

CHAPTER 1: LOW PROFILE

“...in such a short amount of time, the chaotic actions of players have proven that cities simply aren’t as safe as we once believed. Many quick-thinking participants found out that their tournament sigils could be hidden with a bandana, cloth, or helmet. Unfortunately, now, players obscuring their foreheads in town for any reason have become prime targets, even if they’re not tournament participants...”

“Well, damn. Scratch that idea, I guess,” Dakkon thought to himself. The plan had been to fashion disguises which might give he and Cline a chance to move around unmolested. Even now, Merri was out fetching odds and ends for them to cobble together some sort of temporary camouflage.

Shortly after the Tournament of the Gods was so abruptly announced, Dakkon and Cline were escorted to the outskirts of Turlin by Lina, the ludicrously strong fire sorceress, and her powerhouse companion, Merri. Turlin was distinguished as a large, centrally-located trade city, and because of that it should have been a safe place to hunker down while the general turmoil settled itself. Over the past two days, however, Dakkon learned that safety near any city was unlikely, no matter the size. The continent was in bedlam. Even ChronCast, the network which had gained a reputation from its fleeting, one-and-done newscasts, found its focus locked tightly on the most disruptive event in Chronicle to date.

“...it’s been two full game-days since the unexpected start of the Tournament of the Gods, where thousands have been thrust into an unasked-for bloodbath. Though the tournament has caused abundant problems for everyone in the game world, those marked with a glowing crimson, fork-shaped sigil on their forehead are literally being tracked down and killed off by their competition.

“The ChronCast team is working around the clock to bring you the most complete and up-to-date information on the Tournament of the Gods. Here’s what we know so far:

“When the global announcement declared the tournament’s start, those selected were given an event-related quest and were branded with a glowing rune on their forehead. Currently, we know that several thousands of players have been marked—but that’s likely just the tip of the iceberg. Since only a few hours have passed in real-time versus the two full days in-game, it’s entirely possible that thousands more will log in to find that they, too, are participants. If you’ve been out of the game for more than an hour, make sure to pay close attention to this next part so that you can log in with a plan!

“The Tournament of the Gods is a Highlander-style deathmatch with no built-in recourse for those who attack others out of nowhere. While all players will still be held accountable to the same rule of law, don’t expect everyone to play fair. Report after report is streaming in detailing just how bad of an idea it is to log in assuming that everything will be okay!

“After analyzing a transcript of the quest received by those selected to be a part of this gruesome tournament, we know that each participant starts with a single ‘bonus point.’ When a competitor kills another player marked by a forehead-sigil, they take half of the slain player’s bonus points for themselves, and their unlucky victim will be booted from the tournament in addition to the usual 11-hour downtime that players who die must serve before they can log back in.

“That’s right! People are killing each other in the streets for so-called ‘bonus points!’ But why? That’s because whenever a player is knocked out of the competition, half of their total accumulated bonus points will be converted into extra stat points. Players in the tournament have been given an unprecedented opportunity to wildly increase their own power!

Gaining half of a felled adversary’s points means that, with even a single lucky kill, anyone in the tournament could gain several levels worth of stat points. We’ve crunched some numbers and, let me assure you, rewards for playing can get *really* out of control! Toward the end of the competition, the payouts will be massive! Plus, the quest description even states that there’s a chance for additional, unspecified rewards should any gods be pleased along the way. That last bit may seem awfully vague, but since the gods are associated with a wide array of varying characteristics, many players are hoping to make a big-enough splash to be noticed.

“While those chosen to be participants tend to be well-leveled, it’s been confirmed that at least one new player has been included on their very first time logging into the game. So, even if you’re just starting out be sure to take additional care. Though it’s certainly possible to cover up your sigil with cloth, leather, or iron, doing so now will be sure to draw a lot of attention! Even if you aren’t in the tournament, be sure to bear this detail in mind!

“If you have any new information on the Tournament of the Gods, you can contact us by...”

Dakkon stopped watching the video feed streaming from his personal media console. News stations, forums, and social media outlets each gave their own take on the big new event in Chronicle, but the important information was the same. The tournament was going to be a big part of every player’s life, whether they were selected as a participant or not. Aside from the tidbit about players being accosted for wearing accessories that obscured the view of their forehead, Dakkon hadn’t learned anything new since he read his own quest alert two days back.

He knew that the networks had at least one thing wrong, though. Cline had been chosen. That meant—aside from players—at least one Non-Player Character had been included in the tournament. In Chronicle, even though players could come back to life after a few days, NPCs tended to stay dead and gone for good. For Dakkon, it meant that this was one contest his buddy, Cline, couldn’t afford to lose. For now, they’d continue searching for any alternative to taking on scores of high-level, well-connected players.

It was also worth considering that Lina had been selected for the tournament. If there could only be one grand champion in the end, it meant that someday Cline would have to best her. Dakkon couldn’t shake the memory of how easily Lina had obliterated a gang of bandits—of how little the action had meant to her, and of how her nonchalant mastery over a spinning mass of all-consuming fire had thoroughly terrified Dakkon’s usually courageous horse. Between Lina’s jaw-dropping

firepower and Merri's raw strength, the road to Turlin hadn't seemed quite so perilous. Those two certainly wouldn't bow down without a fight, and they didn't know Cline's secret; save for Dakkon and the gods themselves, no one did.

When the four neared Turlin they took refuge in a man named Qirim's modestly sized, though cozily furnished, cottage. Along with Lina, Merri, and the recently-inducted Dakkon, Qirim was a member of the Full-Purse Antiquarians. An order of relic hunters, information brokers, and business partners, the Antiquarians—to Dakkon's great relief—weren't above letting other members crash on their sofas in a pinch. Right after they arrived, however, Lina left—alone—for reasons that were, verbatim, 'none of your goddamned business.' Since Merri let it go with a shrug, the others followed suit. Her partner knew her best.

The house's host, Qirim, had turned out to be an incredibly odd character. He was a bookish sort who made his living by digging deeper into old tomes than most, linking together obscurities, and turning the mess of raw information into something that more adventure-inclined Antiquarians could work with. He was short, with creamy peach skin that looked to be sponge-dabbed white. Odds and ends of silvery hair spilled out from underneath his rounded hat, which was almost comically oversized. He was also outspoken in his opinions, with a tongue which, at times, could cut like a razorblade. Until Dakkon had excused himself to catch up on news about the tournament, Qirim had spent the last hour educating him about the superiority of study and the folly of taking unnecessary risks—all while glossing over the fact that taking risks and killing monsters was essential to gaining the general sort of experience which allowed players to increase their overall character level. Despite Qirim's eccentricities, Dakkon was grateful for his help.

Dakkon pulled out his pair of maps he'd purchased from the cartographer's guild. Neither were particularly fine maps—one seemed accurate enough to suit his needs in travel, and the other, shoddier-looking map contained odd tidbits which had already paid for itself. Not only had his more bedraggled map led him to efficient hunting grounds just outside the beautiful city of Tian, it had also warned of bandits in the area. Now that he was in the vicinity of Turlin, however, there were no clever annotations to guide him—though there were a few caves drawn to the east which didn't appear on his other map.

As Dakkon compared the differences between his maps, Qirim's gaze eagerly flitted over them. Presented with two potential sources of information, the pale-skinned host couldn't help himself. Qirim made no attempt to hide his desires—a single glance was all it took to realize he wanted to examine them firsthand. With a sigh, Dakkon handed over his maps. It couldn't hurt to have more experienced eyes give them a once over.

"These maps are hideous," Qirim stated without a hint of sympathy. "You know, when you keep junky things, you end up looking like a junky person."

"I'll try to bear that in mind," said Dakkon in his best patient tone. He was a guest and, so long as he was still learning how to be a proper relic hunter, he decided that he could abide a fair amount of sass.

Qirim continued looking over the maps, shaking his head all the while. Then, after a minute, he stopped with a thoughtful, "Hmmm."

"Hmmm?" Dakkon asked.

"Yes," Qirim said, still looking at the map while his left hand absent-mindedly rubbed the back of his jumbo-sized hat.

After a few moments of waiting for a reply, Cline's curiosity was piqued as well. He was grateful for any distraction from the constant fretting which had begun to occupy the majority of his time.

"I think he means he'd like to hear about what you've found," Cline said to Qirim.

"I know what he means," snapped Qirim, quickly. His idle hat-rubbing ceased. "Fine, then. This map here has a rather interesting symbol near some stains—or hills—or whatever type of god-awfully-drawn splotches these are supposed to be. I could barely make it out."

Dakkon rubbed his forehead gently with two fingers. He didn't have a headache. He didn't know if someone could even get a stress headache in Chronicle, but he used the familiar gesture to temper his mood all the same.

"Uhhm. What sort of symbol?" asked Cline, fully expecting an unnecessarily testy retort.

Not wanting to fall short of Cline's expectations, Qirim replied, "The sort of symbol that denotes something. Now, be quiet for a second while I decide whether or not I care to tell you more."

It wasn't yet clear if Qirim's sour mood was caused by sheltering unwanted visitors within his domain, or if he was just a bit of a prick. Time would tell, and for now Cline and Dakkon were willing to give their host the benefit of the doubt. Dakkon then remembered catching a glimpse of Lina's smirking face as she left them in Qirim's care, as though she had been fully cognizant of his surly disposition.

"All right, fine," Qirim said. "There's a symbol here that looks precisely like another found on an odd, but useless, artifact within dwarven territory... only—if this child's-drawing is even remotely close to scale—the symbol seems to be in a different area entirely; nearly in the opposite direction, closer to the elves."

Suspecting any further inquiry would only serve to draw out more of the little man's ire, the others waited a moment until his urge to pat his own back won out.

"This symbol here," said Qirim as he pointed to a black rectangle with a light 'M' made up of negative space, all surrounded by two, thin rectangular bands. "It's found at the base of a large stone tablet that the dwarves of Yotgard have guarded for centuries. Knowing dwarves, they probably used to worship it then forgot why." Qirim briefly shifted his massive hat to one side, then immediately readjusted it back to its starting position as if he'd only just remembered it had to stay put. "The tablet's said to be covered in unrecognizable, foreign runes, yet—supposedly—anyone who focuses on it will see a short vision of some great healer's grand feat. Don't bother asking me anything specific about the vision—I've never been to see it."

Dakkon's mind reeled as he remembered the experience of coming across a similar large, stone tablet hidden behind a wall of rubble in the Luck God's temple. That tablet, called Mordurin's Class, had likewise caused him to see visions from a mage's life in rapid succession. Though he didn't know what to make of his hunch, Dakkon suspected that the actions he saw in his vision were those of the uncredited, myth-like man who had first revealed Chronicle to the rest of the world. The tablet did more than show him a vision of someone else's past, however. It had also given him his rare and unremovable class, edgemaster. Any sense of discomfort Dakkon had felt from dealing with Qirim's antics had now been completely replaced with curiosity.

"There are more tablets?" Dakkon asked.

Qirim raised an eyebrow. "Tablets?" he asked, emphasizing the plural.

Dakkon simply shrugged. "I meant, *are there* any more tablets?"

After a moment of quietly appraising Dakkon, Qirim nodded. "I assume it's possible more of such tablets exist in the world, but the one in Yotgard is the only one I've heard of."

"Is the tablet useful?" Dakkon asked. He was legitimately curious about what Qirim would have to say, but he also wanted to draw attention away from his implication that he'd already seen another tablet.

"Not particularly, no. There are some who believe that the Healer's Tablet is linked to some greater mystery within the game, but *everyone* says that about *every* mystery. It's already been thoroughly studied, and I assure you there are plenty of dead ends in this world. Without new information, I doubt the tablet will be of any use to anyone."

Dakkon nodded his head in understanding, but it was clear from his furrowed brow that he hadn't given up hope on the matter.

"Well, if you're that interested in the tablet, you could go and check out the location on your map," said Qirim. "It's not like you can accomplish anything here, cooped up in my den hiding like a fugitive."

He had a point. Coming to Turlin had *seemed* like a good idea, but with things being as they were, going into the city with a glowing-red target on his forehead appeared to be a less-than-ideal proposition. Still, even if he wanted to leave and venture off to unexplored lands, he would certainly need supplies beyond what Merri was carting back to them.

Seeing Dakkon consider the journey, Qirim added, "If it turns out that this pile of a map isn't sending you on some goose chase, I'll expect to examine it again."

Dakkon gave a noncommittal shrug and regathered his maps. Cline looked preoccupied, as though he were unfavorably considering his own options. After a moment, there came a knock at the door. Merri's return was another welcome distraction for Cline.

"Thanks for helping out, Merri," Cline said after opening the door widely enough to accept the sizable man.

The humble giant merely nodded by way of response. He trundled past to unload the contents of his cart onto a large table at the side of the room which had been cleared off in anticipation of Merri's bounty. Cline was quick to help him with the task. After a bit of work, the table was covered in supplies and knick-knacks which Cline and Dakkon had requested Merri pick up for them. They had hoped the items might prove useful in disguising their status as tournament participants.

Headbands, cloth hoods, leather hats, paint, brushes, clay, putty, twine, and performance makeup lay strewn about the table, each waiting their turn to be put to the test. Cline and Dakkon proved thorough in their efforts, testing each item one after the other. The headbands worked, as had been reported on ChronCast, as did the hoods and hats—but only a snug hat looked even somewhat inconspicuous. The sigil could be seen by looking up from beneath someone's hood and, after hearing about people being accosted simply for wearing headbands, such accessories now seemed more like beacons than disguises.

The paint, clay, putty, and makeup all shared the same issue: the light of the tournament's magic sigil shined right through as brightly as if there were no obstruction at all, no matter the amount applied. Even layering putty and paint yielded nothing save for a mess to clean.

Merri watched the two test out their potential disguises while thoughtfully stroking his chin. Eventually, he let loose a muted grunt as he lifted his bulky frame from the stone floor where he had sat, forgoing the plush cushions of his host's furniture. The giant man lumbered to his bag, fished around for a moment, then produced a pair of tailor's shears. He placed the tail-end of a headband

against the sigil on Dakkon's forehead, then snipped the band down to size. Merri held the small, shaped cloth to Dakkon's face with one, large thumb and scraped at a bowl containing stage makeup. After heaping enough makeup onto Dakkon's forehead to both cover and hold in place the snippet of headband, Merri smoothed it down with his thumbs then gave Dakkon a hearty pat on the shoulder before turning to sit back down.

Dakkon could see Cline's smiling face. The laconic giant had found them a temporary solution. The odd bulge likely wouldn't hold up to close scrutiny, but walking the streets with no visible markings on their forehead might just deter any players from suspecting them in the first place.

Even then, they held no illusions about the longevity of their solution. If they had found this method to conceal their sigils so easily, then plenty of others must have already found it, too. It wouldn't be long before everyone knew the trick, but the two hoped that the information might still be scarce enough to justify an excursion. They would need to go into town soon and use their advantage while it existed. As long as the predators were busy singling out those who covered their foreheads with clothes and accessories, there would be a window where errands in the city just might be possible.

The most pressing matter for Dakkon was that he needed a new secondary class. His edgemaster class skill 'Edge' allowed him to use an additional active class, per skill rank, beyond the usual maximum of two. To rank the peculiar skill up, he needed to keep getting classes to level 30. The main downside to his edgemaster class was that, unlike all other players in Chronicle, he couldn't simply deactivate a class when it wasn't useful. No matter what classes he had, he was stuck with them. If he wanted to learn a new class, he was forced to level up the ones he had. With two ranks in Edge, he had a total of four class slots. One was used up by edgemaster, and another by thermomancer. This meant that, thanks to his diligent leveling of the thermomancer class—despite its apparent shortcomings—upon gaining a third class he'd still have room for a fourth should a rare opportunity present itself.

The other downside to edgemaster was that he was forced to multiclass early. Multiclassing, as useful and powerful as it could be in Chronicle, carried a penalty which made both classes function at just 70 percent of their normal strength. Dakkon did have a trick to offset the burden of multiclassing, though. Every rank in his other edgemaster skill, 'Mastery,' increased the power of all his classes by 10 percent. Since his class started with a rank in Mastery, he would be able to completely negate the multiclassing penalty by the time he'd managed to train four separate classes to level 15. After that, every two classes he managed to get to level 15 would continue to increase his power by an additional 10 percent for what seemed like limitless growth. As promising as that sounded, the problems, of course, were how much time he'd need to invest into training and his limited class slots. If he managed to get a couple of classes which were difficult to level—and he knew the sort existed, since he'd spent time grouping with a shaman who'd been happy to share her opinions on the matter—his progress could grind to a halt. Since he needed to get three more classes to level 15 to be at 100 percent power, his base classes would remain crippled for some time.

Fortunately, in a big city like Turlin, there were dozens of new combat-focused classes to choose from. The first time he sought out a class trainer, Dakkon had made the mistake of picking up a weak class because he wanted something rarer than what the average player began with. This time he wasn't going to make the same error. He'd now had opportunities to watch a bevy of other classes in action, and one shone more brightly than the others: Lina's fire magic was awesome. Not only was it insanely powerful, but it had the added effect of making her look like an implacable badass. He knew

she got much of her power from a relic, but even a portion of her strength would be welcome. Dakkon would never be content with only the tiny, low-damage ember he could create through thermomancy. He wanted to be powerful, respectable, and—if he could manage it—cool.

“Say, Cline,” Dakkon grabbed his friend’s attention. “Qirim makes a good point. Maybe hunting for ruins away from crowds of people—”

“Huh? Are you trying to sell me on an adventure that’s actually the safer option this time?” interjected Cline. “Of course I’m going. I’ve already updated the others.”

Dakkon couldn’t suppress his smirk. “I wasn’t sure you’d be up for it after last time.”

Cline shrugged. “Things have a tendency to escalate when you’re around, sure, but when the alternatives are hiding out doing nothing or tempting fate by grouping up with near-strangers, I’m down for a little risk and reward.”

Cline’s demeanor was surprisingly calm. Over the last two days, he’d seemed shrouded by a cloak of almost-tangible stress. The news of an alternative to hunkering down like a scared rabbit while hunting dogs draw ever nearer seemed to lighten his burden somewhat. At the very least, it would be another welcome distraction.

“Well then,” said Dakkon. “You still want to head into town to run errands?”

“Definitely,” Cline said easily. “Time is of the essence, after all, and we’ll need supplies. What sort of place do you think our mysterious destination will be?”

“A cryptic mark on a cryptic map in a cryptic location? Sounds like ruins to me,” said Dakkon.

“Make that adventuring supplies, then,” said Cline. “Well, what are we waiting for? Help me get my face on.”

“I wouldn’t put too much faith in that disguise,” interjected Qirim. Merri nodded his agreement.

“Then we’ll simply need to make it quick,” Dakkon said as he stuck a squared-off band of cloth to Cline’s forehead.

CHAPTER 2: SHOPPING TRIP

Dakkon and Cline were cocktails of apprehension and feigned nonchalance as they walked into Turlin, but they found avoiding players to be much easier than expected. Recent attacks in the streets meant both players and NPCs were giving anyone and everyone a wide berth. In order to make their way through town without being too-closely scrutinized, all they needed to do was stay well away from anyone with blue names floating above their heads—a sure sign that they were players rather than NPCs. While in a town, even their own names would appear to hover above their heads. It was a design choice which seemed intended to facilitate trade and fraternization in town. Names *could* be hidden by obscuring facial features, but—given the circumstances—that seemed like the worst course of action.

The pair decided it was paramount that they finish quickly, so they split up for speed. Each had their own errands to run. Dakkon's first priority was to find a local fire master. Cline's was to learn fletching so that he could create his own arrows as he traveled—a necessity should avoiding towns become a long-term inconvenience. Whichever of them finished first would message the other then stock up on supplies for their upcoming trip. Afterwards, they'd both return to the safety of Qirim's cottage.

Though they were short on time, Dakkon wasn't completely unprepared. Forums had already given him an idea about where he needed to go. Turlin's resident fire master always resided at and taught in a long-standing temple known as the Flickering Fane. The city boasted a proud history of celebrated flame adepts, each of whom led their school for years until a successor was chosen to replace them. Then, after serving their term, retired masters would refuse new students in a show of support for the new head of the order.

The previous master of fire had been beloved beyond his station. He was seen as both good-natured and down-to-earth. It was said that his successor, however, had a superiority complex so insufferable that it was driving potential initiates to seek out different callings. The good news, for Turlin, was that the old master would resume control of the Flickering Fane after a month should his successor prove himself inept. The bad news for Dakkon was that he didn't have time to wait for the order of fire magi to get their act together. If he wanted access to fire magic before hitting the road, he'd need to receive his instruction from the lesser teacher.

If circumstances had been different, Dakkon would have greatly enjoyed his first trip into Turlin. The main streets were wide and long, and roadsides were often devoid of structures—conditions which made the area ideal for scores of traders to peddle assorted goods from stands, carts, and wagons. Though far from clean, the streets were cobbled together using smooth brown stones which had begun to look charming in their old age. Despite the excellent conditions for a marketplace, there were only a few merchants to be found. Dakkon could only explain the apparent vacancy as a reaction to the recent chaos brought about by the tournament. The market's sparsity could not have been its

normal state. Even the shops which had been prosperous enough to secure permanent storefronts were closed for business, save for grocers and a smattering of restaurants.

There were few trees in Turlin, but beyond and between the roads were small, grassy knolls abundant with shrubs, flowering vines, and covered lounging areas made of sturdy stone pillars supporting thick, wooden rooves. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of solemn lampposts lined the walkways. The abundance of the posts unnerved Dakkon. The sight of such a vast number of light posts without the crowds which they'd been erected to serve felt eerie to him. Combined with the considerable lack of merchants in an environment which was so clearly designed for them, the area seemed wrong and hollow.

Dakkon walked toward the center of town, carefully scanning other players while they looked him over, in turn. The tournament had destroyed much of the excitement Dakkon might have found in exploring a new area. Instead, he felt like he was walking through some lawless prospecting town in the heart of the wild west where a few had struck it big, and the rest were becoming desperate enough to try taking what they wanted. Luckily for him, he didn't *appear* to be carrying a large sack of gold—he didn't seem to be stamped with a tournament sigil.

When Dakkon arrived at the Flickering Fane, he could see how it had gained its name. The building was ablaze. It was shaped like a black marble hour glass with one large bowl resting atop another rounded dome. From the bowl at the top, an unconcerned flame flickered with the influence of a mild breeze and dared any birds to attempt to roost. While the bulk of the building was made of smooth, dark marble, its supports and doors were forged from starkly contrasting, well-polished bronze.

Dakkon approached the large metal doors of the Flickering Fane. The building's location in town was indicative of its importance—or its age—or the guild's wealth—he wasn't sure precisely which. Even before opening the door, he experienced a fleeting sense of grandeur which had him convinced that he was about to enter somewhere distinguished.

The left door of the temple swung open violently and from it marched a player so deeply agitated that he shook his fist as he walked. The man could hardly be bothered to notice Dakkon, let alone to shut the bulky door. Had the player cared to gaze critically upon Dakkon's forehead, then he might have noticed the odd, slightly off-color bulge which hid his tournament sigil. It was lucky for Dakkon that the angry man had something else to devote his thoughts to.

"What a load of crap," the stranger muttered as he passed by. "As if anyone would be willing to put up with *that!*" The passerby placed an emphasis on his final words as he stormed off, cradling his left arm tenderly.

With the door open, Dakkon peered into the Fane. An older man with a full, gray-streaked beard shook his head while he slowly approached the entryway.

"Oh, another guest?" the robed man said, surprised. He wore chestnut-colored robes and a prominent yellow sash tied almost flamboyantly around his waist. "Are you here for training?"

Dakkon glanced back to the other player before dismissing the odd display with a shrug from his brow. "I am, actually."

The man's eyes focused on Dakkon's forehead for a moment, then he seemed to half-heartedly shrug.

“Great,” said the older man flatly. He spoke as though suppressing a yawn—as if he’d been given the answer he expected, as per usual, and expected nothing worthwhile to come from it. He gestured to a curved walkway which closely mimicked the room’s perimeter. “Why don’t you step inside?”

Once Dakkon had obliged, the man with the gray-streaked beard closed the door and silently fell into step beside him. The robed man led the way to their unexplained destination as passively as possible.

The interior of the Fane was sectioned into at least two parts, making the only area that Dakkon could see seem quite spacious. The outer edge of the room’s semicircular floor was punctuated like riveted steel with small, rounded pits. Like miniature amphitheaters, the pits might have served a variety of functions. At that time, some pits facilitated chestnut-robed NPCs—wearing red or orange sashes—as they burned wood and charred leather to practice their magics. Curious why the room wasn’t cloaked in a thick haze of smoke, Dakkon’s eyes followed a plume of it to some sort of swirling black disk in the center of the Fane’s ceiling which seemed to draw smoke in toward it without otherwise disturbing the flow of air.

“May I have your name?” Dakkon asked.

“Hm? Oh, sure. It’s Aramon.”

“Thanks,” said Dakkon. After several strides forward without any response from his host, he added, “I’m Dakkon.”

“So you are,” Aramon said coolly, despite the blasts of heat that buffeted them as they passed by an occupied pit.

The two continued to walk through the Fane, toward a door at the end of the pathway. Before reaching the end, Aramon turned to Dakkon and scrunched up his mouth before sighing.

“Here’s the deal,” said Aramon. “Learning fire magic is never particularly easy, but learning the art here and now is... a chore.” The fire mage paused briefly before settling on how he should describe the current state of affairs.

“A chore?” asked Dakkon.

“Well, not a chore exactly,” Aramon revised. “More like... *particularly* undesirable. You know, where the ends don’t justify the means.” Uninterested in containing himself, he let out a large, eye-watering yawn.

“What makes learning now such an ordeal?” asked Dakkon.

After another muted sigh, as though Aramon was still deciding whether or not he cared enough to drone on about the details, he gave in and spoke, “It’s because of Jitan. When Master Flint retired, he made the mistake of giving the order over to Jitan. As per tradition, the new master will have to prove himself as both teacher and financier. So far, he’s done... poorly... with both.” Aramon lazily punctuated his words for a sort of slovenly emphasis. “Regardless, though, he’s the only teacher available until he proves himself... or until Flint retakes control.”

“You don’t seem too worried about the new master failing to perform,” Dakkon pointed out.

“Hm? Why should I be?” snapped Aramon in a short-lived demonstration of emotion. “He’s rude and he makes me do menial tasks—*like fetching newcomers*—despite my rank.” Aramon pointed down to his yellow sash as though to demonstrate his point. “Because it pleases him. Pshh.”

“So, he’s a bad teacher?” Dakkon asked, wondering if Aramon’s sash meant that he was a better teacher to learn from.

"Well, to date, he's successfully taught no one even a *lick* of fire magic." Aramon paused and grinned at Dakkon as though he'd made a particularly clever joke—but, when he received no recognition, he restored his scowl. "But, Master Flint says that Jitan will be the best fire mage in 100 years, though I'll be shocked if he lasts 100 days."

"As it turns out I'm on something of a schedule," said Dakkon. "Reservations aside, I'd still really like to learn."

"No, you wouldn't," said Aramon. "You only think so because you haven't tried yet. You know, there've been seven others today who wouldn't listen to me. You saw the last one leaving as you came in."

"Still, I'd like to give it a go."

With a shrug, Aramon pointed to the door. "I'm not even sure why I try. You adventurers are incapable of taking any advice that doesn't line up with exactly what it is you want to do. He's back in there. You'll find him. He ought to be expecting new prospects." Then, without another word, he walked a couple of meters to sit in a large, wooden chair which faced the Fane's egress.

Given the green light to explore deeper, Dakkon tugged on the iron ring which served as the next door's handle. The room beyond the door was smaller than the main chamber he'd just left. The main chamber had appeared to be bisected by a long flat wall, so he had expected to enter into another large room that would serve as the second half of the Flickering Fane. Instead, the area was much more compact. Three of the walls in the new chamber were flat, while the fourth curved along with the building's rounded exterior. There were two new doors to choose from, and—while the way forward was not made completely obvious—Dakkon chose the door which would lead him closer to the center of the building. He didn't imagine the school's master would sequester himself to some narrow, broom-closet-sized space where the primary feature was outer wall.

The door ahead swung inward this time and Dakkon was met with a wave of warm, dry air. The center of the room was awash in light radiating from a heated-orange metal orb, raised on a stone dais, atop a crucible-like mold. Next to the glowing ball stood a man with long black hair and oversized, tinted-black goggles. The figure was in the process of dipping smelting tongs into the metal sphere. He drew out a tendril of hot metal from the malleable ball and began to curl it to his tastes with his tongs. It looked as though he was near the very beginning of a rather long and meticulous crafting process. Dakkon didn't have the time to wait around politely for the crafter to finish his work.

"Are you Jitan?" Dakkon asked the craftsman while moving forward into the room. He could see that the smelter's long hair was even longer than he had originally noticed, running to the small of its owner's back—considerable length considering it had been tied together once near the middle and again at the end. The craftsman wasn't wearing an apron, gloves, or any other form of protection save for his goggles. Instead, he wore pristine white robes held tightly in place by a matching white sash. After seeing the one precaution the craftsman had taken, Dakkon looked away from the orb. It hadn't hurt to look at, but he still came away with a bright splotch in the center of his vision that frustratingly danced away when he tried to better assess the damage done.

The crafter sighed, but he continued to curl the tendril into a shape that pleased him. Dakkon was about to speak up again, when the craftsman set his tongs down on a marble plinth, stepped down from the dais, and raised the goggles to his forehead.

"Yes," said Jitan, looking both annoyed and insulted. "Do you know of any other master-ranked pyromancers?" Jitan pointed down to his white sash, much in the way Aramon had.

Had Dakkon known what each sash represented beforehand, Jitan's identity would have been as clear as day. With no real basis for comparison, though, a white sash denoting higher rank than a fiery red one seemed completely arbitrary.

It probably wouldn't help for Dakkon to mention that he had been traveling with an incredibly powerful pyromancer, but he couldn't resist a mostly-harmless jab to offset his surly reception.

"At least one," replied Dakkon in a nonchalant tone. "Strongest I've ever seen."

"Then go bother them," said Jitan, unruffled. "Otherwise, state your business and go."

"Very well. I want you to teach me fire magic," Dakkon said.

Jitan's sourness faded a little at the request, then returned an instant later.

"Fire evocation isn't easy to learn. *Well*, it was for me," Jitan amended, "but I can tell you first hand that most people don't have the faculties for it."

"I think I can manage." Dakkon remembered Aramon's words. Jitan was, apparently, not a very good teacher.

"It also won't be cheap," said Jitan. "The lack of *talented* new arrivals has stymied the flow of new apprentices. As I'm on something of a deadline, anyone who wants to learn will need to pick up the slack."

"Wouldn't charging more money just drive even more people away?" Dakkon asked.

"I won't abide idle, speculative banter. I've got better things to do," Jitan said, pointing the thumb of his left hand back toward the metal orb which had already begun to lose its infernal glow. "Do you want to learn, or do you not?"

"Obviously," said Dakkon. "How much?"

"80 platinum," Jitan said without so much as batting an eyelid.

"What!" Dakkon nearly shouted in surprise. He had expected to be fleeced a little given the situation, but this was more akin to a bad joke than the start of any legitimate dickering. Though the exchange rate fluctuated to a degree, 80 platinum was roughly equivalent to 8,000 real world credits. Though his accommodations were far from luxurious, a month's rent still cost him 1,000 credits. For what Jitan was asking, Dakkon wouldn't need to worry about living expenses for around six months. Dakkon was even certain that he'd already overpaid for his first class, thermomancer, by trading away an item he had been given. Even then, he was confident that his training for the thermomancer class hadn't cost him a single platinum piece. Either Jitan was incredible at bluffing, or somewhere—deep down inside—he really believed his extortionate rate was reasonable. Even if he wanted to be fleeced sideways, it was more money than Dakkon had despite the 50 platinum he'd received from Lina for helping her get her class-relic back.

"Hell no," Dakkon said, resolutely. "You're out of your damned mind if you think anyone will pay anything even close to that!"

"Very well," said Jitan as he pulled his goggles back down over his eyes and turned to resume his project of heating and bending metal.

Dakkon found himself in a tight spot. Time was of the essence. He needed to get out of town quickly—before his and Cline's employed disguises were common-enough knowledge that they'd be accosted in the streets. It was the sort of information that would spread like fire to parched wheat, and once it did Dakkon wanted to already be well away from Turlin.

Jitan raised his hands to the metal orb and it began to glow more brightly once again.

The chances that Dakkon might run into another fire mage capable of training him while galivanting amongst the wilderness were slim to none. Finding another appealing class was just as unlikely. Ultimately, he knew deep down that money was merely a means to an end. Having five months plus worth of rent on his person was comforting, but it wasn't helping him accomplish any goals.

"Gah, fine," said Dakkon. "I'll pay you 10 platinum." The amount was one month's rent and it was absurdly more than the class training was worth.

Jitan didn't bother looking up from his work. Apparently, a paltry month's rent for Dakkon wasn't even worth his time.

"All right, you digital extortionist," thought Dakkon. *"I can play this game."*

Using his thermomancer's 'Hotspot' ability, Dakkon formed a small, invisible sphere—encapsulating the glowing orb and the metal tendril that Jitan had just begun to twist again. Dakkon poured his mana into making his created bubble as cold as he could manage. When focusing on an area smaller than his thumb, he could create a point chilly enough to rapidly freeze water—but, even while affecting an object slightly larger than a football, Dakkon was sure he could make the gaudy-looking crafting process grind to a halt.

The tendril of metal that Jitan twisted with his heavy-duty tongs cooled more quickly than the rest of the orb. Growing brittle, the tendril cracked, and Jitan stopped what he was working on with a resigned sigh.

"Some sort of cold magic, huh?" said Jitan. "Fine. I probably won't need to hold back quite as much when training someone who can protect themselves. Since that'll make things easier, I'll train you for 25 platinum."

"That's still way too much," said Dakkon.

With the gentle wave of Jitan's right hand, the metal orb regained its temperature and malleability despite Dakkon's attempts to sabotage the process. The young master of fire magic was simply too strong to be defied by a little patch of cold.

Dakkon grinned and reversed the temperature of his 'Hotspot' skill to the hottest he could manage. It wasn't much on its own—when testing out skills, Dakkon found his thermomancy to be better at freezing than burning or boiling. Still, Jitan's infusion of extra heat to offset the bubble of cold was strong enough that the sudden change of temperature melted and deformed the mostly-smooth metal ball.

"I'll pay 15 platinum because I'm done haggling. Alternatively, I can stand here and keep watching as you break your ball some more," Dakkon bluffed. If he'd had the time to wait around pestering the young fire master, then he'd have also had the time to find a more reasonably priced lesson in fire magic from some other city.

Jitan watched his crafting project continue to lose its shape. The orb flattened against the crucible-like stand which held it in place as it grew far hotter than Dakkon had intended. By the time the metal began to bubble almost like boiling water, he realized it was Jitan's turn to make a point: it was not wise to poke a bear in his cave, even should you happen to disagree with it.

"You'll pay 20 platinum," began Jitan, "and unlike everyone else, you'll pay upfront and in full—regardless of whether or not you manage to absorb the lessons I teach." Meeting Dakkon's eyes, he continued, "I won't force you to waiver or fail—but, if you give up like the others, that's your choice to make."

“Deal,” Dakkon said while extending his hand, and—for the first time in their brief dealings—Jitan seemed legitimately pleased.

CHAPTER 3: ANOTHER PLACE

Brett finally had the leisure to stop and think about things while he hunted. Ever since the Tournament of the Gods began, the escape he so enjoyed within Chronicle had started to erode. The game had begun to seem markedly more like the outside world. He felt like his actions were being monitored and weighed. He loathed the feeling.

For as long as he could remember, Brett had been groomed to take over in his father's stead when that fateful day came. Brett didn't wholly resent the responsibility, but he also hadn't asked for it. Brett couldn't exactly see the situation as fair. His father had never been forced to endure extensive grooming to make *him* 'well-rounded.' Brett's old man hadn't been forced to study supplementary courses such as business strategy from a young age. The daily grind was tedious. Lessons were tedious. For him, there was no wonder why he preferred a simpler existence within the game world. The eight hours in Chronicle per each one hour in the real world gave Brett an avenue to just be himself, free from the watchful eyes of his retainers. Brett still had several daily obligations which required him to go offline, but that just made logging in so much sweeter.

Though he'd never outright admit it, Brett was incredibly grateful for his two closest friends—Savior and Arden—even if he'd never met them in the real world. Those two were always available to group up and quest with him whenever he got back online. No matter their group situation, they'd always have an spot reserved for him.

While Arden had somewhat of a short fuse and was prouder than all hell, he had been a good friend. Like Brett, he too came from a wealthy business-driven family, but being the youngest of several sons afforded him a lot more freedom in his day-to-day life. He had had plenty of time to do as he pleased while growing up and was proud that he'd made many brief appearances within various competitive gaming circuits, though he had never actually won anything. It was through one of these tournaments that he had met Savior. They couldn't recall exactly who had said what, but one thing led to another and they decided to try hanging out online.

Savior was a different sort altogether. He clearly didn't come from money, but he never asked Brett or Arden for anything. They'd have given it to him, too, if he asked—after a bit of teasing, without a doubt—but Savior never would ask. Savior wasn't so predictable—he was a breath of fresh air. Even though he had to work a day job to make ends meet, Savior was always the life of the group. He was happy-go-lucky in a way that Brett and Arden had never really known in their lives, but at the same time he was damned good at what he set his mind on. Savior had won an assortment of low-to-moderate stakes tournaments for fighting games, shooters, and even a few low-contact sports. He had thrashed both Brett and Arden handily at any game the three had ever played together, and though Brett still tried challenging him from time to time, Arden had given up trying long ago.

The three of them had been working well together in Chronicle and were at least as good at getting out of trouble as they were at getting into it. They had tried time and time again to group up

with other players, but for a long while nothing seemed to ever pan out. Either others couldn't keep up, or they just weren't interested in waiting until both Brett and Savior's free times synced up—though, most of the downtime was Brett's fault since Savior's job was for a customer service giant that had begun operating within Chronicle's time compression. Dumb requests were just as common in the virtual world as they were in the real one, and—like the man who demanded complete reimbursement for virtual gear he bought from players despite Savior's employer having no real ties to Chronicle beyond 'real' estate—the most jaw-droppingly idiotic calls were often retold for a laugh.

Savior placed his left hand on the back of his neck and let out a loud, bored yawn. Arden glowered at him, though Brett couldn't help but grin. They were both right. It was boring to just sit there on the side of the road and wait—*really boring*. As seconds passed, Arden seemed to grow more and more tense.

Arden was always the most accommodating of their trio. He worked around the other two's downtimes with few complaints, which was a surprising quality considering his hot head. Then, finally, a few months back in game time, the three had managed to find a flexible fourth for their group—Suresh.

Suresh didn't really say much, but he certainly had a presence—a sort of imposing stare that you could always feel on the side of your neck. That 'presence' didn't particularly bother Brett or Savior, but Arden never really seemed quite as at ease when the large-bodied Suresh was around. Even despite Arden's discomfort, they were all eager to keep Suresh on the team. Arden had a fondness for those who proved themselves to be strong in his particular areas of interest—like he had with Savior—and if Suresh was anything, it was strong. He'd saved all their asses several times, and, through gear or training, was probably equal to any two of them in a fight.

The tall, broad-shouldered Suresh never offered any complaints, either. Most of the time, he just went along with whatever the group was doing. He was very private about his real-world affairs, but it wasn't hard to figure out that he was well-off, too. Most of his gear trumped that of the other members in the party, and they weren't exactly wearing tattered rags. He was quite a bit older than the others, though. So, Brett suspected that, rather than come from a wealthy family, Suresh had made his own fortune on the other side.

When the Tournament was announced, three of their four—Brett, Savior, and Suresh—had been marked as participants. Arden wasn't chosen, as though the gods themselves had been aiming to prod at his short temper. Since then, perhaps in response to Arden's discontent, Suresh had been acting differently—even stepping up to bark orders when, before, he'd never gone so far as to even give advice. Most concerns Brett held for Suresh's sudden stance of authority, however, were soothed by the ever-happy Savior who had said, aside, "Well, at least now we know he's not just some mindless robot."

The four had worked well together. They had their mischievous streaks, sure, but what's a game without a little mischief? Competition ends in equal parts exultation and misgivings. It breeds winners and losers, both, in games and in life. *So, what* if a few blades of grass got trampled underfoot? They were the stronger team—the better people. They were the ones destined to come out on top.

Only recently, they had laughed and laughed after tricking a newbie into being pounced on by some big-ass tree-cat—well, Suresh didn't laugh, but then, he never did. Then, four days ago, they'd fought alongside a healer as they moved deep into an unsafe cave. Once monsters began to reappear

on the path behind them, the four logged out leaving her stranded. You simply had to take pleasure in the little things.

Now, instead of strictly hunting monsters as he had before, Brett was hunting people—not that it made much of a difference to him either way.

“Ah, finally,” Brett thought to himself.

The hooded player who they had been lying in wait for came into view. Brett held up an arm to the others gathered amongst the trees, then dropped it ceremoniously.

“Time for the fun part, boys,” Brett said.

CHAPTER 4: HOT AND BOTHERED

Jitan seared Dakkon's skin for what felt like the thousandth time.

[Jitan has burned you for 19 points of damage. Remaining HP 84/675]

No matter how many times he felt the flames, they still caused him to grit his teeth.

"Perhaps your cold barrier is actually hindering your advancement," suggested Jitan, as flame jumped and danced from finger to finger above his upturned right hand.

"That barrier's the only reason you haven't cooked me yet!" Dakkon grunted, obstinately.

Jitan shrugged his indifference. "It's your money—so, we'll do it your way."

"Hold on!" pleaded Dakkon, anxiously. "I need another break to heal back up."

Jitan sighed and closed his raised hand, extinguishing the flames which had flared from it.

For around forty minutes, ignoring breaks spent regenerating, Jitan had scorched Dakkon with a small flame produced by a low-level fire skill. Though pain was diminished within Chronicle, taking damage still hurt. Some damage in the game, such as damage from fire, could hurt quite a bit as it had been designed to keep players out of and away from obstacles like burning buildings. The experience felt to Dakkon like he was being tortured for information. Had torture been the scenario, then he definitely would have talked, but—unfortunately for him—Dakkon was the one who'd greenlit his own abuse.

Brief though they may have been, each break gave him a chance to reaffirm his resolve. Despite insistent urges to take his time, dawdling now would do him no long-term favors. Though he'd already fantasized about stopping thrice, he certainly couldn't come back later. He'd already ponied up good money for the experience, after all.

Restoring health wasn't the only thing Dakkon did on his breaks. He also distracted himself by checking up on the status of friends he'd met in Chronicle. Cline was doing well—he'd already learned what he needed to from a fletching trainer and was busy buying gear in the marketplace where they'd decided to rendezvous.

Letis—Dakkon's unfortunately-named friend who, through his tireless efforts and the callous humor of the gods, had been 'granted' the ability to spontaneously grow leafy green lettuce miraculously at his whim—had acquired a license to work as a traveling merchant from the capital city of Correndin. The license was in no way required to become a trader, but having one allowed Letis to officially trade with—and on behalf of—any city within the human realm of Denmas. Letis assured Dakkon that trading missions for local governments were among the best ways to become a renowned trader. Supposedly, that was the first step toward having the good fortune to trade on behalf of King Raemun with the non-human kingdoms. International trade had the potential to be insanely lucrative, and no one knew what sorts of doors it could open. If any player had already managed it, they certainly weren't talking about it.

Sift—the powerhouse monk who had martyred himself in their fight against an ancient, rampaging wolf spirit—finally ventured away from his home city of Tian. Saden—the showy exorcist essential in getting to and defeating that same boss—took his companion monk out of the city to hunt. Like Dakkon and Cline, Sift had also been selected as a participant in the Tournament of the Gods, which turned out to be the ideal excuse for Saden to mobilize the devastating might of his monk friend. Even though Sift had no natural inclination to hunt and fight other players, the opportunity was too singular to pass up. The pair were clever and cautious players. Even though they considered themselves friends of Dakkon, they'd decided not to reveal their location until after Sift was released from the tournament through death or total victory.

Dakkon's oldest friends—Mina, Melee, and Roth—he hadn't talked to during his recovery breaks. The three were questing nearby the city of Turlin when the tournament began, though none of them were selected. They had been expecting Dakkon to arrive in town for quite some time, and to Dakkon's own shame, he had only ever directly talked with Roth. It wasn't that he didn't want to speak with the others, it was simply the way things had played out. Now that it had been so long since they'd spoken, he wanted to strike up fresh with them—face-to-face. Everything would be fine, Dakkon was sure, but he'd wait for them to show up all the same.

On this break, he would simply relax a little. On the next break, he might see how the warrior Damak was faring. At that moment, though, he just wanted to sit.

"Break time's over," said Jitan with an impatient, icy glint in his eyes. Dakkon felt that the cold expression was entirely unbecoming of a fire master.

Dakkon looked at his health bar and saw that the young master was right. It was time for another round of being meticulously flame broiled. Knowing there was no sense in delaying the inevitable, Dakkon sighed and arose.

Jitan's chilly gaze seemed to deepen with the addition of his new, sinister grin. "You really are an odd sort," he said while twisting a small, dancing flame between his thumb and index finger. "You can take another break if you want. Come back tomorrow—or never even. You've already paid me, so I don't really care either way."

Dakkon didn't have the time to take a break. If he left, there definitely wouldn't be any coming back. And now, whether it was sunk cost fallacy or not, he'd already paid for the class training.

"Just train me properly, already," snapped Dakkon. "I'm beginning to suspect that you have no idea what you're doing."

"Oh really?" Jitan walked toward Dakkon, spreading the fingers of both his hands as he pointed his palms toward Dakkon. "I'm beginning to suspect that you need a little extra heat."

Before, Jitan had used only a small, lighter-sized flame to scorch 'key points of mana flow.' Now, flames leapt from all the gaps between Jitan's fingers, fully enshrouding Dakkon in a sheath of flame.

Dakkon grit his teeth against the heat and sudden pain, ignoring his first instinct to lunge at Jitan and his second instinct to run around flailing.

[Jitan has burned you for 33 points of damage.]

[Your mettle has been tested. Your resolve unwavering. You have gained a rank in Steadfast!]

[Jitan has burned you for 26 points of damage. Remaining HP 616/675]

At the very least, his hit points were draining so fast that the torture couldn't go on much longer. Though his body writhed from the grip of flames, he managed to stay standing.

[Jitan has burned you for 31 points of damage.]

[Jitan has burned you for 33 points of damage.]

[Jitan has burned you for 30 points of damage.]

[You have learned the new class Evoker (Fire) in the old way, forgoing the easier path. To reward you for your unwavering determination by going well beyond what others would endure, class experience progression will be sped up by 20% over the next hundred days.]

[Jitan has burned you for 34 points of damage.]

"Stop!" yelled Dakkon.

[Jitan has burned you for 36 points of damage. Remaining HP 452/675]

Panting from the pain, Dakkon lunged at Jitan who casually stepped out of the way and ceased barbecuing his apprentice.

After a moment of cooling down and reexamining his notifications, Dakkon couldn't stop himself from asking, "What exactly does it mean, by learning a class 'the old way, forgoing the easy path?'"

"Oh, so you did learn after all?" said Jitan. "Excellent."

"You mean to tell me that there's an easier way to learn pyromancy?" asked Dakkon, his patience rapidly dwindling.

"Not from me there isn't," said Jitan, impassively. "This is how I learned, and it's what provides the best results."

Dakkon, upset though he may have been, was happy to be through with the ordeal. So, for now his glare of indignation toward Jitan would have to be enough.

"No need for that," said Jitan. "Honestly, I didn't expect you'd be able to do it. You're the first one, you know. Congratulations are in order." Jitan turned and exited the chamber, raising a palm to show that Dakkon shouldn't bother to follow.

The approval worn on Jitan's face pacified Dakkon somewhat. Perhaps the young NPC's unreasonable expectations and inhumane methods were simply a result of him being an idiot when it came to certain things. Dakkon had known a few real people who were the same way, and—if he really thought about it—they tended to act just as proudly as Jitan had.

The door reopened to show Jitan carrying a red sash like the ones Dakkon had seen others wearing out in the large, main room of the Flickering Fane. Jitan held it out, offering it to Dakkon.

"Welcome to the Circle of Flame, ember." After the sash had been received, Jitan said, "To blaze brightly, you'll need to stoke, breathe, and burn. The next hundred days will be the best opportunity any trainer can hope to give their apprentice."