

# Episode 2: The Beginning

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From set *The Brothers' War*  
20. 10. 2022

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Tawnos's civil factory was a clamor of human and machine, a cacophony at all hours. Artificers and laborers of all rank and classification crisscrossed the vast shop floor, pushing carts and leading older civils laden with freshly machined bearings, bolts, modular plating, canvas sheathing, and racks of new weapons. The suspended forms of new civils being retooled for war hung from clattering conveyor belts and slowly moving racks. The regimented production environment Tawnos had designed, with its poured stone floor and painted lines intended to guide people and machines along the safest and most efficient paths, had never seen such frantic, barely ordered commotion. He stood above it all, watching from his office cupola behind glass as his dream of a mechanized peace lifted its veil, revealing its bloody truth.

Urza and Mishra never designed anything but machines meant to kill. Tawnos could not speak for Mishra's tutelage, but Urza had been a teacher by example; Tawnos had been clever in his youth, a toymaker of exceptional skill and a wunderkind engineer, but he was only a candle next to Urza's solar brilliance. All Tawnos knew he owed to Urza's instruction. From clever toymaker to master artificer, Urza's steady hand had molded Tawnos as skillfully and distantly as Urza had shaped the face of the world.

Tawnos squeezed his knuckles white as if trying to wring the water from the metal railing of his office's observation deck. His civils—how could he have lied to himself that those machines could be bent to any purpose other than war? Tawnos had sketched original plans for Penregon's civils, but the very theory of their design was based off machines Urza had devised—machines meant only to burn, wreck, and ruin. The civils' delicate yet sturdy manipulators, refined to hold construction tools and tote harvested resources, were so easily adapted to the use of weapons, because they had first been designed for Urza's avengers. The civils' joints and mounting points were universal not because they needed to be able to accept replacement parts from Penregon's stockpile, but because Urza required his war machines be capable of field repair. Tawnos turned from his solitary observation, face a grotesque twist of anger and pain. The most terrible revelation hit him with unflinching clarity: Of every aspect of the machines, none was more ruinous than their power supply. The powerstones of the Thran. Carefully cleaved and polished, these powerstones animated the civils as they had both Urza and Mishra's war machines. In a bitter moment, Tawnos realized that Penregon's stockpile would dry out in the coming years. Without an alternative source or method by which to power Penregon, the people's appetite would not abate—it would rage. By his eagerness to offer his aid, he had only reset the stage: a return to the condition the world was in before the beginning of the Brothers' War seemed inevitable.

Without any other way to keep the lights on, with winter coming, war would rage again. It was only a matter of time.

Tawnos sank further in his chair, staring at the mound of papers and texts on his desk. The sole library collecting the knowledge of a world long gone. He looked over the old folios, rolled blueprints,

notebooks, and bound sheafs; anything he could grab before the end, anything of his master's works. Against this archive of brilliance, Tawnos was a diviner. An augur, not an engineer. Worse, a weapons-maker. Tawnos clenched his fists and a deep, sinking feeling tugged at him. In his youth, his ambition drove him to soaring heights. His ego would not let him stay content as a toymaker. Now, with a dull ache he recognized that if all he had ever done was refine the work of others, he might have been less culpable for the death of the world. If he had spent his life reading the steaming organs of slaughtered bulls for gullible kings and queens, he would have done less harm.



Art by: Matt Stewart

Tawnos's eyes fell upon the corner of a little notebook familiar to him, partially buried on his desk. It was not one of Urza's—it was his own notebook. In it were his original designs—mechanical hawks and snakes, intricate complications, mechanisms for efficient use of powerstones, and designs of a living weapon that blended clay and artifice into a killer. Tawnos tugged that book out from under the stack of paper, opened it, and thumbed through. It was full of wonderful diagrams, precisely drawn lines, and well-reasoned figures. Notes, jotted quickly in different colors of ink and fading graphite, spoke to the lightning moments of inspiration, revision, iteration. His handwriting, faster and more confident in his youth, showed no hint of doubt. Back then, he had been assured of his work. Fulfilled by the elegance of the weapons he designed. Justified by their purpose: the defense of the realm, the defeat of their enemies. What had changed between then and now but the uniform of their foes?

The world changed. He had changed.

Behind Tawnos the sound of creation, muffled by the large panes of glass enclosing his office, was unending. Workers strapped thick, weather-treated canvas sheaths over the civils' vulnerable joints and welded on heavy armor plates over critical components. Brilliant young artificers compiled and reviewed the orders and commands soldiers in the field would use to direct the civils in warfare. Officers of the scouts and city guard walked in small groups, learning from engineers the limitations and operational abilities of these adapted war machines. Across the city, powerstone-lit streetlights and municipal heaters went dark as technicians pried even these small chips from their mountings so that they could be installed in the civils' chests, in the pommels of their powered chain-swords, the cores of incandescent lances. Making peace into war once more, all on Tawnos's orders.

He closed his notebook and set it atop the pile of Urza's designs.

"Send them all into the sea," Tawnos whispered. He thought of Kayla and hoped she would stay true to her promise. He thought of another woman, Ashnod, and wondered if now, after the end of the world, there was still time.

First, however, he would take his first brave action in many years. His first original idea. Tawnos would lead, finally; he would change the world for the better. He looked down at the few pages he had torn from his book: A mechanical snake, a bird, a mouse. His toys. A different method. He tucked them into his pocket.

In the dark, Tawnos smiled.

No one on the factory floor saw the fire until it was too late. It consumed Tawnos's office. Flames licked the glass, drowning everything inside in a stinking, roiling conflagration of burning paper and ink.

The Siege of Penregon lasted a single day and by nightfall had devolved into two smaller fights: The first was the expected contest, the bloody aftermath of the Tal crusaders' failed attempt to take the city from the outside. As the sun slipped below a gray horizon, Penregon's defenders stalked out from the lone, gore-choked breach in the city walls to route the Talite infantry. The crusaders had failed to exploit their only opening; now the survivors staggered away into the night, leaving the dead behind and the wounded moaning and crawling after them. In the distance, between the large body of the march now decamping and Penregon's victorious defenders, grim horsemen in heavy armor waited with clean weapons and dark gazes turned toward the city. Rearmed civils picked their way across the tumbled stone blocks of the breach, their weapons and cores glowing with the waste heat cast by their old powerstones. Outnumbered by the machines and their human counterparts, the Talite cavalry could only watch as Penregon's defenders took prisoners and collected the dead.



Art by: Ryan Pancoast

The second battle was more widespread: Raddic's forces had at some point—likely the prior year, but no one could be certain—snuck zealots of their faith into the residential and merchant districts of Penregon. Over the long, dark, and cold months of winter, these evangelists had proselytized, cultivating

secret cults of the faithful. These followers of Tal's word cursed the machine and the mage both. Animated by evangelical fervor, they saw demons in the smooth metal armature of Tawnos's civils, devils in the few remaining scholars of the Path. Though there was no magic in Penregon, artifice was fuel enough for the faithful. The status of their lives, whether they lived through the war or were born in its wake, was a perfect kindling.

The conflagration sparked with the arrival of the main body of the Talite crusaders. With Raddic's declaration refused and the city gates closed, the Talites in the city surged to action. In the pre-dawn hours of the siege morning, as the Talite army was forming out in the fields before Penregon, explosions and fires rocked the city. Tawnos's factory, many of the residential districts, and several merchant ships in the harbor burned. Black-clad zealots ran into the crowds, attacking the city guard and old civils who came to put out the fire. The city's defenders were slow to respond, but mobilized en masse, bolstered by reinforcements from the wall. The Talites were driven by fervor, but Penregon's people fought for their homes. Alley by alley, street by street, Penregon's civils and militia drove the Talites back to their safehouses. By midday, hundreds were dead and fires raged through the city, battled by brigades of volunteer firefighters. By evening, the worst of the fighting was done, and only a handful of the most die-hard cultists remained in the city, barricaded and surrounded.

Kayla had spent the brutal day in a well-defended post with the commanders of the city guard and militia. Jarsyl was with her. To leave her grandson anywhere other than at her side in such danger was unthinkable; she had lost one son to war and would be damned to risk another of her blood to the blades, even if it meant Jarsyl seeing her not as his grandmother but as his queen.

As leader of the city, Kayla was not just a witness to the military's cold calculus. When her commanders hemmed over pulling rearmed civils from the wall to fight the cultists inside, they turned to Kayla to break their deadlock. When the scouts begged for reinforcements, they turned to Kayla to order Penregon's militia levies to the breach. When dawn broke and saw the walls successfully defended, her staff needed to know—do they execute the captured Talites, jail them, or exile them? The precise tactics of the day fell to her commanders; Kayla was there to be the city's conscience, the speaker for Penregon, the one who determined who lived and who died.

The following morning Kayla stood with a cloth tied around her mouth and nose, surveying the fire-blackened ruins of Tawnos's factory. The charred skeleton of the large building jutted up into the gray sky, damp and smoking, stinking of oil and the foul chemicals that fed and were consumed by the blaze. Slag piles and ember-marbled lumps of partially melted civils packed the building's footprint.

"The fire broke out during the late shift," Myrel said, their voice muffled through their own cloth mask. "The supervisor I spoke with said it started in Tawnos's office." Myrel pointed toward an otherwise unidentifiable tangle of metal and slag. "I'm sorry ma'am, but we haven't found him—here, at his quarters, or among the dead."

Kayla nodded. Tawnos was gone. "And the workers?"

"Everyone else was able to escape," Myrel said. "Some who tried to extinguish the fire suffered from inhaling the smoke, but they will be fine with rest and good air. We lost the civils on the floor, however—at least a dozen."

"This was not an attack," Kayla said.

"The blaze was sudden," Myrel said, frowning. "And all of Urza's old plans, Tawnos's work from the war—"

"Look around, Myrel," Kayla interrupted her captain. "Nothing else burned. No one else died. The workers said the fire began in Tawnos's office while he was there. It wasn't an explosion, and no one noticed until the smoke had flooded the upper levels."

Myrel grunted, agreeing.

"Tawnos did this," Kayla said. She walked into the ruin without waiting for a response from her scout captain. The cloth mask she wore cut the stink somewhat, but the fire had been mighty, and the tang of burnt metal still wrinkled her nose. The few workers sifting through the damp ruins stopped their labors and leaned on their tools, watching Kayla with detached interest.

Kayla stopped before the heap that had been Tawnos's office, now a steaming lump of matted ash and metal where it collapsed after burning through the night. No papers or books remained, nothing but some dirty, faintly glowing chips of powerstones he must have kept on his desk.

"You selfish old man," Kayla whispered to the ashes.

The ticking and cooling of burnt metal. The hiss of dripping water, plunking into still-hot piles of ash. The scrape of shovels on stone as laborers returned to work. These were the only responses. No bright laughter or solemn murmurs, no polite cough or strong, steady voice. Another connection to her old life severed.

"You left me nothing," Kayla said. No half-burnt journal or wondrously preserved folio of plans remained from which they could recreate his civils or devise new automatons to help Penregon face the coming winter. A season's worth of good weather and harvest stretched before her, and but for the spare dozens of civils that remained, the city would be forced once more to return to human labor. Kayla knew from haunting Tawnos's office during the last winter that the few remaining civils had short lives ahead of them—their powerstones were old and worn, harvested from war machines that all but used them up and then died a decade ago. She considered the stresses the previous day's combat must have put on them, and a sour twist curdled through her.

"You left us nothing," Kayla said, standing. She looked around the ruin of Tawnos's workshop. Penregon had needed him more than she had needed him. Yes, the connection he provided to her old life had been as painful as a healing burn, but familiar. With that wound severed from her soul, she could heal; but a city was not a person. Cities never healed, they either lived or died. Tawnos, in taking his life's work and the collected knowledge of Urza's artifice with him, may have taken Penregon with him. Not now, not for years, likely, but the winter would not stop. The ice crept ever closer; if the seasons continued to compress, then in some future not distant enough there would be an age of nothing but winter. A Penregon without civils and powerstones would die.

Kayla turned from the ash slurry and walked away. She had work to do. A city to save, if she could, from the end that now seemed all but inevitable.

A pair of damaged but functional civils joined the laborers later in the day. Fitted with wide shovels designed by Tawnos to clear snow from Penregon's streets, they made short work of cleaning the ruins. The ash was dumped into Penregon harbor, joining the ruined bodies of civils destroyed in the siege and those machines whose powerstone hearts had given out. The age of artifice died in Penregon's dark bay, below gentle waves, before the winter.

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Penregon's end came ten years after the siege, outlasting Kayla's most optimistic predictions, but not her certainty. The intervening years were punctuated by brief moments of chaos and fear, but nothing like the siege.



First came the first whispering summer. Penregon's gardens and orchards, typically thick with the buzz of cicadas—the true roaring lions of Penregon, Argivians would joke—but they never sang that summer. Though many found this a relief at first, the next quiet summer curdled any humor. The birds followed the insects, and summer's quiet begat silent springs.

Ominous signs accumulated. One winter only a handful of years after the siege, Penregon's harbor suffered its first solid freeze. The sea waters of that protected bay froze, trapping the city's fishing and trade fleets in dense bay ice. At first, people despaired. There were riots: lack of work, lack of food. When those demonstrations calmed, people took to building huts and hovels alongside the frozen hulls, creating informal, scattered villages of fisherfolk; if they could not take their ships to sea, they would take themselves to the sea. At first the merchants and ship owners hired the city guard to clear the people away, but as it became clear that the ice would not be broken, they relented and let the people fish. For every winter that followed, the bay became a new land for landlords to lease, suppliers to outfit, and laborers to work: the people found fish, the landlords made the people's work into gold—but not too much gold—and life went on.

Inland, Penregon's scouts kept up their expeditions. Early in the wake of the Talites, they scouted for distant dangers. As the winters began to linger, scouts hunted for warmer lands. Kayla championed the scouts' task, and the people of Penregon looked to their adventures with hope. Against the cruelties of the winter, to the landlords of Penregon harbor, the granary chiefs of spring, and the shipmasters of summer, the scouts were heroes.



Art by: Sam Burley

That hope was rewarded. Near the end, scouts returned with news of green lands to the distant west: Beyond the trailing edge of the Southern Khers the grass still grew thick and strong. There were towns and villages there, built by the descendants of old Yotia, Korlis, and Tomakul, and full of people who had never seen snow lower than the mountain peaks. Those people assured the scouts that further still, across the oases and sands of the Great Desert and west of the ruins of Tomakul, there stood cities. Beyond the Great Desert was a world that had been insulated from the worst of the cataclysm. The scouts were sure of it, and so Kayla—who had grown tired of the bickering merchants, landlords, guildmasters, and soldiers—proclaimed to the people of Penregon that their salvation lay in the distant west.

That news prompted widespread excitement. Caravans were organized, supplies negotiated and bartered, homes deconstructed and packed into carts and wagons. Westbound by the thousands, the settler-refugees departed, and none who went that way ever returned to Penregon. The city grew quiet. Those who stayed either clung to what they knew with pyrrhic resolve—surely the gods would lift this cold before ruin met them—or grim resignation; either they could not or would not leave the city.

Winter bled more and more into summer. Once balmy, those middling months turned crisp; omens mounted. Though usually temperate, on occasion a storm would darken Penregon for a week at a time, burying the city in drifts taller than the dark two-story buildings of the residential districts. Penregon's few remaining civils plowed snow drifts from the city's streets, clearing the cobblestones for the lonely pedestrians who scurried from warm building to warm building. When those civils died, they simply stopped mid-labor. Balanced, they became pillars of ice as snow fell on them, melted, and then re-froze.

Penregon's end—the Penregon of Lady Kayla, the last Queen of Argive—came in autumn. Scouts returned from an expedition into Terisiare's far north, where they had heard rumors of a Gixian threat, a remnant of that foul order forgotten on Terisiare after the war's end. There, the returned scouts said, the land was buried under walking mountains of ice, great glaciers that moved slower than time but were just as unstoppable. Trembling, the scouts told tales of the northernmost Khers crumbling, the roar of their passing echoing for days at a time. In desperation, they had fled to the northeastern coast, where they observed with horror that the ocean itself had frozen to a dirty gray landmass. The sea had vomited up mountains of ice, tumbling and re-freezing, standing as tall as the Khers themselves; the cracking and popping of the frozen ocean sounded as if it were the very bones of the gods snapping. Warmed by fried fish and steaming coffee, the scouts told Kayla that the world was ending. The ice, though distant by generations, would not be stopped.

Through it all, Kayla was calm. Her stoic demeanor was necessary if Penregon was to remain together as those portentous, unstoppable changes to the world accumulated. Standing as a public bastion against hopeless resignation took an incredible amount of work, and there was no avenue that Kayla did not explore. She prayed to the gods of Yotia, old and new—even once reaching out to Tal—but the Argivians were as close to godless as anyone, and she felt nothing besides, so she stopped. She thought to emulate her late father's martial prowess and poise, so she trained her body into a warrior's strength, but she found no peace in running, riding, or swinging a sword. Away from the martial, Kayla dove into texts and scholarship, art, and other disciplines. She directed the construction of a grand manor house outside of Penregon, an estate that would prove her dedication to Argive as a gift to its future rulers—an exercise, she realized upon its completion and her relocation, in denial. She quit the manor and moved back to the city after only a year.

To the public and to her advisors, this all spoke to the drive and determination of Lady Kayla, the Queen of Argive. In public, she was an example to all: a stoic without stoicism's chill, a martyr who did not die but burned as a beacon. This persona was a prison. It was only in private, in the dead of night, that Kayla was free to be afraid. In these dark hours, Kayla let her fear out into the world. This proved to be the only outlet by which she could go on.

For the early years after the siege of Penregon and Tawnos's death, this fear was raw and unfocused: A cold-sweat anxiety that stole her from sleep. A white-hot rage, screamed into a pillow, hoping that no one could hear. She thought she could never empty herself of the pain, the anger, the grief. Every morning she awoke with her lungs raw, jaw throbbing and head aching. It was as if she wore a crown of weighted needles, a corset of nails, and could only adjust where their points dug in. No amount of fervent prayer brought relief. No full-contact sparring or alpine ranging cleared her mind. No painting or poem could capture it. No lonely wandering through the grand and hollow halls of her manor

granted her reprieve. Kayla went through the day assuring others that their pain, their sadness, their fear would not best them, that Penregon needed them, that the world needed them. There was no truth behind her counsel: she felt nothing, could not even muster love for her grandson, and began to think that her grief might kill her.

One cold winter night, many years after the siege, it nearly did.

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Alone, shivering from the cold, drenched in sweat, Kayla clutched a balled-up fistful of cloak to her face and screamed again. She did not fear being heard. She had retreated to her manor, trudging alone through the snow to clear her mind from the small bickerings of her noble council and Penregon's moneyed princelings. The world was ending, and still those august goons argued over leases and owed rents. Myopic ticks, greedy fools. Kayla hated them. Why did they get to live when everyone she loved had died? She missed her Yotia and her family and her future and even the damn cicadas. It was too much.

Kayla—leaving only a note for Captain Myrel so that they would not send the scouts to track her down—quit the city to find a reprieve in her mothballed manor.

Wrapped in an old cloak, a dusty crimson garment rescued from Kroog, Kayla lay in a ball on the floor of the manor's grand entrance and screamed her throat raw. It had been a day since she left the city, and she had not made it any deeper into the manor. She summoned up every horrible feeling and could not stop calling upon the lovely ones as well—every memory of Urza, of Tawnos, of Harbin, Jarsyl, her mother and father, of burning Kroog and shining Kroog, of Raddic and the ice, screaming until the sound left her and she could only croak, only sob, and then she felt something snap.

Heat flowed through her. Fire coursed up from some deep knot in her gut, sizzled through every nerve in her body. She gasped, terrified, and managed to throw her cloak off before sparks erupted from her hands. Furnace heat flared bright in the space above her palms, popping like a festival firework and leaving her ears ringing and face reddened from the heat.

Magic.

The ringing faded from her ears. She knew it the moment it happened. As a girl, she had heard of wonders like this. All her life, she had heard whispers of some power beyond artifice. Even Urza spoke of it, muttering curses about some esoteric power manipulated in far corners of the world. She had dismissed it as fantasy—as had everyone else in the combined kingdoms—but that night all doubt quit her. Magic had cracked out into the world when Urza killed it; at the nadir of her despair, Kayla had channeled fire.

Shivering and singed, alone, Kayla looked at her palms. Thin smoke rose from the air above them. They blistered. The air stank. She smiled. For the first time in years, Kayla laughed.

A new, private regimen replaced her nights of despair. She returned to the city, resumed her duties, and dispatched her stewards to search Penregon's libraries for any books or scrolls on magic. To her surprise, they found many. Survivors from Terisia City—the old seat of that esoteric order, the Third Path—had settled in Penregon, bringing with them a modest amount of their writings. Among them was a copy of a text, an exploration of the techniques of a scholar from the college of Lat-Nam and one of the Third Path's leaders, Hurkyl, who—if war stories were to be believed—once disappeared the first regiments of Mishra's army that attacked Terisia City. Kayla had heard of this during the war but assumed it to be a fantasy, hope spun from beleaguered survivors of that long and bloody siege. After her own channeling, however, she thought otherwise.



Kayla's new nightly practice followed the precepts of Hurkyl's meditative techniques as laid out in the book. She read that her control of magic could be improved first through a focus, so she retrieved a stone of her beloved Kroog from Penregon's archives and learned to pour everything into it, channeling this energy until the stone glowed and grew too hot to hold. Then, she learned to obliterate the pain. She burned herself often as she practiced, but this did not stop her. Instead, she wrapped her hands in clean gauze and continued her practice until the channeling of this energy no longer burned her flesh or caused her pain; then, she pressed further, learning how to direct this heat, to shape it into wild flame and cold light, into repairing her own wounds.

These exercises were exhausting even as they were invigorating. Tapping into the soul as Hurkyl outlined was opening oneself to a raw font of memory and emotion. Even when the tears dried and her practice stone cooled, some hint of Kayla's despair remained. She could not burn away this final feeling. This ghost lingered with her even as her confidence grew from a novice's faltering practice to the assurance of a master. She might only light a candle with a brush of her finger, knit together a paper cut on her finger, or heat a stone to coal-hot in the palm of her hand, but it was the simple fact that this could happen—and that she could control it—that assured her of her mastery.

Kayla realized this: if she could manage her wild and sudden magic, then she could bring herself back from darkness. Both demanded the same effort, and she was a diligent student.

Kayla cooled as her practice stone did, night by night, session by session. Instead of raging through her grief, Kayla imbued her stone with her fire, touched it to a candle, and controlled her anger as the candle burned down. She encountered that familiar pain, mulled it over, accepted it, and then set it aside. Despair had not quit her, instead Kayla had heard it out, and then bade it farewell; the sun rose each morning despite the ice, and each morning, people more scared and less able than she came to petition her for help, guidance, aid, and comfort. Each day, she did what she could to help them. Each day, the woman she knew as Kayla bin-Kroog—not Lady Kayla—did not die. She changed. She survived. She was still afraid, but no longer without hope; she was not afraid of the night when she knew she carried an ever-burning flame inside of her.

So, when the scouts returned with news of hope in the west, Kayla saw to it that any of her people who wanted to make the journey were provisioned and protected, ordering Myrel and their scouts to take whatever goods those pilgrims needed from the storehouses of the guildmasters and grain-lords. There was little they could do to resist Lady Kayla's order, though some tried; they discovered they were alone with their gold and mercenaries against the people, and the lords that lived relented. Most all the scouts left Penregon as vanguards for the migration, followed by nearly half of the city's population arranged in long wagon trains. Myrel went with them; Kayla saw them off, kissing Myrel on both cheeks as a mother would a beloved child, assuring them they would see each other again someday in the west.

Penregon quieted after the last of the wagon trains departed, darkened as the longer winters settled in. Storms battered the city. During one especially bitter blizzard, the Talite crusaders returned. Kayla ordered the gates open and invited them into Penregon's dark streets. They demanded she tell them where she hid the machines, to which she informed the crusaders they had walked off across the ice. Kayla told them Penregon had nothing to hide and no demons but hungry people; she offered to shelter them, and the Talites finally entered Penregon. Curious, she asked after Raddic, who was nowhere among the ranks of hard-bitten crusaders.

"Dead," their new leader said. He was a gaunt and cold man, with none of Raddic's charm. Kayla had found him in the market streets, buying spirits and wines.

"After the Iron Tower we marched to Mishra's forge," he told her. "The demons there were great in number and fury, but thanks be to Tal, we killed them all. Many of the faithful died, Raddic among them." He buried bottles of spirits in his saddlebags. "Who was he to you?"

"No one," Kayla said. "A reminder of the old world."

The gaunt man and his retinue left, and the long, dark-clad column of Talites—what was left of them after years on campaign—followed, trudging west through the snow into the white blankness.

The last year wound down. With each passing day from the first, people bled from the city, stripping it of life, heat, and sound. Districts faded into disrepair, and the city shrank.

Kayla was among the last to quit Penregon. It was her city, but she would not die in its cold, empty streets. That grief she had poured it into her Kroog stone; she left when she had something to leave for. Her scouts returned with dried blades of grass and pressed flowers and promised oceans of green, a living world beyond the desert, beyond the snow-capped Khers and ruin of the east. There were towns and cities, her scouts assured her, and there was something else: a story, tender and cruel, of a man and a flying machine in the western sky.

Harbin.

Kayla had poured out all her grief. With it fled the grief that can be tinged with hope. So, upon hearing this story, Kayla did not let her heart burst. She did not rush from Penregon alone to cross mountains and rivers to find her son. She prepared a final caravan of her people and went west with them, leaving only the grim and bloodied landlords of Penregon harbor behind, who refused to move from their miserable manors, where they stayed counting their gold until the ice took them.

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Kayla left Penregon and her manor behind and marched out along the now well-defined route with the rest of the exodus. Up into the howling Khers, her caravan struggled, choosing the lowest of the passes and still losing a quarter of their number to the cold, the dark, and the desperate creatures there. Down from those bitter passes, they staggered, trundling by the stone-frozen bodies of hundreds who perished on this route years before. The lower elevations brought some relief as the migration finally came upon the shores of that green west. Here, in the shadow of the bitter Khers, Kayla was once more in the land of her youth. Yotia, her dominion by right, the land she once would have ruled as queen. She always hated the bloody, martial Warlord and Warlady titles. How vile they were, and how corrupting. How could one rule a land in peace when their gods-given title named them a master of war?

Kayla knew she would have been a good queen.

The Mardun flowed swollen and wider than she remembered it, rich with spring meltwater. Their migration followed the old river by its new banks, winding along its bends and crossing at the small fords and ferry towns they encountered. No one had built bridges yet, but by Kayla's figuring, they were not far off. The snow and ice did not threaten the lands to the west of the Khers as much as it had menaced Penregon and the east; the long winter was coming, only delayed by that continental wall, and for now there was still money to be made in the mountains' shadow. Some of her caravan, fatigued and aching, stopped their migration in these budding towns. There was rich soil to be tilled here, gold to pan, old metals to scavenge, game to trap, and fish to harvest. One could make a life here; a life in the wake of civilizations, but it was a life one could live, rather than just survive.

The foothills and thick forests soon fell away to dry prairie. Under open sky, the last hundred refugees of Penregon's exodus continued west, passing by the moss-covered ruins of old war machines and abandoned redoubts. Their route took them through the crumbled stone ruins of dead towns and across old battlefields—trenches and craters now shallow ponds where frogs sang in the evening, the bones of

the dead long decayed to mulch for lilies and boughs of reeds where small birds flitted. The route west was a graveyard as much as it was a road; occasionally, they would pass the rotting wooden skeletons of carriages and carts, the bodies of their owners and draft beasts that once hauled them long since eaten by scavengers or buried where they had fallen.

Eventually, they came to New Yotia, the first city of the west. A wooden sprawl built atop a mesa overlooking the vast westward sweep of land, New Yotia perched above the tumbling waters of the old Mardun. Large paddlewheels churned in the river, turning mills and powering all manner of riverside industry. The city had no walls beyond the natural rise of the mesa and earthworks facing the mountains; it was surrounded by cultivated fields and small farmers' collectives. Tall signal towers marched toward the city at regular intervals, rattling to life as their operators saw the approaching train of wagons.

New Yotia welcomed them as Penregon once welcomed those who came to its gates. Most of Kayla's people settled there, finding the city a warm and familiar comfort. Kayla nearly did as well; she was tired and New Yotia reminded her of her youth. The scents, the food, the music, the language—even the buildings, though they were simple wooden affairs—were Yotian through and through. New Yotia was not Kroog—Kroog's corpse lay many dozens of miles ahead—but it was close.

Kayla lingered in New Yotia for the rest of the winter, living in relative comfort above a small tea shop in a busy quarter of the city. By the summer, she decided it was time to continue west. New Yotia was a busy river port for the trappers, miners, and farmers that ranged up and down the western side of the Khers. Some came from even farther, and it was through this churn of people that Kayla learned there were indeed other cities further west: Lat-Nam, Sumifa, and other cities old and new, untouched by the cataclysm that doomed the east. As well, Kayla heard more stories. One of a sleek machine, silver as a mirror and fast as the light's flash, and the last flying man who soared the western blue. He was a hero, the people said. He'd flown into the sun to steal its gold, they said. He'd died in the cataclysm, they said, and was reborn as the wind's herald. Harbin, her son, legend of the western sky.

Dead or alive, ghost or spirit, Kayla resolved to cross the continent to learn the truth. Strange things were happening in Terisiare—with Tawnos she had seen the dead return. Within herself and Jarsyl, she had seen magic. The old world was dying, remembering, trembling; a new world was being born.

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## 80 AR

The evening before Kayla was bound to depart for the west, her grandson, Jarsyl, came to her modest apartment. They ate a private dinner of refined Yotian cuisine on her deck overlooking a busy marketplace, attended to by a single servant whom Kayla sent away after the final plate had been set. It was a light meal, and the two of them ate in silence, letting the sound of the evening crowd below fill the space until Kayla could not stand her grandson's moping any longer.

"Jarsyl," Kayla said, placing her utensils down on the table. "You're eating like a songbird."

"I'm sorry, gran-mama," Jarsyl said. He sat hunched as much as his training in posture allowed. His food, save for perfunctory cuts, was untouched.

"You've not met my eyes once," Kayla said. "You're haunted. Is it a lover, your practice, or something else?"

"Something else," her grandson said. Jarsyl looked off over the market. "Why did you choose this place?" He asked. "You are queen—you could have taken quarters in the new palace."

"True," Kayla said. "But I have been removed from my people for so long. I wished to live among them." She returned to her meal.

"But you don't have guards."

"I am an old woman," Kayla said, "and I am happy that my age of perfume is behind me. I want to stink of spice, oil, and incense; I do not need guards, and I do not want them."

"And the Talites?" Jarsyl said. He searched the market below and pointed at a pair of Talite soldiers, haggling with a tea vendor. "They say they're hunting mages now."

"They do say that." Kayla nodded, taking a bite of her food.

"You're not worried?"

Kayla laughed. "Certainly not. Every old woman has been called a witch by someone, especially those old women unlucky enough to lead nations. Besides—they can't get us all." She winked, and a soft thrum of energy filled the apartment. As one, the oil lamps Kayla had left burning snuffed out, then reignited.

Jarsyl's eyes widened. He looked toward the Talites in the market below. They had not noticed. No one noticed.

"The Talites don't concern me." Kayla said, smiling. She nodded toward Jarsyl's nearly full plate. "Your lack of appetite concerns me—that and your deflection. What haunts you?"

Jarsyl prodded his cooling food.

"Out with it," Kayla said, kind but firm.

"I can't go with you."

Kayla arched an eyebrow. Jarsyl may have been a man, but in this moment, he was as timid as a schoolboy. For a heartbeat, her blood ran cold, but she managed to compose herself before her face could break.

Jarsyl looked so much like his father. Harbin had stood before her, once, the day he told her he meant to join the 'thopter corps. The hitch of fear—not of what could be, but of how she would respond—caught Jarsyl's voice in his throat the same way it had Harbin all those long years ago.

She took a breath. There was no war. Jarsyl, the bright boy, was not Harbin.

"I've heard stories," Jarsyl began, "of a school to the north, on the banks of Ronom Lake."

"There's nothing in Ronom," Kayla said. "The Gixians were driven out a decade ago by the first Talite crusade."

"Right, yes," Jarsyl said. "But I've heard there is something else there now—a school for people who can do what we do."

"A school for magic?"

Jarsyl nodded. "Magic and artifice, both. They're teaching people like us how to be better. Stronger."

Kayla considered this. Jarsyl was, by the customs of the old world and the demands of the new, an adult—though she often thought of him as a young boy still. His life had been lived at her side, abandoned by his father and grown at the end of the world. The end of her world. His world, though perilous, was young as he and growing still—were the rumors he chased any less credible than the stories she followed?

"Magic and artifice," Kayla repeated. She wondered—could it be? "Did they say who runs this school?"

"An artificer woman, Nod, and a mage they called Duck," Jarsyl said. He rubbed the back of his neck, as if ashamed to speak the names aloud. "I think he might be from the west, it's a funny name."

Nod and Duck. Old friends and new. Kayla always wondered if Tawnos truly died that day. She smiled at Jarsyl. "Go north. If there are teachers greater than me, seek them out."

Jarsyl brightened, as if a weight lifted from his shoulders. Still, tears sprang to his eyes.

Kayla stood and rounded the table to Jarsyl, gathering him up into an embrace. "My boy," she whispered, squeezing him tight. "You and I have different stories. Mine might be ending, but yours is about to begin."

"I'm afraid to go," Jarsyl said, his voice muffled by her embrace.

"Me too," Kayla said. She kissed her grandson's cheek. "But I am excited, as well. Let's choose to let excitement lead us, yes?"

Jarsyl nodded. He stepped back and wiped his nose dry. "Will you tell him about me?" he asked. He didn't need to say his name for Kayla to know who he meant.

"I will," Kayla said. "If you tell Headmaster Duck about me. Now, when do you leave?"

"There is a party departing tomorrow morning," Jarsyl said, curiosity over his grandmother's wish vanishing as he rattled off his plans. "I'll have to hurry to the outfitters, but I have already told the pathfinder of my interest—they're expecting me." His tears had dried, and already he began to speak around his breath. When he was excited, he positively burned with energy.

Schooling, if indeed there was a school of magic, would do him good, Kayla thought. "You should not linger," Kayla said. She motioned for him to go. "Hurry and gather your things, let the pathfinder know that you will certainly be joining them in the morning."

"It's hard to say goodbye, gran-mama," Jarsyl said. "I don't want to."

Kayla nodded. "Then let's not say goodbye," she said. She embraced him once more and kissed him on the forehead. "'Til later, my boy."

"'Til later," Jarsyl whispered.

Kayla sent her grandson away. The following morning, she left before the dawn.

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The quickest and safest way west was via the Mardun. That grand river would pass the ruins of Kroog and deposit them at the edge of the desert, where they would follow the high roads through the ruins of Tomakul and beyond.

Kayla was curious to see her old home. The New Yotians told her that the Mardun long ago flooded the city, having been shaken from its banks by the tremendous, cataclysmic detonation that rocked Terisiare. Save for the southern districts of the Kroog where the royal palace and noble quarters of the city once stood, much of the city remained underwater. The grand old capital was now a lake along the new course of the river, fed by the distant snowmelt from the southern Khers.

Kayla was not surprised to hear that a warlord ruled Kroog again. This one was a brute who styled himself after the mighty leaders of old. His raider gangs menaced the roads and fields around the city; it was better to take a swift riverboat guarded by New Yotian archers and Talite mercenaries. The Church of Tal was thick in New Yotia, numerous as the wildflowers in the prairie. Those dour penitents and demon hunters were a nuisance to the bright joys of New Yotia, but their order was large and provided for the common defense of the city. Kayla understood that their presence was necessary to counter the threat of raiders from Kroog. As well, she understood that alone she could not root them out and expel them from this city that could be her home—not even with her magic. So she did not protest when a detachment of dark-clad soldiers filed onto her riverboat. The Talites wore clean uniforms of a



deep and inky blue, their armor black, their swords oiled and free of rust. A far cry from the desperate rabble that once assailed Penregon; it seemed their first defeat did not deter their faith.

The Talites took the bottom deck and the hold, while the passengers and New Yotian archers took the top deck. Should fighting occur, the worst of it would fall upon the Talites; they did not mind this arrangement, nor did Kayla. Below her, the Talites prayed, ate, maintained their weapons, slept, and kept watch. None of them looked at her. None of them knew who she was, and none of them seemed to care. This was much to Kayla's liking as well.

Once underway, Kayla ruled the second deck of the riverboat, ignoring the captain's orders to return to her cabin during the evening hours. She kept no company but her own and resisted conversation. The New Yotian contingent recognized Kayla's old-world accent and bearing and did not mark her distance from them as an insult: an old eccentric, they assumed, one of the few elders who lived through the end of the world. The New Yotians stopped their inquiries and advances after the first few nights on the river. Left alone, Kayla was free to rest and watch the world pass by.

The ruins of Kroog were a day ahead. On her lap, the last pages of a poem she had been working on. An epic, a history of the men who killed the world, lest they ever be forgotten—or forgiven.

Bright laughter from the New Yotians practicing their archery drew her attention, the twang and thrum of their bows as they fired at targets along the bank—trees, fence posts from long-abandoned farms, rusted remains from the war—making a contest out of their training. On the deck below, one of the Talites started to sing and soon the rest joined in, their voices rising together in chorus.

Another week of this did not sound so bad. Kayla was quite curious to see Tomakul—even if that grand city was only ruins—and was eager to explore those lands further west, of which she had only ever heard described in story.

Kayla tapped her foot on the deck in time with the singing. She closed her folio, deciding to take a break from writing for the day. The gentle rocking motion of the riverboat soothed her. The sun was warm on her face. She closed her eyes and smiled.

Kayla was free.

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## 85 AR

Kroog itself looked nothing like the grand city it once was. Its proud stone towers had all but crumbled, save for a handful of hollow monoliths that were now home only to nesting birds. These lone sentinels of the lake remained the tallest structures in Kroog but were not seen as part of the new city that sprawled there; Kroog after the cataclysm was a midden heap of buildings and walkways that huddled atop one another, built above the water on a forest of stilts. Everything in the city was devoted to one of two things: harvesting the bounty of the lake or raiding up and down the river to add coins, captives, and salvage to the wealth of Warlord Fask, the Tyrant of Kroog.

Fask was a clever brute. A warlord in title and bearing, he had killed his way to the top in the decade following the cataclysm. Now Fask ruled a petty kingdom that stretched from the ruins of Zegon on the southwestern coast of Terisiare up to the greening desert's boundary in the north. To the east, his land was ill-defined, contested by New Yotia and the Talites who still managed to hold his reavers at bay. Inside his borders, all paid tribute to him, a simple system of "Four-Of-Ten"—four of any goods were given to his treasury and personal chest, and the remainder spread out among his loyal subjects. He was, to the chagrin of the people who suffered his reign, the fairest of the warlords who had contested this ground. Thus, Fask commanded the loyalty of his favored warriors and the submission of the rest of his subjects until his death.

Fask's end saw his realm carved up between rising domains and hungry warlords. New Yotia and the Talites conquered and annexed the eastern half of his domain while Fask's rivals tore apart the western half. No one knows if the fighting there ever stopped; those records, if they ever were kept, have been lost to time and the ice, or were buried in the archives of the Church of Tal. Lost as well was the story of Fask's end, the nighttime tale of the tyrant and the ghost.

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Warlord Fask, the Tyrant of Kroog, awoke in the deepest pit of the night. A sound in his chambers: cans, coins, and medallions rattling together.

Fask threw off his thin sheet blanket and grabbed his sword, naked as he was in the bed beside him, and leveled it toward the sound. His chambers were unrecognizable from their usual spartan appointments, but he had ordered them to be packed thick as any storehouse or treasury. His guards whispered of the Warlord's paranoia and madness, but Fask was desperate. He needed to prove what he had seen.

A web of strings crisscrossed the large room, and from them all manner of small bright things were suspended: cans, coins, silver and tin utensils, medallions, knives, chain shirts, arrowheads—anything that would create a loud, unmistakable commotion when disturbed by a person's touch. This was Fask's trap, his system to prove he was not mad but perceptive.

For months, Fask had been plagued by voices in the night. Footsteps and the sounds of conversation, building and falling. Outwardly, he feared an assassin—this was the reason for his alarm system, he told his guards—but inwardly, he feared something else, something more deadly: fate.

Fask wiped sweat from his eyes and recalled unbidden the oracle's words once more:

*The dead do not forget their killer, she cackled through bloody teeth. We will meet again someday—every cut of your sword will be returned a thousandfold!*

Fask had encountered the oracle one dark and rainy night during his conquest of the Sword Marches, as he and his reavers tore down a nameless village that had stood against them. The doom she cursed him with had haunted him for a decade; though he sat on a throne he built through war, nothing since the cataclysm had weighed so heavily on his mind.

In the quiet minutes that followed his awakening, Fask felt a curtain of shame descend over his sweat-cooled back. He was a fool to fear that ancient crone. The sword was a fine and proud weapon, sharp as a razor, and his room empty. He was Fask, the Tyrant of Kroog, the Warlord of Old Yotia! The wind, surely it had been the wind over the lake—

The rattle came from the foot of his bed.

"Who is there?" Fask cried out, sword held in a two-handed grasp before him. Fear commanded him, and he could not stop from trembling.

"You will tell me who you are," Fask demanded. "Who sent you, spirit?"

Silence. A pause long enough for Fask to think himself into circles. Maybe it was the wind—a strong wind yes, but maybe it was just that. No, impossible! It would have to be a gale outside to move these lines—surely what had disturbed them was alive; they were strung at chest height, with cans and broken glass scattered on the floor. It was impossible for someone to not make a sound moving in Fask's chambers.

Another rattling at the foot of his bed. The brief hiss of something, something angry, as if a beast stalked toward him, fangs bared and maw slaving.

Fask scrambled up to his feet and pressed his back to the wall, moving as far from the sound as he could. He saw nothing, despite the bright moonlight filtering in through the narrow barred window to his room. Shifting his grip to hold the sword in one hand, he reached across his bed to a hooded oil lamp he kept there. He twisted a knob on the lamp, and its shade flipped open. A beam of warm light stabbed out across the dark, illuminating the foot of his bed.

A man stood there. Not a man—a dim shadow, a bruise on the room's darkness unbroken by the oil lamp's beam. It was a spirit, half-realized, a mist that shifted between formless smoke and the solid figure of a man. Fask could make out the close-cropped hair on the spirit's head, the neatly trimmed beard. The spirit stared at him, unmoving.

Fask screamed. The Tyrant of Kroog dropped his sword and clapped his hands over his eyes. He fell to his knees. This was the doom he feared, the ghost of the dead, come to drag him down below the cold waters of Kroog, the graveyard upon which he built his kingdom.

The spirit drifted backwards, movement resolving into steps as his bottom half coalesced from mist to form. He bumped into another string of cans and medallions, which jingled softly.

Guards burst into the room, swords drawn, but saw only their lord screaming and clawing at his own face. They looked to each other in confusion. Some decided to help Fask and hurried to his side. Others, dark looks clouding their rough faces, left. They had seen enough.

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"Kaya," Teferi said, whispering unseen and unheard from the shadows. "Pull me out."

"You've only been in there for a few minutes, Teferi," Kaya responded, her voice soft as the breeze through the distance. "What did you do?!"

"Nothing!" Teferi said. "I think he saw me." He watched the naked screaming man roll around on his bed, lashing out at the other men—his guards, it seemed—who were trying to calm him down.

"And I may be, ah, coherent," Teferi said. He tested this theory by reaching out and plucking one of the trap strings. It bounced, gently, as if a breeze had shifted the line—far too much movement for his comfort—he was meant to be insubstantial, nothing more than a spirit, not actually physically present. Teferi shook his head. "The Temporal Anchor isn't calibrated correctly, Kaya, and I think we undershot our target—we didn't go far back enough. Pull me out."

Kaya muttered something Teferi couldn't make out.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," Kaya said. "Saheeli has some thoughts."

Teferi could hear Kaya rolling her eyes.

"Alright," Kaya said. "Pulling you back."

Teferi's spirit dissolved into mist, leaving the night undisturbed but for the screams of the Tyrant of Kroog.

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Many centuries later, an ancient man regaled his grandchildren with the story of that night. He spoke to them of the strife that followed, the kingdoms that rose and fell because of a ghost, and the importance of omens and magic.

None of his grandchildren thought his tale anything more than just a story, but they loved the faces and sounds their grandfather would make when telling it, and so they asked for it often. Stories kept spirits high during the bitterly cold nights on the glaciers of Terisiare.

The Ice Age was upon Dominaria, and though these grandchildren all went on to live long lives and recount various versions of this story to their own dynasties, none of them outlived the ice, and neither did the story of the tyrant and the ghost.