside of the wall was simple. Eldric needed to pace back and forth over the course of the day, and should he see anything amiss, he’d be able to press a big red button along the wall that would call the transportation vessel to his location. He’d do that for twelve hours before heading back on the evening transportation vessel back to the barracks, where he’d be able to have his meal for the day and rest for the following day.

It was an easy life.

\* \* \*

Midday, the sun shone brightly down on the desolate wasteland of Eldric’s post. He was getting a little tired, so he sat down to rest. There was nobody to watch him, so he thought it was okay. He put his head down and closed his eyes.

“Are you okay, mister?”

Jolting awake, Eldric jumped to find a boy looking back at him. The boy wore khakis held up by suspenders and a white button-down shirt, topped by a flat cap and black dress shoes. He looked familiar, but Eldric couldn’t put his finger on it. He rubbed his eyes, thinking it was a hallucination from the heat, but the boy remained.

“How did you get here?” Eldric asked, kneeling to the boy’s eye level. “We need to get you back home, okay?”

Eldric walked over to the red button as he’d been instructed. How the boy got out here was beyond him, but he didn’t need to think about it. He just needed to bring him home. He got to the red button and was about to press it before the boy spoke again.

“Do you want to see the inside?” He asked, pointing to the wall. “I know how to get in, mister. Do you want to come, too?” He turned around and ran off in the direction the two of them came.

Knowing he couldn’t press the button without the boy in his vision, Eldric ran after the boy, who was surprisingly very fast. The hot sun didn’t make running any more manageable. After what felt like an hour of running (but likely only a few minutes), the boy stopped and pointed above him.

“Jump in the window,” He stated before doing exactly what he’d said.

Eldric didn’t question the existence of the window. Instead, he dropped his rifle and jumped up to the window just as the boy had instructed. He made it inside, where the halls were eloquently decorated. Stone made the floor with a red carpet spanning the hall’s center, and several stone pillars held the ceiling up. The hall was illuminated by both candles on the pillars and the same artificial light used in the facility below the training field in the capital.

The boy stood right in front of Eldric, laughing at his exhaustion. “You made it inside!” He exclaimed. “Congratulations.”

Eldric finally put two and two together. “You’re that boy from Heldenstadt!” He shouted, pointing at the boy. “What are you doing here! Who are you?!”

The boy laughed. “Who in the world are you talking about? Come, follow me!”

Rather than following, Eldric wanted to catch the boy and exit the wall as soon as possible. If he was caught, he’d not only be expelled from the Guardian Force but arrested as well. The boy led him down the hall to a staircase, where he almost caught him but couldn’t hold onto him.

The boy led Eldric up the endless flight of stairs to a level that wasn’t nearly as nice as the floor he entered. There was minimal illumination and the stone turned from its standard light gray color to a charred black. The hallway was much shorter, with low ceilings and an end Eldric could see from the staircase.

Running after the boy, Eldric reached the end of the hallway, where a locked door stood behind the boy. Knowing there was nowhere to go, Eldric lunged at the boy anticipating his capture. Instead, the boy jumped over him, opened the door, and ran inside the locked room.

Eldric quickly got to his feet and followed the boy inside the previously locked room. Inside, the boy was waiting for him with a giant smile on his face. The room had no other doors, no windows, and very low visibility. The only object of note within the room was a large blue sphere floating directly in the center. It appeared almost translucent, with nothing supporting it.

“What the hell is this?” Eldric asked.

“It seems quite important,” the boy mentioned. “I wonder what it is.”

The sphere made a quiet humming sound, breaking up the otherwise silent room. The boy didn’t say another word, instead gesturing Eldric to step towards it.

“How did you know about this?” Eldric asked the boy.

There was no reply to his question. Instead, Eldric heard the voices of guards on duty approaching the mysterious floor.

“Why don’t you touch it?” The boy questioned.

The boy’s question rang in Eldric’s head, becoming louder and louder to the point where it was almost deafening. The humming of the sphere became ear-grating, causing Eldric to crouch and cover his ears. He felt nauseous. The room was so silent that it became unbearably loud.

“I wonder what this floor is for?”

A foreign voice broke Eldric’s trance. Turning around, he noticed two guards exit the staircase he’d entered moments prior. The boy also caught the notion of this, slamming the door in response.

“Touch the sphere!” The boy yelled, shooing Eldric along. “You can get us out of this if you just touch the sphere!”

Not knowing what to do, Eldric stood up and faced the door. He pulled out the pistol he’d been given hours earlier from its holster in defense and began pacing backward. He didn’t want to touch the sphere as he didn’t know whether to trust the boy. He knew he’d be caught red-handed and sent to prison.

There was banging on the door, likely from the two guards who noticed the slamming door moments ago. Eldric could faintly hear their voices, but the door was incredibly thick that it came through muffled and distorted.

“If I touch the sphere, we can leave?” Eldric asked the boy, who had been barricading the door with his body.

“Indeed.”

After taking a moment to think about it, Eldric holstered his pistol and faced the sphere. Its deep blue color almost put him in another trance. There wasn’t anything he could see to grasp physically, so he took a deep breath and reached out to it. Not a second later, the sphere disappeared, and Eldric felt great energy coursing through his body.

Then, an explosion.

In an instant, Eldric felt the tremendous energy expel itself from his body, causing what he could only see as an explosion. The walls, ceiling, and floor of the previously dark room were gone, and Eldric was falling through an empty crater in the floor’s place, landing square on his back on the floor below.

Surprisingly, Eldric only felt the instantaneous pain before it was gone. Standing, he looked up to see where he fell from, seeing the two guards above him. One immediately pulled his rifle out while the other disappeared from his view. A moment later, he heard the sound of an alarm flowing through the entire wall.

The soldier who pulled his rifle on Eldric shot several bullets his way. Eldric avoided them by running behind one of the pillars to catch his breath. When he heard the bullets seize, he wrapped around the pillar to see the other guard which disappeared standing before him.

“Treason!” He shouted and immediately jumped towards Eldric.

Eldric slid out of the way, reaching for his pistol which still sat upon his hip. The soldier, noticing what Eldric was doing, took his own gun and shot Eldric’s holster, flinging the gun across the hall. While Eldric was still reacting to the accurate shot, the soldier had enough time to get close and put his gun to Eldric’s head.

Everything went black.

As if Eldric had lost control of his own movements, he began moving at speeds which he didn’t know were possible. He snatched the gun from the soldier’s hand and kicked the back of his legs to knock him to the ground. As he fell, the soldier grabbed Eldric’s shirt and pulled him down together. The two tossed each other around on the ground before Eldric, not knowing what else to do, pulled the gun to the soldier’s head and fired the pistol.

The soldier’s head exploded, causing blood to splatter across the floor. Eldric awoke from his strange trance and noticed what he’d done. Immediately he began to hyperventilate and glanced around as he noticed soldiers were heading to his location from down the large hall. He looked at the soldier once more, his face unrecognizable. He looked at his hand and the gun which sat in it. His stomach churned and he felt like throwing up, but he held it in and threw the gun, quickly rising to his feet.

Not knowing what to do, he ran. He noticed the staircase which he’d climbed earlier and decided to make for the roof to get a good idea of how many soldiers were on his tail.

He climbed a few stairs before he heard footsteps from above. Voices were screaming at each other to hurry down, which sounded more than the two from before. He ran back to the floor he was just on and left the stairwell.

To his left and right, guards were sprinting towards him. He knew that if he stayed on this floor, he’d be shot and killed, so he returned to the stairwell.

Unlike before, there weren’t any voices on the stairwell, so he thought he got lucky. He took two steps at a time and began hearing the guards flood into the stairs from below him. Not looking back, he continued to climb the flight of stairs, not exiting until he knew there was nowhere left to go.

The top of the staircase did not lead to the roof, instead leading to another hallway similar to the ones he’d seen before. There wasn’t a wave of guards waiting for him; instead, the hallway was completely empty. He turned left and began running down the hall. This hallway, much like the dark hallway from earlier, had an end to it as well. The door was smaller than the other one, hopefully meaning it was unlocked. He sprinted up to the door and tried opening it.

It was locked.

Thinking he’d try the other way, Eldric turned around and saw three figures exit the staircase. Leading the way was the single person he did not want to see: Asante. The three continued to walk up to Eldric, who had been entirely petrified. Once they were roughly ten meters from him, they stopped.

“As if I’m a psychic,” Asante began in his calm, deep voice. “I knew you’d find one way or another to completely self-destruct. I never knew it would be literally, however. Thank you, Freeman, for surprising me once again.” Addressing the two behind him, he spoke once again. “I want him captured alive. Use any means necessary. Break his bones if you must; I want him alive.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” The soldiers responded in unison, breaking out in a full sprint.

With perfect reaction time, Eldric jolted to the side and attempted to run around the two impending figures, leaping over them with a leg strength he never knew he’d had. Asante made no effort to capture him, instead letting him run right past.

Eldric needed to find a way to the roof. He ran past the staircase where guards were flooding out en masse. Guards tried to stop him, but Eldric dodged their attempts while he continued to search for the staircase up.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the boy standing near a pillar.

“This way!” he exclaimed.

Eldric had no choice but to follow his instructions and ran to the large stone pillar the boy was next to. To his surprise, a ladder was constructed out of the same stone leading to the ceiling where a trapdoor waited above him.

Climbing as if his life depended on it, Eldric couldn’t recall when he’d climbed a ladder faster. Looking below him, some of the guards were waiting while others pursued him in the climb.

The trapdoor was made of dark wood and was relatively easy to break with Eldric’s elbow. He climbed to the roof and glanced around, noticing that no soldiers were after him up there. He saw several wooden lowering machines, and began to run towards the nearest one. Knowing that once the platform began lowering, it couldn’t be raised until it hit the bottom, this was his best shot. He knew that if he could make it out of this pursuit alive, he’d need to risk everything and run out into the great unknown.

There weren’t any lowering machines near him, but he saw one off in the distance. The roof of the wall was coarse and showing signs of age. Several tracks along the roof were designed to carry cannons across, which Eldric avoided, keeping his feet on level ground.

He began to hear the voices of the guards behind him come out from the trapdoor, causing panic in his head. He had gained a decent lead, but with the number of guards chasing him, he didn’t know whether or not he could make it unscathed.

As the lowering machine got closer, Eldric began to yell out to the machine operator.

“Lower the platform!” He yelled, hoping to grab his attention.

Eldric repeated the exact phrase, hoping to get the operator’s attention. Unfortunately, the operator never noticed Eldric, stepping away from the machine to talk to his friends. Eldric glanced over his shoulder and saw a great distance between him and the mob of guards behind him. He knew there was supposed to be a lever that he could pull to drop the platform, so as long as he could make it there, he should get out scot-free.

Luckily, with time to spare, he reached the wooden machine, still entirely out of the operator’s view, and began searching for the lever to lower it. Glancing behind him, he noticed the mob getting closer, so he started frantically pulling and twisting everything that looked moveable. Finally, after what felt like the last lever was pulled, the platform began to descend the wall.

Eldric jumped onto the platform and began to jump in hopes of making it lower faster. He’d lowered by only seven meters before seeing the guards’ faces peer over the edge. They began screaming at each other before shots were fired at the platform, creating holes in the wood and dropping him faster. The shots seized firing, and people started jumping down the wall hoping to catch him. Some completely missed, falling down the whole hundred meters, while others landed successfully on the platform, shaking it tremendously. Luckily, they couldn’t stand before Eldric pushed them off.

Eventually, the shots and falling soldiers stopped, giving Eldric temporary peace of mind. Looking below him, he noticed a guard positioned near the landing zone for the platform. Still about fifty meters above the ground, Eldric got time to plan his strategy for eventually reaching the ground.

The platform reached the ground, and Eldric sprung into action, leaping at the soldier, who had his back turned, and tore away his rifle. On the soldier’s side was a pistol which Eldric grabbed and pointed at his face.

“You will let me go; you hear me?” Eldric threatened the young guard.

“Y-Yes, sir!” The guard replied in a shaky voice.

Once he got the confirmation, Eldric turned and ran into the desert beyond the wall. No shots were fired at him, and nobody came after him.

Eldric kept running.

06

September 3, 535

“Don’t shoot!”

As several Guardian Force members peered over the wall at the fleeing Eldric, a booming voice came from behind them. Asante’s face was red with fury as he marched to the wall’s edge, eyeing the members of the Guardian Force like a hawk.

“He shall be left alive, understand? If fate is to have him killed, let it be by the Land of Solitude and not by our hands. Each of you are to go to your emergency stations.”

With no hesitation, all of the soldiers who sat atop the wall frantically rushed to where their assigned emergency stations were. Most returned to the inside of the wall, while several stayed atop the large stone structure. Asante pulled aside one of them, who had been a sergeant of the wall.

“I order you to find me Kastor Gregor, Leonard Rietveld, Henry Kistler, Erick Newborn, and Hagen Miura. They are all from the 611th corps. Do not question them, I will do that myself. Go.”

A salute later, the sergeant sprinted off to find the 5 soldiers. Asante turned to face the Land of Solitude, noticing a dark cloud approaching. He picked a gun from the ground and returned to the wall.

The 8th floor held Asante’s office, where moments prior he had come face to face with Freeman moments before. He pulled a ring of keys from his pocket and unlocked the door with a large silver key. Inside, the room was spacious, with enough room to fit several large pieces of furniture. In the center of the room stood a wooden desk with a large stack of neatly put paperwork next to a less neat stack of more paperwork. The walls of the room held several large buttons and switches, some lighting up as if begging to be pressed. Only the back wall was free of buttons or levers, instead having large filing cabinets in their place. Asante skipped past his desk and approached the large cabinets, searching for a specific box. Grabbing the desk chair, he stood up on it and opened the ‘F’ cabinet searching each name, he finally came upon what he’d been looking for. He grabbed the file and closed the cabinet, quickly rushing out of his office and locking the door behind him.

The sergeant had called each of the five soldiers to a small brick building in the military town off to the side where none might eavesdrop. Asante had used this building before, as it had been used for similar purposes in the past. Interrogations, executions, and more had all happened within the confines of a small, shed type building. There were two rooms inside: a waiting room and an interrogation room. The waiting room was a small room housing several chairs and was dimly lit by a few candles hung on the wall. The walls were charred, and the floor was cracked and wobbly. In five of the chairs, the soldiers whom Eldric knew were sitting as they eyed Asante. In each corner of the room was a guard with a rifle in hand in case anything happened.

“You,” Asante picked one of the corner guards and spoke to him. “Are they searched and removed of their weapons?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Good.” Asante turned to the five soldiers, who had looks of confusion about them. “Gregor, come with me.”

Kastor stood and followed Asante as he walked through the door into the interrogation room, ducking his head under the door frame.

The interrogation room was much larger than the waiting room, having enough room for a large table where chairs were on either side. The room was much brighter as well, being illuminated by a natural window toward the high ceiling. Asante sat on the opposite side of the table from Kastor, who continued to look confused. He slammed the file onto the table and stared at the young man.

“Tell me what you know about Eldric Freeman.”

Kastor jumped. Out of all the questions Asante could’ve asked, that was the least he expected. “Eldric? Well, uh..” He thought for a very long time before coming up with a response. “I mean, he was a regular guy. I can’t say anything threw me off about him. He was normal to talk to, did normal things, I don’t know what else. Wait, is this about Erick modifying his weapons? Because I had nothing to do with that.”

“It is not about that, rest assured. You often sparred with him, did he ever say anything about his experience with combat or something of the like?”

“I mean, nothing that really stood out. He started off rough, sure, but I chalked that up to him just learning off the streets of the RLD. Why? Did he do something?”

“We’ll get to that.” Asante opened the file and began to rummage through the papers. Kastor tried to get a glance but was shooed away. “Do you know anything else about him? Specifically, about his past. Did he ever tell you about his family or anything like that?”

“Well, I know he’s from the Red-Light District, but other than that, not much. I know he said it was just him and his dad back home, but he never really talked about himself much. Never seemed the type.” Kastor fell silent.

Asante closed the file and looked back up at Kastor, who appeared in a daze. “Did he ever show self-destructive tendencies?”

“Self-Destructive? So he *did* do something.”

“Answer the question.”

Kastor readjusted himself in his chair. “Alright, fine. I wouldn’t call any of his actions ‘self-destructive’. If anything, I would say he’s more protective of himself. Not really allowing himself to find misfortune. I don’t really know how else to explain it than that. He wanted freedom. He wanted peace. He acted as if he already had it. I don’t know, that’s the best I can do.”

“I see. Last question, Mr. Gregor.”

Kastor sat up straight.

“If I were to call you to action, in this case, to go into the Land of Solitude. Would you accept the call?”

Kastor sat back in his chair as he thought about the question. He looked around the room as he pondered the words. “Did Eldric-”

“Yes. We- I am creating a force to retrieve him, and seeing as you, along with your comrades, know him best, I thought it’d be best to bring you all in hopes that you will persuade him.”

Kastor ran his hands through his hair. “Alright, that’s fine, but on one condition.”

“A condition? You’re hardly in a place to ask for conditions.”

“I ask that double my regular pay is sent to my family while we are in the Land of Solitude. In one payment. Done before we leave.”

Asante looked at Kastor, who’s eyes narrowed and his body language opened. “I can double a week’s pay, no more.”

“A week and a half.”

“No can do.”

“Nine days.”

“Seven.”

“Nine or I don’t do it.”

Asante didn’t respond immediately. He thought about the proposal and its worth. “Fine. Nine days, no more. Regular pay after that, if we’re in the Land of Solitude for less than nine days, however, it’s back to regular pay.”

“Fine by me.”

With the completion of the contract, Asante asked Kastor to leave the room and to bring Leonard Rietveld in. As Rietveld entered, he quickly glanced around the small room as Asante glared at him, waiting for him to sit.

“Let’s make this quick Rietveld, I don’t have all the time in the world for you.”

Leonard nodded nervously.

“Right, then. Tell me what you know about Eldric Freeman.”

“Eldric?” Leonard questioned in a similar manner to Kastor. “I-I don’t really know anything about him.”

“Naturally. I wouldn’t expect a Rietveld to care about others. Did anyone ever say anything about him to you?”

Leonard looked at the ground in thought. “I couldn’t say. Someone might have, but if they did, I wouldn’t remember.” All of a sudden he jolted his head up. “I do remember something about him, though. He never knew his history. He barely even heard about any of the wars beforehand, didn’t even know who the Rietvelds were, nor the Kistlers. Tha-That stuck out to me.”

“Right then. And Freeman never spoke to you about his past.”

“*His* past? No, I can’t seem to recall any time where he would. He was much closer to Kastor in that regard.” He stuttered as he quickly nodded his head.

“Right then, that’s all the questions I had. Oh, and just so you’re aware, you’re being called to serve in the eleventh expedition into the Land of Solitude. I won’t provide you with details now, but begin preparing for it, or ask Gregor if you’re so interested in knowing the specifics. Dismissed.”

Leonard stood and as he was exiting the room was told to bring in Erick Newborn.

“I must say, he’s a tactical genius,” Erick said calmly when asked about Eldric. “Somehow, he’s able to know the entire outcome of the battle before it even starts. Other than that, he’s a good guy, quiet.”

“I was told you modified his gun,” Asante said assertively.

Erick shrugged. “Sure I did. I didn’t know it’d be used to kill fellow soldiers in an act of treason, though.”

“What makes you say he did?”

“I heard about it. I was on the roof when he escaped, though fairly far away from any of the actual excitement.”

“I see, well it should be known it wasn’t your gun that killed him.”

“That’s ridiculous, Eldric’s gun had enough firepower to go through steel, why didn’t he use it?”

“The details aren’t important. What is important is under what circumstances did you modify his pistol? When did he ask you to make it stronger.”

“He didn’t.” Erick did not hesitate at all.

“He didn’t?”

“That’s right. I volunteered to modify it. I come from a mechanics family, you see, so-”

“Unimportant. Did you modify his rifle as well?”

“I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“It takes several days to modify a weapon for me, even by a little bit. We’d just gotten our rifles so I didn’t have nearly enough time to do anything to it.”

“I see.” Asante opened the file once more and flipped through some of the papers inside. “Did Eldric ever bring up his past with you?”

“Sure, in passing. I’d talk about how it was just me and my dad, and he’d say the same. We had that much in common, so there wasn’t much else to talk about.”

“Did he speak highly of his father?”

“He didn’t really speak *of* his father. He’d mention his existence, and then change the subject either to me, or to something completely unrelated. Like I said, he didn’t really talk much. Is a question like this really necessary?”

“It is. I have one more question for you, Newborn. What say you to the call to an expedition into the Land of Solitude?”

Erick stood quickly. “You want to go after him?! You’re crazy! We’d no sooner die than find him out there.”

“Newborn, at this point, your place in the expedition is pretty much confirmed. Whether you agree with it or not is none of my concern, I was asking purely out of good will.”

“Well, I don’t agree with it. If you’re taking me by force, fine. But if I have a say in the manner, I don’t want any part.” Erick stood defiantly still. “Am I dismissed?”

Asante nodded and told him to bring Henry Kistler into the room next.

“This is about Freeman, isn’t it?!” Henry shouted as he entered the room and sat in the lone chair. “That bitch deserves whatever comes to him! Couldn’t care a lick about what’s going on with him. Why, if I ever get my hands on him I’ll strangle him to death! It’s what he deserves for killing one of us!”

“This is about Eldric Freeman, and I’m aware the two of you didn’t have the best relationship. Did he ever threaten you?”

Henry laughed so loud one could hear it from outside. “What’s it to you?!” He laughed for several more minutes before calming down. “To answer, I don’t know if he threatened me ever. If he did, it was so insignificant that I’d forgotten about it. I think the only time he ever would have been when he’d protect Rietveld for whatever reason. Kid was fucking delusional if you ask me, protecting a traitor to the country.”

Asante nodded. “I believe those were all my questions, thank you Mr. Kistler.”

Henry laughed as he got up from his seat. Asante told him to bring in the last man to interrogate, Hagen Miura.

“It’s about Eldric, isn’t it?” he asked as he shut the door.

“What makes you say that?”

“The guy went into the Land of Solitude, killed a guy, and you called the five people he’d’ve been closest with in the force. It’s pretty easy to deduce why you want us here.”

“I see. In that case, can you tell me anything about him?”

Hagen got quiet and leaned forward. His smile faded from his face. “Simply put? He’s scary.”

Asante was surprised. “Scary?”

“Yes. Whatever you have in this file about him isn’t enough.” Hagen put his hands on the table. “Normally, with people like him, I can tell what they’re thinking. ‘What’s their next move?’ I ask myself. Usually, if not always, I’m right. But Eldric,” Hagen chuckled. “There’s nothing behind Eldric’s eyes. I can’t even begin to understand what he’s thinking. If given the chance, and in the right circumstances, I wouldn’t think it strange for him to go and send himself on a suicide mission, nor would I put it past him to kill a soldier in the way he did. If you’re considering going after him, I’d recommend against it.”

Asante said nothing. Instead, he flipped open the file began swiping through the pages once more.

“That file isn’t about Eldric, is it?” Hagen asked. “The pages are too old.”

Asante glared at Miura. “What about it?”

Miura stood up and shrugged. “Oh, nothing of note. Just know he’s not going to come easily. A broken man isn’t so easily mended.” Hagen stepped to the door and put his hand on the handle. “Oh, and before you ask, I’m in on whatever expedition you’re planning to take into the Land of Solitude. I’ll start training with Kistler as soon as you let us go.”

With a smile, Hagen left the interrogation room on his own accord, leaving Asante in silence. He looked back down at the file and closed it, leaving the interrogation room and then the large brick building. Outside the building, several soldiers waited at the ready for him to give them orders, which he responded by ordering the retrieval of a carriage.

After the carriage had been retrieved, he turned to one of the soldiers. “I’m off to the capital. There are things I need to have done. I will be back in 3 days’ time and in that time, I need to have the five who I called today to be prepared to enter the Land of Solitude. Teach them to ride a horse. There will be no further questions.”

The soldier saluted and ran off.

\* \* \*

The carriage Asante had ordered was for special uses only and had been able to travel to Heldenstadt in just over a day. It was a smaller carriage than the mass-produced, horse-drawn carriages, but it could comfortably fit him and another person if need be. After a day of travel, the farms of the Empire’s plains turned into large buildings as he approached the capital’s gates. Once through, he made headway for the noble district, where he stopped at the chancellor’s estate.

The estate was a large area surrounded by tall brick walls. A large, paved road leading from the gate to an extravagant building. On either side of the road were gardens and fountains sprinkled across a few more buildings. After being let in by the guards who stood at the chancellor’s gate, Asante followed the paved road straight to the extravagant building: the chancellor’s home.

The chancellor of Heldenstadt was the true acting power of the country, leaving the Emperor as the figurehead of the country. While the Emperor worked from the comforts of the Imperial Castle, the chancellor was offered an equal share in the riches of his estate. Asante, being in the military, worked under the chancellor directly for many years. Despite this, he was nervous for their meeting as he had not announced himself before his arrival.

Stopping in the roundabout outside the chancellor’s home, Asante stepped out with his file and walked to the door. Before knocking on the door, it was opened by none other than a man in a gray suit. He was an older man with a full head of gray hair.

“The chancellor instructed me to take you to his office,” the man said.

Asante had only been in the chancellor’s home a handful of times, each time more impressive than the last. High ceilings, tile floors that could reflect the moonlight in the night sky, and chandeliers that seemed to have been crafted with the highest precision were what greeted him in the hall. A staircase leading to the second floor was off to the left, but the chancellor took him straight. He was led through a maze of a home, each room more impressive than the last. Extravagant furniture, expensive portraits of past emperors, wide, open rooms, each one having a distinct feel that was completely different from the last. Eventually, he was brought to a small room that appeared to be an office. Piles of paper were stacked on chairs, bookshelves filled with books, some on the floor sprawled open. A large window allowed for gazing out in need of thought. Inside the room was Chancellor Joseph Solveig gazing out the window. The suited man bowed before taking his leave.

The chancellor wore elegant purple and blue clothing with gold shoulder pads and a white cape. His chiseled chin was decorated with a brown beard, though he had no mustache. He was around Kastor’s height, thus making him much taller than Asante. His brown hair reached his shoulders and had a slight curl to them.

“Malik Asante, First Captain of the Guardian Force, your arrival is most unexpected,” Solveig spoke in a deep and steady voice, sending goosebumps down Asante’s spine. “Of all people, I would have expected Antonov to be reporting to me before you.”

“Yes, Your Excellency.” Asante bowed. “I hope my arrival isn’t making too much trouble.”

Solveig ushered Asante to raise his head. “It is, but considering the times we’re in, and considering you came in person to see me, comfort is the least of my worries. Please, sit.”

Solveig pushed aside several stacks of paper as Asante took his seat, slapping the file he’d taken from Erdenjist onto the desk. Asante flipped the file open. Inside wasn’t a picture of Eldric, but was a picture of his father, George Freeman. Each page had information regarding his life and where he ended up. “I’m sure you remember this man, Your Excellency?”

“I do, how could I forget? Though I don’t understand. Is he not living in the capital? In the R.L.D? I don’t see how he is anything of your concern out in Erdenjist.”

“The concern doesn’t lie with him, but his son.”

The chancellor grew a look of confusion. “George Freeman had a son?”

Asante began flipping through the “Yes, and he was selected by myself to join the Guardian Force. I never thought of the possibility that Freeman meant George’s son, but after looking into it further, the data matches up.”

“So how does George’s son call for concern? I thought I gave you complete control over the Guardian Force during this war?”

“You did, but things got a little out of hand. He seems to have taken a note from his father and makes everything difficult for us.”

“You’re beating around the bush, Asante. Making *everything* difficult?”

Asante jumped. He wiped his brow before speaking further. “George’s son escaped Erdenjist into the Land of Solitude.”

Solveig sat back in his chair. “So?” He chuckled “Men have deserted the empire before. I hardly see why this requires reporting.”

“It’s not a matter of him escaping, sir, but rather what he brings with him.”

The chancellor stopped chuckling. He sat forward and put his hands on the desk. “You mean, you have reason to suspect-”

“More than suspect, and he’ll reach the Republic in no time so-”

“If he survives at all.”

“He will.” Asante retorted. The two stared at each other for a minute or two before Asante looked away. “Excuse my irreverence, Your Excellency, but it should also be known that he has also slain a soldier of the Guardian Force, and is an enemy to the state regardless of suspicion.”

Solveig put his face in his hands. “So what do you plan to do from here? We’re in the middle of a war and I don’t have the time to be searching for one single man who may or may not be who we’re looking for, and who committed a measly crime such as murder? We’re finally taking some ground in Rivercrest, and should I take my eyes off it, we’d fall behind once again. It’s roughly 400 miles from east to west of the Land of Solitude, meaning it would take this boy at least ten days to reach the Republic, and he already has a day on you, assuming he's headed to the Republic at all! If he is to survive, how do you plan to retrieve him and bring him back?”

“I plan to use him,” Asante said, pointing at the file.

“George?”

“Yes. If no one can convince him, then George can. He is his father after all. I also plan to bring the other men from his recruitment class. We will take horses into the Land of Solitude, catch up to him.”

“Recruits? You mean to tell me you’re taking recruits into the Land of Solitude? Captain, you’re beginning to sound like Antonov.”

“He is imperative to the war. If he is too overwhelmed by men he doesn’t know then it could lead to grave disaster. I plan to bring everyone he knows from the Guardian Force, as well as his father. I only seek your approval.”

Solveig thought for a moment, chin in hand. “You’re sure you have the right guy?”

Asante nodded.

“I see. Believe me, I am aware of the significance which your suspicion brings. If you are sure you are correct in your assumption, you may have my approval on the condition you bring one of my men with you.”

“On what grounds?”

“Should your recruits prove to be insufficient. Those are my grounds. I can’t exactly come with you to observe your effort myself, thus prompting me to send one of my men.” Solveig pushed aside a pile of folders to reveal a communication system. After pressing a few buttons, a soldier entered the room. He was a younger boy, around twenty, with a short head of hair and a gray uniform. He looked to be shorter than Asante, around average. “This is Lawrence Stone, one of my personal men. He will follow my orders and will oversee your operation and intervene when necessary.”

Solveig stood and took a paper from one of the stacks of paper on his desk. After he wrote on it and stamped it with a seal, he walked over to the soldier and handed him the paper, now folded in half.

“Sergeant Stone will handle the letter of approval. He either joins you with it, or you go without it.”

Asante agreed. “I’ll come for you tomorrow morning,” He told Stone.

Stone saluted, and the man in the gray uniform returned to escort Asante out of the building. “Thank you for coming,” He told him.

Climbing into the carriage, Asante knew he had one more place to go. He told his driver the directions and promptly left the Chancellor’s building in the dust.

\* \* \*

The buildings quickly turned from tall to stout, and the bright sky became clouded by the smoke emanating from the houses and shops. Eventually, he reached his destination: the Red Light District. The short, two-story apartment buildings were in as poor condition as ever, and Asante scoffed at the smell. The streets were dark despite it being the middle of the day, and the road was poorly managed. Eventually, Asante reached the address on the file. He climbed out and looked up at the apartment building he'd parked by, looking the exact same as all the other buildings around it. Beggars and homeless people tried to climb onto the carriage, but the driver fended them off.

Climbing to the second floor, Asante knocked on door 201 of the building. After a moment of silence, the door was opened by a man clearly hungover.

“Hello George,” Asante stated.

George fell back as he realized who was at his door. He wore drabby pants and a stained shirt. His hair was rough and his face scratched. “Malik? What the hell are you doing here? I thought you never wanted to see me again.”

Asante stepped inside the small apartment, closing the door behind him. “I didn’t, and I don’t. Though, things haven’t been going my way as of late, so I have to bite the bullet. Nice place, by the way. Much more gunky than your previous residence, is it perhaps taste?”

“If you came here to mock me, you know where the door is.” George stood up and walked over to the mattress in the middle of the room, sitting upon it. “Just because I live here doesn’t make me your bitch.”

“That’s awfully kind of you, completely different from what I’d expect from a R.L.D citizen.” Asante stated, walking over to the window. “You’ve gone stale, Freeman. If this was 5 years ago, I’d see no kindness, much less willingness to allow me in your, must I say, ‘humble’ abode.”

“Not everyone can stay the same person, Malik, you’re the odd one in that regard.”

Asante laughed. “I am, aren’t I? So perfect I don’t need change. Though sometimes, change can be for the worse, as it has been in your case. Back to the matter at hand, I’m here to discuss your son.”

“Eldric? What in the hell does Malik Asante have anything to do with my son? He was to join the military, not your backwards piece of shit division that harbors nobles too scared to fight for themselves.”

“Unfortunately, he did just that. As for your comment about how ‘backwards’ my division is, I’ll let that slide. Believe me if I’d have known you were his father, I would have sent him back to this shithole of a district where he belongs.”

George paced to the window and swung his fist at Asante, though it was blocked by his forearm. George quickly swung hit foot to knock Asante down but instead was knocked down himself by Asante’s quick fists.

“Stale, as I’ve said.” Asante squatted down to George’s level. “Now as I was saying, your son, ‘Eldric’, is not here in the Empire. Do you know why?”

George did not answer.

“You know why, George. Your son is a spitting image of you, you know that? I don’t mean, of course, in the physical way. Frankly, he could’ve laid low for his entire career and I would have never made the connection myself. However, like his father before him, he went and made a mess of everything. Stuck his nose in the wrong place, said the wrong thing, you know how it is. He took control of that which is not his, you know what I mean.”

George’s eyes widened, then narrowed. “Why should I trust you? You’re an inbred bastard who’s done nothing but tarnish names below you to gain privilege.”

“You’re certainly right in that regard, I have to climb the ranks somehow, after all.” Asante rose to his feet. “I am, however, willing to strike a deal with the devil, so to speak.”

“What-”

“Your son has fled to the Land of Solitude. If we leave him be, he will reach Reinbose in a matter of days. Thus, with the chancellor’s permission, I will be spearheading a retrieval of this boy. I am enlisting the members of the Guardian Force with whom your son was acquainted with, and with your assistance we can retrieve him alive and bring him back to Einrich.”

“Why should I help you? This gives you the perfect excuse to leave me to die out in the Land of Solitude. What tells me you won’t do that?”

“George, in order for you to be useful, I need you to speak with ‘Eldric’. It would be of no use for me to kill you without you serving your purpose. Do you understand?”

George did not respond.

“You understand. I will be leaving at 7 in the morning for Erdenjist. Should you decide to assist me, you will be standing outside the Red-Light District at this time. Should I not see you I will not hesitate to leave without you.”

“I thought I was vital to this mission?”

“Oh you are, but not more vital than the time it would take to wait for you.” Asante began walking to the door, swinging it open with great strength. “Oh! I guess I should also mention this: If you assist in the retrieval of Eldric, the chancellor will personally absolve every crime you are accused and found guilty of. You’ll be back in the noble district as it once was. Though, if gunk is your personal choice,” without finishing his sentence, Asante shrugged and closed the door. He walked down the stairs and entered the carriage once again, taking him out of the groggy Red-Light District and into the market district. The sun was once again visible, though everything had a red hue as the sun dipped below the houses and shops. Asante rode the carriage to the noble district, where he returned to his humble home to rest for the night.

Malik Asante’s home was not nearly as impressive as some of the other noble homes, but his two-story home saw a great deal of important people throughout the years, as his tenure within the Guardian Force was quite long. A gated front yard and large wood doors greeted him to his abode, where the inside was dim from lack of use. Waving goodnight to the carriage driver, he closed the door behind him and took off his shoes. He trudged up the stairs to his bedroom where a closet and a desk stood. Stepping over to the bed, Asante took his uniform off and climbed into bed, falling asleep as soon as his eyes shut.

\* \* \*

Asante woke early that morning. Looking out his bedroom window, he saw the merchants beginning to open their shops as the sun began to peer over the horizon. Children left their homes to go to school, while husbands kissed their wives goodbye on their way to work. He put his uniform on and packed his suitcase, heading downstairs to see the carriage driver waiting for him in his dining room.

With a nod of good morning, the two left Asante’s home, entering the carriage and began to make way for the chancellor’s estate. On the way, he had his arm rested against the window and his head rested on his hand. The noble streets were comparatively empty than the market streets, aside from the occasional practicing swordsman. Eventually, the carriage reached the chancellor’s estate which showed no signs of life aside from the two guards outside the center gate. Sergeant Stone was talking with one of them, only to stand in salute when he noticed the approaching carriage. He wore the same uniform Asante had seen him wear yesterday, fitted firmly to his build, with the addition of white gloves that had been absent the day before.

The carriage stopped in front of the gate and Asante stepped out. “Good morning, Sergeant.”

Stone saluted, then put his luggage on the carriage, bidding farewell to the two guards.

The carriage had room for two people, but only by a little. Stone and Asante were packed tightly into the small vehicle, their legs interlocking inside of the small compartment.

“Do you have the letter of consent?”

Stone flashed a folded piece of paper.

“Good. We have one more person to pick up, if he so chose, and then we’ll be off.”

The carriage took off from the chancellor’s estate, heading back through the noble district into the market district and then to the Red-Light District. Much to Asante’s dismay, outside stood a half-asleep George Freeman wearing the same tattered clothes he’d worn the day before. He didn’t have any luggage with him, and when he heard the carriage coming he jolted awake.

The carriage stopped next to him, allowing him to reach for the door. Asante held it shut and pointed to the front of the carriage. Because the carriage had room for only two, there was no room for George inside. Asante pointed to the front of the carriage, instructing George to climb next to the driver for the duration of the trip. With a look of frustration, George climbed to the seat and the carriage was off.

\* \* \*

It took a day to reach Erdenjist, which had looked the same as it did when Asante left. The sun was setting over the large gray wall and in its place the lights of the small military town went on. The carriage drove up to the wall where Asante, Stone, and George all stepped out. They entered the wall and climbed the eight flights of stairs to the roof, where the last bit of sunlight could be seen over the Land of Solitude’s horizon. Waiting for them were the five members of Eldric’s group, as well as several military personnel. Asante, Stone, and George walked to the group, who promptly saluted.

“Every man is accounted for,” one of the soldiers told Malik. “We’ve also retrieved horses for your expedition, and they are waiting on the ground of the other side.”

“Thank you.” Asante ushered to Stone, who pulled out the folded piece of paper and handed it to the soldier. “This is our written consent. Reach out to Antonov, who will be taking over in my place while I am absent.”

The soldier saluted and ran off, entering the depths of the wall.

“You mind telling us what the fuck is going on?” Henry Kistler yelled in Asante’s direction as the others tried to calm him down. “We haven’t been told a damn thing about this ‘expedition’ you’re taking us on, you mind filling us in?”

“Of course, I will fill you in along with the rest of the battalion.” Asante turned his back to the five and faced the large crowd of soldiers waiting to hear what he had to say. “Soldiers of the Guardian Force! Today we embark on an expedition to retrieve a treasonous soldier and bring him to justice! These five brave soldiers, along with these two brave volunteers, will head across the dangerous Land of Solitude in search for this treasonous soldier, hoping to bring him back alive!”

The soldiers erupted in screams and chants. George looked at Asante with a face of worry, while Stone stepped away to discuss the lowering mechanism with one of the other soldiers. Not everyone was content, however, as Henry stepped up and turned Asante around.

“You’re taking us out there?! To our deaths?! Is this some kind of punishment for not stopping Eldric?!”

“If it was, Henry Kistler, I wouldn’t be going with you.”

“Think about it with your head, Henry,” Hagen said from a distance. “Obviously there’s something Eldric has that the Captain wants. We’re simply a means to an end.”

“That’s right,” George said. “Our priority is getting Eldric back. Malik will use anyone and anything to achieve that.”

“Who the hell is this guy?!” Henry blurted.

“This is Eldric’s father, George Freeman. He’ll be of great use to us in the negotiation phase of the retrieval.”

Kastor now joined the conversation, sticking his hand out to George. “Pleased to meet you Mr. Freeman, Kastor’s the name.”

Asante seized all conversations between the group and brought them over to the lowering mechanism. Erick and Leonard had joined Stone in discussing the mechanism itself. After everyone had stepped onto the platform, he instructed the soldier to lower them to the ground.

“I can’t believe this.” Henry turned to Asante. “Why didn’t you mention this at *all* during our interrogation?!”

Asante laughed. “Don’t blame me, all of your comrades knew about this expedition as well.”

Henry quickly jolted his head around to the group, who were all engaged in conversation. He took a deep breath and wiped his nose with his finger. “Fine, then. If I die, I’ll have your head for a trophy.” With those few words, Henry left Asante and joined Kastor and Leonard’s conversation, punching Leonard’s shoulder as he joined. “Ready Rietveld? We’re about to see the land your blasphemous family created.”

Hagen turned towards Erick. “Now we’ll really see if the Men of Gordon are still around, that’s what I’m most curious about.”

The platform began lowering and the faces of the soldiers slowly began to disappear. All that was left to see was the large gray bricks and the Land of Solitude in front of them.

When they reached the bottom, a couple soldiers were waiting for them with leads tied to horses. There were six horses, and when straws were pulled among the group of five, Hagen got a horse all to himself. Asante got his own horse, as did Stone and George. Leonard shared a horse with Kastor and Erick and Hagen shared the last horse.

Asante rode his horse in front of the group. “On the night of September the 6th of the year 535, we are the eleventh expedition into the Land of Solitude by the Guardian Force, and one that some of us will never return from. I appreciate all of you for joining me, regardless of circumstance. Guardian Force, move out!”

07

September 3, 535

Three days before the eleventh expedition into the Land of Solitude began.

Eldric continued to run from the giant gray wall and everything he knew until he could no longer keep running. The land ahead of him never seemed to end and there were no trees or bushes to hide in. The ground was dry and the sun beamed above him. He stopped to catch his breath when he noticed the lack of gunshots coming in his direction. He turned to face the giant wall and noticed the small amount of distance he’d really covered.

The wall stood silent, and not even voices could be heard from it. Above him, large Ashen Ravens, the only bird-life known in the Land of Solitude, circled and echoed their voices. Once he caught his breath, he’d returned to walking away from the wall and into the unknown.

The Land of Solitude stretched out before Eldric, its vast expanse marred by the scars of war. Eldric’s eyes keenly scanned the surroundings, observing the twisted remnants of farms, churches, and once-inhabited structures that stood as melancholic testaments to the conflicts that had scarred the land. Craters littered his left and right, with the occasional grass patch giving him a sign of hope. The air was heavy with haunting silence, instilling a sense of loneliness that matched the desolation of the terrain. As he ventured further away from the wall, its immeasurable size began to dwindle under the horizon.

Among the ruins of life and craters abound, Dust Hares darted across the cracked earth, their agile bodies blending seamlessly into the muted palette of the plains. With every step Eldric took, dust clouds formed around his feet, kicking up years-old dirt who’d known nothing but the pains of war. Strong winds blew over the low-rising hills and plains, blowing dirt into Eldric’s eyes. The once-fertile soil had turned arid and lifeless, and it had seemed as though even nature itself recoiled from the conflicts that had taken place in years past.

The further into the plains he reached, the more a smell of decay and despair entered Eldric’s nose. It was a scent that haunted Eldric, a constant reminder of what took place over these lands decades ago, and his heart ached for the lives lost in the conflict.

His mind then switched to the Men of Gordon. A rumored organization that had been living in the Land of Solitude for a hundred years. *If they really exist,* Eldric thought, *then they’d be out here for sure.*

\* \* \*

Eldric traveled the whole day, watching as the sun began to set in front of him, casting long shadows on the earth beneath his feet. Ruins became more common as he’d believed he found an old footpath that he’d begun to follow. Knowing the night would be even more treacherous than the day, he found an old farmhouse, or the skeleton of one, and stepped inside. The door was burnt down and the roof was almost nonexistent. Inside, small, thin rats emerged and rushed out of the building, leaving their nests deserted.

The inside of the farmhouse was a small, one-roomed home with the last remaining parts of decaying wood. On the ground, broken glass and ashes littered the area, and a stone floor showed beneath the overgrown dirt and sand. In one of the corners of the room, Eldric propped himself and sat on the hard ground. The light around him slowly faded, and the lack of a roof gave way to a sight he’d never seen before: the sky showed an infinite amount of stars above him. He’d done his best to stay awake, but the day of travel had caused great sleepiness to come over him, and he closed his eyes.

After an unknown amount of time, Eldric was awoken by a sound he’d not recognized. He quickly stood, his eyes, still adapting to the darkness, not seeing much. The moonlight from above shined faintly through the broken ceiling, giving him some sense of direction. Then, almost as on cue, a low growl rumbled from the shadows, sending a shiver down Eldric’s spine. From the darkness emerged two glowing amber eyes.

Entering the structure, the creature appeared to be a large cat-like animal, its muscular build outlining its large figure. It appeared to stand 4 to 5 feet in the air, a body length showing over twice that. Its large claws tugged at the dirt beneath it and its giant teeth showed threw a powerful jaw.

The creature advanced, each step sending tremors through the ground. Eldric’s heart raced, and his senses heightened as he braced himself for the imminent confrontation. His breathing became louder and louder as he backed into the wall and began thinking of ways to overcome his enemy.

The animal moved with mesmerizing fluidity, pacing back and forth cautiously as if testing Eldric’s resolve. Its eyes, filled with primal intensity, locked onto him, revealing a predator’s hunger. Eldric’s head suddenly cleared as he combated the panic ensuing in him. Using the limited moonlight given to him, Eldric surveyed the room for any advantage. His eyes fell upon old crates stacked haphazardly against the wall opposite him.

Eldric bent down and slowly picked a rock up to not startle the creature, and using all his strength, threw the rock at the crates in a desperate attempt to create a diversion. The crates fell upon one another, causing a loud crash that echoed through the stillness of the night.

The creature, momentarily distracted by the sudden noise, turned its attention toward the source of the disruption. Seizing his opportunity, Eldric quietly slipped out of the corner, carefully sliding around the wall to the only exit, holding his hand to his mouth. The doorway without a door. As he made his way to the doorway, he could hear his heart pounding deep in his chest, each step a delicate dance between silence and stealth. The creature, meanwhile, slowly approached the crates with the same careful precision it always moved with.

Just as Eldric reached the doorway, the large cat-like creature’s keen senses detected him and lunged forward. Eldric attempted to back up, but tripped over the doorway, falling to the ground. The creature’s large jaws snapped at where his head was previously, narrowly missing him, but its claws dug into his shoulder, causing a scream of pain to come from him. Eldric, without any hesitation, attempted to create another diversion by ripping the ripped sleeve off his shirt and, in a swift motion, tossing it to the other side of the room. The animal, compelled by its hunting instincts, redirected its attention to the sudden movement, its predatory focus shifting momentarily.

Seizing another lucky opportunity, Eldric rose to his feet, gripping his bleeding shoulder, and slipped through the doorway, his movements swift and deliberate. The creature noticed his escape and pounced at him. Eldric quickly dodged this attack by slipping around the doorway to the outside wall. As the creature began looking for him, he grabbed the wall and began to climb it. The animal heard the noise of the stone wall breaking beneath Eldric’s weight and began running at the wall.

Reaching the broken roof, Eldric’s eyes focused on a decaying wood beam. With a surge of hope, he reached for it and turned to face the large figure, who’d climbed the wall with ease. As the creature closed in, Eldric’s heart raced, his mind focusing on surviving the night and away from his shoulder. He waited for the opportune moment, his senses attuned to the creature’s movements. With a burst of adrenaline, he swung the wooden beam with all his strength, aiming for its head, the creature pouncing the instant he moved.

The sound of impact echoed into the night, a resounding thud that proved his swing powerful. The creature’s head snapped to the side, its jaws snapping shut with a painful yelp, and its body fell limp to the ground.

At that moment, a surge of exhilaration surged through Eldric’s veins, his heart pounding with a mixture of triumph and relief. The creature’s eyes seemed to find their bearings once again, and it rose to its feet. As it rose, however, it staggered, its once-coordinated movements faltering. Disoriented, it stumbled and fell backward off the roof.

Eldric’s moment of adrenaline continued, as he jumped from the roof swiftly, landing with no injury, and delivered a rapid succession of strikes to the head with his beam, each blow finding its mark with unyielding precision. The sound of impact mingled with the creature’s growls of pain and frustration, creating a symphony of desperation in the dimly lit farmhouse.

Finally, as the creature’s breath weakened, Eldric summoned all his remaining strength for one final, decisive blow. The beam descended on the creature’s body with resounding force, driving the last of what little will it had to survive.

Breathing heavily, Eldric stood above the creature, noting its large legs and imposing jaw. He sat beside the creature and felt its rough fur. There was no breathing, no heartbeat, no movement from this once imposing figure. He reached over and grabbed the sleeve he ripped off minutes ago, wrapping it around his shoulder to stop the bleeding. Immediately after, he fell to his back and passed out almost instantly.

\* \* \*

Awakening to the sound of Azure Ravens echoing through the plains, Eldric arose in the farmhouse and immediately gained his bearings. He looked down at the creature he’d slain the night prior, being able to look at its finer details. The creature had a thick, black fur and two tails. Each of its legs held a large paw at the end with 5 thick claws that never retracted. He felt his shoulder, sending a stark pain to his head. He tried to raise his arm, but it wouldn’t go past his head. He stepped out of the farmhouse and ventured out to the path again, heading eastward.

Eldric was starting to feel the lack of water taking its toll on his body. The scorching heat of the Land of Solitude intensified his discomfort, turning his sweat into a constant stream that poured out from his pores. Every step he took became a struggle, his feet sliding across the barren, cracked earth, as if it resisted his presence.

The relentless sun beat down upon him mercilessly, its rays scorching his exposed skin and sapping his energy. Eldric’s throat felt parched, his tongue dry and swollen. He longed for a sip of cool, refreshing water to quench his thirst and provide relief to his dehydrated body. With each labored breath, he pressed onward, driven by an unwavering determination to survive. The vast expanse of the desolate plain seemed endless, stretching out before him like a desert of desolation. The Land of Solitude lived up to its name, with no signs of life or respite in sight.

Just when Eldric’s body threatened to succumb to the harsh conditions, his weary eyes caught sight of something in the distance. Squinting against the blinding sun, he saw the faint outlines of crumbling structures, a village reduced to mere remnants by the ravages of war. He picked up his pace and ventured towards the destroyed town.

08

September 4, 535

Two days before the eleventh expedition into the Land of Solitude began.

As Eldric cautiously approached the desolate town, a pungent scent of soot and ash permeated the air, invading his nostrils. The ground beneath his feet transitioned from dry, compacted dirt to a scattered array of crushed stones, bearing witness to the relentless forces that had ravaged the area. Drawing nearer to the outer wall of the town, Eldric's eyes fixed upon a weathered sign suspended above the entrance. The vestiges of words once etched upon it were now mere ghosts, faded by the relentless passage of time. It stood as a silent testament to the existence of a nameless town secluded within a vast desert expanse.

The ferocious gusts of wind, previously hurling stinging particles of dust into Eldric’s face, gradually subsided as he cautiously took his initial steps into the ghostly village. The streets lay deserted, strewn with debris and the remnants of utter devastation, while the houses stood in an unsettling state of disarray. Shattered fragments of glass littered the ground, bearing witness to the shattered dreams that once flourished within these walls. Decaying wood dangled precariously from the rafters of what were once bustling abodes. The wooden walls, weathered and worn, bore the unmistakable marks of decay, with rot creeping upward from the ground and mold festering on their weathered surfaces.

Dead trees, like solemn sentinels, dotted the sides of the road, their barren branches surrendering to the weight of desolation as they cascaded to the ground. Storefronts, or rather their feeble remnants, were now ensnared by an intricate web of weeds and creeping vines, suffocating the very life that once animated them. Eldric stood transfixed, his voice stolen by the haunting sight that unfolded before his eyes.

Turning left onto another desolate street, Eldric found himself confronted by a scene far less promising than the one he had just left behind. Houses, reduced to ruins, lay in complete disarray, while charred stones scattered throughout the ground seemed to bear the marks of an inferno long extinguished. In the crevices of these forsaken remnants, stubborn weeds defiantly clung to life. Even in the presence of faint signs of life left in his wake, the desolation that met Eldric’s gaze left him utterly unconvinced that anyone had ever called this forsaken place home.

As Eldric pressed on, his footsteps echoed through the empty town, the resonant sound of his heels clicking against the cracked and fragmented stone. Along his path, he encountered a stone abode that defiantly withstood the test of time. Upon stepping inside, he discovered the remnants of a once-thriving blacksmith’s workshop. Rusted swords and shields from a bygone era leaned against the walls, bearing witness to the skilled craftsmanship that once animated this place. In the center of the room, a silent and cold furnace stood as a poignant reminder of the dormant fires that once roared within. An anvil, corroded by the relentless march of oxidation, bore the scars of time, its surface cracked and chiseled.

Leaving the blacksmith’s abode behind, Eldric continued his solemn exploration. Eventually, he stumbled upon what appeared to be the town square, now an unrecognizable labyrinth of collapsed structures and twisted metal. In the heart of this desolate expanse, a stone fountain sat forlornly, its once-joyful waters long evaporated, leaving a tangible sense of abandonment in its wake.

Among the wreckage and corroded iron, an enduring symbol of hope emerged—the chapel. Its lofty steeple, though diminished in stature by half, defiantly pierced the sky. While every other edifice had succumbed to the relentless march of time and decay, the chapel stood resolute, its roof nearly intact, and its sturdy walls a testament to resilience

Eldric approached the chapel.

“State your name and allegiance!!” A mysterious voice called from above. It was slightly lower pitched than Eldric’s but its booming volume echoed throughout the village. Eldric stood silent.

A moment later, a large figure dropped from the chapel. He stood and faced Eldric. He was a man, just slightly taller than Eldric. His shoulders were broad and his hair was thick and brown. His eyes, a deep blue, pierced into Eldric’s soul as he paced closer to him. His shirt was dirtied and earth-toned, with no visible tears. To accompany his shirt, his pants held multiple pockets and went down to his ankles, and his shoes were thick and durable. His face and arms showed scratches and cuts, while his chin was protected by a beard.

The man paced towards Eldric, circling around him before stopping in front of him. “An imperial uniform, not a design I’d seen before, but noticeable nonetheless. Who are you?”

Eldric stood, frozen.

The man stepped to Eldric, sticking his face in Eldric’s, their noses a breath away from each other. “Must I repeat myself, who are you?”

“El-Eldric, Eldric Freeman.”

The mysterious man stepped away from Eldric

“Freeman.” The man repeated the name to himself. “Ok, Mr. Eldric Freeman, I’ll lay things down for you nice and simple. I have nineteen individual snipers pinpointed on your very location. They work for me. As soon as I give the signal, or you move, they will not hesitate to fire and kill. Do I make myself clear?”

Eldric nodded. He noticed an audible accent within the man’s voice, but couldn’t quite pinpoint it.

“Good. Now answer my questions concisely and efficiently. Who is with you?”

“With me?” Eldric was taken aback. “Nobody is with me. I’m alone.”

The man squinted in suspicion but seemed to accept the answer. “Alright, what are you doing here? Are you working with the Einrich Empire?”

“W-What?” Eldric chuckled. “No, no not at all. I’m not working with anyone, I just told you. In fact, Einrich’s after me, that’s why I’m in the Land of Solitude, to begin with.”

The man paused, and stared Eldric directly in the eyes, sending shivers down his spine. “You mean to have me believe that you are being sought after by the Einrich Empire, and so you’ve deserted your country by entering the Land of Solitude, and somehow came upon this village. Do I have I that right?”

Eldric nodded.

The man’s mouth widened and exploded with laughter. He laughed so hard that he had to crouch to catch his breath. “Don’t worry, you’re not being followed,” he said, still panting from his laughter. “Not by Einrich, that’s for sure.”

“Why not?”

The man raised an eyebrow. “How long have you been in the Land of Solitude?”

Eldric thought for a moment. “Little over a day, I guess.”

“Then there you have it,” the man said definitively. “If Einrich were *truly* after you for whatever reason, they would’ve either killed you or captured you by now. Einrich isn’t some petty nation like Wargia, they’ve got power. In their eyes, you’re already dead.” The man then looked Eldric up and down before thinking to himself. “Last question, Mr. Eldric Freeman, do you have any relation to a man by the name of Leodric Wilson?”

Eldric drew a look of confusion. “Leodric? Sorry, I don’t think so. I’ve never heard the name. Apologies.”

“I see.” The man nodded before turning his back to Eldric, sticking his hand to the sky and waving goodbye. “Live your life well, Eldric Freeman.”

Eldric was caught aback. He followed the man into the chapel, hoping to find more answers. “Wait a minute, you can’t just leave me here. I’d die if I spent another day alone, and you’re the first person I’ve seen out here! How can you just leave me?!”

The man reached the back corner of the chapel and began removing debris from the ground, revealing a trapdoor leading beneath the structure. “I’m under no obligation to tell you this, Eldric Freeman, but don’t follow anyone in the Land of Solitude. It’s bad manners, you know? Also, I don’t believe I have any obligation to assist you whether I’m the first person you’ve seen or the one-hundredth. Good day!”

“You could at least give me some pointers, maybe a place I can go to? I’m not trying to run from Einrich for the rest of my life.”

The man removed the last of the debris covering the metal door. Lifting it up, he glared at Eldric. “Mr. Freeman, I can tell you’re new to this whole thing, but you’re in the Land of Solitude. Running is all you’re gonna be doing now. Now, as I’ve said, good day.” He climbed into the hole and disappeared into the darkness below.

Eldric peered into the square hole. A wooden ladder, showing no signs of age, led down to the ground where a singular torch illuminated the stone floor below. Having no other leads, he grabbed onto the ladder and followed the mysterious man down into the depths.

Reaching the bottom, the sunlight from above had all but disappeared, and in front of him stood a long hallway with a singular door at the end. The man, carrying the only source of light, led the way to the door at the end of the hallway.

“Woah!” Eldric shouted. “I had no idea chapels had these kinda things down here.”

The man jumped and quickly jolted his head around. “You followed me down here? I thought I told you to *get out of here*.” The man’s eyes shot bullets towards Eldric, making his body shiver.

Swallowing his nervousness, Eldric spoke. “Of course I followed you down here,” he retorted, “you haven’t answered any of my questions, and again, you’re the only person I’ve seen out here! You can’t just expect me to take what you’ve said and go: ‘Oh yeah that makes perfect sense to me!’ Are you crazy?”

The man looked at Eldric for a few moments before turning around and mumbling to himself. Eventually, he began walking down the hallway, Eldric a few paces behind him. They reached the door and the man pulled a metal key from one of his many pants pockets. “The only one, huh?” He said while unlocking the door. “That will change, I guarantee you that.”

Eldric followed the man through the door. Inside was a small room with several bookshelves lined up against the walls, each filled completely with large books. In the center of the room stood a small desk, big enough to hold one person and completely covered in books. The ground held scrolls, tapestries, and open books in no discernable pattern. The man put the torch in a torch holder along the back wall and sat down at the desk, opening a book that was already there.

“Woah, how’d you find this place?” Eldric questioned, running his finger along the many books.

“I just happened upon it,” the man said begrudgingly. “I would enjoy it if you’d stop probing me for questions, thank you.”

“Hey, fairs fair. You probe me I probe you.”

“That’s hardly the same thing-”

“Isn’t it? Your snipers don’t threaten me anymore, we’re underground. Now answer my questions.”

The man looked at Eldric staying silent. The two continued to stare at one another as if sizing each other up. After a minute of this mental battle, the man spoke. “Three questions. I asked you three questions, so you ask me three questions. Fairs fair. Afterward, you leave, and I never see you again. Deal?” The man closed his book and placed it on the desk. He crossed his arm as if waiting for what Eldric was to say.

“You asked me four, but fine. Three questions.” Eldric thought for a moment before speaking again. “First, who are you? I don’t mean just your name. Where are you from, that sort of thing, why are you here?”

“That’s already three questions, but fine, I’ll count it as one. My name is Michael Hickhox, I’m a merchant from the Principality of Rivercrest. I’ve been wandering the Land of Solitude for longer than I can even remember.”

“The pleasure’s all mine.” Eldric turned to face the books once again. He pulled out a random book and looked at the cover. It was written in a text he couldn’t read. Not because it was faded, but because the writing was in a foreign language he had not even recognized. Looking back at Michael once again, “Ok, second question: Where the hell are we? I was taught and I believed that nobody had ever lived in the Land of Solitude, barring the Men of Gordon and petty thieves. Just what is this town?”

Michael chuckled, not nearly as hard as on the surface, but still a hearty laugh that Eldric could hear from across the room. “First, let’s get things straight. The Men of Gordon aren’t here. They never existed to begin with. Sorry to burst your bubble, but from what I’ve learned only the empire teaches its youth about the Men of Gordon. If they did exist, I surely would have encountered ‘em at some point, but they don’t. And I haven’t” Michael rubbed his hands together. “Now to your actual question, of course people lived out here before this was the Land of Solitude. Did you take basic history lessons? Before the Second Alcrestian War a hundred years ago, it was thriving with life, and so too was this village.”

Michael stood up and walked to one of the bookshelves on the back wall. He pulled a piece of parchment and laid it across the ground.

“We’re actually in old imperial ground, Mr. Freeman,” Michael pointed to an obscure place in the middle of the map. “In a town known formally as Clerud.”

Eldric crouched next to the parchment. On it depicted a vastly different map from what he’d known of the continent. The far east was barely explored, and the empire was much larger. Just then, Eldric’s head felt a ringing pain, unlike anything he’d felt before. He felt as if a knife had stabbed him in his head. With no hesitation, he screamed out in agony.

And then almost as quickly as it came, the pain dissipated.

“What the hell was that?” Michael exclaimed. “Are you insane or something?!”

Eldric looked at his hands, not saying a word. “I-”

Michael slapped him. “If you’re going to scream as if someone was murdering you, at least give me a heads up! As far as I know you just called in your entourage!”

Eldric, regaining his composer, sat up. “Sorry. I don’t know what happened. I just got this pain in my head and-”

Michael stuck his hand up to silence Eldric. “Whatever, I’m over it now. If it happens again, however, I’ll pop two pieces of lead through your skull. If I get back to my point, you won’t do that again will you?”

Eldric shook his head.

“Good. As I was saying, the village, Clerud, was abandoned in the war, and hasn’t been repopulated since. Nobody in their right mind would live on the front lines, right?” He went silent before rolling the parchment up and returning it to its previous home. “After the war, when this land was deemed neutral and belonged to no one, again *not*  by any Men of Gordon but instead the nations at the forefront of the war, the town never got a chance to return to what it once was. Now, it stands as a grim reminder of the perils humankind has gone through and the lengths it will take to achieve her goals.”

Eldric didn’t say a word. As Michael returned to the desk in the middle, he looked at Eldric with inquisitive eyes.

“And what of your last question?”

“What?”

“You wanted three questions, you’ve only asked two. I would like to get this over with so I can return to my solace.”

“Right, okay.” Eldric rose to his feet. He had received the information he wanted, so he put his mind to the future. *I have to make it out of here, there isn’t any way I’d survive longer than a week if I stayed out here.* “You said you were from Rivercrest, right? Tell me. How can I get there, or any northern country for that matter?”

Michael looked at him and burst out once again in his enormous laughter, this one lasting longer than the previous. Once he caught his breath, he looked at Eldric and immediately burst out into laughter again. After another few minutes of Michael cackling, he finally caught his breath and wiped the tears from his eyes. “Eldric Freeman. You wouldn’t survive a day up in the northern countries. What, you want to live on the front lines of an international war?!” Michel burst out laughing once more. “It’s impossible.”

“Then where else could I go? I can’t go back to Einrich, they’d kill me. You know as well as I that I wouldn’t survive a day in Reinbose, so where else-”

Michael stopped Eldric with his hand. “I wasn’t saying livin in Rivercrest was impossible, rather leaving the Land of Solitude is impossible. Besides, Mr. Freeman, you’d sooner die in Rivercrest than you would here. Hell, even Reinbose is probably safer for you than Rivercrest.”

“Why is it impossible?”

“Why?!” Michael exploded in laughter once more. “Mr. Freeman, entering the Land of Solitude is easy as a task may come. But leaving? You’d have the stain on your back of someone who came from the Land of Solitude. People, regardless of whom, will take you for a ruffian, a convict, practically someone who escaped their life sentence in prison. Us merchants get a bye because we come back here. One can never truly leave this land. Take you for instance: you will die in the north, you make it seem like you can’t return to Einrich, which is probably true regardless of circumstance, and you can’t get to Reinbose. Even if you do get to Reinbose, your clear imperial accent and body language will give you away. Your best option, again, is to simply live your life here, in the Land of Solitude.”

“But I need to leave,” Eldric said desperately. “I know it’s a stretch, but I can’t stay here. I’ll do anything. I need to live the way I want to live, I can’t do that here.”

“And what way is that?”

“I just want to live comfortably; without the restraints I had in the empire.”

Michael’s head cocked to the side, and his eyes squinted. “And you expect to have that in the north? Where war rages on, families separated, and children slain? You expect a stress-free life in such destruction? Take a look outside, Mr. Freeman. You’ll see land. Desolate land, sure, but peaceful land. Sure, you must deal with the occasional thief or creature, but if you have someone alongside you, you will get on just fine. There is no war, no conflict. People living day by day as if it were their last. You get the freedom you can’t find anywhere else. What more could you want?”

“I don’t want to just ‘get on’, I want to live. I don’t want to have to constantly look over my shoulder in fear of my life. I’d done that enough in the Empire, I’m tired of it.”

Michael put his elbows on the desk and began rubbing his forehead. “Fine then, go. If you’re so insistent on leaving, your best bet is Reinbose. Head due East, if you don’t know which direction that is, it’s the way the sun sets. It’s about a nine-day hike if you know the terrain, so I’d give you about two weeks. Due east is Greenwood. It doesn’t have a wall or anything like Erdenjist where I presume you come from, but it does have guards. They *might* listen to you if you bring up your plight, but they also might not. So, your guess is as good as mine. Good luck!”

Michael stood up and grabbed a book from behind him, opening it and shooing Eldric away with one of his hands. Without another word, Eldric turned around and made for the ladder to the surface. As he neared the opening, he heard voices that were having a conversation from above.

“Hey, Michael?”

Michael sighed before looking up towards Eldric. The hallway wasn’t too long and the two could see and hear each other quite well. “What is it now? I thought you were off.”

“I was, but do you think one of your snipers could take me?”

“My what? Oh!” Michael chuckled to himself. “Sorry, Mr. Freeman, but there weren’t any snipers, that was just a ruse to get you to confess. If you really want someone that badly-”

“You don’t have to lie to me, I can hear them talking above.”

Michael put his book down and stood. “You what?”

“Yeah, they’re talking to each other, I don’t know what about but I could-”

Michael jumped out of his seat and over the desk. “GET OUT OF THE WAY!!!” He exclaimed.

Before Eldric could interpret what he’d said, an explosion ruptured from above him, blasting a giant hole that revealed the secret hallway and room, causing rubble to fall upon him. Michael shielded himself from the sudden sunlight, noticing several figures above the now large hole when his eyes adjusted.

“Hello, Michael Hickhox,” a deep voice rang from above. Michael knew this voice, but he couldn’t tell which figure spoke it. “We thought it was strange when we weren’t greeted at the gate. Did you forget about our little exchange?”

Michael did not respond.

“Anyways, we thought you abandoned Clerud, which we thought was lucky! I mean, first time Michael Hickhox wasn’t guarding Clerud in how long? We couldn’t pass up this opportunity!”

“How’d you find me?”

“It was pretty easy actually. We heard an ear-shattering scream coming from the chapel, so we investigated and found this hole of yours. We sent scouts below and heard you talking to yourself, and knew we needed to catch you off guard, get the high ground, you know.”

“And this is your plan to do that?” Michael’s eyes were beginning to adjust and he could start to see the visual differences in the figures. “You’ve fallen far,

“You’ve wronged us several times, Hickhox. One too many, if you ask me. I think it’s time for a little repentance, and what better place than in the chapel of your own stomping grounds?”

Michael put his hand on his gun. “If it’s a fight you want, it’s a fight you’ll get.”

“Very well.”

One of the men above Michael, presumably the leader, raised their hand and immediately three figures jumped below. Michael quickly drew his gun and fired at the descending figures. Three shots missed, one hitting the shoulder of the back right figure. The three landed and quickly lunged towards Michael. Dodging the attacks effortlessly, he could hear the chuckles of the leader from above.

“Can’t use your tactics if we constantly go after you, eh, Hickhox?”

Michael, not reacting to the taunts from above, grabbed one of the attacker’s heads and swung his body into another, crashing the two to the ground. He pounced on the third, who now had his gun out and pointed at Michael. Before he could fire, however, Michael stepped beside him and whispered into his ear. Immediately, the man drew the gun to his head and shot himself.

Eldric heard all of this from inside the pile of rubble. He felt immense pain all over, but fought through that pain to scrape away what little he could to escape. As he scraped away the rubble, more fell upon the spots where there were holes. He had no idea how much rubble was on him, but he kept digging. Eventually, the rubble stopped replacing the old, and he could crawl out from the rocks.

As he escaped, he watched as a soldier clad in an old imperial uniform shot himself with Michael next to him. Immediately, Michael noticed the struggling Eldric and ran over to him, keeping an eye on the figures from above.

Eldric, coughing, struggled to get his words out. “They’re after me. They have imperial uniforms. I told you.” He finished his thought before passing out once more.

\* \* \*

When Eldric awoke, he was inside a room unfamiliar to him. Several guns lay about the floor, and a workbench sat against the wall, where Michael was working. The bed Eldric laid upon was facing a staircase, and next to the staircase was a railing where a brown satchel was hung.

Hearing the sounds of life, Michael turned around. “You’re awake.”

Eldric nodded.

Michael turned from the workbench and picked up a flask. He shook it before tossing it over to Eldric. “Water.”

Eldric looked at the flask. He unscrewed the top before putting his mouth to the opening and flipping the flask. The water rushed down his throat and dropped into his stomach, cooling his entire body down. His throat was quenched, and his thirst replenished.

When he finished the flask, he set it beside his bed. Michael had returned to working at the bench. “What happened to those imperials?”

“They ran off,” Michael said quickly. “And they weren’t imperials to begin with. Ex-imperials, maybe, but I’ve run into them for years, now.”

Eldric nodded. “Thanks, by the way.”

“For what?”

“For getting me out of there and to wherever we are.”

Michael didn’t respond. The two sat in silence as the sounds of tinkering continued. Suddenly, Michael put his tools down and turned to face Eldric.

“All right, I’ve made up my mind. I’ll take you.”

Eldric was taken aback. “What?”

“I’ll take you to Reinbose. *Only* Reinbose. I’ll be your escort if you want to call it that. I’ve been to Greenwood a few times. It’s a hub for merchants and dealers alike, so I know the fastest way there. I’ll protect you along the way, and we’ll make it there in a week or so.”

Eldric was stunned. “I thought you said-”

Michael stuck his finger in Eldric’s face. “I’m aware of what I said, and I gave it some thought. You said you’d do anything to get out of here, and I’m jumping on that. I’m a merchant, aren’t I? I’m not gonna do this for you for free. I’m gonna need a favor from you when we reach Greenwood. No need for details now, but when we get there I’ll tell you all about it.” Michael stuck his hand towards Eldric, offering a handshake. “Do we have a deal?”

Eldric hesitated.

“Freeman,” Michael began, “I want you to accept this knowing what’s ahead of you. We’ve got a roughly nine-day trek through the deadliest place on Alcrest. Ein help us, we’ll make it in eight. There might be things more deadly than you’ve ever encountered before. Keep that in mind.” Michael’s hand slowly lowered again, returning to the position it once was. “This is my one and only offer as well, so your answer is final.”

Eldric brought his hand to Michael’s and shook it. Quickly, Michael pulled his hand away and turned back to the workbench.

“Freeman, do you have a weapon of your own?”

Eldric shook his head.

“Really? How did you survive out here without one? And didn’t you come from the Empire? Why wouldn’t you have a gun?”

“I did have one, but-” Eldric cut himself off. He thought back to the soldier.

“I see.” Michael drew a look of confusion. “Anyways, we need to get you out of that uniform of yours. Can’t have you revealing who you’re allegiance is towards if you’re trying to go to their enemy. Wait one moment.” Michael walked downstairs. Eldric was tempted to follow him but refrained from doing so. Eventually, Michael returned with several clothes in hand. “These are old ones of mine, but try ‘em on. Best not reveal where you hail from so easily, right?”

Eldric removed his uniform and tried a few pieces of clothing on. He settled for a black shirt and dark brown pants with not nearly as many pockets as Michael’s. His makeshift bandage got in the way, so he took it off.

“What?”

To his surprise, the injury had all but faded, leaving three noticeable scars in its place. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“What’s wrong?” Michael asked.

“Look!” Eldric showed his healed shoulder. “My shoulder! I swear it was bleeding out last night!”

“Maybe you were just dehydrated,” Michael responded. “Hallucinations happen all the time when you are.”

Eldric went quiet. He couldn’t accept that as an excuse for his wound disappearing, but he had no choice. *How else would a deep gouge evaporate in a day?*

Trying to ignore his shock, he finished putting on his shirt and pants. The black shirt hugged his skin, allowing him to move fluidly, and the pants were just the right size. He made sure everything fit well before turning back to Michael. “About my weapon.”

“Right, what kind of gun do you want?”

Eldric shrugged. “Anything works really.”

“That’s what everyone says, but everyone has their own gusto when firing a gun. Do you want something more accurate, or something that fires rapidly, or maybe something in the middle?”

“Truly, anything works.” Eldric stepped to the wall where guns were lined up in a neat fashion.

“What did you use back in the empire?” Michael asked.

“They had us use a lot of guns. Basic training they had us use a smaller pistol, but in practice it was more similar to a rifle, I guess.”

Michael walked over to the array of guns lined against the wall and picked up a small grey handgun. He showed it to Eldric with a proud look on his face. “An Abbasi-X7. A reliable, accurate gun. Easy to hide. How’s this?”

“That’s perfect.”

Michael nodded and quickly slammed the gun on the workbench and began tinkering with it.

Eldric watched Michael move parts around with meticulous accuracy. His hand glided across the machine, moving into place various switches, springs, and parts. His fingers moved like water flowing down a pipe, and his hands held the gun with care found only with mothers and their children.

When Michael had finished tinkering with the gun, he closed it up and handed it to Eldric. “It’s ready to go.” Michael stepped away from the table and grabbed a small pouch off the ground. “Here’s the ammo for it.” Michael walked over to the staircase and began heading down. “We leave at first sunlight. Don’t kill yourself before then.”

\* \* \*

Eldric rested in the room for an hour or so before getting up and deciding to explore the village while he could. He walked down the stairs to see the dilapidated remains of a house. The front door was dislocated from its hinges, and the walls were chipping away, but the house was intact. The ground floor had signs of furniture once existing, and water dripped from the cracked ceiling. The windows were broken and charred, and the floor was covered in cobwebs and dust.

Exploring the houses around Michael’s, there wasn’t much to see outside the occasional half-broken piece of furniture, or an old book strewn about. When Eldric returned to Michael’s temporary home, the sun had begun to set, making the sky orange and the streets a dark shade of red. Stars began to appear in the sky and the noises of the night had begun.

Michael had been in the broken house when Eldric returned, reading one of his books. He looked up at Eldric briefly before returning to his reading. Still looking at his book, he ushered to the makeshift bed Eldric woke up in hours prior.

“You can sleep there tonight.”

Eldric stared at him, puzzled. “Where will you sleep?”

“That doesn’t matter. I’ll be out when you go to bed and I’ll be out when you wake up. When and where I go to sleep is none of your concern.”

Eldric began walking over to his new bed before asking Michael if he could read one of the books lying about the floor. With a slight nod, he picked up one of them with a thick spine and a hard leather cover and sat at his bed.

The bed was comfortable, though dead grass pierced into his skin unless he shifted about. He found a nice spot and flipped open the book. Inside, there were symbols Eldric didn’t even recognize, similar to the ones on the cover of the book he’d picked out in the underground library, but slightly different.

Some time had passed before the sky had darkened to the point where the symbols were impossible to read. Michael had taken notice of the darkness and slammed his book shut. Standing up and bidding goodnight to Eldric. Without a word further, he stepped downstairs and exited the house with minimal sound.

Eldric had grown tired of trying to read the incomprehensible symbols, so he too closed his book and laid his head on the grass. Surprisingly, it supported his head quite nicely. Soon enough, he had fallen asleep.

\* \* \*

Michael’s word held true. When Eldric awoke, there was nobody in the house but him. Thinking Michael would be in the hidden library, he grabbed his newly acquired gun and began walking to the central square.

The sky was covered with clouds, and the air was much cooler than the day before. A certain moisture hung about the air, giving the weeds some weight under the small droplets of water. The night sky began to appear more blue as the coming of dawn neared. When Eldric reached the central square, Michael had already been there, waiting for him. He wore his satchel around his shoulder and posted his own gun on his shoulder.

“Ready to go?”

“Let’s.”

09

September 5, 535

One day before the eleventh expedition into the Land of Solitude began.

Eldric and Michael left the destroyed town of Clerud behind them, venturing eastward. Michael was a few paces ahead of Eldric, always armed and at the ready. Eldric, too, held his gun firmly in his hand, ready to defend himself if need be.

As the sun rose behind them, the moistness of the air dissipated. The clouds remained, leaving a gray overcast, but the air warmed up. The ground beneath Eldric’s feet was not only dirt and sand anymore, but patches of weeds and grass had begun to spring up occasionally.

Michael hoisted his gun over his shoulder. The gun he used was a larger one with a thick strap. It looked like the type of gun that would fire quickly, but Eldric never asked. “I’m surprised you made it to Clerud, in all honesty.”

Eldric tilted his head and grew a look of confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Well, to put it simply, nobody makes it out here alive. I see dead skeletons all the time, all scattered about. You were lucky to not encounter any bandits or creatures. Though you did mention *killing* a Stalker. You’ve got balls, kid.”

Eldric laughed in embarrassment. “I didn’t have a choice. My life is practically over already, so I wanted to struggle to win. To fight.” He shifted his gaze to the north, admiring the desolate, ruin-filled landscape. “What about you? What brought you here?”

Michael remained silent, as if thinking about his answer. “Rivercrest isn’t exactly the greatest place to live right now. There’s a good market for stuff not typically sold in normal markets. Rare stuff, artifacts, that sort of thing. As for everything else, that business is purely my own.”

“What’s it like in Rivercrest?”

“What’s it like?” Michael gazed at the sky and thought for a while before giving his answer. “There isn’t really a word that describes it, but in essence, it’s incredible. Wide open fields, long winding rivers, that sort of thing. I haven’t been there in some time, so I don’t know if it looks like that now.”

*I see.* Eldric noticed the clouds beginning to dissipate in the sky. The sun revealed itself, creating shadows over the small dunes in the landscape. Looking behind him, Eldric saw the town of Clerud, now a small dot in the landscape, disappear over the horizon. The grass patches became more common and Ashen Ravens flew overhead, their calls echoing through the empty fields.

“We’re heading to a chain of ruins called the Valley of the Forgotten. We’ll need to get something from there to enter our destination afterward.” Michael reached into his satchel and pulled out a small compass.

“Reinbose?”

“What? No. We’re going to a settlement of traders and bandits. Very set in their ways. The trail we’re taking to Reinbose is under their supervision, so it’ll help to get their blessing.”

“Why do we need to go into the ruins then? Can’t we trust that you’ve got a good relationship with them? Or take another trail?”

Michael stopped walking and turned around. “What you’ll come to find is that out here, everybody wants favors. If we just stumble into the settlement and begin asking for things, they’re gonna want something outta us. But if we come prepared, we won’t have to deal with their stupid fetch quests. The Land of Solitude is only backed by one currency, and that currency is ‘you do things for me, and so I’ll do things for you’. It doesn’t get simpler than that.”

“But can’t we just take another path?”

Michael sighed. “Every trail, every path, and every square meter is watched or controlled by somebody, many of whom I do not exactly have the greatest relationship with. If you want the easiest way to Reinbose, you’re just gonna have to sit through this little detour.”

Reluctantly, Eldric agreed, and they were off once again, now walking side by side, not speaking for a while.

Eldric was the first to break the silence. “So tell me, what kind of wares do you sell?”

Michael shot him a glaring stare before loosening up. “Normal things. Weapons, gunpowder, ammo, collectibles, you name it. I run across all kinds of people here, all asking for different things, so I help ‘em, give ‘em what they want, and in return, they give me things. Never money. Money has no use in the Land of Solitude. If they do give me money, I refuse it and request something else outta ‘em. Why the sudden inquiry?”

Eldric shrugged. “No reason. Are there more of these trading outposts out there?”

“You mean like the one we’re going to? Oh sure. It’s kinda an allegiance thing, you know? Only trading with one group, giving them exclusive benefits, and they do the same. It’s mutually beneficial.”

“Do you ever get to visit some of the countries surrounding the Land of Solitude?”

“I already told you, I haven’t been to Rivercrest in ages. Einrich ain’t so easy to get into either. You’ve got that Guardian Force that shoots the smallest sign of life from a thousand miles away. Reinbose, though, I’ve never been. Never had the chance to, I guess. How about you? You ever go abroad?”

“You think I had the chance to—being stuck in the Red-Light District? Hell, I could barely leave the city before just three months ago!”

Michael didn’t react. “Just thought I’d ask. Like I said, you’re not the first Einrich citizen to pass through the Land of Solitude. Doubt you’ll be the last too. Not sure where any of ‘em end up though. I always ask, but none of ‘em answer truthfully. It’s always ‘anywhere but here’ or ‘to freedom’. It was the same with you too. That’s why when you said that Einrich was following you, I couldn’t believe it. Part of me still doesn’t. There’re holes in your story leading up to Clerud, and I think they’ll reveal themselves before we get to our destination.”

“What makes you think there are holes in my story?”

Shrugging, Michael responded. “Maybe there aren’t, that’s just my hunch. I’ve heard many stories from seasoned travelers of the Land of Solitude. I’ve kinda got a decent hunch for when a story is half-truthful or fabricated. Plus, for you to make it out here alone on no food or water, defeat a Stalker without a gun and live to tell the tale? Either you’re superhuman, or you’re not telling me something. Again, I could be wrong, but that’s the conclusion I’ve reached.”

Eldric stayed silent, waiting for Michael to continue. He thought about his bout with the small child and the events he left out of his retelling.

Michael continued. “It’s good, though. You never want to tell anyone your full story. Gives ‘em too much leeway to blackmail you. Whether you did it on accident or for that purpose, it was a wise decision. That’ll be the case with just about everyone you meet out here. Nobody’s living to their true selves. Farces upon farces. Built on a foundation of lies, nobody trusts each other. Knowledge is key to survival out here. Nobody wants to relinquish theirs.

“That applies to me, too. Just ‘cause I’m helping you out doesn’t mean you should go around telling me anything and everything. We’re business partners and that’s about the thick and thin of it. If it’s related to our deal, of course, I’ll tell you, and you would be wise to do the same. Everything else, though?” Michael shrugged and shook his head several times. “Point is, be careful with who you spill your beans to.”

Eldric remained quiet, keeping pace with Michael. The two moved quickly through the dead ground. Occasional creeks and dead trees had become commonplace now. When the two stopped for a break, Eldric took note of one such dead tree with a long metal object sticking out of it. He began walking towards it, quickly making his way to the vicinity of the tree. Immediately surrounding the tree was sand. The roots of the tree were hidden from sight, giving Eldric flat ground between him and the branchless tree.

Taking a step forward, he immediately felt the weight of the ground give way.

Eldric saw the sand around him fall, the tree falling sideways. Everything had been moving in slow motion. Below the thin layer of sand was a deep pit, a crater digging deep beneath the ground. Before he could fall any farther, a hand grabbed the back of his shirt and with immense strength threw him far from the crater. When Eldric had landed, he looked up and saw Michael grasping the edge of the crater, quickly climbing to the surface. Eldric jumped up and helped Michael regain his composure.

Once the ground had settled, Michael looked at Eldric and slapped him cleanly across the face. “You’re about as stupid as they come, you know that?! What happened to sticking close to me?!”

“What the hell was that? The ground showed no signs of being completely without stability!”

“That was glass-sand. When bombs and other explosives destroyed the ground, some did so without destroying the surface tension of the top layer, leaving sand and dirt that gives way under any amount of weight. What the hell were you thinking?!”

“There was a tree with something sticking out of it, I thought it could be good to investigate and-”

Michael sighed and palmed his forehead. “That ‘something’ was a sign that glass-sand was there. There’s tons of ‘em all around, I’m surprised you haven’t noticed them already. I get you’re new to this place, but you should at least take precaution with anything remotely showing signs of life.” Michael turned and faced the crater. The crater wasn’t that large, but was deep enough to cause serious harm should anyone fall into it. The dead tree sat among the sharp rocks at the bottom, split and scattered across the hole. “Let’s get moving.”

Michael grabbed his things from the ground where they made camp and began heading on. Eldric took on last glance at the crater before running after the merchant.

\* \* \*

“Here we are, the Valley of the Forgotten.”

After travelling for the better part of the day, Eldric and Michael reached valley dipping below the ground. In the valley, several ruins piled on each other, some dipping below the ground, creating a large stone garden. Leading Eldric down into the Valley, Michael pointed out several of the ruins and what was held within them. Eventually, the two stopped at a smaller ruin near the back of the valley.

The ruin had three standing walls reaching no higher than Eldric’s head and a fourth that had fallen under its own weight. In the center of the room was a small square hole with a wooden ladder running to the bottom.

“This is the Library of Whispers, as I’ve dubbed it,” Michael began, wearing an excited expression on his face. “I’ve heard about eight explorations into it, but only one reached the bottom floor.”

“Who did that?”

Michael looked at Eldric and pointed boastfully at himself with one of his thumbs. “Anyway, what we’re here for is the Veil of Whispers. Apparently, according to the texts within the library, it can enhance all senses when worn.”

“How is that possible?”

“It probably isn’t. But it’s the possibility that it does just that which makes it valuable. We give it to the leader of the outpost and before he can try it, we get permission to go to Reinbose, simple as that.”

“What if someone had taken it before us?”

Michael burst out in explosive laughter. “Relax! Nobody knows about this place but us and, like, three others. We’ve all claimed our respective ruins, this one just happens to be mine.”

*So you’re the one that explored it eight times…* Eldric thought.

“Anyway, let’s press onward!” Michael jumped to the ladder and began climbing down, Eldric quickly following him.

The ladder had taken them well below the ground. When Eldric reached the floor, Michael grabbed a torch laying about and lit it with materials from his satchel. When the torch was lit, Eldric saw ahead of them a great atrium. The walls were adorned with towering columns and faded artwork, while the ceiling was held up by towering archways. Sunlight found its way through the few cracks in the ceiling, protruding beams of dusty light to the ground. The scent of parchment filled Eldric’s nostrils as he followed Michael further into the large hallway.

“This is the Main Atrium,” Michael explained. “Stay close, it’s easy to get lost here.”

They passed several doors and hallways, each surrounded by towering shelves of books, their spines faded and rotting.

“How big is this place?” Eldric asked.

“Not sure, I’ve probably only explored roughly sixty percent of it. There isn’t much in the hallways, just more books.”

“Is this where you got the books below the chapel?”

Michael chuckled. “No, those books were already there. I did bring some from here to there, but I always returned them when I came back.” Michael waved his torch around, highlighting the enormous bookshelves. “Most of these books are on random things, like medical procedures or historical events. A lot of it is in a language I can’t even read. I can only guess they’re from before the Great Cataclysm.”

“The Great Cataclysm?”

“Time before time. It’s just a hypothesis, but there’s a lot of evidence showing that there was something that caused a mass extinction across the continent about 500 years ago. That all advanced civilization at the time was completely wiped off the face of the planet. You know the calendar we use right now?”

“The Hrofth one, right?”

“Yeah, it’s made by the Holy State of Hrofth saying that Ein birthed the world 500 years ago, and that everything before was the ‘dark ages’. What if these ‘dark ages’ in question weren’t in fact dark ages, but instead a giant advanced civilization that had its own customs, cultures, and countries. I believe Hrofth had something to do with the covering up of this Great Cataclysm.”

“What makes you think that the Holy State would do something like that? The way I see it, they would have nothing to gain.”

“Couldn’t say. My best guess is that it probably goes against their teachings. Religious text is very specific in what it teaches, I wouldn’t be surprised if there were texts from before the Great Cataclysm that explained everything I’m saying.”

“What do you think caused it—the Great Cataclysm I mean?”

“Like I said, it’s just a hypothesis. From what I’ve read, though, the ancient civilization had better technology than what we have right now, maybe that played a role.”

“Does anyone else know about this hypothesis?”

“Oh, sure. In fact, across the Land of Solitude it’s taken as fact. It’s only officially a hypothesis because nobody really knows what caused it or how Hrofth fits into it. I’m sure other countries take it as fact as well, but don’t give two damns to bring it up.”

Eventually, the two stopped at one of the doors, wedged shut by force. Michael took a step away from the door before kicking it open with great might. The door flew back, completely dislodging from the frame it was attached to. Behind the door was a long, short hallway. The walls were lined by bookshelves with thousands of books within them.

Michael led Eldric once again through the hallway, telling him not to touch anything. At the end of the hallway was a small room. No books lined the walls, and the cobblestone which made up the walls was crumbling under its own weight. Michael felt around the room before grabbing onto a stone and pushing it in. A hidden passageway revealed itself with a revolving staircase heading downstairs.

The two took large strides as they went down the stairs. When they reached the bottom, they came upon another large hall. No books dawned the walls, instead faded artwork surrounded them with tall marble pillars holding the ceiling up.

“This is the Main Hall,” Michael explained. “Not sure what its purpose was, but we need to go deeper-”

Before Michael could finish his thought, a loud deep groan echoed through the large chamber. Booming footsteps shook the ground while the large groans echoed and bounced around the walls. Immediately Michael grabbed Eldric by the arm and pulled him behind a pillar.

“What was-”

Michael shushed Eldric. The footsteps continued to echo throughout the chamber while the deep groan faded in and out. Michael peered around the pillar and stuck the torch out before quickly turning back. He began to breathe heavily and began looking around for an idea. Eldric stayed silent, watching Michael scramble for an idea.

*We need to be very, very quiet,* Michael mouthed. *It can’t see, but it can hear.* He paced around the pillar and waved Eldric to follow him. The two hugged the wall as they continued further into the main hall, hearing the deep groan along the way. Suddenly, the groan stopped.

When Michael noticed the silence, he immediately stopped moving. He exchanged glances with Eldric, holding his breath. After a moment of silence, a high pitched screech resounded in the chamber, causing Eldric to lose his balance and falling to the ground. Immediately after, a giant figure crashed through two of the pillars. The pillars scattered among the air, falling at Eldric and Michael’s feet. The figure was tall and rugged, its back reaching the ceiling. Its broad shoulders and powerful limbs carried a force unlike Eldric had ever seen, and its face was absent of eyes, instead housing two large ears that moved at the speed of a chicken’s head.

“He heard you, we need to go!” Michael yelled at Eldric.

Eldric looked up at Michael, his ears still ringing from the screech. He understood what he was saying and quickly got to his feet. Behind him, he heard a slam and when he looked behind him, a large hand-like object fell to the ground before lifting itself up. It turned towards Michael and Eldric, swiveling its gigantic body quickly.

“What the hell is that thing?!” Eldric exclaimed, grabbing his gun.

“Doesn’t matter, we need to get to the trap door!”

The monster swung its large arms around, breaking everything in its path. It took large, booming steps that quickly gained its pace, each step shaking the ground and everything on it.

“Follow me!” Michael said calmly. He tossed his torch far ahead and quickly wrapped around one of the pillars, entering the large open area in the hall. The giant creature heard them do this and broke out in a sprint towards them.

“It’s coming!” Eldric screamed.

Michael, grabbing Eldric to his pace, grunted. “This is why I travel alone,” he said quietly.

They quickly crossed the main hall, hearing behind them the behemoth wreaking havoc. Looking behind him, Eldric saw the figure of a dark blackish creature with limbs that were proportioned in strange, otherworldly ways. The creature’s hands were almost human-like as they grabbed the ground and tore it up in pursuit of the two of them. It’s large mouth gaped open showing millions of sharp white teeth. When they almost reached the other side, Michael let go of Eldric’s arm and reached inside his satchel to grab a matchbox. He quickly lit the match and grabbed another object from his bag, using the match to light it.

“Flash bomb, cover your ears!” Michael screamed as he threw the object back at the gigantic creature.

Eldric did as he was told, but even his hands couldn’t cover the immense sound that rang through his head. He tripped, causing Michael to fall as well.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” Michael exclaimed.

Eldric quickly rose to his feet and didn’t help Michael get up, instead opting to keep running from the beast, who was now hesitant in its movements as its senses were disarmed.

After a few moments, Michael did the same, rising to his feet and joining Eldric, pulling him now to the side and behind the pillars against the wall.

The two walked along the wall quietly but with haste, holding their hands to the wall the entire time. The monster, its senses now beginning to return continued to destroy the area around it before stopping suddenly. Eldric opened his mouth to ask a question, but Michael quickly shut him up and smacked his head, then returning to pulling him along the wall. When the two of them reached the end of the large room, they turned inwards at the corner and found a set of short stairs in front of them. Michael led Eldric up the stairs and to a set of large metal chairs facing the hall.

Michael pointed at the largest chair and ushered his hands to tell Eldric they were to lift it, and move it out of the way. Eldric nodded and the two grabbed hold of the chair. They lifted it, but Eldric’s grip slipped and caused the chair to slam to the ground with great noise.

Immediately, the monster’s groans stopped and, illuminated by the lone torch in the hall, began sprinting towards the two of them at an unmatched speed. Michael reacted quickly and pulled the chair out of the way, revealing a small trapdoor beneath the chair. Eldric swung it open and the two jumped in a moment before the behemoth’s hand swung at where they had just been.

Beneath the trapdoor had been a small hallway like the one leading to the hidden staircase but with a shorter ceiling and wider walls. Michael had found a wall torch and lit it with another match from his satchel. Before Eldric could say anything, Michael turned to face him with a pissed look on his face.

“You have to operate better under stress.” Michael said angrily towards Eldric. “You could’ve had me killed! First, you slip and fall causing the behemoth to notice us, then you trip when we’d *finally* be able to get away from him with my flash bang! And to make it worse, you lost your damn grip on the chair causing the behemoth to see us yet again!”

“I’m sorry,” Eldric said, “I just wasn’t prepared.”

Michael sighed. “You know, Eldric, I thought there was something about you. When you told me you made it alone to Clerud, and killing a stalker for that matter, I thought I could rest easy knowing you could hold your own. Clearly I was wrong, because even when your one simple instruction was to *remain silent* you found just about every excuse to make as much noise as you could!”

Eldric stood, a blank stare on his face.

“I knew I should’ve never taken this on,” Michael said turning his back to Eldric. “I’m dead! I’m going to be killed.”

“I’ll do better. I’ll make sure-”

“You better.” Michael did not turn around. “Now, let’s go, we’re almost to the veil.”

Michael led Eldric down the small hall, which got smaller the deeper they got through. Eventually, the size of the hallway was so small that all Eldric could do was crawl immediately behind Michael. There was a tight squeeze which pressed down onto Eldric’s back before he was immediately relieved. The small room was well lit, not by torches but by what sat in the center of the room. A white veil perched on a small pedestal, resting on a small red pillow.

Michael retrieved the veil and put it in his satchel. “Well, we’ve got the veil. Let’s go.”

“Simple as that?”

“I’ve never been in this room, the main hall was as far as I’ve gotten, I’d no idea it would be this easy.”

With that, Michael crouched and led the way out of the square room. Eldric got one last look at the small room before crouching and following him.

“So how do we deal with the monster?” Eldric asked.

Michael looked at him. “I don’t know, wise guy, you’ve got any ideas? A behemoth isn’t exactly easy prey.”

Eldric thought for a moment. “A diversion.”

“A diversion? What, are you going to volunteer? That would make this whole operation a waste.”

“No! We use the torch to create a noise off to the side, allowing us to slip off in the opposite direction. Hopefully, if all goes well, we’ll get out in no time.”

Michael thought about Eldric’s proposal. “It might just work. You’re going to throw the torch, though. If you get eaten, not my problem.”

“Fine.”

The two reached the trapdoor, which remained shut from when they were last here.

“You know what, I’ll get on your shoulders,” Michael said. “I’ll throw the torch and pull you up.”

Eldric hesitated.

“I’ll throw the torch. You hoist me up. That’s our new plan. Got it?”

After a long hesitation, Eldric agreed. He crouched down and allowed Michael to stand on his shoulders, hoisting him up to the level above. When Michael reached the ceiling, he reached down and pulled Eldric up, putting his finger to his mouth again. The behemoth had gone away in search of the torch Michael threw, meaning they could head down the stairs and along the wall to the spiral staircase.

Michael led the way, leading Eldric along the closest wall to the end of the hall, where the spiral staircase stood. They heard the deep groans of the behemoth as it stomped around, but it never heard the two in their escape.

They climbed the spiral staircase and out into the main hall, climbing the ladder to escape the ruins.

“Well done on the return. You learned your lesson it seems.”

Eldric sighed. “Thanks for the praise.”

Michael ignored him. “Now we’ve got the veil, so we’ve just gotta make it over to the outpost and then it’s straight on to Reinbose. Shall we?”

Michael led Eldric back through the crowds of ruins and out of the valley. From the entrance, the valley appeared much smaller than it had been. Eldric followed Michael, keeping himself a pace behind his leader.

10

September 5, 535

“The outpost is called Abatu,” Michael mentioned. The two of them had made good headway to the outpost, the sun showing it was late in the afternoon. Eldric had felt it was much later than that, but he said nothing.

“I’m not sure if he’s still around, I haven’t been in over a year, but the leader of Abatu calls herself Paulek. She’s been out here in the Land of Solitude for decades now and she has a bunch of outposts, so I wouldn’t be surprised if she wasn’t here.”

“How does she own all these outposts? Isn’t it difficult to operate one?”

“As far as I know, it’s like a vast interconnected organism. Word spreads faster than anywhere else, so if something happens to one outpost, the rest find out in a matter of a day or two. Paulek’s got a lot of influence around these parts, so having her blessing is imperative.”

“Have you met her?”

“Who, Paulek? Oh, sure. Just ‘cause she has a lot of influence, doesn’t mean she’s a legend or some mystical figure. I believe I’ve met her five times over the years, and once you meet him once he never forgets you.”

Michael continued heading eastward with Eldric behind him. The craters around them became less apparent, with multiple signs of glass-sand popping up around them. Ashen Ravens echoed their voices through the landscape, which had become less and less desolate as the hours went by. Patches of grass became bigger, and running water made a few appearances throughout the landscape, though sand still predominately thrived.

Another hour passed, and in the distance Eldric saw a small structure looming over the horizon. As he got closer, he could distinguish the finer details of the building. It was not one structure, but rather multiple ones that were surrounded by a tall wooden wall. A large gate opened to show the inside, which appeared to have a few tents and one or two bigger buildings. A tall tower rose above everything else, the only one to reach a height taller than that of the walls.

Next to the gate were two muscular men, each wearing similar tattered clothing. They wore black boots and each had a scruffy chin and scars up their arms. Above the gate read a large sign. *Abatu—The Central Trading Hub.*

“State your business,” The left guard stated sticking his right hand out. In his left, he held a large gun which positioned itself on his shoulder.

“We’re here to trade with Paulek,” Michael stated promptly.

The guards looked at each other and then back at Michael. “Who are you? How do you know Paulek?”

“Let’s say I’m a regular. I’ve met her in Joest and in Meik. We arranged a third meeting for today, you should have been notified.”

The guards looked at each other once again. Eldric was confused as well. *Notified? How could he have notified them?*

“We’ve never seen you here before,” The right guard now spoke. He wore similar clothing to the left guard but held a significantly bigger gun, taking up both of his hands. His left eye had a scar running through it. “We’ll ask again. Who are you?”

Eldric attempted to grab Michael’s shoulder but before he could do that, Michael shifted his gaze to the left guard. In a commanding, soft voice, he spoke once again. “I am Michael Hickhox, and you were notified of my arrival.”

The left guard stared at Michael for a moment. His eyes dilated before he seemed to put a name to a face. Turning to the right guard, he spoke again. “I was mistaken, I was notified of his arrival. I forgot to mention it to you.”

“You know him?” The right guard questioned.

“I don’t, no, but Paulek must.” The left guard turned to the two of them and invited them inside the outpost. “Come, I’ll show you around Abatu.” Michael and Eldric followed the guard inside, his large figure moving with force.

The inside of Abatu was simple. In the center was a large open area where traders were talking amongst each other. Along the walls were tents and shops that seemed to be there for a long time, each having a shopkeeper who shouted prices at the passing crowd. In one of the corners of the outpost was a wooden building which seemed to run below the ground, and in the other was another building that had only one floor. Far from the three of them was the tall tower that Eldric had seen from afar, its winding and crooked look rising high above the ground.

“This is the central square,” the guard began gesturing around them. “This is where most of the traders do their business, as you can see. That small building over there is where news from other outposts come in, no need for you folk to worry about that. That tower over there is where you’ll be meeting Paulek tomorrow, and-”

“Tomorrow?!” Michael exclaimed, pulling the guard aside. “We need to meet with him *today*. Tomorrow isn’t an option.”

“Mr. Hickhox,” the guard said in a condescending voice, “tomorrow is the *only* option. Paulek is out right now and is meeting nobody. I apologize, but there is nothing more I can do. Until your meeting time, we’ll have you a room at the outpost inn. Understand?”

Michael looked at Eldric and then back at the guard. “Fine. Show us to the inn.”

The guard agreed and took them to one of the wooden buildings in the corner of the settlement. Inside was a room with a front desk and several benches strewn about the room. Off to the side was a unattended bar with several bottles of liquor lined against the wall. The guard went to the front desk and spoke with the lady there for a moment before returning to Michael and Eldric. “Your room is three floors down, second door on the right. Your meeting with Paulek is at first sun tomorrow morning. Be at the tower there before then or you will miss it. Sleep well.” The guard waved farewell to the front desk lady before exiting the building and returning to the gate.

Michael sighed and waved Eldric along to the stairs, leading them down the three flights as instructed and to the second door on the right. Inside was a small room with two small beds and a lantern hanging from the ceiling. A small table stood in the back corner, and the room smelled of rot and feet.

“You said you’ve been here before, why’d you need the tour?” Eldric sat on one of the beds and tested its feel. It was hard.

“We didn’t, but it’s polite to take it. It’s also been well over a year since I’ve been, I’d be surprised if there was anyone that remembers me from then. People don’t stay in one place long enough to remember anyone else. They remember their clients and that’s about it. Other traders or merchants aren’t nearly as important to remember, because we’re all out for one thing: money.”

“Still, I’m amazed you found the time to notify the guards of our arrival, how’d you do that?”

Michael shrugged. “It’s unimportant. What’s important is that we have a meeting with Paulek to get her protection along the line to Reinbose. From here’s it’s a three day trek to Greenwood.”

Eldric nodded.

Michael sat in his bed and reached into his satchel, pulling out a book. “If you want to see the outpost, it’s probably best you do it now. I’ll be here when you come back.”

Eldric nodded again, standing up and exiting the small room. When he reached the surface, the sky had gotten pinker, showing the sun was reaching the horizon. The traders had decreased in number, and the shopkeepers began to pack their things up. The noise had decreased as well, as people reached their final agreements, and began to head to the inn where the bar was now attended. The tower sat idly by, quietly watching over the outpost.

Eldric went to a few of the shopkeepers who kept their wares out to ask them about the settlement. They’d all either ignored him or told him to buy, none answering his questions. The tents closed their doors, and the small wooden building across the way was as unpopulated as ever.

As the sky grew darker, he noticed the two guards step inside the outpost and slam shut the large gate doors. They spoke a few words with each other before heading to the inn.

Eldric followed and returned to the inn where the inside now held several traders and merchants drinking away. Some carried on their deals and trades while others talked about the news around the Land of Solitude. Music played by volunteers that kept the scene lively and entertained several merchants who sat around them and sung along. Eldric went to the front desk lady, a different one than before.

“What’s going on here? Is everyone from outside the settlement?”

The clerk smiled at him. “Of course. There’s very few who live here for more than three months, every night they come here to forget everything and enjoy a drink or two.”

“How do they pay for the drinks?” Eldric questioned.

“They get special currency only used by Paulek outposts whenever they trade with us,” the clerk said with a smile.

Eldric thanked the clerk and began heading for the stairs but was stopped by the sounds of cheering and shouting much louder than before. Everyone in the inn turned their attention to the musicians where a bard had come out. After hearing for some requests, the bard picked up a lute from against the wall, tuned it for a moment, and then begun singing.

*“In the Land of Solitude, where silence reigns supreme,*

*A tale unfolds of war and might, like a long-forgotten dream.*

*Reinbose and Einrich clashed, their nations torn apart,*

*Yet legends whisper of heroes, etched within each heart.*

*“Amidst the raging tempest, where swords clashed and rang,*

*A band of fifty-seven, their valor undeterred, they sang.*

*The Men of Gordon, warriors bold, stood against the tide,*

*With strength and unwavering courage, they fought side by side.*

*“Oh, Land of Solitude, where hope is but a dream,*

*Whispers of forgotten battles echo through the stream.*

*Amidst the chaos and despair, one story stands tall,*

*The legendary Men of Gordon, who heeded destiny’s call.*

*“Through the darkest nights of war, their spirits burned like fire,*

*They faced the harshest trials, their hearts filled with desire.*

*A beacon of hope in a land so torn asunder,*

*Their deeds of bravery and valor thunder.*

*“No foe could break their line, no army could prevail,*

*The Men of Gordon fought with fervor, their foes began to quail.*

*With each swing of their blades, they pushed back the foe,*

*Their unwavering resolve becoming a legend to bestow.*

*“Though time may fade their memory, their legacy lives on,*

*The Men of Gordon, a symbol of courage, never to be gone.*

*In the Land of Solitude, their story is told,*

*Of heroes who fought valiantly, their spirits forever bold.*

*“So let their names be sung, and their valor be known,*

*The Men of Gordon, whose legend forever has grown.*

*In the annals of history, their triumphs remain,*

*A testament to bravery, in a land once torn by pain.”*

His voice was serene and flowed through the air. Throughout the song, the inn was quiet. No other instruments accompanied the bard as he sung his tale, none needed to. Each word was meticulously placed one after the other as a story was strung. The bard’s blonde hair waved as his head nodded back and forth, as if singing to everyone. Some whispered the words along with him, while others swayed to the tune.

Eldric listened to the tale until its completion. When the bard finished, everyone who’d been sitting stood up and cheered. Drinks and liquor flew as the bard was smothered in applause.

“Quite the singer, huh?” Eldric hadn’t noticed, but during the song a large man had stood to his side. Looking over, he noticed the guard that showed them around as he cheered for the bard.

“Yeah, I’d never thought a voice that nice would be out here.”

The guard finished clapping and turned to Eldric. “Romeo Vicente, the song weaver of Wargia, or so they call him. There’s many like him out there, but I think he’s one of the best. He travels all around the Land of Solitude, does these shows in the inns sometimes, gets paid a whole lot in food and shelter.” The guard put his arm on Eldric’s shoulder. “You’re Mr. Hickhox’s companion, yes? Let me buy you a drink.”

Eldric tried to decline his offer, but before he could the guard was already halfway to the bar. He had no choice but to follow. When he reached the bar, he sat down at the barstool next to the large figure, a drink already in front of him.

“How’s Einrich this time of year?” The guard asked, slamming down his half-finished drink.

“Einrich?” Eldric thought for a moment before remembering Michael’s words. “Not sure, I’ve never been.”

The guard laughed. “Sure you have! That accent is about as thick as I’ve ever seen. You gotta try harder if you’re to trick anyone into thinking you’re not from there. I get it, though. You want to forget where you came from. It’s the same with everyone. Nobody comes here lookin’ to talk about the past. Some of us aren’t afraid to talk about where we hail from, others never mention it. Apologies for my irreverence.”

“It’s alright.”

The bard introduced his second song and with haste began to play it as beautifully as he did the first.

“You know, I’m from Wargia too.”

Eldric turned to the guard with a confused look on his face.

“It’s best known for its mountain range that spans the entire country. Early in the Northern War, it was said that Reinbose wanted the resources within the mountains, but I guess its changed to the resources in Rivercrest. The mountains make it damn near impossible to overtake, so I’ve got no worries for it regarding the war.” He wiped the liquor off his lips and laughed incredibly loud.

Eldric thought about Alf in Antonov’s mansion. He, too, had been from Wargia. He wondered if he’d been alright since his departure. He took a sip of the drink he’d been given and nearly spat it out. It had a bitter taste and burned his throat. Not wanting to be rude he swallowed it against his will. “You don’t mind sharing this with me?”

“Oh, sure I don’t. Never have. Plus, I got the Einrich information outta you, fairs fair, right?” The guard gave Eldric a thumbs-up with his large hand before returning to his regular posture. “I came here about 2 years ago. I’d been promised by Paulek that I could find work and shelter here, so I’m about one of ten who stays here year-round.”

“And do you like it here?”

“Sure. It keeps me busy, let’s me see all kinds of folk. You and Michael are no exception. People like you are what keeps me here.”

“I see.” Eldric looked at his glass. Despite the terrible taste, he’d been slowly making his way to the bottom. How his father ever did this daily was a complete mystery to him. “Sometimes,” Eldric began, not looking away from his glass. “I feel like I should go back. Back to Einrich, I mean. I know that if I do, I’ll be imprisoned if not killed but even still, a part of me wonders if I’m making the right decision.”

The guard thought for a moment. The blonde bard had begun another song and had made the inn go quiet once again. When he finished speaking, the guard spoke in a quieter tone, to match the room. “Michael’s companion. Let me tell you a story which I think might help. It’s about yours truly, so it might be of assistance.”

Eldric nodded.

“Let’s see, in Wargia, because of the Empire’s rule, the entire country is ruled by a governor selected by the empire. The noble class and those in the political sphere must align with the governor’s every decision or the ultimate punishment could be put in place. My father worked in that political sphere and worked very closely with the governor, so I grew up in a very political household.”

“I’m not interested in politics,” Eldric retorted calmly.

“I’m just setting the stage. You can’t fully enjoy a story without background, the lore. Anyways, he, my father, and the governor grew very close together and each had children around the same time, you can probably guess who. So, naturally, an arranged marriage was set in stone. Of course, she was very nice and very beautiful, and honestly, if I’d met her in any other circumstance I might’ve fallen in love. Who knows? Maybe I did. But I knew the circumstances of the marriage, so when I found out that I’d be marrying her, I felt like a tool to my father to gain political influence. I was still attracted to my fiancé, so I pleaded with her to come with me and flee the country, either east to Rivercrest or west to Balcesteria, neither of which was under imperial rule. Unfortunately, she did not feel the same as I did and was going to turn me in the next day for deserting the country. So I ran. Came to the place I didn’t even mention to her—the Land of Solitude. I knew if I’d gone to Balcesteria or Rivercrest I’d’ve been found, so I came here. Eventually, I found an outpost, made myself known, met Paulek and the rest is history.”

Eldric looked at his cup, he said nothing, waiting for the guard to continue.

“Everyone’s got similar stories to mine. Some committed crimes and others wanted freedom from oppression. Regardless of the reasoning, we all feel like we made wrong choices in life. But isn’t that the fun of it?”

The blonde bard finished his second song and applause roared throughout the inn once again.

“Do you hate your family?”

The guard jolted back in his seat. “*Hate* them? Hate’s a strong word. No, I won’t say I hate them. It takes a lot for me to say I hate someone and truly mean it. Hell, I don’t even know why I don’t hate them, now that you mention it. They probably hate me, for all I’m worth. I was my father’s ticket to endless wealth and prosperity, and I threw it all away.”

Eldric finished his drink and asked for another one, denying the guard’s request to buy him another. As the bartender brought his second glass, Vicente began his third song.

“The Jannik family. That’s who I come from. They’re one of the largest families in Wargia, so I can’t help but hear things about them when Wargians come through here. Ask any one you know, they’ll probably know about my family. From what I’ve heard, I’ve got a younger brother and he’s supposed to marry the girl I was set to be with. I think a part of me hates them for that. Not entirely, of course, but enough to have me notice it.” The guard slammed back his drink, finishing the large glass in one gulp and quickly getting a replacement. “Somehow, everyone in Wargia knows about what my family’s doing, but you ask any of them and not one knows about Otto Jannik.”

“Otto?”

The guard chuckled. “Same response and everything. Yeah, that’s me. It’s not like I want to be known or anything, the less people know the more I can stay hidden away. My theory is that my family didn’t want another instance where someone runs away from their duty to my father that they began to engage with the public in any way they could. Get the name out, and everyone can spot you from a distance. But, even if I don’t want to be known-”

Otto went silent. Almost at the same time, the bard had finished his third song and the room, almost as if it were on a cycle, erupted once more. Gold coins flew towards the bard’s hat, most not making it all the way there. He took several bows and flipped his large feathered hat.

“That song.” Eldric gulped down a large portion of his second glass. “The one about the Men of Gordon, is it true?”

“The first one he sung? What about it?”

“Well, I was under the impression that they never existed, but that song talks about them as if they were real.”

The guard looked at the bard, who thanked the applauding audience. “I think that each person has a different opinion about them. Whether or not they existed, whether or not they still exist, whether or not they were killed, everyone seems to think something about it. Me? I think they aren’t more than just a legend. Probably some tale that was thought up to instill morale in soldiers. Even if they did exist, they’d probably be dead by now, considering they’d be over a hundred years old!” The guard laughed. “Songs sung by bards are meant to be just that—songs. They’re stories strung together for the sake of entertainment. If you analyze every little detail about them, you won’t find any enjoyment in them.”

As Otto finished his thought, someone called his name from outside the tent. As he took another sip, a different guard came up and began to lecture him about all sorts of things. Eldric tuned out, turning back to the stage where the bard was still working on exiting the stage.

Otto finished his drink and stepped away from the counter. “Sorry I gotta end things short. Guard things, you know how it is. Hope I didn’t scare you off from visiting Wargia, it’s really a beautiful country.” He tossed some metal objects on the counter and with an over-the-shoulder wave, exited the building with the other guard.

Eldric took another bitter sip of his drink before putting it down. He tried listening to the group which replaced the blonde bard, but they weren’t nearly as enjoyable to listen to as him, so Eldric thought it was best to leave as well. He thanked the bartender and stepped away from the bar, heading to the stairs. As Eldric reached the stairs he slowly began heading down.

He eventually reached the third floor and entered the second door on the right. Michael was still there, reading his book. When Eldric entered, Michael looked up and gave a slight smile. Eldric sat on his bed, not able to hear what went on upstairs.

“How’s it upstairs?” Michael asked, closing his book.

“Loud,” Eldric said, “but the bard did play a good tune.”

“What about?”

“The Men of Gordon.”

*Ah*. Michael put his book into his satchel and set it on the small table in the corner. He returned to his bed and laid down on it. “I can’t drink like that anymore.”

Eldric turned around to face him.

“I used to drink with ‘em all the time. The people upstairs, I mean. It’s good for networking. Getting to know other merchants, they give you better deals when you have a history with them. I can’t do that anymore.”

“Why not?”

“I may not look it, Eldric, but I’m old. I can hold my own in battle, but my age doesn’t allow me to do many things. Drinking being one of ‘em.”

Eldric was baffled. Michael easily looked his age, if not just a little older. For him to claim that he was much older made him scoff. “I was talking with the guard from earlier, he mentioned that he was from Wargia. You ever been there?”

“Me? No. I don’t get out much. The Land of Solitude has everything I could ever need. No reason for me to go to places I’ve never been, you know?”

“But you’re going to Reinbose.”

“If it’s for business, it’s different. If someone like you came through Reinbose to get to Wargia, then I’d have an excuse to go.” Michael sat up. “Moreover, I’m curious about you. You’ve seen what it’s like out here—the kinds of people, the way they live—have you any second thoughts about going to Reinbose?”

Eldric thought for a moment. He thought about his conversation with Otto, and how he’d been wondering the same thing moments prior. Before he could conceive an answer, Michael resumed.

“I’m by no means saying we stop our mission now. I’m still taking you to Reinbose, and you’re still going to help me when we reach Greenwood. What I mean is, if I were to say to you ‘*You need to stay here’*, how would you react?”

Eldric chuckled. “‘You need to stay here’? I’d think you were trying to kidnap me! In all seriousness, I’d seriously consider it, really I would. There’s a part Yes, I’ve seen what the people are like and how the way of life is out here, and while it *is* better than what I had back in Einrich, I can’t say for certain that I’d be able to live out here, much less survive on my own.”

Michael thought for a moment. “You’re right. You can’t know until you do it.” He stood and blew out the candle inside the lantern, casting darkness in the room. In the darkness, Michael spoke once more. “I personally believe you could survive. If it’s worth anything, if you decide to get bored of Reinbose in a year or two, I’m sure you’d be welcomed out here.”

Eldric nodded to nothing. He laid down on his bed and closed his eyes, anticipating his discussion with Paulek the next day.

\* \* \*

Eldric woke up to the sounds of Michael lighting the lantern above them. The room illuminated and he fought his drowsiness as he exited his bed. Michael left the room before him, saying he needed to speak with the guards once more. Eldric woke himself up, got his things, and shortly afterward followed Michael upstairs.

When Eldric reached the surface, he noticed several merchants asleep on various benches. Employees cleaned the floor as a clerk cleaned glasses behind the bar. He stepped outside and breathed in the moist morning air. The dirt beneath him was damp as it appeared to have rained the night before.

The sky was still dim as the sun had yet to rise above the horizon, and shopkeepers were beginning to set up their wares while hungover merchants stumbled to the inn for a glass of water. Across the outpost was Michael talking to an extremely tall man who, after exchanging a few words, led him to the tower. Eldric walked over to the two of them, who paid him no attention and continued their discussion in a language Eldric couldn’t understand.

When the two finished their discussion, Michael turned to Eldric.

“He will lead us to where we’ll be meeting Paulek.”

The tall man, who stood over a foot above Eldric’s head, stepped inside the tower before returning with two more men. The two men took Eldric and Michael’s names and led them up several floors in the tower to a small room with a balcony and a few chairs. In the center of the room was a small coffee table, and at the back of the room had a very large chair with black leather cushioning.

One of the men who led them there spoke a few words to Michael before shutting the door. The two men stood guard next to the door they entered as Michael took a seat in one of the smaller chairs. After looking around the room once more, Eldric took a seat in the chair next to him.

The two sat silently next to one another for a moment before the doors swung open with a loud sound. Michael immediately stood and Eldric did the same shortly after. He turned to the door to see who’d entered, and it was the last thing he expected.

A huge, tall, fat woman walked in through the doors, having to crouch beneath them. She wore a navy blue suit and a purple tie. Her face was angular and her hair was pulled out of his eyes. She had a handkerchief in her breast pocket with clovers on it, and used it to wipe her face. The woman stomped over to the chair and sat. Michael stepped out to the center of the room and sat on his knees, looking over to Eldric for him to do the same. When Eldric knelt, the fat woman spoke.

“Mikey!! How good it is to see you!” The woman spoke in a high-pitched, feminine tone. She waved his arms around while she spoke before returning to a natural pose as she rested her head on her hand. The woman turned to Eldric. “I see you brought a companion, this isn’t like you Mikey.”

“We’re just here to do a simple deal and then get outta your hair,” Michael said, respectfully.

“Ah! Must we really part so quickly, Mikey? I think we are long overdue for a chat, wouldn’t you say?” The large woman turned to Eldric. “Whom might you be, companion of Michael Hickhox?”

“He’s Eldric,” Michael said before Eldric could. “We can catch up another day, but we need to-”

“The boy can speak for himself, Mikey! And you two needn’t kneel before me, I’m not the emperor of Einrich after all. Please, you can stand.” With those few words, Michael stood. Eldric, doing so after him. “Eldric, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Paulek, though I’m sure Michael has told you many things about me.”

Eldric nodded.

“You know, Eldric, Mikey and I go waaaayyy back. We’ve met only a handful of times, but it feels as if we’re the best of friends. Wouldn’t you say so, Mikey?”

“I would,” Michael responded quickly. “And I promise I’ll be back in a week’s time, and we can exchange information then, but for now we need to go.”

Paulek shifted her position in her chair. “A week’s time, huh? You’ve broken that promise many times, Mikey, what’s to say you won’t do the same yet again?”

“I have something to wager this time, Paulek. We’ve come here to strike a deal.”

“Pray tell, what deal might this be?”

“We need full protection along the trail to Greenwood in Reinbose. In exchange, we offer the Veil of Whispers.” Michael pulled the veil out from his satchel and offered it to Paulek.

The fat woman squinted and shifted her gaze to the guards at the opposite side of the room and back to Michael. “Greenwood. You two are heading to Greenwood. Mikey, now I’m not an expert on you, nor are you of me. But I think we both know that I’m not buying that. You have never needed my protection much less to get to Reinbose of all places. Why now-” Before Paulek could finish her question, she shifted her gaze to Eldric and seemed to answer his question himself. “I see. Eldric here is the one heading to Greenwood and you are his escort. Am I right, Eldric?”

Eldric nodded.

Paulek’s fist slammed on the arm of the chair. “Use your words, boy. It is you heading to Reinbose, yes?”

“Yes. It is me.” Eldric quickly responded to her question. Michael shot a glare at him before shifting back to Paulek.

Paulek seemed to have noticed this shift in gaze, as she smirked and looked to the guards, nodding at them. After a moment, the doors swung open again and a muscular man stood beside Paulek.

“Eldric, this is Joshua. Joshua is a highly trained ex-military Sergeant who was once the leader of his own battalion in the Reinbose military. I won’t need any payment of any sort if you simply decide to switch your escort and allow Joshua to take you to Reinbose. Not a bad deal, yes?”

Eldric looked at Joshua and back at Paulek. He knew this would be a good deal, but he didn’t want to go against Michael. Taking little time to think about the deal, he gave his answer. “Apologies, Paulek, but I’ve made a deal with Michael already, I wouldn’t be able to fulfill that agreement if I chose to travel with Joshua. Thank you for your offer, though.”

Paulek thought about Eldric’s words for a moment, before turning to Joshua and sending him away. Once Joshua had left the room, Paulek turned to Michael once again. “Listen, Mikey, the Veil of Whispers is a very powerful negotiation tool, but I need something more.”

Michael stepped forward, his face visibly angry. “Paulek, is this veil not enough?! It’s just protection we’re looking for, what else could you *possibly* want?”

“Information,” Paulek said with a smile. “I wish to exchange information.”

Michael thought about his offer for a moment. Eldric glanced back and forth between the two. Paulek had complete control of the discussion, and Michael had gone right under her thumb. Michael looked at the ground and gritted his teeth before looking back up at Paulek. “Fine. I won’t give you too much but I’ll tell you what I can-”

“Not with you, Mikey. I wish to talk to Eldric.” Paulek looked at Eldric and bore a devilish grin. “Is that not so difficult?”

Michael looked at Eldric before turning back to Paulek. “No. You can talk with me all you want, but Eldric is off-limits.”

“Then our deal is falling through.”

Michael took a step back, putting him in line with Eldric, and looked for a response.

“Fine.” Eldric stepped in front of Michael and agreed to Paulek’s offer. “I won’t tell you much, but I’ll have a conversation with you.”

“Oh, goody!” Paulek exclaimed. “Mikey, it seems you lost this battle. Now, don’t be spying on us, now. Go back to your room in the inn, and don’t think about coming back. I’ll take the veil from you, and that will be the end of it.”

Michael hesitated but stepped forward and handed Paulek the veil. He turned around and began heading for the door, glaring at Eldric the whole way through. When the doors shut, Eldric felt the room shift, as if Paulek’s presence was increased.

Paulek was the first to break the silence. “Good riddance, if I’m to say. So, Eldric, how are you enjoying the Land of Solitude? Is it everything you wished for and more?”

“I guess. I’m just trying to get to Reinbose.”

“A fair answer, I do say so myself. It’s not the greatest place on Alcrest, but it’s home.” Paulek stood and waved the two guards out of the room. “Eldric, do you know how long I’ve been out here?”

Eldric shrugged.

“Longer than you’ve been alive, that’s certain. Long enough to know many things about the people here. I’m sure you’ve heard from Michael, but information is currency out here.”

Eldric nodded.

Paulek chuckled. “You needn’t be so uptight, Eldric. I’m not here to probe information out of you, that was merely a choice of words to make Michael a little ticked off. I’m simply here to have a discussion with you. I promise my information gathered from you won’t be of any importance, no matter what you tell me.” Paulek walked over to the balcony doors and turned to Eldric. “Eldric, would you join me outside?”

Eldric took up his offer and stepped outside. The air was silent and the sun had begun to peak over the horizon, casting large shadows on the growing merchant crowd.

“Eldric, I must ask, where in Einrich are you from?”

Eldric was taken aback. “I’m not from Einrich, I’m from Arlington.”

“You say you’re from Arlington, but your voice tells me otherwise. I’m sure I’m not the first to tell you this, no?”

Eldric swallowed his frustration. “Heldenstadt, the capital.”

“I see. How’s your father been? It’s been many years since I’ve had the pleasure of talking with him.”

“You know my father?”

“Of course I know your father. I’ve met just about everyone who’s been into or out of the Land of Solitude. Not that anyone could forget Leodric Wilson, of course.”

“Leodric Wilson? Michael said the same thing, do we really look that much alike? Sorry, but you’ve got the wrong guy. My father is George Freeman.”

Paulek looked at him for a moment, before turning back to the crowd. “Apologies for the mistake. I saw your eyes and thought you must’ve been his son. He had a certain determination in his eyes, a fire that never extinguished. A man many looked up to. I’m sure the same could be said for you.”

Eldric looked at her.

“Regardless, I’ve pulled you aside not to berate you with questions about a possible connection between the two of us, but to warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“Yes.” Paulek’s voice lost it’s femininity and deepened. “Now, Eldric, I want you to listen very closely. I don’t mind giving you this information, on account of reminding me of George. Michael Hickhox is a very dangerous man, and someone you should be very careful of.”

Eldric stepped back. “You’re still trying to get me to split from him? I told you, I’ve made a deal with him and I’m not wavering from that.”

“I’m not trying to split you two up. By all means, go ahead and complete the deal, but I only offer you this warning after years of crossing paths with him. Michael is a man who never works with someone, let alone travel with them across the entire Land of Solitude for a simple deal. I’m sure he offered you his escorting in exchange for a ‘favor’ when you reach your destination. Am I right?”

Eldric did not answer.

“Michael has extraordinary capabilities. Powers, if you wish to call them. Michael is able to manipulate the mind, control people to his will. Haven’t you noticed it yourself? The moment he stepped out of the room, his entire control over the room had dissipated, and you relaxed, whether you realized it or not.”

“That’s ridiculous, if Michael could ‘manipulate the mind’ as you say, he would’ve already done so to me.”

Paulek sighed and pointed her hand out to the crowd. “Eldric, I want you to look out onto that crowd and tell me what you see.”

Eldric looked at the crowd below, which had grown in size as merchants began striking deals once again, as if yesterday had never ended. “There’s merchants, shopkeepers, and guards down there. They’re either doing their job or trying to sell something.”

“Good. That’s a very good surface level analyzation of the scene. Now, Eldric, I want you to look at that man down there.” Paulek pointed to a merchant discussing a deal with another merchant down below. He wore a blue jacket and a red scarf. His face was round and friendly and his body was welcoming. “What is he looking for?”

Eldric was confused by her question. “He’s looking for a deal. He’s trying to sell that man something in exchange for something else.”

“Yes, you’re right, but not entirely. What does he *want* out of that exchange? What is his goal entirely?”

Eldric looked a the man with greater focus. His mouth and hands moved with grace, but his eyes told something different. “He’s looking to sell something for an overvalued price in order to take advantage of someone who doesn’t know better?”

Paulek jumped in the air, though not by much. “Bingo! That was exactly what I wanted you to say. That man is known around these parts as someone who takes advantage of new merchants. He lures them in with grandiose promises, and though he might not always catch his prey, when he does, he squeezes out every ounce of them.”

“What does this have to do with Michael?”

“Michael is nearly identical to this man. Haven’t you thought about why he’s traveling with you? I can see it myself, there is something within you. Something that simple words cannot even begin to explain. Because of whatever is in you, Michael is unable to control you, just as he’s unable to control me. He’s fascinated by you, and because of that, he’s traveled with you all this way to study you and see what makes you crack. He wants, just like that merchant, for you to be taken advantage of through his little ‘favor’.”

Eldric stood in silence.

“The Land of Solitude works very differently than any other place on Alcrest. Nobody travels alone. Michael is the *only* exception. Even for a merchant, to control Clerud with nothing but himself is a freak of nature.”

“What makes you think I’m not under his control right now?”

“The fact you’re responding to me at all means you aren’t. Michael is very intelligent, and if he was able to control you, he would’ve told you not to speak to me, but here you are.” Paulek shifted her body to turn towards Eldric. “Michael is very powerful, and all I am trying to do is issue you a warning. Do you understand?”

Eldric didn’t respond.

“I’d like to offer you another deal, one that you needn’t reply or respond to right this moment. After you leave this outpost, you might ‘forget’ something back here, requiring you two to return. Should you two return, my guards will apprehend him, and Joshua will escort you free of charge to Greenwood, no strings attached.”

Eldric stared at her, blankly.

“The point I’m trying to drive across is to be careful of his ‘favor’. I’ve no idea what he’s trying to gain from you, or what his goal is when he reaches Greenwood, but it can’t be good. Just consider my offer, that’s all I ask.”

Eldric nodded.

“Well, that’s enough of the serious talk.” Paulek’s voice returned to its original tone. “Shall we head inside?”

Eldric followed Paulek back inside as the large man took his spot back in the large chair, fitting perfectly.

“Eldric, I’ve talked your ear off enough, and I did promise Mikey an ‘exchange’ of information. Are there any questions you have for me?”

Eldric thought for a moment. There were so many things he could ask her, but there was one that he wanted to know the most. “What do you think of the Men of Gordon?”

Paulek grew a look of confusion. “What do I think of them?”

“I was told they never existed, and that everyone has different thoughts about them—about whether they were real or not I mean. So, I want to know your thoughts.”

Paulek chuckled. “I don’t know who told you they weren’t real because they most certainly were. They existed one hundred years ago and were all but extinguished. I don’t know whether or not they were all killed, but I know a good many of them were if not all.”

“What makes you think that.”

“I don’t think it, I know it. I’ve been here long enough to hear many things, Eldric, and the Men of Gordon are a great topic of discussion. The way I know of it, they created this Land of Solitude, and keep the large countries out of it, even today. As far as I know, however, they are not active, which causes me to worry for the stability of this land.”

Eldric cocked his head to the side.

“What I mean, Eldric, is that this land is both the freest and the most vulnerable land out there. Both Reinbose and Einrich are too afraid of entering this land due to the threat of the Men of Gordon, which is why they’ve taken to the northern countries for their little war. But I’m sure you see where the error arises.”

Eldric thought for a moment. “Should both countries realize there isn’t anyone to protect the Land of Solitude from each other, they’ll issue war directly upon one another.”

“Exactly. Part of me thinks both countries realize that the Men of Gordon are gone, but neither wants to make the first move. The Chancellor of the empire and the President of the republic are playing a large game of chess, wherein many lives are at stake depending on the winner.”

“What happens if one of them begins a conquest across the land?”

“There’s nothing petty merchants and bandits can stop. All we can do is huddle under powerful men like me. The idea of the Men of Gordon is all that is protecting the freedom of this land, and is probably what will end it forever.”

“Will you stay here if that happens?”

Paulek sighed and shrugged. “Hard to say. I operate many outposts, and they aren’t exactly as powerful as this one. I suspect I will have to make an allegiance with one of the superpowers in hopes of saving not only my life but the lives of those whom I’ve given shelter to. Though I’m not so powerful anymore, I must do what I can. The land we walk upon is becoming more and more unstable as the days pass.”

“You said they were killed, the Men of Gordon I mean, what makes you say that?”

“That, I can’t tell you. You will have to take my word on it, that they were indeed slaughtered by one of their own, and that he, the killer, is still alive.”

Eldric was taken aback. “Even if it happened decades ago? How could he survive that long?”

“That is another thing I cannot disclose. You will find your answers in due time. Of that, I am certain. I don’t want to be the one to tell you, is all.”

“One last thing,” Eldric puffed his chest and drew a deep breath. “Why are you helping me? What do you stand to gain?”

Paulek smiled. “I stand to gain nothing. I’m not in it to help you, specifically, it could be anyone standing in your place right now and I’d say the same things I told you. I’m merely working *against* Michael Hickhox. You and I are not on the same side, even if you take my offer up. I’m sure you could’ve come up with that answer on your own. Michael is someone I would protect anyone from, and that is why I ‘helped’ you today. It’s as simple as that.”

11

September 6, 535

The sky was clear that night, as Malik Asante pressed onward into the desolate Land of Solitude. The moon cast an ethereal glow over the eight soldiers, the commander leading the way. Over their shoulders, they bore their guns as they scanned the landscape.

Silence enveloped the group as they weaved through the barren landscape, the only sound being the rhythmic thud of horse hooves against the hardened earth. Two horses followed Asante, on them were George and Lawrence. Behind them were two more horses. Kastor and Leonard shared a horse while Erick and Hagen rode the other. Behind all of them was Henry, who watched with a vigilant eye the movements of the foreign George.

On each of the horses were two satchels that housed varying materials for venturing through the landscape. Sleeping bags, lanterns, and other camping supplies found themselves on the horses of Erick, Henry, and Hagen, while more important materials like food and drink sat upon Asante’s horse.

“Hey Malik,” George rode his horse next to Asante’s, matching his pace. “You got any booze on ya? My head’s achin’ like a bitch.”

“I think that’s a problem with your habits, George,” Asante said scratching his unshaven chin. “I’m surprised you made it this far.”

“You’ve gotta have something’! I’m dyin’ out here!”

“I hardly believe you’re dying. If you wish for alcohol so much, you should have brought some with you. I never said you couldn’t.”

George looked at Asante through the moonlit night. He slowed his pace to return to his spot next to Lawrence, who continued to remain silent. The two exchanged glances, Lawrence giving George a long hard stare.

“What’re you lookin’ at!”

Lawrence sighed and looked forward. He reached into his coat pocket and revealed a small metal flask. Popping the cap open, he took a short drink from the flask before extending it to George. George’s face lit up. He grabbed the flask and quickly thrust it upwards as he took two large gulps from the mysterious flask before spitting out the contents.

“What the hell! This isn’t booze! This is water!”

Lawrence chuckled before being tossed the flask once more. He returned it to his coat before returning to silence.

As George sat back in his horse, continuing to plead for alcohol, the two horses behind him stared in awe. Hagen did his best to hold in his hysterical laughter while Henry grew a face of disapproval.

“What the hell is this?!” Henry exclaimed quietly. “Asante couldn’t have grabbed a more unfit crew. First, he grabs a bunch of kids who’ve never seen the lines of a battlefield and then he gets a drunkard who doesn’t know his left from his right!”

“Now, Henry,” Hagen said, turning around. “We don’t know if George could be a huge asset for us! It’s not nice to assume one’s ability based on mere habits.”

“Yeah, but this doesn’t seem like a habit,” Erick responded, keeping his eyes in front of him. “It’s more of a liability. I mean, what happens if we enter combat? Mr. Freeman *might* be great at combat, but what if he isn’t? Hell, we don’t even know if Eldric is great in combat. He might be dead for all we know! We’ve only seen him in real battle once, even if it was a simulation.”

“The Captain seemed to be confident that Eldric was alive,” Leonard commented quietly. “I think it’s best we hold onto that.”

“Nobody cares what you think, Rietveld,” Henry quipped.

“Even so, it worries me,” Kastor noted, ignoring Henry’s retort. “The guy doesn’t leave a lot to the imagination if that’s what he’s like outside of battle.”

“The crazies outside of battle stay crazy inside it,” Erick stated, looking around his shoulder at Hagen, who chuckled. “Regardless, let’s wait until we see him in combat before making any rash judgments.”

“Okay, Mr. Righteous,” Henry scoffed. “While you’re waiting, I’ll be making assessments of my own. So far, it’s not looking good for Mr. Alcoholic over there.”

\* \* \*

After hours of traveling across the desolate landscape, Asante suddenly stopped his horse, causing the rest to halt in response. Asante turned to face the rest of the group and held a finger to his lips. He then pointed to his eyes and gestured out into the darkness.

The group looked around them, hoping to figure out what it was that Asante referred to. Just then, Leonard gasped before his mouth was covered by Kastor’s hand. Holding back his breath, he pointed out into the darkness with a shaky hand.

Kastor looked out into the moonlit night, squinting his eyes. He then saw what Leonard saw. Glowing amber eyes lit up in the darkness as they slowly approached the group. Another pair joined them, and soon another. Soon, more than ten pairs of glowing eyes approached the group before stopping.

“Stalkers,” George said in a soft tone.

“What, now?!” Henry whispered.

“Stalkers. They don’t do well with loud noises, but if we keep our tone to a light mum, they shouldn’t do anything. If anything, they’ll watch for us to make a mistake or a sudden movement. We’re tightly packed so they think of us as a large foreign object. Should we refuse to falter from this formation, they won’t attack us. They only attack if they know they can win.”

“How many do you see, Freeman?” Asante asked.

“Eleven, no, twelve. No alpha either. This is a stray pack. They’ll circle us before realizing we’re a big foe, then they’ll leave.”

“Your advice?”

“Stay put, stay quiet. If an alpha shows up, we fire. The town shouldn’t be much farther, if we feel the need to retreat, we book it for there.”

“We’re taking advice from the drunkard now?!” Henry whispered angrily. “Now I’ve seen it all, next you’re gonna tell me we’re putting Rietveld in charge!”

Asante glared at Henry. “Keep your mouth shut if you know what’s good for you. We may have the upper hand right now, but if the stalkers realize we’re not one big animal, they’ll strike and they’ll have the upper hand.”

“Will our guns work?” Erick asked.

“Yes,” George replied, “but aim for the head. They’ll be able to recover quickly if you shoot in the arm or chest. They’ve got three hearts, but one brain, take your pick at which is easier.”

Erick gripped his rifle which sat on his back. The eyes, which had been sitting still for minutes began moving again. They smoothly entered the group’s view as they began to circle them. Everyone gripped their guns except for Leonard, who was half passed out.

Hagen tapped Erick’s shoulder. “If they attack, let me drive the horse.”

“What?”

“You’ll be the turret, I’ll be the tank.” Hagen gave Erick a smile and a thumbs-up and looked back out to the stalkers.

The creatures circled the group for what felt like days before stopping in position. Each one put itself the same distance away from one another after they stood there for another few minutes, two of the stalkers exited the circle.

“What’re they doing?” Kastor questioned.

George looked at the animals’ movements and grew a worried look on his face. “I seriously hope they aren’t doing what I think they’re doing.”

Asante shot his head around. “What the hell does that mean?”

“If I’m right, and I do mean it, I hope I’m not, they’re getting the alpha.”

Henry shook Hagen’s shoulder. “What the fuck does that mean? The alpha.”

“It means their leader is coming, and we’re in for a fight. Erick, switch positions.”

Erick nodded and the two slowly moved to each other’s spot on the horse. In the place where the two stalkers exited the circle, a new, larger creature entered. It bore fangs that extended past its jaw, and its tail was split down the middle into two distinct tails. The black coat on its fur bore the same dark tone as the others, but its movements were made with much more precision.

“There it is,” George said. “That’s the alpha. Kill it, and the rest go away.”

“Then let’s get that son of a bitch!” Henry shouted, jumping up on his horse.

With Henry’s declaration, the stalkers immediately pounced at the group. Hagen followed by whipping his horse into action, sprinting away from the group, a few stalkers tailing him.

Kastor and Leonard noticed their movements and followed suit. “Leonard! Grab your gun and start shooting the hell outta those things!” Leonard, with a shaky hand, grabbed his pistol out of his holster and aimed it at the stalker which followed directly behind them. He then saw another stalker to the left of them and switched his aim towards the other creature. Noticing the creature from behind, he quickly redirected his aim once more to his original target.

“For the love of Ein shoot one of them!” Kastor exclaimed, directing his horse to circle back to the group. He quickly reached for his own pistol and began shooting at the stalker next to them without aiming, hitting it in the chest.

“Nice, Kastor!” Leonard exclaimed.

“Did you not listen to a word Mr. Freeman said? We need to hit them in the head!”

“Oh, right.” Leonard aimed his gun once more at the stalker behind them, and with a shaky hand pulled the trigger. The bullet flew out of the gun, and with incredible accuracy struck the animal in the head, knocking it to the ground.

“I got one? I got one!” Leonard exclaimed.

“That’s great, Leonard, but we still have one more on us!” Kastor shouted in response before the creature in question pounced onto the horse, gripping the back legs of it with its incredible claws. The horse squealed, raising onto its hind legs and knocking Kastor and Leonard to the ground.

Kastor quickly rose to his feet. He ran over to Leonard and helped him up before watching his horse sprint off into the darkness. The stalker which had gripped onto it fell to the ground before picking itself up. It glared at Kastor and Leonard before pouncing once again before being quickly knocked to the ground.

“Got ‘em!”

Kastor and Leonard whipped around to see Erick wipe his gun as Hagen pulled their horse in front of them.

“Was that you, Erick?” Kastor asked.

“Yeah, I can’t believe it either,” Erick chuckled. “When Hagen proposed this strategy to me, I thought he was insane. But it seems to have worked well for us. He drives, I shoot.”

“What about the stalkers that followed you?” Leonard asked.

“Dead as dead can be!” Hagen laughed as he shook Erick’s shoulder. “They’re not as fast as me, so Newborn easily took care of them!” He grabbed the two satchels off the back of his horse and tossed them to Kastor. “Take those, we’ll recuperate after the battle. You can hold your own, yes?”

Kastor and Leonard nodded as they watched Hagen take his horse into the fray of battle.

“They’ll be fine, right?” Erick asked Hagen.

“Not sure, I sure gave Kastor a lot to watch over.”

The two circled the central battle area, where Hagen stopped the horse and jumped off. “I’m going in, you good here?”

Erick nodded as he aimed his gun at the large cluster of people and animals. The alpha was still alive, targeting Asante who held him off with a combination of swordplay and gunplay. Henry continued to shoot from his horse, spraying bullets in every direction. George and Lawrence were off their horses, standing back to back as they shot down several creatures.

“You’ve got a good gun, Stone,” George shouted to no reply. A stalker pounced at him, causing him to jump to the side and dodge its large claws. Lawrence quickly whipped around and shot it dead in the face. “I’m gonna help Malik,” George said as Lawrence nodded.

“Help Malik?!” Henry exclaimed with zeal. “What about the rest of us?! Damn drunkard fighting like he’s ten beers deep!”

“Don’t focus on him, Kistler!” Hagen entered the fray by smacking down a pouncing stalker about to strike Henry. Henry quickly noticed it, aimed, and fired at its skull, rendering it dead. “You have to keep an eye on your surroundings. Don’t focus on the others. They’ll do what they can.”

“I know that!” Henry exclaimed as another stalker was shot down by Erick. “You need to stay out of my way.”

“I’ll stay out of your way, but you want George to help you? Seems like you really respect the guy!” Hagen laughed as he ran to the other side of the cluster leaving an angry Henry in his dust.

Off to the side, Asante and George were in a standoff with the alpha stalker. The stalker paced back and forth as Asante gripped a sword in his right hand and a pistol in his left. George held his shotgun with both of his hands as he took a step backwards.

“On my signal,” Asante said.

“The usual?”

“Correct.”

George nodded as he entered a ready stance. The two waited for a movement from their opponent, which came almost as soon as they’d hoped. The creature lunged and Asante immediately dodged to the right.

Asante’s movements were a symphony of precision. His sword slashed through the air aiming towards the beast’s neck. The blade clashed as it connected with its target, singing a tune of death that rang through the air. The alpha squealed in agony but recollected itself as it slashed away Asante causing him to lose his grip on the sword, his pistol shooting at the creature’s large paw to knock it away, eliciting another large cry in pain.

George rang his attack next, aiming his shotgun at the head of the beast and echoing a deafening blast from his barrel. With a swift motion, the beast swung its head out of the way causing the shrapnel to hit him in the chest. The stalker recoiled under the force of the shock, its large form momentarily staggered. Not taking his gaze away from the beast, George quickly pulled his gun back and reloaded it with his steady hands.

Noticing the creature’s recoil, Asante lunged forward to grab his sword, lifting it from the animal’s neck. He jumped to the side and struck again, this time aimed at the stalker’s flank. The blade carved a crimson arc, slicing through the thick fur of the beast. The creature’s pained roars echoed through the quiet night. Its attacks grew frenzied, as it realized that its life was soon over.

“It’s done,” Asante said pulling his pistol to the beasts skull. With no hesitation, he fired his pistol, its shot ringing throughout the desolation. The beast fell to the ground, its large body covered in scars.

George rose from his knees, dusting himself off. He turned around to see that the rest of the stalkers had either fled or were slain in the conflict. The battle was over.

“You were supposed to anticipate the beast’s movement, Freeman,” Asante stated as he stood beside George. “Instead you hit it in its chest, which could have just as easily hit me if I wasn’t an expert at evading your ridiculous firing.”

“I wouldn’t have had to aim for such a seizing creature if you hadn’t gotten your damn blade stuck in it. If you hadn’t it would’ve been a clear shot!”

“Shouldn’t you have prepared for these things? You should’ve warned me beforehand!”

“Like I can remember every single thing about every fucking beast and insect I’ve come across. You’re the master analyzer, I’m surprised you haven’t read anything on it in your millions of hours of free time!”

“What was that?! If I hear one more thing out of you, it’s straight back to the R.L.D with you! Don’t forget who’s saving who here.”

The two bickered some more as Kastor and Leonard joined the others. They explained how they lost their horse and, in turn, their supplies. Asante noticed and stopped arguing with George, entering the circle with the rest of them. Erick rode his horse, which was largely unharmed, back to the group, and thus everyone was together once more.

“So, what now?” Erick asked the group.

“If my memory serves right, we should be close to our first stop.” Asante hopped to his horse. “Everyone to their horses.”

“But, Sir, Kastor and I lost ours,” Leonard said with a worried look.

Asante sighed. “Must I direct everything to you? We have three riders without anyone else. Pick one and join them. If you don’t want to pick, you get Kistler.” Asante reached into his satchel and pulled out a map, which he began to study.

Kastor put his hand on Leonard’s shoulder. “You go with Mr. Freeman, I’ll take Mr. Stone. I doubt Henry will want anyone on his back.”

After Leonard and Kastor joined their new horses, the group was off once more. Riding in the same formation as they’d been previously, though Henry taking the spot previously held by Kastor and Leonard.

\* \* \*

It wasn’t an hour before the group noticed buildings off in the distance. A town stood within the desolation. It’s black buildings standing in the horizon as a beacon of civilization.

“A town?!” Kastor exclaimed. “I thought there was no life out here!”

“There isn’t, Mr. Gregor. This is but a relic of what once stood as a town.”

“You mean people lived out in the Land of Solitude?” Leonard asked.

“Sure, people still do. But not like this, not anymore.” George grew a solemn look on his face. “What we see before us is the site of the empire’s most tragic story.”

“The hell do you mean by that?” Henry barked. “The most tragic story? Don’t even get me started. What the hell did the Rietvelds do to this place?”

George did not respond.

“Mr. Alcoholic? You gonna tell me or what?”

“If anyone is to tell the story,” George said in a serious tone, “it should be Malik, not myself. I don’t have the courage to tell such a tragedy.”

Henry sat back in his horse. The group continued to ride in silence, eventually reaching the town. The sign above the entrance was charred, its words blackened and removed.

“A town of no name,” Hagen commented. “A town most wanted, or most needed, to be forgotten.”

Asante stopped his horse, jumping off and tying it to one of the beams of a house that had certainly seen better days. The rest of the group did the same, tying their horses to other beams.

Looking around, the houses, though standing, weren’t in any good condition. Where once stood roads now stood crumbled stone scattered across the ground.

“What the hell is this place?” Henry asked. “This place looks like its been abandoned for a hundred years!”

“It has been. You’re in the old imperial village of Clerud. It once stood as the easternmost city or town in the Einrich Empire.”

“So, what happened to it?” Erick asked.

George shook his head and looked to Asante. Asante, exchanging glances with George, looked away as if in denial.

“We will split up,” Asante said, ignoring Erick’s question, “look for any signs that Eldric had passed through here. If we don’t see anything, we pass through. Understood?”

The group looked at one another in confusion before nodding in agreement.

\* \* \*

Asante assigned the groups, creating three of them to scout out the town. Kastor and Leonard would search the western side of the town, which they were already in. George, Erick, and Lawrence would search the central square and the surrounding area, while Henry, Hagen, and Asante would search the eastern part of the town. The groups all split up and began their search. Before leaving, Hagen whispered into George’s ear before giving him a thumbs-up and running off.

Kastor watched as the others left to go to their positions as he clapped his hands and turned to Leonard. “Shall we?”

The two walked down the dilapidated road and over burnt down houses before stopping to search the debris.

“Why’s everything burnt down? Or, I guess, why is only some of it burnt down?” Leonard questioned as he sifted through the rubble.

“I don’t know, it seems to just—stop.” Kastor turned behind him to see a line of standing buildings with signs of charring on the walls. “Whatever happened here, it couldn’t have been good.”

“I wonder what George meant, that this is the biggest tragedy that the empire has ever faced. Why’d he say it like it was still going on?”

Kastor paused for a moment. “I’m sure he just misspoke. Whatever it is that happened here certainly isn’t going on now.”

Leonard pulled aside more debris and noticed a half-charred piece of paper. “Kastor, can you read this?”

Kastor stood and walked to where Leonard held the piece of paper. He looked at the lettering, which seemed familiar but at the same time very distant. “I can’t, you think it’s a nomadic language?”

“Nomadic?”

“Yeah, old folk. Before there was civilization, nomads roamed the continent. I’m pretty sure there’s still tons of them way out east in the Republic.”

“You think this town was a town of nomads?”

“Beats me, all the nomad settlements are in Reinbose. How should I know what a nomad town looks like.”

“If this was a nomad town, why would it be destroyed? There doesn’t seem to be any reason.”

Kastor scratched his chin. “I wonder. You should hold onto that paper, Leonard. Mr. Freeman might know something about it.”

“Why would Mr. Freeman know?”

Kastor looked off to the center of the town. “Mr. Freeman seems to know a little more than he lets on with this town. He clearly knows what happened, but it seems to be more than just that. Just my intuition anyways.”

“What makes you think that.”

Kastor looked back down at Leonard. “Intuition, I told you. It doesn’t work with logic. Now, do you mind telling me why it is you couldn’t pick a target back there? You made us lose our horse!”

Leonard quickly darted his head to the ground. “I- I don’t know. I didn’t want you to be hurt, but I didn’t want it to hurt me either. I’m sorry, I should’ve shot before I did. I didn’t want to miss- I’m sorry.”

Kastor sighed and crouched to be at Leonard’s level. “Look, I’m going to be honest with you. I don’t know why Asante brought you here. Frankly, the only reason you were on our squad to begin with in the simulation was that Eldric somehow knew we’d be put against Kistler with you there. You had a use. Now I don’t have the same strategic prowess as Eldric, so frankly I can’t tell you what he was thinking, but find your place. Right now, all things considered, you’re being a burden to the group. You lost us a horse, and frankly, I don’t want to see what else you mess up. Regardless, you’re a part of the team, and that’s something both me and you need to come to terms with. Mistakes are fine but you gotta have a little more confidence in yourself.” Kastor got up and stretched his arms. “It doesn’t look like we’re gonna get anything out of a few burned down houses, that scrap should be enough to prove we searched. Let’s try to find Mr. Freeman and Erick.”

Leonard rose to his feet in silence and followed Kastor into the town still standing. The roads were thin as dilapidated houses lined the edges of the footpath. Doors were nonexistent and the windows were empty. Eventually, the two reached the central square where the path opened up to a circular path surrounding what once was a fountain. Around them were buildings that appeared to be old shops, inns, and the like. To the north was a chapel, where Lawrence was smoking a cigarette out front.

The two walked up to him and asked about George and Erick. Lawrence nodded his head towards the inside of the chapel, ushering them to the inside of the tall stone building. Inside, pews were knocked over, and in the back corner a large crater carved out the remains of an old hallway.

Kastor went first and entered the crater, leading following the hallway into the ground leading to an ajar door. Leonard followed behind closely as the two approached the door, hearing light conversation between two people.

“It’s Erick,” Kastor told Leonard.

The two of them knocked on the door before entering the room, where books lined the walls. George was running his fingers through the books as Erick sat himself at the desk in the center of the room, reading a leatherbound book.

“An underground library,” Leonard commented, startling George.

“What the hell are you two doing here?” George said, jumping back. “I thought you were supposed to check the western town?”

“We did,” Kastor said, grabbing Leonard’s arm. “We found this paper and wondered if it was nomadic writing.”

“Nomadic writing?” George looked at the two of them before bursting out into laughter. “Nomadic- You really thought-” he said between breaths. When he finally composed himself, he spoke once again. “Take a look at these books, is that your handwriting you seek?”

Kastor walked to one of the bookshelves and pulled out a book. It was a large leatherbound book with gold writing on the front that looked very similar to the charred page. Opening the book, he found pages upon pages, each holding a drawn image as well, with the same writing as the handwritten page Leonard held.

“See what I mean? That language isn’t nomadic, it’s Old Eincrestian. Before the First Alcrestian War, that was the language of the world. Afterwards, only a few places spoke it, but it was soon faded out for the Eincrestian language we know today. Point is, this civilization was very much civilized. In other words, not nomadic.”

Leonard walked over to George and handed him the page. “Can you read Old Eincrestian, Mr. Freeman?”

George took the page. “I can read you this page if you’d like. Lucky I learned the language back in school.” He glanced at the page, reading its handwritten writing before looking up from the paper.

Erick looked up from his book and turned to George. “What’s it say, George?”

George did not speak. Balls of tears entered his eyes as he handed Leonard back the page. He quickly wiped away the water before speaking once again. “I can’t tell you what it says,” he said with cracks in his voice.

Kastor and Erick exchanged glances. “What happened here, Mr. Freeman? This isn’t a natural disaster that came through here, someone or something did something to this town. I know you said that the Captain had to tell us, but I feel that his words wouldn’t be as genuine as yours. What happened here?”

George looked around the room. Erick stood from the chair and moved it to George, prompting him to sit. “Alright,” he said quietly, “I’ll tell you. But when you return to Einrich, not a word about this story gets told to another soul, understand?”

\* \* \*

Asante quickly glance around each and every house, hoping to find a trace of life anywhere. He then noticed a house on a street corner which looked to be promising and began to make headway to it. When he reached the door, he was stopped by Henry who stuck his hand out to block the entrance.

“What’re you doing, Kistler?”

“What am I doing? I’m listening to the words of George Freeman. He said you would say what happened here, and I expect to know. I don’t get the heebie-jeebies often, so why do I feel so uneasy here. What the hell happened?”

Asante turned around and saw Hagen staring into his eyes. “I don’t have the answers you seek, nor am I at any liberty to say. Even if I did have something to say, I wouldn’t say it without everyone here, only as a common courtesy.”

“That’s no problem, I don’t mind hearing the story twice if it’s that good. So tell me. What the hell happened here?”

“You best tell him, Captain.” Hagen said in a serious tone. “If you’re waiting for a moment to tell everyone at once, what then? What if you avoid the topic then?”

Asante scoffed. “I doubt I’d hardly miss that opportunity.”

“Well, George probably has you covered in that regard. Why don’t you tell Kistler? I feel he should find out alone and away from others, being a son of one of the three great houses after all.”

“If you want him to know so badly, why don’t you tell him? I am hardly in that position.”

“Oh, I don’t know the story, not entirely that is. Even so, I’m not curious to learn the whole thing. I see it as in the past, something to move on from. Kistler, on the other hand, would feel different should he find out. That I can be certain of.”

“If it’s in the past, there’s no need to recite dead memories.”

“This is not one of those moments. I am hardly as impacted by the effects of the tragedy as Mr. Kistler over there.”

Asante turned to Henry, his hand still blocking the entrance. “You want to know badly?”

“I *need* to know,” Henry stated.

Asante stared into Henry’s eyes for a moment before sighing and pushing his arm aside. “Fine, I’ll tell you inside. Let’s find a place to sit, this is a long story.”

Henry followed Asante inside, Hagen close behind him. The house was well constructed, its walls still intact. Stairs that led upwards sat in the corner, and half-broken pieces of furniture were strewn about the ground. Henry sat against the wall, Asante sitting across the room from him. The door was dislocated from its hinges, and water dripped from the ceiling.

“Clerud was once a thriving town,” Asante began. “Population low, around two-hundred. Everyone knew everyone. Traders often came through the town to offer goods from Reinbose, the northern states, and beyond. It was a nice town, from what I’ve heard.

“The town was founded well before the First Alcrestian War, and survived all the way through it. After the First War, it became the easternmost settlement in the empire. It was powerful for that. Many politicians saw it as a political piece. The citizens wanted to be no such piece. They wanted complete peace throughout the continent as many republican citizens came through the town. You used to be able to see republic settlements from Clerud. Records exist of this town all the way until 425, five years before the Second War. I’m sure records did at one point exist of the town from 425 until its destruction in 430, but they’ve since been destroyed as well.”

“Its destruction?” Henry questioned.

“Correct. On April 4th, 430, in the dead of night, the town was completely destroyed by hired mercenaries. They came from the east, and ravaged through the town. They killed men, women, children, animals, whatever life they had encountered didn’t survive. Of course, hired mercenaries are evil as well, raping the women before killing them and setting fire to the western portion of the town as they made headway for Heldenstadt. Nobody survived that night.”

“Why the hell did Reinbose do such a thing? Why did Rietveld-”

“It wasn’t Rietveld, Henry.” Hagen said with a concerned look on his face.

“Then who the hell did it?” Henry rose to his feet. “Who the hell hired those evil men? Was it a third nation?” Nobody responded to him. “Who did it?!” Henry slammed his fist against the wall.

Asante mumbled.

“What’s that?!” Henry screamed. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you over the dead silence of this town!”

“We did.” Asante said in a low tone.

“I’m sorry?!” Henry screamed once more.

“WE DID!” Asante shouted as he stood up. “We did. We hired the Pale Rider Mercenaries to use republic weapons and destroy the town of Clerud. That was then used as a reason to declare war, and that started the Second Alcrestian War.”

Henry lost his balance. He slammed against the wall and slid down to sit.

“After the war,” Asante continued, sitting down as well. “When the Treaty of Oneseo was signed in 435, the empire made a large request in the condition: that if the Land of Solitude were to be made, neither country would acknowledge the existence nor tragedy of Clerud. The town would be removed from all maps, and the reason for the war beginning would fall on each individual nation to create.”

“Einrich chose to use the same reasoning they always had, minus Clerud’s existence,” Hagen noted. “Reinbose invaded us first, so we had to retaliate. I’m sure that’s what you were taught.”

“But, why?” Henry said in a defeated tone. “Why did we use an innocent town as the reason for beginning a war?”

“We needed to show Reinbose who the true superpower of Alcrest was, that’s all there was too it.” Asante said calmly. “I’m, of course, not in the mind of the chancellor nor emperor who made the decision at the time, but most of us who *do* know the tragedy tend to stay quiet in solidarity of the lives lost. I’m sure you can understand.”

Henry stood in silence. “I’m going to continue the search.” Without another word, Henry exited the building.

Hagen and Asante stood at the same time. The two exchanged glances before Asante stepped towards the stairs.

“You stay in silence in solidarity, which means you’ve learned from the tragedy, yes? I’m not sure what you hope to gain from retrieving Eldric, though I have a good idea. If it is anything like what I think it is, then staying silent in solidarity will look like just an excuse to the world. I hope you’re not going down the same route as those terrible people did one hundred years ago.”

Asante looked at Hagen. “I don’t have time to be lectured by mere children who’ve seen less than a day on the battlefield. I hope you can learn to keep your mouth shut.”

\* \* \*

“I can’t believe it,” Erick said in disbelief. “A town with a rich history dating back centuries, gone in an instant.”

“Yes, but even worse the effort to erase that history with a mere signed paper,” George noted, now holding the paper Leonard found. “I found out about the tragedy through my time with the higher-ups of the nation, learning what really happened behind it. All I could do was hold back my anger, and my frustration. The truth was right in front of me, but I couldn’t do anything. It had already happened and had I not been so stupid I could have prevented it.”

Kastor patted the old man on the back. “Don’t feel so down about yourself, the town was gone before any of us were even born.”

George nodded. “You’re right. You know, another rumor that floated around for a bit was that a few of the Men of Gordon were survivors from the Clerud tragedy, crazy how everything comes around full circle, right?”

Slapping his knees, George stood from the chair, returning it to its previous spot at the desk. He ushered the others to exit the small library, following suit after giving the room one last look around. On the surface, Kastor, Erick, and Leonard exited to the central square where Lawrence was finishing up his smoke.

“Let’s find Asante and the others, I’m sure they’re finishing up their investigation soon.” George noted, and led the others to the neighborhood.

\* \* \*

After searching for no more than an hour, the group found Henry standing outside one of the buildings in the eastern section of the town.

“They’re upstairs,” Henry said with a disgruntled attitude, they found something.”

Kastor, Erick, Leonard, and Lawrence entered the building quickly before George and made their way upstairs. George stopped by the front door and put his hand on Henry’s shoulder.

“Did he tell you?”

Henry turned away from George. “Hell if I know.”

George nodded and entered the building. The inside was worn down, but sturdy. The walls, while intact, were falling apart, and the ceiling dripped with water. Heading up the wooden stairs, George stood in awe at the sheer number of weapons that lay about the second level. A workbench stood in the corner as gun parts and ammo were strewn about it. A makeshift bed stood in front of him and did not look in the slightest bit comfortable. On the second level stood the three who entered the building earlier as well as Asante and Hagen who stood by the workbench.

“Looks like *someone* was here,” Hagen noted with a smile, “was it Eldric?”

“There’s no way all this could have been Eldric,” Asante replied quickly. “It wouldn’t be out of the question for him to have met whoever is responsible for this, however.”

“So Eldric’s got a guide to the Land of Solitude, great.” Leonard threw his hands in the air. “He’ll be in Reinbose in no time if we don’t step on it.”

“Which we will,” Asante said. “If Eldric does have a guide, that guide would have taken him to a settlement, and would no doubt take him to Greenwood before any other republican city. If we find one of them, we can use their network to our advantage.”

“So we head out once more?” Kastor asked.

“We have no choice. If Eldric does have a Guide, our best bet is to make it to Greenwood faster than them.”

“Let’s get going then,” Erick said with haste, looking out the window.

Asante nodded. “We’ll rest and do as we need for the next hour. We will then leave. Any complaints?”

No one responded.

Asante nodded and walked downstairs and exited the building, Stone following closely behind. The room remained quiet as Erick paced over to the workbench and began tinkering with the items on it.

“Hey George,” the silence was ended with the calm voice of Hagen. “I heard you found an underground library. Mind showing me where that is?” George looked at Hagen with a blank stare before nodding. The two made their way down the stairs on their way out of the building. Before leaving, Hagen turned around and looked up the stairs at Kastor and Leonard. “Oh, you two might want to look for Henry before we have to go. I can’t imagine he wants to spend the night in this dump.” With a wave, he followed George out of the building and down the street.

Kastor and Leonard looked at each other, then looked over at Erick.

“You go on without me,” he said, not turning away from the workbench. “I’m sure whatever Henry needs to hear will be fine with just the two of you there.”

“Why would we need to talk to Henry?” Leonard asked.

Kastor sighed. “You don’t get it, do you?” He turned and began down the stairs, Leonard soon following after.

The search for Henry didn’t last that long, only needing to turn down a few side roads. Leonard was the first to find Henry, calling out to Kastor when he’d found him. He was standing on the balcony of the second floor of the remains of what used to be a watchtower. The two entered the watchtower and climbed to meet Henry on the second floor.

“Hey, we’re leaving in an hour or so,” Kastor called out. “Asante gave the word and so we’re following it.”

Henry did not reply.

The balcony overlooked the inner part of the city. From atop, the entire destruction of the city could be seen. Not a single house stood firm against the winds of time and the destruction from a century ago. Kastor and Leonard stepped to the edge of the balcony, where the remnants of a sturdy fence failed to do its once endless duty. Leonard sat over the edge, his feet dangling, while Kastor remained standing, positioning himself to Henry’s right.

“Why-” Henry spoke in a quiet, almost unintelligible tone.

Kastor looked at Henry, who continued to glance over the destroyed town.

“Why did you join the military? For what reason?” Henry asked.

Kastor did not reply. He instead turned to the town. The view of a village once beaming with life, now extinguished.

“I thought-” Henry began, still in a quiet voice as if talking to no one. “I thought we were a noble cause. That my father was noble. That my family was noble. That it was my duty. My duty to my country. A country more noble than any other. A country which gave me a life I not only enjoyed but that I deserved.” He gave a small smile as he looked at his feet. “What is this then? Why do I see such destruction?” He ran his hand through his hair. “I joined the military- I joined it to become a part of that noble cause. To go to the front lines. To fight for what I believed was right. To destroy Reinbose, to destroy the evil in our world. I had been told it was my duty, my dream in life, to fight for this nation. My father said so, my brothers said so, everyone had told me.” He turned to Kastor. “Tell me then! What is it that we are fighting for!”

Kastor looked at Henry. His face was filled with distraught and worry. His eyes looked for an answer. They darted across Kastor’s entire face. Leonard did not say a word.

“I don’t know,” Kastor said in a melancholic tone. “I don’t know what we’re fighting for. I don’t know Einrich’s goal. Hell, chances are that what we see in front of us—this village—is but the tip of the iceberg. Einrich is probably hiding more things from us than we could possibly imagine. Secrets that your father, or Asante, or anyone who’s ever held a position of power might never tell us. Look, I’m not like you. I don’t come from a noble family. I don’t even know what the smell of wealth is. I joined because my family needed me to. I joined because the money I get from my time here can help pay for my parents, my siblings, and my grandparents. That might seem completely different than fighting for some noble cause, but we’ve all got our reasons for being here, and even if the nation that we end up fighting for isn’t what it’s cracked up to be, then we still have our goals and our families to fight for.”

“He told me my family planned for this,” Henry said. “That my family, a century ago, helped prepare for the destruction of the village of Clerud. The murder, the rape, the kidnapping, the complete annihilation of this village. We were a noble family then as we are now. We sought revenge upon the Rietvelds and their nation, but we didn’t have a valid reason for war. My ancestor, my father’s grandfather, he created the idea for the destruction of this town. He called it a ‘negligible asset’. Is-” He paused. “Is this what we’re doing in the north?”

Leonard stood. “I-I don’t know if I’m phrasing this right, but no family is without their past. As someone who’s been, you know, attacked for my last name and for an ancestor I never met, I can understand you when you say that your family isn’t what you want it to be. I’m right there for you if-”

“Shut up Rietveld,” Henry barked. “The last thing I want is to hear anything out of your damn mouth. I can’t *believe* you would even begin to compare the two of us. You know what? If it weren’t for you and your damned family, none of this shit would’ve had to happen! My name wouldn’t be tarnished and Einrich would be the greatest nation on the planet but your fucked up grandad had to go and ruin things for everyone. Your words mean nothing. Nothing at all. And if I hear one more word out of your damn mouth I’ll strangle you with my own two hands-”

Kastor’s hand slammed itself across Henry’s thick jawbone, causing spit to exit from his mouth.

“How conceited do you have to be?!” Kastor yelled. “We are trying to help goddamn it! For *once* I thought you’d be able to see that you and Leonard and me and Erick and Hagen aren’t all that different. That we’ve all got shit in our past, people with our names that did fucked up shit. That you could finally shut the fuck up about Leonard being ‘below human’ and some other shit like that because your family is as fucked up as his. I know you’re not here for Eldric, and you couldn’t care less about him but would you please get your head out of your ass for once in your goddamn life. Not everything revolves around Henry Kistler, got it? You don’t want to continue this expedition? Fine! For all I care, you can stay in Clerud as long as you want! Maybe head back to Einrich! Or are you too depressed about your poor family to do that?! Well obviously not if you can still assault Leonard for his!”

“Kastor, please, I-I’m fine.” Leonard grabbed Kastor’s shoulder but was quickly tossed away.

“I’m trying to help, Henry, I really am. I’ve known you for how long? Not even half a year? Frankly, I couldn’t give two damns if you accidentally got left here and had to fend for yourself. Hell! You might die and I’d still care more about ants than you. That’s how little I actually care. Even still, we’re a team. You, me, Leonard, and the others. We’re here for what reason? To get Eldric. We’re not in the nation with nobles and commoners and families and enemies and friends anymore. It’s us, the Land of Solitude, and the sweat on our backs, can’t you fucking see that? Someday you’re going to have to learn that we’re not going to put up with the way you’ve been acting forever, got it? And until that day comes I want you to seriously look at yourself and think about everything that you’ve done. I didn’t want to parent you but it seems your own didn’t do a very good job.” Kastor paced over to the ladder he and Leonard used to reach the balcony. “Come on, Leonard, let’s get going.”

Leonard followed Kastor’s command and walked over to the ladder, Henry’s eyes following him the whole time. Before he reached the ladder, he turned to face Henry. “M-My family scarred Einrich in a bad way. W-We did something I doubt can never be undone, and I recognize that. I’m trying my best to move on from that, and to do what I can to repay my debts.”

Henry looked at him and didn’t say a word.

“That’s my answer. You know, why I joined.”

\* \* \*

The remainder of the hour passed with little discussion. After the hour passed, as previously commanded by Asante, the group met up at the mysterious house and travelled to the edge of the village. Henry was not among those present.

“I thought you talked to him,” Hagen whispered to Kastor.

“We did, but he’s still stubborn in his superiority.”

Hagen sighed. “I hope to believe that he will be here, but right now, not even I know what he is thinking.”

Asante stopped the group and turned to make sure everyone was in attendance. “Is Kistler not continuing with us?”

Kastor shrugged. “Leonard and I did what we could.”

Asante nodded. “Very well. We shall head due east for the Republic of Reinbose as previously planned. Unlike Clerud, there should be no stops other than for light rest and recouping. Do we all understand. We will rest during the night briefly and travel during the day quickly.”

Everyone nodded.

“Very good. Let us be off then.”

The group jumped to their horses and giving one more chance for Henry to join them, looked back onto the destroyed village. Nothing but the desolate wind could be heard, giving the group the answer they didn’t want to hear.

“Right then,” Asante yelled triumphantly. “To Reinbose!”

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Eldric left the meeting room and immediately saw Michael standing on the other side of the door. He was leaned up against the wall and his arms were crossed.

“I thought you were going to wait outside-” Eldric was interrupted by Michael, who pushed him aside and entered the large room.

“Wait for me at the gate. When I’m finished we’re leaving.” Without turning around, Michael slammed the doors shut, leaving Eldric alone in the hallway.

There were several guards who stood throughout the long hallway, one of whom escorted Eldric out of the building. As he stepped outside, he looked back at the tower which loomed over him, knowing something was being discussed in the room above. He tried to put it to the back of his head and returned to his room underground to retrieve the duo’s items.

\* \* \*

“It’s very rude of you to barge your way in without permission, Mikey.” Paulek stood tall above Michael as she wiped her brow with her handkerchief. “I thought we agreed that I would talk to Freeman, and that was all you wanted for our deal to go through.”

“What did you discuss?” Michael stood defiantly against the large woman, planting his feet firm to the ground. He gripped his gun as he spoke, wary of the direction the conversation might turn.

“So needy, Mikey. Isn’t it polite not to ask about others’ conversations? What me and Mr. Eldric talked of should be none of your concern.”

“Why was it important to talk to him, and not me?”

“You’re asking questions of me which I don’t feel inclined to answer. Mikey, you should know your *tactics* won’t work against me, like Mr. Eldric.”

Michael bit his lip. “Then let’s strike another deal!” He exclaimed. “You tell me the details and I’ll-”

“No.” Michael took a step back. Paulek’s voice deepened as she took several large steps towards him. Her large figure shook the ground as she walked, quickly decreasing the distance between the two. When she had gotten as close as she could get, her entire head was directly over Michael, casting a large shadow over his face. “There are no deals to be made. I do not wish to speak with you, nor do you have any right to speak with me. You can’t expect everything to be in your realm of knowledge. If Mr. Eldric wishes to speak with you about what we talked about, then he’s more than free to disclose it. But you shall get *nothing* out of me.” Her voice lightened as she grew a devilish smile across her face. “Do we understand?”

Michael hesitated but nodded his head. Immediately, Paulek pushed away from Michael, returning to her seat across the room. She shooed him away and Michael turned to open the door. Before he stepped out, he turned back to Paulek. “Don’t do anything to Eldric.”

Paulek smiled. “Duly noted. I’m hardly the biggest danger to dear Eldric’s life, but duly noted.”

\* \* \*

When Michael was escorted out of the building, he couldn’t find Eldric at the gate like he’d instructed. Instead of looking for him, he walked over to the gate and stood there, waiting for Eldric’s arrival.

Several minutes went by before Eldric arrived at the gate carrying two small felt patches. They were in the image of a feline creature with a long curly tail. The patch was entirely black apart from the creature’s glowing green eyes. Eldric extended one of the two patches to Michael, who bore a look of confusion as he stared at the patch.

“Otto—sorry—one of the guards gave these to me as a good luck charm. Apparently Reinbose worships these cat creatures like they’re gods. It changes its coat of fur to the seasons and it’s also a very wise creature. I think it’s pretty cool.”

Michael swatted Eldric’s hand away. “I don’t believe in luck.”

Eldric didn’t respond. He put the patches in his pockets and followed Michael out of Abatu. As the distance between them and the outpost increased, he turned around and saw the large woman Paulek standing on her balcony. He couldn’t tell if she was smiling or not, nor what exactly she was doing on the balcony, but he knew she was watching them, waiting for Eldric’s reply.

The two walked for some time in silence, and the sun slowly moved overhead. Azure ravens echoed through the wasteland as the dirt beneath their feet crunched. Eldric remained a pace behind Michael as he clutched the patch in his pocket.

*Michael is very powerful, and all I am trying to do is issue you a warning*. As Eldric looked to the sky, he was taken back to his discussion with Paulek. *Michael’s been at my side this whole time. Is he as dangerous to me as Paulek makes him out to be? That I’m not manipulated by him and so he wants to learn about me?* He turned to Michael as his head swerved in every direction. *Working against Michael. What does that mean? Why would she allow him safe passage to Reinbose in that case?* Eldric scratched his head vigorously. *One of the two is lying to me, but who? Paulek never met me before, so she could be believed because there’s nothing for her to lose. At the same time, Michael’s never done anything to harm me, much less deceive me. He’s been as honest as they come. What do I do?*

“Eldric.” Michael didn’t turn around as he gripped his gun and continued to swivel his head from side to side. Eldric escaped his thoughts as his head jolted up. “What did you discuss with Paulek?”

“Nothing much. She asked me a few questions and I did the same.”

“Ah. All right.” Michael pressed forward, and the two plunged into silence once again.

“You talked with her too, right?” Eldric caught up with Michael, looking at him from a lower angle. “What’d you two talk about.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “We didn’t. She didn’t want to speak with me at all and kicked me out as soon as I’d gone in.”

“Damn. Well, it’s not like she’s any enjoyable to talk with, right?”

“Sure.”

Ahead of them, a school of dust hares popped from the ground and scurried about. They ran into one of the craters nearby and burrowed themselves deep into the dirt and sand. An azure raven swooped in from the skies and began to pick at the hole the hares made.

“I’m curious,” Michael put his gun around his shoulder and held onto the strap. “How did you end up in the Land of Solitude? Einrich isn’t exactly an easy nation to escape.”

Eldric laughed. “I didn’t *escape*, they let me go. As for why-” He looked at the ground. “Unimportant.”

“When I met you in Clerud, you’d said that Einrich was following you. Do you still believe that?”

Eldric nodded. “I do. I don’t know why they would, but I have a feeling they are.”

“And you still believe they *know* you’re coming to Reinbose? What if they assume you wanted to go to the northern countries, like you originally did?”

“If they do, then that’s better for me.” Eldric looked at Michael and squinted. “Why so inquisitive today?”

Michael shrugged. “It keeps us busy. Nothing more than that.”

“So what if I start to ask about you?”

Michael outstretched his arms. “You wouldn’t find anything of note, that’s for sure.”

“So then why did *you* come to the Land of Solitude?”

Michael’s eyes narrowed. “Who knows? It was a long time ago, I don’t remember details like that.”

“How long ago?”

“I-I don’t know, I lost track of the time. It happens when you’ve been out here for so long.”

“That’s not what Paulek said.”

Michael’s head jolted to look at Eldric. “Then what did she say?”

Eldric chuckled. “Nothing at all, I just thought I’d push your buttons.”

Michael shoved Eldric. “That wasn’t funny.”

Eldric laughed as Michael continued on. “Oh, come on! Lighten up a bit. I know you’ve got a sense of humor; you wouldn’t stop laughing at me in Clerud.”

“That’s because you wouldn’t stop saying ridiculous things.”

“And I wasn’t the only one,” Eldric continued as he caught his breath, “you thought my dad was Leo something something!”

Michael stopped walking. He faced Eldric with a serious look on his face, clearly done with joking. Eldric still bore a smile but slowly lost it as the two looked at one another. “He’s not Leo something something,” Michael yelled, “he’s Leodric! He was- No. He *is* a great man, and you could learn a thing or two from him. He once stopped a battle between a thousand men with a single word from his mouth. Soldier’s yearned to live the way Leodric did!”

The two stood against one another as the wind blew through their hair. The azure ravens had stopped their calls briefly, lending near silence between the two. Eldric’s smile faded as Michael stood up straight and continued walking.

“Then there’s no mistaking it,” Eldric mentioned bearing a slight smile on his face. “That man isn’t my father at all.”

Michael stopped.

“Stopping a battle? Yeah, right. My father sits in a bar all day *wishing* he could do something as incredible as that. Then, he lets his son go to the army without so much as raising a finger. This Leodric wouldn’t’ve done that, right?” Eldric scoffed. “Well, whatever. Once I’m in Reinbose I can cast that all away.”

Michael looked at Eldric, who once again bore a smile across his face. He didn’t say anything has he faced forward and pressed on.

\* \* \*

As the two continued for another hour or so, the clear sky lent the sun to roast the ground below them and the air around them. The temperature rose quickly as soon the two began to sweat underneath their clothing. September wasn’t usually a hot month, but today it certainly was.

Ahead, Eldric began to see hallucinations and strange lines that levitated over the horizon. He stumbled as he reached for his water, which quickly rejuvenated him to continue pressing. Michael was much better prepared. He constantly rehydrated himself while his head continued to swivel about his neck.

“Michael.”

“Yeah?”

“What’s this favor you’re having me do? You know, since we’re getting closer to Reinbose, I thought I’d ask.”

“Well-”

As Michael replied to Eldric’s question, his ears began ringing as they felt like they were about to jump out of his skull. His brain rattled inside his head as the headache he experienced in Clerud returned. His vision became dizzy as he attempted to stay planted at his feet but to no avail. Eldric crouched to the ground as he screamed out in pain, echoing across the desolate plains.

“What the hell?! Again?!” Michael leaped into action, laying Eldric down and feeding him water. The headache went on for much longer than it had in Clerud, and Michael began to sift through his bag as he tried to calm Eldric down. After another minute of Eldric screaming so loud it could rupture ears, he slowly calmed down as the headache dissipated.

“Seriously. What the *hell* is that? What’s with your head?!” Michael said, slapping Eldric’s back as he sat up.

Eldric shook his head. “I don’t know. Seriously, I don’t. I’ve never gotten them like this before.”

“You need to let me know when this pain is starting. Last time it was hunters, who *knows* if you called someone to our location this time.”

Eldric looked at the ground. “I’m sorry, I’ll look into it at Reinbose.”

“Shh.” Michael put his finger to Eldric’s lips as he suddenly jumped to his feet. Michael returned his hand to his gun and pointed it at the horizon. Eldric rose to his feet as well and opened his mouth to ask what he’d seen but remained silent as the merchant carefully aimed his rifle.

Eldric continued to look off at the horizon, and almost on cue a group of horseback riders appeared from the horizon, approaching their location quickly. He tried counting them all, but as soon as the number reached ten he could tell they were at a disadvantage. Eldric glanced at Michael and waited for instructions.

“Fire your gun.”

Eldric took a step forward. “At them?”

“No, you dumbass.” Michael mumbled his instructions as he continued to point his rifle towards the riders. “Shoot it at the sky, slightly backwards so it doesn’t hit anyone when it falls. Universal sign of discussion.”

Eldric nodded and did as he was told. He pointed his small gun to the sky, aimed slightly backwards. With a little pressure he squeezed the trigger and a loud boom radiated from the barrel of the pistol. His ears rang as the recoil of the gun shook his arm. He opened his eyes and Michael’s aim on the horses continued. Looking off to the horizon once more, he could see the riders nearing as quickly as they were before.

“If they respond in kind, we’ll have a civil discussion.” Michael spoke with a cautious tone. “If they don’t, we gotta fight.”

Eldric put his hand on Michael’s shoulder but was knocked away. “We’re outnumbered twenty times over, we can’t fight them.”

“And you suggest we run? Just wait for my instructions. Everything will work out.” Michael increased his grip on the rifle, still pointed directly at the group of horse riders.

The riders neared the two, enough so that Eldric could see how many. When he finished counting, the number reached twenty-six. They rode in three groups, with one group ahead of the other two. The lead rider wore a dark grey cloak and a hood covered his face. When they reached about two hundred meters from them, Michael fired his gun towards them, missing on purpose and landing on the dirt several meters in front of them. Immediately the group responded by repeating the discussion signal, a gun shot in the air.

Michael lowered his gun and hoisted it around his shoulder. Eldric was instructed to put his gun away and he did so. The two stood firm as the group of horses quickly approached them.

The riders who weren’t the leader wore a lighter shade of gray on their cloak with no hood to obscure their faces. Men and women alike rode side by side, each housing a more grim face than the last. When they at last arrived at Michael and Eldric, they surrounded them by creating a circle some meters from their location. The horses stopped and the two groups looked each other down.

After the standoff reached five minutes or so, the leader in the dark grey cloak removed his hood revealing a dark man with a large red scar across his face. He bore a large mustache and long black hair that was tied up out of his face. When he jumped off his horse, the other riders did the same, holding their horses by the mane.

“If I wasn’t mistaken, that is Michael Hickhox!” The dark man exclaimed, bearing bright white teeth. “How lucky of us, to investigate an unknown noise and to find the gold treasure himself. It sure has been a while since we’ve seen you out of your usual habitat, hasn’t it?”

“I see your influence has grown since we last crossed paths, Zaorth.” Michael remained firmly planted on the ground. His hands moved into a position where if he needed to he could quickly pull out his rifle. “Don’t you know this is Paulek’s land? What is The Enclave doing here?”

The dark man Zaorth smiled gleefully. “Oh, we’re more than aware, Michael Hickhox. We’re under a sort of agreement, a contract of sorts.”

“The Paulek I know wouldn’t ever make a deal with bandits like you.”

Zaorth shrugged. “Times have changed, Hickhox. The Paulek you knew went out of style a decade ago. Deals like ours are made all the time, who else is going to protect all the land she holds?”

Michael bit his tongue.

“That said, you’re not the only one getting culture shock. I mean, Michael Hickhox with a companion?!” Zaorth turned to his members who all began to chuckle amongst themselves. “Boy.” He began speaking to Eldric. “I don’t know *what* you did, but you did something no one could ever do!”

Michael stepped in front of Eldric. “He’s not a companion, we’re under an agreement as you are with Paulek. Like you said, times have changed.”

Zaorth laughed with his comrades before returning to his serious look once again. “Now, Hickhox.” His voice became extremely deep as his forehead cast a shadow across the rest of his face. “Normally, I’d ask if you’d received permission from Paulek for passage to Reinbose, but I’m not concerned with that at the moment. Truth be told, we’ve received word that several of my lackeys were found dead in Clerud. Now, I’m not one to place blame or anything, but we *did* have a cordial meeting with you in Clerud only a day or two ago. Now, I find it quite strange that the day we were to have this meeting, with you no less, is the day my friends are seen dead. Quite honestly, Hickhox, I’m about three seconds from killing you. So speak.”

“I-”

Before Michael could say anything, Zaorth leapt forward and grabbed his face, slamming him to the ground. The other riders did nothing, looking onward as Michael was pressed by the large man. Eldric took a step back, taking his gun out and pointing it at the dark man.

“You won’t.” Zaorth mocked Eldric as he bore a large smile on his face.

“Let go of him,” Eldric stated.

Zaorth sighed before turning to one of his compatriots. He nodded and immediately the gun was shot out of Eldric’s hand. His smile grew larger as the pupils in his eyes dilated. He turned back to Michael who struggled to relinquish himself from Zaorth’s grip. Using his other hand, he reached inside his cloak and pulled out a small handgun similar to what Eldric used in the empire. He pointed it at Michael and whispered something in his ear. He pulled his hand away and sat on Michael, putting the gun to his head.

“This is where Michael Hickhox ends, isn’t it?”

Michael spat at Zaorth. “Far from it.”

Eldric tried to think of something to do. He glanced around at his surroundings, looking for something to aid Michael in any way possible. He couldn’t reach his gun without the riders noticing and there wasn’t anything except his belongings on him, which wouldn’t do anything to the powerful Zaorth. *It’s hopeless*, Eldric thought. *Michael will die here and I will follow suit.*

“Augh!” Eldric grabbed his head. The raging headache which caused all this returned once more. As he tried to rub the pain out, he opened his eyes. Instantly the pain dissipated as his shock overcame it. The world, which to him was surrounded in browns, yellows, and the blue sky, had become completely monochrome. Everyone around him had seized moving and even the birds were held in place. Eldric glanced around. He could move just fine, but he couldn’t move anyone else.

“Hello, Eldric.”

A voice came from behind Eldric. A young boy in a white shirt stood before him with a slight smirk.

“You’re-”

“It’s been some time, a few days! Wow!” The boy jumped in the air in celebration. “Congrats on making it this far, Eldric!”

Eldric stepped forward. “What do you want? Last time you were here you completely ruined everything for me! Are you here to do it again!?”

The boy shook his head. “I’m here to help as I did before. I do owe you for that time in the market, of course.”

“Consider your debt repaid. I don’t want your ‘help’ anymore.”

“Eldric, I don’t want to be the bearer of bad news, but if I don’t help out, Michael Hickhox will die. Of course, if you *want* that to happen, I can leave things alone and make sure you don’t die!”

Eldric’s jaw dropped. He looked at Michael and behind him towards Abatu. If he’d returned to the outpost announcing Michael’s death, Paulek would certainly do something for him. A full trip to Reinbose without the worries of anyone. He turned back to the boy, who’s youthful expression never faded. “How do I help Michael?”

“Well, you’ll need to get in the way of Zaorth’s handgun without it killing you. Come, let’s get you situated.” The boy skipped over to Michael and Zaorth and knelt by the two. Eldric did not move and stared at the boy with a look of frustration. “You don’t know if you should, isn’t that right? Well, look at it this way: I help you, and you get to Reinbose in the span of a short nap!”

“What?”

The boy covered his mouth with both of his small hands. “Sorry, I spoke too much. Just know that helping Michael is the right thing to do!”

Eldric looked at the boy, who’s smile had turned into a look of concern. He looked back once more at Paulek’s outpost, and back at Michael. He switched his gaze several more times before returning to the boy and nodding. “Alright, let’s do it.”

The boy’s smile returned. “Okie dokie!” He snapped his fingers and instantaneously switched the places of Eldric and Michael. Zaorth’s gun was now pointed at Eldric’s chest, which send shivers down Eldric’s spine. “Alright! It was wonderful to see you as always, Eldric. See ya!”

The boy snapped his fingers and Eldric’s headache returned. He went to rub the pain away, but it was completely overcome by a ringing in his ears and a sharp pain in his chest. He’d been shot. As he opened his eyes he saw blood escaping his body at an alarming rate and a look on Zaorth’s face of disbelief.

“You-”

Eldric didn’t respond. He was too focused on the immense pain stemming from his chest. Michael looked on at the scene. He gripped his own chest and tugged at his shirt. Zaorth quickly rose to his feet and waved his gun around in Michael’s direction.

“What the hell did you do?! I knew you were bad but bad enough to sacrifice your own comrade?! You’re dead, Hickhox.”

As Zaorth leapt once more at Hickhox, who’s vision began to narrow. He looked down at Eldric who wasn’t moving and back at Zaorth. The Enclave riders whipped their guns out and began to shoot at Michael, but he effortlessly dodged each one. Zaorth neared him and he jumped out of the way, kicking the back of Zaorth’s head into the ground. He turned to a group of riders who were reloading their guns and stepped towards them.

“*You are the target.*”

The soldiers stopped for a moment before completing their reloading, and moved their guns to their chin in a trance-like fashion. All at once, they shot themselves through the neck, killing them instantly. The other riders looked on in shock as some dropped their weapons and began scrambling to jump onto their horses. Michael melancholically strided towards Zaorth, who was still picking himself off the ground. Michael grabbed him by the collar and whispered into his ear.

“*Shoot your comrades, kill every last one.*”

Zaorth’s pupils dilated once more. His body went limp and he rose to his feet like a marionette tied to strings. He loaded his gun and pointed to the riders, who all began to scream his name. Some ran away. Some continued to scramble to their horses. All of them slain in a matter of seconds.

Awakening from his trance, Zaorth looked around at his fellow soldiers before turning back to Michael. “You demon,” he mumbled. “You are the scum of the earth.”

“*You are the target.*” Michael locked his eyes with Zaorth as he mumbled his final command. Zaorth’s body tensed up as he attempted to defy Michael’s commands but was ultimately unsuccessful. He pointed the gun to his chin and fought against his own finger to keep his life.

“You’ll pay! YOU’LL PA-” Zaorth’s head exploded into a thousand pieces, sending blood and pink secretions everywhere. Michael swatted away the small chunks of his head and took a deep breath. He looked at his surroundings. He saw the people who’d killed themselves, his enemies. Off in the distance, he saw a young soldier running on foot away from the scene. He let him go as consolation. He then remembered. Eldric.

Jolting his head around, he saw Eldric who’d begun spazzing on the ground due to blood loss. He dashed over to him and reached into his bag to pull out a bandage which is wrapped around Eldric’s chest. No words were spoken as he did this, Eldric concentrated on his breathing as Michael sat him up to complete the bandage wrapping. When he’d finished, he called over a horse and hoisted Eldric’s unconscious body over the back.

“Let’s get you to Greenwood,” Michel said stoically as he jumped to the horses back and commanded it to run. The horse took off towards Reinbose as the sun neared the horizon.

13

September 7, 535

The group led by Asante the rest of the day after leaving Clerud and took a short break overnight. The trip was mostly uneventful, with Kistler gone they could focus on the land in front of them rather than Rietveld’s family issues. When they stopped to rest overnight, they slept in shifts leaving two awake at all times.

When the morning of the 7th came, everything had been as it always was. Asante rode in the front with George closely behind. Hagen, Erick, Kastor and Leonard followed with Lawrence taking the rear. They engaged in light conversations about the weather and certain animals they found in the Land of Solitude, but nothing of note was brought up. Henry was never brought up, but the weight his absence left was felt by the recruits.

“At this pace, we should make Greenwood by tomorrow morning.” Asante rode while looking at an old parchment map he’d taken from Clerud. The map was half burnt but showed enough for him to get his bearings. “Unless we’re stopped by stalkers, we’ll have no issues.”

“We might have a few regardless, Malik,” George noted. “We’re on contested land, you know. People might think we’re bandits.”

“Or worse, Imperials!” Hagen joked as his face bore a large grin.

“That’s an excellent point, Freeman.” Asante put the map away and extended his arm to the side. “Everyone. Remain vigilant. You may never know when we might be assaulted by unknown enemies.”

“You mean like him?” Hagen pointed to the group’s right as a lone figure danced along the horizon. He was not on horseback and appeared to be fleeing from something. “If all bandits are like him, we’ll do just fine!”

“Sh-should we go up to him?” Leonard stuttered. “He might be in trouble.”

Asante looked over the group who’d slowed their horses to get a better look. Turning to the horizon where the figure continued to move in spastic ways, he made up his mind. “Stop!” He extended his hand once more as the group seized their movement. “Freeman and I will investigate this strange figure. If we’re in any danger, one of us will shoot my flare. Seargeant Stone will remain in charge until we return. Understood?”

The group nodded and quickly Asante and George took off towards the horizon. Asante never lost sight of the figure while George began glancing from left to right. As they got closer, the figure began to take the shape of a man. He wasn’t incredibly tall, but his clothes were tattered and he was out of breath as he stumbled across the desolate horizon. When he saw the captain and drunkard approach him, he dropped to his knees and looked to the sky.

“It’s over,” he mumbled. “My judgement has come.” He continued to mumble to himself as Malik exchanged glances with George.

“Where are your companions?” Asante did not leave his horse as he questioned the strange man.

“It’s over. I’m dead.” The man continued to mumble to himself as he gave no answers to Asante.

George glanced between the two before jumping from his horse. Asante stuck his hand out in protest but was ineffective. George walked up to the strange man and sat down in front of him. Slowly, the man lowered his head and looked George in the eyes.

“What happened?” George asked with a stoic look on his face.

The man stuttered and fumbled over his words before he could retrieve anything that resembled a sentence. “The death. He was death.” As the man grabbed his head, his eyes began to widen. “My mind. It- It was- He did it.”

“Who did what?”

He shook his head vigorously. “He did it. Made me kill myself. Made them do it.”

“You haven’t killed yourself. You’re alive.” George stood and faced Asante. “He needs the comfort of civilization. We can’t leave him to die like this out here.”

“And you suggest we take him to Greenwood? Freeman, you have idiotic ideas when you’re drunk but even more when you’re sober.”

“No, I know a place. At least, a place that existed a decade or two ago. We take him there and be on our way.”

“Have you forgotten why we’re here? We’re here to get your son. To bring him back to Einrich. To allow you to return to the noble sector of Heldenstadt. Have you forgotten?”

“No, I haven’t. But he’s clearly on the verge of death and it wouldn’t be that far out of the way, we’d drop him off and move on as if nothing had ever happened.”

Asante adjusted his collar. “George. We cannot indulge ourselves in little side quests when the fate of the war is at stake! Every day your son gets a little farther from us, and you want to sit back and help some stranger who can barely form sentences as he was a fifth grader! We are *not* helping him!”

“Aren’t I necessary to get Eldric? I’ll go on my own then and catch up with you all at Greenwood. If I’m not necessary, then go right ahead and get him without me. I’m headed to where I know this man will be safe and will live.”

The two glared at each other as George craned his neck to the higher Asante. After a minute of silence between the two, Malik sighed. “How out of the way is it?”

“Not far. It should add at most a half a day to our travels.”

“Where is it?”

“A little back the way we came. It’s an outpost called Umutu, run by a woman who knows her way around collecting refugees.”

Asante looked to the sun and reminded himself of the time of day. “Very well. We’ll indulge in assisting this man. However, if he proves to be anything more than baggage, we leave him instantly and return to our expedition towards Greenwood.”

“Fine by me.” George picked up the mumbling man and sat him upon his horse. He jumped up and instructed him to hold on. The man did so properly and the two rode to return to the rest of the group.

\* \* \*

Umutu had not been that far from where the group began. After George had explained the situation, they found themselves in, everyone had quickly shown their agreement to the detour. They rode for an hour and a half in the opposite direction before the horizon showed a small outpost in the middle of the desolate land. George’s face lit up as what he thought was there still stood. The tall tower that once barely overlooked the outpost walls now loomed over the walls, casting a large shadow that covered most of the interior. George had asked to ride in front as a show of good faith, and Asante obliged, switching the two’s spots. When the group arrived at the gate, the two guards approached them with large spears in hand.

“State your business.”

George bowed in greeting. “My colleagues and I were travelling across the land when we spotted this young man in dire condition. We were hoping Paulek would take him in and nurse him to health.”

The guards looked at each other before the taller of them walked around to the side of George’s horse and got a good look at the man. His face whitened with shock as he quickly returned to the other guard, spoke some words into his ear and ran inside the outpost.

“Is everything all right?” Kastor asked inquisitively.

“Just wait a moment,” the guard responded cautiously, his hand assuring him.

Some time later, the taller guard returned to whisper some more words into the other’s ear before stepping aside. He returned to his post and did not look any of them in the eye.

“You are to enter with me,” the shorter guard said, “leave your horses and follow.” He promptly turned around and stepped inside the outpost.

George and Asante exchanged glances but obliged. The horses were handed to the taller guard who assured they would be taken care of and they stepped inside the outpost. The shorter guard was waiting for them at the large tower and ushered them inside. Once inside, the door was closed behind them leaving the group in a circular room. Doors on either side of the room were shut as well, and the room was dimly lit. Because there were no guards in the room, Asante got his bearings and turned to George.

“George.” Asante pointed to the front door. “Check the door.”

Leonard and Kastor looked at him with raised eyebrows. “W-Why would he need to? We’re waiting for our escort, r-right?”

George pushed the door to no avail. “It appears this door is locked,” he said with a smirk. “Erick, Hagen, check the other doors for me real quick.”

With a nod, the two did so to find the same results. Locked doors. Asante removed his gun from its holster and instructed everyone else to do the same and to remain quiet. The group sat in that room for what felt an eternity in silence, occasionally checking the doors to see if their status had changed.

“What if we knock them down?” Hagen asked.

“B-but we’re guests!” Leonard replied.

“Yeah, let’s not get on their bad side,” George stated. “I’m sure someone will come and help us out.”

All of a sudden, a maniacal laugh came from above the room. Mechanical sounds echoed throughout the circular room and the lights brightened showing several guns pointed towards the group. They were on a balcony a level above them pointed downward, so the group couldn’t shoot the guns away. In response, everyone had returned the favor by pointing their guns to the balcony, all the while the maniacal laughter continuing. The soldier the group were delivering began to mumble once more. Repeating *I’m dead*, and *it’s over* ad nauseum.

“Paulek!” George shouted, the only one with his gun still holstered. “What is the meaning of this?!”

When George finished his question, a large woman arrived on the balcony. She wore a suit with a handkerchief to wipe away the sweat on her brow and a devilish grin spread from cheek to cheek.

“Georgey!” She shouted in reply. “How good it is to see you again!”

“What’s your game Paulek?!” George asked angrily.

“What’s yours?!” Paulek tilted her head to the side and deepened her voice. “We will not give you anything in return for that man.”

George’s face squished with confusion. “What?! We aren’t asking anything for him. We just wanted you to nurse him to health!”

“Georgey, you can play your games all you want, but it’s ineffective on me. Guards! Subdue them!”

Before anyone realized, the guns above them fired several rounds at the group, quickly hitting Kastor and Leonard in the head, knocking them unconscious. Hagen was able to dodge the first several rounds but was quickly subdued by rounds coming in all directions. Asante, George, Lawrence, and Erick all accepted their fate, succumbing to the mysterious rounds and falling unconscious. George, losing his vision quickly, looked back up at Paulek, who’s nauseating smile never seized.

\* \* \*

George was the first to regain consciousness. As he glanced around, he quickly gained his bearings and realized that the group had been taken to a holding cell. It was a rectangular cell with enough room to carry them all comfortably, with thick bars running from the ground to the ceiling. A singular guard sat on the other side of the bars, diligently looking at the end of the hallway where stairs were placed.