|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Blackfhyre | and so, we are Cold Dead and Gone |

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# A FAREWELL TO KINGS

## by

## Blackfhyre

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**Prologue IV**

**chapter 1 – A Farewell to Kings VI**

**chapter 2 – Road to Tomal XX**

**chapter 3 – Stranger in a Strange Land XXXIII**

**chapter 4 – The Trade City of Arburg XLIV**

**chapter 5 - LXXXIII**

Section 3.1 #

Section 3.2 #

Section 3.3 #

*Subsection 3.3.a #*

*Subsection 3.3.b #*

*Subsection 3.3.c #*

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 was 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, Serge’s hunter green hair spilled past his pastel face and matching mustaches to his waist whilehe 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 snowy 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 stubbly face like rain drops tree bark 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 rebellion 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 moon 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 buggar 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 buggared 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 honestly 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 gotten too 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 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 scarlet 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 loosen any peddlers’ tight lips.” The look of emptiness shone through his sapphire 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, perhaps 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 were 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 that tells things----------------------------

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.

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 alike. 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 speck 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; 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 speed 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 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 focused 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 with 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 encampment. ”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 Gimza’s 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 now.” 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 foe 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 an 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 and 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 conurbation 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?”

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“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 not quite as tall as Serge, unordinarily 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 *you* 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 afool. The mayor took a quick glance at the stranger behind him 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 *Umbrae* stirring 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. Although shorter in stature than his guests, they mayor looked down at his adversaries. His voice was 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” The long ebony eye brows that fell past his cheeks and strode his snout were greasy with a partial day’s residue of mire flowed in unison with his shoulder length likewise hair. “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 bobbed. “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 remain?” 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 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 dazzling agate floor now blemished from the impact of the mayor. The bright artificial light reflected radiantly off the outlandishly dressed fellow’s entirely bald onyx 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 upheaval 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.

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. “Stay close this is a maze” was what the peddler bellowed as he nimbly led the kroyo around their would be beneficiaries that slashed and swung wildly trying to catch the slightest bit of pay dirt. An unmounted pack runner that did not have the room to squeeze through was taken down as one of the voracious Tomals caught her outstretched neck with several of his fingernails. The kroyo fell straightaway and was devoured by several ravenous scavengers but there was no time to fret as the commotion only picked up. Not only was business work in full swing, an alarm could now be heard over the discordance as the delinquents failed at blending into the slapdash inundation of ruckus whilst they followed one another relying solely on kroyo navigation. Serge now realized the level of concern if their newfound accomplice was not leading them on a known path of escape. One wrong turn would ensure their permanent residence here. The riders safeguarded and ducked the incoming attacks as now every citizen of Tomal must know of the intruders stirring. The cumbersome number of escapees made this flight not only precarious but also made any momentum gained hard to sustain. Serge knew through Tarnor that there had been no more loses since the scuttle. The knowledge that every legrunner was within the gang was equally second nature to rider and runner pair. The safety of each kroyo’s equestrian was relayed like machinery to the gang. Serge would always be left dumbfounded when presented with the functionality of a kroyo gang. No kroyo have laid claw on this landscape prior but they all follow the peddler’s order as if the route was their own. It was also through this involuntary gang interaction the pair now knew was the length of the marathon that would prove most treacherous as they followed the kroyo ahead of them into a subterranean tunnel.

The hullabaloo continued underground as this heart of the continent worked at full speed above and below the scape of the land. The continuous motion of perplexity may cause a few pursuers to lose purchase, but it did not provide any additional coverage for the caravan as they made their tear out of the rural heart of Aetatis. Everyone took in what they could of the underground activity as the runaways gained a momentary advantage. Refinery, batching and Dio knows what else carried on with the same efficiency as overground in this unseen hive of rumpus. It was a shame few really knew the true brilliance developing here in Tomal. It was not long before their stalkers re-established chase and now the underground populace was aware of their insurgence. Surely their exit could not be lengthy still for at some point exhaustion would set in. Yet to his displeasure, the hunt endured. There was no discerning how long their breakout had amassed, but it seemed moons. Still, to his satisfaction the kroyo showed no marks of fatiguing.

Before worry crept in, Tarnor took notice at the decrease in replete. They must be reaching the city limits. Ever steadfast, their hunters hung to the cavalcade. As the residencies became more intermittent, the channel became more straightaway and Serge could feel the speed in his legrunner rise. Their would-be accosters now vanishing in the distance, light which signified land’s boundary could now be seen ahead. Relief set in with the recognition of sunlight as one by one, each kroyo leapt from the pocket in the earth again touching stable ground. The cobalt sun was still on the sky as hours still remained before dusk. The peddler led the procession to a thicket rooted on the coast of the Therva. The band let out their collective breathe as the kroyo came to a halt.

The peddler inspected several trees and shrubs before coming to a placated break in front of a scrub that appeared no different than the others. With a few swift gestures and adjustments of the plant he gave his attention, a schooner emerged and skidded gracefully into the Therva. On the rear starboard, the tag *Nequaquam.* An interesting call to go along with the incomer’s aura. The man hustled to and reappeared with several sacs.

"Not the hospitality you were expecting? They weren't always like that." the man said as he let down the packs. "No something recent jittered their craws." The foreigner eyed Tum with caution. "That isn't the same mayor that conducted Tomal's business a year past." It was a statement, not a question but still, Tum recoiled behind Corelle afraid to speak. However, the newcomer now revealed a friendly smile towards the tot which promptly changed his scared demeanor. “Sorry lad, I never properly introduced myself. Name’s Wilther, but most know me as Dusk.” A glimmer gleamed in his eye that now captivated Tum, the peddler had a way with people.

The aroma of the dinner now being prepared by Dusk, more bountiful than any thought they’d be dining tonight brought out Tum’s famished appetite through his eyes. He then began supplying all the alterations over the past years that had slowly changed Tomal into the tyranny they had seen today. Everyone listened to his story of how the once cheerful institutional society of agricultural and livestock production had turned. At first very relaxed and then as though overnight there was a new mayor, new set of laws, and an entire new hierarchy. It was quite remarkable the amount of understanding this not-fully developed mind could comprehend and relay to another species. While Tum was indeed likely brighter than a common fully matured Tomal, he could only see the changes happening and not the undercurrents which caused these modifications. Still, this was a trove of information which would surely prove useful at some point.

Corelle and Dusk served the finished repast, and everyone set their minds to Arburg and how tomorrow should be approached. A well-deserved long night’s rest came to fruition thanks to the distinguished peddler.

**Chapter 4 – The Trade City of Arburg**

As day broke, Serge sat atop Tarnor beside Gimza upon Easar gazing over the river Therva at the Trade City of Arburg. The pair of riders had been there twice before, on assignment together and they recalled their pleasant firsthand experience inside the city limits. Undoubtedly, one has to be on the lookout for swindlers but their accurate keep on directives ensured easy visits into and out of Arburg. Traffic was heavy as obscurity became dawn on the waterway. Easar’s resplendent blue scales shimmered off of both the river’s glistening coral reflection and the sun’s already tropic rays as the imposing legrunner first noticed the peddler emerging from his vessel. All four had an eye for any stir in their surroundings, but Easar won this begird.

“Howdy” Dusk called in the act of closing the cabin door. Everyone else would be rising shortly as they had all agreed to an early departure. The merchant frequented the trade city and had no shortage of connections inside the confines. Consideration last evening led to a simple plan. The group would split up not to draw attention. At eventide, they would all meet at the inn Dusk specified, where a few night’s stay could be easily arranged. The owner and he had been used to travel together and had shared more than several obloquies over their time.

Serge, Gimza, Aezi, and Zid would make up one party; Jeifer, Ylle, and Qeles the second. Corelle and Tum would comprise the third bevy, accompanied by the remaining pack kroyos. Even unbonded kroyo were strikingly amiable when raised with humans, and it was almost standard that if one could afford kroyo, the benefits to life became well-nigh quintessential. Thereupon, to everyone’s relief it would cause no additional scrutiny to keep their kroyo in tow. At nightfall, the company’s entirety would make their way to Dusk’s acquired lodgment at the *Second Stone* where Corelle and Tum would be settled in with outbuilding for the kroyo. The goal for everyone was to gain any information, even rumor in regard to the falling star, diablous, the Umbrae, or even any timeworn prophecy hearsay the streets may carry. Arousing aught conjecture would be of utmost eminence in gathering any tidings regardless the promise. Arburg was not as extensive as the City of Kings in measure of dimension, but the populace of dwellers and wayfarers inhabiting the Trade City could perchance triple that of Katur. Not only would shearing into troika keep down misgivings, additionally more of vast conurbation could be probed. By the time the three had promptly outlined their intentions, the others could be seen riding over after breaking down camp. Either the three had exhausted exorbitant time canvassing agenda, or the rest dismantled cantonment awfully swift. Serge didn’t have to check the letch of the sun to know it was the subsequent.

“Don’t leave without us!” Ylle quipped as the minuscule bedims became pairs of riders and legrunners. “It’s only a jest.” Laughter could be heard after her remarks; despite the deterrent foretime, everyone else demonstrated sincere optimism and gaiety. This ensemble displayed hope and would not be easily driven adrift. Serge felt a bit at ease and could discern an agnate feeling in Gimza’s disposition through Tarnor. It was always a tremendous boon to have confidence, but it never guaranteed success. Nonetheless, the two pair were elated to see an optimism in the others. The inspiration was absolutely contagious.

Dusk didn’t need a kroyo so recognize the peace of mind felt altogether. The merchant appreciated abetting company, and sensed the favorable inclination spread throughout. He too announced sprightliness. The catamaran was splendid, albeit hampered for more than five, so two crossings would be necessary to usher all to the oppugnant shore where they could then divide their numbers and head into Arburg discretely. Kroyo were infamously known for their abhorrence of boats, also renowned for the astonishing marine affluence the gang would cross the Therva unaided. The Trade City was easily visible from the west bank of the river, for this metropolis was sprawling. Everyone gathered at the bed of the river, and after a light parting half of the company ensued Dusk and *Nequaquam* withdrew eastward. The kroyo trailed into the Therva not a keli infra, the gang would easily arrive prior to the ferry even if the craft was spry. Gimza, Serge, Zid, and Corelle accompanied Tum waiting ashore for the peddler to return. The stripling seemed more excited than nervous for his first maritime commute.

They all knew the day’s itinerary, but it was never a bad idea to revisit the outline before onset. Jeifer, Ylle, Qeles, and Aezi carried the surviving luggage alee, which would be fastened to the pack kroyo. Once equipped, Qeles, Ylle, and Jeif will ride to the southeast gate and scout out eastern Arburg. Aezi was to tend the kroyo while the rest transired the ravine. Once everyone was docked on the eastern beach, Serge, Gimza, Zid, and Aezi shall ride into the southwest gate for a day catechizing west of the city. While Dusk skirred to the seahaven erected on the northeastern terminus of the expansion, Corelle’d precede the tote kroyo on land with Tum to meet up with Dusk at the harbor. Finally, a rendezvous at the inn after sunset would reunite the compeer.

Just as the course was finalized once again, the gondola coalesced and the five hopped aboard. It was not a long ride across the Therva, still Tum embraced every instant. Who would’ve thought that a Tomal could thrive as a cadet, there was still pleasant marvels to be realized, and that was something that you could please to keep your sights on. There wasn’t enough time for anyone else to fully enough appreciate the ferry across inasmuch as in jig time, they were all disembarking unto the eastern shore, where they were welcomed by Aezi and the kroyo.

Serge and Corelle gave their loving sendoffs and then the ensemble dissolved, dispersing toward their distinct destinations. The remaining coterie drove towards Arburg, ripe for the day’s business as the sun rose upon the sky. As the quartet approached the thoroughfare, there was gridlock up to the city’s portcullis. Neither posse should have an issue maintaining reticence, any sort of impediment could be cataclysmic in this foreign commonwealth. Serge knew firsthand the impasses earned when at variance with legislation, and that was back in Katur where his closest friend was prince and heir to the throne. He put any thoughts of mishap and quandary out of his mind and the ensemble joined the bottleneck.

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Corelle waited anxiously atop Aviendha scanning all of the piers for the little schooner and the ebullient peddler but there were even too many to count. They stuck out of the waterfront like the spines of a lionfish, long skinny sometimes bent fingers thrusting into the watercourse. People filled the boatyard to capacity milling in every which direction, this haven was a city on its own. If you took the time to look closer, it could be seen that there was an austere structure to the pandemonium. She was very mindful to keep one eye on Tum and the kroyo while she eyed every passerby with scrutiny. There were even more people than wharfs and so many around her in this unfamiliar environment had her on edge. To her reprieve, the tot seemed to be enjoying this venture, giving her one less worry. She pulled the cloak back further over his head so that no unwanted attention would be drawn to the exotic biped, Dio knows what kind of undesirables would cheat to make a gald off a rare specimen. With all this commotion, she questioned her odds of locating one person here at the port.

But before worry set in, Tum’s excited voice showed her the trader’s prominent cranium heading their way which allowed relief to pour into her mood. It shined like a beacon, slicked over in exudate magnifying its luminosity. Dusk had spotted them first; he would know his way around this harbor as well as anyone. Corelle could watch out for herself, but the dealer’s presence put her at ease. A lone woman could always be thought of as an easy target for a cutpurse. As he approached, he now donned a midnight blue cap with a short brim that shielded his face from the sun’s assault. Out exposed in the direct sunlight, the true asphyxiation of the torrid could be appreciated. Not even here at the apex of the seaport would a passing draft materialize. The mercantile smiled when in earshot, “My lady” he said as he mounted the kroyo. He produced a trinket from his cloak for the tyke which got him a gracious reaction as Tum accepted the toy. “The *Second Stone* isn’t but an hour’s scamper northeast, best inn around.”

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Jeifer, guided by Koda, led Ylle and Qeles southeast through the lightly spread coppice nearby Arburg. There were countless tiny trails and byways in the Arburg expanse, it was not a big landscape, but it was easy to waste time navigating these labyrinths. Keeping the district’s city-wall on the left-hand would guarantee a short junket to the Great Guild Gate, or G3 located in the heart of the slums right outside the Guild district. They were not segregated boroughs by design, but over the years they were developed whether deliberately or by default, he supposed it was a little bit of the latter and much of the preceding. More familiar than the others on Arburg, he’d trekked to the Trade City on numerous occasions, for both study and pleasure. It was a marvelous state, filled with all sorts of debauchery and hooligans. He had a few beloved pubs, but his absolute favorite was 7th Heaven located in the *Kislev* county, right in the heart of the favelas. Full of transients and tenement housing. “Dude-spooner!” he heard Ylle bark from over shoulder. “Have you wool in your ears? How long I said?”

“Calm yourself, streetwalker. We’re turning the south corner now; it’ll only be another three-quarter hour.” Jeifer jeered back “Enough time to philander on ‘ere.” He gave a deviant smile and Koda gave a playful bite at Median’s neck. Meidan returned with a not so playful snap at Koda’s shoulder, catching Jeif’s cloak on the way, her ruby iris cutting glass through the pair. To say Meidan was prig was not fully disclosing, her retorts to Koda’s coquettes usually drew blood, and this one was no different.

“Ha!” Qeles chortled at the exchange. “Don’t try that stercore in Kislev you will get knifed or schtuped.” She cachinnated.

The rest of the trot to G3 was filled with friendly banter which was a welcome relief after the day’s past. As the thoroughfare came into sight, a procession of incomers waited as sentinels inspected the flow of traffic. Consent was not required to gain entrance through the gate, but suspected transients and anyone appearing queer the wardens could deny admission or even detain an unlucky commuter. Without stay, the trio was passing through the gate, none given a second glance. The magnificent archway opened into a splendid square and unfolded into an expanse of streets and buildings of all layout and stature; from thatched to singled roofs and an unending variation of height and size. Straightaway lay the commercial district, or *Termina*; and to the north of the portico sat *Kislev.* Even the most brazen would not tread unaccompanied through the slums.

7th Heaven was positioned right in the heart of the Kislev slums, constructed on Main Street, the artery that separated East and West Kislev. There were many possess that infested the purlieus, and although they all travailed one another, all belonged to either the East or West faction. The militia did not patrol Kislev but gangs and strongarms kept a certain order to those who complied compensation. Establishments which employed enough manpower was able to designate its own militia. 7th Heaven wasn’t among the biggest inns, but it held a substantial battalion which allowed it to maintain residency on the main boulevard. It was not long to the lounge, but through one of the preeminent underhanded quarters in all of Aetatis.

“Keep near me”, Jeifer’s tone was all business now as they left the asylum of G3. “Kislev is no hijinks, even we three together must keep an eye.” They took a broad boulevard north away from the entryway. It wasn’t long before the well-maintained buildings became unkempt constructions until abruptly the decrepit brick road that crumbled under the kroyo was lined with dilapidated erections. Multi-level apartments stuffed well past occupancy, shops, and inns with signs long faded many past recognition. The mass of them with broken or no shutters and makeshift doors to keep out the elements. The roads were now dirt and rock as the like of stonework had not been seen in ages since Kislev held any sort of wealth or political standing if it ever did. Destitute pocked each roadway, eyeing the riders with envy as they neared the inn. Lucky for the threesome, kroyo were a rarity and if one rode one through these slums, they were considered not worth the effort. Koda’s nostrils flared with disgust as the familiar stench even disturbing to Jeifer himself swept over the trio. He turned and hooted at the girls’ reactions as he knew that the stink was pedestrian to Kislev.

Just as the sun was past its apex, they made another winding turn and Jeifer informed everyone that the inn was just further down Main Street. “There it is!” Ylle exclaimed as she pointed out the unordinarily well-kept sign. An overly large *7* sat in front of the word *Heaven* with the ‘H’ emphasized with a *TH* in much smaller print above the ‘H’ in Heaven. The sign was in easily much better condition than the building itself, but loud chatter could be heard from within, signifying a crowded common room, even at the hour of midday. “Sounds fun.”

“Just let’s not have too much fun.” Qeles warned, knowing all too well what kind of ‘fun’ Jeif and Ylle had in mind. She knew how enjoy herself, but Jeifer’s nature labeled her as a niggler.

“This is my backyard.” Reminded Jeifer as they secured the kroyo inside the stables of *7th Heaven*. It was not common for a tavern to have full stable accommodations here in Arburg at all, but here in the slums it was an oddity. Once they were inside, he swiveled his head to inspect the common room, then the innkeeper behind the bar. “Praise Dio, it’s the same!” What a relief after seeing all of the change everywhere else they’d traveled on the way here. The inkeep, Bolgan was slow by nature, but after many years in a traveling circus, he learned to fend for himself and even gained some smarts on the way. The round proprietor noticed Jeifer without delay and motioned him over before Qeles was even through the door. Slow he may be by wit, Bolgan lacked nothing in quintessence was even quick in acumen.

“Jeifer! Jeifer! Come! Pull up a seat you must!” Bolgan was just as excited as he was every time their paths crossed. “Who are these beauties? How much were they?”

“Shhh Bolgan! Now’s no time for that ste- “He cut off his whisper as the two women came into sense. “Bolgan! My two dear inamorata, Ylle and Qeles.” He corrected himself to the inkeep. His exult was terse as both women were more lingual than he and two separate blows landed on his neck and groin. “Yes, my two sisters. You know Ylle of course.”

“Ylle! We’re friends Ylle.” Bolgan rejoiced. ”Qeles new friend!” The bartender declared. Bolgan then produced glassed and some *eroasch*. It was strong, but nothing more than the friends had binged on. They put a few back and another joined them at the bar and before long all of the local rumors and gossip had been conferred.

One bruit sparked interest from Qeles about a barbarian that has been banished from several taverns over the past few days for heresy and violence. Although scuffles were permitted and even endorsed, Arburg was still mainly religious and any unsettling talk of unease not to mention cataclysm resulted in unrest. In an incredible turn of misfortune, the barbarian had not patronized 7th Heaven in his spree. Nevertheless, he had left a glaring path through Eastern Kislev which could be easily tracked. With a defined course of action, the threesome parted ways with Bolgan and Hix and promised that if they needed lodging, they would return to 7th Heaven.

Once outside of the tavern, it was a surprise that it was already after nightfall. Jeif missed a step on the patio as he realized that they had been drinking for a number of hours with Bolgan. The booze always hit harder when you stood up, walked a few, and went outside. The searing temperature had not chilled a fleck with the onset of night. Gossip had the ternion riding to *The Rusty Pint* located at the eastern corner of the quarter. On kroyo it was an easy and short ride through the squalor leading to the Pint. The three were harassed on several occasions, but the kroyo quelled the kibitzers with ease while they cantered toward their endpoint. Although it was a short distance, the commute was beguiled by miscreants, hampering advance. By the time they approached their destination, night had well fallen, and disorder could be heard from outside. Jeifer turned back at the two women for the obvious decision to go inside.

Inside was not what they expected, there was no barbarian or even an unordinarily large agitator. Jeifer turned around and sighed at his two friends. The common room’s commotion well drowned out the music as melee could be observed at several areas of the saloon. “I have a good feeling about this place.” Jeifer declared as he grinned at the tussles and led the women over to the barkeep. He was a short, plump balding man or his middle ages. His image aged well past his years from dealing with the claptrap that comes with trying to keep order in the slums of Arburg, but his hair still displayed some of its brown shade of youth. Jeif knew the man behind the bar from past travels. “Lemai, you son of a fish, how are you?” he said in a tone that came off a little bit too friendly.

The innkeep’s sullen eyes darted toward the sound of his voice. “And what in the twelve layers of the underworld are you doing showing your face here after last time?” The man’s voice cut through the air with acidity at the trio. “I’ve my own whores, don’t try to bring be anything to fix your shortcomings. You’d better be out of here in half the time if took you to prance your sapphic ass through here.”

“Now wait a stut here, last time wasn-“

“You’ll shut the mung up and get the glek out of here. Now!” Lemai’s voice was ice as he eyed his sorry excuse for a militia.

“Let’s go, the barbarian isn’t even here.” Ordered Qeles and Jeifer did not disagree.

The trio turned about face to leave, but there was time to get the last word, “Not even a drink for the road? No need to be *improbus*.” Jeif turned and glared at several patrons at a table that had been burning a hole in his back with their eyes.

Before he could get out another quip, “I’ll give you a full bottle if it gets you *schlets* out of my sight.” the steward retorted, producing something from behind the bar. Sensing this, Jeifer was turned about once again, facing the angry keeper. His beady eyes saw the bottle forthwith, discerning it from danger and let the sweaty twit slam the bottle of *oasqoui* on the smoke-stained, dingy bar top raising a small cloud of dust and slag. No sooner did the bottle make contact with the unkempt surface, Jeifer’s spry hand unpleasantly snatched the prize from the owner’s grasp. In one swift motion, he <better word for he> popped the cork and tipped the bottle back with all the sloppish finesse he possessed, making sure to spill dribble down his stubbly chin; and swigged easy more than half of the contents before handing it off to Ylle on his right. He opened his mouth to give thanks, but what came out as he began to speak was a loud, wall-shaking belch that ejected spittle and particles from earlier meals. If that was not enough impudence, he opened up once more, this time to disgorge wildly onto the man behind the counter. In a brilliant corkscrew he pivoted around counterclockwise, spewing still more excrement at the miscreants glaring him down from behind.

This now got a reaction from the table-sitters, as they now rose, all four wielding daggers or stilettos. To his left, Qeles now wielded the empty bottle in her offhand, paired with her short sword in her right and Ylle her quarterstaff and dagger. Jeif knew he could take all four with ease, as could the pair of girls alone. Just as that thought was finished, a massive *clunk* seized his skull as Lemai whacked his head with another full bottle of spirits. Jeifer’s short hair provided no help against the incursion. Stars took his sight as the four now began to surround him, ignoring the two women. He shook off the blow, and geared up for the oncomers, but still ignored the source of the blow, and was struck in the shoulder this time, as the chunky attacker missed his mark. Despite the being off target, the impact still crippled Jeifer, knocking him to the ground as the four came closer, but Qeles and Ylle leapt between the adversaries. Also impaired by the sqoui, by the time he stood up, the four thugs were debilitated, shards from the table from whence they arose littered the immediate vicinity. Witnessing the onslaught, the bartender had taken distance, and was safely out of reach. The two ladies aided Jeif to his feet, and he looked for the inkeep whom as about to get a thrashing. “Not now you lackwit, I swear to Dio above we will leave you here.” Ylle scolded the tippler before he could scuttle over the tabletop.

“Aye” Jeifer agreed reluctantly as he looked one last time at the hussy cowering in the corner, sighing to himself distraught like missing out a love that would never be. He grabbed the empty bottle from Qeles and heaved it toward the pathetic excise for a man, hitting pay dirt for a little bit of satisfaction on this failed stopover.

They all harried to the exit past aghast patrons that started openly in disbelief. None made any effort to halt them as they left the establishment, but they still kept all of their focus on those sots as they spilled into the street. Jeif at the onset, they all three slammed smack dabs into a large, immovable stature; Ylle, and then Qeles behind her.

The titan towered over even Jeifer and the three stepped back in reverence. “By the stars in me arse!” the behemoth yawped as he turned and focused downward on the intruding threesome. His slick brown hair that came well past his shoulders whipped around as he turned, exposing an exquisite symphony of mustaches. A top set of hairsbreadths came to a point that was formed in a natural upwards hook with a second set of whiskers fixed in a fine semblance of braids down into his beards. His chestnut hair was also interweaving through his matching villus into his muttons all the way to his chin beards in a pleach of braids and twists. The brilliant display of facial hair that sored entirely over Jeifer’s head outright was a dazzling mixture of weave work to form a complex jungle on the backdrop of beardhair. A calm serenity sat behind the blaze of fury on the surface of the giant’s eyes. His outlandish garb and bits of covering coupled with his size made him a beacon here in Kislev and labeled him a stranger, it was precisely those that had even the most brazen bandits thinking more than once. His skin’s tan showed much time spent in the sun. “I’ve no time for larks.” He stated as simple fact. These eyes now glared down at Jeifer as the hulk clearly winded up to deliver a blow. It was a slow delivery, but the three were caught in awe.

Jeif was able to get into the defensive stance but the collision was inevitable. A full freem from the frontdoor of the Pint, Jeifer was sent smashing right through the aforementioned door, shattering the heavy wood. The wreckage slowed his flight, but he still touched well over down over a nitch into the common room, well to the dismay of good ole Lemai. “What in the fresh hells-” he was cut off as the brute broke through what was remaining of the frontdoor with the two women en tow. Jeif scrabbled up in front of the invader.

“I won’t hit girls.” The mighty barbarian bellowed and tossed the dazed Jeifer through a few sets of tables, plowing through several bargoers. Some of those whom took collateral damage now set their sights on the Katurian.

He had no time for these brawlers, he got to his feet, “I love me a foight, but bloody hell.” Jeif complained, clearly outmatched.

The bully charged toward the helpless defender but did not make it all the way there as he fell flat on his face to reveal a smiling Ylle standing over the tumbled foe. “-in the helstars.” The outlander mumbled as he got up to now face the two women. Maybe he would hit a girl. But before he was fully upright again, Jeifer slammed down the butt of his dagger directly on the aggressor’s trapezius. The blow would debilitate any formidable warrior, but it only merely drew the attention back over to Jeif, but this time with an unexpected grin. “I think I might like the three of you.” The towering brute announced.

Unsure what to make of the declaration, Jeif got into an aggressive stance but the now amicable giant just laughed which prompted Jeif to relax his posture. “I think I like you too.” He replied back in a most playful tone which got a laugh from Ylle and a disapproving look from Qeles. The new friend walked over and confirmed the amenability with a sweaty hug, compressing Jeifer’s now eviscerated face into the very hairy, exposed chest. He’d never been manhandled like that by any one man before and he did not know how to feel.

Upon release the superman now gleamed at Jeifer, baring his extremely crooked but inexplicably white teeth. But the joy was short lived, and shouts were now heard at the door accompanied with the clangor that obviously meant city guard. They were another rarity in the Kislev slums, but still did make appearances when the outcry was enough. Which meant they had caused one hell of a disturbance. “Right here these inbred scoundrels!” Lemai could be heard jabbering from behind.

There was no time for that insignificant flea, more city guard were pouring in by the second. “On us!” Jeifer commanded as he and the newcomer readied to charge the guards. “Making it out of here is our main focus, not pummeling them all.” He stated the obvious goal before the charge. But he could not keep up with the giant hulking’s long strides and fell in behind him. The barbarian led the party directly toward the exit and was immediately surrounded, allowing Jeifer to easily pick the guards behind him. The entranceway over the front porch now suddenly collapsed burying several of the intruding guardsmen as well as widening their passageway for exit. The brute swung his massive hammer in a full circle, throwing back a mass of the sentries and opening the way for their escape.

All four easily made it through the clearance onto the verandah but were stopped in their tracks at what lay in front of them. At least two score of city guard accompanied by no less than fifty assorted militiamen.

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Serge swore at the picotee sun as it sat atop the sky as it continued its offensive on the quartet as well as the rest of Arburg. The trade capital would provide no relief from the furnace overhead. “Can’t you do something about this miserable fervor?” he shot a glance backwards.

“Who? Me?” asked Aezi, pleasantly shaded under his immense brimmed headdress, but clearly not impervious to the heat as sweat glistened his bronzed skin. His mind had clearly just come back from somewhere else.

“No, the other wizard here. What are you doing?” Serge japed.

“What? Nothing.” The wizard said absentmindedly, “No, I can’t change the weather. Don’t you know that casting magic in public in this city is frowned upon. We don’t want to draw any unwelcome notice our way.”

The diviner would have continued for span if Serge did not interrupt him, “Can’t you tell a jest? Glek it’s just bloody hout. Let’s be on our way I don’t know what in the stars ashes we are looking for so you and Zid can fill us in on the way.”

They left the expanse of the Water Gate and took in the borough’s wonderous view. The din of city life could be heard faintly from the outlet of the municipal entrance. As they toppled the summit of the district and entered the heart of Arburg, the harmonic cacophony of business in the full swing of midday now filled their hearing from all directions. A survey into center city revealed shops of all variety, from tailors to bakers, blacksmiths to butchers, surgeons to grocers, booksellers to brothels, and crafters such as fletchers, bowyers, potters, and metallers. Hangouts including taverns, inns, eateries, saloons, smokehouses, and theaters lined streets that were veins of the commercial district which was also littered with hawkers, buskers, jugglers, painters, and musicians. Not quite as extravagant as the Festival of Kings, it was still a wonder to see the streets with this bustle on an everyday.

The first inn they came across was *The Tired Traveler*, its canopy displaying a large ‘T’, “THE” written vertically to its left, and “IRED” above “RAVELER” to the right, all neatly tucked under the canopy made by the large ‘T’ itself. The top of the T’s canopy formed a bed in which rested a so called ‘tired traveler’. Inside the bar was quiet, a handful of patrons scattered in pairs and singles about several of the tables. All keeping to themselves, these goers did not appear the talkative type, so the 4 headed straight over to the barkeep. He was a tall lanky fellow with a short nose and dark sunken eyes. The man’s white cloud of hair showed he had likely owned the traveler for some time. “Good day sirs, what’ll it be?” His voice was kind, but with a hint of nails on glass, not someone that you could stand to take an hour lecture from no doubt.

It was agreed that Zid and Aezi would handle most of the talking, unless it could not be helped or if a subject was broached that Gimza or myself had expertise. “Four beggars brews, much obliged.” Zid ordered.

“Excellent.” The inkeep delighted, “Freshly brewed onsite every day and today’s is a favorite blend of mine. I make it myself.” He was clearly very proud of his work. Also, talkative which bode well for the foursome.

“Most exemplary, nothing beats an inhouse brew.” Zid responded, plainly intrigued by the innkeep’s enthusiasm for his drink. “A tender who serves with passion is a rare commodity these days.” He complimented.

The lanky man now showed his yellowish teeth with a wide grin as he poured the drinks, five glasses indicated one for himself and the five of them made small talk about the different kinds of local brews and which saloons were owned by the best brewers. It was jolly conversation until Zid changed the subject to the green falling star and recent abnormalities. The keep’s face went from his pale complexion immediately to a personified strawberry. “Well this weather as of late is good for business but it’s anguish on the body, yeah? Other than that, I prefer to stick my nose elsewhere.” His jubilant voice now visibly shaky. “They say talking about that kind of stuff will bring a bad omen. I’m a faithful man, yeah? Some can’t help themselves though, you know?” The man poured them all another glass after emptying his own. “This one is on the house. Just keep tight-lipped about what you hear ok?” A satisfied nod from them all gave him the confidence to run off a number of inns that may be more helpful than he was. “They can at least lead you in the right direction if not better. I’m a good judge of character, no? I trust you are on the up.” The host hefted his cup in the direction of the crew, and they clanged for good fortune and they all emptied their brews in unison. The barman then wiped the sweat that now inundated his entire face which gained some of its original color back but was still flush. “Don’t say ole Jarid never did ya a favor.” He winked as they left, wearing a mask again of all smiles.

Jarid had given an excellent of all of the establishments he deemed worthy of product, as well as those that may be leads for any unsavory information. Aezi’s memory was impeccable so he led the way through the winding boulevards, and it was not long before they were upon their first destination, just as the friendly keeper had described. The *Symphony of the Night* lay on the eastern fringe of Termina right on the border of the residential district. The name of the institution was written in very tidy cursive inlaid over a violin and bow and to the left of an extravagant harp. Barroom chatter could be heard out on the street as they secured their kroyo at the stablepole and tipped the groom coin to ensure a bountiful midday meal. Keeping your legrunners happy and well-nourished was essential to both keeping a good bond and a well-behaved animal.

The *Symphony* lived up to Jarid’s oasqoui recommendation and gave several interesting, if not off topic rumors. The *Children of Hope* have been said to been plundering farmland in the name of blasphemy again the Light. Blaming the swings in weather and wildlife with the other abnormalities occurring on “non-believers” and heretics. No one openly spoke out against the *Children* in public, for even though their home was all the way at the Holy Capitol of Eastminster all major cities had squadrons stationed within under the guise of providing protection for the weak, but was mainly for recruiting and keeping a thumb on local governments. If you asked Serge, they were a tyrannous organization that needed to keep to themselves inside their walls. He wanted to spit at the thought of these fanatics taking advantage of farmers and their families. That was not it regarding the *Children* though, their most recent King Cardinal, Andyl Almandar IV had been found dead under suspicion of poison, giving some credence to the rumors that an unseen hand controlled the Holy Capitol from behind a curtain. Serge and the others could not really care less who controlled Eastminster from the dark, but he thought it a good idea to keep a handle on their objectives. Katur fell to a legion of the Children of Hope during a city-wide festival celebrating the shadow and dark arts, taken unawares in their merriments. The gossiper could not keep a straight face while telling the last bit for it was sheer rubbish yet “A rumor’s a rumor no matter how looney.”

The busybody continued, eager to share his valuable information in return for keeping his tongue wet. Apparently, the stifling hot climate was not the only irregularity with the weather. All throughout Aetatis, weather was amiss, from the northeastern *Peninsula of Irenvelle* up to the *Sea of Storms* off the northeastern coast down through the *Desert of Arrakis* past the *Bay of Pigs* and all the way west to the *Gallipoli Mountains*. This news was very disconcerting, but not surprising in the least. They had covered quite a bit of terrain since they left Katur, plagued by savagely blazing temperatures all the way.

Livestock have been disappearing and the wildlife population had dropped to scarcity. In addition, sightings of rabid beasts have been alleged throughout wooded areas and in the waters of the river. The Therva fish populace has pretty much dried up and now imported fish, harvested from the ocean’s deep must be relied upon solely in compliment to over ninety percent of Arburg’s food source being from Tomal. Rural farmhouses have been quickly disappearing due to raids and these blood eyed beasts, forcing the remaining farmers to pack everything and move inside the general protection of Arburg’s walls. Those that could afford to that is, the rest had to fend for their own hides, mostly now refugees living on the streets of Kislev. Thinking on it, while the avenues of Termina were packed with pedestrians and people trying to make a living, it was unexpectedly clean of destitute. “I ‘ear much of the other states face the same issue, Tomal has no issues keeping up with demands, however its driven prices to an outcry.” The tabby complained as he seemed to be fresh out of rumors at this point.

Though a good bit of substance, much of it was either kind of useless, or already known. Still, Aezi offered the taleteller a drink as we all rose from the table, and head to the next tavern. The passing of the luminous blue ball above showed about an hour passing, and 3 more beggars brews made the windy roads a little more meandering. Despite the brews taking affect, Serge still made a point to note the lack of streetmen. It was a joyous ride to *The Salty Sailor* which was located right on the edge of the harbor with a view of the river that was no doubt reason for the salty smell, and the name of the inn. A large, oversized ‘S’ sat in front of a slinked rendition of “The”, following the ‘S’, at the top half was “alty” depicted in grains of salt atop the letters “ailor” completing *The Salty Sailor* on the awning above the main entrance.

Inside was expectedly full of sailors and seamen and women of all sort, packed from wall to wall. The superb condition of the building told that the Sailor brought in good business. Despite its reputation for one of the top drinkeries in Arburg, the beggar’s brew did not match up to their first two stops. Serge wagered that all of the haste this busyness caused may lead to sloppy production; not that it was distasteful, but coming from the Traveler and the Symphony, this brew left something to be desired. Despite many times the number the customers, not much in addition to what was given at the Sailor could be learned here. A few variations or the same rumors gate to a greater variety, but after interviewing several sailors eager to talk gossip only really one totally different tale was told.

A werewulfen, over three nitch tall had been terrorizing the Kislev slums, bloodcrazed by the full moons and under the magicks of the Children. It was murdering and eating men by night and blending into the populace by day. Another said it was a savage brute form the Sea of Storms, on his way to the *Badlands* leaving a trail of destruction and bloodshed from Luin through Eastminster into Arburg. Serge thought they were all nutty, wulfenmen and barbarians, poppycock! He glanced at Gimza to see he felt the same way. It was getting to suppertime and the sailors were getting drunk, their tales getting taller as time passed. It was time to leave, nothing else useful was to be learned here. But when they looked at Aezi and Zid, a look of intrigue was on their face. No matter how much the level of inebriation, you’ll not get me to believe such a cock-and-bull story! Blood and ashes!

Outside, the sun had begun to set but the heat remained. “Another dawn with early dusk.” Serge complained to his mates. The next several stops on the way to *The Second Stone* were much the same, exaggerated repeats of what was told prior. These bloody wulfen were going to give Serge an aneurysm. Although he had to admit, as more drink was consumed, the accounts became at least interesting. As day became night, it was almost as if the temperature rose. It made no sense, but Tarnor confirmed the aberration. A kroyo’s sense of temperature was second to none and the odd weathers had the young legrunner on edge as they rode through Termina. It was a sprawling intricacy of buildings as far as the eye could see when they reached one of the last names on the list.

*The Wavering Flag* was the biggest of the roadhouses out of all they had patronsed and was roaring with energy as the music could be heard from the stablepole. The entrance door opened, emitting a tantalizing toon that saturated Serge’s ears. Well, there was some time to enjoy the culture of Arburg while lead hunting. He was convinced they would hear no more worthwhile information and all four of them were in the mood for some good tomfoolery which could be observed taking place right now through the windows. This time Tarnor warned Serge to be on guard, the kroyo did not like the scent in the air. He acknowledged his companion’s concern as they all finished lashing their belongings to the legrunners.

However, any unpleasantries in the air were left outside. Once inside, the **scene** was jubilant and energetic; the drinkery was well over capacity with tosspots and ruffians. All of the pub’s tables and chairs had been arranged as a boundary forming a large area roughly five freem square with a stage at the far end. Viewers stood on these tables and chairs, packed in elbow to elbow, some with arms around each other, some with their hands gesticulating about in synchronization with the rhythms. The rostrum was slightly elevated so that a half rodg musicians could be seen working various musical instruments.

“Aye!” A round balding man said over the partying as he placed a hand firmly on Serge’s shoulder, causing Serge to rubberneck. “Admission’s ten stut a body.” The hefty man continued. It looked like he was going to say something else, but before he could continue more, Gimza produced four gald from his purse.

“Be sure the performers see at least two of those.” Gimza was sure to be heard by the doorman.

The melodies were so intoxicating that it was near impossible to stop at the bar for a sample of this parlor’s mélange. They all managed, and though ‘twas gluttony, each carried away a beggar’s in both hands after Gimza dropped another gald onto the bartop paying surely for triple charge. It was *never* a bad idea to pay a little extra to the barkeeps, especially in a foreign land. The harmonies pulled all of them through the barrier of goers atop tables closer to the source of the nirvana. Once Serge was through, he could finally see the sextet. The stage was lit strategically with torches and lanterns to provide shadows and flickers which added mystery and emphasized the assonance. Inside the wall of bodies, there was a narrow gap before the other vigorous horde of masses started. Wenches rushed through the channel and hoisted large carriers hawking fresh potables to folk with empty hands. All but Aezi rushed to finish the remaining drink in their occupied hand as he still had cups in both. “You guys know I can’t keep up drinking with you.” He reminded them.

They all four laughed together when Serge and Zid grabbed the swills inhabiting Aezi’s hands and put back those as well. “Now you can get’chrself a freshy.” Zid slurred as he showed a wide smile to the mage, who was not wearing his headpiece.

It was not a feltch before a steward noticed their empty hands and was on Gimza at once. He gave her a nice leer; her alacrity was much appreciated. He produced another gald and that with his charming leer got him the privilege of placing the gald in her bodice. She handed out a chalice and small phaper snifter containing a strange blue thick fluid. Serge gave the tender a raised eyebush at the tumbler to which she replied, “Glach.” She consumed one herself in one quaff, then raised another upwards to which they all matched. They all imbibed together just as the music halted. The crowd roared a massive acclaim and then one of the musicians chanted what sounded like a battlecry, which was immediately repeated by the audience as the music once again sounded.

Everyone looked at each other and saw the urgency in all of their eyes to get closer and steal a better glimpse of the performance. Enthralled by the fantastic sounds and sheer energy surrounding them, they began to push through the army of people in front of them. Once inside the mass, the music and ongoing battlecry engulfed the foursome, drawing them closer still they trudged through the seemingly endless wall of human bodies. Then at once, they were all in a clearing and Serge had a perfect view of the performers.

NEED TO FINISH THIS PART FROM THE CONCERT TO THE ENCOUNTER IN THE ALLEYS

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The high reading of the thermometer above the bartop did not reflect the temperature of the people still awake in *The Second Stone.* Corelle sat in between Tum and Dusk who were kept company by the innkeep, their moods all cold as fresh winter frost on a window, ready to crack. Under the light of the bar-torch, the keep’s balding scalp was perfectly framed by light chestnut hair, not quite graying; each open side connected by sideburns and a thin paintbrush mustache which sat above his bare chin. All of the other patrons had long retired and still none from either gang had made it to the inn. It would soon be dawn and the common room would be full of action once again. The array of rumors and hearsay coming through the tavern today had her completely on edge. Tum was visibly upset as he had grown quite attached to everyone for taking him in. Even the reassurance given to Corelle from Aviendha did nothing to calm her nerves. The kroyo was sure that the rest of the pack was alive and well, despite their equivocation. Over distances, especially when in a densely populated area, specifics became convoluted and unreliable between the kroyo. It was just another one of those unexplained enigmas of kroyo pack communique.

The silence was broken by the barkeep, Daigan once again trying to lighten the mood for everyone. “Say Dusk, did I ever tell you how I came up with the name *The Second Stone*?” His brown birdlike eyes sat widely spaced at the top of his beak of a nose, magnified greatly buy the oversized round framed glasses. His wing like ears sprouting out from behind the sideburns completed his flawless mimic of a forest owl.

The peddler’s lips convened in a thin smile that barely reached his whiskers. “Maybe only ninety-two times.” He laughed as he replied, “But I’m sure Tum here would love to hear a history lesson.” There really was nothing else to take their minds off of everyone else.

The tot’s eyes showed their first glimmer since dinnertime for even in his worry he was a sponge for learning. He was so neglected in Tomal that he jumps at the allude to anything.

“Well, ya see here sprout, there wasn’t always two moons, ya know?” Tum shook his head and Daigan’s smile split his face at the chance to tell the story of his lodge again. “You see Tum, a long time ago, there was a great catastrophe right here on Aetatis. People like you and me may have been going about our everyday routine just like any other Juneday, except there was only one moon in the sky, the Crimson Moon. And then without warning, a stone ‘ear eight hundred flik wide intersected directly with our planet we’re standing on today.” He thumped his foot once for emphasis. “Somehow, life managed to endure the cataclysm, but it was not the first time this had happened. How do you think that Crimson Moon came into orbit ararnd us?” He scanned the room as if telling the story to an entire audience. “Evidence shows that another stone collided with us yet predating this one, in turn creating a first moon. What do you think that tells us? That history tends to repeat itself no matter how grand or finite the measure.” Daigan now looked around the room, very pleased with the outcome of his tale. “And that’s ---

Just before he could get in the grand finale of his allocution, the door burst open, admitting four of the amiss.

ALSO FINISH THIS SHORT SCENE

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It was the heat the finally woke Jeifer from his nightmare. His head felt like pea that had sat out in the sun all day and he wished that he was unconscious. He looked around but the light was so bright, and his eyes burned. “At long last he wakes.” He heard Ylle growl in one of her usual tones, she wasn’t happy. But where in the skies of slamber were they? He rubbed his eyes forcefully, rustling out all of the caked in crumbs and whathaveyou finally revealed his surroundings. He swiveled his head to see the familiar amenities of a prison cell, populated with Ylle and one other gargantuan of a person. The other man surely could not stand unbent in these cramped quarters that must have been built for single prisoners. One slab of wood protruded from the iron wall, occupied by Ylle, her typically vibrant scarlet hair dingy from a night in the slammer and the stranger, a man approaching three nitch, his tree bark brown hair’s braids and twists disheveled from days on the streets. Their laughter at Dio knows what only caused the megrim in his head to pulsate even more violently, on the point of popping. Why was he always the one left with disquiet and she wakes like a gorram little sprite. His mouth felt like a sandstone on the ass end of a baker’s orgy. Now he was starting to remember the night’s past. But there was three of them, Qeles was absent! Lemai and the militia, nothing ever seemed like it was a good idea when Jeifer thought back, which was maybe why he did so little of it.

“Where’s Qeles?” he managed to cough out.

It was the drifter who answered, not Ylle, “She got the better of them, aye. Don’t reckon they even noticed her escape.” The two of them had comatosed after being corralled by the city guard before arrival here in the Kislev penitentiary. “Glad yer okay. Name’s Kireyin, I’m not from around here.” That much was plain as the sun will set but *where* was he from. Kireyin had been awake their entire transit. He had seen Qeles’s safe flight, their processing into the lockup, and their assignment together to cell 4859E, which meant they were in the *Nortune*. Since they were of strong stature, they would be sentenced to excavating across the river. Workers from Eastminster have been buying prisoners to dig across the river by the ruins in search of something. Even though it’s been a quiet operation, word made its way to Katur for who would listen but Jeifer didn’t care much for that codswallop, so he never paid a close ear. He heard enough, however, to know that if you were put to work out in the ruins, it was a life sentence.

“Digging in the ruins is a death sentence, why do you think the *Children* don’t dig it themselves?” He looked around at their cage, it was like slaves stacked upon one another. One iron wall had a window that must have been put in just to allow extra heat from the sunlight with metal mesh to ensure your captivity, not that anyone could survive the fall into the factories. Two iron walls ran parallel connecting the cell door, which was made of metal bars, even Kireyin had no chance of bending.

“No glek Jeifer.” Ylle quipped. “You don’t think we’ve been sitting here idly all this time do you?”

“How long was I out? Is it nightfall?” I asked out loud.

“Tis been 2 full days.” Kireyin bellowed. “We weren’t sure you’d e’er be right. Glad you are, aye.” The colossally oversized man shook his head. “T’ain’t right, treating people like sheep and that.” He looked out the oriel with ambition. “She’s made it to your friends, I’d say; but we shant count on others for deliverance. Tis ain’t the first time I’ve been in a bind, aye. Let’s not do anything rash.” He said as he eyed Jeifer, “A good well executed plan has the best chance of success.” For sure this guy would get it on quite well with Aezi.

“No one goes to the ruins until they are prepared.” Ylle’s undone hair still framed her face beautifully as she walked through their procedure. “All sorts of magicks and weird drivel over the next few days to ensure *workers* don’t vacate the grounds. I think we’re on course for the morrow.”

“What art we being held fore? This don’t seem right.” Kire again brought up the inequity at hand which he was just not understanding. Such corruption must be implausible in his homeland. It mattered not, a getaway plan must be devised.

“It’s not, but we’re in.” It was as simple as that. Once you ruffled the wrong feathers in Kislev your existence was very easily forgotten. If you wanted to get out of the Kislev criminal system, you as well wish for *both* moons on a platter. Jeifer did not know whom they’d harried, but to get excavation duty, they must be right peaved. “It matters naught what we’re held for, but whom we’ve stewed, and seems we’ve stewed quite the silk stocking.”

Both Ylle and Kireyin had been meticulously eyeing every move of every sentry and all of the rounds. There wasn’t much of an option, the break would have to be almost spontaneous, and carried out to perfection to have the slightest chance to avail. Their only shot was at some time during their preparation. Since the pair was only observing from the confines of the cell, there was no information on the preparation itself so everything would have to be done on the fly. After anyone was prepared for excavation, they were then dispensed to another facility where they were strengthened, given nutrient supplements, and then shipped across the river under full rental of the Children of Hope. These *rentals* of course, would never be returned and promises of freedom upon completion of their chores were false motivators. Jeifer really wanted to take from the entire operation from the bottom up, but in their current situation, their own freedom was paramount for the time being. “Nortune.” Jeif shook his head, “No one escapes Nortune.”

Since everything once they were out of the cell was unknown, Kireyin would use his height advantage to choose their opportune time for an attempt. At his signal, they would both purposely trip, causing a disturbance amongst the guards. At that instant, Ylle would use as little energy as possible to free the shackles binding Kire. It was possible to detect the use of magicks from afar, so it was imperative that stealth was considered. With him free, he could rid Ylle and myself of our binds and be quick on our way. From there it was all instinct, once the preparation for excavation was complete, it may be too late for a way out. Jeifer truly loved these schlet infested shanties, but it would not be where he last breathed.

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Qeles ran as fast as her feet would take her to *7th Heaven* through the alleyways and gutters of East Kislev. Thankful for her unexplained bond to Noerya, she was always certainly aware of the general direction her kroyo was in relation to herself. She hung onto that with all of her being and scurried on a direct line to its source. She used her magicks to help her scale walls and traverse roofs, run across laundry lines and jump from tall structures. It was impossible to tell how much time had elapsed during her rush, but at long last she stood at the doors of the stables to 7th Heaven. She checked in on the runners and then headed to the barroom.

Inside the tavern, it was very quiet compared to when they had last been here. Bolgan was behind the bar, but he was not in his jolly mood like prior. Then she took in the whole of the room and saw the upturned tables and wrecked furniture. Hix was starting to put the building back in order, salvaging what pieces of this and that could still be used for new furnishings. Qeles hurried over to the bar to Bolgan, he already had two cups ready for them. “I’m not sure who he did it to this time, but *they* made sure I was harboring none of Jeif’s cohorts in here. I didn’t even now he had cohorts or what he is into now, but they’re bristling.”

“The city guard? Why are they so mad at Jeifer? Lemai is just a lowly barkeep.” It made no sense to her.

“Not the guard.” He took another sip from his cup as he went on, “Not the militias either, it’s the *Children*. I don’t know who’s leg he’s pissed down this time but I’m afraid it may be his last. You don’t just get let off from the likes of them.” She had no idea what the Children of Hope could possibly want with any of them, Children usually stayed away from common folk and their establishments unless they were meddling. Well Jeifer did not like to be meddled with either so who knows. “Now that I think twice…” Bolgan went on, “I think they were after you as well.” He went into his drawers and pulled put a few papers. After some shuffling, he eyed the one that he was looking for. “Ah, yes, I can’t be mistaken.” He handed over a paper with a written description of a young unusually dressed woman. He was not mistaken, the description fit her to her clothing. She jumped at the realization. “Didn’t mean to startle ye.” He apologized.

“No, thank you so much.” This head start she would have with his warning could not be repaid. “I just hope no one spies my presence. Every feltch I’m here you are in danger, I’m sorry.” Bolgan’s look turned to a frown.

“Don’t be sorry, it comes with the territory, eh?” He now laughed at his predicament “They know my wits trail theirs and I let on more than’s there.” This time his laugh was that of heart, “Sometimes I think I actually have them outwitted.” He again washed the glass in the hand he had been holding. “I know, you better be on your way, believe me, there was nothing I could do to help ol’ Jeif.” Bolgan pressed a coin into her hand as they made they farewells. “This will allow you passage through the residential borough. You should avoid detection and cut your travels in half that way. Just take the Hammerfall Highway, it cuts right thgough. It’s the least I could do.”

“I don’t know how to thank you. You don’t even know me.” Was all I could manage to say in return. Why would someone risk everything for someone they never knew. “Thank you, from the very being of my soul.”

“Don’t worry about me, I will be fine.” She was unsure of his sincerity, but he was doing this of his own accord. He was making a conscious decision to help a friend in need and do the right thing in his eyes. No amount of gald of threat of force could sway a man like Bolgan and I count myself lucky to have such an ally on my side. With that reassurance, she left the tavern and entered the stables. She must change her look and be quick about it, she had to get to the others so that they could figure out how to find Jeifer and Ylle. With the escort of 3 kroyo to the *Second Stone,* Qeles almost felt pampered.

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Serge knew that the light penetrating through the window was not that of a fresh dawn, but it must be well after midday after yesterday’s travels. In the end, they obtained nothing useful, and he had a splitting headache to match. He pushed the matted green hair out of his face and thought about how much he would enjoy a fresh wash. He probably the last to wake, he hoped that the rest of their entourage had arrived after they. Putting the wash out of his mind, he clothed himself and headed to the first floor, wanging his head on the doorway that must have been built for men of smaller stature on the way out. The Second Stone had a couple private dining rooms, and he knew that’s where everyone would be gathered. As he made his way down the stairs, he could get a glimpse of all the owner’s past, their portraits lined the stairway. Now that he thought about it, they did all look like owls; from Malwen I to Fridwyn III right up to Daigan IV whom he had met last night. The only thing he remembered from the getting to the inn the night’s prior was the owlman and that his comrades had not yet arrived. At once, he was taken back the present when he knew he heard the voice of Qeles, which meant that everyone had made it to *the Second Stone*!

He put the head pain right out of his mind as he now hurried down the stairs. He followed the sound of her voice to a private room off the main saloon to see everyone listening intently to Qeles as she waved her arms in the air. He didn’t need to hear what she was saying to figure out the cause of her agitation, Jeifer and Ylle had not returned with her. When she saw his entrance, she quickly recounted what he had missed. The two of them seized by the city guard along with a barbarian outlander in the heart of the Kislev projects. Dusk was already out gathering information on the location of the three and what they were being held for. On his way out he mentioned they were probable in the *Nortune*, everyone had heard the stories about that place, if incarcerated there, you weren’t like to leave. From all accounts, it was a slave trade.

It was just now that Serge looked around to see that he was in fact the last one to wake but it looked like Aezi was catching up on sleep, head down on the table his raven black hair spilling out from under the big hat covering his whole head. Gimza sat in front of a boule of soup that looked wonderful. He inversely, did not look so good as sweat ran down his blanched face like little rivers of feculence. Zid, who never seemed to be affected by intoxicants, smiled at their displeasure, but before he could say anything snide, I threw the closest mug right at his big stupid nose. “Hey Aezi, can you do something for my head?” I asked as I tried to nudge the cap from its place. A groan and wave of his hand was the response given.

“He’s worse off than you love.” Corelle said, picking up on her husband’s discomfort. “You know that he can’t do any magicks in this shape.”

“Well can’t you fix him so that he can fix me?” I replied with a wince, but I knew that she couldn’t. I was being sarcastic and letting the hangover and situation get the best of me. “You know I don’t mean to be like that.”

“I know, it’s okay.” Corelle replied with a smile, “Dusk will find them, he knows a lot of people here.”

The peddler probably did have more connections here then all of them combined back in Katur when it stood. “I hope you’re right, finding them and arranging their release may be another problem altogether. I just wish that he would get back here soon with some news this waiting is the worst.” Just as those words left his mouth, he heard the buoyant voice of the huckster talking to Daigan.

“…to get a meal ready, we have some work to do.” He then entered the room, with a cautious smile on his face, “Well, I have lots of news to talk about. It won’t be easy, but I’ve located our friends, and I’ve come up with a way to get to them. Even I don’t have the money to buy one prisoner, let alone the three of them. Lucky for us, the prison warden is a reprobate gambler, and can be bought in more ways than one. Can any of you ride a kroyo?”

The question seemed like a joke, but he was dead serious. “Um, we all can as you have seen.” I said in return confused.

“No, can any of you *really* ride a kroyo?” His look was that of pure ice now.

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**Chapter 5 – The Golden Circuit**

Appendix A

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

Versions

V1.7 – Zack and Brian’s edits ch1

V2.4 - + Brian’s edits to ch2