

Episode 3: Sword One

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Kroog died on a crimson morning.

To Sanwell, it sounded like a festival day, only the crowds cheered in a minor key, and the booms and reports were not fireworks exploding, and the smoke rising over the city stank of burning industry and steaming bricks.



Art by: Steve Prescott

The orniary's main yard was abuzz with activity. Technicians and artificers sprinted back and forth hauling anti-armor bolts, powerstones, and avenger swords. Stompers and other autonomous units waited in ready ranks, crowding the plaza. Piles of ammunition, spare parts, and other material stood in hasty stacks. The five student pilots and their instructor stood in front of the canvas-covered supplies, facing a rank of old, refurbished avengers.

The morning sun hung low and hot in the sky, burning away the rest of the night's blood-warm rain. Sanwell, at attention, swayed, lightheaded. His stomach lurched, and he retched on the hot brick between his boots.

"Pilot Sanwell, you will tighten up your constitution," Llora shouted. The cadets' instructor was red-faced and stern, dressed in a crisp and clean uniform despite the early hour and hurried muster.

"Sorry, ma'am," Sanwell said. He spat the last of his sick out onto the hot stone plaza and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He had nothing to cough up but water and nerves; the attack had come before breakfast.

"You good, San?" Rica muttered.

Sanwell's face burned with embarrassment. Rica stood unwavering at his side, as stoic as if he was carved from the red brick of Kroog itself.

"Fine," Sanwell said. He wanted to die. "I think I had something sour last night."

Rica did not answer. The warning bells of Kroog rang out across the city. The sound churned Sanwell's stomach almost as much as Rica's stiff non-acknowledgement.

"I'm worried about my brother," Sanwell said. "Rendall is in the capital proper—he's a flyer, he's not cut out for fighting."

"Eyes forward!" Llorá barked, interrupting Sanwell's one-sided conversation with Rica. The old Suwwardi paced before the short line of avenger trainees, staring at each one in turn. The woman was tough as new leather and harsh as the lime that cured it, thin as a reed and sharp as needle.

Sanwell felt faint. He was dipping into metaphor, he realized, to get away from the moment.

"You five cadets," Llorá began, "have the honor of being the only ground-pounders in the city capable of crewing an avenger while keeping your head on your shoulders." Llorá pointed to the ground beneath her boots. "You are being called up, boys. Training is over. Today's the day you save Kroog."

Sanwell looked between his own boots at the crimson bricks, neatly laid in spiraling star patterns. That had taken some getting used to for Sanwell—the Yotians decorated everything. It meant everything from cooking to construction took a little bit longer, but to young Sanwell that was worth it. In Kroog, as in much of Yotia, even the streets were art. Unlike the stoic blocks of his native Penregon, Sanwell could walk with his head low or eyes up, and either way, he would find a little majesty. It was as a city should be, Sanwell came to think: full of little wonders, plainly hidden delights, all watched over by mighty triumphs.

Was he ready to fight to defend it?

Not a theoretical question. Llorá had just leaned in, face to face, to ask him.

Sanwell blinked and wavered.

"I said," Llorá growled, "are you ready to fight for Kroog?"

"Uh, yes, I am," Sanwell said.

"Yes, *ma'am*," Llorá corrected Sanwell. "You're on the line now, Sanwell. No more training, no more practice. You ready to fight?"

"Yes ma'am," Sanwell said, louder.

Llorá nodded. "Show me," she said. She pressed a slim device into Sanwell's hand and stepped back. The four other students—*pilots*, Sanwell corrected. *Mentality. Change your mind, change reality. You're a pilot now*—the four other pilots walked to Llorá, taking up relaxed but attentive positions behind the instructor.

Sanwell took the handheld device—a command rod, but a new model—and checked it. It was the length of his forearm, etched on one end for grip, tapered ever so slightly at the smooth opposite end. A small, tactile switch rested under his thumb when he held the rod. Sanwell thumbed the rod on, and a soft hum warmed the tool. A toggle and a trigger rested under his pointer and ring fingers; more controls.

Sanwell flipped the toggle and listened to the slight change in the rod's pitch. He pointed the rod at his hand, pulled the trigger, and saw the brief flash of light on his palm.

"Check," Sanwell said. He raised the command rod. Stopped. "Uh, ma'am," he said to Llor. "Which unit am I paired to?"

Llor pointed with her chin. "That one," she said.

Sanwell turned. His jaw dropped.

A new, shining avenger, one of the sword-pattern prototypes, still curled on its transport sledge. Sanwell had only seen the plans for them, passed around the mess during meals. They were larger, lighter, faster, more powerful—unkillable, the artificers bragged. The best they've made to date.

Behind this avenger waited four more. Technicians and artificers hurried to clear the packing debris—straw, canvas sheathes, leather pads, and protective oils—from the waiting machines, preparing them for activation.

Sanwell grinned, nerves momentarily suppressed by excitement.

"You'll find these sword patterns much more intuitive than the units you've been training with—even for prototypes." Llor said. Sanwell thought he could hear the pride in his instructor's voice.

"What's its name?" Sanwell asked Llor.

"Sword One," Llor said.

Sanwell raised his command rod and clicked the transmit button. The rod pitched up.

"Sword One, at attention!"

Sword One unfolded, standing from its sledge. The machine was humanoid, around fifteen feet tall at the shoulder. The prototype avenger looked to Sanwell like a lithe knight animated by magic fire: a mirror-polished cuirass covered its central power core, exhaust apertures fluttering, venting excess heat from its thoracic powerplant. The roar of its power core sent a rush through Sanwell. This was *power*, and it awaited his command.

"Sword One," Sanwell spoke firm and clear, as he had been trained. The command rods themselves were little wonders, able to pick out its operator's voice through the chaos of battle or a crowd. "At the ready!"

The avenger moved in a fluid, silent twist to a low ready stance, positioning one manipulator on the hilt of its primary blade, the other out for balance. Sanwell rocked backward, hair tousled by the rush of air displaced by the speed of Sword One's maneuver.

"Sword One, draw and guard!"

Sword One drew its primary blade, whipping it into a medium guard, one manipulator on the blade shaft to guide it and stabilize against incoming attacks. The blade was larger than a person, eight feet long and a foot wide at the base. Like its cuirass, it was polished to a mirror shine and caught the sun, flashing as it moved.

Sanwell could not suppress his excitement. With one of these, they could turn the tide. With *five*? He raised the rod one last time.

"Sword One," Sanwell commanded. "To me!"

The avenger darted toward Sanwell, stopping in a defensive crouch above him, sword at the ready.

"Good work, Sanwell." A different speaker.

Sanwell turned and saw Tawnos, Urza's chief apprentice, standing with Llorra and the other pilots.

"Sir," Sanwell saluted. He double keyed the command rod and, as with the older stompers, Sword One dropped its defensive stance, resting at ease.

"I see you're acquainted with our new model already," Tawnos said. He spoke with a smile, though Sanwell read through the chief apprentice's brave face.

"It's a dream, Chief," Sanwell said. "Movement fidelity feels one to one—how did Urza do it?"

"Later, son," Tawnos said. He was breathless, as if he had just stopped from a run.

Sanwell realized that was probably the case: the cause for this promotion was not a happy one. Kroog was under attack. He walked over to the group of students and fell in line with them.

"You five are the best of our student corps," Tawnos said, addressing Sanwell, Rica, and the others. "Llorra here has told me that each of you possess the skills, temperament, and cleverness necessary to command our sword-pattern avengers, and so it is with great pride that I hereby, officially, promote you to full pilots."

The cadets looked to each other with excitement over having their promotions confirmed—and by Urza's own assistant, no less!

"We can't go through the usual ceremony right now, nor can we bother with unit placement," Tawnos said. He hunched slightly as he spoke, apologetic, a stiff formality about his presentation. He really meant it, Sanwell thought, he really was sorry there could not be any ceremony about the day. Sanwell's heart swelled—Urza may have been the brilliant one, but Tawnos was nearly as smart, and he cared. That made all the difference.

"Kroog is under attack," Tawnos said. "The first waves of Mishra's force have crossed the Mardun; they control the River Wards. The spearhead of their attack is a detachment of dragon engines—large automatons capable of breathing fire. We believe them to be unpiloted."

The students—pilots, Sanwell reminded himself, for *real* this time—exchanged worried looks. Rica, Sanwell knew, was Yotian, and so was Carlo, who was from Kroog's River Wards. Sanwell looked to Carlo and saw he had paled, a bloodless look of fear and worry falling over him. Sanwell put a hand on his back, hoping to steady him.

"Thanks," Carlo said, quietly.

"The city guard and Kroog's garrison have drawn a defensive line around the capital district," Tawnos continued. "Evacuations of the other districts are underway."

"Does that mean we've given up the city?" Carlo said, voice wavering. "What about the River Wards?"

"It means we're defending what we can hold," Tawnos said, ignoring Carlo's second question. "But standing in one place isn't going to win us the day, which is where you and your new avengers come in: we're going to mount a counterattack to buy the evacuations more time." Tawnos motioned to Llorra, who hefted a long crate into the middle of the group. She levered the crate open, revealing four command rods packed in straw.

"Each of you take one and pair up," Llorra said. "Sanwell, you stick with Sword One." She passed Sanwell an empty holster.

"We need you and your avengers to take down the dragon engines," Tawnos said. "Once the engines are down, we stand a chance to drive Mishra's forces back."

Sanwell listened to Tawnos's briefing as he belted the holster on. The command rod fit snugly in the leather scabbard. That moment made *this* moment real, Sanwell realized. He looked to the other cadets

—pilots—and watched them pair up with their avengers. Rica took Two, Carlo paired with Three. The others were cadets from a different year, the one just after Sanwell's, and unfamiliar to him. They paired with Four and Five.

"Good," Tawnos said when all the pilots were paired. "I have to go, but I've given instructions here to Llorra for your deployment." He looked to the five pilots, hesitating. "We'll have soldiers escort you, so don't worry about being exposed to the fighting," Tawnos said. His voice was hoarse, as if he had been shouting, even though all he did was talk. "With these avengers, visual range will do—anything you say into the command rod, they'll be able to pick up. Don't get too close, aim with the rod, and remember to stay behind your escorts. Good luck, cadets—" Tawnos said. "Pilots," he corrected. "Good luck, pilots. Stay safe, and if you're in danger—don't think, just run. Hench, in the east, is where I have been told the army will gather."

Tawnos's face was a pale mask, graying as if wounded. Sanwell searched for the optimism that usually animated Tawnos but did not find it. A bolt of worry bittered his gut: Tawnos was afraid. Calm and steady Tawnos, the one who came to mess and laughed with the cadets, was afraid. He couldn't even look at them. Worry curdled to fear, a little fear that gnawed at him. How bad was it out there, really? A sudden snap of adrenaline, and Sanwell flinched, moving to raise his hand as if he were still in class.

"Master Tawnos, sir?" Sanwell asked. "My younger brother, Rendall—he's a cadet in the ornithopter corps, stationed at the palace."

"Rendall," Tawnos said, frowning. "I might know him, but don't worry—all of our thopters are deployed with Urza's forces elsewhere or about to depart," Tawnos said. "If he's in the thopter corps, he'll be out of here soon enough."

Sanwell exhaled a long breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He did not have time to thank Tawnos, though, as a sudden and tremendous explosion roared up on the far side of the city along the Mardun, where the fighting was heaviest.

The commotion in the ornary yard stopped as everyone turned to look, even Tawnos and Llorra, at the distant calamity.

Roiling crimson smoke leapt into the sky. A whole block of the city rippled with fire. Sanwell could see a darker shape moving in the center of that rising blaze, a conflagration so great that flames swallowed the tops of the belltowers that remained standing. They crumbled as the dark shape moved and another roar split the sky, a gout of smoke and fire lancing through the blocks along the Mardun.

A dragon engine.

Tawnos cursed. He pressed a small order scroll into Llorra's hands, with instructions to give them to the captain at their post. He left the yard with a quick salute to the pilots, hurrying just short of running.

"Right," Llorra said, watching him go. "Let's get moving—double quick, avengers online and vigilant." Sanwell noticed that Llorra had belted on a sword at some point during Tawnos's briefing.

As a unit, the five pilots and their avengers filed out of the yard. Sanwell looked back over his shoulder as they departed; behind, crews hurried to repurpose the transport sledges to haul any goods, materials, chassis, and supplies they could fit. They were preparing to evacuate the ornary.

A shout from Llorra. Sanwell was falling behind.

"With me, One," Sanwell said to his avenger. Together, the two of them hurried to catch up with the rest of the pilots as they moved down into the city.



Art by: Josu Hernaiz

Kroog was burning, and people choked her streets, fleeing the fire. Sanwell couldn't stop thinking about festival days, where competing parades to the many gods of Yotia snarled the wide brick boulevards and cheering crowds thronged in the side streets. The ringing of festival bells crashed and clamored through the city, a high and bright sound of chaotic joy that propelled and intertwined with the music that filled the air. Sanwell had been overwhelmed during his first festival season in Kroog; by his second year in the city, he fell in love with it. Far from the ponderous ceremonies in Argive, the festivals in Kroog and across Yotia were ebullient, alive. Never in his young life had Sanwell lived in a place where the gods were so close—and never did he imagine himself becoming someone who loved that proximity.

But today, in the blood-slick red brick streets, the gods felt quite distant. This day was a dark mirror to those celebration days, and each block the pilots advanced plunged them deeper into that horrible mirror; the ringing bells today were the same bells that tolled on celebration days, only now they screamed.

"Listen," Llorra commanded Sanwell and the rest of the pilots. "Stay close to me and order your avengers to do the same—they will avoid civilians better if you let them navigate the crowd on their own. You focus on staying close to me."

Llorra and the pilots hurried through the city streets, shoving their way through the fleeing crowds as they made for the northern district. Sanwell labored under the weight of his pilot kit, donned in haste that morning. Not two blocks into the city proper and his jumpsuit was soaked through with sweat under the light cuirass. The satchels he carried—spare powerstones for Sword One, a brace of tools, small and delicate replacement parts—together felt like an anvil's weight across his shoulders. The few encouraging shouts Sanwell registered from the general pandemonium did nothing to hearten him; to the contrary, they seemed thin and hopeless cries. There was a second, lower tone bubbling through the shoving and rushing crowds, a more terrible fear under their immediate panic. This was not just an attack: this was the beginning of a war, and they were losing. Kroog might die, and with it, all Yotia.

The closer they got to the northern districts, the thinner the crowds were, and the louder the sound of fighting. Fewer bells rang here, but they were still audible, echoing in from the other districts still hurrying to evacuate. The closer the pilots came to the northern district, the more bodies they came across as well. At first, they were the crumpled forms of people who had been trampled in the early rush to flee; by the time the pilots reached their rendezvous point, they started to encounter the bloody and burned dead—soldiers and civilians both.

“Hold here, pilots!” Llorá shouted, calling them to a halt. The five pilots and their avengers came to a stop in an abandoned market plaza. Overturned stalls and stands scattered bright sprays of spices, fruits, and vegetables across the ground. A small fire licked the charred ruins of a storefront where a food seller’s cart had tipped over, spilling hot coals into the shop’s dry interior. People had fled in the middle of their morning routines, leaving everything behind.

At the far end of the plaza was a hasty but substantial barricade defended by at least two dozen Yotian soldiers, soot-stained and bloodied after retaking the plaza. The barricade would not hold off a dragon engine, but it would deter any human soldiers from attacking. The Yotian squadron looked to the avengers with hope, and their pilots with concern. Sanwell tried not to look at the pile of dead Yotians, civilians and soldiers both, that lay in a heap next to the small fountain at the center of the square. Debris fluttered in the hot wind stirred by the raging fires. A scatter of dead Fallaji troopers splayed out unceremoniously on the far end of the plaza, arrow shafts sticking from their bodies.

Llorá talked with the ranking officer there—a lieutenant, by his stripes; the captain Tawnos had assigned the pilots to had been killed. Sanwell figured the lieutenant to only be a year or so older than he, though it was hard to tell under his heavy armor.

Sanwell overheard the lieutenant say that this had been a second-line medical post before a bitter fight contested the small plaza. The Yotians now planned to use the plaza as a staging ground for the counterattack: Stacks of firebombs, arrows, and darts stood near the barricade. Occasionally, a runner would come sprinting into the square, haggle with the supply officer, and then run back with a bundle of firebombs tossed over their shoulder or a healer in tow.

“Pilot Sanwell,” Llorá called, waving him over. “Sanwell, this is Lieutenant Markos—” Llorá’s introduction was drowned out by a roar loud enough to send everyone in the plaza diving for cover. A long, buzzing series of explosions followed moments later, reports echoing out over the city.



Art by: Fariba Khamseh

The bells nearby fell silent. Sanwell and the rest of the pilots, Llorra included, stayed prone, their avengers watching over them. Some of the soldiers pushed themselves to their feet, gathering up their spears and adjusting their sword belts, peering over the barricade, crawling back to their posts.

The brick was dry and hot. Sanwell clutched the control rod to his chest. The thumping of his heart against the ground matched the rumbling of the nearby dragon engine on the move.

The bells began to ring again and Llorra stood, hollering at the pilots to get up. Lieutenant Markos bellowed at the rest of his soldiers to get to the walls. Sanwell stood on trembling legs, helped up by Rica and Carlo. The two younger pilots stuck close to Llorra and had already sent their avengers to the barricade.

Big, booming explosions crashed through the plaza, sending whistling and skittering shards of metal into the air. Sanwell flinched as a chip of plaza brick leapt up and cut his cheek, flung into him by something pinging off the ground as it flashed past him.

Shrapnel—the Fallaji were attacking!

Sanwell, rooted to the spot, watched as Yotian soldiers hurled firebombs over the barricade toward the charging, unseen Fallaji. Smoke and bright flashes followed, explosions thundering and echoing off the storefronts, raining glass and clouds of dust on the street opposite the barricade. Screams mixed with the rising cry of charging Fallaji as they returned fire, launching heavy crossbow bolts and whistling arrows at the Yotians. Sanwell ducked just in time behind Sword One's extended arm, cringing at every whining ping that rattled off the avenger's armor.

Above it all loomed the dragon engine. Mishra's engine. Sanwell saw through the smoke the heat-warped visage of the titanic machine, reptilian, a beast of artifice and war towering high above the building tops of the northern district. It roared, hungry, cruel, *alive*, and advanced toward them, shrouded once more in the thick smoke.

"Sanwell!" Llorra shouted to be heard over the cacophony of combat. "Take Rica and Carlo down that side street," she ordered, pointing with her sword down a narrow alleyway. "Find a way to flank the engine and bring it down, pilot!"

“Yes ma’am!” Sanwell saluted. He started to ask for more direction, but Llorra had already hurried toward the wall, a bandolier of firebombs thrown over her shoulder.

“Get your Swords,” Sanwell said to Rica and Carlo. “Let’s go kill a dragon.”

Sanwell led the charge down the side street following Sword One. Rica and Carlo followed behind, Swords Two and Three in tow. The sound of battle at the plaza barricade surely gave their movements some cover. They moved quickly, not quietly.

They made it halfway down the alley before the dragon engine fired a blast into the plaza behind them.

A roar like the sky splitting open, a rippling crescendo of explosions. The boiling red mist scoured the plaza, blasting apart the Yotian barricade and incinerating its defenders.

Sanwell, Rica, and Carlo turned, looking on in horror as the crimson blast swept across their narrow view of the plaza. Llorra and the other pilots, Lieutenant Markos and their soldiers—gone in a breath.



Art by: David Auden Nash

The smoke lingered, not moving despite the stinking, howling furnace-blast wind. The air itself sizzled, writhed in pain, crackled with heat-tortured bolts of lightning.

A body staggered into the alleyway from the burning plaza. None of the pilots could tell who it was. The poor soldier bounced off the alley wall, stumbling like a drunk, and collapsed, shattering into ash where they hit the ground. All thoughts of revenge and glory quit Sanwell then; worry stopped gnawing and started consuming.

The plaza echoed with the sound of charging boots: soldiers emerged from the boiling smoke, helmets slammed shut against the burning air, their anti-mech spears raised toward Swords Four and Five. Their pilots gone, blasted and heat-warped by the dragon engine’s burning breath, the machines nevertheless held their ground, swords flashing. A handful of soldiers died, but the avengers were torn down to cheers. They had slowed Mishra’s engine for a moment, and the greater advance of his forces not at all.

A moment. Sanwell remembered the years of training; it bought those other pilots, whose names he never knew, a moment.

Carlo started to scream and neither Sanwell nor Rica could get him to calm down. There was no telling whether the Fallaji could hear them, but they couldn't take the risk. Rica tore open a linen bandage from his medical kit and tied it around Carlo's mouth while Sanwell held him steady. The two of them dragged Carlo away into the darkness of the alley, praying that the dragon engine would not follow.

Their sword avengers followed, ash piled on their armored shoulders.

Sanwell and Rica, with an alternating mute and screaming Carlo in tow, followed their avengers through the alley into another small and nameless plaza. This one was a crossroads walled in by two- and three-story buildings on all sides. Their alley continued across the plaza; the crossing road was a proper carriageway, wide enough for three carts abreast. At one point in the morning, it had been fortified by a barricade on the northern exit from the plaza, blocking access to the rest of the city against anyone approaching from the Mardun. Now the barricade lay in ruins. Yotian and Fallaji dead splayed across the smoldering wreckage, flies already making meals of them. A stray dog scurried away when the avengers and their pilots came running into the plaza.

Sanwell and Rica ordered their avengers to take up watch on the Mardun side of the crossroads, then staggered to the end of the square opposite the barricade, dragging Carlo with them. His avenger stood still at the end of the alley, awaiting orders. The three of them sat on an overturned cart and caught their breath. The dragon engine hadn't followed them. For the moment, in this quiet corner of besieged Kroog, they were safe.

"What do we do?" Rica asked.

"We can't fight the engine," Sanwell said. "Not even with our Swords—we'd need an army of them to fight that."

"So what do we do?" Rica asked again.

Sanwell looked back down the alleyway they had just emerged from, back toward the scoured plaza. He looked up, at the smoke-darkened sky. The sun, so clear up by the orniary, burned a dim, sick orange. Ash drifted down, black and gray.

"We run," Sanwell said. "Like Tawnos told us—if we're in danger, we run."

Rica took his own survey of their surroundings. "Where?"

The dragon engine bellowed again, deafening, vision-shaking. Sanwell and Rica clapped their hands over their ears, eyes watering at the loudness of the roar. It passed, and like thunder from a moving storm, the two boys listened for its source; it appeared the dragon engine was moving away from them and their avengers, making for the heart of the city.

"Away," Sanwell said, a little too loud as his hearing slowly came back to him. "Anywhere but here. Didn't Tawnos say something about some town? Hinge?"

"Hench," Rica corrected. "Some caravan town, I think. A place for horses to get water."

"Maybe there," Sanwell said.

"We'd have to cross the city," Rica said, chewing his lip. "West might be better—we could run to the western gates and make for the coast, find a ship."

Sanwell hung his head. He thought of his brother, Rendall—was he in the air by now?

"Where would they send the evacuees?" Sanwell asked Rica. "Korlis or Penregon?"

“Korlis is closer,” Rica said. “But they’re merchants, and they’re neutral. Besides, they don’t have a standing army, just mercenaries. My guess is Penregon. It’s farther, but that’s where Urza and—”

A sudden clatter and a shout sounded from northern entrance to the crossroads—the Mardun side where their avengers stood guard.

Sanwell and Rica looked over to see a rank of Fallaji brasscaps approaching the crossroads. Behind them, Sanwell could see what looked like a forest of pikes under which shone the polished brass helmets of a whole marching column of soldiers.



Art by: Joshua Cairos

“Sanwell,” Rica said, standing. He wasn’t calling Sanwell’s attention, only uttering. A reflexive gasp, spoken in disbelief at what he saw: the Fallaji army, unimpeded, marching toward them.

“Sword One,” Sanwell cried. He stabbed his command rod toward the Fallaji and pressed the trigger. A thin beam of light visible only in the passing smoke dazzled the front rank of the brasscaps. “Attack!”

Sword One bounded toward the Fallaji, followed a second later by Sword Two. Carlo, catatonic, triggered his control rod, flashing the ground at his feet. Sword Three did not move; the machine had dropped into an idle, sword ready but not raised.

The marching soldiers were unable to form a pike wall before the two avengers crashed into them. The front ranks died in chaos, their pikes skittering off the avengers’ armor plating. The two avengers worked their great swords with a butcher’s efficiency, grinding the Fallaji advance to a halt at the ruined barricade.

Sanwell watched in horror and awe as the avengers cut through the brasscaps. The sound of their swords buzzing through the air, the heavy, wet thunk of the blades meeting and separating flesh, smashing bone, crunching through the proud, bright Fallaji armor as if it were little more than thin foil. Sanwell could only stagger backward, command rod level and aimed, and watch the avenger interpret his most basic command. Sword One cleaved through the soldiers before it with expeditious strikes. Short chops, one manipulator holding the hilt of its sword and one along the blade to guide it.

Rica piloted Two with precision, directing his avenger toward officers and targets that presented a threat to their machines. Soldiers with heavy explosive-tipped lances and crossbows, officers with their

command flags and steady voices—Sword Two, under Rica's command, hunted them through the chaos made by Sword One's assault.

Who taught Sword One how to fight?

Sanwell stabbed his control rod toward a pair of brasscaps who had made it around Sword One. He triggered the rod, dazzling its beam across the soldiers, and Sword One immediately interceded, impaling them both with one heavy lunge. Sword One lifted them and swept them off its weapon, sending their bodies tumbling into the still-advancing column.

At some point Sword One had to learn how to move like that, Sanwell thought, keying another target. He backpedaled, retreating with Rica, dragging Carlo with them, putting distance between them and the fight.

Who taught Sword One how to interpret his simple first command and translate it into movements Sanwell could not do himself? He had seen inside the older models as part of his training—they, like Sword One, were not alive. As he understood it, they could not think. They were machines, humanoid assemblies of a thousand complex calculations and delicate complications; thousands of hours of genius and technical acumen and human labor set to a single purpose, achieved with uncanny grace: to swing a sword and end a life.

Brilliance. Madness.

Sword One ejected its dull blade toward the advancing brasscaps, then drew a fresh razor from the magazine on its back. The avenger moved so smoothly that Sanwell could almost believe it was a giant person in armor, a warrior that could not be stopped by fear, pity, or fatigue. Spears and crossbow bolts shattered on Sword One's legs and deflected off its brachial and thoracic armor plates, each glancing blow driving home how indestructible the avenger was.

Another feeling mixing with Sanwell's fear: relief. Relief that the Swords were on *his* side.

An explosion boomed out over Sword Two's upper half, staggering the avenger into Sword One. Sword One gracefully sidestepped its fellow, and Sword Two fell back into the plaza, landing hard enough to crack stone.

Rica swore and Sanwell saw why: a bomb had blown away Two's right arm. Hydraulic fluids and dark oil sprayed from the damaged equipment, pumping into the air until Two's internal systems shut off the flow. Drawing a fresh blade with its remaining arm, Sword Two struggled back to standing—but it was too late. The gap had been made.

The Fallaji brasscaps advanced, driven by their officers behind, cheering, hoarse, heartened by the blow dealt to Sword Two. Sword One tried to intercede but could not hold the road by itself. At first only a handful of brasscaps made it through; Sword Two tried to drive them back, but the Fallaji fired a hail of explosive bolts at its head and legs. The reports boomed on top of each other, pressure waves battering the wounded machine back to the ground. As it fell, soldiers swarmed Sword Two, stabbing bomb-pikes into its joints and between its armor plates, arresting its movement. On the other side of the yard, more brasscaps brought the idle Sword Three to the ground, anti-mech pikes stabbing and slicing vital internals, joints, and mechanisms.

Sanwell screamed something wordless, a mix of terror and fury, stabbing his command rod at the Fallaji, stabbing a dazzling beam at them again and again. No commands, nothing from his training, just giving voice to raw panic as the enemy flooded into the crossroads. Sword One fought on, as it was designed to do.

The brasscaps detonated their bomb lances and killed Sword Two. The avenger's powerstone erupted, a bright flash that blanked the square with white light.

Sanwell went flying, blinded by the blast. Somehow, he held on to his command rod, and as he lay on his back he blinked his vision back from burned to blurry. He could see Carlo laying still, near the overturned cart, uniform smoldering. He watched Rica push himself to his feet, his cheekbones and nose raw and burned. A sandpaper wind whipped through the streets of Kroog, scouring Sanwell's own burned face and hands. He cried out in pain, voice muffled as his hearing was slow to return.

The bells still crashed and rang. Other explosions thumped throughout the city.

Distant, screams.

Distant, the roar of dragon engines.



Art by: Svetlin Velinov

Sanwell's world was a haze of cloudy, gray smoke under an ochre sky. The sun above was a dying marigold, fat and close, threatening to slip from the sky, an egg's yolk sloughed from its white. Everything stank of burning wood, burning oil, burning flesh. Ash fell like snow.

When Sanwell was new to Kroog, dispatched with his brother as a child to learn artifice at the orniary, he'd been schooled in Yotian custom and belief. Cultural education, his parents told him. Necessary for any child of the east, for the young scions of civilization to understand the world they were destined to rule; in this education, Sanwell learned that of the many gods of Yotia and their domains, no single one ruled over an underworld or accursed afterlife. A human soul was too myriad to be thrown into hell on the word of one god: damnation for the Yotians was not that simple. One had many souls throughout the course of their life, and each of them was afforded its own judgment.

Sanwell knew now that the Yotians had missed an aspect. They had forgotten a god somewhere in their celebrations: the one who'd damned his living soul to this city of hell. Sanwell imagined that morbid deity flying above the city on torn wings, belching crimson mist down into its burning streets.

"Sword One," Sanwell whispered into the command rod. "To me." Be it hell or nightmare, Sanwell wanted out.

Dark shapes stalked through the haze, though none cut the reassuring profile of Sword One. Lumpen silhouettes bent over their long spears, wide helms turning slowly, listening, searching.

Sanwell moved up to a crouch, slipping further back from the moving shapes. He padded past Rica and hissed for him to follow.

Rica shook his head and held a finger to his lips. He pointed, directing Sanwell's gaze.

Carlo. He crawled toward Sanwell and Rica. The burns across his back and legs were terrible, rendering him into a mess of blistered flesh and melted steel.

"San?" Carlo cried, sobbing. "Rica?"

Rica started toward Carlo, but Sanwell grabbed him and shoved him back.

The dark shapes in the brick haze stopped, listening. Their broad heads turned. Their spears probed the gently falling ash.

"Where are you guys?" Carlo cried again.

A flurry of crossbow bolts thudded into Carlo's back, killing him. A second volley peppered him seconds later, stray bolts pinging and ricocheting off the ash-covered ground. The brasscaps shouted, calling to each other the location of the dead pilot.

"Sword One, kill!" Sanwell shouted into his command rod, his voice cracking. "Kill!"

Rica turned, grabbed Sanwell, and shoved him to a run. Over his shoulder, Sanwell heard Fallaji soldiers screaming in terror under the rising whine of a laboring, wounded machine. He turned, backpedaling for three short steps, and saw Sword One's tall, armored form rising from the darkness.

Sword One was a heat-warped knight in yolk-yellow light, golden death splattered with soot and ash. Though horribly wounded, Sword One was not dead, and until it was, it would obey Sanwell's last order. Blood-splattered, fearless, the terrible machine may have been another forgotten Yotian god: that of war and the crossroads, of machines and the age to come.

Sanwell threw down his control rod. There was nothing left to command.

"San!" Rica's hands clawed at Sanwell's collar, the other boy trying to pull him along. Sanwell stumbled but did not fall.

Together, the two boys ran.

Kroog died on a crimson morning; the war began at sunrise.



Art by: Kamila Szutenberg

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Aiman lay on his back and squinted against the wan light of the marigold sun. The sky was a foul orange tint, deep as the burnt brown of a charred pepper where smoke from still-burning fires belched. Everything stank. Beauty curdled by death, sweet azure sky rusted over, bright bells twisted to screaming.

Aiman needed water.

The thudding thunder of nail-bottomed boots. A stampede of boots. Hundreds, thousands, a million, the whole of the world running by him. One kicked his head hard enough to tumble him over, as the waves once did. Argvian or Fallaji, he could not tell. The strap of his brasscap snapped, and his helm bounced away. Some reinforcements, he thought, running to battle.

To battle!

Kroog, burning city, invaders' city, the city of thieves. Why were they there? Mishra, the snake-tongue, hungry, jealous. The qadir's greed.

Aiman needed water.

He groaned and tried to move, but when he tried to sit up all strength drained out of him. He coughed, wincing at the pain. He couldn't see well. He looked down his body.

Aiman let slip a weak cry of fear and shock. Three arrows. He'd been hit. One in his upper thigh, one pinning his arm to his chest, and another through his side. Thigh was the deepest, right in the meat. Arm was all the way through, but his arm and breastplate underneath had stopped the arrow from wounding him deeper. Side was little more than a deep cut, trapped in his armor and padded cloth underneath—once the arrow was gone, a clean bandage would be enough. His face throbbed, and a horrible split feeling told him he had been wounded there as well.

Aiman dropped back down.

"I need water," Aiman called out. "Water," he cried, and realized his was only one of many voices adding to a chorus of moaning, weeping, screaming wounded. He looked around, lucidity coming back with the pain.

He was in hell. Bodies packed the space between the buildings, filling the road where they had fought. The gullet of the city, through which soldiers of both kingdoms were ground into meat.

He tried to remember what happened. Some huge golden knight, some bright machine of terror. The column marching forward, shoved by the rear ranks, terrified of death ahead and Mishra's officers behind. Explosions, pain. The boats before that, his hands shaking, the quiet prayer of the soldier next to him, the cold of the river as they charged up the banks, the screams and the screams.

Aiman needed water. He needed to get away. Hands grabbed at him, and a dead man moaned in his ear, begging for his mother. Aiman slapped the hands away with his good arm, gasping for breath. He kicked and scraped, scooting away from the pleading corpse.

Wheezing, Aiman crawled, yelping where the arrow shafts tapped and dragged over the brick. He collapsed against the side of the alley, shaking violently, vision graying.

"Water," Aiman moaned. He was dying. He could feel it. Burning, deep pain throbbed through his leg, his eye, his side—

Aiman woke up. It was nighttime. He had passed out.

The alley was silent. The dead draped over every surface. Fires lit the night, casting everything in the pit's own ochre glow. No more bells rang, though Aiman could hear the battle still raging in the distant quarters of Kroog.

Aiman moaned when he saw it. A ghost. A revenant, glowing a soft blue as it picked across the fetid alleyway. Aiman started to pray.

The ghost looked over at him.

Aiman's prayer caught in his throat.

The ghost walked toward him, dim blue form tracing an echo through the hot evening air behind it. Death, Aiman knew it. This was death itself, claiming souls to journey with him.

Death crouched above a horribly wounded man. The man's chest rose and fell, hitched, and then deflated. Aiman could hear the rattle from where he hid.

Death stood. His head tracked across the alley, as if taking in the sight. A harvest, Aiman thought. A harvest for this cold reaper.

"Not yet," Death said. He spoke to the empty alley, but Aiman knew Death spoke to him. Death had a strange accent, like something from the far east. As a boy Aiman had tended his father's trading ship, sailing all around the bounds of Terisiare. Penregon's austere harbor had been a regular enough stop, and Aiman had picked up some Argivian; Death's language sounded similar.

"We're too early," Death said. "We're years away, decades at least. It doesn't happen here."

Relief and confusion flooded through him. Aiman let himself hope.

Death sighed, and then Death disappeared.

Two weeks later, Aiman's fever finally broke. He limped out of the airy medical tent, the right side of his body aching and itching, but healing. He had lost an eye; save for that wound, he would suffer no more than puckered scars where the arrows had pierced him.

The dry desert breeze cooled the sweat on his brow.

Aiman's war was done. His life, he knew for certain, was only beginning. He looked up at the pale blue sky, tracked thin clouds in their heights, and watched the birds wheeling.

Death had told him: not yet.