

# Episode 4: The Ink of Empires

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Ten miles from the golden domes of Tomakul, Farid sat on the fire step of an old trench and used his knife to chip apart his frozen stew. Stoked with shattered arrow shafts and small wads of packing paper, the coals under the stewpot—his own brass cap, its liner removed—soon had the frozen slurry thawed and simmering. Without reverence, Farid shook the last of his salt out of a small tin into the broth, stirred, and felt his stomach twist with hunger at the thin scent of wild garlic and onions. The smell drew the rats out of their holes as well, but the cold made them sluggish. Farid watched one creep toward his rag-wrapped boots and stop to sniff him. It was fat, large as the golden cats that lounged in Tomakul's temple district streets, and carried itself with the same languid, waddling confidence. The rats owned the trench; the humans huddling in it were just temporary occupants, and food if they died. Farid kicked it away.



Art by: Thomas Stoop

Their trench neared two decades old, a relic of the early war expanded into something resembling the great earthworks Farid had seen during the retreat out of the trans-Mardun territories of Yotia. Down where the Mardun river bordered Kroog, they had trench lines reinforced with squat stone towers. Bunkers that hid heavy bolt-throwers, subterranean hospitals and mess halls, weather-sealed bunks that were lit and warmed by smokeless powerstones. But all that was a year and miles behind him,

abandoned after the Argivians and their allies began their counterattack. Life on the Mardun front was cold and boring until it wasn't.

Farid's war had been one year-long walk home with mechanized death at his back and pestilence where he slept. Every illusion he had of glory, honor, and adventure was ground to pulpy meal, pressed into the mud along with honor and humanity. Each trench Farid's unit had retreated to had been older, shallower, and found in greater disrepair. When the war was last this close to Tomakul, there had been no machines, just foot soldiers and cavalry; only the qadir's closest advisors knew what a dragon engine was, no one had seen an avenger, and Farid hadn't yet been born.

When Farid and his unit first tumbled into this trench, exhausted and bloodied by the artificer's cavalry, they found it a shallow ditch that stretched for a handful of miles across the valley floor, flooded, home only to the rats and the dead. They dug down into the earth, bailed out the water, and reinforced this old line for the realities of modern warfare. Now it was home, with underground dugouts to hide from thopter bombers on clear days, sapper-dug traps to sink advancing avengers and triskelions into the mud, and thickets of needle-wire strung across the front-facing side to tangle any charging enemies.

A month of cold work and thin living followed. Talk burbled through the trench of an attack, but Farid did not put too much stock in talk. Soldiers talked; attacks were slow, grand things these days. They needed soldiers to replace the dead and reinforce the living and officers to holler and shine. Thankfully, it seemed the generals never wanted to attack unless they had at least one dragon engine, or a division of the qadir's own machine soldiers to try and break the enemy line.

So, Farid cleaned his spear, kept his boots patched, rotated his socks, and cooked. This morning it was a stew. When it was ready, Farid poured a portion into Karrak's cup first, then the rest into his own. Farid nudged his friend, who sat wrapped in two cloaks, staring at the opposite wall of the muddy, frost-webbed trench.



Art by: Bruno Biazotto

"Food," Farid said. He had to shove Karrak again before he noticed. Karrak looked over, coughed, took the stew, and ate.

Farid blew on his own cup, sipped, and let the warm broth filter through him. He chewed a chunk of sodden bread and watched as a line of soldiers tromped around the sharp corner of the trench. They walked in single file, shuffling along the plank floor to keep their boots free of the rimy mud underneath. Eyes downcast, the soldiers all looked the same. The mud here dried pale, caking their boots and wool uniforms, staining the once-fine colors of the Imperial Fallaji army from dusty reds to cold shades of white, tan, and brown. All wore their helms wrapped in dark cloth, to prevent the sun from shining off the polished brass. They walked through the trench, short-stepped to not clip the heels of the soldier in front, shuffling to not be clipped by the soldier behind. Some leaned on their spears as they walked. All bowed under the weight of their packs.

"Hey," Farid said, calling up to the soldiers marching past. "Where are you going?"

None of them answered. Few even acknowledged him, and those that did just looked him over with fatigue-sunken eyes while they shuffled by. An older soldier whose coat bore a set of sewn-on sergeant's stripes passed, and Farid called out to her, asking where they were headed.

"Making room," the sergeant said. She stopped to adjust her pack, perching on the fire step. "Replacements due in this afternoon."

Farid cursed. Replacements. "They human?"

The sergeant shook her head. "All we were told was to make room for 'em. You have any more of that soup?"

It was Farid's turn to shake his head. "Just broth and bones now. What do you have?"

The sergeant thought for a moment, then fished into her coat. She pulled out a golden coin and held it out to Farid. It was one of the old ones, thick, with the last qadir's face stamped on both sides.

"For when you go home," the sergeant said. "Live like a qadir for a day in Tomakul, or an emperor for a week anywhere else."

Farid offered the sergeant the remains of the broth. She drank it down, then held the makeshift stewpot tipped to catch the last drops.

"Here, take this," Farid said, passing the sergeant one of the broth bones when he finished. "It's chicken, not rat."

"Chicken! Where did you find one of those?" The sergeant, grateful, took one of the bones.

"That miracle I cannot reveal," Farid said. "The quartermaster would have my head for it." He held a gloved finger to his lips, then pocketed the rest of the chicken bones in a pouch he wore at his waist. "Keep the coin. When you're qadir for a day, send us somewhere warm to dig a trench."

The sergeant laughed. She set the coin down on the fire step next to Farid anyways.

"For when you're home, my boy," the sergeant said, smiling.

Farid saluted. The sergeant nodded and hurried on to join the rest of her regiment as they shambled away. The unit passed through the trench for a few more minutes, the marching soldiers silent but for coughing, and the creaking and squelching of the trench's soggy floorboards. The wounded brought up the rear of the column—those who could walk, who could still carry and thrust a spear, were sent back to the front—shuffling with their heads down and eyes distant.

"A sorry lot we are," Karrak said. He'd come back from his distant staring. A wet cough roughened his voice. "Are you going to take that gold?" he asked Farid, eyeing the coin the sergeant had left on the fire step.

Farid looked at the coin. The sun had started to burn away the mist, and the gold gleamed in the cold morning light. He passed it to Karrak, who bit it and checked the impression. Satisfied, he tucked it into a pocket deep in his coat.

"Replacements, she said?" Karrak grunted.

"Replacements," Farid agreed.

"I hope they're machines," Karrak said. "Some of Mishra's. Not those dead things." Karrak coughed. "No more meat for this beast."

"I say give us the dead ones if it means we can go home," Farid said. "Let the qadir and his brother fight this war with their toy soldiers."

Karrak shrank into his coat and shivered. Farid reached out an arm and pulled him close. He could feel the heat Karrak threw off, like a brazier filled to the brim with coals. The same plague that had savaged him just two weeks prior, Farid guessed.

An officer—a captain in a pristine uniform but for mud-stained boots—brought up the rear of the marching soldiers. Farid noticed him a second too late. Cursing, he stood. Karrak struggled, but Farid hauled his friend up and held him as the captain marched past. The two of them saluted and the captain ignored them, consulting instead a sheaf of orders that a runner had passed him. The runner, a youth in a similarly pristine uniform, paced alongside, hopping between the fire step and the plank walkway above the muddy trench floor, taking notes as the captain rattled off orders to be dispersed to various units up and down the line.

Farid and Karrak and the rest of the men in their section stood for as long as it took for the captain to pass. When the officer turned the corner and was out of sight, they sat back down on the fire step, slouched back into their dugouts, and curled back up to sleep.

Winter's deep chill sank into Farid. He watched over Karrak as his friend shivered. Officers, movement, replacements, and reinforcements—activity. Nothing good could come of activity. Activity meant action, and action meant going over the top, into the blades and fire of the machines.

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The replacements arrived the next day, stooped under their heavy packs, yet to be lightened by the practicalities of war. They were human, not Mishran automatons or those stinking mechanical corpses; a mix of old men and women, out-of-place youths drawn from the farthest corners of the empire, haggard soldiers ferried over from the newly pacified Sarinth, and convicts. The replacements tromped through the trenches, eyes down, under the silent stares of the soldiers long on the line.

Some looked to Farid as if they came from Tomakul, though most of the replacements seemed to be desert types: thin before arriving at the front, either swallowed by their uniforms or barely able to fit into them. A scattering of Zegonians passed, talking in their quiet tongue. A pair of broad, tattooed Sumifans marched past, a nervous song on their lips that left a taste of ozone on the air. A penal unit marched by at a quick step, closely watched by their broad and rough-tongued minders, the lot of them simmering with such a mix of fear, desperation, and brutality that Farid was glad to see them continue down the line, not stopping at his post.

Some of the replacements carried themselves with an air of defiance, but most peered out at the brass-caps with wide eyes, all pity and fear; the front never looked like what you wanted it to. Farid recalled that he had expected to see knights and champions and all that when he first arrived; instead, he found a city compressed into a canal of gray stone and mud a dozen yards wide and miles long, populated

by fearsome and beautiful warriors with equally fearsome and beautiful weapons, all arranged toward the glittering Mardun and the ruins of Kroog beyond the river.

Truth was, the front was hell: a nightmare made by men. You dare look too long at its population, and you'd see what you would become: hollow-eyed and sinewy, caked with mud. Gaunt soldiers in uniforms bleached and patched and stained. Farid was glad that moment was behind him. Better to already be the ghost.

At last, the officers came. Lieutenants by their stripes and sashes, shepherding the replacements to their new posts. The young officers carried that Tomakul sturdiness about them and, unlike the soldiers they led, actually wore brass caps and rose cloaks trimmed in gold cloth. Their armor was polished, and they still carried swords. Farid, broke away from the marching mass of soldiers with a squad of replacements in tow.

"Soldier," the lieutenant called to Farid. "What company are you in?"

Farid stood from the fire step and brushed his trousers flat. "D Company," he said, saluting. "Third Tomakul Spears, commanded by Colonel—"

"Sure, fine, that'll do," the lieutenant said. "These are yours, spearman." The lieutenant waved the squad of replacements forward. "Welcome to D company of the Third Tomakul Spears," he said to the replacements. "That spearman will be your senior here," the lieutenant said, pointing to Farid. "Look to him for guidance. I'll be in the officers' dugout that way," the lieutenant waved down the line. "Parade is an hour after dawn tomorrow under the company flags. Dismissed." The lieutenant tugged his brass cap, adjusting it, and then squelched off through the muddy trench, leaving the replacements to Farid.

As soon as the young officer was away down the trench, Farid swore, slumped free of his rigid parade stance, and waved the replacements over. Ten men—mostly youths a few years younger than him and an ancient veteran missing an eye—walked together in a rattling clump of brown wool coats, packs, and long spears.

"Welcome to the Argvian Front," Farid said. "I'm Farid of the Tomakul. This here is Karrak of the Suwwardi," Farid said. "The rest you'll meet at some point. Talk to the quartermaster down that way, she'll get you your regimental patch and some thread to stitch on the company letter," Farid thumbed down the trench, and the replacements all turned to look. "Any of you from Tomakul? Or are you all from the desert tribes?"

The group nodded. The older veteran stared forward with his good eye. He had the same look as Karrak—he was anywhere but here; he was nowhere at all.

"I'd never been out of the city before the war," Farid said to the assembled replacements. "Never been out in the deep desert—I heard it got cold at night, but never expected this. At least the Mist Moon is a great beauty." Farid looked around at the wide-eyed replacements. Nothing there but fear. "Why are you standing?" He said to them. "Grab a seat, find a bunk."

There were little cavities and burrows dug into the trench wall and reinforced by planks, their muddy floors covered with strips of burlap and torn clothing taken from dead soldiers. The replacements scrambled to grab the good ones. Each vacant dugout burrow had housed someone who went over the wall and never came back, and the dead always left small trinkets behind; if you were lucky, you might find something valuable to trade to the quartermaster for smokes or nabiz.

"Have you seen the enemy, sir?" one of the younger replacements asked as they settled into the dugouts. "The Argvians and their machine devils?" The replacement swam under his brown, undyed cloak. He carried a spear, around the blade of which a thin ribbon of rose silk was tied. Farid first

thought it a favor from a beloved that the boy had tied on, but as he looked at the replacements' weapons, he realized they all had a similar ribbon fastened to their spears. That was the new mark of regiment, Farid realized. No more brass caps for the brasscaps. The boy, like the rest of the replacements, wore only a soft field cap with flaps tied down over his ears instead of the proud helmets Farid and the rest of the long-deployed soldiers had been issued. They must need the metal for more automatons, Farid figured.

"I have seen them," Farid said. "Their machines as well."

"How many have you killed?" the replacement asked, eager.

Farid thought for a moment, recalling what he could of his year on campaign. He shrugged. "I don't think I've killed any."

"What?"

Farid looked to Karrak. "Have you killed any Argivians? Any Yotians?"

Karrak, always bundled, shook his head. "None," he rasped from his wrappings. "I seen many dead. Never killed one myself."

"Come to think of it, I've never even clashed with one blade to spear," Farid said. He flashed the long knife he wore at his side, then nodded toward his can opener—a sturdy pike about as tall as he, with a flat head that tapered to a sharp point.

"These are can openers. We use them on Urza's machines—though I've only ever used mine on fallen avengers and thopter wrecks," Farid said. "Closest I've been to using these in a proper fight was when we followed a unit of scythe runners into a trench. All the Argivians were dead by the time we arrived."

"Seen many dead," Karrak agreed.

"Told you." One of the other replacements said, nudging his fellow. "Trench rats," he said. "Disgraceful cowards. No wonder the Argivians have pushed us so far from Kroog—nothing but soft city-dwellers between them and the heart of our empire."

Farid and Karrak laughed. Some of the other soldiers who had been eavesdropping chuckled, shook their heads, and continued resting, eating, or maintaining their worn equipment.

"The Argivians are only two hundred yards that way," Farid said, thumbing over his shoulder in the direction of the Argivian trench. "You want to storm their line? Wait another hour—the rising sun will be at your back and then you can strike like the midday sun on the head of a waterless traveler," Farid said.

"That—that is exactly what we should do!" The replacement spluttered. He was the bravest of his companions, but they all nodded along with him. "Why are we not driving them off our land?"

Farid stood from the fire step and stepped toward the young man. "How old are you?" he asked, sizing up the youth.

"Fifteen," the replacement said, looking to the side but not stepping back. The boy stood an inch or so taller than Farid, who affected a permanent stoop after this time in the trenches.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Assad."

Farid drew his knife. Assad stepped back, bumping into his companions.

Farid grinned, then turned and stabbed his knife deep into the plank wall of the trench behind him. He levered out a chunk of rotting wood, sheathed his knife, and reached into the earth. He pulled a double handful of clay out from the cavity, dug a few scrapes deeper, and then wrenched something from deep inside the trench wall. He turned and held out a rag-wrapped length of bone, matted hair still clinging to the fetid remains.

"You're younger than this trench," Farid tossed the bone to the ground at the youth's boots. "But not by much." He pointed to the ragged, soggy bone. "Look at that bone. That was a person—can you tell me which uniform they wore?"

The youth stared at the bone and did not answer. The rest of his cadre were silent.

"This land doesn't matter," Farid growled. "You got a cloak?" Farid asked the group. They all nodded, some even grabbing the corners of the cloaks they wore to show him.

"Boots?"

Again, the youths showed Farid the plain but sturdy boots they all wore.

"Good," Farid said. "Listen to me and learn my lesson well: your cloak and boots matter more to you than this trench. If the Argivians make it through our wire, if their metal avengers lead the way, if it looks like we're going to lose this line, you grab your cloak and you grab your boots and you run." Farid kicked the bone off the planks and into the soggy mud of the trench floor. "There's always another trench. Might not always be another cloak or pair of boots." He waited until each of the boys nodded at him. "Good. Lesson over. You're dismissed."

The replacements shuffled away. One remained, not moving from where he stood: the old, one-eyed veteran. He leaned on his spear with the comfort of a killer.

"How long?" the old veteran asked.

"A year and some months as of the start of winter," Farid said. "Karrak here has counted three. You?"

"I lost my eye at the Siege of Kroog," the old veteran said. "Served in the supply corps for a year following, and then they sent me back to train new warriors."

"The Siege?" Farid whistled. "I was only a baby when Kroog burned." Farid waved the old veteran over to sit next to him on the fire step. "What's your name, uncle?"

"Aiman," the old veteran said, setting his pack down. Aiman's voice was low and soft. The old man looked around the trench line, taking it in. "The war has changed since I was last a part of it," he said. "More mud." He fixed his good eye on Farid. "You all are still children."

"The qadir's war," Farid said. He looked away and spat. "We all must do our part."

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Weeks after the arrival of the replacements, lieutenants and captains hustled up and down the trench line with trails of supply and logistics officers in tow. Grumbling and muttering quartermasters were forced to distribute tins of armor polish, new gloves, squares of cloth with which the spearmen were meant to patch their crimson cloaks, bolts of silk, and other useless things. They also doled out extra rations of nabiz and mutton that were well received by the young replacements, but who did not know what extra rations of wine and mutton meant. In the mornings, the soldiers were woken by runners and their sergeants for parade formations, ordered to line up as best one could in the narrow confines of the trench for presentations to the majors and colonels who walked with scarves held to their noses through the places where the soldiers lived.

Farid, Karrak, and Aiman knew this was not routine. The young, fresh replacements did not. They all thought this was a mighty refutation to Farid's chilly warnings made only days prior. Assad let Farid know as much after their section was dismissed following this morning's inspection.

"Not so bad, this life," Assad said, overloud, to the coterie of conscripts that followed him. "You just need to lose that city softness, you see?" He exhaled a powerful breath, sending a plume of steam roiling out into the cold morning air. He beat a fist against his firm stomach. "Carry that desert heat in your belly and love for our empire in your heart, and you'll never see a sad day in this mighty force," Assad said. "Our qadir means to set us on the attack again." He looked to Farid, smiling. "And I think everyone here should clamor to cover himself in glory after this last year of defeat. Only way to wipe away that shame is to put Tomakul to our back and send the Argivians running, right boys?"

A cheer went up among the replacements and—to Farid's dismay—even among some of the soldiers who had been on the line for months now. Fool's courage, second only to fear, spread quick as fevers. Only those who had been on the line for an actual attack and lived resisted the fervor.

Farid did not engage with Assad. He was not a fighter; besides, he had plans to make.

That evening, Farid, Karrak, and Aiman huddled together in a deep dugout and spoke in hurried whispers over a single low candle.

"Tonight, before dawn," Karrak said.

"Right," Farid said. "The attack is certainly coming by the end of the week. We need to go tonight."

"And how will they know to expect us?" Aiman asked.

"That I can't tell you," Farid said. "Not yet."

"Fine," Aiman grunted. "Whatever gets me through it, I won't complain."

"Good man," Farid said.

"If it must be tonight, then who do we trust to bring in?" Karrak, whose fever had finally broken, spoke around the warm smoke of the trenchroll he smoked. He offered it to Farid, who shook his head. Aiman plucked the roll instead.

"Not Assad," Aiman said. "He reminds me too much of the ones I fought with at Kroog. All muscle and no think."

"Jamal?" Karrak offered.

"Jamal could be good," Farid agreed.

"He's quick," Karrak said. "And quiet."

"No," Aiman said. "Jamal is Sarinthian. The qadir only just suppressed their rebellion," Aiman said. He shook his head. "I like Jamal, but no one outside the unit will trust him. If we get caught out there with a Sarinthian " Aiman drew his thumb across his throat.

"Right, good point," Farid sighed. He ran a hand over his shorn head. "Damn it, Karrak. Why do we have to take someone new?"

Karrak shook his head. "Sergeant said we have to take someone new to make it look convincing. Says the lieutenant told him that the colonel has ordered night patrols to be teams of four." He shrugged. "If it's just the three of us, we look suspicious."

"Fine," Farid said. "Four it is."



"Ehsan," Aiman said. "Ehsan is nobody. He'll do as he's told and stay quiet after."

"Ehsan?" Farid looked to Karrak, who shrugged. "Perfect," Farid said. "Aiman, you go get young Ehsan."

Aiman nodded and touched his brow. He scooted back from the candle and pulled himself out of the dugout. Farid and Karrak listened to the sound of his boots tromping away down the trench. When they faded and they were alone, Karrak finally spoke.

"Can we trust Aiman?"

Farid looked up at the canvas flap that covered the entrance to their dugout.

"I trust that he wants to live," Farid said. "Same as you and me and everyone else the war didn't kill yet."

"Just as well," Karrak grunted in a tone Farid knew to mean agreement. "Aiman knows who the real enemy is."

A commotion outside broke the long silence that followed. Boots thudding past on the plank flooring of the trench, excited murmurs and cursing. A shout.

Karrak started to his feet, hand to the long knife at his belt. Farid darted past him, bursting out into the trench in time to collide with a group of soldiers jogging past. They all tumbled to the ground, cursing and blaming each other for their clumsiness. Trading shoves, they pulled each other to their feet and parted. Farid hollered curses at the soldiers as they hustled down the trench; they shouted curses back, but they continued down the line.

"What's going on?" Karrak asked, poking his head out from the dugout. Not an attack—if there was an attack, it would be much louder. This was something else.

"I don't know," Farid said. He stepped to the side as more soldiers jogged past. "Something down that way, maybe a fight, maybe some new war machine." Farid offered his hand down to Karrak. "You coming?"

Karrak laughed and ducked back inside their dugout, twitching the curtain closed behind him. A no, then. Farid buttoned his coat against the evening's chill and joined the stream of curious troopers heading down the trench, shuffling along with them through the zigs and zags and blastbreaks. Though the sun had only just set and the world above the trench still clung to the day's light, the belly of the battleworks were plunged already into deep night. The trench's lights hummed on and burned dim, banishing the umbral dark with warm, blood-red light. To Farid that light—meant to save their vision in case of a nighttime assault—always made everything seem darker. To this moment it added a special horror.

Muttering filtered through the close-packed soldiers ahead. A pair of troopers crouched at the lip of the trench, offering their hands down to help haul any who wanted up. Whatever drew this crowd happened behind their line; it was not the Argivians.

When it was Farid's turn, both soldiers hauled him up. They were silent, grim-faced, ashen. Farid did not ask questions. The last fingers of light bled below the horizon. Dozens of soldiers stood a short distance away, their breath puffing white into the deepening night sky. Red and green lights flashed and slipped through the gaps in this wall of bodies.

Farid went alone to join them.

The stink hit Farid first. Like an open latrine pit before the sanitary corps got to it, or a battlefield thick with the dead. A weight to the chilly evening air. He pushed through the crowd, which seemed more

than willing to part. Some of the soldiers even turned and started back to the trench, prayers tumbling from their lips.

The sound of chains and marching. The crunch of frosted ground trod over by hundreds of bare feet. The dim red and green nightlights topped poles carried by their minders, marker lights that the chained creatures followed. The dead ones. Farid thought he felt the blood drain from his face. Transmogrants. Hideous, piteous things that were once human, now a rotting amalgam of flesh and machine.

Whispers spread through the line of onlooking soldiers as the transmogrants marched past not ten yards away. The work of Mishra's protege, these things. The fate of any who died on the line, or those who passed of illness, or those who did not want to fight when the conscription gangs came to take them.

The transmogrants were chained together at their ankles with some distance allowed between them, but they moved at a uniform step, more perfect than any drilled line of human soldiers Farid had seen. In the dying, light he could not make out many details of these horrors, but what he did see burned into his memory. He saw dead and graying skin, scoured from the cold and the sun, stretched and woven through dark metal. They walked without outward care of the cold. They carried no weapons, but wicked claws burst from weeping stumps. Bloodless flaps with dead tufts of hair pulled taught over polished metal domes. Chain veils hiding the ruins of faces, but not the hot breath puffing out from between the links.

Farid's stomach soured, but he did not retch. The horror of what he saw made sense. It was the battlefield he knew, embodied in a decaying legion of killing machines. Farid pitied the people these things had been. He pitied himself. He turned to head back. By the time he reached the trench a short distance away, officers had already begun shouting and bellowing at the soldiers to head back to their posts, lest they be volunteered for mechanical service.

The night was cold. Outside Farid's dugout, the trench was alive with movement. Soldiers quietly hustled by with crates of handheld bombs, replacement spearheads, bomb-lance tips, armor-piercing bolts, wire-cutters, spare powerstones, and various other ordnance.

An attack was coming. Farid guessed they would be ordered over the top within the week. He did not sleep, and neither did Karrak or Aiman. Instead, with Ehsan sitting confused but silent with them, the four spearmen huddled together over a dim candle and planned for a long night.

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Farid, Karrak, and Aiman, with Ehsan between them, moved quietly and quickly through the trench, taking care not to disturb any of the sleeping soldiers. They carried only their knives, no spears, and left their brass caps behind, favoring instead dark clothing and soft wool caps. Ehsan didn't ask any questions, though Farid could tell he had many. The boy was as quiet as Aiman promised he was, small and quick, likely no older than fourteen.

Farid carried one of the red-lensed nightlights. It was powered by a powerstone chip and burned dim enough not to call attention, but bright enough to dispel some of the trench's deep darkness.

"Wait here," Farid said, pointing the nightlight at a wooden sign. Aiman put his hands on Ehsan's shoulders to steady him—he was old enough to be the boy's grandfather, Farid thought. Karrak held a trenchroll between his lips but did not light it.

"Sergeant Usman," Farid whispered as he crept into this section of trench. He knocked quietly on the planks outside of each dugout, calling the sergeant's name. "Sergeant Usman, it's Farid of D Company, Third Tomakul Spears."

A rustle, and one of the dugout flaps flipped back. "You're late, Farid," Sergeant Usman said, crawling out from his dugout. "I expected you an hour ago." He yawned, tugged his cap down around his ears, and crossed his arms for warmth. "Where are your men?"

"Here," Farid said. He looked back to Karrak, Aiman, and Ehsan and waved them over. The three of them moved quietly to join them.

"Good, four, good," Usman said, tallying the small group. "Here, one moment." Usman whistled between his teeth, a short and clipped sound that slipped quickly away into the night. Another soldier emerged from a dugout with an armful of soft satchels. Usman took them and passed them to Farid, who handed them out one by one to his companions.

"One full satchel for me and my boys, remember," Usman said, wagging a finger at Farid. "Or I talk, and you join the machines."

"Uncle, you'll be cheering when I return," Farid said, a quick smile on his lean face. "Do you have the order chit?"

Usman reached into his coat and pulled out a ring of thin, tin tabs. He snapped one off and held it out to Farid.

"You'll need to think of an excuse for why you're late and far from your unit," Usman said. "But that chit will make your story believable to any officer that might stop you."

"Outstanding," Farid said, reaching for the chit. Usman did not release it.

"One full satchel," Usman said. "If it's not bursting at the seams—"

"You'll talk," Farid said. "It's not my first time, sergeant, don't worry. You'll have a full satchel by the dawn."

Usman released the chit. Farid pocketed it and Usman waved toward the fire step, where a ladder had been built into the trench wall. "We cut the wire this morning. Go up here and stay low. Whistle when you return."

"You'll hear a tune as pretty as the flowers of Tomakul," Farid said, turning from the sergeant. "Boys, let's go." Farid crossed the trench and tested the ladder. Finding it sturdy, he started to climb. Karrak followed, with Ehsan and Aiman bringing up the rear.

As Ehsan watched the other men's boots disappear over the lip of the trench, he hesitated. The boy looked back to Aiman, who he had followed close behind until now.

"Uncle," Ehsan whispered to Aiman. "Where are we going?"

"Quiet," Aiman whispered.

"Are we going to fight?"

"No," Aiman said. "Now, up over the top—and be quick, we don't want any officers to see us," he said. He gave Ehsan a soft push, encouraging him to climb. "I'll be right behind you."

War had ruined Farid's faith, but he still regarded the world above the trench as hell. It was a place out of balance. Paradise was all things distributed in harmony and proper apportionment: the balances of stone, fire, sky, and water, imbued in one's body and soul, in the land and in dreams.

No-man's-land then was the opposite, a crucible into which people were fed and ghosts emerged. It was a hell of the body, the soul, dreams, and the land. It was colder up here than in the trenches: Every surface was exposed to the bitter valley wind and watching eyes of soldiers on both sides. Nothing

remained of the forest that once filled this valley. The trees that hadn't been harvested before this valley became a battlefield were now cinder-blackened stumps. The river that once coursed here had been dammed somewhere near Tomakul to deny the Argivians any of its bounty. Of the towns that once dotted the valley, only a single low, ragged stone wall remained. It was a landmark to the soldiers: how far from the wall has one moved in a year? How close to it?



Art by: Sergey Glushakov

Farid led his small group across this alien landscape, moving as quickly and quietly as he could while scurrying, belly low to the ground, guiding his party around the worst of the dead and the craters flooded with sour water. One crossed this hellscape by scrambling between craters and along old and decaying plank walkways, laid by advancing forces in long-forgotten attacks. One plankway had its builders' corpses rotting alongside, festooned with order chits dropped upon them by soldiers from both sides, grateful for their sacrifice in making this place more navigable.

They reached their first landmark without incident: a downed bomber thopter, a heavy Argvian flying craft that resembled a fat-bellied bird. The four of them crawled inside through a rent in its thin metal fuselage.

"Damned cough," Karrak said. He wheezed, struggling to breathe.

"Take a moment," Farid said. "All of you, take a moment to rest here."

"Like a wanderer gull," Aiman said, peering through the dusty glass of the thopter's crew compartment. "Great big birds that would soar alongside my father's ship." He spoke out loud, but to Farid it seemed as if he talked to only himself. Aiman looked through the wreckage toward the Argvian lines. "I never saw them land. I never thought they could."

"Where are we?" Ehsan said. His voice was still high and soft, very much a child's.

"Lower than the Nine Hells," Karrak grumbled. He set his heavy pack down on the damp floor of the thopter, groaning in relief at the weight off his shoulders. One hand rubbing his throat, he clambered over to Aiman and tapped him on the shoulder. "Let me look."

Farid offered Ehsan a sip of his water. The boy took it, drank, and passed it back.

"About fifty yards that way—where Aiman and Karrak are looking—is the Argivian line," Farid said.

Ehsan looked bug-eyed toward the enemy lines.

"Don't worry," Farid said. "We're not going to attack"—he indicated the packs Karrak and Aiman carried—"We're going to trade. All we have to do is hang this flag here," he said as he pulled a short bolt of white cloth out from a pocket on his coat. "And wait."

"I don't think I've ever seen an Argivian before," Ehsan said. "I was wondering how I'd kill one without a spear—the officers said they're made out of metal, and all I have is this little knife."

"It's not the people you gotta worry about," Karrak said.

"They die quick as cut flowers," Aiman said, agreeing. "Same as us."

"We're not going to kill anyone," Farid said, quieting the group. "You can keep that knife hidden away, Ehsan. You won't need it, unless it is to cut chocolate or sausage."

Ehsan smiled at the mention of chocolate. Farid could tell it had been a long time since Ehsan last smiled. For that matter, it had been a long time since Farid had smiled. It took humanity to smile and mean it, and Farid had none. This was not a condemnation; it was an admission, a necessary act of survival. Tunnel your vision to the task at hand and survive.

Farid, quickly, hung the strip of cloth on the outside of the crashed thopter, facing the Argivian trenches. Then, they settled in to wait.

The cold pre-dawn night was endless, stretching across this blasted valley from Tomakul to Kroog and beyond. It wormed into the hearts and desires of every bejeweled lord and power-hungry emperor, flooded their eyes like blood in milk. Eager, they reared up and sent a million of their children to fuel the night's appetite, which was now indistinguishable from their own.

Farid was only one of millions. The princes of the world would see Ehsan's soul added to the butcher's tally and, unmoved, call for a million more.

He looked to Ehsan, reached out, and patted his cheek.

"You don't need to worry," he said. "You'll be fine."

And then an explosion boomed somewhere in the distance, followed by a series of sharp pops and long, sizzling whines. Spotting flares launched from both sides illuminated a section of trench and no-man's-land a mile and a half down the line, far enough that the light from the flares' ignition flashed a heartbeat before the sound of their detonation. They could hear the echoes of distant screams somewhere down the valley but could not tell whose side cried out.

"Down," Farid hissed. He waved his palm down and put a finger to his lips. "Down, now!"

The four of them dropped to the shadowed belly of the crashed thopter, hands over their heads, and waited. The harsh, steady light of the parachuting flares cast stark and nightmarish shadows through the cracked and dirty glass of the ornithopter's crew compartment and bombing windows. That light was unrelenting, white and furious, the gaze of a god who only knew fire.

The thunder quieted. Not a battle, just a fight of no consequence. Farid let out a long and trembling exhale. He counted as the light from the flares faded and night returned.

"They're coming," Aiman said. He peered through the thopter's dusty glass canopy. "I see four of them at least, thirty yards distant."

"Just them, right?" Karrak asked. "No avengers? No walkers?"

"Just them," Aiman said. "Farid?"

Farid looked over to Ehsan, who had crawled into a corner, pale-faced and trembling. His hopeful smile gone. The boy knew he would never be fine. Even if by some grace Farid could resurrect this ornithopter and fly it home, Ehsan would never be a child again. None of them could steal back what had been ripped from them. It was easy to become one of the next million, harder to resist the momentum of lords and emperors. Unless—

"Karrak," Farid said. "Go greet our friends."

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The Argivians spoke some Fallaji, and likewise Farid, Karrak, and Aiman had some Argivian. Four Argivians clambered into the wreck of the bomber. One of them produced a canteen filled with some acrid spirit, Karrak broke out his trenchrolls, and the soldiers got to talking, joking, and swapping small things. Though hesitant at first, Ehsan soon joined the rest of them, and the eight soldiers together made a warm escape from the war. In the wreckage of the downed ornithopter, this small group may as well have been comfortable acquaintances at a cafe in Tomakul or a tea shop in Argive; if Farid closed his eyes, he could almost imagine a world outside of this one.

"I want to apologize for being late," the Argivian leader said in lightly accented Fallaji. She was a wind-bitten woman who reminded Farid of his mother. Stern, but he could see the laugh lines worn into her face. Laria, Farid remembered her name.

"Crossing our line was difficult," Laria said. "Lots of officers. Many new ones." She pointed to her eyes, and then to her group. "They don't trust us, so they watch."

Karrak grunted. "Sounds like officers," he said, speaking his own rough Argivian. "Always looking to use their swords."

The Argivians chuckled. Laria smiled. She looked past Farid and Karrak to Aiman and Ehsan, who, though part of the group, had kept quiet. "And who are they?"

"This is Ehsan," Aiman said, speaking before Farid could. The old man's Argivian, though accented, was perfect; he spoke with the comfort of one who had heard a language young and grown up with it close. "He's new on the line, from Tomakul. My name is Aiman. I am not new to the line, though I thought myself retired from the war many years ago after I was wounded."

"You speak our language well," Laria said. She switched to Argivian and introduced herself. Farid only caught a few words as she and Aiman carried on a rapid, gregarious conversation. Farid watched the two of them talk and felt a distant sort of hope. Aiman, like Ehsan, could still spark into the person he was before the war—the only difference was he had been through it before. The old man had been shoved into hell, all but torn to ribbons by the death machines there, and still knew how to make someone laugh. His smile was not sweet; many of his teeth were missing and the scars that webbed out from his ruined eye tugged at the corner of his mouth. But it was a beautiful smile. Laria's quiet laughter was the sound of Farid's sisters and mother, kneading dough.

This moment was good. The war didn't make this moment happen; it happened despite the war. Farid looked from Aiman's broken smile to Laria's graying hair, Karrak's gaunt face to the bandaged brow of the Argivian soldier he compared and traded knives with. Farid was not a poet, but the beauty of this moment sat with him. He committed to memory the tragedy of this little peace: their blood was the ink in which lord and emperors rewrote the borders of the world.

"It's nearing dawn," Laria said after some kind hours passed. The eight of them were well comfortable now, their helms discarded and packs piled, laden with the goods they all brought to trade. "We should get back."

Now, Farid thought. The mighty could not write without ink; rob them of their medium. "There is an attack coming," Farid said. "Our officers have been preparing an assault. The whole front."

Laria raised an eyebrow. She looked to her soldiers, who paused as they adjusted their packs.

"Farid," Karrak said, speaking Fallaji. "This could get us killed."

"Quiet," Farid snapped.

Karrak quieted, glowering. Farid ignored him and continued, switching back to Argvian.

"Our generals have moved in a whole regiment of transmogrants—the qadir's dead men," Farid said. "Those silks and kits we gave you? They passed them out to us just days ago. They've given us wine and meat. Brought in thousands of replacements from across the Empire," he said, gesturing to Aiman and Ehsan.

Laria nodded. Any soldier this long on the line knew what extra rations and troop movements meant. "Thank you, Farid," she said. She looked to Aiman and spoke to him in Argvian, far too fast for Farid to understand. Aiman responded, Laria smiled, and with a salute, she and her troops left the ornithopter.

"What did she say?" Farid asked Aiman.

"Clay statues," Aiman said.

"What?"

"Their general," Aiman said. "A man named Tawnos. He's an artificer in service to their Lord Urza. He has brought with him a dozen units of his Clay Soldiers." Aiman nodded toward the Argvian line. "Laria said they know our attack is coming. They've been preparing for weeks. It's going to be a slaughter on both sides," Aiman said. "But if we stay back, she said, it will only be a slaughter of machines."

Farid exhaled. He had been holding his breath the whole time without realizing it. He looked at Karrak, who was pale.

"We have to keep this to ourselves," Karrak said. He looked at Aiman and Ehsan. "We can't tell anyone."

"I know," Farid said.

"If anyone else discovers that we know this," Karrak whispered, "we'll be hung as traitors if we don't die first."

"Yeah," Farid nodded. He closed his eyes and sighed. Pinched his brow. "Fine. We keep this between us, agreed?"

"Aye," Aiman said. He muttered a quick prayer.

"Agreed," Karrak said.

Ehsan said nothing but nodded.

"Good," Farid said. It was far from good, but it was enough.

As they crawled, silent and burdened, through the cold mud back to their trench, Farid wrestled with hope. What other choice do the disposable people of the world have? The men above them had

weapons, gold, blessings from the gods—all that Farid had was his body. All he could do was refuse to be ink and try to save the ones that could still be pulled out from the night.

The order to attack came two days later.

The officer's whistles thrust the cold morning into blinkered clarity. One purpose now: survive and advance. Farid flinched as another barrage of energy beams and shells rumbled overhead, whistling and screaming through the sky. The earth shook, his heart pounded against his cuirass.

The first wave had already gone over the top, only a handful from Farid's section tumbling back into the trench, feathered with bolts. The second wave stood ready on the fire step; Farid, Karrak, Aiman, and Ehsan stood in the final wave of the day, shoulder to shoulder with the other soldiers of D Company, Third Tomakul Spears. Stinking fear and shallow breath fogged the air above them. Someone retched, as someone always does. Farid's leg could not stop shaking.

A sound like thunder rumbled overhead, constant and bone-rattling. Heavy bomb-lobbers, catapulting shells overhead from somewhere well behind the line. Farid had seen those machines before: they looked to him like beetles with smokestacks bristling from their backs—cannons, the engineers and artificers called them. They had been firing for the better part of an hour now, pounding the Argivian line with explosions and shrapnel. Acrid smoke drifted back. Though he could not see from inside the trench, Farid could smell the raging, terrible fire. They would continue that bombardment until the first wave was nearly upon the Argivian lines.



Art by: Campbell White

An officer stood directly behind Farid, sword drawn, and bellowed about glory and honor and driving the Argivian dogs back to the Mardun. He promised the first soldier of his company to reach the Argivian trench a sack of gold coins, a commendation to any who captured an Argivian flag. If any cowards remained behind, he promised to have them taste Tomakul steel.

D Company's lives were packed onto their backs. If this attack was successful—which the officers demanded and assured them it would be—then they would move into the cleared-out trench. If they died,



then it was easy for the quartermasters and supply officers to collect. D Company wore their coats, their long knives, brass caps if they had them or soft campaign covers if they did not. They carried their short spears and bandoliers of extra bomb-tipped heads, clubs, trench nails. Anything to make them better killers.

The bomb-lobbers fell silent, the last reports of shells echoing away down the valley.

Another whistle. The barking of sergeants and hollering of officers drove the second wave up from the fire step, up over the ladders, up over the lip of the trench and into the swirling smoke. No land beyond the lip of the trench, Farid thought as he stepped up to the fire step. He cheered along with the rest of the men, cheered until his throat hurt so the officers would not turn on him. Aiman bellowed, Ehsan's voice cracked and wobbled. Karrak cursed over and over.

They were next.

"What do we do?" Ehsan looked up at Farid, clutching his spear in a white-knuckled grip.

"We go slow," Farid whispered. It wasn't safe to talk here. "Stay with me. Be my shadow. Don't go anywhere I don't go. If I die, look for Karrak or Aiman." Farid looked down at Ehsan. "If you can't find any of us, get down and stay down until night. Don't fight, just stay alive."

Ehsan nodded. He shuffled closer to Farid, who put an arm around his shoulder.

"Ready up, spearman!" The officer behind them shouted, slapping Farid's arm with the flat of his sword. Farid cursed and removed his arm from Ehsan's shoulder.

Shouts up and down the line. Runners hurrying with last-second orders. Officers clenched whistles between their teeth but did not blow, reading the small scrolls.

The wind changed. The rotten stink of decay washed over the trench from behind as the officers shouted at their soldiers to pull up their masks. Farid and the rest of the company tugged their muslin masks from their pouches and tied them on. The fabric was soft and did little to banish the eye-watering stink of the transmogrants. Freed of their chains, they trod in shuffling lockstep over narrow plank bridges laid across the trench. But for the sound of their bare flesh-and-metal feet thudding on the wood or squelching in the cold mud, they were quiet.

Farid, thankfully, was not under one of the bridges. He hazarded a look over to the nearest crossing and watched in horror as the transmogrants advanced; though mass-produced in some charnel factory, each one seemed a unique body, a one-off marriage of dead flesh and iron. They were each a nightmare.

Farid tugged his cloth mask tighter and set his eyes straight to the ladder in front of him. When the whistle blew, he climbed, pushed along by those behind him. Near the top of the ladder, he reached up and took Karrak's hand, pulling himself up over the lip of the trench. He turned and helped Ehsan up, and then left the officer behind to fend for himself.



Art by: Daarken

The charge was slow despite the screaming of the officers' whistles and hoarse cry from the third wave. Smoke drifted over everything, shrinking their world down to a hazy ring a dozen yards in diameter. Farid, Aiman, Karrak, and Ehsan moved slowly forward, spears level, spaced only a few feet apart, marching rather than running toward the Argivian line. A dozen or so spearmen walked in rank alongside them, vanishing into the smoke on either side. An officer walked behind them, sword drawn.

"Steady boys," Farid said. "Steady. Watch your footing." A hot rain fell, mud and water tumbling down from the morning's mighty bombardment. Here and there, they came across the fallen bodies of their comrades, torn and burned. Casualties of the shells that missed their mark and fell among their own ranks.

The charge across no-man's-land was a slow tumbling of balance and recovery. They slipped and slid across muddy craters and used their spears as walking sticks. Shouts rang up and down the line, drifting in from the smoke along the advance. Together they crossed the crater field and passed by the ruined ornithopter. Ahead it was quiet, without the usual sound of battle. No cries of pain or fear, no shouts, no clash of metal on metal, no great booms and reports of bombs or the massive weapons of the machines. Just the crackle of fire, the soft rattling of their equipment, and the quiet encouragement of the officers behind.

They reached the Argivian trench and found it empty. Their bombardment had been effective and terrible, churning the well-engineered battlements into a mess of wire, burning wood, and abandoned equipment. Some lightly wounded Fallaji soldiers of the first and second wave sat smoking or resting on captured crates of Argivian equipment. They greeted the third wave with exhausted nods and sardonic cheers.

"Where are the Argivians?" a lieutenant screamed at the wounded soldiers. "Where is the enemy?"

"Front's moved," a wounded corporal said. She thumbed over her shoulder, down the valley toward the distant Mardun. "Rest of the Third went on to the next trench. Looks like the Argivians are running back to Kroog."

The officer stamped and fumed, then ordered D Company to check the trench while he went to find out what he should do. Farid, Karrak, Aiman, and Ehsan went together, the four of them wandering off into a section of the trench that was largely intact.

They found it to be a mirror of their own. Dugouts and small chambers for soldiers to crouch and sleep in. Empty racks where they would have kept weapons stowed for quick access should an attack come. Plenty of small things left behind in the hurry to escape. Not a single soul remained. Farid and Ehsan found a transmogrunt that had tumbled into the trench and snapped in half. Farid stabbed it with his spear, thinking to put the beast out of its misery, but it only grabbed the weapon and turned its eyeless gaze to him. Farid released his spear and staggered back. The transmogrunt shuddered, as if trying to stand, but made no sound. Aiman pulled Ehsan from the transmogrunt, wordlessly steering him away before the boy could try to use his own spear on the fallen creature.

"Hey, Farid," Karrak called. He stood halfway in a dugout, spear tucked under his arm. "Look what I found." He held up a small packet of paper wrapping, secured with a shred of familiar fabric. Farid walked over and saw it was a strip of Fallaji silk—one of the sashes they'd traded with Laria and her soldiers.

"What is it?" Farid asked.

"No clue." Karrak said, offering it to him.

Farid took the packet. For a moment, he worried it was a trap, but that moment passed. Karrak, Aiman, and Ehsan crowded him, curious. Farid tugged the silk free, stuffed it in his pocket, and unwrapped the contents, revealing a small piece of chocolate and a note.

*Our gratitude*, written in Fallaji script by an Argvian hand.

Farid smiled. A small and human thing. Ink, blotting the page.

The officers' whistles started up again. Forward, the order.

Eleven miles from the golden domes of Tomakul, the front was on the move once more.

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#### **44 AR**

Teferi appeared at night in a place very much like hell. Fire burned low on all sides of the spot where he snapped into coherence. He was grateful that as a spirit he could not smell what he saw: The dead were so closely packed that in some places there was no visible ground, only bodies atop bodies. Ruined machines ticked and cooled. Earthworks, once mighty testaments to engineering and human brilliance, were empty and abandoned. A battlefield at night, after some bloody price paid. Teferi looked around, grim-faced, and tried to get his bearings; the last two jumps had rattled him.

The Last Battle took place on Argoth, an island shattered and buried by the sylex blast. Histories recorded by survivors elsewhere on Terisiare spoke of it as a verdant jewel, the last green place where the brothers fought. This place was not that. A bit of wall stood alone in a valley stripped of trees and greenery, boiled to mud and crisscrossed by wire-bordered trenches. Fires burned on what surface it could eat. Not Argoth; likely somewhere on the mainland.

The knot of time around the Last Battle was a confusing morass of recursive loops, potentialities, and branching paths. Navigating them, even with the aid of Saheeli's brilliant Temporal Anchor, was a nightmare. Or Teferi thought it was, until he realigned here on this battlefield. This was the true nightmare. Worse even than the burning streets of Kroog. He'd returned shaken from that experience, but

time—even for him, and even with the anchor at his disposal—was running out. He had to return, quickly.

Teferi guessed and, against Kaya and Saheeli's protestations, had engaged the anchor once more, seeking the Last Battle in the manifold mess of time that was the Brothers' War. On paper his search was simple enough: find what he came to think of as "blotted time," where tens of thousands of lives met and came to an end. Blotted time looked to Teferi like holes chewed in a hanging curtain, or stars in the night sky. Its cause was great death—the infinite possibilities of all those lives ending in a moment, taking with them a piece of the great tapestry of time.

Time was running out; the moment Teferi sought was difficult to find. He was only one observer; he was not a god. All other possibilities were slipping away from him.

What did he know of the Last Battle? Urza brought a colossus of stone and iron, and it fought a titan of wood and resin and the dead of Argoth. Then Urza and the sylex killed the world.

Teferi glided over the ground, giving himself a few minutes before heading back and trying again. He didn't see a stone colossus or a titanic forest creature, like Kayla's poem mentioned. There was no ocean. Only mud and the dead.

And the scavengers.

Teferi didn't see them when he first arrived, but he saw them now. Lone figures stalked across the field, bending every now and then to examine a body. Alone or in small groups, they dragged bodies behind them, stacking them on carts that others wheeled off into the night. Some collected the ruined parts of fallen automatons, prying powerstones from sockets and working joints from shattered bodies.



Art by: Peter Polach

"Who are you?"

If Teferi had blood, it would have run cold. He turned, slowly, and looked into the hideously augmented face of one of the black-robed scavengers.

“Are you the one from our dream?” the person whispered. They stepped forward, a deep whirring and clicking issuing from them. Their eyes were black chips of glass set deep into puffy, red sockets. Their mouth was lipless, toothless, replaced with a studded, tumbling cylinder that clicked thin metal strips as it turned. The sound was flat, soft, and hideous.

They did not seem to be in pain. Instead, it looked as if they were smiling.

Teferi drifted backwards, avoiding the scavenger as they reached toward him. The hem of their sleeve fell away, revealing an arm that ended in a cluster of dozens of small grasping manipulators.

“Brothers,” the scavenger screamed. “Do you see him?”

Teferi had seen enough. This was not the Last Battle, only a footnote lost in the great void on time’s tapestry that was the Brothers’ War.

It was time to go.