

Episode 1: The End

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From set *The Brothers' War*

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It was snowing in Penregon.

Five years after the war that ended the world concluded, the survivors found that nothing truly ended; in the wake of the machines, the quakes, and the scouring waves, spring still came. Soldiers wandered back from far-flung apocalyptic fronts with their ragged uniforms to beg for rice and bread. Merchants traded their wares and dispatched their ships for distant coasts, exacting gold for goods, erecting manors, and tabulating their customers' debt. Guards policed the streets and borders of the high districts, hands on their swords and eyes wide with the same fear as always. The fields still needed sowing and harvesting; thin laborers still shuffled out to gather grain under the stern eyes of supervisors. The price of bread and milk crept higher, livestock and game grew scarce, the wage one took home from working in the fields did not spend as well, and in the evenings the horizon far to the southeast never really darkened. Life continued in Terisiare, though the spring and summer seasons seemed to run shorter, the warm months compressing into warm weeks, and in winter, snow now fell in Penregon.

Everyone who witnessed the cataclysm—that is, everyone in Terisiare—knew the world had ended on that day. Then they woke up the next morning and found that life went on, only it never really seemed to change for the better. The best that people could hope for was that things did not continue to get worse.



Art by: Lucas Staniec

Five years after the blast, Kayla bin-Kroog sat alone in the council chambers of Penregon's government house, listening to the warm crackling of the room's dying fire. With the day's agenda complete but

for one last private meeting, her councilors and committee members had all filed out to trudge through the snow back to their homes. They left her alone with Penregon's latest ledgers, census figures, and expedition debriefings—a coterie of nightmares scratched out in watered-down ink on scrubbed paper. Jarsyl had been seen to, sent away for evening study with his tutors.

Alone at last. Kayla held a grain report, the numbers grim, and stared over it to a newly drawn map of the Visceral Sea to the east, spread out on the table before her.

Empty.

The once-verdant island of Argoth to the southeast was gone, reduced to monolithic spires of basalt stone lashed by waves. The merchant guild had demanded this most recent expedition, hoping to revive the old trade routes between Penregon and the distant kingdoms across the ocean, but the small islands they once used to resupply their water and food were gone; either the stars were now wrong, or those islands had been swallowed by the sea.

Kayla threw the grain report to the side. She already knew what it would say—the harvests were in and lower than last year, as last year's reports were lower than the year before it, and so on back to when the world as they knew it had ended. The papers fluttered to the floor some distance away near a cracked-open window overlooking the city, where they mixed with the melting flakes of snow drifting in.

Snow. Kayla remembered rare walks in her younger years in the foothills around his tower. The mountains, the alpine forests, the wind—winter had a severe beauty that she had tried to relate to Urza's austere bearing, but she could not. The truth was Kayla hated winter.

Though the steam heaters pumped enough heat that the whole chamber should be comfortable, Kayla still felt a bone-deep cold. Her council put her in a dark mood.

"How distant you gods are now," Kayla muttered. When had the gods last felt close to her? Kroog, before it was sacked. Its airy spires and crowded markets. A home, torn from her. Kayla closed the window. Nostalgia gripped her by the heart today. A hint of distaste to the memory, not for what she recalled but for the pain of recollection; there was a reason for her reverie, due to intrude in moments.

A polite knock from the chamber doors drew her attention. The bitter flood of adrenaline that followed was unexpected, uncharacteristic, and unwelcome despite the previous night's preparations.

"Yes?" Kayla said, addressing the knock.

A young page entered the chambers and cleared his throat.

"Ma'am, your last meeting is here."

"Send him in," Kayla said. She waved him away. "And bring us refreshments, I'm sure our guest is hungry."

The page bowed and then left the chamber, closing the door softly behind.

The door opened again, and her guest shuffled in. Kayla looked over to see a dead man. Ragged and wind-chapped, his nose and ears blackened with patches of frostbite, the high ridges of his cheeks peeling where the ice had scoured him. The hale and steady man she knew decades ago withered to a crooked skeleton with crisp, white hair. His eyes remained bright, though, and his voice unmistakable.

"Hello, Kayla. You look well."

Kayla allowed a polite and hollow smile. "Tawnos," she said. "I thought you were dead."

Urza's former assistant bowed. "In a way, I was," he said. Tawnos spoke with a stiffness new to Kayla. In his youth he had always seemed a warm contrast to Urza, an affable man spoiled by his love and devotion to her husband. Now Tawnos was almost a mirror to Urza, even down to his white hair.

Kayla waved him toward a seat at the council's table, to which he hobbled and sat.

"The world has changed since I was last a part of it," Tawnos said, tucking his cloak around himself. "I never knew it to snow this close to the sea."

"The world was changed," Kayla corrected him.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Tawnos grimaced. "But that is past—I have so much to tell you, and much to show." His smile was that of a skull stripped of its flesh. Kayla had seen too many smiles like that since the end of the war, stretched across the faces of the soldiers that returned and the dead piled high on charnel carts.

"Nothing is *past*," Kayla said. "As evidenced by you shambling into Penregon."

The door to the council chamber opened, saving Tawnos from having to respond. Two pages wheeled in a cart carrying mint tea and small, steaming, savory pastries. Dinner, for now.

"I was with him just before the end," Tawnos said, taking a pastry from the cart.

"You were always close with my husband."

"He stopped a demon from taking this world," Tawnos said, quiet but firm, eyes downcast. "His brother had been—" Tawnos searched for the word and found it in bitter memory. "Turned by that creature. Fused with a machine." Tawnos looked up, tears brimming. "The same thing would have happened to the rest of us if Urza had not acted. He saved us."

Kayla poured herself tea. "You told me he would keep my son safe," she said. Without looking up from her cup, she offered the steeping pot to Tawnos. "I never saw him again."

"He—" Tawnos cleared his throat. "Harbin was an example to his men—a brave officer, and a good pilot."

"Was his death a good one?" Kayla said. Her voice was even and calm, but colder than the wind that had clipped Tawnos's ears and burned his nose. "If my son was an *example*, I would hope that he was a good example and saved other mothers the pain of losing their firstborn to war."

"As a pilot he—"

"All Harbin ever wanted to do was make his father proud," Kayla said, interrupting Tawnos. "He always worried, because he was only a pilot and not an artificer like you, that his father thought less of him," Kayla said. "Before—when he was young—Harbin would tell me of his dreams. He dreamed he could fly, and that whenever he returned home, his father would be proud of his flying boy. Did he ever make my husband smile, Tawnos? Before he died, did he make his father proud of him?"

"Urza never wished to put Harbin in danger—"

"Then why did he start a war for my son to die in?" Kayla snapped. The anger blazed through her, a wildfire. She flung her cup against the wall, where it shattered, echoing throughout the chamber. Tawnos said nothing while she calmed herself.

"Tawnos." Kayla spoke, composing each word, shaping every syllable from primordial sound to meaning. "So, we are clear: I will never forgive you for convincing me to allow my son to go off and die in my husband's war. Your road back to my grace is tenfold as long and cold as the bitter trail you followed here."

"Yes, ma'am," Tawnos said.

"Now tell me what you came here to tell me."

Tawnos reached into the folds of his cloak and pulled out a waxcloth roll. He unrolled it on the table, revealing a short sheaf of old papers, thick and yellowed with age. Some water damage crinkled the edges, but not enough to spoil their contents. Kayla recognized them immediately.

"Designs," Kayla said. "My husband's work?"

"And some of my own," Tawnos said. "I kept them with me while I was away. Avengers, clay statues—you remember those? Ornithopters as well, all types." Tawnos carefully peeled the pages out of their waxcloth roll and displayed them on the table. "Steam engines, communication towers—ships, machines, and devices he had designed. Most for war, to be sure, but some for a peace he hoped to live in one day."

"And all useless without powerstones," Kayla said. "Unless we wish to create a novelty clockwork rat industry in Penregon." She waved one page bearing the sketched designs for a toy rodent at Tawnos.

Tawnos laughed, and then realized that Kayla was not humoring him. He coughed. "Indeed, yes, of course, and to that point, I have good news. I was able to recover a clutch of powerstones and know where we can find more."

Kayla leveled her gaze at Tawnos. She steepled her fingers, pressed them under her chin. Closed her eyes. Sighed. "It doesn't matter how much grain we harvest or how many fish we catch, men like you will always be hungry. Tell me."

"Before the collapse, Argive had the largest stockpile of powerstones in Terisiare," Tawnos said. "Their storehouses were buried, but in Urza's documents, I found a map. With the powerstones I have in my possession and these designs, I could build new machines to go and dig them out." Tawnos was enthusiastic, as animated as Kayla remembered him in their youth. His wild shock of hair and wide eyes, paired with his frostbitten nose, made him look like some creature from a fairytale—wild, if not almost grotesque.

"No weapons, only tools," Tawnos said. "We can use the stones to power automatons that will help us mine and harvest. We can use them to light the city at night, or power heaters to keep the cold at bay." Tawnos leaned forward, reaching toward Kayla. "We could rebuild Penregon. Your guards told me when I arrived that any who saw the light of Penregon was welcome in this city." Tawnos pointed across the room toward Penregon's walls. Kayla knew he was speaking of the lighthouse overlooking the harbor. "I would offer my knowledge and these plans to spread that light across Terisiare."

Kayla did not answer, nor did she take Tawnos's hands.

The first year after the cataclysm was a year of tumult. In Penregon, the blast caused terrible earthquakes that leveled most of the city's stone and brick buildings, collapsing them on top of their occupants. The king and his court, sheltering in the Lion's Hall—the mighty citadel perched on the vertiginous cliffs overlooking Penregon Harbor—collapsed into the sea. Massive tidal waves followed, pounding the coastal districts, scouring the city streets, scraping them clean of rubble and survivors.

When the shaking stopped and the water receded, Kayla bin-Kroog was one of the few nobles left alive. As the wife of the alliance's leader and a princess herself, rule of the city fell to her. Six long years later, and she was still the shepherd of Penregon, the city of remains.

"You sound like my husband," Kayla finally said. "All he wanted to do was make the world a better place."

"If I may," Tawnos said. "He did ask me to relay a message to you."

Kayla arched an eyebrow.

"He asked me to tell you to, ah"—Tawnos sipped his own tea—"to 'remember him not as he was, but as he tried to be.'"

Kayla laughed, a sharp, crystalline sound that held in it the breaking of her voice. For a moment Tawnos thought it was a genuine laugh, but that moment vanished as soon as Kayla spoke.

"Does he think I am still the little princess he won?" Kayla said. "All he ever tried to be—all he and his brother ever tried to be—were princes of the world." Kayla pointed at Tawnos. "You knew that then as well as I do now; through our whole marriage, you spent more time by his side than I did."

Tawnos remained silent.

"My husband and his brother forced cruel choices on their people," Kayla said. "They burned the world down because neither of them could talk to one another." She reached across the table and picked up one of Tawnos's designs. An upright automaton, one of the war-forms she remembered Urza designing after the sack and ruin of Kroog. Kayla looked at her husband's precise script. His perfectly drawn lines. The machine, rendered in old ink on fine paper, looked as if it could walk off the page if one were to utter its activation command.

"Now we must rebuild from those brothers' ashes," she said, setting the page down. "Look at me, Tawnos."

Tawnos did as he was commanded. Tears tracked down his weathered cheeks.

"Stop crying," Kayla said. "You and me and everyone else lived in the shadow of my husband and his brother. Terisiare was stripped of everything by their war. I lost my father, my son, and my kingdom. Every good and kind thing that made up my life I lost because of him." She gestured around the room—the peeling wallpaper, the gurgling steam pipes. The snow that still fell outside. "I don't relish my husband's death. There has been enough death. But I am happy that he is gone, and I do not forgive him for what he did. I will not remember him as he wanted to be remembered. I will remember him as he was." Kayla's voice was firm as iron. She saw something in the slump of Tawnos's shoulders—a hesitation, distinct from the sinking of his spirit. "Tawnos?" She asked. "What are you not telling me?"

Tawnos chewed his wind-chapped bottom lip. Tears welled again, but he blinked them away. "Urza is not dead, ma'am."

The pulse at Kayla's temple quickened, and the clench of her jaw could have cracked stone. For Tawnos, who only ever knew Kayla as the bright and lovely princess of Kroog, the iron in the woman who sat across from him was terrifying. Urza had ruined the world, but the one he hurt most was Kayla bin-Kroog.

"What?" The anger in Kayla's voice was honed to a needle's precision.

"He's not dead," Tawnos said. "He has become something else."

"Is that 'something else' a better man?"

"I'm—I'm not sure what he has become," Tawnos admitted, dropping his gaze. Slowly, he stood and began to scrape together his loose papers, tucking them back into the roll.

"What are you doing?"

Tawnos stopped. "Leaving, ma'am."

Kayla shook her head. "No, Tawnos. Sit. Please."

Tawnos sat.

"We recovered what we could of my husband's factories after the blast," Kayla said. "Machines, chassis, stones—the things he used to build his automatons in great number. No one here knows how to use them, but with your arrival, it seems that has changed." Kayla gathered her small items and walked Tawnos to the door. "Tomorrow, I will have Myrel, my scout captain, take you to the warehouses so you can begin."

"Thank you, Kayla," Tawnos said, pausing at the door.

Kayla's lips thinned, offering not even a ghost of a smile. "A long road, Tawnos," she said. "Go. It is cold."

Tawnos left, following the waiting page into the candle-lit darkness, leaving Kayla alone once more.

Spring arrived months later, and Penregon became a living city once more. The jagged summits of the Kher Ridges could be seen piercing the range's ever-present shroud of mist, their horns white with the winter's snow. Downslope, new growth stood between the root stumps that were once ancient forests, harvested during the war for fuel and coal. Streams, swollen with snowmelt, tumbled down the mountains, spilling into the fields outside of Penregon where they filled the old defensive trenches, creating new, thin, regimented lakes. Those old battle lines, once a hellish panorama of stone, metal, and fire-stripped earth, were now oceans of grass across which sprays of delicate wildflowers bloomed. Under the flowers, the numberless dead lay unknown but never forgotten. Birds flocked, roosting in the old and decaying communications towers Urza once erected, all those years ago.

Near the base of the Khers and out in the marches to the south of Penregon, barren sores marked the earth where the worst of the war's machines had died. Large, corroded hulks listed in pools of dark water, slick with horribly mutated lichens that dripped and never froze. No songbirds made their winter homes inside these machine corpses. No beasts drank from the oil-slick water. A stink simmered the air around them, and Penregon's scouts were careful to mark a perimeter around any such remains they came across in their ranging.

Kayla paced along the top of Penregon's new inland wall with Tawnos at her side, looking over the parapet at the work being done along this part of the city's fortifications. Hundreds of laborers worked to fill in the gaps in the old stone wall, whole sections of which had slid into Penregon's ancient moat when the earth shook during the cataclysm. The wall, once a mighty testament to the skill of Penregon's engineers, had tumbled in minutes. Its reconstruction was of low priority until winter started to wane. This spring would bring more than warm weather and flowers: another danger threatened Penregon.

A detachment of long-range scouts had returned to the city in the early hours of the morning. Kayla, expecting their arrival, met them at the wall to hear their report. Tawnos had been closing out the late shift at his factory and had hurried to answer her summons. The small group atop the earthworks were a motley collection: Kayla in trousers and a padded coat against the cold, Tawnos in his foundry apron, and Scout Captain Myrel in their muddy uniform under a dark poncho. Myrel had returned from the field this morning and still wore a cloth-wrapped cuirass and sword.



Art by: Nicholas Elias

“How many?” Kayla asked her captain.

“My best assumption is ten thousand,” Myrel said. “The front of the march had reached the foothills before the tail had broken camp, but the column was narrow, no more than five abreast.”

“And how many warriors?”

“There did not appear to be a distinction, ma’am,” Myrel said. “Most of them carried something: a club, a spear, old armor-breakers and anti-mech pikes from the war. Around two or three hundred mounted riders.” Myrel shrugged. “It’s not a professional army, but there were many dressed in armor. I saw old Fallaji armor, Korlisian cuirasses, Argivian plate, even some in Yotian mail. It is as you thought—they’re organized, but not regimented.”

Kayla watched the construction below. Laborers and engineers worked alongside some of the earliest models of Tawnos’s civil automatons, dragging massive tumbled, but salvageable, stone blocks from the flooded moat via pulleys. Other teams hauled previously salvaged blocks, fresh timber, and baskets of gravel and earth to the breaches in the wall, filling the gaps. This labor stretched all along the inland wall of Penregon, per Kayla’s orders. Slow work over the last year, though, with the addition of Tawnos’s new automatons, the repairs had picked up speed.

“My crews should finish the wall by month’s end,” Tawnos said, as if listening to Kayla’s thoughts.

“The city depends on this work,” Kayla said. “Let the council know what you need to get this done. Captain Myrel,” Kayla said, turning to her scout captain. “Did the march show any colors?”

“They flew flags of both sides,” Myrel said. “Though the most common was a plain black banner. They also hoisted machine remains.”

“Remains?” Tawnos asked.

“Automaton parts,” Myrel said. They grimaced. “As well as the Red Woman’s creations, carried in cages or bound up with wire.”

“Transmogrants,” Tawnos said. “Ashnod’s hideous work.”

Kayla knew the name, though only in passing. Some artificer who worked for Mishra during the war—his torturer, when he had been captured. His lover as well, if rumors carried truth.

“Tawnos,” Kayla called the old artificer’s attention. “The automatons—your civils. Can they be converted to the defense of Penregon?”

Tawnos furrowed his brow. “You mean, can they fight?”

“Yes.”

“They can. With some time, I could repurpose the civils to wield weapons.” He hesitated. “Should I?”

“Not just yet,” Kayla said. “Though be ready.”

“I will set my artificers to the task.”

“Captain?” Kayla said to Myrel. “See that you and your scouts get rest. Come tomorrow, I want steady eyes on this column and daily reports on their movement. We need to know if they are bound for Penregon or elsewhere.” Kayla looked to the mountains to the south. Behind those wintered summits, the march gathered. Within a month, the passes would thaw, and surely the ragged march would come upon Penregon’s walls soon after.

For the first time in years, Kayla felt more than the dull ache of reconstruction’s heavy burden. What she felt was sharper, more bitter. The feeling roused her from bed this morning well before dawn, though she had only slept for an hour at most: fear.

Two months later, the shambolic march tromped through the muddy fields outside of Penregon, the sound of their passing a low rumble of boots, horses, and long cart trains. Instead of road dust, distant shouting rose above the column, the conflict of many songs and cadence chants all competing to be the march’s voice. The hollering and braying of human and beast, voices raised in prayer or anguish, hunger or protest, joy or—to Kayla’s ears—meaningless utterance. It was the sound of delirium, pandemonium, of war and fear and deliverance. It brought to Kayla’s mind the memory of the morning Mishra’s forces attacked Kroog, how the city of her birth had sounded as it died and became something else: a ruin, a grave, a symbol.

Ten thousand souls had been a sober estimate, Kayla realized; had she scouted the march she would have guessed a hundred thousand. The passage of people seemed endless and overwhelming, a dark-clad column winding up from the south to cross the riparian grasslands between Penregon and the Khers. The march reminded her of migrating ants, how they would form an unbroken thread of workers and warriors when traveling from old hive to new, the queen hidden among the commoners. Was it the same with this march? Who was its queen and where were its warriors?

Kayla empathized with the scout captain’s uncertainty in calling this great assembly an army or a migration. With the aid of Myrel’s looking glass, Kayla saw elders and children, masses of people clad in scavenged or makeshift armor, some wearing only rags—all marching together in a heaving mass, swirling, organized by momentum. Like the refugee columns of her youth, this seething river of humanity was a creature, a being whose only drive was to stay together and stay moving. After a time, Kayla did notice some patterns in her observation of the march: Riders hurried alongside the vast number, ferrying messages, distributing water and extra blankets, carrying those too exhausted or otherwise unable to continue on their own back to the long train of rolling carts that followed the march. These riders kept the great column’s course as herding dogs would guide livestock.

“Ma’am,” Myrel called Kayla’s attention. They pointed toward a small clutch of black-clad riders that had broken away and begun riding for Penregon’s gates. There were only five of them, all armed and

armored. One carried a tall lance—an old anti-mech pattern from the war—with a black banner fluttering from its tapered steel point, a white bolt tied beneath.

“Emissaries,” Kayla said. “Captain, bring a squadron of your scouts. Let us go meet these marchers.”

Down from the patched walls and into the crowded streets of Penregon in spring, Kayla and her escort of scouts pushed through the noontime press of people, all eager and hurrying to the walls to watch the distant procession. People shouted as Kayla and her guards passed, hollering questions and encouragement. To be seen and acknowledged by the Lady of Penregon was enough for most; the eager reached out their hands, heartened by Kayla’s touch. She had an idea of what she had become to the people she led—a living martyr, the forgotten wife of the world-killer who, in the shadow of his passing, led the survivors in carving out a sanctuary. Not a gentle place but a safe one. Secretly, Kayla hated how the people thought of her: she was more than a forgotten, bereaved wife. All the same, each cheering person, each hopeful or fearful face she passed on her way to the gates, drove an iron nail of determination deeper into her: she would see Penregon safe through any adversity set before it.

Clearing the gates took some shouting and shoving, but the scouts were able to usher her to the front, where the little gate to Penregon—a door cut out in the much larger stone and ironwork portcullis—stood open. She ducked through and walked out onto the cobblestone road where a line of city guards waited. Captain Myrel hurried to Kayla’s side and barked commands to their scouts to do the same. So arranged, Kayla’s retinue parted to allow her through. The black-clad emissaries of the march waited to meet her opposite a patch of barren land a scant few yards wide.

Kayla wrinkled her nose at their stink, composed herself after the reflex passed. The emissaries did not seem to mind. They slouched over the horns of their saddles, leered toward the city behind her, and waited.

“Welcome to Penregon,” Kayla said, raising her voice to cross the space between. The sound of the march rumbling along behind the emissaries was an unwelcome substrate, a new background that set the small hairs on the back of Kayla’s neck standing up.

“All are accepted within our walls on three conditions. Surrender your weapons, maintain yourselves, and contribute to Penregon’s well-being,” Kayla said. She looked for who among the emissaries would be their leader but found no relief in marks of station or ornament, as the men wore an eclectic mix of sigils, colors, and armor. Kayla’s old knowledge of protocol, banners, house signs—all those identifiers of the world long gone—served only to increase her confusion. She settled on the man in the patched set of drop-trooper armor, assuming him to be their leader by his bulk, equipment, and bearing.

“We are penitents.” A man in an iron-armored coat spoke first. He was older and weathered by a hard life. He had thin salt-and-pepper hair, with a dark beard growing between a spidery web of shallow burn scars. Kayla had seen these wounds before on some veterans of the war: those who had been there at the end, when the machines lashed each other with terrible energy weapons.

“We are righteous pilgrims,” the man continued, speaking past Kayla to address the people and guards arrayed along Penregon’s walls. “We are the living of Terisiare, who seek to clean this land of machine filth.” He looked at the battlements, panning across the dark stone, staring at each person there in turn. “We have liberated Korlis and march on an iron pilgrimage. We approach you as kin, with peace and a request: that all who hold righteous hate and fear of the machine join us on our crusade.” The man’s voice was clear and sturdy, a leader’s voice, with an edge like a razor. He was not speaking to her, but to the people of Penregon; Kayla could hear his cruelty. She hoped her people could as well. “We are like you—survivors of the machine demons and the doom that their creators brought upon us. Many of us fought on opposite sides during the war, but in the wake of the end, we now recognize our shared humanity. Do not fear us—join us.”

One of the marchers in the leader's retinue, a man carrying a black banner, spurred his horse forward. Kayla's scouts stepped back, dropping their hands to their blades, preparing to draw. The flagbearer wheeled his horse in a tight circle, hoisting the black flag high, a salute toward Penregon. The other riders cheered, three shouts to their order's glory.

No cheers followed from the curious crowds along the wall. The distant sound of the march filled the space instead. The rising wind snapped the dark cloth, loud as a whip cracking. Kayla furrowed her brow and read the banner, realizing it was more than just a simple black field. Embroidered on it in a deep blue, so dark it was difficult to see from a distance, were two circles, side by side.

"Lady Kayla," the speaker finally addressed Kayla. For a moment she was taken aback that he would know her name—she had assumed them bandits, raiders, maybe even one of the western warlords that her scouts had told her now ruled inland Terisiare. "I am Raddic of Kroog." His voice was unaccented to Kayla's ears, placing him anywhere from Yotia in the south to the small Argivian holds in the far northeast. "You do not know me, but I served under your father during the second Suwardi campaign." Raddic said. He spoke with a rough grace, like most commonfolk officers Kayla knew. Her father at his best had been one like them—a man of rough grace, simple in his understanding of leadership and rule.

It was no wonder then that this man seemed familiar.

"You are Yotian?" Kayla asked.

"I was, yes," Raddic said. "I wandered to the southern Khers after the sacking of Kroog. Found a home there until the Korlisians drafted us for the Tomakul Campaign of 955." He nodded toward the man in the brass cap. "Met old Arah in the trenches, though we did not see each other again until after the Cataclysm." Raddic grinned as much as his scars allowed. "After our defeat, I spent the rest of the war in a Fallaji work camp."

"What a journey," Kayla said drily.

"All of us living have suffered one like it," Raddic agreed.

"And what is this?" Kayla asked, pointing toward the marching column in the distance. "Another army, gathering old soldiers? Or something else?"

Raddic looked up, staring past her and up to the walls, as if self-conscious under the gaze of the crowds that watched their little summit.

"I spoke the plain truth, Lady Kayla." Raddic said. "We are warriors for humanity. Crusaders against the mage, the unliving, and the machine demon." Raddic raised his left hand to his heart, and Kayla saw that his fingers had been shortened—likely cut away in some battle. "We began our crusade with a purge of the Gixian lands to the far north, emptying out that wretched temple of oil and machine," Raddic said. "We then marched through the desert that was the old Fallaji empire, and then through the ruins of fair Kroog. Korlis followed; we liberated her from a cruel machine warlord and recruited many to our cause. Now we are bound for the Iron Tower, where the Lord Protector," Raddic practically spat Urza's old title, "once birthed his machine demons into the world. We seek only food, water, and what other supplies you can spare. As well I ask that my priests be welcomed into your streets to minister to the people and call the faithful to arms."

"The Iron Tower?" Kayla asked, ignoring Raddic's request.

"Do you know it?" he asked, without a hint of a question softening his words.

Did she know it? He meant Urza's old tower. "I was taken there once, years ago," Kayla said. "But I could not tell you the way. It is well hidden in the mountains somewhere to the west or southwest. You'll know it by the thick mist that surrounds it."

"Your husband was not a trusting man," Raddic said.

Kayla bristled. "Urza was not a trusting man, no."

"Why not come with us then?" Raddic said. "Show us the way, lend us your soldiers. Come and wipe this world clean of machines."

Kayla looked past Raddic toward the slow-moving march in the distance, that mass of humanity. Everyone carried something—heavy packs, weapons, the elderly too feeble to walk or children too young to carry themselves. The war had ruined so much. These poor people. Kayla did not fear them anymore; she understood. Raddic's hatred for the machine was the same hatred she held, only he was free to follow that burning vein to its bloody end. Kayla had a city to lead, a world to rebuild—not a grave to fill.

"I cannot," Kayla said, tearing her eyes from the sight. "I am the queen regent of Penregon, not a warrior, nor a storied commander. I am, however, willing to trade. We have goods, food, and artisans," Kayla said. "Your people are free to seek refuge in our city, but we ask that no soldiers enter. No weapons may cross our gates."

Raddic bowed as best he could on horseback. "Your charity will be remembered," he said. "Thanks be to Tal for your humanity."

Tal. An old god of Yotia, something to do with the sun. Kayla recognized the name but did not recall any great cults or monuments to the deity; the end of the world shook all kinds of strange things from their hidden corners.

"You quest for all of us," Kayla said. Polite, neutral. "Penregon is happy to see you along your way."

Raddic grinned, understanding her diplomatic language well. He clicked his tongue to his horse, turning it around. His guards followed suit. Without looking back, he raised his shortened hand to the sky, a lazy gesture, half-wave, half-salute. A farewell, for now.

Kayla, escorted by her own retinue, walked back through the gates into the safety of Penregon. The crowds on the wall talked a rainfall chorus of excitement, curiosity, bravado, and fear. It was the sound following a decision before its outcome was decided. Kayla only hoped that she had made the correct one, and that the days to come would not prove her charity wrong.



Art by: Dominik Mayer

Peace lasted a day and ended in screams. Kayla did not hear them at first; she was busy in a meeting with representatives from Penregon’s fisher guilds, mediating as the masters hollered accusations of net-slicing and claim jumping at each other. Fish, unlike land-based game and agricultural industries, had not been brutalized by the cataclysm; poor before the war, after its end, these fisherfolk had become fantastically wealthy. With much of the world guttering like a dying candle, piscine gold came to be bitterly contested by the sailors who worked long hours to harvest it, though no dockyard fight was as bloodthirsty as these arguments over contracts, fishing rights, and fleet timber. Kayla had just thrown her hands up in frustration when Tawnos entered the council chambers.

“Ah, thank the gods,” Kayla said. She spoke without worry, as the guildmasters certainly could not hear her over their shouting. “Nothing so sweet as moving from misery to annoyance.” Kayla stood and hurried over to her artificer, motioning for him to leave the council chambers. “They’ll be fine,” Kayla said, reassuring him when he looked to the arguing guildmasters. “They’ll have it out at some point, or the guards will step in before.” Kayla took Tawnos by the arm and walked with him down the hall, guiding him with the determination of a harbor pilot navigating a treacherous strait. She stopped next to a narrow window overlooking inland Penregon, with a view of the mist-shrouded Khers.

There was a stiffness about Tawnos, a rigidity that turned Kayla’s relief to concern. All the same, she kept her pleasant tone—voices carried in stone halls. “Now, tell me,” Kayla said. “What is important enough to have drawn you out from your factory?”

“There’s been an incident,” Tawnos said. “A group of Talites in the market attacked one of my civils.”

Kayla swore. “Did it—”

“No,” Tawnos said. “No. None of the models in the city have been trained or equipped to fight. It didn’t fight back. The city guard, however.” Tawnos sighed. He checked down the hall to see that they were alone. “Two of the pilgrims are dead and one of our guards was wounded. She’ll live. The rest of the pilgrims near the area were arrested.”

Kayla stepped to the window. From this vantage point, nothing seemed different. The march had slowed or stopped in the fields outside of Penregon, and thin gray ribbons of campfire smoke drifted up, tugged along by the wind. Cookfires and industrial smoke bled from chimney tops all over Penregon. People bustled about their work. It was a normal spring evening, though the news Tawnos brought colored the panorama with a sinister tint.

"Did any of their order witness the attack?"

"There were dozens of people there," Tawnos said. "I would be more shocked if the marchers did not hear of this."

Kayla swore again. "The Talites attacked the civil unprovoked?"

"Yes," Tawnos said. "They called it a demon. They managed to damage one of its knee joints, but nothing serious—it can be repaired in an afternoon, no more."

"Fine," Kayla said. "We will try to keep this quiet. I—"

A shout echoed through the government house. A door slammed open, followed by the sound of booted feet charging through the bottom floor. Kayla looked to Tawnos with concern, then to the end of the hall where a corner hid the stairs to the floor below. The two braced themselves for who would round the corner.

"Ma'am! Lady Kayla!"

Kayla exhaled. She leaned a little against the wall. It was only Myrel.

"I'm here," Kayla called back. She reached over and patted Tawnos on the shoulder. "Composure," she said, quietly. Tawnos nodded, unclenched his fists.

Scout Captain Myrel rounded the hall, out of breath, followed by a pair of their scouts. Their eyes were bright and cheeks flushed—adrenaline, the cold: action. "Lady Kayla, we need to get you to safety," Myrel said between breaths. "The marchers are arranging against the city."

"What?" Kayla said. First the civil, now the marchers. Where was Jarsyl? With one of his tutors, to be sure. She would need to send for him, keep him close—

"Ma'am," Myrel interrupted, calling Kayla's attention. They pointed out the window, toward the distant campfires. "Raddic and a dozen men, all armed—they're approaching the gates, and my scouts have seen their marchers arming themselves for battle."

"Then they know," Kayla said. "We must tell them Tawnos's civils are not the same machines—"

"Ma'am, please," Myrel said. "We should go to a higher floor. I have my scouts barricading the house —"

"Send them to find Jarsyl and bring him here," Kayla said. "I will not hide, not just yet."

Concern crossed Myrel's face. Kayla waved it away.

"This is my city, captain. I will not hide when Penregon is threatened."

Myrel nodded to the two scouts, who saluted and took off at a run to find Jarsyl. Kayla watched them go, then turned back to the window.

The setting sun flared warm behind the Khers, plunging the fields outside of Penregon into a premature twilight that hid the black-clad marchers. As Kayla watched, cookfires stippled the darkness, flaring like dim stars in deep night.

This march outnumbered Penregon's warriors. How many did they have in the city's colors? A mere hundred scouts, a city guard numbering less than a thousand. She could order the city levies to be called, but that would put untrained people on the line of battle. Penregon's strength was her isolation, but when she was not isolated, and when a force threatened the city—

Enough. There was only one option left for Kayla. In her youth, she fled Kroog and never returned. To this day, her home was a ruin. Kayla would not flee Penregon.

"Tawnos, arm the civils," Kayla ordered.

Tawnos rocked back on his heels—a small movement betraying his surprise. "I don't know if we should do that," he said.

Kayla's eyes flared with the same steel that had animated Urza, cold and efficient. Brilliant, unrelenting.

"I lived through the end of the world as well, Tawnos," Kayla said. "I was not on the front, but I know what I am asking you to do." Kayla reached out and laid a hand on his upper arm, squeezing it. In their youth, a gesture like that would have sent sparks shooting through him. Now, it was only pressure. "I am not Urza," Kayla said. "I'm asking you to do this to protect Penregon and her people. Nothing more."

Tawnos placed his hand over hers and squeezed.

"Thank you," Kayla said. She lifted her hand from Tawnos's arm and turned to her captain. "Myrel?"

"I have already called the scouts," Myrel said. "And the city guard has been on alert since yesterday."

"Levy the militia," Kayla said. "Empty the armories. Send everyone able to lift a spear to the walls."

"They won't be much in a fight."

"I know," Kayla said. "But we need numbers. Find those with experience from the war and have them lead the others. They will fight to defend their city. Go." Kayla did not turn from the window as Myrel ran to carry out her commands; to turn from the window meant the beginning of a terrible new chapter, a return to the cruelties of the old world. Penregon was a fragile place, her walls unnecessary for years before today. Kayla hoped that they would become no more than a relic after this: a reminder and a warning of the worst of the old world.

Kroog fell in the morning. The memory came to Kayla with an unwelcome and bitter pang. A hazy spring dawn, the dew still fresh on the leaden glass of the city's magnificent towers. Kroog's red brick streets were still damp from the evening's rain and only just beginning to steam in the morning heat. She fled the city, pregnant with her son. Tawnos had been there as well; he saw her safe from the city, fleeing with her while her people died.

Kayla turned from the window. "It is disheartening how little the world has changed," she said to Tawnos. "I thought we would have learned our lesson by now."

Tawnos looked up from his journal. He was jotting notes on the steps necessary to arm the civils—reminders, orders, ideas. He frowned, his brow furrowing. "With respect," he said, "I think as long as there are people, the world will never really change."

"I hope you are wrong," Kayla said. "How soon can you have the civils ready to defend Penregon?"

"Give me an hour to brief my artificers," Tawnos said. His voice wavered in a way Kayla had never heard from him. "The civils are easy enough to adapt—I could have dozens ready by the evening, and a hundred by morning." He spoke like a man chewing gristly meat—persevering through what must be done.

“Good,” Kayla said. “And then we march them into the sea after this, yes?”

It took a moment, but Tawnos realized that Kayla was joking with him. He smiled, and Kayla laughed. Short and sharp. Nervous, but genuine. With a parting nod, Tawnos hurried to work.



Art by: Francisco Miyara

“You harbor machine demons,” Raddic said, barking at Kayla as she emerged from the portcullis. Slouched over his saddle horn, mouth never quite closed, the sun setting over his shoulder, Raddic struck an animalistic silhouette. His posture reminded Kayla of the languid way some predatory cats carried themselves—relaxed and deadly. His voice was cold as a dagger’s blade, and this time, ten riders in black armor flanked him.

“When our faithful tried to drive the machines out, your guards killed them,” Raddic all but hissed between his teeth. “Can you not hear their children crying? Or does the buzz of your city’s hellstones drown them out?”

Hellstones? The streetlights, Kayla thought. Last winter, Tawnos had sent his artificers to install chips of shattered powerstones in the public torches, ensuring that even in the bitterest of winter storms, Penregon stayed lit against the dark. In quiet corners of the city, one could hear them buzzing. A creeping, prickling realization crawled up Kayla’s back.

Kayla had never seen the black banner of Tal flown in the city, nor had she heard any street preachers extolling the sun god’s scripture, but she could not be everywhere. “How long have your people been inside Penregon?” Kayla asked.

“Long enough to know that this city cannot be saved,” Raddic said. “Many of the faithful arrived here years ago, desperate for shelter, thinking that you of all people would know the danger of the machine. They watched in horror how you welcomed one of the Lord Protector’s own into your council, how your artificers labored to bring more machines to life, and how they train Penregon’s mechanical demons to obey their commands. The faithful braved the bitter passes to tell us that Penregon stands unrepentant,” Raddic snarled. “You and your people are fools. You raise new walls and consume the earth in the same manner as the killers Urza and Mishra did. Tell me, Lady Kayla—why do you cling to the very things that killed the old world?”

"Our civils are not those machines," Kayla said. "The works of Urza and Mishra died when they died. We are building—"

"New demons for a new world," Raddic said, dismissing her protest. He glared past her, toward Penregon. "We cannot save this city," he said.

"We do not need your help," Kayla said. "We offered you supplies for your journey to the Tower as you asked, aid to your people after their long journey, but now you must continue on. Penregon has no need of you, nor do we want to fight. Leave us."

"Cast them out," Raddic ignored her. He called up to the city walls, looking to the guards and nervous militia there. "Drive the machine demons into the sea," he said. "Prostrate yourself and beg Tal's forgiveness. March to the White Tower and tear it down, brick by brick, or come the dawn, we will do the same to Penregon."

Myrel started to draw their sword, but Kayla held up her hand. Myrel slid their sword back into their scabbard, glaring at Raddic.

"People of Penregon," Raddic bellowed. "You are not our enemies yet. You who spit on and curse the machine demons, you who reject the leaders who cannot imagine a world without machines—you will find company in our numbers." He reached back to one of his companions, who passed him a spear. "The age of machine-magic is dead," Raddic said, raising the spear above his head. "Choose: die with it or live with us!"

Myrel drew their sword fully this time, but Raddic did not attack. Instead, Raddic threw the spear on the cobblestones between him and Kayla. It skittered and bounced to a stop at her feet.

"Dawn," Raddic said. "You decide, Lady Kayla." He wheeled his horse around and whistled to his riders. Together, they spurred their horses into motion, making for their camp.

"Should I have my archers fire?" Myrel asked.

A cold wind rattled across the cobblestone road leading into Penregon. The fields stretching out before the city, so vibrant at the start of spring, were ground to muddy ruin. The dark river of the Talite march spread across it, their campfires burning. The Khers loomed beyond, gray and stark.

It was the end of the world. The end of the age of artifice and machines; come dawn, a new age would break across Terisiare.

"Save our arrows," Kayla said. "We'll need them tomorrow."