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A person wearing a costume

Description automatically generated

# A FAREWELL TO KINGS

## by

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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

*“We ride! On kroyoback may our banners fly, we ride! To New York where the king will die”*

**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 alit with 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**

Streetlamps made the dimly lit stone visible as their fires flickered in the night. The gentle breeze of the mid-summer twists up remnants of garbage and dust not yet 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 hundred years by The Kings. 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, in attempts 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 twisting path to the castle was already 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 its 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 Sons 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 charge, 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 and some of the others. 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 its 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 creature fell to the ground in one final gasp for air as a hammer of flame crushed it to the earth. (this sentence needs work)

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 see 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 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.”

“Shadow?” 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 with ancient precision. 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 *eltch*” Aezi chimed in apprehensively. “It’s bloody hout 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 – Strangers 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 perfidious 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 Dargor 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. Dargor’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 Dargor 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 *Sons 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 Sons 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 eltch 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.

“There’s a big race in wee under a huts.” Ylle’s undone hair still framed her face beautifully as she walked through their procedure. “Biggest of the year in fact, requires all the security acquirable.”

“The Galden Circuit” Jeifer interrupted.

“Uh. Yeah.” Ylle responded sarcastically. “Once their big race is over, all that manpower will be used to transport *workers* to the ruins. There are three races leading up to the final race and that’s when security here will be at its weakest. That gives us about a maj to figure out how to use that to our advantage.”

“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. Slave labor was so very profitable until you ran into the wrong someone. 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.”

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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 Sons 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 eltch 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 Game**

It had already been three days, yet Jeifer and Ylle sat in Nortune with their new friend still. I did know that it would not be a quick deal, but the drawn-out bureaucracy of a corrupt government moved at a snail’s pace, whether you sit in the Iron Walls of Katur, or Nortune here in Arburg. Well, there was no use dwelling on what was out of his control, a plan was in action. The plan was very precarious and far from a sure thing, but Serge found himself excited to be a part of this venture.

All around Arburg, on the way to the Second Stone, Serge could remember seeing highways with kroyo speeding by. You could always see them flash by, but it you did not pay close attention, you would not see the riders upon the hurtling kroyo, nor could you see the outfits the legrunners were fitted with. He was curious, but never got around to asking on their initial day in the state. These freeways twisted and ran all through Arburg, forming The Galden Circuit; a series of intertwined raceways which was the heart of entertainment here. Almost anywhere in the state, you could get a glimpse of at least part of the circuit. From politicians to merchants, from innkeep to street urchins, everyone could be seen around the Circuit. That was why if you wanted to enlist a crooked member of the upper class, the kroyo circuit was the best way to go. Unfortunately, it was almost an unwritten rule that someone standing of higher class would undoubtably forsake the lower classman in the end; which is why these deals usually ended in animosity. It was no revelation that thugs and footpads strutted the streets like they owned them. Dusk had warned them that the warden of Nortune was no different and odds were that this agreement they had would just allow them the opportunity to strike a real bargain. Virtually every race had a prisoner promised freedom waiting to be broken if they could win the warden some gald. That would not be the case here as neither Jeifer nor Ylle were very sturdy on a kroyo. Serge and Gimza had spent innumerable keli joyriding kroyo and even had to race to decide whom would compete. The thought of full contact kroyo racing gave him skin erection he was so excited.

As luck would have it, they were in town at just the right time of the year for a high stakes wager with the warden. The Galden Circuit wasn’t just the name of the racetracks, it was the name of the championship racing series as well. Once a year, a series of four races are held over four days in festival-esque fashion shared the same name. It is said that more money exchanges hands gaming on the kroyo in those four days than the entire merchant guild does in one full year. That does not even include the revenue incurred during this festival. There were many that worked on just this Circuit and made enough gald to last the rest of the year. And today it finally starts again.

As the sun breaks Serge’s kroyo appears and looks the young man in the eye, he then spreads his wings and warks at the throng. Tarnor was just as fired up as I, the joint adrenaline was a phenomenal exuberance, both of their senses were all heightened. Serge raised his right arm to nestle it around Tarnor’s neck as they swaggered to the participants area, or *roost* where Gimza and Dusk would be waiting. No one had a crew of more than three so having the two of them as his crew was inconspicuous. They walked side by side down the cobble path until they saw their friends waiting at the track stables. All of the tracks were littered with stables to repair both human and kroyo. Dusk had warned him, these races were extremely deceitful with competitors and their crews doing anything they could to gain an edge. The rules to the Galden Circuit were few and enforcing of those rules were insurmountable, so if you weren’t cheating, you weren’t trying. The pair were as arrogant as a peacock, so their brains and brawn would undoubtably lead them to a smooth victory. “Aren’t you two the most darling *bael*!” Dusk jeered at the two of them. Bael was a Kislev term describing a rider and their kroyo that spread and become part of the common lingo of the times.

The three of them escorted Tarnor to the starting area where all of the other riders could be seen stretching with their kroyo. That’s probably a good idea he thought to himself as he and his counterpart started the same. Just as he stood straight from one of his stretches, he was confronted by a peddler of sorts. “Need some *bill*? Just call my number fifty-three!”

“No, just put by expenses on my pay for the race.” What an idiotic question, some people had a head like a turnip. And he was off to the next rider.

At that, Dusk sauntered over snickering. “Dude wasn’t asking you to pay your invoice, you giblet-head, he was offering you *bill*.”

“Hmm.” Serge thought aloud. “Bill, bill bill. Um what the stys?” he scratched his head and looked around and then saw the peddler a few runners down exchanging words with another rider.

“Seriously? You’re credulous as they come, do you buy your chizmers from a brady too? He’s pushing blacht. It may help you with the race… but the fare taken on your body is different for everyone.” Dusk warned him seriously still with a laugh from Serge’s innocuous. “Folks’ll do anything to gain an edge, just to get into the Circuit.”

Serge looked around full circle, finally taking all of this in, the expanse of The Galden Circuit. The gald it generated. The contracts it fashioned. The crowds drawn to viewable areas of the racetracks. And the emotions shaped here in these four days. Blacht was a term that he was familiar with, you probably heard it on the street every day in passing. It was a blanket term for any enhancer. Assuming these *bills* were akin to their blacht brethren, they would give an almost instant boost to your perception and reflexes with Dio knows what kind of ill affects afterwards. He again looked around at his competition, no sort of blacht was going to give these lunkheads an advantage over me.

The crews were starting to dress their kroyo with protective gear and weaponry. The Galden Circuit was a full-contact race, and that meant clashing and slashing. Kroyo have ferociously sharp talons with the inner one positioned on each foot for a kill. Not only that, a kroyo’s wings did not allow them to fly, but they were lined at the edge with a hacksaw trimming of additional talons. If that was not enough, other riders could be seen fitting their kroyo with offensive weapons such as a mace ball at the end of several kroyo tails. A powerful weapon, but it surely gave way to balance problems at such high velocities and so much melee between the racers. Tarnor leered toward Serge at the thought of attaching a spiked ball to the end of his tail. As tough as a kroyo came, Tarnor was also entering the prime of his maturity, and did not intend on getting a scratch on his well-formed stature. In their element, kroyo are naturally dangerous and have several built-in offensive weapons, but still Serge saw riders adding blade extensions to wings, a bayonet at the tip of beaks, and even additional blades by the foot talons. Tarnor thought there was a fine line in how much weaponry you dressed in, the difference between threatening and just plain bulky was small; and the legrunner was sure to express his opinion to this rider as they trio dressed him. “Don’t worry boy, your scales are as strong as any armour I’ve seen around here, and your claws put everyone’s knives to shame.” Serge said as he attached some subtle blades to the tail and forewing Tarnor. He wasn’t just blowing smoke, Tarnor really did have the toughest skin he’d ever seen on a kroyo, as a matter of fact, it had been years since Serge had seen his runner’s skin break for blood. His talons would do for any set of daggers of short swords as well. The option to equip Tarnor lightly would have huge benefits so long as the runner’s skin held up. Light leather armour was placed strategically to help give the most likely assaulted areas some extra protection. Stepping back, the leather looked marginally awkward on Tarnor, he’d only worn armour in exercise prior to the preparation for the Circuit. Even if he did have the toughest skin out there, you could have dire consequences from dressing too lightly.

“He looks ready to wage war.” Gimza chorted with a smile. “No way anyone is getting under this guy’s skin.” Literally, and figuratively, Serge hoped both were the case on this day.

“From what I hear he’d better be.” I replied whilst slapping Tarnor’s shoulder. With his kroyo all dressed for the dash, it was time to locate Corelle in the stand and get her blessings. It wasn’t a letch before he located his love, they always did seem to be drawn together for as long as he could remember. It wasn’t anything like the bond with a kroyo, but he knew there had to be some supernatural force that drew the two together and allowed him to locate her in the massive audience with such ease. That was not something for the present contemplation, it was time to win this sprint! He could feel his hackles starting to vibrate. “Back in five.” He said as he bolted past several other bael and over the fence for his pre-race snuggle.

“I know you will do well but please be careful.” Serge nodded at her request. Her eyes were wide with excitement but as well as worry. “You may be the best rider in all of Aetatis, but it just takes one waylay to take you out. And that could be out of the race of out of this life. I know you are excited, but this is really a nasty game. I would not be able to go on if anything happened. So just please don’t do anything stupid.” Her mood at once changed to that of assurance and warmth, “I’ll be cheering for you the entire time dear.” Her hair fell down beside her matching rosy cheeks haphazardly leaving Serge with the perfect image to get him through the race.

“By the Great Sword Above, you have my word. I will not be reckless, I promise.” It was now my time to be serious. All japing aside, this sprint was going to be a real test of Serge’s resilience, in addition to his riding talent. “I know that I am better than everyone down there” Serge craned his head around to make sure no one could hear, “I don’t think there’s one bonded kroyo out there from what Tarnor said.” Bonding a kroyo was a sticky situation at the least, and making it known would not help anyone here. However, bonded bael had a high probability of sensing other bonded bael in the nearby vicinity. All eight of them were bonded to their kroyo and it was commonplace in Katur, but outside of those walls, beliefs varied and keeping quiet on a touchy subject always left for the better. “But please don’t worry, I won’t be injudicious.”

“I hate when you tell me not to worry. Why is it arbitrary things like this give me the biggest doubts?” She shook her head. “It matters naught, I know you will prevail, now go get ready!” she exclaimed as she threw her arms around his neck and jumped up, forcing her entire self onto her husband. Serge could not say how long they clung to each other, but it was only a moment’s passing that they cherished here.

“I’ll see you in a few keli.” Serge said as he left his other half on the bench there. Again, on the way to Tarnor he had several opportunities to get some 53 and he even heard another guy hawking a 56 as the time to the start of the race began to dwindle. He passed riders injecting their kroyo, injecting themselves, it seemed that Serge was out of place not taking any enhancements in preparation for the big event. Stys, he could use a drink. He did not need anything to heighten his senses, his adrenaline was flowing through his veins, and as he approached Tarnor, their bonded excitement was peaking.

“Keep your eyes open and don’t be a Jagoon out there yeah.” Gimza was also now had austere in his face as he spoke, “I’ve seen brigands and ninnies setting up all over the place – out of sight – in the nicks and micks of the track, ya see?” Gimza knew the real danger of a first-time racer, or phyte, more than his wife fore sure here. The records showed, first time riders only lived through the entry race seventy-four percent of the time. “You know, those three out of four odds of survival, those aren’t for finishing the race, Dusk? They’re just for making it through the race?”

“Now don’t try and scare the boy.” Dusk cut in before Gimza could make it sound more audacious, “Yeah there’s a low survival rate, and a lot of pairs don’t finish the race. But you got to remember that they let almost anyone enter this Entry Sprint. Serge, you are trained as a rider and fight more than anyone out there.” He looked at Tarnor and then back at Serge “You two have no reason not to make the cut. This is what you have been getting ready for these past few days. Don’t be scared. But don’t be too cocksure that’s what always gets the good ones.”

“He’s right, go wreck ‘em up!” Gimza said with a smile, and the two hugged before Serge donned his armour. This was where you did not want to hotdog anything, a lot of riders overloaded their kroyo and didn’t dress themselves up enough. There some perfect balance in the middle between agility and protection the no one seemed to ever find. Serge hoped he was at least close as he donned his typical battle mail. Some may say he overdressed in his armour, but you can’t sew the arm back on once it’s been hefted off. He’d spent countless keli in this armour, it was almost like a second skin. He donned his helmet and watched his friends walk away before mounting Tarnor. It was only moments before the race was to begin as he could see many of the riders frantically making last gelgen changes as the delegates readied their signals to start the race.

Now Serge sat atop Tarnor, ready to ride straight into Stys. As he looked down the line at his competitors, it seemed less than half would be ready when the race started, still fussing over this or that. Such idiocy made absolutely no sense to Serge, but it tilted the odds towards him. This race took place entirely in the Kislev, and the conditions of the racetrack were probably no better than the slums themselves. With races year-round, there wasn’t much time for upkeep.

The sound of the cannon signaled the beginning of the race, and Tarnor darted from the starting line in pace with the other legrunners. Serge remembered all of the pointers that were given to him one being to stick within a pack if possible, close combat was much preferable to an unknown trap that may be sprung solo. Only having two days to prepare, Serge was suddenly feeling a little overwhelmed, he was the best kroyo rider, but he was out of his element, in someone else’s backyard. Tarnor picked up on his dubiety immediately. *Just what in the twelve levels of Stys are you thinking? Out of your element – when was the last time that you planned once, for anything? You are the Lord of unplanned, last minute affairs, spur of the moment tycoon. Do you think that I like to do everything my entire life with not a gelgen notice! Quit being such a milksop and focus with me before I toss you right off my back!”*

Tarnor was never a pacifier, and as usual, the kroyo was exactly what Serge needed at this exact moment in time. Rather than giving a sarcastic reply, he pushed all of the cuttys out of his head and looked straight ahead in unison with his kroyo. All of the kroyo stampeding down the track amongst them suddenly became akin to points on a graph as their two sets of eyes became one set of four eyes working in unison while the pair’s bond grew stronger. At once, Serge could see the veins in the blades of grass off to the side of the racetrack and he could see every scale that made up the skin of each kroyo. The combined sensation of excitement, adrenaline, bravery, and emotional bonding shifted their relationship to something they had never experienced before. Without asking Serge knew that Tarnor felt the same rush as he, in fact their minds may as well have been one. Rather than having to guide Tarnor where he would like him to go, instead they decided in unison, thoughts combining together faster than Serge could even process. When Tarnor noticed the rider to head-left readying a blade; Serge reacted immediately as if his eyes had seen the assailant, easily parrying the attack and tossing the other rider into the passing gully without taking focus off the kroyo ahead. Tarnor tiptoed over the toppled rider with ease, ducking under an incoming swing of an enemy kroyo tail equipped with a flail extension in turn and all in one fluid motion pirouetted while still sliding forward on one foot, sweeping down the attacking kroyo with his own unarmoured tail. He then dodged the toppling pair and was again in sprint, gaining ground on the riders still ahead.

With senses working even harder than before, they picked out their next move, around the next ascending bend, they’d split the two bael ahead hand fighting, taking both unawares. As they are reaching the start of the bend, about five freem from their target, something seemed awry, nothing either of them could see visually, but there was something threatening to them aside from the two bael they were planning to ambush. It was almost too much information flowing at once for Serge to handle, but he leaned on Tarnor’s mental stamina to help in processing the inundation of data. He suddenly felt at ease, realizing it was Tarnor taking over the bulk of the mental burden. *Relax.* Serge’s mind relaxed, and he let Tarnor drive their awareness. It was now as if time slowed, just a letch. *Head-right. At the top of the bend.* Serge had already perceived the threat Tarnor relayed and was back in perfect sync with his companion. It was the bael ahead to the left. As the three bael reached the summit of the hill, the left bael came to an immediate halt, leaving the right sprinting full speed ahead, alone. At once, Tarnor leaped up and careened hard head-right, veering completely off the racetrack. While airborne, they saw what the left bael stopped for, a cable had been raised across the entire peak of the track, completely removing the lead kroyo’s feet from leg. The kroyo cried out in pain as its rider struggled to realize what had happened. Another approaching bael saw the carnage and tried to slow down and jump the cable but was just caught as they ascended and toppled down the decline of the hill. They would be able to continue, the first team would not. Serge and Tarnor together felt a surge of pure anger at the injury to the other kroyo and made a mental note of the bael responsible. They could make out a tiny insignia on the kryder’s shield matching the sigil on the runner’s breast. A SIGIL 1. Taking attention back to themselves, as they started to reach the peak of their jump, they followed the track down the hill and around the next bend. The track doubled back almost under the hill and continued back in the opposite direction. It was an easy adjustment for Tarnor with his tail unimpeded and light dressing, he simply arched his tail all the way head-right, flapped his wings a certain way, and they were gliding now in the right direction almost over the track again. Baels were now starting to run by below them as they settled down onto the roadway now behind a pack of racers and again picked up speed.

After seeing one of the traps firsthand and the possible injuries, it made sense that riders and kroyo alike would take supplements to enrich their senses. Tarnor scoffed. Serge snickered, “Like we’d need any help, culus.” Kroyo had a sense of humor but is was much less complex than a human’s, at least what he could understand. Without setback, the bael was on the heels of the pack ahead. Out in the open in between crowds like this was the best way to lose your life, and suddenly the runner lurched into a top speed unseen previously to close in on their prey.

Before a moment’s letch, they were at the heels of the stipant and back into relative safety from being picked out alone. They had reached a clearing, and the size of this horde was larger than any Serge or Tarnor had been a part of, and it was a moving battlefield. For a hair, Serge and Tarnor both openly gaped at the dance going on in front of them before entering the fray. Several bael fell in the sandstorm of skirmish, but it was a fair fight. The thought of the trap still stung a twinge in both of their minds. Some of the riders were in the race looking for this kind of action, and god blessed, there was nothing like the scene unfurling in front of the pair right now. The battle raced forward across the landscape, Serge and Tarnor chose their route in a moment’s gelgen opting to try and advance in positioning rather than seek out melee. A rapier ricocheted off Serge’s helmet as he thanked Gimza for insisting he wear one. In a fluid motion, parrying the rapier attack, he adjusted and kicked the rider off kroyo and Tarnor again sped through the cyclone of bael. Again, something seemed off to the pair, but there was too much going on around them to distinguish anything standing out. Instead, Tarnor put his head down and plowed through the few bael obstructing their way; still gaining speed. It looked like up ahead the clearing turned back into treacherous twisting raceway as they began to separate themselves from the throng behind them and gain ground on the lead pack ahead.

Again, at their most vulnerable in the open between groups, the bael noticed that nothing seemed anymore awry. Ignoring what must be a lapse in judgement, they put their focus on catching the lead lot and then at once they were jolted forward even faster and then they realized the heat. There was an explosion right behind them in the ganglion of the melee, their abutting position gave them a slight burst of speed as the matter behind them was pushed forward by the blast. Not a lapse in judgement, the bael was literally an eltch from threat when both realized as one that they no longer perceived danger. Pushing the thought out of their combined mind, they engaged the lead drove.

There was easily two gilb bael to enter the race, it was anyone’s suppose how many remained in the running at present. Tarnor’s guess was under fifty. Serge shook his head, who the stys knew he just thanked the stars that they had made what he assumed was the final stretch after the clearing. The top twenty-five racers were allowed to advance to the next race, all awarded a purse depending on your finish.

At that very instant, the bael felt something else awry. Rather than wait and see what happened this time, Tarnor actually leapt and climbed the side of the building, hurling himself over the roof and onto the next building top as they now could actually see the final stretch. Tarnor again leapt just before the building in front of them fell directly onto the raceway, crushing a handful of bael with it. *Such disregard for life in this sport* Tarnor thought as Serge silently concurred.

With the finish line now in sight and the lead few bael in arm’s reach, Tarnor still picked up speed atop the buildings overlooking the raceway as they closed in on the first-place racer, Tarnor ascended off the rooftop and darted down in an angle directly at the finish line, still picking up speed. Serge knew the pair was too far behind, as alas Tarnor came to a hard landing across the finish line in fourth place, only to see a familiar face wearing that blasted silver star behind a pitchfork in the champion’s ring.

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Ylle awoke in a hot sweat. It was hot as an oven inside the sun here at the Nortune Prison. On top of that it was like the whole stench of Kislev seeped up through the mold encrusted floorboards that may give way any keli. Jeifer was once again atop the outlet. “Again, on that thing!” She exclaimed as she awoke again from one nightmare to another.

“I’m just sitting on here, calm yourself.” Jeifer chorted as he settled back into the corner where the station was positioned.

“You really like it over there huh. Ever spend any time elsewhere?” She japed at her friend. Kireyin was again sleeping, when he slept, a kroyo in heat could not wake him; or as like compete with his snoring. Men from adjacent and adjoining cells were eyeing Kire with pure venom, although given the opportunity I couldn’t think of anyone getting one over on the lumbering brute. He slept through all of their stares and remarks none the wiser. The bouldering man was akin to a rock, he would let blows brush off of him without striking back just to enforce his might. She’d seen as much the night of their arrest, while she and Jeif retaliated and were overwhelmed by the city guard, Kire stood tall and chuckled as blows that may strike dead common folk merely recoiled off the massive knave. It was truly a sight to behold.

“And just whit are you sniggering at over there?” Jeif mocked as she realized that she was grinning at the recount of that night.

“I was just recollecting your amusing attempt at contesting the city guard the other night. Do you remember?” She wasn’t lying about that either, his effort against them was a marvelous display of befuddled clowning.

Clearly peeved by her depiction, he even stood up to gesture, but then collapsed back down onto the commode, the floorboards beneath him grinding and grating with a high squealing sound under his weight coming down forthwith. “I don’t know what the hell you’re jabbering about woman.” He complained waving his arms in a dismissing reply. The floorboards would creak and moan whenever any weight was shifted upon them, beckoning the question when one or more might finally give, either exterminating them in the collapse, or granting them an early attempt at escape. Where the four corners of adjoining cells met, four outlets were built with their backs to each other for convenient plumbing. After the years of poor upkeep, these corners were now weak spots in the structural integrity.

“What’s underneath Nortune?” She asked Jeifer, suddenly curious what they might be quickly falling towards.

“There’s a complex sewer system beneath Arburg, and below Nortune is no different.” He sneered at the thought, “It was built to be mostly self-sufficient with little to no upkeep, it’s like a river system charging through the mountains down there. Since it is hardly maintained, drifters and fugitives inhabit that squalor as well.” Just as he finished the sentence, another oversized miscreant stood over the adjoining privy, clearly readying himself. Jeifer turned to the fellow criminal, “Why don’t you wait until I’m done over here before you come foul it all up ya caitiff.”

The malefactor glared through the cell bars which may or may not hold him back should he try to charge through, “I’ll shit when eye please ye glekkin pantywaist! Ye ain’t moved off that crock since ye been ‘ere.” He said as he plopped himself down next to Jeifer, winking right at eye level to clap it.

Jeifer instantly stood up and leapt onto the stahl. “Jeif you birdbrained namby- “, but it was too late, and the floorboards were already giving way. Their neighbor’s floor gave way first, swallowing the four which occupied that cell down below. Ylle bounded up immediately, frantically scrambling over to the slab of wood Kire currently slept on as a bunk, still unawares of the mounting trouble. “The floor won’t hold you Jagoon what were you thinking!” She gaped at the harlequin as he grasped for the bars of the cell that likely wouldn’t hold his weight. As she crashed onto the bunk holing the snoring barbarian, it promptly detached from the wall, hitting the floor with a wail that sounded like the cries of an avian horror unseen.

With that, Kireyin’s eyes snapped open, and the whole of the cell floor gave way under them.

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The Guild’s borough was a mixture of extravagant apartments with massive warehouses and factories, usually coupled together arranged by the controlling company. Factories mass producing products from clothing to weaponry, furnishings to carts, roof slates, wooden planks, cups, utensils, and kroyo saddles. All of these good were being churned out here at such efficiency, allowing the members of the guild to live lavishly in the Guild Quarters. I don’t blame them, I would do the same, Aezi thought to himself gazing at the exorbitant flats whilst he led Zid and Qeles into the guild district of Astana.

The heat was absolutely gruff as the trio strolled down Kersey Terrace, taking in the beautiful scenery. The cobbles of the street were flat, solid, and lustrous, as were the buildings themselves. The merchant district was much cleaner than the commercial district of Qeynos, the streets were cleaner here than he could ever remember the streets of Katur, even during holidays. Despite ample opportunities, there was absolutely no time for distractions. The three of them must be at their designated location at the bend above Levens Brothers company warehouse well before the start of the second race today. Security wasn’t impossible to break, but it was easier to arrive prior and avoid a possible encounter. This area had been scouted out by mates of Dusk, around midtrack, completely out of view, with a perfect sight line to the bend where the entire track is exposed to their canopy; it is unavoidable every racer has to pass that bend. That was where Aezi and Qeles would strengthen and heal their bael, giving them a much-needed boost. The races were always more than meets the eye, traps and cohorts ambushing opposing bael, all measures must be taken to help raise the odds of survival in our favor.

Continuing their walk, they came to Hournung Wheel-makers depot, where they were to turn south onto one of the main boulevards, Tavon Thoroughfare. In direct contrast with Qeynos, Astana’s grid-like layout was greatly appreciated, their destination was on this avenue. The sun had not yet risen, and the streets were quiet but Aezi noted that all were not asleep at this hour of the day. Factory lights and the interior illumination of guild residences could be seen, every now and then another pedestrian walked past, sometimes a little cluster; but it was quiet. Much the like some of these passersby were off to stake a spot hidden along the trackway, same as the three of us. Some had much more sinister plans, setting a trap on the raceway could make you responsible for taking someone’s life, yet hundreds were set. Their plan was to help someone make it through the duration. He couldn’t help but laugh.

###### **A COUPLE OF STREET THINGS** #######

Finally, Aezi saw the Levens Brother’s logo straight ahead. It was still twilight when they asserted themselves at the Tavon entrance. The door swung open and the trio vanished from the cobble footway.

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Still battle worn and weary from the day prior, Serge strode beside Tarnor approaching Tavon Thoroughfare, the main artery of Astana. Today hadn’t yet woke, and more shadows danced in the dimly lit footways artificially illuminated by the road-torches that lined the Thoroughfare. A fistful of pedestrians littered the borough in this early spell. A man and kroyo bael wandering the streets at this hour marked them as racers and the pair had already spotted a few making their way to the roost, the heightened senses of the bond now taking affect as their consciousness awoke together.

Yesterday’s race concluded shortly after dusk and had left the bael completely exhausted, covered in abrasions. If not completely heal the pair, Corelle and Aezi were able to alleviate the physical damage and stress to the body by combining their medicinal artes. However, the mental strain still remained for the two, no magick in the halls of the University could emulate rest for the mind. Nor had artes been utilized since the Age of Magicks to simulate food or nourishment, but there was no need to fret, as they both knew the importance of eating when the occasion was presented. They cheerfully remised the cuisine prepared at the Second Stone by Daigan with a grin.

Brought back to the walk to Way of the Warrior, Tarnor noted at once all of the pathlights had extinguished simultaneously and without an eltch’s delay the brilliant cerulean sun stretched its magnificent umbrella of light over Astana. Now painted indigo, the district seemed to wake up, the streetways sparsely speckled with inhabitants beginning to crawl with modest crowds. Alleys and sidepaths were now dark with shade created by the massive structures that housed the guilds appurtenances.

The ways were mostly empty, and it was still easy to pick out bael en route the racetrack from blocks away, many dressed in their under guard at their apartments. Out of the shadows appeared a little husk of a man who interrupted their march. “Bills?” His beady eyes in their hollow sockets showed the pusher lived off the stuff. “I got 53s and even gots 82s for your runner.”

“Nah, I don’t want that glek.” Serge dismissed the street urchin; he was not in the mood to deal with one of those bursars.

“Hey man, no one else has got *Bowes*” the unrelenting man said as he thrust a palm of the 82s up at Serge.

“Get that blacht out of my face before you are looking in the gutters for them!” Serge snapped back before Tarnor could swipe his claws at the punk.

“I get it.” The little insect said as it skittered back into the dark alley from whence it came. They were not running late, but a few more distractions, and the bael would be on edge to make the race’s start.

Gimza and Dusk would be waiting and have the stable prepared for the pair, they had set out much earlier with the others. Aezi, Zid, and Qeles rose extra early to get in place trackside to provide a boost midrace. Everyone was so concerned with setting traps and sabotaging their opponents, self-preservation often fell from thought. The bael weren’t downright hypocrites, but they felt they had a sense of honor and setting dirty traps sat rotten.

At last. The stables came into view as daylight began to overtake the night’s shroud, however the shadows of the colossal superstructures lined the landscape. The stables designated to the competitors were neatly tucked away under the spectator accommodations which encompassed the start and finish lines. The pair were greeted at the terrace by Dusk who led them under the archway straddling the entrance and into the stables that were already bustling with commotion. Riders and runners lined the halls, eyeing the stalls for one to free as groomers armed their kroyo. Dusk hurried them to the stables where Gimza had occupied a small corner pen with their wares ready for arming. This time the bael was equipped in a few gelgen and on their way to the starting gate well ahead of time. They could hear raising voices over their open stable as they strutted away.

The stable front opened directly to the roost, where bael could be seen warming up and stretching. From the start, Serge noticed there was much more organization here at Way of the Warrior. There were one hundred bael competing in the race today, but only twenty-five from the qualifying race which meant the majority of racers already belonged to the Racing Guild. All competitors must belong to the Racing Guild, and if you weren’t a member prior to yesterday, the only way to gain entry was to enter the Qualifying Race.

Already loose from their trek to the raceway, Serge and Tarnor performed some warmup routines and made their way to the starting line, or scratch. The scratch also operated as the finish line today, and Tarnor had located Corelle and Tum in their seats trackside. The squad made a quick detour for a pep talk before the race’s start. Corelle’s eyes lit up and Tum could not contain himself at the sight of the battle ready bael.

“I want to be a racer just like you!” Tum exclaimed as the pair approached the stands.

“You’ll make an excellent rider!” Serge complimented the sprout as he tussled the boy’s hair and placed his arms around Corelle. He inhaled her scent, allowing it to calm his nerves for a moment before the maelstrom of melee commenced. Slightly more familiar with the routine, Serge felt a prickle and a chill swept through his body as Corelle provided the bael with a magickal boost. Her eyes became deeper, her skin felt smoother. The air seemed dried, the sun hotter, alas the breeze which crept by felt just brisker. There were no rules against magicks, and laws did not forbid the act in Arburg, but it was not common, and it attracted ruffians. Everyone was too busy with blacht and traps it was easy to be overlooked and Serge planned to keep his head down and do just that.

The sun was now full above the skyline and some bael were starting to take position at the scratch. The line was enormous and provided room for all of the competitors, your position was on a first come basis. The quartet made farewells with their advocates and took leave to claim a spot. Tarnor hurried the rest over but eased up when he realized there was no real advantage to be gained by your starting position. They opted for the far sideline, leaving their head-right wing free for the starting cannon. Tarnor gave Serge a mental nod *A tiny advantage is an advantage.* Serge smiled at his partner’s golden eyes, Tarnor never missed anything and never gave away his intellect.

They began to ready themselves as they noticed the stands to the rights start to reach capacity. More stakes today, more gald to be made today. “Good race today.” Dusk beamed as he slapped Serge on the back. “Top thirty-four advance today.”

“Thirty-four?” Serge thought out loud.

“In honor of some famous racer from years past.” The peddler said as he turned away.

Gimza outstretched his arms for an embrace but a little weasel of a man appeared as if out from under Gimza’s boot. “Bills? Bowes? I’ve even got – “

“No! Son of a fish! No blacht, now get!” Serge snapped again before the little rodent of a man skittered off to his next prey. “Every time.” Serge complained.

“Easy.” Gimza conveyed as he embraced his best friend. “You don’t need that schlet, leave him, now go show these jagoons how to ride a glekking kroyo!” His azure eyes burned like the sun with the proclamation.

The rider took his mate’s words to heart and felt his muscles relax yet again. “Little schlet’s just making our like more difficult doling those out.”

“Maybe it doesn’t even work, maybe he’s just taking them all for fools.” Gimza shook his head and sounded as if trying to convince himself.

Tarnor singled out the jockey a few positions down, his eyes taking on the shape of an insect’s and glowing with a hue of red, the telltale sign of an active user. “You think he’s checking his pulse?” Serge asked as the rider cut the length of his forearm and held it straight, the wound patched itself and the rider smiled. “It works, we’ve seen it in action. But you’re right, we don’t need it.” They all knew that was truth.

“Be careful.” Gimza warned as he caught up with Dusk and then skeined into the crowd.

“Thanks.” Serge said to himself as he began the final readying of the kroyo. The both of them just wanted to start the race.

He was again interrupted before he could ready Tarnor. “I said that I did not want any -“ he was cut off before he could finish dismissing the pusher.

“Your numeral.” The official said courteously with a bow as he handed Serge the fabric with their bael’s identifier – ‘84’. “It must be visible on the legrunner. It’s the only required piece of attire.”

“Thank –“ Serge again thanked no one as the official was at the next bael with their numeral. He stroked his beard in deliberation, “Where do you want this?” he asked the runner. Tarnor, as indifferent as a rock, glared impatiently back at his master. “Right. Like you care. Not on the face.” He fastened the fabric to Tarnor’s breastplate and finally hopped atop the kroyo.

With the other bael now readying themselves for the cannon, the pair settled into their opening stance as a loud voice filled the arena. “Attention all competitors and spectators: Due to the excessive amount of fatalities due to outside interference with yesterday’s Qualifying Race, for the safety of everyone, security has been escalated. Let it be repeated that *ANY* foreign assistance or distraction is strictly forbidden and will result in an immediate disqualification and mandatory incarceration for all offending parties.” They knew the rules prohibited such interloping, however everything up until that announcement had encouraged the deeds. Serge wondered if the warning would actually be enforced but sat confident knowing Aezi and Dusk would never be so negligent to arouse suspicion.

Putting dubiety out of their collective mind, the bael was now ready for the starting cannon. Tarnor craned his neck, gendering down the scratch to see all of the other bael composing themselves for take-off. As the kroyo eased back into form, a grandiose melodia filled the air. Everyone clearly ready to ride into war, the kroyo began to bob, kick, and run in place to the beat of the euphony. The intensity of the musick seemed to inspire the adrenaline already pumping through the bael and harmonized the duo’s thoughts even richer, again stretching the bond past its previous restraints. As if the race already underway, the pair was a coiled spring, still as a silent sea, ready to submerge anything at a gelgen’s notice. And at the edge of omnipotence, the score came to a grand closure which was promptly suffocated by the mass’s ovation, which was then belittled by the sound of the opening cannon.

Tarnor gushed out to the front only to settle back into the heard. Despite the announcement of heightened security, dashing out ahead of the mob was asking for a target from the rest of the bael. The qualifying race was well known to be the most dangerous and lawless, but maybe the Racing Guild was actually trying to enforce safety.

When the lead stipant containing Serge and Tarnor came to the first bend, all thoughts of escalated security were washed away like a rogue wave. The three lead bael were caught unawares and topped off the track into the gulley underfoot. Maybe not fatal, nonetheless, those racers would be hard pressed to regain their lost distance should they continue.

Coming into a straightaway from the head-left bend, the bael in front of Tarnor did not want to be overpassed, and initiated a pre-emptive attack on Serge, the rider turning completely around and producing a blowgun which fired three successive needles directly at his face. The small pieces of matter were moving too fast in all of the chaos to be seen, but Serge knew the exact gelgen when the needled would strike his left eye. Without toil, he raised his left arm, using his bracer to catch he incoming darts. Serge tucked the weapons away, now ready for to take offense. Tarnor increased speed to come up on the opposing bael’s head right. The attacking rider did not even bother to see if his shots hit their mark, which made Serge think back to his class on ‘loose ends’. He drew his blade, and tapped his opponents left shoulder, directing his attention in the other direction. As the rider turned left, Tarnor used his tail to weaken his adversaries’ position in his saddle. Serge then kicked the rider, toppling him from the mount, the stirrups entangled all about, the kroyo went tumbling in turn, displacing a few other unlucky bael. The crash caused the leading stipant to split into two separate, smaller packs. Bringing up the rear of the head stipant, Tarnor dug in, advancing the bael up to the middle of the crowd.

The upcoming area had been pointed out prior to the race, dubbed *The Zipper.* This stretch crisscrossed and doubled back so many times that it made a gauntlet of intersections all but dictating continuous encounters between the competitors. *The best part of the race!* This was where the bael really got to dance! The track suddenly broke into scores of tracks which now became the zipper. Dozens of tubes to choose from at a moment’s eltch! Theoretically, the first bael into the zipper would have to face the least number of opponents and it was well known, so there was generally a bottleneck at the zipper. While everyone else contended for position, Tarnor sought out the less traveled tunnels that required a few extra strides. It would probably matter naught the amount of combatants, but who wanted to waste time jostling for a tunnel anyway. Tarnor also speculated what kind of kroyo would gladly avoid contest.

For no reason other than a favorable plant sprouting at its opening, the bael chose the ninth tunnel from the right end upper level. The apertures to the shafts were positioned haphazardly with no apparent reasoning. Rows and columns of channels stacked unevenly upon one another, Tarnor wagered there were seventy-six holes, not quite enough had all runner simultaneously initiated the zipper. Serge smirked at the builders’ approach, designed to advocate collision. Tarnor questioned how long their flagging seedling would survive the circuit.

The orifice of their track was entirely underground, providing no light for the bael. Few plants here gave off iridescent light, like to attract insects, though it may help warn the pair of an upcoming change in the terrain. Immeasurable rides under the stars helped their eyes perceive everything here without the aid of light. In fact, their senses so attuned, they could easily pick out the bones of prior contestants against the solid earth. Still dripping with sweat, the escape from the surface’s broiler was emphasized. The hardened moist dirt was a swift contrast to the dry state of the surface. It was a welcome change, as short lived as it may be.

The channel hooked hard left then almost straight as if allowing you to pick up speed for something. The bael readied, and began to sprint, the impending incline would unveil their first intersection. Serge tried to imagine navigating these tracks without the combined mentality of the kroyo bond, he may as well place his eyes in his pocket as well. “Some of these bael are running more than their twentieth circuit.” Daigan had said, the innkeep was certainly somewhere in the audience, he rarely missed a race. Some had been racing longer than Daigan could remember.

The first cross section came without an adversary, but the bael gave no ground, Serge felt strife at the next head-right bend and the bael easily parried and continued. The track fell straight down and slit across another as Tarnor’s talon disarmed a cudgel from the other before it struck home on Serge’s exposed ribs. Now the incoming head-left downslope curve was very race-worn and Tarnor lost his left footing. Tumbling into a complete freefall could prove fatal but Serge quickly shed his shield, and used his left arm as a third leg for the pair to balance and pirouette back onto a sturdy lay of the track where Tarnor’s claws dug into earth and the bael was in full stride as if there was no mishap.

Without time for triumph, another bael slammed right into Tarnor head-right. The collision turned the pair completely off course, and they were now running side by side in their foe’s passage. The crazed man’s eyes elongated out of his face like doorknobs and his skin was clearly not all staying on. Serge felt charity on the man, as he hefted his sword, it wasn’t necessarily fair that this guy would lose his life just because he crossed paths with me. A gelgen’s hesitation had easily cost hundreds of racers their life in similar circumstances, and Tarnor, unwavering from his gallop, mentally gaped at his companion as the lunatic beside him began his downswing of the silly oversized axe that must be cumbersome. As if fluid motion, Tarnor marginally altered his path and Serge grabbed and pushed the axe by its top, continuing the rider’s downward momentum, causing the stoke to err entirely. Serge then used his sword in his off hand to slice and latch onto the other bael’s saddle. Pushing the rider down, Serge finished the motion by continuing to spin fully around, sheathing his sword and grasping the other’s saddle. Again, facing forward in the proper form, Serge discarded the saddle, well enough gap between their enemy.

Now on a new lane, Tarnor was back at a hard trot as the impending crossway neared. Battle ready, the bael blew through the next two junctions cleanly, but neither’s alacrity wavered as they convened on another crossing. Serge struck the head-left incoming rider down his unprotected leg as he took a perfectly aimed blade to the joint of his left elbow. The blow stung like the dickens but immediately began to mend, thanks to the still lingering magicks. But the hack was deep, and Serge didn’t have the alar to use a healing arte on himself, so sword already sheathed, he took a bandage from the saddle pack and retrieved saliva from Tarnor. In a gelgen’s notice, he bandaged the goo unto the wound and flexed his offhand. Not as good as magicks or cured herbs, but the healing properties of a kroyo’s spittle was well known to expedite coagulation.

Bearing into another annexation, the bael again centered themselves and fended off the oncoming flurry from the left. Without stay, a detractor from the head-right lurched down a club protruding blades which Serge was just able to deflect and the throw the rider down a crag with an unseen bottom. The bael focused their sights upward, a little stunned to see the ceiling give way and bits of detritus dusting into their faces. Then the full weight of another bael found itself now trying to gain footing on Tarnor’s tail, to which the runner awkwardly attempted to dismantle the newly attained passenger. The movement was uncouth, and Tarnor fell forward with the bael’s release. Now lumbering at a loping canter, Tarnor was at risk of being overtaken by the tailgating bael. As the mighty kroyo struggled to regain balance, Serge spun about face, and now stood atop the legrunner’s saddle. Careful not to wang his head on the ceiling which now once again enclosed the gladiators, he drew four kunai and sneered at the enclosing rider. He armed himself, aiming all 4 blades at once, and released his ammunition. The daggers hit home, precisely spread across the top of the tunnel. The ceiling collapsed behind the bael, and their pursuer was muddled in the wreckage.

Again, focusing onward, the tunnel was now widening, and outside light was coming in a higher capacity. Now ahead and to the rear, bael could be seen closing in on each other. As daylight overtook the raceway once again, Serge could see the lot of Tarnor’s golden scales were coated in crimson. Serge himself was saturated in not only sweat, but the now familiar shade of blood red. The bael scanned the newly formed stipant to see it was a common theme throughout the zipper.

Outside from the subterranean labyrinth, the arid grasp of a bastard took hold as somehow the accumulated blood seemed to stick and dry but the sweat only quickened its discharge. The freshly recognized fervor was again a sharp contrast to the tunnels’ dreary chill. Daylight glorified Astana, although the Guild’s magnificent architecture was indeed a marvel.

There was no time for sightseeing, the bael’s four eyes were focused on their immediate surroundings. Suddenly, it was as the pair had been douse in ice water. The sudden stiffness of the cold and awe of the alteration caused Tarnor to miss a step, but without inhibition regained form, as the couple felt the now familiar excitation of the healing arte which almost caused the faulter. The realization meant not only the everyone’s safety, but in addition, the bael could make a mental halfway estimation of the race.

The chilly aura of magick did not relinquish the day’s swelter one eltch but given a rejuvenation the bael could not help their upbeat feeling towards the race’s remainder. The track now led the stipant into a dormant warehouse, long ago now remodeled into a kroyo playground. To the naked human eye, the decrepit edifice was high belated for bulldozing, but a trained kroyo rider could definitely distinguish the paths and obstacles clearly meant for exercise.

Long production belts with decades of padprints and wear steered the legrunners into the building. Even with Serge’s years of portentous riding experience and the advantage of the bond, he left navigation of this intricate quandary solely to Tarnor. The wide eyes of more than several transients crept from their encampment, not sure what to make of the stampede disturbing their respite. One of the supposed squatters produced a boleadoras with which he was able to catch Tarnor’s left leg, the impediment did not stagger the bael completely, yet pulled the assailant’s entire weight up onto the track and drug the contesting goon in tow. The badger then collided with another bael, his lasso now entangled with the casualty’s legs and wings, the load becoming too heavy for Tarnor to shoulder, Serge then used his blade to sever the boleadoras and loose the bael from the concussion ensuing behind them. Serge didn’t stare to see the conclusion of the collision as they were mugged again by a traducer. He engaged the enemy while paying mind to the course ahead, the three separate belts now began to spiral descending into the floor of the depository. The harassing kryder immediately tried to take advantage of Serge’s lack of a shield, using a smaller boleadoras to hook his loose offhand. The man clearly had the eyes of a bill and the initial yank almost completely jostled Serge from his saddle. This time, he did have the dexterity to amplify his vigor and used his full body to detach the rider from kroyo. Serge discarded the extra weight and again readied his defenses while scouting about for potential game. He just thought it good virtue to have the intention of not crippling a bael out of the race completely. The kryder converging headright was trying to do just that, unable to land his strike, the aggressor now took aim at Tarnor’s exposed neck in an attempt to decapitate the kroyo. Serge unsheathed his sword to defend, but instead on the upswing clear severed his opponent’s arm at the bicep, kukri in hand falling harmlessly to the tract. That bael would not be finishing the relay and Tarnor failed to find any sympathy for the downed goon, Serge spoke compliance grasping the creature’s intact neck.

Now in a complete downward plunge, the stipant was once again closed in tenebrosity, the bael’s perception adjusting in tune. The course took the herd right and then rolled into several short humps before arching practically vertical, imposing serious strain on the runners’ legs. The kroyo direct head of the pair stumbled, forcing Tarnor to bound at a gelgen’s turn. Unable to completely clear the plunging bael, Tarnor had to plant his left foot on the runner’s mid-tail then using the rider’s head as leverage, his right foot sprung the two airborne safely replacing them in the opening left ahead.

Finally reaching an apex, the track now turned aslant left and split down the middle into two separate paths. Taking the right, Tarnor kept on the edge, leaving Serge only one side to defend. Taking the offensive, he swung his blade at the kryder to his side, causing the bael to shift head-right and allowing Tarnor space to gain speed ahead just as the left path reunited with theirs. The runner dug in and allowed Serge to ram the oncoming kryder with his shoulder, sending the bael lurching into other racers and yielding the pair some room to breathe.

Just as well, the track split in half again, leaving the bael on the left edge at a steady trot. Feeling the runners behind gaining ground with no room to advance, Serge drew a handful of kunai and released to their tail-right causing their pursuers to dodge and parry, losing speed. The break split the pack in two, barely before the coarse combined once more, this time no one directly opposite allowing an easy integration into the center of the herd.

Now whole, the runnel broke to another ascent, climbing high at a rate hard to pace everyone surmounted to continue. Not as long as the first climb, the stipant topped the summit and followed the now descending track to gain speed into the Way of the Warrior’s next hurdle. Without time to assess, the bael quickly made out what Tarnor labeled as floating islands which must be skipped to and from. Navigating these atolls in the midst of a stampede seemed like a good way to join the damned, but with the assemblage of islands just ahead, Tarnor made a snapdash decision and put all thought of good virtue to the wayside. Dashing faster still towards the bael head-forward, imitating a previous maneuver, the legrunner placed his left foot on the kroyo’s mid-tail, using the rider’s head again with his right foot as a spring point, crow-hopped the bael entirely, and landed in front of the entire pack at an even faster lope than before.

At breakneck speed, it was now clear what Tarnor intended. There were two isles that were clearly the intended path to the head-left or head-right. The stipant would logically split between the two and rejoin at the following extensive archipelago before splitting again to more smaller enclaves. At this speed, timed perfectly, it should be possible to skip the first landing points all together and aim for the larger, third islet. Executed flawlessly, the bael might be able to accomplish the vault, Serge sneered and leaned forward, still gaining speed. At the very furthest peninsula, Tarnor bounded aerially using his wings for all the extra leverage they would provide. Based on their trajectory, their success was questionable at best, but in a stunt that defied logic, Tarnor gained momentum, angling ever so horizonal downward they accelerated toward the landing. As the lip seemed to fall just out of reach, Tarnor extended his right pad past his beak, and just barely grasped the wooden beach. The timber buckled under the weight of the descending bael but provided the runner just enough grip to heave forward and clasp a stronger foothold on more solid ground.

Regaining inertia, the bael picked up velocity before easily making the next hurdle, a much safer distance to clear to the platform directly head-forward. These next few islets were very tiny, only allowing two or three steps before forcing you to choose your next move. A hop to the head-left, the right straightforward to another small scaffold the bael chose hard-left followed by an opposite hard-right. This was a little narrow straightaway allowing the pair to again gain celerity before a sizable gap to what appeared to be the exit of the warehouse. Serge turned back to see they had a decent lead on the flock behind them. Rather than play it safe, Serge urged the runner to instead continue to gain alacrity into what must be the final stretch. In full accord, the kroyo continued expedition.

The warehouse withdrew onto a massive rooftop which allowed several impractical routes for decent. Unwilling to give up any ground, Tarnor still accelerated, hopped the fringe into what must be at least an eight freem drop. The bael landed if not harshly, at a run as Serge both heard and felt and arrow wisp by his head, like to have taken some hair in its passing. Tarnor now parried and ran up the side of a building’s wall as several more arrows missed their mark. Trying to gain speed again on the street, the bael was forced to skid to a slow to dodge a javelin before bucking back into a sprint.

With the finish line now in sight, Serge allowed a look back to again see a familiar face fast approaching with **SIGIL 1 SIGIL 1** clearly visible on their armory. Before he was able to rejoice at the arrival of another target, the bael now saw assailants sprout from the windows to attack only the lead racers. Undeterred, Serge grabbed his last few kunai and launched a pair at the oncomer. To his chagrin, the projectiles were deflected away by these window dwelling weasels! He loosed his last three to see them again deferred by those scoundrels. A cable tightened over the roads width caused Tarnor to slow and hop the impediment, their bogie now trailing only a few freem. Another cable and some more near missed by arrows, a boleadoras hacked by Serge’s blade, the bael could not help but laugh at the race’s warning this morning.

The finish line now within reach, Serge didn’t have to turn to know the bael was fast approaching as they tried to regain their scamper. But the distance was too short, and Tarnor wasn’t able to regain full steam; their effort would be for naught as they were overtaken at the last gelgen but their newly entitled nemesis. The bael turned about after victory only to deepen the wounds by showering the pair in dust and rock. Tarnor had enough and charged the victor, talons flashing, and Serge leapt from his saddle, dismounting the kryder from kroyo.

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Corelle waited anxiously clinging onto Tum as commotion began down the final stretch. A racer had appeared ahead of the rest and was making a dash for the finish line. It was too dusty and there were too many onlookers to make out what was happening, but she could easily make out the sounds of arrows hitting wood and kroyo grunts. Focusing in on her excitement, she improved their eyesight, she could finally make out Tarnor’s emerald and gold scales reflecting in the hot air. But there were many hoodlums impeding their progress, and she spotted another bael closing in on her champion. She knew the first lot advanced, but she could literally see Serge and Tarnor forestalling one fatal blow after another, her cries of warning falling unheard. Tum hung onto her dresses for his very life as he peeked through the creases to see the bael still advancing. It was truly tango they danced with these projectiles, one fluid motion into another perfectly in tune with each other, deflecting arrows head-left and returning fire tail-left without falter.

But the onslaught was too much for the Tarnor to overcome while maintaining mach speed and the tailgating bael surpassed them just able to break the tape with their outstretched kroyo’s head. The bael then reared upon her husband and ridiculed them, raining upon them rock and dirt. The agitation stuck a chord as Tarnor scampered without pause, talons brandished, and the reaction incited an uproar as the grandstands began to empty Corelle only thought of protecting the little child at her side.

As the congregation disassembled in all directions, a loud voice took the air: “Attention. The intent of harm towards a security official is punishable by indefinite imprisonment at Nortune Detention Center. People tend to make rash decisions on sudden impulse. Please discontinue any hostility and any degradating reactions may be overlooked. Attention. The intent of harm towards a security official is punishable by indefinite imprisonment at Nortune Detention Center. People tend to make rash decisions on sudden impulse. Please discontinue any hostility and any degradating reactions may be overlooked…” The interruption seemed to need no further demonstration as the fracas instantly settled down to channels of people going about their business.

Corelle could now see Serge and Tarnor being separated from their foe by guild officials and thankfully he was using some thought as her spouse was fully compliant with the meddlers. Both bael were led to the dais and the third-place runner was accosted from the congestion. Before the bael even reached the stage, the same loud voice filled the amphitheater once more: “Attention. Attention. All bael advancing and participating in tomorrow’s marathon. There is a conference at the Racing Guild Hall directly after the trophy presentation. All kryder *must* attend. Please make your way over immediately. Thank you. Attention. Attention…”

**Chapter 6 – The Unforgiven**

The common room was exceptionally loud tonight after the conclusion to The Way of the Warrior. Voices of all accent could be heard babbling over one another about their version of how the race ended. It was still beyond Serge’s comprehension that Daigan was able to keep it under the table that the newest celebrity and entourage was lodging here at the *Second Stone.* The closure of the race was only half of the excitement though, the development at the Racing Guild Hall threatened to drown out the combustion still fresh from day two of the Circuit.

Instead of finishing out the circuit in traditional fashion with the final two races, a longer, two-day challenge was set as a replacement on the morrow. The news had caused turbulence among competitors, the alteration clearly giving advantage to some and harsh detriment to others. For many participants, there was no easy solution, for the additional terms to the now two-day long marathon was that the contention must be run in tandem. Now, many bael were prepared for such adjustment, for squad races were common here in Arburg. Still, for the unprepared, a random partner-bael must be chose from the Racing Guild for allowance into tomorrow’s endeavor and Serge was no exception. It took foedera of deliberation and Dusk was still convinced it would cause trouble later on, but after much convincing, Gimza was finally allowed to ride Dargor as Serge’s counterpart. The move could be taken as a gamble, choosing an inexperienced racer over a proven guild member, however their comradery and familiarity outweighed any Guild Member’s experience in both Serge and Tarnor’s viewpoint.

It was not clear what turned the tide for such a under the axe drastic revisions, but this season’s Galden Circuit had been infested with more bloodshed, deaths, foreign intrusion, and controversy than any in either Dusk or Daigan’s memory. It mattered naught, done is done and there would be no taking back, at stakes now were the freedom of Jeifer and Ylle. Win the race and they could save their friends; it was as simple as that.

Battle worn and mentally fatigued, Serge had spoken to Dusk behind Tarnor’s back about the gain of taking a few *bills* to help he and Gimza in any way. Dusk didn’t have any righteous stands on blacht, everyone seemed to use it, but he was adamant that neither he nor Serge would be able to get anything now that wasn’t tainted. The Racer’s Guild did not want an outlander coming in and overtaking their entire event. Dusk ensured him that every pusher he encountered was offering him tainted supply, it was part of the mire came with the territory. However, Dusk did happen to have one 53 that he had just held onto out of curiosity. Perhaps Aezi or Qeles could produce a similar stimulant without such negative concomitants. The pair was in Aezi’s apartments hard at work and Serge wagered they would not be getting to rest any time soon.

The barkeep then called attention to everyone in the room, “I want to say something before y’all turn in for the night. When we first met,” the innkeep looked directly at me “I never got to explain the importance of the namesake of this tavern. I reckon it has relevance to tomorrow’s obstruction, for us all.” Everyone gave the burly man their unconditional attention. “As I did begin to explain, the ‘Second Stone’ was the asteroid that hath collided our first moon, already in orbit. The resulting alignment of binary moons, which actually orbit one another whist orbiting own planet propelled Aetatis to achieve the proper conditions to once again for the chance to sustain life.”

Tum ran over and pulled up the closest bar stool for a better look of Daigan’s annotation. “But what does that have to do with the morrow’s race?” the tot yelped.

“Oh, trust me it has plenty.” The buoyant keep bustled as he washed back another swig of oasqoui, beads of liquid forming their own race down his beard. “A little dry and sciency for me, but let’s just say that yesterday’s post-race eruption was akin to the collision forming Aetatis’s orbit system. Arburg’s Racing Guild has been ruled by a bully for over a decade, and the corruption is spreading to the government, starting to canker the state from its core. Ylle and Jeifer are held prisoner at Nortune Detention Center. No matter how you look at it, the whole of Arburg is in peril. Just as the two moons aligned just right to reshape Aetatis, Serge and Gimza, you are the two moons that can reshape Arburg!” Daigan was now standing on top of the bartop “You are Arburg’s Second Stone!” The race wasn’t until the morrow, but after a delivery like that Serge wished that he could saddle up now.

With night well settled in, Gimza and he walked out to the stables under the cloak of darkness to check in on their runners before they called it a night. With such a daunting charge ahead, any extra advantage was welcomed, and with a track that hadn’t been used in over fifty years, relying on some help trackside may be farfetched. The comrades agreed that both kroyo would not be keen on the subject of enhancements so the decision to keep quiet was an easy one. Both kroyo were well resting and there was no reason to introduce any additional stress to the runners’ itinerary.

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Kireyin’s bunk hit the ground with the combined force of the corsair and Ylle in addition to Dio knows what the slab was cut from. Without a gelgen’s delay, Jeifer came crashing down atop the garderobe, raining down the constituents of Nortune’s plumbing unto the wreckage. The pair had the wherewithal to scoot backwards, avoiding the toxic shower. Crinkled in a defeated pile of fetor, Jeifer let the monsoon envelop him but quickly skittered away when if possible, the downpour worsened. The body of our annoying neighbor came down not so elegantly. The dot crumpled like a pile of dead leaves, his fall not so forgiving. The trio could hear the voices of befuddled guards above which would overrun where they now stood before long. Not waiting to see that image come to life, they picked a way and began moving away from the crash site.

The lighting down here was shady at best, and none had particularly fair eyesight, Kire already having trouble seeing what was in front of him. It didn’t take a scholar to discern they had landed in the sewers under Nortune. An unexpected favor, helping mitigate their escape and they took the advantage to widen their early start hoping to entirely avoid detection. The causeway was large enough to admit a large barge, if the ochre stream it clutched was deep enough to float one. She did not intend to learn the depth of the delta of discharge.

“This is insufferable.” Jeifer bitched, “I smell like rotted fish guts stuffed with turned onions soaked in moldy cheese.”

“And how is that any different from how you normally are?” she asked, almost honest. “Besides, this whole sewer is malodorous.”

“Stick it up your fag end.” He chorted back, “But seriously, isn’t there anything that you can do about it?” He blinked his eyes like a dim-witted child. “If not just murder me now.”

Actually, there was something that I could do, but she just laughed at him anyway, Kire joining in. “Don’t cry now.” Neither were particularly strong in magicks, and Ylle tended to rely on her surroundings to aid her composition. If you didn’t truly believe in something, you will never really be able to master that discipline. Jeifer never fully took the time to understand magicks, so he was never able to really grasp the core concept. “There is. Just stand still.” She could filter the liquid that formed the subterranean waterway here and wash off her stinky friend, hopefully purge him of any possible infection. It was really just a simple water arte, she used it on all of the food and liquid that she foraged as a cleanser before ever consuming anything. “It’s going to be really cold.” Manipulating water was one of the first Fortes Ylle had learned and has numberless uses. It still amazed her to watch the impurities separate from the liquid, leaving pristine drinkable water from the sludge flowing before them. She them washed the stench from her friend and let the refuse flow down into the firth. Jeif was the breed of person to have just experienced what she performed yet not believe it possible with enough will to achieve the feat himself. She could spin in circles trying to understand that reasoning.

“I’ll repay you in any manner for the favor.” He grinned, now in a better disposition.

“A thanks, and genuine appreciation is well enough.” I replied not wanting to give the deviant and intentions.

“Okay. Thank you. I truly am very grateful to be free of that mephitis.” It may have been the earnest words to ever leave his mouth.

“You’re welcome.” She meant it too. No one should have to endure wearing such grime, a dear friend to boot. The gesture raised her spirits in addition, she always wholeheartedly embraced helping others, and gratitude returned always gave a warm emotion. Even Kireyin drew on the elation and seemed more upbeat as they continued down the aphotic passage.

Up ahead could be heard the grunts and moans of something that Ylle would not classify as human. The memory of Shaigan spewing forth from the river Therva seemed to happen another life ago, but somehow the image still fresh in her mind. Whatever was making those sounds, she hoped they stayed far away from the three of them. Approaching an junction, the trio had the option to continue left or right, already being on the left pathway and not wanting to cross the mire unbidden, they took the left course.

Heading at a quickened pace, the groans and wails seemed to get softer and like produced back behind them. Feeling a slight sense of relief, the party quickened their pace even further, hoping to spend no more time that absolutely necessary in this cloaca. “That rill’s moving considerably quick, don’t ya think?” Kireyin pointed out to the others. “It was not this torrent before?”

The flow was much calmer when she cleaned off Jeif back where that had crashed down, but she had not given thought to its flux. “Yeah it might be rising, let’s stay to the side and just look for any exit.” They did not want to surface in too close proximity to the prison, but at the same time did not want to get trapped in this cesspool. “Just be careful.”

“Good advice. Thanks, I won’t go swimming either.” Jeifer said with a gibber. But she couldn’t tell if he was again being a jagoon or if he was actually trying to lighten the mood. Rather than instigate anything, she thought to play nice at least until they were back on solid ground. But before she could decide either way, the stream again seemed to double over in rapidity and was now near the height of their footpath. Starting to feel desperate, she looked up and all around, but there were no ladders or rungs or bridges to be had. They continued to quicken their canter.

“We might not have a choice.” She warned, suddenly serious in her tone and she could now see the solemnity in Jeifer’s face. Kireyin’s posture remained unwavering as he kept pace with whatever stride was set. No chance she had the phrenic aptness to cleanse an onslaught of drainage should the phantasm present itself. At the emergence of another two-way intersection, this time the right option presented itself with a bridge, so the threesome turned right and crossed the bridge. Droplets of spume polluted them as they crossed the midpoint of the overpass, but the stain was not actually poisonous. After the three of them had debarked, Ylle turned back and focused on the flow below the bond and forced the current into the ramp, shattering it into the gulch. Satisfied that the interdict would trammel any stalkers, they once more progressed.

With the sewage still threatening to overtake the couloir, Ylle spotted a collection of platforms past the next archway and what looked like some tracks that may have been used for carrying construction or maintenance equipment just ahead. Their salvation was over another crossing that she wagered they would make it to just before a flood overtook the whole passage. Ylle was first to reach the bridge which she bestrode steadfast, but she was just embarked when she caught three masses eject from the bight and thump down on the trestle a few freem beyond. The triad came to a shrilling halt as they heard more drubs from the access.

Horrifying fecal demons congealed before her with bright munsel eyes. Raging waters below threatened to submerge the entire platform while any spilling over the levee rushed to join the slop that traversed the monsters. There was no clarifying what they were truly composed of or how they actually maintained existence but sure as grass is green, they were standing in front of them. She reared her head around to learn what had landed behind them to see four Shaigan, of the same complexion ochre. “We must scrap through these mephitic hellions!” Kireyin asserted.

The three miscreants impeded them from higher ground, and they now slowly lumbered towards the trio. Before Kire could charge past her, she blocked his way, and focused all of her heed on the leading foe, aiming to cleanse the liquid pulsing through the reprobate’s vitality just as she had the sludge prior to clean her friend. This was a much more strenuous arte than purging a still body of liquid, but the result was none less astonishing. The leading fiend burst like a rotten melon, expelling putrescence in all bearings, leaving a puddle of unadulterated water to drain back into the tide below. The effort staggered Ylle, but the two men lunged past her, engaging the remaining turd burglars.

Turning back, she was reassured that the group of Shaigan were indeed interested in them as well and were skulking her way. They too had a layer of sludge that seemed to be alive, creeping about their surface like a liquid army. Taking her attention once more to her companions, she could see that they had the fiends reeling and she once again set her parties targets on higher ground. But taking the moment to recover herself, the Shaigan has closed in the gap and she was now cornered in-between the two gangs. Harnessing the little energy she had regained, she used Kire’s backside as a ramp and put herself over the scuffle onto the withdraw of the bridge. The felt naked without her arms, but she still took the advantage to sweep the legs from under her friends’ foes. Still staggering towards her, stroke actually passed completely through the ankle areas of her marks providing some resistance but ultimately giving no hindrance to the attackers. However, their concern was directed towards her just long enough for the two men to dishevel the fecal demons and join her on the egress of the overpass.

Before exiting the arch completely, Kireyin paused to jump high into the air, a full length above Jeifer’s top and somehow accelerated down to come to an eruptive landing, severing the connection completely to the walkway. He then casually stepped off the crumbling structure and joined the ascent. It would not completely lock the stalkers but may hamper their progress. To her wonder, three humanoid forms appeared out of the shadows to block their path.

“Please do not hurt us, we are harmless.” One of the bodies articulated before anyone could engage the trio. “Here please take this as amnesty.” The man handed her a nice long bastard sword and two rusty short swords. They were not particularly decent weapons, but they were much obliged.

“Right.” She replied to the newcomers. “Do you know a way out of here?” The folk looked in no hurry to go anywhere but she did not hesitate in getting to their intent. “We’re in –“ But she was interrupted before she could continue.

“You’ve escaped from Nortune. We saw your triumph over the fiends. They will not be long now that they have the scent.” Maybe smarter than their guise let on, Ylle was never quick to judge by appearance by habit, she let their leader continue. “Aye, we know the way out of here, but you must allow us to accompany you. We are fugitives as well and so far as combat, we are like a housecat in a farmyard. Please allow us.” The desperation in her eye reminded Ylle of how she felt locked inside the detention center before the floor gave them their chance at escape.

“Very well. I think you trustworthy.” She turned to gain approval from the two men and their nod told her that they trusted her lead in this fully. “You,” she gestured their designated leader, “Stay in front with me and you two stay close to them. My name’s Ylle and this is Jeif and Kire.” She motioned to her followers.

“I’m Nayla. And this is Darwi and Bront.” She motioned to her two cohorts. The two nodded and fell in with the others. Nayla fell in behind Ylle, “Take the next left.” It was dark and slippery up here, but the current down below was beginning to overtake the walkways and she was happy to set her feel on these planks. The path they were on came to a halt and she chose the left way. These aisles were only wide enough for one abreast and she felt relatively safe from ambush as they advanced.

“Is it far?” She turned to ask the other woman but quickly focused her attention back on the path ahead.

“Nay. But be leery, you’ve seen what lurks here.” She had and took the reproach seriously as she was careful not to take too quick a pace to avoid mishap. “The way will open up ahead, once it does we should speed up, they hang out up there.” Not wanting to face any more putrid imps, she would heed that caution as well. As they passed another archway, the path started to open up as Nayla mentioned and before moving on she brought the group to a halt. “There is a way out just past this area here. Their vision is bad but they have excellent smell and will be able to locate us that way. If we are quick enough with any luck, we can avoid an encounter.” Ylle hoped she was right in that regard.

“Everyone stay close.” She whispered as she tried to see what lay on the platform ahead. It was just too dark to make anything out, but she could hear the grumbles and grouses they may be using as communication. She pondered if they were intelligent enough to converse but did not think too hard on the question as time was not unlimited. She gripped the golok given to her by Nayla eyeing Jeifer with the rusty kalis and Kireyin with the long claymore before moving forward, slowly at first. She did not want to bump into anything before seeing it.

She led them midway across the rafter before stopping once more, her vision was subpar at best, but she could always hear what others seemed to miss. She homed in on the bewailings and was satisfied that the bulk of the population congregated to the perimeter near the fringes of the structure. She turned and gestured her assessment to the others and Nayla spoke up in a quiet voice, “Aye, they like the rims. They aren’t too quick on their feet, if we hurry.”

The girl knew a lot about these things. “How long’ve you been down here.”

“Too long.” Her response was quick and stiff. She wanted out and her tone hid nothing. Ylle nodded and continued on, this time at a run and was glad to hear the rest close behind. As they advanced down the expanse, the surroundings burnished in the slightest, and she could now make out the shapes which emitted those glutaral sounds enclosing upon them. She raised the golok in a signal she intended to quicken their run and then shifted into a sprint, the end of the plateau now in her sights as she could now smell the forms stench. With the narrow path and their temporary safety in reach she heard a yelp from Bront behind her followed by a rap on the wooden floor. She stopped at the entrance to the catwalk as Nayla and Darwi followed suit, “You have to help him.” She pleaded but Ylle hadn’t planned on giving him up without a fight.

She urged her and Darwi onto the catwalk and headed in reverse with Jeifer and Kireyin to retrieve their downed mate. It was bright enough to see the man struggle to regain his footing and then begin to lope towards them. But there were dozens of aspersers now closing the space between them. An outstretched arm grasped the shoulder of the fleeing man and Ylle flung her blade at the assailant. Her mark struck a solid substance as the blow immobilized the fiend and loosened the captor. But the snag caused Bront to slip yet again, landing flat on his backside as he began to become surrounded. She saw the spirit drain from his eyes as he knew his future. “You must leave me!” He urged. “Please, save my sister.” Ylle knew he was a dead man.

Bathroom bodied astral zombies ravaged the poor sibling as she could tell his effort not to let Nayla hear him scream. “Glek.” She griped as yet again she watched someone die in front of her. But his demise was their deliverance as the whole mass of diablous swarmed the fallen brother while the rest made their safe escape.

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Dawn had now yet broke when the pair opened the stable doors to see that their kroyo were already stirring. The arid temperature reinforced the pungent fetor that was the result of a rodg kroyo housed in a barn built for ten. Tarnor had been unrelenting preparing Dargor once the new standards had been set for today’s race. If not adept as Tarnor, Dargor was an exquisite legrunner. Everyone had put such effort into their kroyo’s upbringing, and it really showed as they were all magnificent creatures; but ever since he could remember he and Gimza had always tried to best each other at everything. Ever since their adoption, the runners had taken to their trainers’ sport and emulated their rival as well as forming an inseparable friendship.

The legrunners were antsy to get in the saddle when the duo entered the sheds. The race embarked from the western residential gate, or The Stalwart Pass, which separated Qeynos and Deling. Aezi, Zid, and Dusk had long ago set out to the roost to ready the gear. While feeling fully rested physically, both Serge and Tarnor had not been able to recover mentally one flek over the past three days. Weary and wrought with strife, Serge felt about to crash while he could barely notice a strain on the runner’s psyche, predominantly more resilient than himself. He would have to lean heavily on his buddy he thought as he fingered the blacht fashioned by Aezi and Qeles that he hoped he would need. He thought of them more of a safety net than actually something he was really going to use, plus Aezi could not guarantee their stability. Still, their concoction somehow felt less dirty than those street bills. The thought made him cringe.

In a short letch, the kroyo were saddled and they were out of the stables. For the benefit of warming up, they hopped atop the runners and took a brisk trot. On kroyoback, it was a gelgen’s run to The Unforgiven, the track was used so infrequently that the Guild had spent all night preparing the raceway. According to Daigan, it had only been used a handful of times in his entire life, and he wasn’t even completely sure the last time of its use. Its route was also undocumented, and the details were dubious at best. The first few tifa gnarled through Qeynos, eventually leaving Arburg’s limits through the docks. There was then a sort of a marine trackway which then would bend head right at some point into the Braemwood Forest that surrounded the city. None were required to rest, but history said it would be needed, even with bills the toll on the body and mind was too much. There’re a few markers in the Braemwood which every bael must pass through, it didn’t necessarily matter how you got there, but there were marked ways and clear paths to use. Once your bael pair crossed the final marker, it was an all-out dash to the finish line, which lay just past the Great Guild Gate inside Kislev.

During the quick commute to the roost, the bael pair became mentally in tune, and the pair had experienced this affinity merger in past rides, but none as forceful as present. In a now familiar cohesion, Serge felt the bael pair completely interface together, their eight eyes now working in unison making this loose amble down Sunken Grave Bend seem a meticulous examination. The street sign, which was a few flik back, was wearing and little cracks riddled the surface, making the writing illegible if you focused in on them too hard. Inside the building to the head-left, was something foul, old rotting food or worse. Each ray of light from the sun illuminated Qeynos brighter than he’d ever seen. He saw the bael pair jogging down the boulevard, then closed his eyes and rubbed his face. One could get lost in the immensity of everything if not careful. When he opened his eyes, he was back riding Tarnor, they had taken maybe three steps. Now taking everything in at once, he could still read the street sign without altering his perception like that. But controlling the shift in pace could have countless benefit. He figured to take the duration of their trip to adjust to his new acumen, however to his wonder, he could change the focus of his perception at will. It was as if he’d known this his whole life. He turned to as Gimza, but the buddy responded before any words were voiced, “Yes, it’s amazing!” he grinned. He could also feel Dargor’s giddiness, perhaps more elated than the rider, while Tarnor stood above looking down on the amazed trio almost pompous. The four reveled in their newfound affinity until they were at the archway to the track.

The roost was just off to the side away from the scratch, and it was always easy to place Dusk, today he was wearing a flashy red over jacket that reflected the sun’s light like a beacon. He claimed the suit actually kept him cool, but Serge wouldn’t be caught stoned wearing something like that to actually find out. They had reserved a favorable corner spot and all of our furnishings were laid out for us. We separated mentally as we gathered with the others. As they dressed, they noticed their armor felt a little off, maybe it was just their newfound awareness but Aezi spoke, “We *runed* your garb whilst we worked last night, it’s not much but we reinforced it what we could.” Corelle had joined he and Qeles to rune the armor and even their arms. “You probably won’t even notice but it should hold up for the duration of the race.” He added.

“You guys are ridiculous.” Gimza took the words right out of my mouth as he flexed and started to jump in place. “This feels a foedera buoyant!” He went on and openly the kroyo concurred as they too tried out the freshly runed gear. All of the histories had writ of augmented attire but the true existence of such was incredible. The armors were distinctly more flexible and resilient while alleviating more than half its adiposity. The magick workers had got no rest, as everyone worked for the success of the crue if only behind the scenes, but nothing went unnoticed.

“You’re too modest.” I said back to the diviner and then began poking at Gimza’s armor and playing with the blades. Satisfied once more, the bael pair began to make their way to the scratch.

The opening to The Unforgiven was enormous, the turnout today easily tripled what was able to fit at the other tracks and their sound enveloped what seemed like the whole of Qeynos. Somewhere in that myriad was Corelle, Tum, and Daigan. Certainly marred with bullies and muggers but the sight of the massive innkeep kept unwanted strays from causing a bother. And when push came to shove, Corelle could handle any street ruffian.

The starting line was already teeming with bael pairs as the four of them parted ways with their pit crew. “Remember, only take one or two at a time.” Aezi whispered to Serge away from anyone’s earshot. “You know that I have never tried to produce anything like this before, they’re completely untested.” I nodded went to rejoin our bael pair, but he was persistent. “I don’t jape.” He enforced as he grasped my arm.

“It’s understood. If I don’t live to see them freed what’s the point.” It was rhetorical, and Serge didn’t even intend to try these bills, he and Gimza didn’t need anything to boost their competence. “Thank you, pray tell I don’t have to take a one.” I finished sincerely before the four racers parted from their friends.

“Watch yourselves.” Zid conveyed, “And just finish this quickly, this lot doesn’t look like they could piss on their own feet.” Not as arrogant as the bael pair, he knew their capability was matched by none. “I also may have put the better part of your winnings on you two have you seen the odds?” After it being revealed that Serge was riding with a completely unseasoned bael, the odds had been set at a gilb to one. “Your victory not only unshackles those two clowns but wins us fifty thousand gald. So, don’t go and cock it all up okay.” Serge didn’t necessarily care much about the winnings, and they must win anyway. Be that as it may, win or lose, their kin would be liberated any means necessary.

The four of them at once responded with ardor, for it was their competition to lose. The scratch was composed of probably ten rodg boxes in which the bael pair must contain themselves until the cannon. They took a position in a cluster of other bael, as to draw no attention and began settling in for the marathon. Their awareness again fully intertwined, the opening ceremonies were finally astir with bright flames and light from all over. Then the coliseum erupted with sound so loud The Good Lord Ronnie James could only know how it boomed through the surroundings. The melodies were irrefutable as Serge and Gimza actually looked at each other through their own eyes instead of through the bond. The fury of the song took their cognition to yet another plane as the pair of them now began to arouse in place and nudge against each other, preparing as the oncoming contest was now just a gelgen’s notice. Serge felt that there was no way that the help of any blacht could invigorate more than they were at this very moment when verse now joined the harmonies:

*Life in the fast lane is just how it seems*

*Hard and it’s heavy, it’s dirty and mean*

*The kryder are drawing nearer*

*On the leather steeds they ride*

*They have come to take your life*

The thunderous diapason instantly took back over as the remainder of the challengers were finishing up amassing on the scratch. The crowd clamored in unison with the barrage of intonation as the score came to a reverberating end. Without pause, the familiar voice of the circuit’s announcer again filled the stadium, “Attention all bael: The race is about to commence. Follow the raceway to the southern tip of Arburg where each bael will be directed to the next checkpoint at the docks. This is a team event and both bael must complete the entire marathon to place. Good Luck.” The spectators once again erupted with a roaring raucous as strident consonance overpowered their clamor. The maelstrom of melodies impaled the aspirants as they readied for departure they were on the edge of the pendulum.

*In shadows faces appear*

*Warriors wearing full metal gear*

*On our kroyo together, we ride on forever*

*Their hearts filled with splendor*

*Our swords will shine over the light*

In complete sync with the concord assaulting our senses, the cannon’s blast signaled the start of the race. The bael pair dashed off at a strong canter, the length of this marathon didn’t demand a sprint from the scratch. Some of the other bael clearly didn’t get the memo and were galloping ahead as if absconding from slag water, and Tarnor giggled at their indiscretion. The move was reckless, beginning at a steady tread allowed the quartet to select a favorable place among the stipant. Their eight eyes working in unison made navigating the course on the fly among so many bael akin to plotting stars across the night sky. Vicious computations, the majority bulk of navigation was left to the legrunners while the two knights steered the combat. Tarnor was at ease and Dargor was sharing the load with no strain as they heightened to full awareness. The outset of The Unforgiven was a short straightaway into a thicket of sharp turns heading east through the alley of eastern Qeynos. The narrow avenues made for cramped aggregations and frequent altercations. The ambience of the commencement turned the crue battle hungry, and they picked their prey. *Anyone in our way.* Side by side, the pair occupied just about the full raceway, and at this heightened awareness any bael dead ahead of them was in the dangerzone. It was not the best spot for advancing, but the object wasn’t an idle trot. However, before they could advance any further on their game, an alert donned from behind. Many bael homed in on them almost as if they were being singled out. It was a familiar feeling from the previous races that both Serge and Tarnor dismissed as pretension. As the riders turned their attention to the stalkers, the course took a sudden turn upward onto the city’s rooftops. Equipped with an uncountable amount of kunai, the pair unleashed handfuls as they ascended aloft. The barrage did not dismount any of their targets, but it slowed them enough to allow the bael pair to reach the vertex safely.

Once atop the gambrels, there were several routes to choose from and scores of bael pairs vying for favorable position among the obstacles. If not clearly defined, it was easy enough for Tarnor and Dargor to discern designated raceways while perceiving the optimal avenue. Kroyo were distinguished navigators at heart and the desire to best one another came naturally and the two runners relished in this opportunity. They crossed the first rooftop without confrontation and hurdled the freem gap over the alley below onto the abutting gable which had a slight incline. Its surface was spotted with protruding windows; some empty, some of which held spectators taking advantage of the view in the middle of the action. Many of them crowded with onlookers jostling for a better view at the racers. They all knew the be weary of hostiles in the midst of the audiences but this time it was from an unmanned window which the assault came. The mugger vaulted right past Serge with his talwar aimed at Gimza. That was his first and only mistake. Caught in the hype of battle frenzy, Serge went to sever the hand from the wielder which held his blade; but in the furor, Serge’s blade cut clear through not only the assailant’s wrist, but straight through the man’s thigh, half-severing also his leg there on down. The man, who turned out to be a woman fell convulsing down the rooftop and hit the ground, rendering her lifeless. Serge felt a twinge of remorse at the realization he had slain a lady, he hadn’t prior to his knowledge. *She was no lady! She was a tramp.* Tarnor gaped *She got what she deserved.* He wasn’t wrong, anyone attempting to take someone unawares like that deserved her fate.

Still focusing on the race around them, the quadroon missed not a step as the two kryder confronted the accosting bael from their rear. From their position among the competitors, there was an endless queue of stalkers at their rear. One insane rider stormed ahead of his companions and tried to take on the both of us alone. It was his last mistake as Gimza easily dodged the initial attack and cut him down his midsection, rendering the man a new corpse as it tumbled off the canopy. The kroyo seemed to be relieved at his release as the rider fell limply to the ground, and immediately bolted outward. This piqued the bael pair’s collective interest, but only for a flek as more aggressors converged on them in a gelgen flat. This time a trio of racers converged on them, all unleashing a variety of slung weapons towards them. The barrage struck the two kryder several times, while most were with their sword and shield. Today, the two knights carried a variety of swords to account for abrasion and different surroundings. The shower provided no inconvenience for their kroyo, but their pursuers seemed to gain an extra burst of speed as they rapidly gained ground on them. Directly ahead of the quadroon was a fragile bridge that led to the top of the city wall. Use of artes during a race was strictly forbidden, but so was everything else going on; so glek it. He turned to Gimza as they boarded the overpass, but he already knew Serge’s intent. Both of their bodies pulsed with energy as they spewed a green fireball towards their pursuers, the bolide struck the trestle’s entrance and downed the three bael; falling to the city’s floor. The wreckage also prevented and further bael from advancing using this route as the rest of the archway fell behind them. The course took a sharp turn head left onto the city wall where the track ran direct to the southern tip of Arburg. The wall must be at least two freem wide and was open as a clear night sky, providing virtually no opportunity for an ambush from any outside impeders.

The kroyo pair took this to their advantage and arched into a full sprint. There were more than several bael ahead of the team as Tarnor and Dargor easily maneuvered past any who came into their sites. No easy place for a waylay, although in an all-out dash, all eight eyes were on the lookout for any indication of danger. Though there was no visual sign of any onset, somehow the threat was realized, and the two kroyo came to a complete halt, as if to stop time. As if on cue, no more than ten freem ahead the top of the boundary erupted in a sphere of combustion; searing a few bael into unrecognizable char. Without hesitation, the two kroyo bounded forward and vaulted over the newly formed bowl in the wall’s top. The blast left a sizable gap in the racers, giving the bael down track a nice advantage. It was another cloudless day, and the quadroon’s vision was only impaired by mirages caused by the intense fever. Today’s fierce temperature was no better than any since the fall of his homecity. Specks littered the raceway ahead representing the bael which for the time being possess a better position.

With all likely in a full sprint to take full advantage of the several flik long straightaway, the pair seemed to be in full stride as their pads hit the iron-like surface of the wall’s top. In fact, the entire wall seemed to be made of the same alloy, Serge thought noticing this for the first time. Within a moment’s letch, Tarnor and Dargor were zipping past other kroyo, clearly themselves in a full scamper. This only had the two legrunner’s heads even bigger, if that was possible, further establishing they were the dominant kroyo among The Unforgiven’s whole stipant. An upcoming bael made an attempt to cut us off, sensing our approach. It was a mistake that would likely end their hopes of victory as Tarnor kept full speed into the offending bael. They were not expecting such an attack, and were thrown clear off of the wall, a several freem drop. The kroyo was like able to slow the fall for a safe landing but regaining position among the racers seemed an impossibility. Serge did not have to look visually to see that the bael impeding Dargor did not fare any better, Gimza parrying the on-comer’s brand whilst driving his own through the assailant’s chest, life instantly leaving the now victim. At once, the now free legrunner hefted the remains off his back and flew south off the wall away from the city. Disgust from both runners flared across the bond at yet another kroyo forced to race against its will. Enemies in competition, all kroyo still shared a kinship which humans could not understand and to force one into anything was anathema. The sport here in Arburg was a dark business indeed, with many facets of corruption and indenture. There was no excitement compared to the circuit, but it should be fair, no matter the size of its machine. This time it was Dargor who scoffed across the bond. *The race ceased to be fair when the pair of us entered. Look at these imposters riding our kith! I wager half of our brethren didn’t sign up for this.* Tarnor could not disagree as they sped past many of their competition but warned his brother *Don’t be careless.* All four of us could agree with that as the first checkpoint came into clearer view.

Still probably a flik away, the southern corner of Arburg’s wall was a massive tower which must lead down to the city’s floor as well as provide as a watchtower for both inside and out of the Trade City. Over a millennium since an attack broke through the wall, and only a handful of small attempts since, guards vigilantly manned the towers at each of the wall’s corners, more so keeping an eye on the peace within their walls. The entrance to the tower’s checkpoint came to their reach as the bael pair slowed to a halt to check in. It appeared that only a piddling of quadroon were queued ahead of them as several guild officials carried out the check in. When it was their turn at last, they realized what had them waiting so long, the procedure was not as quick as one would anticipate. First, the numerals were confirmed, *84* just as the bael had entered in the first race. Next, a series of questions that only the registered kryder would know the answer to; how the guild obtained such information I did not even want to think. “What was your rank in alchemy IV at the University?” “Two-year past, you and a Jeifer spent a maj jailed. Which jail and what for?” “How were the moons of Aetatis formed?” Sure enough, I knew all of the answers to them without hesitation. Next, the kroyo were given a small series of physical tests, ensuring it was the same runner which entered the event. If that was not enough, lastly, a sample of each’s blood was taken, brought into another room behind a closed door, and a gelgen later the handler came out with our positive result. A little excessive, and a real pain in the jagoon, the pair of them could understand the caution; a fresh runner could give the quadroon a likely unbeatable advantage and the same went for a fresh kryder. The process seemed longer than it actually took, the officials rhythmically sped through the checks and got the bael right on their way. Taking the lift down to the city floor, the four took note at the line of bael that had amassed behind the tower waiting for the checkpoint. Collectively, they were all satisfied to not be waiting in the queue.

When the doors to the lift presented them back onto the city floor of the commercial district, the pair took a flek to discern the course ahead and were quickly able to pick an optimal route to take. The track clearly zigzagged through the streets of the city, but to try and cut a straight path to the docks would easily cost them more time. The track was set for a reason and was the fastest route to the next checkpoint. Occasionally, the track would fork into two or even three paths, eventually meeting up again. Because of the wait at the tower, it was a few bends and bows before another bael came into view. As they approached the leading bael, they spotted the partner slightly ahead on the road. It was then that Gimza thought out loud that it was odd there had been no traps or ambush attempts since the checkpoint. Or did he comment across their combined consciousness? Eerily, Serge could not tell, but Tarnor *did* respond into their collective: *Security near the checkpoint. The farther away we get, the higher the risk for danger.*

“Clever girl.” I said out loud and wondered if Gimza heard my voice or heard my evoked thought through our bond. Like was he had no better of an idea than myself previously. Without actual coordination, Dargor advanced head-left at the closer bael and Tarnor brought me to the bael head-right and slightly farther ahead. As if within unison, both Gimza and Serge dismounted the opposing kryder and once again, the kroyo went dashing towards the city walls. At this point, Tarnor would like to see just one runner other than us that is racing of their own accord. “It can’t be them all.” I said, this time purposely across the bond, directing it to comfort the kroyo. The gesture worked, as kroyo were very emotional creatures, and sometimes just the thought of reassurance carried its weight in gald. There were other entrants like the pair, racing for personal reasons or just for the prize; but the sad fact remained that many were guild cronies, only racing to further the guild’s agenda and keep as much purse within the machine as possible. I suppose you couldn’t blame the guild, but it still left a somewhat tarnished feeling to the integrity of the competition.

Full attention back to the race, Serge noticed that all of the shops and house fronts were closed and locked up; most likely by choice as getting run over by a legrunner in full stride would like to prove fatal. The lack of outside traffic made it easier to sense danger nearby, and though the road ahead lacked any bael, an alert of a threat pulsed through each of them. There was an urge to avoid the main raceway, and the pair vaulted up the building to the right, taking to the rooftops once again. The couple bael behind them did not get the memo, and the unseen cable took the feet from both runners just as Serge and Tarnor had previously witnessed. It was a horrible sight, but the warming gesture of the kryder attending their fallen runners made the foursome actually believe that not all of the riders cared naught for their animals. Their feelings were mixed with pity for the bael as good-hearted competitors were unfairly denied their chance at victory. The roofs were not a safehaven either, attackers leaning out of available windows with unsuccessful swings at both kryder and kroyo. Something that had been bothering Serge this entire time was just realized, the insignia on all of these outside assailants was the same. They were the same as many of the riders wore as well as the schlet to whom he owed a price of blood. It was not the guild’s sigil they wore, but some sort of secondary con, **SIGIL 1** but it all made sense that it was the guild. These were guild riders. Serge still felt strongly that they were being singled out from the other racers, but why would the guild be targeting him specifically? In the end it did not matter, they pushed all thought out of their collective mind, but it was too late, the short small distraction caused the pair to acknowledge the peril. The delay cause Serge’s parry to come a gelgen late and the right arm was badly damaged.

“Glek!” he cried out as the pain surged from the wound through the entire bond. The quadroon took shelter in a small alleyway in between two shops. The alley was shaded, and not much wider than a nitch and littered with empty crates. Tarnor knelt down to let Serge settle onto one of the crates as gently as he could. Right behind them was their teammates, Gimza was immediately on the ground next to his injured friend inspecting the laceration. The two runners stood guard at the alley’s mouth.

“Well, it’s not pretty but it’s far from your worst.” Gimza said as he tried to squeeze out a smile without much success. My skill in healing magicks was less than average at best, and his was only a fraction of that. The adrenaline surging from the wound may boost the strength a little, but it would doubtful be sufficient to close the wound. Time was valuable and for more than one reason, the kryder were extremely vulnerable and could be trapped is confronted. Gimza’s face strained with effort as he conjured all of the strength he could muster and poured it into Serge’s wound in the form of a novice healing arte. The quickened recovery was palpable, but it would still take a few days to recover at this rate. Serge then reproduced Gimza’s effort with a slightly better result. The wound was clearly responding with quickened mending, but even with some kroyo saliva and bandaging, the arm could not wield a sword or even fend off an oncoming strike.

From the direction of the track, the two sensed their companions’ warning as a skirmish erupted at the street corner. Through their runners’ eyes, the two knights saw what happened if you tried to assault a peaved kroyo on foot. The assailants clearly underestimated their prey; their first mistake dismounting in the first place. Four intruders approached the sentinels without caution, and that was their final mistake. Two charged directly at the pair of legrunners, both wielding a scimitar in each hand, the other two right on their heels. When the first came within a freem, Tarnor took a small charge, then skidded to a halt, pirouetting a full rotation, his sickle claw cut down the two men nearly severing their heads in half at the face. The following attackers took notice of the slaughter and took some caution, still proceeding. This time Dargor charged the invaders, both lunging towards him with their scimitars. The blows were easily parried as Dargor hurdled the blades and came down on the two attackers, using his win talons to nearly decapitate both men. The four dead men formed a small lake of blood and provided a warning to any others who thought of approaching the angry kroyo.

Hoping that would buy a few gelgen respite, the two companions hurried over to check on their knights. Not life threatening, but the situation was still dire as without the use of the arm, their race was over. Never documented anywhere to have any sort of magickal Talent, kroyo were still extremely intelligent creatures and these two were always proving this. *Can you two not link your artes?* Dargor asked the two as if the answer was obvious. In their studies, they had both read about magicians using magick in tandem with two or more users, in what few histories were left of the Age of Magick, a time when fabled *Espers* are have said to walk the realms of man. It was more of a legend that truth history, but Serge and his friends always seemed to think it some truth was held in the tales. Well maybe everyone except Jeifer, an Esper could shake his hand and he would still question their authenticity. Some say that kroyo share some of the memories of their ancestors, and it’s feasible that many of all kroyo ancestry had witness linked magicks. The two knights looked at each other and shrugged, they had no lesson in such a thing, and had never attempted the combination either, but they had naught another option.

The two reached out over the collective consciousness of the kroyo bond, and their two minds became one; and both could visualize their combined magick potential as well as a representation of their current power alone. Their combined strength vastly overpowered even the addition of their separate abilities. They focused all of their might into Serge’s wound in the form of a combined healing arte and to their surprise, he felt the wound’s revival expedite still. However, the entire quadroon could feel that the effort was still far from enough to get them back in the race. The four of them looked at each other, all perplexed except Tarnor. *The four of us should be able to cast a stronger arte if we can focus properly. We alone cannot harness magicks, but the two of you can borrow our untapped strength as a booster.* The argument was sound. But there was no mention whatsoever about this sort of magick link; not even in the war texts. Then again, Tarnor had never been wrong about the nature of kroyo; and the history on the Age of Magicks was scarce at best, the bulk of it burned by the Sons of Hope with Eastminster’s founding. Established in the year 0 of the Standard Era there was almost no history to be found for around the two sharpe surrounding its insemination. Much of Aetatis’s great history was lost forever during the *Holy Purge*.

So once again, the two cavaliers focused with all their capacity into Serge’s wound the same combined healing arte that had performed a gelgen prior. The strain nearly pushed them both into unconsciousness, but at the brink of exhaustion, they felt a flood of ice stream through their every cell. All four minds forming one across the bond hit a crossroad where they were able to act as one and a new arte was born which the world had possibly never seen before. Not only was the bone deep lesion completely healed leaving not a scratch but in addition, the quadroon was completely invigorated. Without trying to wonder how long they had been incapacitated, the pair mounted, and darted out of the alley back into the raceway now crowded with rivals. Whatever time was lost, they seemed to be right in the main fray of the competition.

Freshly galvanized and adrenaline near busting from their ears, the quadroon worked in tandem to advance up the standings rather than focus on taking others out of the race. Tarnor and Dargor homed in on a pair of bael a few freem from what appeared to be a sharp zig followed by a zag that was formed by a two-story fabric shop. In a calculated move that like earned them another nemesis, both runners hit break speed to catch up and hopped onto the base of their prey’s tail, using it and then the head of the kryder to perform a fabulous crowhop which took them to the height of the shop’s top. Using their legendary legs to burst themselves upward yet again, we easily cleared the entirety of the shop. Now at the flight’s peak, both kroyo shifted into a downward dive, slightly steep, directly back onto the racetrack. The landing wasn’t perfect and a little rough, but the bael pair was back into a hard lope immediately upon landing. The maneuver easily past a few quadroons and also had them running with great inertia from the propelled dive. Now the track had a small straightaway directed towards the eastern tip of Arburg in which the legrunners could take real advantage of their modified crowhop as they shifted into an all-out sprint. It would only last a few gelgen before they reached the severe turn at the corner of the city. During the dash, the two knights took in the city they had resided in for the past huts: butcher – *Step’s Meats*, fabrics – *The Cuttery*, shoemaker, tavern- *The Smoking Log*, lodge – *Cat’s Haven*, baker – *Baker’s Dozen*, farm stand – *Berrybush Bairns*, blacksmith, armory, tavern – *Hourn’s Hollar*. Business upon business stacked upon one another, with patchy streets separating them. Wide enough for a handful of bael to pass abreast, the way was not crowded, but still littered with opponents adequate for the haughty runners to display their superior footwork as they easily danced around and ahead of frustrated challengers. Some took swings at them as they approached and passed with their rapier, or mace, or flails, many kroyo were equipped with a tail flail which although hindered agility, could easily prove deadly if properly landed. Minimally armored in superior garb, Tarnor and Dargor easily avoided the onslaught as the kryder easily took leverage against a missed swing when possible to throw the aggressor off his mount onto the ground.

Now at the right-angle turn, both again picked their prey. This time they used the unsuspecting bael as a cushion as well as slight booster, allowing them to surrender minimal speed and subsequently regain it at a quicker pace. With the outstretched fingers of the docks now in their sights, the track lazily curved to form an elongated **S** that ended at the second checkpoint. Perceiving a threat from the rear, both kroyo split to the edge of the course, and the kryder tucked close to their companion. The sound of passing kunai buzzed right by the heads of both man and kroyo. In a defensive act of offense, both riders spun a half circle, releasing several kunai of their own at their pursuers landing with shields raised sitting reverse on their mount. More than half of their attempts hit their mark, disabling several of the kryder in their scopes. Their invigorated senses heightened in accompany with the bond provided them with deadly accurate throws, many missing their mark only because their target had already fallen. With a temporary reprieve from backside assault, the quadroon again took to speed while being aware for any outside threat.

With all four of the squad in uninterrupted unison, detecting a valid threat was as easy as plucking a dumbapple from its stunted tree. The fruit grew sparsely so that any developed fruit stuck out like a kroyo in a classroom and was easily picked off. Despite this method which got the fruit its name, the trees were still so successful that dumbapples could be seen clear from the Badlands to the Sea of Storms. In addition to perceiving a threat in advance, the kroyo could discern with almost certainty weather the threat was valid, meaning the hazard was aimed at them. Finally, the trickiest part was the timing, it was almost simple to perceive where and how an ambush may occur, but the *when* may be the most valuable bit of information yet the hardest to determine. The mathematicks behind these calculations were far beyond the comprehension of a simple-minded human, and the immensity of this mental prowess only further went to illustrate the untapped potential of the kroyo species. As if on cue, a smattering of mercenaries vaulted out of vacant windows and deserted apertures, all descending directly upon their bael.

The attack was not the ambush they had intended, as the quadroon was fully aware of their presence and intent before the first offender sprung from their alcove. The lot of them were dressed to imitate their companion for that horrid night, Shadow. They were by no means brethren of the legendary duelists as they clumsily tried to stalk the pair of bael. Despite being outnumbered by nearly two rodg, advancing through the gauntlet of disputants was no more arduous than a light training back at the University. The phony gladiators approached them one by one, sometimes in pairs; garbed in ratty depictions of what someone who never saw a true ninja thought one may look. Far from accurate, the band still resembled a true ninja enough to recognize their intent. Different from the outside marauders they had faced, this was clearly a crew of hired mercenaries again targeting them out from the rest of the racers. Would the Racing Guild really go through the trouble of hiring these clowns in addition to their own goons just to prevent us from winning and keep Jeifer and Ylle in custody? It didn’t add up, someone was spending a lot of gald to come after us in such force. To further establish the severity in which the two chevaliers outmatched these imposters, several already lay trounced on the road during Serge’s musing. *This is no time for fancying!* Tarnor snapped at his partner. The kroyo did never miss a flek and Serge snapped back into battle as Gimza mechanically cut his way through the oncomers.

The mercenaries continued to come at the quadroon in pairs rather than try to overwhelm them, and it was a mistake that would cost much of them their lives. Many tried to take cheap shots at the neck or exposed area of the legrunners but those were maybe the easiest kind to defend. Clearly an untrained lot, all of the good mercenary companies must be occupied elsewhere. While only being a jape at the skill of these buffoons, Tarnor raised an eyebrow at the notion, pointing out that hiring someone like this was a waste of gald even if they were all that was able to be found. One man in tattered faded gray that was once black robes took an ill-advised swipe towards Serge, and another in slightly closer to black yoroi over-swung at his runner’s face; both as easily debilitated as the rest had been. Another pair, this time in faded maroon garb both lunged at the kroyo’s neck in unison with an assault directed at Dargor’s legs from an identical pair of frauds but garbed in midnight blue apparel. Clumsily executed, both duos were no additional effort to disable as the quadroon lost little speed in the battle. Though they were many, the onslaught was over in a letch.

An unnoticeable distance closer to the checkpoint at the docks, the ensnarement lasted less than a block. *There’s something about that.* Dargor mused as they gained speed towards the storied docks of Arburg. *It was a message. Someone’s after* ***us*** *and they’ll go so far as to make sure that every hired knife has eyes in our direction.* It was easy to dismiss. The four of them let that sink in and spent the rest of the trot to the docks in silence. It was a heavy thought to absorb and digest. Who would want me dead so extraordinarily to reach such meed?

Well, it mattered naught as the great Lord Tehlu himself could want us dead all we could do was fight the oncoming storm. *The storm’s just beginning.* Tarnor warned, more of a proclamation really. None of us could disagree. We both knew that the attempts and incursions had got increasingly deadly as well as more brazen. Despite the storm clearly brewing inside all of our minds, the cloudless arid day’s assault beat down on every racer with no sign of break in sight. Despite the sweltering temperatures, the lack of insect annoyance was maybe just as disconcerting. Since their travel to Tomal, there had been virtually no sign of insect or any wildlife activity.

The grand archway leading to the seahaven quickly came into their stretches and abruptly, their entire attention was directed back towards the task at hand. The entrance to the dockery was absolutely massive, dwarfing even the largest carriage or wagon that passed underneath. In fact, the aperture would dwarf even a fully-grown dragon passing through. Both kroyo snorted a laugh a at the thought of a dragon passing through a city in this Age. It was truly an unrealistic notion, as no dragon had been seen walking on Aetatis in over a sharpe. Kroyo tended to take everything so literally, it was not as if I expected a dragon to just walk through the gate in front of us. It was a losing battle, there was very little you could change a runner’s mind on. An immaterial matter, the bael pair passed underbreatdh all eyes on the infinite nooks and crevices that could be housing another trap. None detected, neither from the quad was *that* arrogant to think just because there was nothing to detect, there was nothing there. Cloaking magicks, potions of hiding, runed items which could do a whole diversity of magick enchantments were all used throughout history. If they are still around in the Standard Age, we must anticipate them.

Directly through the colossal entryway, there was a clear egress for the bael to assemble. Still at the front, there was a short queue for the two bael gather into. Still, a number of bael wait ahead of them and many were jostling to assure their position in line, causing tensions to stay high. As we dismounted to relax for a flek, a couple freem ahead a scuffle broke out. Officials were cautious to intervene in such a closed quarter lest they spread the disagreement, the altercation only lasted but a cit and resulted in the aggressing kryder missing a right hand, the bael essentially eliminated. The pressure in the air seemed to settle a flek after the loser was led presumably to the medica. It was an interesting note again that neither kroyo intruded to defend their rider. It was true that a bonded bael could not understand the behavior of an unbonded bael any more than the unbonded could fathom what it meant to have the unconditional mental connection that was borne with the binding. To the common folk, a kroyo was just an animal used for hauling stocks or speedy transport; not the lifetime companionship which was shared between this quadroon. It was rare indeed a layman appreciated the complexity of a legrunner’s personality.

The progression was actually quite efficient as the file was split into several different lines in which the same asinine over analysis was given to each participant, man and kroyo alike. Although the runners could not answer questions, their set of inquiry was no less scrupulous as both complained through the entire ordeal just as they had the first. Despite their protest, the investigation was over in a matter of cit and the next quadroon was called in as we entered the great seahaven Qeynos. *Why not take us out at a checkpoint? It would be easy enough.* Dargor reflected as they mounted and took a light walk into the haven to scout their paths. “That’s a damn good question.” Gimza answered aloud. “Makes you wonder what is really going on over here. But there is no point in overthinking it until the race is over.”

They all mentally nodded and tried to put their targeting out of their minds in order to fully link. There were a few different routes to choose from, the wider one in the center, the clear popular choice, the pair stuck to their strategy of most irrelevant which by Tarnor’s calculation was head right. It was the narrowest, cargo obstructed, liquid slicked path of the three, and the runner reckoned they’d be the first to travel the most treacherous of the tracks, which was a large advantage in itself. Another advantage, Dargor pointed out, was likely the shortest and most direct route to the merger. On constant surveillance for hidden adversaries, man was not the only danger in these parts. Pulleys supporting a complex system of rope carried a boundless array of cargos, continuously swinging through the confines of all paths, albeit ours to the right a substantial amount greater than the rest. Boxes and crates and barrels falling and being retrieved by their stewards, the occasional loose animal or child stumbling onto or off of their direct ken. The path they had chosen was greatly unused for a reason as it was literally bustling with activity whereas the other two were relatively vacant. Again, it mattered naught as our runners easily navigated and tiptoed in and out and over and around everything that came our way. A bundle of barrels fell just as we passed, striking Tarnor directly in the ribs, he strode on and onto the obstructing girder hoisted by a pulley rope in unison with his brother. The two runners gained speed descending from the truss onto a stack of cargo crates which just seemed to suddenly topple over as we gained solid footing. But the runners were undeterred, simply bounding from the falling rubble onto the ground below as if their intent all along. The way then burst into several sharp turns, creating a drunk zigzag leading up to the pathways’ recombination which caused the pair to again slow, but still gained ground overall as they rejoined the stipant in higher position. Straight ahead of them now was probably a rodg or so old decrepit boats and barges, some just shells of the sea nomads they once were. The vessels were loosely tied together forming a maze of rotting wood and misshapen metal girders, keeping them close enough to navigate across, but swinging and swaying making for deceptive and slippery piloting. Some bael took the approach to the maze slowly with extra caution, unable to make the intricate complications at high speeds while the more confident racers accelerated onto the mesh of metal and wood. This particular obstacle was originally constructed a stek or so ago, only upkept a handful of times since then, the last maintenance performed before the Unforgiven’s last use, more than a hourn or two ago. Because of this, caution was needed, and would prove itself several time over as it took its first victim. A cocky bael attempted their entrain hastily and ended up in the underwater brier of ship bones below, an easy way to die. The initial once barge’s framework claimed several casualties ahead of the bael pair, reinforcing the burden of this segment would be caution. Finally, at the foot of the ship graveyard, the two runners broke into a hard dash and leapt into the fragile skein.

There were more than a handful of joists and rafters to carefully choose from and the paladins let their legrunners take on the routing as was now custom. The two logically chose different terminus, both using their attrite excuse for wings to land light as a lichen on their respective support someway only gaining speed. Even through their affinity, to two men were unable comprehend the acrobatic artistry in which their companions moved through the tangle of what used to be a flatboat. The trussing bent and creaked under the pressure of the kroyo’s pads. Although they tread swift as a jacklion, flakes of the once firm crossbar were shed with each circumspect stride; they felt as if they couldn’t support a child, but the mounts burst ahead with poise as bael continued to misstep or break their abutment. Either blunder brought the same result, not always fatal but an extensive delay if you were to survive. We were so surefooted Tarnor had the mind to scoff at an incoming assailant before simply upstepping the bulky javelin. As to add affront to abuse, he then fluently flicked his tail to send the bael plunging below. To the kroyo’s credit, Gimza and myself had been mere spectators through this leg of the track, just keeping double sure to keep mounted sturdy. The tangle of metal and wood demanded complete attention and then some from all kryder directing their kroyo to keep the path they intended while our minds shared our destination.

A twinge in their peridium caused Gimza to look to the left and lean back in his positioning. As if at his command, an arrow with the tip aflame whizzed past the both of us. The same warning told me to hold close to Tarnor as another flew overhead aimed at us this time, snipers were positioned on both ends. A lousy spot for an ambush, the bael pair deviated from their preferred transmit on the on the fringe of the hulls into their midsection. Being in the midst of the iron and wood labyrinth allowed some cover from the deadeye’s arrows, but the bael were now atop the core of nettle below. Trading the waters clearer of debris paid off immediately as several arrows struck rafters and joists before reaching the quadroon. Not foolproof, as still arrows made it to the heart of the skeleton but never seemed to hit their intended mark. With the additional shielding, Gimza took the time to notice that no marksman was aimed the other bael to the head and tail of us. *Quirky.* We all agreed that was very odd. Without time to consider the implications, the foursome dashed onward, overtaking another bael as an arrow intended for us hit the wrong target. The lifeless body fell to the gorse below as the headend of the arrow pierced through his neck.

Nearing a breadth only ample for one runner at a time, a choke point had formed. Coming now to a halt, the quartet took in the upcoming impediments. All of the beams and supports overhead the narroway were corroded and rotted with Dio knows what, and the crossbars and scaffolding beneath were broken and spinous. Tarnor wagered it was at least six freem to the end of the transfer.

With that survey, the heat really seemed to knock it up a notch. The brightness of the sun made it difficult to see clearly when looking upwards and now a wind started to pick up. However, not the cool fall breeze that all of these racers so desperately needed. No, this was a raw gust of pure scintillation. The sultry surge only became more oppressive and suffocating as the speed of the current picked up with a quickened pace. The old grody lumber had been worn to their ossein and despite making residence atop the great Therva the arid weather had made them near fatwood. All four of them knew it was only a matter of time before a deadeye arrow lit the whole mess of scrap caught alight. With that thought, Tarnor took the lead and leapt forward over the remaining queue waiting ahead; the runner then used the absurdly cumbersome warhammer of the next kryder waiting to emplane the plank as he lazily rested its butt on the ground. The kroyo did it so delicately that the kryder did not even notice the transferal until the bael in line began swearing in our direction as Dargor followed in stride. The limber prancing from kryder helmet to kroyo to rafter and onto a finely placed shield and then onto the landing where the support connected the two corpses of the sea was not even noticed by the patsies until the bael were onto the next bound.

However, awaiting them at the quay was a gaggle of bael who had just spanned the pass were right pissed to see us take a shortcut. One could not blame them, but the mistake was theirs this time as the two bael pair were no match for our quadroon. From right in front of them whizzed by another dart, nearly hitting one of their opponents. The next one was a mis shot, aimed at the aggregation waiting to pass over the subtend but this time struck the right piece of timber as the desiccated wind lit up the scene like a wizard’s illuminations. Several awaiting bael plunged into the spiny waters below without discretion so avoid becoming grilled alive, a few of the sprightlier runners were able to glide and skim to safer waters. The explosion was a warning for those not cause in the flare as bael pressed past the ensuing scuffle in which we were engaged. We heeded the warning as well as Serge placed a kunai perfectly in the eye of one assailant. He would have died on impact down below or in the blaze, I was doing him a favor. The second bael came on direct, and easy work was made just continuing his momentum down into the barbed underfall. As if waiting for the other, both remaining runners wafted off together into safe waters. Turning to assist Gimza, his opponents had met the same fate, one of their kroyo counted in the casualties as well. Legrunners too can be brainwashed from a young age just as humans.

No time to think on matters, just as quickly as they downed their foes, the inferno had begun devouring the ship graveyard. It was past time to leave and by now we could see the last of the entrants ahead, leaving a clear path as our quadroon now raced against the Firewind growing behind them. The flames grew hot on their heels, but it never got too hot as the runners bounced from a loose post to a one-time mast, then skipped onto broken bolster, vaulting heavily forward onto an unstable cantilever. The crosspiece buckled under the weight of Tarnor but provided no deterrent Dargor settled on the same bail unmuddled having to take a slightly taller bound to reach a slightly sturdier skiff stanchion. The quadroon could now see the terminus of the graveyard, and it wouldn’t be The Unforgiven without a departing finale which was a culmination of perpetually moving scaffolding until the very end where any survivors could disembark onto the glorious land. The enclosing conflagration was now a wildfire that threatened to spread into the shipyard and part of the seaside city. There was no time to calculate a proper path as the pair of bael gander at a countless amount of fallen corpses below.

Tarnor blinked his eyes once again. *Schlet we’ve to wing it.* Before Serge could even steady himself, they were off, and he hastily reassumed the reins. Moving at this speed the runners may as well have closed their eyes as they were right running blind. The short delay at the foot of this last stretch made the foursome literally feel the heat of the race. Even with the enhanced vigor of the kroyo bond flowing through their consciousness, vision was still densely burry at this speed without knowing the exact course you were to travel ahead of time. Not only that; the dust, debris, and ash in conjunction with the flurry of wind squalls had now constructed an opaque stormy cloud which enveloped the whole of the ship graveyard and even reached into the seahaven and city wall. The city guard would have to get on that else the whole harbor could need rebuilt. A fleeting thought as swinging spars and scantlings zipped by the kryders’ appendages. Shifting and dodging was the only way to avoid collision with swaying or falling obstructions. The two kroyo came close head to tail and the two kryder combined their shields to circumvent an oncoming bolster. With the mix of cloud, thicket, swirling cyclones, and yes still bolts of the marksmen flitted past the bael, close enough to hear them pass in all the turbulence.

Just as the gangplank connecting the ship graveyard to solid earth came within reach, an inflamed missile struck Tarnor in the bulk of his quadricep. The other three could actually feel the pain surge through them as without thinking, Serge tore out the cursor and murmured an alien phrase as he touched the wound and reconstructed the injured tissue. This was an arte he’d never heard of in all his studies, not a mortal wound still the leg indicated no damage from the impact. Ignoring the last inconvenience, the bael pair loped acrost the access to land with increasing speed as the wildfire still grew behind them. A scant straightaway ahead lead them to the next checkpoint as the feeling of a well needed short reprieve began to flourish through the bond. Not losing their guard, the quadroon slowed to a canter as they approached the queue to proceed.

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It was arduous to see what was going on from their vantage point atop The Second Stone even with Aezi’s *Visu* spell enhancing the pair’s eyesight. The sudden increase in air current had gathered the despondent dust, sand, and other rubbish developing a befog encircling the vast area around the Ship Graveyard. We could see the deadeye aiming darts at their comrades, but Aezi knew none would hit their mark. It was the other thing he was worried about. And as if summoning the sudden burst with his thoughts, one of the bolts struck home and an explosion enveloped a smattering of bael. “They’re ahead of the blast, surely they can outrun its advance?” Zid asked.

“They’ll be fine.” Aezi said absentmindedly as they both watched the inferno grow by the freem it seemed. Before our next breath the scorch had right doubled.

“Should you do something about that?” Zid chided.

“I suppose we shant let the city lay to flames, aye?” the wizard replied thoughtfully. Always something on his mind, no always multiple things on his mind. There’s always something on my mind but I’m not always reasoning something. “Let’s head towards the wall.”

The wall was only one avenue away from our perch, and a short trot. We eased off the edge and when we hit the ground, already startled bystanders were practically stunned to see two outlandishly dressed foreigners jump from the inn’s gambrel and land lightfoot as a grimalkin. No time to give explication, we both hustled to the wall, directly east of The Second Stone. We arrived in no more than a gelgen and hastily found the nearest ladderway up. When we reached the crest, it was our first view of the wildfire since we’d left our perch and the display was dreadful. The whole of the Ship Graveyard was enclosed in a dense becloud of ash, smut, and smoke. As if we had a seeing-eye, the both of us watched Serge and Gimza dart out of the cloud onto solid ground. It was expected, but seeing it visually was still a relief.

From our placement on the walltop, the heat of the blaze could be felt, and the swirl of ash and debris was starting to envelop the harbor and make its way into the city. The City Guard was already fighting the inferno but to no avail, they only seemed to feed the flames as the holocaust began to take on a life of its own.

“Enough of this, no?” Aezi said as he began to concentrate on saturating the air to quell the coruscate. He murmured in the ancient tongue as he concentrated on the atmosphere in front of us. Not particularly gifted in magicks, I still know some basics and therefore began to concentrate my energy into strengthening the wizards artes. The air around us suddenly began to feel heavier and even thicker, as it saturated with artificial moisture.

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Departing from the third checkpoint made us all remember how mundane and scrupulous these probes actually were. I suppose they were necessary though to ensure that fresh racers were not being exchanged midrace. In addition, the flek of reprieve was also a welcome commodity. Rather than dash out of the egress, the four of us walked casually for a flik. It was like stretching our muscles and relaxing our minds for a short letch. The race was going well, as good as could be expected, and we laughed. “If you’d had told me that all of our lengthy ventures together would’ve prepared us for such an undertaking?” Gimza said aloud.

“They were joyrides, but at the end of the day, all of those keli together, they made riding in pair a matter of course.” Serge chimed in, not even rationalizing that his mere thought would correctly be traversed through the bond which they all shared.

*It’s trained us for more than just this.* Tarnor agreed as he added as well. We all four nodded mentally and prepared to dive back into affray. The feeling of stability permeated throughout our wholeness as the all of us eased back into deep convergence. Our saunter quickly became a trot and before a gape gelgen we were at an all-out gallop as the emanation was abruptly furcated into several circuitous trails, some visibly less traveled with overgrowth.

Impulsively, Tarnor chose the second-most overrun avenue. The camouflage of the lush forest would help the quadroon from likely instigators which by my count was already past overdue. The recent disruption evident in the path ahead shows that ours is not the first quartet to tread this way. Steadfast in concentration and navigation, it was effortless to detect a considerable expanse of traps in this already tested byway. It was right laughable to consider a pair or two unbonded bael would not spring one of these impediments. Nevertheless, the each of us skipped and larked around each jap unhindered. Up the trunk of one angled mossfoot tree which led to a stunted jimberwood that easily bypassed one obstacle. Then a brisk bound landing us on a branch no wider than the belly of a jyunmouse somehap supported all of our heft, omitting another ambuscade. The dance with trees went on for some length until abruptly we were in a clearing. The expanse was not natural. Sensing great immediate alert, the two runners came to an immediate halt and we took in the assart. The clearance must be manmade in such a crowded woodland. *If this is the same woodland.* Tarnor remarked. “Impossible!”, Gimza audibly louder than he intended. Though, the ambience was irregular, like a dreary projection. The air was cool with a daft frostiness what was a stark contrast to the barren sultry we had grown accustomed to. The draft wafted lazily through the encircling trees and shrubbery. Something wasn’t right.

Without warning, a coterie of men emerged from the outcropping. They suddenly became visible as if only appearing at the edge of the timberline. Shadowy beings, there were a good rodg total, forming a ring right around us as we stood still in the center. Walking upright at the height of an average man, their smokey facial features showed nothing unique. All twins of one another, they closed in together but only one spoke in a guttural tone. “You tread the wrong path.” His dialogue had a raspy sound like the crackling of leaves. The one whom spoke stepped a nitch forward of the rest as they stood in place in a circle around us. Their odor was of that worse than a farmhouse covered with decomposing fish bowels filled with the excreta of a chiliadal decaying lepers. It left rust up our nostrils as then came yet closer. “Turn back.” The lead scoundrel demanded. The sound of his voice was enough to turn your guts to snakes.

“Surely you jape.” Gimza retorted with a mad grin before their defined commander had closed his jaws. “You come unarmed.”

The shadowmen were indeed armed to the britches, wielding swords or hammers or axes in both hands as well as extra armaments attached to their belt and backpiece. The all of them began to look and laugh at one another whilst emphasizing their weaponry. Their eyes, pink with evil turned darker crimson as they became the glowing red color of fresh blood. “We outnumber and out arm you ten to one, *Rajah*.” The last word was said with such scorn that the air truly chilled with anger.

“Mayhap you pervert my words. You walk alone.” Before the intruders were allowed a rebuttal, Dargor spun sideways and frog-kicked their declared chief neck-high, removing the head clear from his torso. Black blood oozed from his neck agape, smoking as it touched the fresh oxygen. “What in Dio’s name are you…” Gimza trailed off as the others took in what had just happened.

It seemed without their leader they became perplexed and awry. They looked at each other with bewilderment before another stepped forward. There was no introduction from this one as he was all business. *“Impetus!”* It roared. Its ear shattering tongue literally brought blood to our ears and Gimza and Serge screamed in agony. In seconds, the two kroyo had their companions in a sane mind, deep in the cognizance of the bond; but the momentary delay gave the imposing squadron a generous advantage.

Afore the skirmish could turn into a slaughter, Serge whipped a chakram from the saddle and lashed it through two of the marauders’ cervix, clearing one’s head straight from its body, and leaving the other’s hanging on by a flax. The bodies crumpled idly to the soil, obsidian blood again blistering with smoke as it stirred with the fresh oxygen. An attacker detected at the closing gelgen was effectively broken in half by a direct hit the bulk of Tarnor’s tail. Gimza hucked several kunai at a pair of incoming invaders, most hitting their mark, causing the two to stumble making them easy for Dargor to finish off. *“Diablos!”* Gimza spat as more midnight blood smoldered the air as the two combined. The rest of us could only agree, more evil fiends singling out us in an ambush. It was extremely disconcerting.

However, as another kefk encompassed us, this time apparently in sync with their new director gave us no time to ponder this reoccurring problem. Without time to count the interlopers, through our combined consciousness, we sensed seven more foes. Their approach suggested that they would come all at once, with their head just behind maybe to pick out a weakness after we were engaged. As they drew yet closer still, we decided that we would not give him the opportunity to exploit any kink in our armor.

As they neared an arm’s length, the two legrunners bounded over the ensuing opponents, and landed safely outside the ring of *diablos*. The lot was confused by the abrupt preemptive measure and before they could turn about face, three more lie motionless on the dirt. The self-appointed chieftain looked more like a craven than a platoon leader as he once again darted behind the cover of his accomplices. The three took offense to this act of cowardice and quickly slayed the imposter. “Addition by subtraction.” Gimza japed at the remaining renegades. Their response was an ejection of saliva showing their disgust with both the slain and the all of us.

*“Stercore…”* One of the lasting fiends hissed as the trio assailed us head on at once. Odds more in our favor, Serge and Gimza both debarked and drew their blades and bucklers, advancing on their adversaries. The trio met the pair in the core of the expanse, the fiends’ ebony blades searing as they clashed with the chevaliers’ iron. All focus on the dismounted knights, the hellions were ignorant to the kroyo once again leaping over the melee. The talons of the runners easily again separated head from body, rendering the three carcasses.

Taking in the entire scene once again, we saw that not all of the corpses stayed, and the remaining cadavers broiled with smoke as they disintegrated into the air right before our eyes. Before we had the time to contemplate what we had witnessed, the surrounding region began to do the like, and before realization dawned on us, we were back in the familiar Braemwood, back in the arid heat. No longer on a pathway or footrail, we had been displaced some length. Furthermore, the azure sun sat blazing on the sky, at least two hoars preceding our departure from the third inspection square. Even Tarnor was out of sorts trying to mull over the entire dramatic turn of events. No time for deep deliberation, we all quickly took hold of the collective bond and turned all focus back to the burden at bay.

Nautics told us that we were a good kefk of flik north of the actual intended raceway. The beauty of the jungle is that one can take any path they desire, even those never tread previously. With a gelgen’s respite, the runners had a route pegged and scurried off east bearing south to reconvene with the raceway a good few flik ahead. Hoping for a relatively quiet stretch in the privacy of the foliage was probably too much to wish for. Despite their deepest reserves, the first half of the trek was peaceful and brought the foursome back to their joy rides in the Arland Woodlands. In an array of ways, The Unforgiven was an extension of their time together in Arland. In addition, the farther east you traveled from the River Therva, the greater the populations of bandits and brigands that took residency in the Braemwood. Truth be told, hunting the curs of Aetatis was as much fun if not more than the joyriding. In all candor, there is nothing that gets the blood streaming like combat on a kroyo. Nevertheless, the brief relaxation was awfully welcomed.

As if on cue, a pair of quadroons came into view on our flanks. Although before they actually came into view, their stench was oppressive. If these perpetrators had a foul odor, it made the last encounter seem a garden of flowers. Clearly not racers, these kroyo were colossal, easily the most sizable runners any of us had seen. Tarnor actually gawked at the size of these beasts. Our heard of legrunners, or audita had been on countless tears through the wilderness of Aetatis and seen all species and variations of their kind. If the kroyo were massive, the kryder were equal in proportion. Their blackened eyes actually burned with the cobalt color of the sun’s blaze; runners included. A heat so torrid that we could literally discern their glowers from the fevered clime. The sense could truly turn your insides to insects if not seasoned or prepared for such revulsion. The four pair of beasts would easily serve as the most considerable threat, affirming that their most recent trial as just an easy warm up of what was to come. Always excited for a new and arduous tribulation, the bael pair delved ever inward to their united awareness.

Unsure of a real battle strategy, the quartet was absolutely outmatched in such certitude which we have not at any time endeavored. The fiends looked fierce and aggressive, but something about them shouted acumen. As they enveloped us, the wisest thing to do seemed to be to vault straight up, and drift behind the intruders. If anything, it would give a quick letch to consider a tactic. We landed a good freem behind the intermeddlers, providing crucial gelgen as our adversaries scrambled to locate our moor.

Instantaneously, the four of us felt an alien sensation ravaging through the bond. As if our veins were near to blowout, overrun with fully oxygenated blood coursing the sail of starlight. Seemingly controlled by an unknown force in our consciousnesses, in one fluid movement together, Tarnor and Dargor let out a wailing “*Waaaaaark!”* totally in unison with the two chevaliers as they let out a booming “*Glacies!”.* Coldness inflated us and, in that instant, before the imps could about face, a huge mass of sleet coalesced over the middle two bael and dropped precisely on the offenders; straightaway encasing the quadroon in permafrost. As though following instructions from some imaginary script, our veins suffused even greater gorged as if erupting our every muscle was inevitable. The unknown force controlling our every motion once again, in absolute accord, the legrunners roared *“Kweeeeh!”*, combined with the paladins’ resounding “*Ignis!”*. Our erupting capillaries began to boil as atop the frozen brutes a massive sphere of liquid fire assembled and fell unto the now captives. When the flame hit glacier, the width erupted in a blinding detonation, the result essentially erasing the assailants from assistance when the smoke cleared.

With only a bael pair remaining, the odds shifted closer to an even fight. However, after performing a combined arte that all the like hasn’t subsisted since the Age of Magicks, we were all right weary. We clung on scarcely to the bond, our collective mindset drifting in and out of focus. The crisp enhanced vision now showed our approaching enemies as a blurred lump atop another bleary shape. The pair of cavaliers thought back to the University’s abbreviated class on fighting blind. It was thought to be such a pointless class that over the years it was almost a running jape. Turns out at the time of the University’s inception, it was very commonplace to be blinded either temporarily or permanently for an enumeration of causes. That knowledge did us no asset now as the fiends were now only a nitch in front of us at full strength. In addition, even a master unsighted brawler needed strength to combat. Even no time to use the blasted bills, Serge was clear out ideas.

As if the thought of those abominations set Tarnor’s entire being on fire, the bond was once again gushing through each of our recognition, vision clear and strength in our bones. The advancing rivals took no notice, now in blade’s reach, both hefted their respective weapons at once. A laughably massive bastard sword wielded with the ease of a blacksmith brandishing a butterknife and an equally ridiculous battle axe in the hands of the other. The effortlessness in which these towering creatures handled those armaments would make any mortal man loose their bowels. Their unfathomable fetor in conjunction with the stifling aridity of the current climate was indeed an assault on our senses, the fiery sun only intensified the affects. “There has to be some sort of magicks that can deter this foulness.” Serge complained as the confrontation ensued.

Re-invigorated, but not quite full strength, although outstepped, the quadroon relished in facing death. *You are never as sharp as when the stakes are the highest* was what Master Coulin, our Professor of Arms would always say to the point of exhaustion, but it was true as the sun is blue. And his illustrious aphorism would be put to the iron test right now.

The runners met first as just a matter of physicks. Tarnor seethed rage across the bond at these plagues on his kind, surely the iratest any of us have witnessed. He harnessed all of that fury into a lethal moon kick, clear splitting the legrunner’s face in two, each flopping sideways at the neck. The kryder dismounted immediately, unperturbed as his mount crumpled to the ground, its coal colored blood hissing at the encounter of oxygen. *“Diablos!”* Gimza spat, stating the obvious.

“Ya think?” Serge jested out loud as he took in the toll at which that last action took on his companion. On the brink of collapsing, Tarnor kept his mind crisp to aid the strength of their joined cognizance. Serge gave a quick pet and hopped onto the ground in between his kroyo and the shadowman. Willing to defend his counterpart with his life, he felt a new re-invigorance from this new threat. Serge often put his loved ones’ safety ahead of his own to a fault. So far it has paid off every time. Releasing a few kunai as a distraction, the opponent predictably used his sword to parry the blows, giving Serge an opening to slash at the leg. But the foe was too quick, his appearance betrayed him as bulky and slow, but his form was fast as a falcon as he easily side-stepped the attempt. Still, the mongrel was slightly on the retreat, and he took advantage of the small opening. A false high swing gave the opening to boot the monster in the chest, sending it further reeling, if only a letch. *Taking down this schlet little by little is like to drain me completely before I can land a blow.* It was now the enemy’s turn to take the offensive as it parried the next attempt and lunged forward with a hefty stroke aimed directly head height.

However, this was anticipated as Serge parried preemptively and ended up directly behind the traducer; leaving the adversary’s sword driven a good nitch into the earth. As it struggled to pull the blade free, a sudden fervor filled Serge’s muscles. Again, out of control, he called, *“Luna Ferrum!”* and in one swift motion swung his blade in a full circle towards the swine with its back still turned. The empowered blade easily cut through the fiend’s flesh, leaving a scrunched corpse on the ground in between him and his kroyo. Tarnor now stepped back, confident that he would not be needed the remainder of the brawl.

Correct, Dargor and Gimza already had their challenger backpedaling, clear with the advantage; they were still weary. Picking that up over the bond, Serge used his last bit of energy to dart behind the roiling enemy and take out the legs of the defiled kroyo, causing both runner and kryder to turn their attention behind them to Serge. The bael took well advantage of the opportunity, easily cutting down the distracted fiends.

The three than turned their attention to Tarnor who was now resting in the brush, not life-threatening, a good night’s rest was all he needed. As fatigue set in, we realized that is what we all needed. However, setting up camp right here at the scene of the skirmish seemed a rather lazy way to get killed. No, resting here would not do. With the strength of the bond fading, Gimza and Dargor used some of what little energy remained to empower the other bael, leaving the entire foursome with enough fortitude to hike lightly through the woodland. Hopefully undetected for another surprise encounter was unfathomable. The quartet had hoped to reach the next checkpoint by nightfall but would like have to cut the day short. If an adequate site could be set for a camp in short order, we could be racing by night’s heart.

It was a slow crawl through the thickest part of the Braemwood, but for some reason we perceived no hazards. It seemed no more than a few letch we came upon a giant jimberwood copse, several rodg atop one another. In our present condition, neither of us could think of a better place to rest for a few hours. One jimber in particular sat in lower ground, its roots virtually concealed entirely. The small crater in the ground in combination with the root structure provided the quadroon with an almost comfortable hideout. With luck we would rest undisturbed until the other racers were sacked out. By the internal kroyo clock, we had approximately five hoars until night’s heart, not a full rest but it would have to do. The down time would still be more than double than which they had planned to rest. The all four were slumbering deep afore a cit.

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It was easy enough to track down our quadroon, the fumes of the immense burst of magicks was detectable for fliks if you knew how to look for it. Predicting their path was just a simple matter of logic, knowing any traffic was to be avoided as well as staying covered this jimberwood orchard was undoubtedly the most rationally sound shelter that they would stumble upon first. Not only that, the quartet effortlessly found the ‘natural’ shelter placed for them. Natural enough, the all four of them were comatose in a gelgen’s note. So far, all going impeccably according to the scheme. Night fell swiftly as if on cue to their dozing, but once again, it did nothing to quell the miserable heat.

“Are you actually smiling?”

“I am, the easy part of this trip is about to come to an end.” The wizard quipped, “The stars above know what stalks this night.”

“Always so cryptic.” Zid retorted, “Can’t you just once say something?”

The wizard sighed, tonight dressed in his onyx robe, amusingly titled *Night’s Heart*, “Fine… We both saw the aftermath of the last pair of encounters, I only expect it to get worse from here on out.” The conjurer’s look grimaced, “Be prepared for anything.”

“So, if you expected worse, why are only the two of us preparing for this war?” the scholar gibed, clearly irritated by the mastermind’s planning.

The sorcerer actually laughed, then shaking his head and progressed into another sigh, “Do you really need to question my machination?” Clearly irked by his friend’s inquest. The wizard then reconsidered, “No, you’ve the right of it friend there’s nothing to hide but the entirety of the mission should be common knowledge.” This time a sincere smile was passed to his friend. “Qeles and Corelle are accomplished and experienced battlers. They’re strong and hard willed. Dusk has probably proven his loyalty by his actions, but everything is on the line here. You know as well as I no one equals us when it comes to stealthy handiwork.” Zid returned the smile to the magician. “Whether we think so or not, the Second Stone is in harm’s way in thanks to us as well, so the three of them really must stay watch there.” The augurer now adjusted his customary conical crown shaped hat, as if now conceding his final mark. “As a pis aller, if we are in over our heads, we can rouse the others. To their ignorance, I’ve already envigored the lot of them but the rest will do them well.” The cap somehow now sported the color of Night’s Heart, greatly concealing the wizard in the evening's cloak.

The scholar donned his usual brawler tunic, the disciple owned a variety of tunics, a good rodg saved from the massacre all of a different shade. Tonight’s was the same evening shade as the wizard’s, but less the fancy name. The legrunner besides, Flore, deep cobalt with minor gold trimmings, blended well into the night as well. All kroyo are inherently intelligent, and this one knew when and how to keep discreet. “So, what *do* you expect tonight?”

“I’ve no hint.” Aezi turned to his right to comfort the runner beside him. Ornitier’s pure golden scales would stand out in the night like a beacon, so the wizard had enchanted his companion’s scurf to match his hat and robes. “He doesn’t feel comfortable when he’s not in *his own skin*.” The mage caressed Ornitier’s collar and spoke quietly, “It’s ok it’s still your skin, it’s just a different color.” Aezi then turned back to the left, facing Zid, “I’m sorry, he’s jittery, he doesn’t quite understand that it’s only a widthless film over his skin.”

“I don’t understand that either, and I was a top graduate at University.” The scholar laughed. *Glek that! I don’t want some strange film encasing me!* Flore agreed adamantly with the other kroyo. Zid turned back to the left, “I don’t blame you, neither do I.” Again, facing the wizard, the student chaffed, “Lovely, so I suppose we’ll find out just what to expect.”

“Something will happen soon enough. Or maybe nothing will happen.” At that Ornitier actually warked a laugh. “You *want* to draw something near!” The wizard jeered at the kroyo. “It’s ok I know you are anxious, just try to be a little quieter.” To their delight, almost two hoars had passed as they bantered together.

*Stercore! I sense risk.*

Ornitier looked at his master in confusion. “Blood and ashes, who in stys was that?” The wizard blurted out also in shock.

“You heard that?” Zid asked uncertainly.

*Dio’s ashes yes, I heard that!* Aezi looked at Zid but didn’t have to ask. The answer was given unspoken.

“What in the moons is going on?” the troubled scholar asked aloud.

“I’m no kroyo expert but –“ the magician was quickly cut off.

*A converged bond it was once called, in a time long forgotten. Our DNA can remember. It has remembered unintentionally.* Ornitier was an expert in kroyo, the runner probably knew more of his race than any being on Aetatis. “In times of great need, things inconceivable or long forgotten can be achieved.” Aezi recited. A prominent paraphrase from University.

“Good ole Master Roedran, I don’t think he was ever wrong about anything.” Zid joked.

“Well we are about to find out.” The wizard showed a thin smile, “Get ready for some fun.”

*We’ve got incoming to the camp from the north.* The wizard imparted through the cognization. At that instant, it seemed to turn unnaturally dark. Even with our Second Sight, the camp was now invisible through the twilight’s veil.

*Schlet we can’t even see the camp; we’ve got to get closer.* Zid conveyed.

*We shouldn’t move we’ll give away our advantage.* Ornitier warned.

“But we none of us can’t see a flek.” Aezi said out loud, clearly perturbed. “Our only objective is to protect our friends.” Immediately sighing at his misstep.

*We may as well move, now, and shut up.* An irritated Ornitier projected strongly. *Tread with caution, they come from the south now.*

*And the east.* Flore declared. “Dio’s ashes!” Zid gaped “I could really another hand helping right now.”

We moved towards the camp, but it was as it had disappeared. *The darkness could not hide anything this well.* Zid complained.

Abruptly, Ornitier and Flore held up at the same time. “The air is rotten.” The wizard said blandly. “We’re… this isn’t… We are on instable ground.” It was stated a matter of factly.

“What in the blood of brady does that even mean!” Zid again griped out loud.

*Voices!* Ornitier all but shouted across the bond. *Mother’s milk! Get a hold of yourselves. Look at the trees around us, the odd misty haze that dances on the cool breeze. It’s not natural, any more than this obsidian sky.*

We all took a flek and regained our composure. *They’re coming from the north and the east… and the south. We need to take out the squad to the north and then choose our next move.* Ornitier was as good a battle strategist as any man at University and that was not flak on the University, the two of us were as adept as many of the high-ranking officers and strategists of the King’s Army. At once, we were racing north directly at the source of peril. No jimberwood, no camp; yet closer the perceived danger came. Both men believed in parallel worlds, but to think that either of them would ever experience one in person was virtually outside comprehension.

The nearer we approached the origin, the calmer we became as the excitement of the impending battle settled into essential nature. With the distance closing, the reek protruding from the focal point became abhorrent. The root of the stench was clearly what we were headed straight for, and it made a sewer’s cesspit smell like a woman’s cuttery. The clout of their stench stuck them a lantern in this stained shadowy sundown.

Straightaway, the miasma conquered their senses, and whatever the quartet was tracking may as well have been on top of their faces. As if their nares were ablaze, the pollution was not only fetid, but sultry. In this bizarre chilled air, the odor flared like the dickens. Disgust seethed through our cognization as the presence of five others became evident. In some way, we were completely surrounded. The two kryder leaned on the mental prowess of the kroyo and we were able to deflect much of the malodor, for now.

Now focused, the wizard cast a ball of light up above, illuminating the would-be battlefield. As their perception told, five combatants surrounded the bael pair, tall boar-like creatures which walked upright standing almost three nitch tall. As they stalked closer, drivel slavered from their snouts which were jutted with misshapen flaxen tusks and fangs. Their frames bulged with muscles; and their hands, which carried blades or axes sported talons the size of a man’s fingers. They spoke an incomprehensible dialogue as they licked their chops.

“They look hungry, and not for chicken.” Zid said with a wry smile as we picked our targets.

Forthwith, the wizard uttered a rune *Ignis,* swiftly detonating the beast head straight in a brilliant gleam. The sudden blast of radiance seized the others, leaving them addled and fixated on the explosion for flek. The daze was succinct, but it allowed the pair a small leverage in which we both picked out a single foe to overtake. Zid dashed head left as Aezi darted head right, each culling the nearest adversary. Far too late they realized, ast Flore used his rudder to sweep out the minion’s feet allowing Zid to cricket hop off the kroyo, utilizing a jet kick to fully behead the fiend with his heel. Ornitier took a different approach, achieving an accomplishment only mentioned in children’s’ tales. The rest of us gazed on in awe, as the legrunner let out a bellowing *Kweeehh*, and expelled a rush of balled light at his marked fiend. The target erupted in another scintillating display of starlight as the expanse was looking more like an aurorist’s night show than a battleground. The spectacle had the remaining *diablos* blinded in awe as we both reared on the leftovers. Even the four of us were so astonished that our movement was inhibited for a quick flek before we were able to regain our serenity. Ever the apostle of a wizard, Ornitier has never ceased to accomplish accolades unseen for sharpes.

Not out of adjust for long, the remaining couple were rushing us in a gelgen’s graze. Under the illumination, and scrutinizing these beasts for more than a flek, we could see the truth in the fairy-stories that had been passed down through the ages. Rather than the reports of the hellions growing gruesome and more terrifying as time draws, it would seem the opposite was true, as no depictions on sheets could capture the horror that stalked our way.

Nonetheless, we charged unperturbed, and without speech we hastily agreed on a blitz tactic. Flore bounded over the pair and as the bael soared overhead the two were unable to deduce any counter, as the concept of splitting up and each taking a bael was past their intellectual grasp. Not knowing what to do, the recreants lashed faster towards the wizard and his runner causing the bael the slightest misstep from which they recovered at once. Still proving a modest advantage for the incendiaries Ornitier leapt backwards furiously, giving the magician a letch to murmur a rune *Radix,* ensnaring the pursuers a fraction. The minimal delay was plenty of an opening for the brawler and his runner to make quick work of the distracted fiends. Splitting the work evenly, Zid dismounted and used his bare fists to twist the beast’s skull clear off its neck. Flore again took advantage of his sickle talon to slice true through the kneecaps, causing his foe to double over, making it simple for the kroyo to now use his other lune claw behead his aim.

In this distorted dimension, it was a wonder how much time had elapsed. Both of us had as an extensive understanding of parallel dimensions as any known scholar on Aetatis. What felt like a quick few cit skirmish may well have raged on for hoars. In addition, time streams contrastingly across dimensions, videlicet, there is no standard. Ut quod ait, deducing the most expedient return avenue took great precedence over another skirmish with more fiends. However, with *diablos* fast approaching, we none of us had an inkling on a retreat. *A rodg from the south, ten cit. Seven from the southeast, a leven.* Ornitier recited back as if reading a set of instructions. Clearly, their pursuers had a direct lock on us as we had on them; hiding was not an option. Regardless, we had to find a way home now or we prepare for war.

The latter seemed inevitable, twenty-two incoming aggressors against a single bael pair. *Some run on four legs. I don’t know how many, wait they’ve combined.* The wizard’s kroyo conveyed what we all felt. The two sorties had jointed to form a small militia. “We can outrun them for a stretch but what might we stumble into?” the wizard thought out loud. *We can’t. They’ve combined but given no up no time. I can’t figure it.* If Ornitier was at a loss, we may be in trouble. *We must find refuge, or at the least high ground.*

Before the one of us could respond, the entire blackness above expounded into a geranium hue; illuminating the woodlands. After a gelgen, when our eyes adjusted to the brightness, we all could not help but freeze in place.

The forest around was absolutely abound with vermin. Blood eyed rodents to creatures afly, and they now were all focusing on us four. Turning about face, we now could see the platoon of fiends quickly approaching our position. A kefk of bael, a rodg of shuck, and a few fiends on foot, there was no refuge in sight. “Nothing gets the spirits arise such as a fight to the death.” Zid cackled.

“We shan’t perish here.” The wizard said logically as if reciting what was for lunch. “We –“

At once, Zid’s flesh and bones began to fade, like a mist over a swamp. Clearly perturbed, Flore saw himself begin to vanish from existence as well. Before the new squadron was upon us, the bael had completely evaporated. Ornitier swiveled his head around to look the wizard directly in the eyes. Now alone facing near two rodg the wizard smiled. This time the smirk touched his eyes. *You are never as sharp as when the stakes are the highest.* “The odds are in our favor.” Aezi laughed to the runner.

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We awoke to a ruckus nearby. After the past days’ circumstances, we were all on edge and easily stirred. The disruption and loud grunts emanating into our bunker only made us surer that the hooligans outside were once again after us. Moon high in the sky, our internal clock told us that we had gotten a good bit of rest here. Freshly invigorated, we sensed multiple parties around our location. *They can’t discern where we are.* Tarnor conveyed. *The area is dense with forest and there is a few rodg skulking about. The course is south bearing east. We need to make a dash for it.* The four of us gathered our wits in a gelgen’s flick and agreed on a path. Before the potential pursuers could detect our hideaway, we were on the move.

Between Tarnor and Dargor, a faster pair has not been renowned. If the interlopers combing the area of our camp were after us, they were never able to give any chase. By the time we intervened into the main raceway, the sun was nary present. Completely devoid of bael, we all knew that this was the time most would be getting their reprieve. We hustled on, determined to make up some of the lost time we could before the sleepers we abound once more. The open pathway was quiet, empty. Only now did the familiar landscape devoid of any wildlife settle back into our systems. Even though the biota has shown renownedly barren over the past few huts it was impossible to get accustomed to and you still felt the need for some sort of wild presence.

It was an uncomplicated dart to the fourth checkpoint. Located squarely on the main trackway, it blended into the forest almost taking on the form of a natural formation. If a bael was not fully focused, the structure could be easily overlooked. A missed checkpoint resulted in immediate disqualification, so it was a good call to stay on the main route in this early hoar. It was obvious to discern that the vast majority of racer bael set up camp beyond this checkpoint. We only felt a few camps indicated as we sprinted to the checkpoint, which was also empty at the early hoar. The banal inspections were almost a force of habit now as we eased through the process in record time. The track through the egress was just as empty as the course leading up to the access, completely barren, of both bael and life.

An all too familiar scene, the quadroon sprinted through the raceway with an audible sigh. *Just because you get used to something doesn’t make it ordinary.* Tarnor complained through the bond and we all agreed unanimously. The heat and the lack of animals in the wilderness seems to even be affecting the plantlike. The trees and shrubbery exhibited signs of discolor and deterioration. “It’s like all of Aetatis is vexed.” I added in, “Everywhere we go, it seems to get worse.” Despair faintly skimmed across the cognization but was quickly replaced by determination. *If the world is going to end it will do so on our terms.* Suddenly taking on a prophetic tone, Tarnor’s words infused our blood with courage, as strong as the runners’ legs.

With the fresh invigoration the kroyo hit that newly found acceleration and were again topping their peak velocity. As we galloped at a speed fast enough to blur your vision, we sensed the dense population of camps right off the mainway. Hoping to avoid as much impediment as possible, the legrunners demanded even more from themselves and gained still greater speed as the presence of many man and runner came and went out of our consciousness. Surely our time alone on the track was dwindling, we could now feel the change in perception as bael now began to rouse in the early morning hoar. With the roadway about to become crowded with kroyo traffic, now was our time to chart a direct route northwest to the next checkpoint, which was located on the outskirts of the city wall near the merchant gate. The location of the northeastern gate was fixated in our collective mind and heading right for it would take us off course and through the dense bush. Hardly a deterrent, our kroyo pair could navigate the dense briar just as well as any other runner could a clear raceway. Again, drifting back to our outings since childhood for a tick, it was a rare occurrence that the four of us tread on a pathway.

As we drifted off-path, it reoccurred to us that our last scuffle was not with racers at all and the thought of human foe rather than unnatural may be a welcomed sight. Ignoring that, bushwhacking was the shortest route to our destination. Regardless, if the aberrant wanted us, they would right find us. It was easier to have one set of probable foes than multiple. With luck, the cover of the brush would keep us separated from the other bael until we hit city limits. As the bush became denser, a tinge of excitement shifted to joy as the runners absolutely loved a dance with the trees. Quite complicated than afore, the two kroyo were in bliss as they executed their carefully maneuvered acrobatics. It was as well an exhilarating jaunt for the kryder as the legrunners carefully chose where each footpad touched down in perfect harmony. It was almost as if the two were insects fluttering from branch to branch to trunk to dirt and again onto the briar. All in a gelgen’s descry. If not so attuned to the kroyo ballet, such expedient shifting could cause nausea.

Although the motion was quick, lurching, and often not upright, the mutation occurring in the Braemwood was visible in pristine clarity as time slowed to let Serge focus on a single leaf. It hadn’t seen water’s embrace in a moon’s age and looked at if it was ready to break free from its stunted branch. The branch was decrepit, forming a hook as it slumped down supporting its sickly cast of petals. It was as if veins erected from the branch forming a world of pathways. Pathways, however, that were completely devoid of life. No ants, no bickons, not a little critter to be seen just re-enforced the quick turn Aetatis had taken since the massacre. The altered trees still donned a good majority of their bracts, but the slightest breeze which was generated by our passing easily displaced the petals from their home. Serge’s eyes followed a single leaflet as it meandered to the forest floor with its other fallen companions.

Whispers from the fallen leaves told tales of ages past as our combined consciousness seemed to swirl into one with the surroundings around us. This daze may have lasted a gelgen or an hoar, but when we aroused, our environment appeared to be the same, but with a slightly shifted color hue. Everything just seemed greyer, and dimmer; almost as if something was missing from the atmosphere. Unable to put our eyes on it, we instead focused our efforts on any possible intruders stalking us. This hazy dream-like mirror of our world showed no threats to us, in fact, our cognizance could not detect anything at all. It was as if there was nothing at all here. We can physically see the plant life around us but to our discernment, it may have well been lifeless decoration. As I went to touch the varied tree branch, my misted hand felt the petal just as it would any regular plant.

With that, a crow landed on the branch a flek from my face. It looked directly in my eyes and I conveyed a sharp pain through the bond as our eyes were locked on one another. Tarnor realized my endeavor, he simply turned, and our eyes unlocked as the pain vanished. Before we could completely wrestle our cynosure, we were again surrounded. In this murky world, seven solid figures sat around us, clear spring water. Evident in front of us, these shadowmen were invisible to our bond. Not only that, visibly against the faded world, they stuck out like fox out on the chickens. At once, they all seven charged us, and in the flash of a flek, the runners leapt right over the oncomers and darted straightaway. A quick calculation made our decision to flee as the odds of victory we very unfavorable in this unusual land. The sun not visible on the beclouded sky, and the bond groggy, we were unable to discern a navigational direction. We sprinted towards the only noticeable disturbance our combined awareness detected.

Unsure what we were racing towards, the all of us were focused on any impending ambush. Our vision not at full strength in this outland, the knights held their blades ready and shields up. We were not taking any chances. All we could ascertain about this anomaly was that it was there, and faintly that we were getting nearer. After dashing at least a tifa, our beings began to shift resolve as we began to become more solid the more we approached the beacon. The setting around us remained unaltered, misty as a swamp’s surface. With the solidification of our shapes, we all began to feel somewhat more whole, as if we were incomplete in this strange region.

As we still came closer, the aberration became more stable in our perception. Still unable to gather any more data, the irregularity would be upon us any gelgen now. We topped the crest of the oncoming ridge and discovered the disturbance in the void. A breathtaking waterfall, clear as a sunrise, protruding from the dim and befogged forest like a daiken tree in a desert. The rationale escaped our understanding as to what significance a fall could hold to send out a signal in such a dismal environment. Our builds now as solid as the cataract we stood in front of, there was something that drew us unto the waterfall not only mentally, but physically as well. Just as the realization dawned, ruckus behind us signaled the arrival of our traducers. Surprised by their swift arrival, the quadroon dashed into the waterfall, unknowing what lay through the torrent.

The water of the fall felt refreshing and as it washed over us, it invigorated us. As we ruptured through the wall of rain, it was immediately tangible to all of our senses that we were back home on Aetatis. The fall we emerged from was ominous and befogged, just as the forest we had fled. In addition, any deviation from the void was not marking this area as unusual. The ball of fire beginning to touch the trees’ tops told us that we had been away for far longer than we’d hoped. Uncertain of exactly how long we’d been gone, with the gate re-fixated in the void, the weir had arrived us a great deal closer to the fifth checkpoint. The advantage was taken away by the loss of time as could sense nearby bael charging on towards that next checkpoint.

Sparing no haste, we dashed straightaway into a lope heading due east. We aimed ahead of where our opponents were hoping to make a more direct route at the checkpoint. We could now see the city wall and northwestern gate at our left signaling we were on a good bearing. Impossible to brush the thought of another invisible threat after the mist forest encounter, we all pushed the thought to the back of our cognizance and focused on what we could see; hoping the unnatural contingencies stayed on the other side. The presence of others became more apparent as we could now see the raceway up ahead. Not only that, other bael now ran through our periphery making this seem once more like a race.

Upon penetrating the track, the checkpoint was visible not a few flik straightaway. Bael seemed to line the raceway, some in our sights and even more to our rear. Somewhat refreshed by the company of other man and kroyo, the foursome’s mood elevated, once again allowing us to genuinely enjoy the competition afresh.

Without dispute, we arrived at the ingress with the other bael pairs. A few feisty kroyo snapped and warked at one another, but no open fighting took place as everyone was eager to get through the marker. Despite the large population passing through the accommodations, the process was expedient and efficient, allowing us to pass through with only a slight delay and no more checkpoints until the finish line at the Gates of Nortune. The race ended in front of the massive prison, where the Grand Warden could have a frontside view at the race’s monumental climax.

**Chapter 7 – The Gates of Nortune**

The final leg of the race was mostly inside the city limits, as we trot down the egress, the massive ramp lay straight ahead of us that would take us over the city wall and into Arburg. The roadway and ramp were wide enough to birth several kroyo-pulled carriages with room to boot. Recently remediated, the rearing monument glimmered reflecting the little sunlight that reached it at this hoar. The new work of masonry shone out against the faded and worn arras of the city wall. The heavy collection of bael only sparsely populated the trackway and gradient ahead, allowing our duo of runners to weave out and about the slower participants and gain ground on this straightaway.

An agitated kryder lashed out his halberd in an attempt to trip up Dargor, but the dexterous legrunner easily capered the frail attempt and used his tail to dismount the assailant from his runner. The bael lost no velocity, and we both darted onward alee the throughway. The colossal ramp was a mountain in front of us as we now approached its base. Wasting not a gelgen, the quadroon scurried up the gradient, still passing adversaries. A splendid setting for an altercation, everyone seemed to be fixated on gaining ground rather than taking eliminating rivals. The strategy sat well with the four of us, confident that no faster kroyo raced this day. As the summit came nearer, we could start to see the landscape of Qeynos out in the distance. Even at full speed, the city wall was a tiresome undertaking as the fatigue could be seen setting in on the other bael. Tired muscles threatening to turn to deadweight kept us on edge as we all leaned on each other for support both mentally and physically through the bond. Some bael collapsed from the fatigue and lay flopped on the raceway, even with blacht, the body materially had its limits. Finally culminating the crest, the entirety of Arburg sprawled before us in its grandeur.

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The hatch sealing the sewer from the city streets was too heavy and rusted for Jeifer to pry open as he tried not to sulk while Kireyin seemed to dislodge the lid with no strain. The light which illuminated this dark approach revealed the main entrance to the penitentiary which we just made our flight. “Close the hatch!” I stammered to Kire, careful not to be loud enough for anyone in earshot above to hear. “We could end up right back from whence we came.” Ylle explained as she gestured to the grand bastille.

“Can’t you conjure up some nonsense to disguise us for a flek?” Jeifer asked in a condescending tone.

“Glek!” Ylle cursed as she pretended to slip, her heel finding the exact rung where Jeif’s left hand gripped. He grumbled a curse under his breath but took the hint. “Oh, that’s right, I suppose I can give us a quick illusion.” She replied joyfully as she relished in her rebuttal. It always groused her when he treated proven magicks as tomfoolery. Still, five civilians emerging from the sewerways was sure to draw attention, especially in front of the nation’s outspoken stockades. However, trying to navigate the sewers overrun with fiends was an even worse option. It would be risky, but we knew the prison guards’ attire, however Kireyin stood a clear head taller than the tallest man in Arburg and may pose a risk. He would have to hunch, and we would have to be quick to seem like we are looking for escapees. Envisioning in her mind’s eye everyone as they would appear was simple as shortbread, influencing reality to take form was the exhausting element. Not quite advanced in illusion but far from a novice, relegating five individuals was quite taxing especially after such a wrangle. Nevertheless, I focused all of my remaining strength and made my vision materialize.

Completely detaching from the ladder in which we gathered, for once Jeifer proved himself useful and seized me from a painful plunge. “Thank you.” Ylle conceded to her friend, now looking every bit the part of one of the patrolmen surely in their pursuit. Kireyin looked awkward in the officer’s garb as he clearly was not used to such restricting attire. With Dio’s blessing, our askant would be ignored with all of the chaos amidst Arburg caused by our abdication.

As we casually left the sewer hatch, the pandemonium overtaking the city was worrisome, surely with so many resources allocated, our recapture was as sure as certain. Immediately upon the replacement of the hatch, we were hustled off the mainway by unfamiliar officials and brushed into a large crowd, promptly ignored as they tended to more important matters. The presence of a giant among our band was paid no mind declared something else was amiss.

Able to catch my breath amongst the large congregation, Ylle was able to enhance her vision, as well as her hearing. Buzz of the grand finale to a dramatic, dangerous kroyo race with the attendance of Grand Warden Goofdell in person to witness its climax. Mention of the grand warden niggled her instinct as she then focused her attention on the balcony of the notorious Nortune penitentiary.

A flamboyant terrace, pillowed couches lined with city officials and mostly bare women overlooked the obvious goal line. The patio was flanked by many a sentry, but all eyes would be on the race’s payoff. I revealed my initial strategy which we modified yet agreed unanimously the warden must be handled. We coolly made our way through the crowd to identify a deficiency in the prison’s buffer.

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There was no time to take in the extravagant view of the cityscape as we instead shifted out attentions to the descendent access which elbowed head left down into the Qeynos district. The entrance to the commercial district was a precipitous sharp bend leading directly onto a main boulevard which had been closed off for the race. Though a large throughway for the marketplace, the vast width of the egress made the thoroughfare appear a tight and the squeeze of bael at the transition would pose a high contingency for melee. Weariness was clearly evident on many of the participants, their air clearly betrayed their apathy towards a tussle. Fatigued as the four of us were, our emanation radiated a fiery vigor. Near impossible for a human to pick up on, other kroyo certainly noticed our dispose and somewhat unintentionally kept evasion.

Nevertheless, when the quarters became closed, fracas erupted like starfire. All restraint vanished in a gelgen’s glimmer as the congestion caused weary tempers to loosen. Not possessing the bloodlust we shared at the start of the race, the pleasure associated with a good tangle seemed more a chore. Left no choice in the mob, the fatigued combatants showed no sign of their lassitude when the dance began. Likewise, as we began a dance of our own, a resurgence of invigoration surged through our bonded consciousness. Any languid sentiments faded when the fire of combat gleamed in our eyes. We knew that there had to be some bael who had beat the rush and therefore would have a substantial outset. Considering that, even with the desire back in our veins, quick work must be made of this blockade.

Calculating the most efficient battle path meant just about trying to wedge our way through the fray and pop out of the other end akin to some lame magician’s trick you could have caught at any corner tavern back home in Katur. We knew of no tricks to have us wondrously appear at the other end of the affray, but our magick would have to be generating a gap in that salient, thick with bael. Minds joint, the two knights hucked nearly all their remaining kunai towards the center of the melee to create a disturbance possible at range. The small tremor generated was just enough to allow us entry with momentum. Just before impact, the runners changed gameplan and crowhopped off of an adversarial kroyo, which with the ferment narrowing the width or the disquiet, we were scarcely allowed clearance without opposition. As we left the battleground abaft, the vitality of combat adrenaline still surged through our veins, once again allowing us a natural re-invigoration.

With an open highway ahead and a ruckus behind, our two legrunners had a chance to best each other before we caught up to the leading racers. Probably the best competition of the race, Dargor took the quick lead, while Tarnor positioned himself directly behind his brother and then used his position to cut inside quickly around the head left turn. Now behind, Dargor used the same technique around the next bend to regain his initial lead. The friendly competition caused the two brothers to exert themselves greater that just running in tandem, giving us greater productivity.

Growing accustomed to the ambush of unadvised meddlers, the sudden tinge of an upcoming threat was a welcomed shock to our bonded consciousness. Headleft and headright were multiple hazards, with an empty throughway, like they would appear from select windows. Our mental prowess was such that we could tell with probable certainty which windows would yield defiance. The knowledge of these risks actually gave us a preemptive strike at our assailants expecting to catch us off-guard. It was truly noteworthy the amount our quadroon had had grown since the race’s onset. To waylay a quagmire proactively catching their assailants offguard was quite remarkable. Splitting up, Dargor veered headleft and Tarnor headright to simultaneously take out both angles of danger.

To our disenchant, we passed all of the perceived threats without conflict. As we elapsed the final risk, all peril faded in the distance until they all one by one disappeared into equanimity. *It’s as if they sensed our recognition.* A chilling possibility that once again time avowed us no allowance to question. Moreover, that dreary feeling now familiar to us started to take hold of our sensorium once again. Conditions have been getting more enigmatic with the passing of every leven and this sensation was no longer an anomaly to our nerves.

As the gloomy aura engulfed the entire city the beaming buildings suddenly appeared decrepit and worn, faded with the passing of many hourn. As the tone and mood completely took effect, the sense of any life and activity slowly ceased as all of the scenery bleak and dismal. Although the legrunners were travelling at top speed, the passing of the dull, decaying edifices seemed to slow as we completely settled into this eerie dimension. This place’s air made the hair on the back of our necks stand on end and could turn your blood to ice.

The city that held these streets we traveled had long been deserted, buildings ransacked and left unattended for who knows how long. For an unknown motive, my eyes were drawn overhead, which exposed our new and current peril. Scores of flying beasts circled the skies above, letting out raucous outcries as they intermingled with one another. Were these dragons? Beasts of legend? The varmint soared too high for even Tarnor’s seasoned eyes of a kroyo. They said kroyo had the best vision of all the animal kingdom. Rather than trying to deduce what we might be prey for, we turned our attention to navigating the streets just as if we were back in the race.

As we charged down the roadways at full stroke, the air was thin, virtually empty in contrast with the cityscape lazily drubbing by. The entire polis had an almost hollow ring to it as the crumbling structures could not be more uninviting, but the more you gazed into their holes, the more they niggled at your curiosity. *We’ll be lost in here forever!* Tarnor warned. “I wasn’t considering…” Serge spoke aloud but trailed off as his focus shifted to the upcoming intersection which we never seemed to reach.

“Blood and ashes!” Gimza cursed aloud as we all came to a halt in the middle of the abandoned thruway. “Just what in the samhell is going on here.” He demanded.

“Buggar me.” Serge replied, “This place gives me the jiggers.” And the legrunners were no less perturbed. We stood still in the silent streetway; glancing rearwards and looking ahead, it was not even discernable how far, if any we’d traveled. Peering into the dissipated boutiques and domiciles captured our curiosity moreover, nearly drawing us to walk closer. Though the hollow dwellings grabbed at our interest, the increasing feeling of unwant washed over our cognizance flowing inward from the lifeless city. Gazing up at the sky, I wondered if the aviators above avoided this land as I would, given the option.

Without further hesitation, we presumed standing idly would provide no help in flight and were once again drawn this time to a market that stood out from the dreary cityscape. Its features seemed crisp, even brighter and more colorful than its neighbors. Not vibrant, but the building was prominent, nonetheless. It possessed an intriguing semblance and its presence became stronger even as we still stood idle. As we continued to focus on this storefront, its grip became inescapable, and we galloped over at once. Unlike the rest of the landscape, the entrance to the shop was warm and inviting, even soothing our angst as the structure swallowed our beings.

We entered the anteroom hall, and it seemed illuminated in twilight as mysterious figures danced in and out of our periphery. Shimmering colors and flashes glinted and gleamed but that with the figures was all on the edge of our convergence as we were all fixated on the beacon somewhere upstairs pulling at our chords like some alien symphony. Undeterred, we scampered up the stairway one, two, three, and finally four levels until we were satisfied with our altitude. There near the end of the drab hallway loomed a toran the color of stellar red radiating energy and intrigue.

Without blinking, we were suddenly at the vestibule, our eyes locked with the incredible astral crimson door. At our will, it leisurely opened and revealed a room empty save a brilliant mirror. The mirror drew on our senses. The mirror’s reflection offered an echoed image of ourselves and when our eyes met something aligned. At once, the four of us dashed to the looking glass, the urgency to integrate outweighed any sound logic. As we merged through the mirror, the piddling veneer of desolation seemed to feel less empty. We could almost feel the world’s sensorium once again becoming whole as the colors strengthened to their discernible spectrums and our dim beings were now unbroken. We could feel at once the amenity of Aetatis upon us.

The feeling of awe drained from us at a gelgen’s glint, as we were pulled back to our trial at hand. At once, we found ourselves inside an unfamiliar apartments we assumed somewhere in Qeynos. It was impossible to even deduce any analytics on our tarriance, neither ingression nor withdrawal. Nevertheless, there was one door out of the chamber we occupied which admitted us to a hall filled with more doorways and one window to the streets outside. More often than not, the course was laid out for you to see, if you only knew to look. With haste, we dashed through the glassless casement, each legrunner using aileron appendages to ease the plunge to the roadway below.

Our feet on solid ground once again, the warehouses and repositories revealed that we had emerged in the heart of Astana, the Merchant District. One could get lost in the labyrinth of Astana for hoars even with the navigational aptitude of our quadroon. For once not a fluke blessing, the escalier leading the racetrack to the city wall’s apex lay directly in our vision. *Egah for small miracles* we all imparted to one another as we harried on. Gazing at the sky, the sun hadn’t moved a letch told us that nary much time elapsed on our sojourn.

The way lay bare of bael both onward and astern we tarried not and bolted towards the ascension. There was no slow in pace as we climbed the spiral stairway to reach the summit of the great wall. Still an open track ahead the runners again hit full throttle for the lengthy straightaway ahead. A chilly silence took over as we hotfooted along the eastsouth overpass. The uninterrupted run made the slog to the wall’s bend brief and in a gelgen’s guff we were now bearing southwest towards the final hook.

The last hook was a sharp headleft bend that steeply drove down to the forest floor just outside the city wall. The accession then allowed a small straight until the semi-sharp headright curve which formed the “hook” which was the closing approach to the Great Guild Gate which admitted the last stretch to the final scratch. The crook was surely an impetuous tangle of treachery as the rest of the course yet novel. Doubtless riddled with an assortment of unseen assailants.

In the time that it took us to comprise an expectation of the upcoming hasp, the adit was in our eyesights. The egress was uncertainly alike to the onramp in succession the final checkpoint. The empty racebank cast an eerie breathe of bleakness over the quartet as they emplaned their passage. Once again, the gradient was broad, ample enough to support several peddler’s payloads abreast. Unaccompanied on the egression ramp, the foursome felt like a pod of dace alone in the River Therva. The peculiar void was oddly comforting as we made our progression to the forest floor in a feather’s flek.

Wondering how much distance divided us from the leading stipant we all were was a brief thought as we focused our concentration on the surrounding woodlands any perils. The Braemwood held many dangers, both conceivable and imperceptible. The inkling of another bael had not disquieted our consciousness since our re-entry to Aetatis. However, we did not expect the ending stretch to be free of conflict as the whiz over the wall. As if on cue, a pair of bael appeared out of the bush and flanked us on either side. The fact the we did not detect these aggressors was not necessarily a surprise, but still unsettling nonetheless.

The two legrunners were massive in size and jet ebony in color, as they blended into the shadows they crossed. The kryder were garbed in the same color dress, what looked like light cloth that hung still impervious to the gusts and flurries created by their riding. Similar to our opacity in the strange twilight world, they appeared misty in construction, like they were not wholly of this environment. As expected however, their cutlass struck solid as stench, clanging as they battered at our shields and blades. Only able to parry at the outset, these fiends were as skilled in combat as we’ve yet encountered. Their eyes shouted with the screams of tortured souls, hollow sockets ablaze with flame black as midnight. Their runners had eyes to match and as mine locked the hellish stare of one, an acute pain ran through my being and then through the bond as Tarnor instantly broke speed to break the gaze. Although only enthralled for a gelgen, time creased and my physical body froze as my mind reeled; the exchange felt like a leven. The shockwave sent through the bond stunned us all for a flik and gave the opposing quadroon major leverage.

Howbeit, we thrived in adversity and the detriment gave us a surge of adrenaline as we both began an offensive assault. Serge busted his opponent’s lancet straight out of the hand’s grip and forced the enemy to parry whilst probing for a replacement. The momentary miscue gave an opening as Serge used the butt of his blade to bunk the kryder on his headtop, dismounting him from his runner. Per contra, the outlander grasped a saddlebag and swung himself in a circular motion as he re-landed on the pillion once again piloting as if nothing had happened. Gimza was deep in combat as well, gaining favor as Dargor pushed the opposing legrunner to the edge of the trailway. Now fending off shrubbery and tree branches, the two bael veered more into the brush. Separating kryder from kroyo, the sparring bael now became a two on two contest.

With the city gate now in sight, the remounted adversary now brandished a scythe, which at first looked bulky and inappropriate until the rider displayed his expertise in an array of offensive blows. Landing glances and swipes many a gelgen, the shadow kryder wielded his weapon like a dancer would a baton as Serge reeled to defend himself and his kroyo. Twice as deadly this time around, the foe now had Tarnor backing to the middle of the track before he dug in and forced the way headright. Serge used his shield to bash the assailant atop the runner to gain some solid footing. These relentless trials in succession had the bael on the brink of exhaustion when their psyche hit a crossroad allowing them supplemental swell of sinew. Exploiting the newfound energy, Tarnor used his tail to sweep out the opposing kroyo’s legs in an immaculate pirouette defying physicks. This caused the fiend to stumble slightly, causing the kryder to slip somewhat and adjust allowing Serge to leap straight up off his companion legrunner and summersaulting with using all of his force to drive his longsword through the kryder and down into the kroyo. The two fiends hissed in agony as their being crumpled to the floor and evaporated like a cloud losing steam.

At once we darted over to our partner bael to find Gimza starting to overpower his foe. The shadowman was unarmed now but deflecting every strike with his arms. The cloth, parchment thin, dismissed the paladin’s blade without tatter sand as the blade made contact, reality’s air rippled. Serge immediately knocked an arrow, but the assailant was aware and simply deflected the dart harmlessly. However, that slightest bother allowed Gimza the opening he needed to run the enemy through a kink in his cloth. We all turned our attention to Dargor in a tangle with the dark kroyo in the thick of the forest. Fatigued as the rest of us, Dargor let out a piercing *Kueh* as he sustained a gash to his left wing. Drawing on the heat of the pain, Dargor forced a beryl fireball into existence which disintegrated the left half of the aspirant.

Back on the track, we could see the Great Gate still several flik ahead in the distance with an enthusiastic throng that could barely start to be heard from our present stance, hungry for an exhilarating ending to a marathon of a race. As well, the quadroon was starved for their own climax to this endeavor so without tarry, the foursome harvested all of their reserves and harried to the city’s gates. Once through the pass, there remained a pair of straight dashes, the first longer than the latter; and separated by a small knot. This was the grand finale and a popular finish for many championship cups. The expanse to the conduit was quickly at our rears and the great portcullis was towering over us.

We passed through without incident, however the wide-eyed sentries informed us that we were well ahead of schedule. It mattered naught, as we should stroll ahead to victory within the hoar. As we crossed the threshold into the city limits, the first straightaway was absolutely crammed with spectators literally sitting atop one another. Somewhere in the audience were the rest of our crue, waiting to see us pass through. *On this day we would not disappoint* we collectively thought as we traversed onto the final leg. The first sprintway was a sizeable thruway yet narrow enough for contention, if we hadn’t such a staggering lead on the other racers. A lengthy stretch, our runners made it about midway when an alert triggered to our rear. It did not register as a bael but was closing directly in on our moving position. Possibly a fiend, its portrayal was unrecognized to us. Some quick calculations showed the incoming threat might not intercept us until after we crossed the final wire. Once the race was over, any additional delay was of no consequence to the outcome, so we continued on at full choke.

As we darted down the initial runway, we zoomed past onlookers as speeds that left us a blur to their scrutiny, however Serge could pick out the color of every individual’s eyes or hair that he set focus to. Each a different individual entity hollering about in a sea of countless vastivity that formed the pandemonium that was the entirety of this last leg. Conflict here could easily spill over into the bleachers causing massive bedlam. Closed storefronts stood so packed to the brim with crammed spectators, impossible to do business with such confusion about. Distracted shop owners too invested in the race would find much of their inventory purloined when their attention finally set back to their respective outlets. Not an opening to spot in the crowd both kryders observed as they passed over the lot of the congregation, everyone in Arburg might be on hand.

As we came nearer to the transition between the two longruns, the glaring menace was closing ground at an alarming rate. Mayhap we could lose it in the little twist of street that lay betwixt the two sprints. It was almost disappointing when the quadroon worked through the curvy bends of the Civil War quarter which divided the two dashes with no conflict. Anti-climactic, but the weariness in everyone’s every fabric was starting to wear thin and the nice break was a welcomed sigh of relief. The knot that made up the Civil War district was just a small cress cross avenues and boulevards loaded with taverns and inns dedicated to Arburg’s great civil war. It would have been a marvelous ending to behold in these alleys and still might be when the remaining bael jab for position around the sags and tilts. Fuddled patrons absolutely ran over the scrubby shoe box sized saloons which littered the promenades where any could be fit. Scathing through a pub here and another drinkery there as we traversed the gnarled understreets to dilute our scent.

The labyrinth of byways seemed almost abrupt as we engaged the final line with the wire in sight. As our four pads took place on the last stretch of dragway, our eyes locked mentally and physically, and we could feel us altogether draining all of the remaining ardor hurried towards the finish line in an attempt to outrun the incoming crisis. Once over the goal we could quell whoever had our bone to pick. The second sprint was the shorter of the two but may contain more viewers as the boutiques and cantinas that lined the final thruway were a sea of human beings. Some overfell from windows, or balconies as the excitement was overpowering. The spirit was contagious, as it helped fuel our closing bolt to elude the approaching foe in advance of the final wire. A hasty computation said it would be close. *We should be able to outrun it.* It was not expressed with confidence, and even if we won the race first, whatever we had to fend off would have a chance at us clear exhausted. It was easy to forget that our friends were again here to help after all the trials since race’s onset. None of us were truly battle-tested before the onslaught of our homeland but test after trial we’ve prevailed.

Now only a letch to the wire the fiend hunting us now had to be at our heels. But as we reached the last span, it seemed to fade off into the distance. Ignoring the anomaly, we drained our final strength and reached for the line. As Tarnor’s beak just about grazed the pylon, a massive load came crashing down upon the leading quadroon. It struck a flek ahead of their present position, forming a perfect interception. The resulting blast was massive, an initial shock wave or air pushed onlookers away from the epicenter of the collision followed by a heavy tide of dust and dirt with rock and larger debris subsequently shredding a mass of bystanders blinded by the khamsin. Blasted backwards, the foursome was all stunned and separated from the fallout. Serge tried to stand, his surrounding now fuzzy and turning faint. His legs gave way and he hit the ground before he could locate or communicate to anyone else.

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Perched atop the roof of Seventh Heaven provided a spectacular view of the finish line. With the unforgiving sun above getting ready to set the race’s end was drawing closer. There would still be some time before the first set of bael would be seen from our perspective; allowing us ample time to cook under this egregious swelter. Nevertheless, we camped out early in the event of crisis. Fatigued from the night and day’s past, it was a grueling trek over to the tavern on top of our task prior.

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