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| Blackfhyre | about Number words |

P.O. Box 516

Eagleville, PA 19403

(920) 940 - 8430

Tifa.lockhart8487@gmail.com

# A FAREWELL TO KINGS

## by

## Blackfhyre

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COLOR KEY:

REMOVE

ADD

TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT (works either way)

MY NOTE AS TO WHY I DID SOMETHING

**Prologue**

The cavern walls illuminated green radiation as he approached the source of the disturbance at whole the very center of this cavern created by the destruction that shook these lands less than a moon prior. The traveler came from faraway lands to investigate the anomaly firsthand, but he knew quicker ways of travel than the land took you. From the landing in that wretched forest he traveled out of sight atop Zeira, who now followed closely behind with his backpack. What terrors they snuck by in that dark land he did not want to imagine, if they were anything like what infested these frozen mountains of death… Beasts of lore stalked these slopes, unaffected by the immobilizing cold which required the traveler’s constant attention to keep his blood flowing. If the subzero chills and knife-like winds that cut through all clothing wasn’t bad enough, some of these fiends had eyes that could penetrate his illusions and cut him in two with one nicely aimed swipe. Snow has not ceased to fall here by any record in the histories, but certainly this extreme frost could not be of the natural here. Not only that, the place reeked of evil, and the stench grew stronger the closer he enclosed on the epicenter.

At the end of the hall, an area was illuminated in dancing bright lights of varying color. As the massively irradiated cavern now surrounded him, he was taken by awe at what lied in the center of this steaming crater. As his interest was piqued, Zeira warked a cry that always meant trouble afoot. She had a knack for detecting evil, always could with alarming accuracy. And as if by her command, several figures outlined the smoking enclave, surrounding the night’s traveler. A dagger split one’s skull before the movement could be detected. The man slashed the on comers as they barreled towards him surrounding and overtaking where he stood. He swung his sword and axe, dismembering several of his opponents as Zeira clawed at them from behind. She was a gallant creature, but she could not save her master from this ambush. “Be gone!” the man cried to his beloved companion as he fell to the assailants on this evening.

**Chapter 1 - A Farewell to Kings**

Street lamps made the dimly lit stone visible as their fires danced in the night. The gentle breeze of the mid-summer twists up remnants of garbage and dust not caked into the streets from the day’s revelry. Steins, food trays, torn clothes, and other debris litter the well-traveled pathways after a day of excitement. In the late hour, festival goers still straggle nosily along the winding roads of the capital city. Inside TheBird of Prey, blue hair spilled to his waist asSerge sat at the table with his companions, each heavily in their cups from a long day of celebration. Every year at the Summer Solstice, there is a celebration for all the peace and freedom that has been brought to Aetatis over the past twelve thousand years by The Kings of this city. The Festival of Kingsin full swing, the entire **City of Kings** was deep in merriment.

Jugglers and acrobats still occupied some of the street corners to take advantage of the more intoxicated partygoers. For as the night ages, the more generous their coin becomes. Serge looked deep into his wife’s glazed over eyes with passion, as he laughed at the antics of Jeifer and Ylle in their drunken glory. Her fire red hair framed her face perfectly as if fell loose past her chest. The top students of the University had reason for celebration aside from the recent marriage of Serge and Corelle, the eight of them were the brightest The University had seen in centuries.

The Bird of Preywas loud and rowdy as the winds picked up outside; no one was aware of the stirring in the shadows. No one inside even batted an eye at Jeifer’s loud and offensive obscenities as he slammed back steins with his friends. The beads of sweat ran down his face like rain drops on a window as he made his mates gasp in laughter. Serge caught the anxious look on Aezi’s olive toned face as he scanned the room in between his cackles at Jeifer’s buffoonery, always on alert. He looked odd not wearing his tall pointy hat which could always been seen sitting atop his long black hair. I detect nothing in the room that would draw anyone’s suspicion, but remain on guard. “Serge?” Gimza interrupted, clearly picking up on the uneasiness in the air. Maybe it was just the knight in them. The room erupted once again in glee as music filled the common room of the tavern.

The elation was severed as the windows shattered like deadly confetti of broken glass into the room. Gimza and Serge jumped to their feet as Corelle and Qeles leapt onto the table from which they all just drank. Aezi and Zid immediately got into a defensive stance. Jeifer and Ylle emptied their cups, but not to waste a drop before entering the fray. Shadowy figures danced into the room undeterred while Serge, Gimza, Zid, and Aezi hacked away at the intruders. Corelle and Qeles tried to strengthen and rally the patrons to fight off these cursed invaders, but to no avail. The crue worked to keep each other alive, the common folk fell to their deaths like glats at the slaughter. As the seconds ticked on, it became more and more clear that the common room was now a death trap and if they wanted to make it through the night, they would have to escape the tavern immediately. Serge and Gimza whistled as they swung around towards the front door and chopped a path for the others to follow.

The scene outside was worse than inside the tavern. Blackened creatures beat down the streets’ wanderers as if in a chicken coop. Common folk could provide no sort of resistance against this sort on onslaught. Serge could make out the figures of what looked like great wolves and the unmistakable/recognizable look of skeletons (its assumed they are walking upright but it does need another descriptor). From the ground beneath him, big rats, the size of feral cats bit at his legs. The red of the wolves' eyes was the only distinct feature that separated their black grizzled fur which camouflaged them so well into the night's darkness. The only other light was the fire that shined fierce from the eyeholes of greyish smoke colored skeletons, slashing away to the sounds of screams that bellowed from within the evening’s murky shadows. Evil lurked this night.

Serge could see Gimza’s attention turn toward the city’s castle; his shoulder length blonde hair hiding the grim look on his face carved from stone - both his residence, and where his father, King RAZORNIPPLES<King> would be under minimal guard on this festive night. But the path to the castle was too dense with fiends and smoke could already be seen twisting up from the castle towers and windows. The city was being overrun, and if the friends did not find a place to endure the night, they would fall with it. Still, Serge led the eight on an attempt to make it to the castle walls, but it was for naught. Even Aezi’s fire magicks seemed to only provide a slight discomfort to this evening’s unwanted guests. They needed to get what they could from the manor and leave the center city.

Their manor sat on the outside of the city, just away a few blocks from The Bird of Prey. Outside of the main avenues, the screams of dying partygoers could be heard from where the slaughter was worst. Screams and the glow of burning flames could be heard from the other manors as the chaos littered it’s way up the long main road to the battered castle gates. The castle was starting to crumble under the assault of the night’s onslaught and the screams began to get louder, apparently getting closer now to the outskirts of the city. The manors along the road shared by theirs, seemed untouched by conflict; but that would not be for long as the commotion grew nearer still.

The eight companions all lived in that manor, except Gimza who was heir to the throne and was required to live on castle grounds, but most of his time was spent either at the manor or at the University training and bonding with everyone. The other seven grew up in a crumbling house in the slums which they warmly referred to as ‘the orphanage’. All orphans of a previous war, they were as good as blood. All started attending the University soon after establishing a family together. Gimza quickly joined their crue as they became inseparable over the ensuing years. As bad as things were years ago, it seemed like a dream compared to this dreadful eve. Serge’s attention drawn quickly back to the terror at hand, he gathered what he could in great haste, as he hears banging and scraping now at the manor door and walls. The sound of their livestock coming to an end signaled their time here was up and all rushed out of the residence with everything they could fit in their packs and under their arms. The comrades all hopped on their **kyoros** and rode off towards the outskirts of the **City of Kings**.

As they raced towards the fringes of the **City**, the screams grew fainter, but never died. The outskirts were unharmed, there seemed to have been no order to the assault aside from amassing as much death as bloody imaginable. The atrocious activity would be contained to the most populated areas as these fiends lusted for blood in the most substantial way possible.

“*Diablos*!” Zid spat in disgust. “I’ve heard of the like before.” He spat again. Zid was the eldest of the crue and a mild historian at that. In the history books there were vague mentions of such evils that would terrorize civilizations in ages past. But none had been seen by man for over a millennium. They were as good as folk-lore, things to scare children. But we had all seen this with our own eyes.

“Diablos!”, Jeifer japed. “Next you’ll say they rode in with Chandrian, Trollocs, Wulfen, and the Fae as well! What do I look like, a damn half-wit Zid.”

“Now we all saw what happened Jeif. Those weren’t the Children of Hope. And we all saw the comet the other night to the North past Zek. I’m not a little child either, but you can’t ignore what we see!” Ylle rushed to the defense of Zid. Now the party had come to a halt to have a discussion.

“If we go by logic, it is more likely some mad wizard whom finally figured out how to summon an army of the dead got some balls. It’s really not that hard if you just tri-“

“A mad wizard? That makes no sense” Jeifer said, now more argumentative than earlier. “I say it was a dragon and a princess’s wart dun crossed with a fallen knight on the wrong moon cycle.”

“Dio’s ashes!” Serge blurted in. “Do I always have to do this? Who the bloody hell knows what that was! We only got a quick glimpse. Now, everyone! Do we want to stand here all night and argue while these scum catch up and fuck us to death? Or are we going to find shelter, you blithering fools?”

Gimza nodded in agreement.

“Yes, yes, you’re right”, Zid said.

“Yes sir” Jeif slurred

“Of course, we must be on our way at once.” Aezi thought out loud.

“Now who’s going to get fucked to death?” an unfamiliar voice interrupted.

“What’s it to you?” Jeif scoffed.

Serge gave Jeif a look that shut him up. “What he meant was; what are you doing here? It’s dangerous. Are you heading into the city?”

“Aye – well I was but it seems I’m too late. I just couldn’t get here fast enough. I came from…” he trailed off as his eyes met with the fires of what was the city’s castle. “I was heading to the castle but” he sighed “there’s nothing that can be done now.” The man was shrouded in the night as he sat atop his equally camouflaged kyoro. His eyes the only thing visible in the smoky evening.

“You are not from here – what business do you have at the castle?” Gimza eyed the mysterious man cautiously as he considered the stranger.

The man eyed the center city. “I ride from Zek carrying dire news, yet I am too late. I –“

“From Zek?!” Jeif laughed. “Did you bring back some scrael as well? He must have been drinking more than I! We can’t be jerk’d-“He was cut off as a sledge mallet slammed into his shoulder. He fell from his kyoro as a boney intruder whaled a wicked cackle. Before it could finish the kill, it was drove to the ground by yet another unseen interloper.

What was left was a pile of dull grey bones and a happy bark. “That’s my boy, **Wind**!” The man exclaimed as he hugged what can now be seen as a wolf on the ground. “We need to get to a safer place before we are overrun. The edge of the city is unharmed, we will be ok if we can make it there." Before the last word was out of his mouth, a flash glimmer left his hand to discover a wicked beast not five yards from Qeles, completely unaware. “We must move, now!”

“Right right” Gimza echoed for everyone to hear. “On me” he rode as everyone followed, the newcomer taking up the rear in the shadows.

They rode for an hour, hard, southwest. After another few minutes, Gimza halted at an uninhabited barn, the years hadn’t been kind, but it stood strong in the evening fog. Its well-rusted frame caught shines of the moonlight as the dilapidated building stood before them. “We’re here” Serge proclaimed. He knew the structure. He and Gimza had trained uncountable nights here on the fringe of their city. “As good a place as any, I suppose. We should fortify the perimeter.” He eyed Jeifer and Zid before they could argue with one another about how to do it. “Just do it.” They obeyed without banter, this was no time for frolicking or choosing who to take orders from.

Everyone started about their own so to establish a perimeter around their safehaven, when the familiar sound of commotion disrupted the otherwise silent immediate area. “I said no cockery you t-“ Serge was interrupted as he saw that the noise was not his friends, rather the unwelcome invaders from beforehand were afoot. Not too concentrated around their newfound refuge but they had been too noisy in their work, however the murky night may conceal additional devils.

“We have company” Gimza was heard across the perimeter. They were surrounded as expected when the encompassing circumference alit in flame. Aezi, Qeles, and Ylle had united their magicks to form a ring of flame around the comrades. A perfect collaboration as the three linked fire, nature, and wind just as in exercise, augmenting their combined learnings in hostility was accomplished without faltering. The trespassers enclosed inside the fiery boundary were easily hacked down by Gimza, Zid, Serge, and Jeif. Corelle could be see keeping the company invigorated near the heart of mêlée. Collaborating magicks together was as easy as having a conversation with one another. A conversation that takes place mentally. And while multitasking with another task, as simple as all focusing on the same object or joining altogether, mid-conflict, fixing on several separate adversaries simultaneously. Serge understood it at the basics and had even done so in exercise with Gimza or Corelle or Aezi or Qel. His thoughts were once again drawn back to the skirmish at hand as a flamboyant intimidating battle-cry came from the northeast of the periphery. A skeleton, the height of mid-aged Yral wood tree stood at its source. Rather than taking a moment to realize that nothing like this actually existed in all of Aetatis, Serge and the rest of the crue formed a regiment in perfect nonagonal imposition; the new member of the cohort included, as he’d fought alongside them hitherto.

The ash blackened skeleton roared in the night as the company engaged it in its lunacy. Its furnace ridden eyes blazed as the frame of the atrocity towered over their congregation. It let out another screech as flame ascended directly toward them amassing from the mouth of its colossal head. The coalition split in two, surrounding the goliath; Serge, Gimza, and Zid focusing on the torso and head as Jeif aligned himself perfectly behind it for maximum efficacy. Aezi, Qel, and Ylle were still allied in their entwining as Corelle was now illumining down direct light unto the terror. It was always taught in class that any magick intended to restore life would by hook or crook harm the dead. Well the dead never walked, but this creature juddered in agreement as the light washed down on the bones. Still the scoundrel battled adamantly as glimmers of radiant pewter could be seen striking their mark on the foe’s joints initiating from their shadowed friend, his wolf companion galloping upon the skeleton tearing at every stride. No one could easily say how long the battle raged. But at last, the skeleton fell to the ground in one final gasp for air as a hammer of flame crushed it to the earth.

From the cloud of embers out arose the four warriors, covered in grey head to foot. “It’s right dead!” Zid announced happily. His white teeth could be seen through the smoke colored film concealing him elsewise.

Before the dust could settle, Aezi darted to the corpse, taking samples from what seemed like each and every bone. “There isn’t even a brain.” He called from the haze, which seemed to be diffusing out to the entire grounds by now. Aezi could be heard muttering to himself where the soot was dense in the still air. It was not ash that enclosed the night, but a heavy veil of fog which appeared to encase the entire city.

“Don’t tarry man!” Serge directed to the wizard, who now did don his immense sunburned hat; it could be faintly seen now as the dust, char, and culm almost completely settled to the ground around the corpse. “We’ve to reinforce the barn so we can get some rest.”

The newcomer was already inspecting the exterior of the barn, placing several items at the corners and medians of the walls. “I’ve got that.” He said to the group. When a few of them gave him a sideways look, he replied back, “Wards. They can be casted as a spell on the spot or enchanted into an item. *Diablos* would rather run headfirst into a fire than approach these wards. I’ve the best in the land.” He muttered some incantation and appeared satisfied. “Tis safe.”

“Just who are you?” Jeif asked the man apprehensively. “Wards and all – Aezi, can you even make a ward?” Aezi is the most skilled wizard in the University, or was until tonight when the whole of it likely lay in cinder and ruin.

“I’ve studied wards, but there’s been no use for centuries except to thwart eavesdropping or prevent spying or the like. Who’ve thought we’d need it for the next thousand years? I suppose it is a blunder on our part. If the city was warded against *diablos* this would have been impossible,” he said as he looked back on his fallen home.

“Yeah *who* would’ve thought” Jeif accused as he eyed the newcomer once again.

“Enough again. We need to get inside the barn.” Serge complained as if talking to a child. “You can bitch in there where it’s safe.”

“Why should we believe it’s safe in there after he said some words to some *relics*? It could be a trap. Aezi or Qeles should make sure it’s safe for sure.” Jeif barked back.

But Aezi was already considering the wards, unable to contain his excitement. “These are incantations even I can’t comprehend, they’re considerably more advanced than I’ve encountered even in the libraries of the University. Just astounding!”

“But are they safe? Can we-” Jeif was cut off as Gimza cut in.

“Come now, you simpleton, they’re safe. Look, he and Serge are already inside. Have a hint.” Gimza stated as he followed the rest of the group in ahead of Jeifer.

Inside, a fire blazed in the hearth and the two had already arranged seating about the inglenook. “Have a seat, listen to what … We haven’t got your name.” Serge motioned to the outsider.

“I guess now is an appropriate time to introduce myself. I am Egde, I am from the once established republic of Taedas.”

“Taedas? Is that a real place? Isn’t that where ninjas were supposed to have once trained? I always thought it was fiction, you know, from the novels.” Zid asked.

“I never paid attention in history.” Jeifer scoffed “A village of ninjas? What is this – *The Chrono Tales*?” he laughed.

Egde cleared his throat to quiet the room. “My village of *yes, ninjas,* once resided in the eastern forest of PLACE . We lived in peaceful seclusion from the rest of Aetatis until about four years ago. That was when something happened. It was almost as if the forest around us was rejecting our residence; as if as a whole it was consciously inhibiting our existence. We sent out scouts to the rest of Aetatis, myself included. I returned eight moons later with what I experienced, but I could not find Taedas. Like it had never existed! I traced over its location to my wit’s end, but to no avail. It was not easy, but I tracked *something* northeast into Zek. My senses told me that it was not my companions, but I had to follow it anyway. Once in Zek, physicks act awry, causing it nearly impossible to track anything and the sensation of always being watched is ever evident. The trail was almost immediately lost, but I saw it headed north towards the mountains. The closer I got to those mountains, the more skewwhiff the environment became, twisted trees and stunted shrubs; mutated rabid animals with glowing eyes of all colors. I spent many moons in and out of Zek with my boy Wind; one cannot spend an extended amount of time within the confines of that cursed land or you will go rabid like those animals. Alone, I could never make it through the northern areas of Zek and certainly not into those snow covered mountains. The closer I got, the thicker the shrubbery and more fiendish the animals became. Rats the size of bobcats and wolves with blood red eyes- exactly what I saw here tonight… *Diablos.* Then the green comet pierced our world and struck the northern mountains. I could obviously not investigate, but I knew the significance. I rode immediately to get an audience with the king, but even in all haste was too late. I saw the shadow of *Umbrae* with my own eyes and it is spreading. It will consume this city before long.” He studied his spectators. “I’ve not seen another of my kind since I left my village.” Sadness filled his being as he finished his tale.

“A horrid tale.” Qeles spoke for the first time. “I’ve never seen a ninja.” The word was still foreign on her tongue. Everyone had read about ninjas in the history books and their amazing acrobatic way of life. The flames painted his cowl crimson as he studied the men and women studying him. None of us had seen a ninja in person before. We all assumed they existed, but to see one in person was almost too much to take in at once at the moment of realization. It was said that you could be staring directly at a ninja and not even notice their presence. I’d never believed in their stealth until seeing this man in front of me tonight, his movements deceptive to the eye. I would not have believed a lot of things had I not seen them with my own sight tonight.

“So where do we go from here?” Zid asked no one in particular. The screams had become fewer as the sounds of the ungodly scoundrels causing mischief came and went. The city was dying and as the night aged into morning, any hope of fighting the reaper’s stay with the cries for help which faded to insignificance.

“These *diablos* have an aversion to the light. They don’t avoid it completely but are much less active and prefer to rest during the day hours in any darkness they can find. Hence the ever-enshrouding mist which darkens the forest of Zek, north of us. It’s like a living entity attracted to these creatures of the night. One will form over your city as well if they form a residence here. I picked up a, what I would call, faint radiation of this mist in  where Taedas once stood. I don’t know what happened there but there was an *Umbrae* presence at some time to cause it. The morning’s light should allow a search of the city. We’ll be safe to rest inside these wards.” He eyed a sleeping Jeifer and within an instant the man was asleep with his wolf. He looked as if he would spring up at any time, even in his rest.

One by one everyone made their arrangements, the eight of us all nestled in the safety of one another. During this mid-summer night, a certain coldness had taken to the air. The gales of wind in the night had overtaken the howls of the fiends for a time, and rest was finally given to all.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

As the cerulean sun’s rays awoke the sleepers, the stark silence was resounding. Serge, Gimza, and Aezi were already outside staring at the ruins of a once proud city. The stench of filth and ash dominated all incoming scents. The city was dead and there was not a living soul inside it.

“There will be no rescue mission.” Serge stated dismissively. “No one lives in there anymore. We must leave at once.”

“Edge?” Was a question from Ylle.

“Gone with the morning. I’m not surprised. The nearest town is **Tomal**.” Serge looked back at everyone, then his wife Corelle.

**Chapter 2 – Road to Tomal**

**Tomal** was a rural village, stuck in ages past. A town that never climbed atop that second peak as civilization advanced into the modern era. Regardless of their place in society, their output was an essential muscle that kept Aetatis’ heart abeat. The farmers here have lived a long life of isolation and inbreeding, therefore evolving indicative of their surroundings. On several occasions, while on task from the University, Serge had ridden past Tomal, both alone as well as accompanied by companions a time or so. They had never got to close to the village, for they’d never had business within the limits, and *Tomals* have been recorded as being hostile to outsiders. They are known to speak the common tongue and should be amenable to helping a company in distress.

The crue rode southeast towards Tomal, the path was well trodden with still growth between the stones laid ages past. Clouds of dust and insect kicked up as the Kroyos feet combatted with the uneven landscape the road presented the travelers. “Not much in the carriage, huh?” Ylle questioned Gimza as she muttered a curse and revoltingly pulled a *bickon* from her fire red hair that spilled past her waist.

“Not much to choose from, some cloth, tools, weapons, and rations was all kept up in that shack.” Gimza explained. “We’ll restock there in Tomal, maybe come by a peddler, and head east for the Trade City. If we can locate a peddler, we can aye persuade him to offer us a good route to **Arburg**. Good thing my father always made me take his purse when I went on the town. A heavy purse shaken the right way can loose any peddlers’ tight lips.” The look of emptiness shone through his saffire eyes as he replayed a memory of the king.

Serge and Gimza closed up the carriage and fastened the Kroyos. A kroyo without a dedicated trainer has a strong free will but these pack Kroyos are accustomed to the interspecies interaction. With the carriage set and everyone ready, all hopped upon their legrunners and the City of Kings was left in the distance, maybe forever.

At the height of summer, the rays beat down as the party galloped toward Tomal, it seemed every *letch* the sun rose another degree rose along with it. By midday, the travelers had shed most of their layers but still encased with sweat as the temperature continued to steadily rise. “I don’t reckon it being this blistering far as I can go back.” Zid said absent mindedly as the kroyos carried their partners through the brush. “Now that I say it, wasn’t nearly this hot yesterday eh?”

“Not by a *feltch*” Aezi chimed in apprehensively. “It’s bloody haut the likes we haven’t seen I’d wager Dio’s light.” He turned back to look at the ruined city in now the far reach of his view, his massive hat shading him and his kroyo as they came upon the nearby stream. His dark skin took in the heat as he tied his long black hair back at his neck.

Two hours into the voyage, the dogged riders atop their kroyos appeared many hours fatigued under the scorching sun.

The party dismounted and rehydrated as the heat still flexed itself over the river. “This must be the Therva, we’ve all swam here at one time or another I’d hope.” Serge stated as he splashed the cool river water into his face and hair. A few daiken trees provided some well needed shade for the not yet accustomed to voyagers. It was only midday, but the dancing smoke off in the distance reminded everyone what had happened last night at **Katur.** It was not only a reminder, but as the aura of everyone already told, it was a new beginning.

Corelle served up the rations along with whatever game had been collected through the mostly plains traversed by the kroyos as they rode through the blistering heat. It was a mostly silent ride, as Serge thought to himself what everyone must be cycling through in their own minds. It was a hard realization to perceive, everything all of them had ever worked for, not to mention everyone they had ever known wiped off reality in the swing of a few bell tolls.

The silence was broken by Jeifer as usual “At least I was able to grab me spirits,

---------------------------Some useful dialogue----------------------------

As everyone packed and saddled up, Serge took a long glimpse at ruined Katur. It may be the last time he laid eyes on the land of his birth. As he turned away he knew this ashen city meant an end to the existence he loved and the unknown village ahead of him signified an unfamiliar start to a new life. But he also felt this end to simplistic worry-free days may hold a much more important meaning yet to be realized.

The blazing fury continued its assault on the riders as they once again took travel. As Katur evaporated in the distance, Serge tried to put last night’s calamity out of his mind with it. As he stroked Tarnor’s neck, he lulled back for a moment to a better time. It was a long road until nightfall and a daydream was a welcomed distraction. Serge often took long rides alone with Tarnor and just let his mind drift, it was a great way to unconsciously bond with your kroyo. A kroyo instinctively builds itself on the personality of its trainer, and as the pair mature together, their beings as a whole grow together and the duo is forever interrelated. Tarnor stood roughly 3 gloug and was a formidable adversary on the battlefield as well as an unrivaled transport animal. Kroyo were used by all merchants and wanderers likewise. A rather large male could grow as lofty as 5 gloug and have a wingspan of up to 3 gloug where inversely a runt female could stand as low as 1 gloug, but generally all trained kroyo averaged 2 – 3.5 gloug, their size essentially depended on their environment and diet. Wild kroyo’s size often varied. It was not common to bond your kroyo, due to the mental strength and strain it required by both the trainer and animal. Even when all conditions were thought to be satisfactory, the connection could transmogrify causing mental instability for the pair. It was a controversial practice and to say it was not accepted everywhere was putting the matter lightly. Keeping that in mind, it was not routine conversation in public. A kroyo’s proficiencies in journey included many instinctual aptitudes and mostly knew where they were headed and how to traverse the landscape without thought. How this process functioned was a complete mystery but relied on for nearly all land traversal. It was because of this that the kroyo could share the daydream with its rider, another kroyo utility which could not be explained but was practiced every day.

A flamboyant cry from the sky above awoke the duo from their revelry and back into the baking afternoon atmosphere. Serge realized he was staring directly into Tarnor’s golden iris as they were both brought back to the moment at hand. The azure sun’s hue mirrored Serge’s hair not only in color but also in fever as it grasped his face demarcated in perspiration. The essentially unchanged position revealed less than an hour’s passing as its emissions reflected upon Tarnor’s emerald scales, assaulting Serge from both above and below with its luminosity. Moisture flowed from Serge’s body, producing its own deluge unto Tarnor. Many of the kroyo let out a *wark* as an instinctual response to another primal animal’s cry as the dragon passed overhead, boasting its brilliance whilst it soared through the clouds. Just better than a spec to the eye, dragons were not rare in the skies, but their presence had become more frequent in the foregoing months; something everyone had brought up to discussion more than once. While its meaning was never elucidated, a connection to last night could not be dismissed as happenstance. As he assessed his friends upon their related kroyo, he questioned once again why the custom was so widely frowned upon; whilst he had spent the better part of his life with Tarnor, in fact life without his presence would be rather awkward. Tarnor agreed, regarding both custom and dragon incidence.

“What do you think it means?” Zid queried over the racket of the legrunners talons on the thoroughfare, crimped ceaselessly from centuries of usage.

Aezi spoke up quickly before Jeif could get a remark in “In ages past, the increase in dragon activity habitually led to the unfolding of some famous event. Whereas the severity and nature vastly differ, it always leads to something…” he trailed off.

But it was not too late for Jeif “Words in books that idiots wrote before Katur even existed. I’m surprised anyone could even make sense of their slapdash language to write our histories. How many different versions are there anyway?” Koda warked in agreement, even adding in a strut to match.

Tarnor shot them both a glare but Serge instinctively calmed his companion before it turned into anything else. To say Tarnor was not fond of Koda showed that kroyo could hold a grudge as well as any human.

“For the sake of the stars. Can’t you ever just listen? Or contribute? If you gave it even a little thought of imagination you could tell that there is a little truth in every history buried within all of the superfluities. Aetatis did not all of a sudden erupt into existence with the establishment of Katur 13 stek yore you dumdum. Time went on before our kind.” While Zid and Jeif would issue blood for one-another, their views on history and other cultures were different as ice and fire. “If you don’t have anything constructive to say, stay the goct quiet!” Zid exclaimed as his kroyo declared agreement.

“Nevertheless” Aezi continued “I would gamble to conjecture there is more on the horizon than what we experienced in Katur. Don’t forget Egde and the falling green star coupled with their timing. I just hope we have some time in Tomal to mend ourselves and –“

“The gruck with all this end of all talk eh? I’m riding up to scout incase the end starts up ahead” Jeifer bitched as he rode Koda forward. The crue was keeping a good pace, although one never went full distance with their legrunner at distance, so the pair quickly became an ort in their view and then disappeared.

“What a cutler” Ylle gawked once he was out of earshot. “I love him as we all do but he can be a real displeasure sometimes. I would not hope that something bigger is afoot, but I believe that we should prepare for something most foul.” She said in correspondence with Aezi as she hugged Meidan for comfort. The kroyo’s furious scarlet coat matched Ylle’s hair color as well as her fiery outlook on life.

Qeles interjected from the middle of the convoy “I feel a squall of vitality mounting, the likes of which I can’t accurately put to words. It’s as if I can anticipate a great change taking place but I cannot quite visualize it clearly. I’ve felt it before yesterday and now it’s about to boil over. Our difficulties have just begun I fear.” With no missed footing, Noerya craned her head back to show concern for her worried rider. Kroyo showed as much if not more concern for their human complement, especially in times of trying. The petite lavender comrade was an impeccable reflection of her keeper. Not long after connection, Qeles changed her once midnight hair to match that of her legrunner. It was ordinary for both keeper and kroyo to bend their makeup to accommodate that of the other.

Again, continuing focus on the absurd heat, Serge tried to lighten the mood “Any spells you know that can suppress this vile heat?” he said as he looked over Aezi, then Qeles, then Ylle. “Bugger me, don’t all speak up at once.” No sooner were the words out of his mouth the oppressive sun seemed to disappear as night enveloped the sky above.

Before he could finish his nod of approval, Jeifer appeared out of the dusk. “An odd time for night” he pronounced as he took in the alert party.

Serge turned back to the wizard but what he heard was “We did nothing” Aezi avowed “This is an odd time for nightfall”

“There’s a scattering of trees not a few fliks from here. Just follow me and we’ll set up camp right quick. Something is off” There was no jackassery in Jeif’s tone now, everyone quickly trailed behind as he led them to an outcropping.

“That’ll do” Gimza said with approval as all surveyed the landscape, detecting all areas of weakness, and ample placement for sentries. “I’ll get a fire started, we’ve no rations but we can surely forage something here.”

Something hit the ground inside the encampment perimeter “There’s a whole load of crabapples all over, this must be an old orchard.” Jeifer shouted as he hucked a few over. “They aren’t real apples, but they will make do for the night and are not a bad side to a few goblets. I used to love these things.”

The response now came from Zid “They’re called dumbapples, before the war my pop would bitch about them all the time. He could never get real apple trees to grow. *They’re dumbapples* he would say, *and if you eat enough of them, you’ll become dumb as the tree they fell from*. Maybe that’s why you have the mind of a pup, eh Jeif? Once you started gobbling these away, your brain ceased development.” A laughing reaction was given by much of the company before the expected retort was returned.

“You’re a son of a whore, your father’s the son of a whore, and his father too was the son of a whore. What the hell do you know anyway?” Jeif cowed as he headed over to the carriage “Gruck y’all”

“Come, take it easy” Serge yelled after him before looking over to Zid in between snickers. “Do I always have to do this? What the hell is wrong with him anyway. He brings it on himself but try to lay off.”

“It’s got to be all of those dumbapples. I tell you they’ll make you limp. Tell him not to be such a cutty”

“Bloody dumbapples, you’re going to give me a urinary hemorrhage” Serge japed as he trailed to the carriage to repair the hurt sentiments. It had been a long run of hours since everyone started rejoicing for the festival. That mixed with no rest and all that went on, emotions were impulsive, and everyone should stick together rather than drift apart. Serge opened the carriage door to Jeifer with his spirits out and two goblets on the table. “I knew it would be one of these nights from the start” he murmured as he took the empty seat.

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Outside, Gimza helped everyone finish up camp preparations, and despite his earlier jests, gathered up as many dumbapples as possible. Not one game animal had been detected but there was no shortage of the sorry looking fruits. After what appeared to be a dragon’s weight in dumbapples, he then went to assist Aezi, Qeles, and Ylle with the perimeter.

“…wouldn’t do to have some of Egde’s wards right now” he heard Aezi finish as he approached the trio. He was perceived right away as three pairs of eyes focus on Gimza. “Perimeter is ok. I’ve set detection alarms and Ylle’s set traps, but we have yet to see any wildlife. The river Therva keeps us safe from attack to the East.” He described as he motioned towards the riverbank and the sound of the water ever in motion.

“It’s been all quiet since we’ve settled in here and the kroyo are all sleeping or on the verge.” Qeles shared the feeling of safety with Aezi as she spoke. No one would take them unawares in this campment. ”I have the faintest memories of my grannie cooking with fruits.” She shared as she assessed the stockpile of misshapen apples and the fire ablaze.

It was just then Gimza felt a twinge in his nose, he sensed something. But before he could realize his sensation, Ylle was in action, to the direction of the disruption. As she approached the perimeter, the alarms sounded. There were visitors. With the sound of breaking branches, Ylle came darting back to the heart of the camp, where the fire lit up the night. “From the water, there’s a good handful of them. Walking upright they absorbed my water nets and merely brushed off my vine roots with apparent ease. They’ve webbed hands and feet, a scaly body, a reptilian head, and they speak a garbled speech. I could see their turquoise body glistening in the moonlight. They are coming.”

Before the question was out of his mouth, Aezi spoke, “Shaigan. It’s only beginning”

Six of these water fiends staggered towards the four of them as Gimza looked around for the rest of his company. He saw Corelle coming to join from the other side of camp and before he could let out a wail, from within the carriage spewed Serge, Zid, and Jeifer; their voices louder than the racket emitting from approaching Shaigan. “Ya know…” Gimza sighed as he swung his head towards the interlopers “We aren’t rejoicing here!” he cried “We’ve trouble here.” Not knowing how much was consumed and how much help the 3 would be, he drove forward and prepared for a hard fight. As he drove his sword forward into his adversary, he felt it saturate with energy illuminating the surrounding area the shaigan’s body offered no resistance.

Surprised with confusion, he heard Aezi from behind, “They’re feeble to electricity.” Another fell to a bolt of lightning precisely felled upon its target. Before Aezi could direct him, Gimza took another swing, almost in mental unison with his comrade – once again his sword lighting up the night penetrating the for with no opposition. Gimza looked twice to make sure he had actually cut through a solid being.

“Amazing!” he exclaimed to himself as he the rest of the Shaigan approached. Another fell to a impeccably placed bolt of light. A quick look back proved Aezi had expended much of his energy delivering those blows. His keen awareness noted their netted feet easily slipping through vine entanglements. If Ylle’s efforts provided one moment’s time it could mean the difference between success and demise. One finally scarcely caught the foot of an assailant, Gimza used that advantage to leap up gain position behind the duo. But as he landed, the 3 drunks confronted the pair of fiends. Even in their intoxicated state, the three of them made quick, if not messy work of the remaining trespassers. “Nice of you to show up.” He said to the clearly impaired threesome.

“Easy now” Jeifer guffawed “You know I’d never let anything happen to the likes of y’all.” His wide smile split his face and with that, everyone was just happy to be together as the mood seemed to instantly lighten. Jeif had a way of instantly fixing a rotten mood, however no one could deny that their camp now absent diablos, was a major part of their relief.

A cheerful voice from the direction of the fire brought along the scent of something delectable. “Come before our bountiful harvest goes cold!” 🡨(Better sentence here?) She snickered at everyone’s surprised remarks “I’m the master chef, don’t worry about how I got it prepared.” Corelle encouraged everyone as they sat around the fire. “We can’t forecast what tomorrow holds, so let’s enjoy the present.

Although everyone was on edge after the disturbance, the rest of the evening followed without interruption. After the long day, no one was opposed to an early night of rest, sunrise would not linger.

**Chapter 3 – Stranger in a Strange Land**

Condensation ran rivers across Serge’s face as the blinding rays of sunlight put an end to his slumber. His head felt like a rotten pulsating fruit, just waiting to pop on the plain of a desert, winking out of existence. If the heat was not worse and rising, he’d spit on his own foot. He gazed upon Corelle nuzzled in his arms, there was still good in this world. As if reading his mind, Gimza called from the riverside, “I’ve enough dumbapples to drown a Yelsh! I know you’re awake come give me a hand.” His hair and body gleaned with perspiration; Serge had known from the start that drinking with Jeif last night would definitely stagger his strength today. However, he saw no way to avoid the matter, and in doing so his crue was once again a tight knit family. Keeping everyone together was always imperative and Serge would wrestle a kroyo to have that continue. Content with that, he pushed his headache aside and rose to assist with breakfast. He gently left his wife asleep and headed over to the riverbed. Just a few fliks south, they could make out the houses and even some figures moving about. Too far away to be noticed, Tomal went on with its regular grind like an ant colony. Locals were not known to venture past city limits and therefore, nobody had seen one up close. Their isolated lifestyle had caused a whole new species to evolve over the centuries, as only peddlers and merchants had any need to pass through this rural behemoth. Roads ran through the whole of the township mostly in an organized grid like pattern, clearly laid out by design when landscaped. Conversely, a handful of twisting and winding paths could be seen that must have been additions over the years as population and the need for more in-city transport grew. The pair discussed their thoughts on how the Tomal populace veered from their own evolutionary path. One could not make out in detail, but at this expanse the difference in breed was still discernible. Discussion of these unfamiliar folk dominated the breaking of fast. With everyone was excited to meet a new culture, the mood was swiftly improved as camp was dismembered. Before the sun hit sgril, the band was gathered in a tight knot en route to their destination.

The congregation came to a stop as they approached the town’s horizon. What looked like well-maintained assemblage farmhouse up close could now be seen to have not been used in weeks, maybe months. The accumulation of grime told the story. Spider-webbed windows and doors left ajar littered the walls of the houses along the main avenue. Inspection further down the road showed the everyday bustle of the agricultural machine moving along; none the wiser it seemed to the decay on the outskirts of town. As they slowly rode into the hubbub, the stench of a rural community was finally realized as if they had been dowsed by an onslaught of turned milk. It hit man and kroyo alike everyone groaning and becoming accustomed to the new environment. The stale heat had left the ground dry and caused dust clouds colonize this metropolis for the foreseeable future. Tarnor gave a slight chuckle relating the clouds to a grandparent of one of his lures after their rider had passed, here to stay. Serge smiled at his kroyo’s sense of humor and agreed that those clouds weren’t going anywhere soon.

The sounds of livestock and steel upon steel grew louder as everyone approached the opening of what seemed to be a town square. Everyone was on highest alert as a new unfamiliar sound struck Corelle’s auricles, she immediately turned to the disruption while gathering her spouse’s attention. From behind a door held on by one hinge, a young sprout emerged, and for the first time they laid eyes upon a Tomal face to face. The child was afraid but not frightened, seemed as this child was an orphan as well. “Nowhere to go?” Serge spoke gently as to not further scare the youngin, “Where’s mam and dod?” The youth’s hair was frayed, and it had been a few moons since the youngster had been scrubbed. Probably a male, his massive hands donned fingernails the likes of a spade; each finger its own individual entity. It was no wonder this one district claimed to support the bulk of Aetatis’ nourishment. However, this youngster’s nails were splintering, his eyes were hollow, and it was clear he was not a part of the clamor that kept this town thriving. Not fully matured, he stood nearly half Serge’s height as he sat atop Tarnor, the clothes caked in muck, masking the true appearance of this disheveled boy.

“They call me *Tum*.” The child startled the group with his words. “They call me Tum because I can tumble down the city streets.” He was timid, but curiosity and hunger overcame his fears as he ran to the congregation. “I don’t think you are going to roll me any, please.” The feeling of apprehension displayed across Tum’s face as everyone took him in, their kind faces a great indulgence which allowed him to settle down a little.

“No one’s going to roll you if you don’t choose to be.” Qeles assured the little farmer as he seemed to calm down some more. “Is there someone who is in charge here? Someone who gives commands?”

“The mayor.” He said with almost no emotion. “He’s bad” The child fidgeted nervously “He doesn’t like me. Or anyone.” Tum hid his face into his overcoat as he finished talking. But the child was not done speaking. “He thinks he knows all. He knows naught. I’ll take you, please help.” The small being hugged tight against Noerya’s tuft spoke up once more “He thinks I can’t realize his actions. No one sees.”

Corelle approached the boy. “You look exhausted, can I help?” her gentle voice, calm as a harp eased Tum into her trust as he acknowledged her request. Light filled his reality as his nails, teeth, and hair healed and grew with sustenance. The renewal brought tears of bliss to the sprout’s young face as his healthy teeth now shone with a smile. Visibly concerned with his new rejuvenation, Tum led the way through the grime and filth of Bronzon Avenue and at the very end, the mayor’s extravagant manor waited. As if anticipating our arrival, the massive gates moved apart, allowing the troupe to pass. The mayor’s house emanated cleanliness, clearly standing out from the other gridwork houses. A few manors tarnished the impeccably constructed gridhouses that made up Tomal like framework. It must have been a massive undertaking to construct this settlement, the walls stood the test of time, it was unknown when or how these structures had been erected.

Pulled back to the moment at hand, the enormous gates came to a brash halt as everyone dismounted and reassured the kroyo. A strong arm at the door signified where any disagreement with the mayor may end up. The man tipped his cap and allowed the convoy through the door into the establishment. The atmosphere inside the building allowed everyone to relax and escape the heat that assaulted the workers outside. But their welcome was short lived as the large metal door swung open to admit the city’s mayor. Tum darted to the corner of the room behind Corelle in response to the mayor’s entrance. His opaque black eyes fixated directly toward Gimza as, yet another man emerged from the doorway. The mayor stood almost as tall as Serge, extremely tall for a Tomal, his massive hands at least 3 stut in diameter; and those fingernails draped to the ground like scythe. Those massive fingernails were what allowed these Tomals to thrive in their work. Particles flew from his mouth as he still continued his conversation with the person at his back, he clearly deemed inferior. By the man’s garb, he was easily identified a peddler. “Look! We don’t need the likes of your kind around here anymore. All of your shit just addles our workers and your gossip won’t shut anyone up for months to come! You can all just piss off!” the mayor’s attention was now directed fully toward the newcomers. “The hell are you doing in this town?” was what came out of the mayor’s whisker infested lips. While it wasn’t common for a traveler to just wander into Tomal, to be completely spurned like this was certainly out of the ordinary. “We don’t take kindly to unwelcomed visitors impeding on our territory.” Those fingernails clanged against one another and scraped the glistening marble floor as the mayor decided what to say next. “You are here in front of me so tell me what you must. I don’t know why your kind still finds it necessary to mosey on here.” Our presence here was clearly a nuisance and Serge could feel the apprehension in each individual. He knew it was only a matter of time until Jeifer spoke. The mayor took a quick glance at the stranger and then refocused himself on the crue.

Before the atmosphere grew more taught Gimza finally presented himself to the mayor, “I am Gimza Kingshart, heir to the throne of Katur, we ride from the capital city, on our last leg.” His voice was unwavering as his lips moved in between the golden hair that fell to his collarbone. His face was carved from ice; if it could be cut that cold. “Two night’s yore, an evil swallowed our city. We came here to warn you of the evil afoot along with the possibility of a few nights respite. Of our whole populace, we may be the only lucky enough to endure the blitzkrieg.”

Mayor Albert Haynesworth of Tomal would not hear another word, he even took the time to light a claro before he reacted. His voice as jarring as those fingernails when the words manifested, “Now I’m just a simple-minded resource orchestrator and I don’t claim to have your hoity toity University education, but you are telling me to believe that you are the heir to the throne of Katur.” The mayor still took his time to make sure that everyone understood his words as he nodded. “In addition to that you want me to believe that some unstoppable force – the likes *unseen* to any -hu-mahn-” the declaration of the human species was like sacrilege as it sounded out of his vocal chords “just cut down all of your people and you’re all that’s left?” He did not give time for an answer as his focus shifted to Tum cowering behind Corelle in the furthest corner of the room. Tum’s hid from the mayor’s eyesight as if is was a breathe of fire. “That?” he signaled clearly towards the panicked youth. “Collateral damage, ***that*** one.” Disgust overcame him with the acknowledgment of the disgruntled Tom. “Leave him –“

Before the mayor of Tomal’s grand proclamation was delivered, the foreigner that lingered in the background finally stood at his full height. The man was taller than Gimza, a rough whitegrey beard coated his face as he smashed the iron slab acrost the mayor’s backskull. The mayor fell to the floor at once, the fingernails breaking wall and statue as he collapsed. “We shant another chance” The interloper professed as the hefty mass collapsed involuntarily to the brilliant agate floor now blemished from the impact of the mayor. The bright artificial light reflected radiantly off the outlandishly dressed fellow’s entirely bald scalp as he hollered toward everyone, “Guy’s a real prick.” His brilliant white teeth shone through his cracked lips as he gave a wide devilish sneer to match his tone of voice. “Be fast about it. He’s down but not out for the count. Backup will come.” All primed, focus now went back to the entrance from which they had come. “I know the way.” This time he did not wait for any to ready themselves, he burst through the entranceway.

“I’m coming!” Tum managed to articulate as he shuffled behind everyone holding onto Corelle’s dress for dear life.

Outside, the same man sat idle on his oversee as commotion could be seen where the kroyo clustered at the mouth of the mayor’s property. Mechanical carriages were now running on peak schedule as the workday entered its pinnacle of amalgamation. It was a bad time to be caught in a mosh. A kroyo lay bloodstained on the ground as the rest of the flock, who had been deemed lunch by some hungry workers skirmished together. Once their presence was recognized Tarnor gave a shrieking battlewark that thrust the surrounding Tomals back and dazed them for just enough time to mount. The peddler eyed one of the pack animals. Before the words came out of his mouth the kroyo helped him atop, their endgame was the same. Putting herself at risk, Corelle aided the tyke as he clobbered on the back of another pack legrunner. “Hold on and don’t let go no matter what!” The words echoed sharp as a tower bell inside Tum’s skull as he held onto the kroyo’s ligatures with all his might. The dark eyes watched her leave as he entrusted his life into this foreign creature he’d just affixed to.

With everyone atop their legrunners, their safety still seemed far from reach and now the bemused scalawags were ready to refocus their attention on their next meal.

Appendix A

Appendix A will be a glossary of terms used in *A Farewell to Kings.*

**Aetatis –** The entire known world.

**Children of Hope –** The knighthood which defends and spreads the word of His Holy Majesty. Even the thought of magicks, musicks, science, and philosophy are sins the carry the punishment of death.

**The Chrono Tales –** A popular account of the history of Aetatis mainly believed to be mostly myth.

**City of Kings –** Established around year 50 of the Standard Era, it’s exact founding date is lost in history. Founded by King Cecil I, the City of Kings was founded on moral pillars such as liberty, equality, education, musicks & magicks, and free enterprise. Quickly the city became a capital of Aetatis and a center of all activity. It has been ruled by fair minded kings ever since with no rebellion to date.

**Glats –** for lack of a better term, lambs

**Kroyos –** A bird-like reptile commonly used for travel by folk who can afford such a luxury. The bond between a kyoro and their trainer is one of intense power and it is said that some can even communicate telepathically. Since kyoros typically outlive their trainer, if a kyoro dies before the trainer, it is rare that the trainer can handle the mental anguish to train another. In some extreme cases, the trainer is said to even go mad, usually fleeing into a life alone in the wilderness until taken by death.

**Measurement** – Foedera is a unit is measurement

**Zek –** An untraveled forest to the North of the City of Kings. Its rumored to be haunted and adventurers who venture up that way are never heard from again. It’s been an untraveled territory for well over 1000 years, and everything North of Zek is completely uncharted.

Versions

V1.7 – Zack and Brian’s edits